TUTORING FOR SCHOOL SUCCESS

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had profound impacts on education. As of April 2020, more than 90% of students globally experienced school closures due to the pandemic (*The Economist*, 2021). In many countries around the world, public health measures have required students to learn remotely for the first time.

Remote learning has created unforeseen challenges for Canadian students in primary and secondary education. In a survey of Ontario families, Children's Mental Health Ontario (CMHO) found that more than half of parents reported their child's mental health had deteriorated during the pandemic, with worrying behavioural changes – including negativity in mood and personality, as well as difficulty sleeping (CMHO, 2020; Radomski et al., 2020). The negative effects of school closures have been greater for Canadian youth with pre-existing mental health issues, as well as students who face systemic barriers to education (CMHO, 2020; Environics Institute, 2021).

> For a variety of reasons – from unequal access to the internet and technology, to significant differences in their digital skill levels – the shift to remote learning has significant implications for inequality among students (Dorn et al., 2020; Middleton, 2021).

To support students during this difficult time, many organizations in Ontario have come together to collaborate on new academic support initiatives such as tutoring programs. This article will discuss how tutoring programs – defined as programs which provide more personalized attention for students in small groups and one-on-one sessions – can improve well-being and reduce inequality in education by accounting for the needs of marginalized students.

BARRIERS TO EDUCATION FOR MARGINALIZED STUDENTS

Even before the pandemic, systemic barriers were creating difficulties for marginalized students, and by extension, hindering the success of their communities.

Research reveals that many racialized youth disproportionally face barriers to education (Cameron, 2019; TDSB, 2017). A significant proportion of Black youth (94%) report the desire to obtain a university degree, yet data shows low rates of applications, with approximately 43% of Black students not applying to university (Diversity Institute, 2021). The Black Experience Project, which includes a survey of 1,500 Black high school students in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), provides some insights into why this gap in educational attainment persists. Findings show that only 41% of Black students believed that school was a welcoming place, with 37% of respondents stating that they either "sometimes" or "never" felt accepted by their teachers (Environics Institute et al., 2017). Additionally, one in two young participants (those aged 16–24 years old) cited racism as the biggest challenge for the Black community that is not faced by other students. Furthermore, key performance metrics indicate greater difficulties for Black students when contrasted with other groups, such as higher suspension and expulsion rates and being disproportionately streamed into applied courses (Brown & Sinay, 2008; Spence & Cameron, 2019; TDSB, 2017). From 2006 to 2011, 69% of Black students in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) graduated high

school, compared to 84% of White students and 87% of other racialized students (James & Turner, 2017).

Newcomer youth also often experience considerable difficulties in education; particularly first-generation students, who typically perform worse than students without an immigrant background (OECD, 2015). In Canada, newcomer students with limited English proficiency attain lower educational achievement than non-immigrant students (Lara & Volante, 2019). Without extra support, these challenges for newcomers will persist in higher education settings (Roessingh & Douglas, 2012; Volante et al., 2017).

> While COVID-19 and the shift to remote learning have created new challenges for all students, it has further exacerbated the difficulties that marginalized students face in the Canadian education system.

For example, immigrant youth were more likely to indicate that COVID-19 negatively impacted their schooling and academic success (ACS, 2020). The shift to remote classes has reduced opportunities for one-on-one assistance, including peer-to-peer learning and teacher-to-student instruction. For newcomers, in particular, this has left a significant gap as they are often unable to turn to their parents for learning support due to their limited language skills. As such, these students tend to be less self-efficacious when approaching independent homework tasks (Bang et al., 2011).

Even if immigrants had the language skills to understand the subject matter, many immigrants and racialized groups are overrepresented among healthcare workers and a significant proportion are precariously employed as essential workers, which means that they are unable to work from home to supervise and provide one-on-one scholastic assistance to their children (Turcotte & Savage, 2020; James, 2020). The demands on low-income parents to monitor their children's learning while also working full-time creates considerable household stress. Research during the pandemic shows that parents with children who struggle with remote learning experience elevated levels of stress. This same research highlights the importance of supporting parents as a way to improve children's education outcomes (Davis et al., 2021).

THE VAST POTENTIAL OF TUTORING PROGRAMS

There is growing evidence that tutoring can be an effective supplement to traditional models of education. Students in classrooms tend to only spend about 65% of their time "on task," while this number rises to over 90% for students while they are being tutored (Ander et al., 2016). Tutoring has also been shown to improve "student attitudes and interest," while increasing the amount of real-time feedback and correction for each student (Ander et al., 2016). This extra support ensures that more individual attention is available for students experiencing difficulties in their education.

Tutoring is also an effective strategy for addressing the learning losses emerging from school closures. Reports show that there has been a substantial increase in demand for such services (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2020). However, while wealthier families have the capacity to arrange for private learning support, this is seldom the case for low-income families among which newcomers and racialized individuals are over-represented. The shift to remote learning and uneven access to supplementary academic support has deepened inequities in education outcomes, with marginalized students falling further behind.

Innovative strategies have arisen to manage the extra costs associated with widespread tutoring. Pilot programs in the US have leveraged the expertise of trained college graduates, which creates high-quality learning environments for young students while keeping costs low. "The results are impressive: participating students learned one to two additional school years of mathematics in a single year" (Dorn et al., 2020). Based on these early results, the National Student Support Accelerator is aiming to scale this initiative nationwide in the US by increasing funding and establishing quality standards (Dorn et al., 2020).

With tutoring as a complement to regular classroom instruction, students may have greater potential to "achieve the many long-term economic benefits that go along with academic success" (Ander et al., 2016).

CANADIAN PILOT PROGRAM: STUDY BUDDY

Led by Ryerson University's Diversity Institute and several partner organizations, Study Buddy seeks to provide K-12 students in Canada with extra support during the pandemic, with a focus on supporting racialized students and newcomers. Since May 2020, Study Buddy has provided over 5,500 hours of tutoring support, connecting 200 tutors from five universities with more than 400 students.

> Parent: "Because of this program, my daughter has developed a real love for math... Her teacher said she is not afraid to try now – and even when she is wrong, she takes feedback in a positive way."

Study Buddy has been designed as a mutually beneficial opportunity for both students and tutors: students receive free one-on-one tutoring from highly qualified tutors, who are teacher candidates completing their degree requirements for practical fieldwork. This arrangement was made possible through contributions from Ontario Tech University, Laurentian

University, Nipissing University, Queen's University and the University of Toronto, who helped to source teacher candidates for the program.

Study Buddy has also relied on a variety of community organizations to connect it to learners in need of its programming such as the Lifelong Leadership Institute, which builds leadership in students of African-Canadian heritage; the Jean Augustine Centre, which aims to empower young women through programming such as mentorship and experiential learning; and Kingston Employment and Youth Services (KEYS), a non-profit that serves a diverse population including persons with disabilities, mature students, and newcomers to Canada. Other community organizations include Midaynta Community Services, Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC), YWCA Toronto, Black Business and Professional Association (BBPA), Black Female Accountants Network (BFAN), Indus Community Services, YMCA Sudbury, Nigerian Community of Greater Sudbury, Afro-Heritage Association of Sudbury, and the Multicultural Youth Center of Thunder Bay.

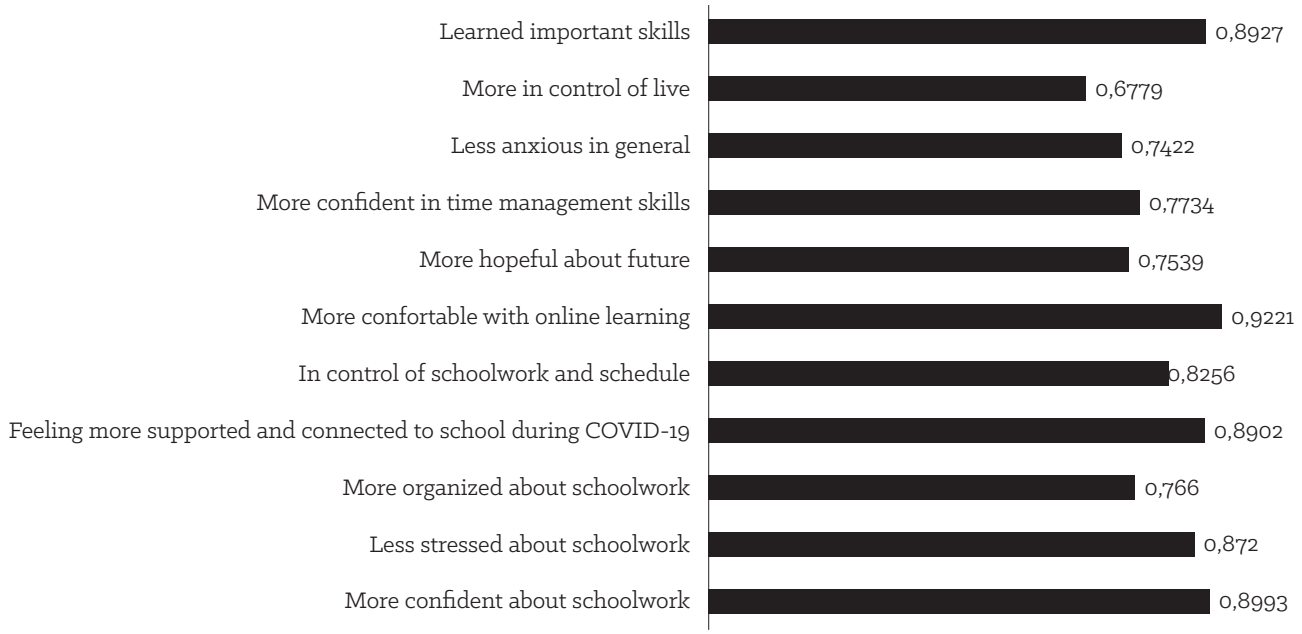
A survey was conducted among families that participated in the Study Buddy program to evaluate its efficacy (Diversity Institute, unpublished). Over 80% of respondents identified as a visible minority or belonging to a racialized group and nearly 12% identified as a newcomer (i.e., arrived in Canada within the last five years). The survey results show that the Study Buddy program had a positive impact on student learning. A significant majority indicated that the program contributed to an increased comfort with online learning (92%), increased confidence in schoolwork (90%), learning an important skill (89%) and reduced stress (87%).

In addition to the quantitative findings showing a greater sense of support and connectedness to school during the pandemic (89%), anecdotal evidence from parents affirm the importance of the program in a remote learning environment:

> "please keep doing it, it helped fill in the gap so much with the COVID-19 missing of classes. I realized my 8-year-old son was more receptive to the teacher while being taught than when I was guiding him to study."

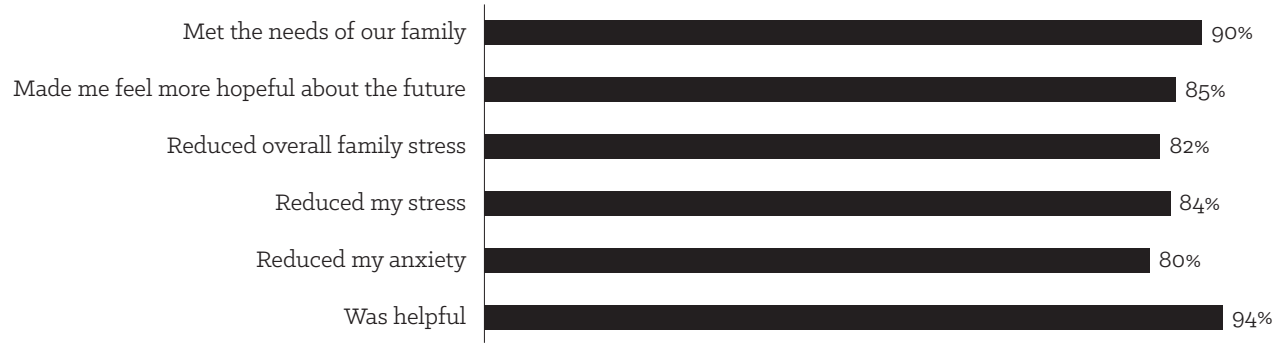
Student: "I received an outstanding achievement award in Chemistry. My final mark was 96% and I believe one of the things that contributed to this award was the tutoring I received."

FIGURE 1: STUDY BUDDY'S IMPACT ON STUDENTS' LEARNING



Study Buddy has not only helped improve education outcomes for participating students, but is also beneficial for other members of their families. The majority of the parents recognized the program as helpful (94%) and as meeting the needs of their family (90%). In addition to reducing the parent's stress (84%), the program has been effective in reducing overall family stress (82%).

FIGURE 2: STUDY BUDDY'S IMPACT ON PARENTS AND FAMILY STRESS



One of Study Buddy's keys to success has been its emphasis on positively impacting all participants, including the teacher candidates who serve as tutors. Overall, teacher candidates have benefited from:

- First-hand experiences with inclusion for racialized and marginalized students
- Opportunities to experiment with new virtual tools and lessons
- Training in diversity and inclusion and anti-Black racism
- Completion of degree requirements, despite COVID-19 restrictions

The majority of tutors have found that the program provided them with meaningful work-integrated learning opportunities that enabled the development of important skills, including teaching and learning (91%), interpersonal (89%), problem solving and decision-making (78%), as well as technology (75%).

But perhaps one of the more exciting impacts of the Study Buddy program is that it is fostering empathy and increasing awareness of inequities that tutors will bring into their teaching careers. Many tutors have reported that the program opened their eyes to the additional barriers that affect the education outcomes of marginalized youth:

> "Overall, this community leadership experience has greatly impacted me both personally and professionally. I am now a more conscientious teacher who's aware of the inequality that exists within our education system. With this knowledge also comes the realization that I need to do my part to make sure my classroom teaching practices promote equity for all so that all students have the tools and support that they need to succeed."

CONCLUSION

Education is the strongest predictor of social mobility, and research has shown that racialized and newcomer students have clear disadvantages in achieving educational success due to systemic barriers. These vulnerable youth and their families, who have experienced hardships due to COVID-19 restrictions, need more support that:

- Recognizes the complex nature of the digital divide, including experiences of racialized people.
- Increases affordable access to infrastructure and devices for remote learning.
- Enhances access to support services, including mental health.

While tutoring cannot solve the underlying systemic problems entirely, programs like Study Buddy can help combat educational inequity by augmenting online learning and providing personalized support to marginalized students. Moreover, Study Buddy has helped several families achieve a renewed sense of hope for the future – which is critical in reversing the decline in mental health and well-being experienced by many communities during the pandemic.

By coordinating institutional resources between universities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Study Buddy has been able to meet the needs of Canadian students, their families, and teacher candidates simultaneously. And by expanding this program further, its leadership team intends to establish an enduring system that ensures marginalized students are not left behind, as the educational landscape in Canada continues to evolve.

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