

Digital Access: Who is Underserved and Why?

Subproject: Digital Access for Jane Finch Youth: Phase 1 Report

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Project Digital Access: Who is Underserved and Why?

Background:

A new pandemic era has emerged with new ways of communicating and new ways of providing essential services to people on a global scale. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the pandemic of systemic racism that many young people in Toronto face - including unaffordable housing, unstable income, health inequities, and a lack of adequate supports. Quarantining has brought to attention the social economic disparities in the education system, which have amplified further by the mandated transition to online education. Given the state of our current climate reconciling what is deemed as “**the pandemic within the pandemic**” it's imperative to understand the impacts of this on the City's young people.

Access to the internet is increasingly recognized by countries and organizations around the world as an essential tool for participation in modern democratic society. In Canada, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) has acknowledged that "broadband internet access services are vital to Canada's economic, social, democratic, and cultural fabric.[2]" In 2019, the Federal Government indicated that "internet connectivity is essential for personal and professional communications, to grow a business, to apply to jobs, to do homework and to access government services"[3]. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments have had to take active measures to help low-income urban communities access the internet for a range of reasons including online school, public health, and accessing essential government services. However, in the absence of key information, it has been challenging to know where these resources are needed the most as well as to appreciate the impacts of a shift to online, on the lives of young people.

Digital Access for Jane Finch Youth

This project is interested in the experiences of high school students specifically (aged 13-18) located in the Jane- Finch community, with digital access following the transition to emergency remote learning. This study aims to fill in the gaps between mainstream media representation of online learning through misleading metrics and the lived realities of young people on the other side of the digital divide. By centering this study on the lived experiences of high school students from an historically underserved community, this data will begin to illuminate the realities of young people in Jane Finch that counter some of the narratives in the mainstream media. The hope is to share these missing narratives in order to provide a fuller picture of the experiences of young people navigating emergency remote learning. Due to the novelty of such phenomena as Covid-19 tactical adjustments have been made to the research design in order to collect data.

Subproject Overview:

Focusing on specifically the youth (aged 13-18) in the Jane Finch neighbourhood. Our project supplements is part of a much larger, trans-university research project being run by The City of Toronto entitled *Digital Access: Who is Undeserved and Why?*

The main priority in our research is to tell the stories of the youth in the area and translating these lived experiences on paper and collaborating together to present their own narratives. Through a series of interviews documenting our participant's lived realities we will attempt to identify the impediments to their access to digital and internet spaces and broaden the conversation around the impacts this has in their daily lives.

Methodology

Our research has two phases. This report is based on phase 1, interviews with community leaders.

The overall goal of our project is to illustrate the experiences of Jane-Finch youth. We begin by interviewing community leaders to gain insight and perspective. In phase 2, we will interview young people themselves.

This project has met the ethical approval of York University's Tri-Council Research. Our research occurs in 2 stages.

Phase 1: Response with community leaders (Feb – March 2021)

During February 2021 to March 2021 six semi-structured interviews were conducted with community leaders. See appendix 1 for the questions.

Due to Covid-19 restrictions, interviews took place virtually via zoom video platform and were recorded to a password protected computer.

Participants were predominantly from the Jane Finch Education Action Group committee, a board coalition of community activists, leaders, parents, caregivers and education leaders, to focus on strengthening and improving education in the Jane Finch community.

The interviewees were:

Mohamed Ahmed	Success Beyond Limits Executive Director
Tesfai Mengeshai	Success Beyond Limits Executive Director
Anna Kay Brown	Jane Finch Education Action Group
Christopher Mammoliti	TDSB Trustee, Ward 4 Humber River-Black Creek
Bryon Gray	York, TD Community Engagement Centre
Sam Teclé	Community Activist, Success Beyond Limits

Based on Tri-Council Research Ethics, the quotes used in this report are anonymous.

Phase 2: Research with Youth (Summer 2021).

a) Semi structured interviews with youth in Jane and Finch area to share their lived experiences regarding digital access.

b) These youth will be trained as research facilitators to facilitate conversations amongst each other and share their experiences with digital access in regards to the Covid-19 pandemic.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS: Phase 1

Based on the findings of Stage 1, interviews with Jane Finch community members, leaders and activists, we have found a pattern of where there is a rupture between the general public's idea of the online schooling transitions that is shared through the media and the reality of actual student engagement on the ground. The pandemic has put a visibility to the issues that have long existed but have become further amplified.

We have found 5 key issues laid out below that reveal these tensions.

1. Inadequate technology
2. Limited internet connection
3. Insufficient internal structures to support online learning
4. Insufficient external structures to support online learning
5. Failure to adjust teaching pedagogies

ISSUE 1: Inadequate Technology

Assumption: To the general public, it appears that virtually all students across the city of Toronto have access to digital devices.

Reality: While it may seem that all youth have access to devices, there are many issues that impede young people's ability to use them effectively.

The assumption could be to the public that the thousands of technology distributed were new pieces of technology, but in reality when you connect with young people on the ground they are pieces of technology that were already in school buildings for years, many that are not working well.

-Interviewee

- a) **Devices themselves are old and need repair.** When the devices don't work it presents a series of complications and obstacles that make it hard for students to adequately adapt to emergency remote education.

It's laptops, tablets, huge pieces of technology that have a lot of issues of repairs that are needed. So it's like you know, a young person would say, "Yeah, I did get a tablet in school, but it's not working well", or "it's not working at all" or, "I'm having a hard time connecting with tech support to figure out how to use a specific piece of technology that I got". But on the other side, it looks like, okay, thousands of people got their technology, so that is the issue.

-Interviewee

b) Insufficient training / troubleshooting on devices for students

Once the device is in student's hands there aren't adequate accessible support available for troubleshooting when they face tech troubles. Students feel left on their own to deal with this. When this happens, there is no way for students to troubleshoot this without dealing with a third party tech support company.

Some teachers themselves are unfamiliar with the online learning tech and are unable to help to student's navigating connection and tech issues.

c) Often families are not receiving a device for each student within the home.

Despite the narrative that each student is getting their own device, often there is not enough working devices for each student within a family.

You know, sometimes it's four kids that share one device. Imagine they're probably in four different grades, schools, which start at the same time for all of them. So when does each one get a time on this? [device]

-Interviewee

ISSUE 2: Internet Connection

Assumption: WiFi connection is widely available to all.

Reality: There is an uneven access to stable, reliable and affordable internet connection.

a) Lack of a stable or reliable internet connection.

Regardless of having a working device or not it all relies on having access to the internet in which case is the bigger issue currently. Without secure, stable and reliable access to the internet it is challenging for students to have an online presence.

b) Stable, reliable and secure internet is costly.

While internet packages have become available at affordable rates, it is often unstable and comes with a low bandwidth making it unreliable.

It took a global pandemic to provide widespread internet packages at affordable rates. Jane Finch community members now have plans as low as \$10 a month.

-Interviewee

Now that you got that piece of technology. Do you have the internet access needed? So there were resources needed to figure out who would need those supports when it comes to you know having proper internet, or even Wi Fi. Some folks would have the internet but it necessarily wouldn't be Wi Fi. T

-Interviewee

ISSUE 3: Insufficient Internal Structures to Support Online Learning

Assumption: Online learning platforms are easy to use. Young people and teachers can easily transition to using new platforms and software without training.

Reality: Students and teachers lack sufficient training on platforms, applications and programs that are being used in student's classes. Learning to use this requires time and sufficient internet access.

a) There is a significant gap in teacher preparation and training for emergency remote teaching.

Teachers have not been adequately prepared with the best ways to ensure students' continuity of learning online.

[Teachers] are used to a certain type of teaching, so they're also adjusting and trying to figure out how they will do that. And sometimes that isn't the best fit for some teachers.

-Interviewee

b) Students also lack training on new platforms, applications and programs.

Students have a wide range of skill levels and comfort levels in adapting to new platforms, programs and applications. Students unfamiliar with navigating online learning platforms face many challenges when new programs are introduced.

There's a piece of just having it [technology] . There's another piece of knowing how to use it, how to navigate it is another piece of the user experience, a piece around the adults, you know in school buildings who have never even used that before. -Interviewee

c) Learning gap around academic and interpersonal skills for students.

The transition into online platforms and asynchronous learning requires students to develop skills of self management which has widened existing gaps if these skills did not exist prior.

d) Inability to successfully navigate the software alienates students from the class.

Students who can't figure out these systems risk missing class, where attendance is a visible metric of engagement which can lead to further disengagement.

It's not just a piece of technology it's also the platforms that are being used. Being able to navigate them for the young people because we've had young people ask us , "I don't know how to submit my assignment online, I don't know how to get into my classroom".

-Interviewee

So I think that's a really important piece beyond just having the access, especially if someone's getting a laptop for the first time, The assumption many times is that a young person would know how to use that piece of technology, because you know, people are generally tech savvy. That's not always the case so there are quite a few barriers beyond just having a piece of technology or having access to one. It's also once you get access to it, it may be something that's unfamiliar for one person and they'll have to learn how to use it.

-Interviewee

e) Insufficient training and supports for parents/guardians

Adults in the home may not be trained with the technology or online learning platforms and can offer little support. Parents/ guardians do not always have technological skills to support young people.

[When sending their child's] teacher an email and hoping that the teacher gets it while they're in the middle of teaching, so that the child can get access to a classroom, and then marking them late, right, what that does to a child psyche what that does to the parents, you know, I mean, those things aren't being considered right and what is attendance, like, What is it saying attendance like completely not being there but being awake, right, like, it is not the same thing as our physical [in person learning] especially when you're getting reports from a parent saying hey, we're struggling with getting online here, help us out.

-Interviewee

f) Online culture and anonymity and effects on Interaction amongst peers

Its intricacies like relationship building and the online platforms not being conducive for facilitating spaces for cultivating a new remote learning culture. The lack of relationship building opportunities, interaction with peers and establishing an online community are important within in- person school dynamics and should be translated online.

And now you're putting into the virtual environment where you, it's very hard for you to even connect with your peers, because you don't have control of how this classroom works right like the chats may be turned off or, you know, people are more anonymous than anything else. So it's like, how do you create that sense of community and that sense of, you know, support, when you don't even know the person beside you and can't get to know the person. There have been challenges, even socially around that, which leads to poor performance.

-Interviewee

ISSUE 4: Insufficient External Structures to Support Online Learning

Assumption: That all students are adaptable to support online learning for young people

Reality: There is a great disparity in the learning environments and other external pressures on young people.

a) Other obligations

Many students are left feeling more isolated by the current online learning system and feel their time could be put to better use. The interviews indicate that many young people are choosing to work full time and put their education on hold until the pandemic is over. While our research did not focus on the 18 - 20 year old age group, community leaders indicated a sense that older youth who were doing well in post secondary school, are putting this on hold to work, with the idea being that they will return once the pandemic is over. There needs to be a much greater analysis of this situation.

b) Home environment

There is a great disparity in young people's home environments as sometimes these spaces are not conducive to doing work. Beyond just having an appropriate space to work, the idea for a student, especially giving access for their teacher and peers to come into their home space can be very worrying and can lead to further isolation.

Yeah, you're at home and that's kind of your own personal space which people [typically] separate usually from work or from school. To ask someone to bring their whole classroom into their own personal space in ways like, would you invite your whole class to your home? Do you want everyone in there? So I mean that also creates a learning environment that's much different from being in a school and environments designed for education.

-interviewee

c) More pressure on parents / guardians

Parents/guardians have taken on new roles with more responsibility. Parents/guardians are given the tasks of being teachers and homeschoolers, while also being faced with competing demands from other obligations (e.g., working from home)

Working from home I've struggled with just being able to balance work and getting stuff done. Because I'm constantly helping my children to do their work and you know people will criticize you and say well you know isn't that a parent's job? Yeah, it's just it's a parent's job to an extent, yes we're always supposed to help our children in whatever capacity we're able to, but I never thought it would have been a full time job right on top of working a full time job.

-Interviewee

ISSUE 5: Lack of Adoption of Digital Pedagogy

Assumption: That the way education had functioned prior to the pandemic can shift seamlessly into digital spaces with little adjustments.

Reality: Moving into digital spaces as part of the teaching day has radically altered the core of teaching and pedagogy and there needs to be a serious reflection of this.

a) Teaching expectations haven't adjusted

The educational system underwent a rapid transformation which essentially eradicated traditional expectations and dominant in-person practices to heed social distancing precautions. Furthermore, the expectations around engagement and interaction pre-Covid-19 still remain, presenting an inequitable standard to uphold given the fragility of being within a global pandemic and the issues listed above in this report.

When a student doesn't have access to adequate online presence due to lack of high speed internet access or WiFi how can they be accounted for?

For example relying on pre-Covid-19 attendance rules isn't feasible for students who face unstable internet connections, along with the many other pressures listed above. Yet instituting such expectations, leads to further alienation for some students.

There's a lot of children and young people who are not being able to engage and this digital piece doesn't work for them. They like to be in class and they like to have that accessibility.

-Interviewee

b) An increase of breakdown of communication between students and teachers

The relationships between student and teachers pre-Covid have translated onto the digital landscape. Students with previously strained relationships show more distrust towards their teachers resulting in further disengagement.

For example, the shift to email as the main form of communication between students and teachers can amplify tensions with teachers. Students are struggling with communication with teachers and at the same time lack skills of how to write a proper email etc.

Some of those online platforms are just a lot of young people sending emails for the first time, because that's how you have to communicate with the teacher now, compared to just walking in front of the class and asking your teacher a question now you have to send them an email. And you know many [young people] are like 'It's my first time sending an email'. Knowing what it looks like to be checking your emails and figure out how to reply to them. There is a lot of learning that's happening.

-Interviewee

c) Hiring new teachers who are unfamiliar with the community

With the shift to digital teaching there has been a turn over in teachers as many have retired, had to change schools or have gone on leave. To fill these gaps new teachers are hired, but do not come from the community in which they are teaching and don't know the context of the community. Teachers who are not from the community working as outsiders have a hard time connecting with students and gaining trust. In addition many interviewees indicated that teachers outside of the community are not doing their due diligence in understanding the community politics, history, customs and culture. This can create further distrust on behalf of the students, which results in disengagement and gaps in learning that have the potential for long term effect on students.

d) Traditional definitions of success not capturing adequate narratives.

The metrics from a pre-Covid education system does not produce an accurate narrative around the experiences of online learning. The ways in which schools measure and define success do not necessarily translate into online spaces.

You know, if we're thinking about high school you know success for a school means graduation rates. You know, more absences, better credit accumulation it's never about the nuances stories of individuals and what those experiences are like so. I think that those metrics are really kind of almost simplistic but those kind of surface level metrics that we have within our education as much in the same way that we're looking at the digital divide.

-Interviewee

You have access to technology, great success. You graduated, great success. Rather than [focus on] the specific experiences of students as they graduate, or don't graduate and what are the kind of specific experiences of students. I think those are the things that we don't always necessarily dig into so I don't see it much different from how we how we go about looking at just success in general, or like experiences of students in general, across the board.

-Interviewee

Discussion

The pandemic has exacerbated visible equity issues that have long existed within communities like the Jane-Finch community. Identifying the tensions in between this transition reveals challenges that need to be addressed in order to improve young people's experiences in digital spaces.

1. Media and narrative disparity

Firstly, the narratives represented across media rely on a notion that citizens should have faith in the promise public institutions will support them through turbulent and uncertain times of the pandemic. However the findings reveal good faith is no longer sustainable or an accurate pacifier in racialized neighbourhoods like Jane Finch who have been continually under-resourced.

Until the governments can mandate public education as a human right, access to digital internet and being online, we can't rely on good faith.

-Interviewee

2. Access Isn't Equity of Access

Second, within the Jane-Finch community the pandemic did not reveal anything new, a sentiment many interviewees expressed. Instead, the pandemic has only revealed deeper equity issues. The transition to emergency remote learning has illuminated the idea that "access" doesn't mean "equity of access". A distinction that is integral in telling the story of our findings. The uncertainty the pandemic has caused has not left time for adequate reparative measures.

Equity of access has presented a major hurdle, it's not just about the technology or the physical devices and tools students are using, it's the internet itself. A young person may have the tools, the access to the internet but still be in an environment that is not conducive to learning. Looking at the numbers it may appear that all students are able to access the internet, however the reality is that students are not getting adequate support and in the process further disenfranchises students and perpetuates marginalization putting quality education out of reach for some.

There's all kinds of variables in communities that we have to recognize and I think that's the gap, recognizing those spaces where it's not equal for the equity is not equal, the equity of access is not fair to those students in those families.

-interviewee

3. Amplification of a Two-Tiered Education System

Third, the transition online has amplified a two-tiered education system which was prevalent prior to the pandemic. The transition to remote online learning and shifts to digital pedagogy has revealed the undeniable learning gap students are facing and will face as a consequence of the pandemic and insufficient student and familial support. This learning gap is not new for many students from racialized communities. Students in these communities are left on their own to navigate systemic hurdles and in that process reconcile education as a worthwhile endeavor. The failure to support such communities contributes to the deepening learning and equity gap. Failure in recognizing systemic issues and potential hurdles in the way of students prior to Covid-19 is at the forefront of this conversation.

Many of them [students] were already facing the gap and already had problems where they weren't necessarily at the level that they needed to be. Now this pandemic has even increased, who that gap impacts and how the school, collectively with parents input, solve this.

-Interviewee

I think that when it comes to education and funding or resources. I think that these things have to be allocated to those who need it the most: the schools that need that extra support.
-Interviewee

NEXT STEPS: AS WE MOVE INTO PHASE 2

Moving forward it is clear that there needs to be more reflection regarding young peoples' experiences in order to establish clear understanding about their realities. This second phase of the research will expand to consider the impact of digital access on young people's lives beyond education such as their social lives, their work lives, family connections, etc. The main priority as the next step in our research is for Jane Finch youth to articulate their own experiences and collaborate together to present their own narratives.

Phase 2: Research with Youth (April - June 2021).

a) Semi structured interviews with youth in Jane and Finch area to share their lived experiences, identity impediments to their access to digital access and broaden the conversation around the impacts this has on their daily lives.

b) These youth will be trained as research facilitators to facilitate conversations amongst each other and share their experiences with digital access in regards to the Covid-19 pandemic. This training model aims to provide young people an opportunity for agency in designing a part of the research and taking control of their stories and how they are to be represented in the conversation.

Appendix 1:

Phase 1: Semi- Structured Interview questions with Community Leaders (Phase 1)

1. Tell me about yourself? What do you do? (what is your position within the community)
2. In your opinion what does digital Access look like to you? Or from the examples out there already what should it look like?
3. From your experiences and insight , can you tell us the reality of digital access that youth face in Jane Finch?

4. What are the impediments to their access to digital / internet spaces? What impacts this has in their daily lives?
5. Has this issue been brought to light because of pandemic or just further amplified an existing issue?
6. What narratives/ stories are missing from the conversation?
7. In your opinion what is the cause that's responsible for digital disparity within "neighbourhood improvement areas" in the city? Why doesn't the media cover this?