

THE BLACK LENS



OCTOBER 2025
ISSUE 1

TABLE OF CONTENTS

01

BCSA Beginnings: Shaping the Black Lens

02

From the Grad Desk: Transition from Undergraduate to Graduate Studies

03

In Focus: Centering Black Graduate Voices

04

Citations of Brilliance

05

Disseminate the Knowledge

06

In the NBGN Pipeline



BCSA BEGINNINGS: SHAPING THE BLACK LENS

NBGN Editors

On October 28th, 2025, Sahra and I had the pleasure of attending the Black Canadian Studies Association symposium titled: Possibilities and Refusals. We pleasantly accepted the invitation to present the work of The National Black Graduate Network. We shared the work we had done for our first issue in October. We also shared what we are presently working on and our vision for this school year.

For this second issue, we wanted to trace back our origin to the Black Canadian Studies Association. What follows is a short explanation of how the National Black Graduate Network began.

“The NBGN is affiliated with the Black Canadian Studies Association (BCSA), and emerged out of critical conversations among members of the 2019-2020 BCSA executive team about how academic racism impacts the growing numbers of students interested in pursuing Black Studies in Canada. We envisioned this interactive and secure website as a space from which to promote critical dialogue among network members and to develop a public resource for a new era of Black Studies scholarship in Canada.”

We hope to stay in touch with the Black Canadian Studies Association and to keep working together in the future. The images on this page are from the event. Sahra has generously shared the images she took.



Caption: Executive members of the Black Canadian Studies Association are leading an interactive piece with the audience on stage.



Caption: Volunteers from the Black Canadian Studies Association (BCSA) smile for the camera.

FROM THE GRAD DESK: TRANSITION FROM UNDERGRADUATE TO GRADUATE STUDIES

By Emmanuel Rutayisire & Sahra Mohamud
Black Lens Editors

For this section, we covered three questions and took turns sharing our reflections

Question 1: How different is graduate coursework from undergrad?

Emmanuel: When I think of my undergraduate coursework, I think of rigid structures, more personal guidance, and clear boundaries on what to do and not to do. However, in graduate school, there seems to be more room for coursework to be exploratory and often open-ended. This approach in graduate studies allows for a different pace. The biggest difference I have found between undergraduate coursework and graduate coursework is that graduate coursework demands a certain level of independence.



Sahra: I find my undergrad coursework eerily similar to my graduate coursework, but rather it's the depth of inquiry and independence of thought that really separates the two experiences. I come from an Early Childhood Studies background, where I built a strong foundation and interest in understanding the education system and working with children and their families. However, when I entered my master's program, I began to see how multi-faceted the education system truly is, particularly in relation to curriculum, pedagogy, and educational policy. In my undergraduate studies, I learned how to be a professional—how to apply theories, manage classroom dynamics, and collaborate with families and communities. In graduate school, the focus shifted toward how and why we engage with those practices. I was no longer simply applying knowledge but learning how to critique, deconstruct, and produce it. I had to strengthen my academic reading and writing skills to engage with complex theoretical frameworks and articulate my own position within scholarly discourse.

Question 2: What skills from undergrad have been most helpful in grad school?

Emmanuel: This is a difficult question to answer because I feel I was playing catch-up during my undergraduate studies in terms of having the desired skills that one needs from high school to undergraduate work. However, I did manage to graduate from my undergraduate studies, and here are some of the skills I learned and used during that time. The first is not to be shy to seek support from fellow students, professors, and university programs. The second and last skill was to persevere and not isolate when the journey becomes difficult.

Sahra: The skills I found most helpful from my undergraduate studies were the time management and organizational habits I developed while balancing coursework and placements, as well as the communication and interpersonal skills gained from working directly with children, families, and educators. My foundational understanding of child development and educational systems also provided essential context for the kind of deeper inquiry required in graduate-level study.

Question #3: What do you wish you had learned or done before starting your program?

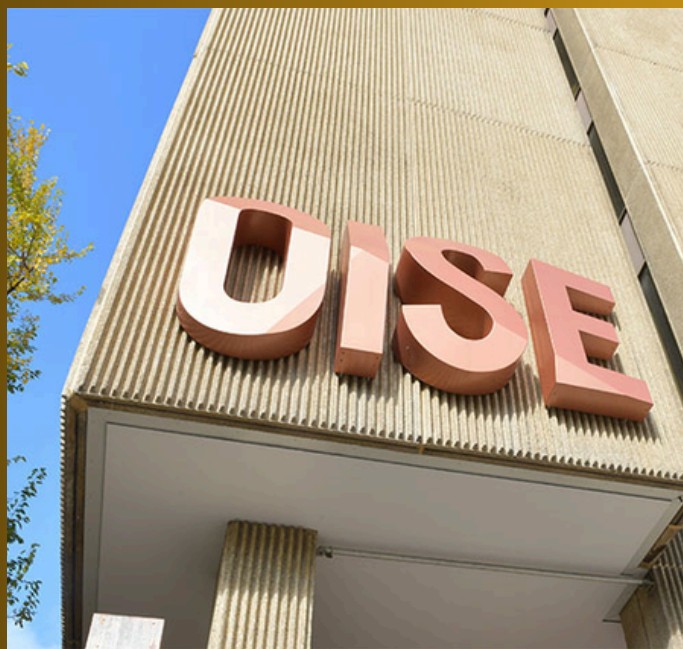
Emmanuel: The issue of finances immediately comes to mind with this question. Toronto is an expensive city to live in. The scholarship given by the university to pursue a doctoral degree barely covers rent. Students are then left to find other ways to support themselves and their families financially. There is constant pressure to perform well academically, which is in tension with being able to sustain yourself and those who depend on you financially.

Sahra: Looking back, I wish I had developed stronger research and academic writing skills earlier, particularly in synthesizing literature and framing arguments. I also wish I had engaged more deeply with academic journals to better understand how scholarly conversations evolve and sought mentorship from graduate students or faculty to gain a clearer sense of the expectations and demands of graduate-level research.

IN FOCUS: CENTERING BLACK GRADUATE VOICES

A Word from the Editors of the Black Lens

In the October newsletter, we had the pleasure of working with three Doctoral students and one Master's student. Suad Ahmed, Zenah Hussun, and Stephen Francis were all coming off fresh from presenting at the OISE Centre for Leadership & Diversity 6th Annual International Conference. Jennifer Chinenye Emelife was coming from presenting at the Sixth Symposium of Southern Ontario Universities on "From Silos to Solidarity: Rethinking Languages and Literacies in Education through collaboration and care." We were interested in asking critical questions that would allow our contributors to situate both themselves and their research. We crafted questions that encouraged deep reflection and made room for exploration in their responses.



Caption: The exterior of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

Caption: The logo of the Centre for Leadership and Diversity



Caption: The logo of the Centre for Educational Research of Languages & Literacies

Below are the questions that we asked Suad, Zenah, and Stephen for their presentation at the Centre for Leadership & Diversity's 6th Annual International Conference:

- There has been a growing conversation and tension around Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) within institutions. As someone working within this space, how do you feel about these recent challenges, and what keeps you motivated to continue this work?
- How do you hope your work will impact others or your community?
- What are your next steps or upcoming projects? How do you want to continue making an impact through your work or research?

Suad Ahmed

Ph.D. Candidate,
York University, Ontario, Canada



Caption: Suad posing outside, framed by the trees and natural surroundings.

My name is Suad Ahmed, and I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Faculty of Education at York University. My research focuses on the identity formation of Somali Muslim youth in Toronto. With a background in community-based research, I employ Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), which incorporates artistic methodologies, such as Photovoice, to explore the emotional and social dimensions of identity-making among Somali youth. I also work alongside young people to reframe them not as subjects of study but as producers of knowledge. I hope the findings we co-create will eventually inform educators, policymakers, and community organizations on how to foster greater belongingness in schooling environments (and other public institutions)

Beyond the academy, my work with the Coastal Research, Education & Advocacy Network (CREAN) and York University's Black Maternal Pedagogies Project has shown me how community-engaged research can shape public policy in meaningful ways. Co-developing research programs with young people and parents, or conceptualizing questions alongside Black mothers and their daughters, has revealed the transformative power of collective inquiry. These collaborations have not only generated policy/structural recommendations for anti-racism in education efforts but, more importantly, have nurtured enduring networks of care and advocacy that have extended beyond the research itself. I hope these initiatives remind others that meaningful change begins with relationships—with listening deeply, valuing lived experience, and co-imagining what justice might look like in everyday life.

Next Steps and Continuing the Work:

Recently, I presented at the OISE Leadership & Diversity annual conference on my doctoral work, but looking ahead, I am preparing to expand this work through upcoming projects that bridge academic, community, and creative forms of knowledge-making and sharing. We're in the process of developing a digital toolkit on Black maternal pedagogies for educators, curating an arts-based exhibit on the belonging of Somali youth in Toronto, and contributing to an SSHRC-funded study on Muslim women's experiences in higher education. These projects all share a commitment to centering marginalized voices and transforming how research circulates—moving it from institutional settings to public spaces, classrooms, and community!

Ultimately, my work is animated by a belief that above all, research is a relational practice—one that asks us to witness one another, to hold complexity, and to always imagine otherwise. I see scholarship as an act of deep care and responsibility: a way of making visible the emotional, spiritual, and communal dimensions of knowing that are too often overlooked within the Western episteme. My hope then with this work is to restore the possibility of joy in the spaces where we live, learn, and dream together.

To learn more about Suad's work, please [click here](#) for her abstract

Stephen Francis

Ph.D. Student,
University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada

I don't think there's enough space here for me to fully articulate my feelings about the increase in anti-DEIA moves globally, but I'll try. On one hand, it viscerally upsets me that history is repeating itself like this. Beyond the use of advanced technologies to oppress historically marginalized peoples, very little of what we are experiencing is new. However, I am also hopeful because amid the heaviness, pain, and anger, I'm privileged to work and be in community with people who are challenging the attempts to normalize all this oppression. I get to be in community with people who are naming and disrupting these injustices through research and protest as much as through various forms of mutual aid and community care.



Caption: Professional headshot of Stephen Francis

I hope my work will do two main things:

1. Help keep certain elements of African Indigenous/Afro-Caribbean traditions, like storytelling, alive within Caribbean (academic) spaces.
2. Help people like me to find the language to explain to ourselves the injustices we continue to face and to find our place in the movements that unsettle oppressive structures and actors within them.

Next Steps and Continuing the Work:

I am currently enrolled as a doctoral student in education leadership and policy at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. So I'm currently immersing myself in that experience by trying to learn more about the issues that Black students, educators, and administrators are currently facing and the historical contexts for these. I'm also actively engaged in learning more about African Indigenous/Afro-Caribbean methodologies to research these issues and develop solutions to them in community with the people affected by them. My ultimate hope is to become more grounded in African Indigenous/Afro-Caribbean ways of knowing and being as guiding principles as I go through life, and to share these with people in ways that actively counteract the narratives of deficit with which we are seen globally and have been taught to see ourselves.

To learn more about Stephen's work, please [click here](#) for his abstract



Zenah Hussun

MA Student,
University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Over the past few years, I've been reflecting on how conversations around Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion have shifted. What once felt like a movement toward justice and representation has, in many spaces, become procedural, something that lives in blanket statements and policies rather than a practice. For those who are leading equity work within the community, myself included, it's no longer just about how equity is practiced, but who gets to define it, who gets to share knowledge, and who has access to it.

Caption: Professional headshot of Zenah Hussun

These questions sit at the core of my work as a community educator and researcher. I've always been guided by the belief that knowledge doesn't only live in classrooms, but lives in our communities, our experiences, and our relationships with one another. Before DEI became an institutional language, our communities were already modeling what equity looks like: showing up for one another, hosting events, creating learning spaces rooted in care, and building what we now call "representation" simply by existing fully, and that's what keeps me grounded, knowing that this work has never started or ended within the institution.

Recently, I had the opportunity to present at the OISE Centre for Leadership and Diversity's International Conference on Leadership for Renewal, Sustenance, and Resistance, presenting my research, *From the Margins to the Center: Reimagining Education as a Form of Resistance*, explored what it means to build spaces where education is not about performance, but about belonging. We asked: What happens when those who have always been positioned as "recipients" of knowledge are recognized as producers of it? That conversation reflected on what it means to build learning environments where education isn't a performance but a practice of belonging, in spaces that affirm who we are and allow us to bring our full selves.

My years working in the non-profit sector and leading community programming have shown me how these environments become powerful sites of possibility, especially for Black and racialized youth navigating the complexities of adulthood. As a Graduate Assistant at the Centre for Black Studies in Education (CBSE) and a Master's Student in Adult Education and Community Development, my work continues to explore these ideas through the lens of third spaces, community-based learning environments that exist outside of formal systems. I'm interested in how these spaces nurture belonging, identity, and self-determination, and how they challenge traditional notions of who gets to teach, lead, or be recognized as knowledgeable.

Next Steps and Continuing the Work:

Looking ahead, I want to continue bridging community and academia in ways that center care, relationship, and reciprocity. My hope is that my work contributes to reimagining what learning can look like when it's not confined to institutions but shaped by the people it's meant to serve because ultimately, the work isn't just about inclusion, but collaboration. This work is meant to provide opportunities where everyone can access knowledge, contribute to it, and find new ways to build spaces where learning is shared, knowledge flows both ways, and when community becomes the classroom."

To learn more about Zenah's work, please [click here](#) for her abstract

Jennifer Chinenye Emelife

Ph.D. Candidate,
University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Editor's Note:

Below are questions we asked Jennifer:

- Your work aims to bridge boundaries and foster connections. How does it challenge silos, and why do you think this is important today?
- How has participating in this conference or pursuing this work shaped your own understanding of solidarity, collaboration, or human connection?
- What are your next steps, goals, or hopes for your work moving forward? How do you hope it will impact your community or field?

We thoroughly enjoyed reading and engaging with their reflections. We look forward to staying in touch as they progress in their research and academic journey. We also hope that we can keep supporting each other.



Caption: A headshot of Jennifer Chinenye Emelife

I am an Igbo woman from eastern Nigeria who grew up in Sokoto, northern Nigeria. I learned early how to balance this feeling of belonging amidst obvious differences and discrimination. In classrooms where conversations about ethnicity, religion, or politics could quickly turn tense, I was often quiet because silence felt like the safest option. We were taught to recite that Nigeria is a land of over 200 ethnic groups and that diversity is its strength, yet we were given no safe spaces to explore what that diversity meant in the shadows of conflict and inequality that defined our context. I remember times when our school would suddenly close, with parents rushing in to pick up their kids in fear of impending attacks. But then we would return to class the next day to resume lessons as if the fear and chaos of the day before had not happened. These contradictions quietly shaped my understanding of education as a system that too often asks students to ignore their lived realities.

As I began to pursue work in language and literacy education, I saw that silence replicated itself, in other forms, in our curriculum, teacher education, and youth dialogues. In this way, Nigeria's education system, like many others across postcolonial contexts, still bears the legacies of colonialism, which stress compliance over questioning. However, I have come to see literacy as one means through which these systems can be disrupted from within. Beyond the ability to read and write, literacy can also be the power to name one's experience, to interrogate history, and to imagine alternatives.

My work now focuses on critical literacy education as an approach that encourages learners and teachers to engage their own realities and to question the power structures within and around them. Education, I believe, has to connect to the experience of learners, or else it can easily become irrelevant. In my research, I examine how classrooms might be a site for reflection, resistance, and hope, especially for those young people who have been impacted by conflict and displacement. As global crises from Gaza to Ukraine to Nigeria's northern regions continue to displace and disorient communities, creating educational spaces where young people can think critically about violence, identity, and belonging seems urgent.

Working with schools and language-literacy organizations allows me to translate these ideas into practice. I organize programs that bring teachers together to discuss how to approach peace, conflict, and diversity through literacy teaching. My goal is to demonstrate that subjects like the English language can do more than teach grammar and comprehension. Language-literacy education can help students cultivate empathy, dialogue, and social awareness.

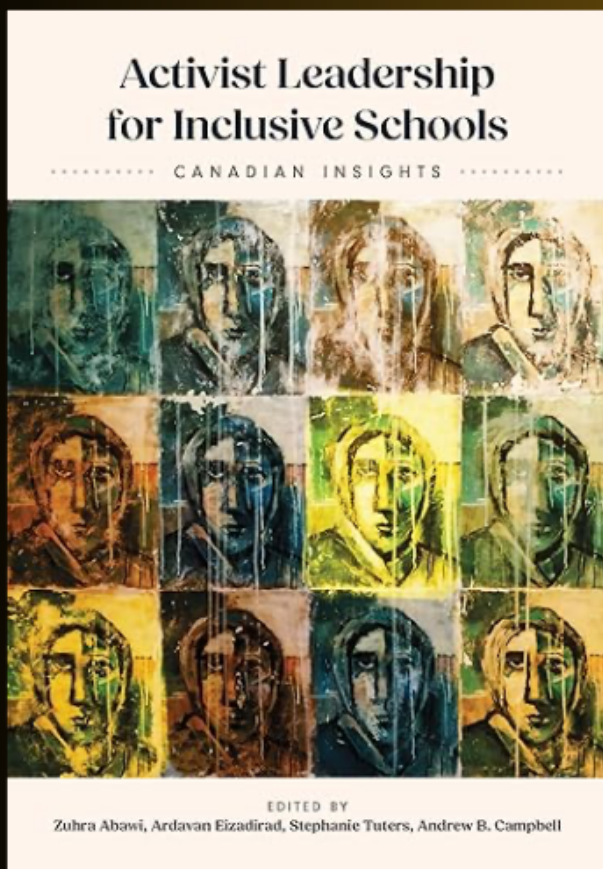
Next Steps and Continuing the Work:

I hope to develop and publish more research into the areas where literacy education meets peacebuilding and social justice, contributing to international conversations about the education of displaced youth and refugees. This work is really personal for me. It speaks to the silences I once carried as a young girl, navigating two regions, two cultures, and many layers of belonging. I have come to realize that education is the radical space of possibility in which young people learn not only to read the world but also to rewrite it.

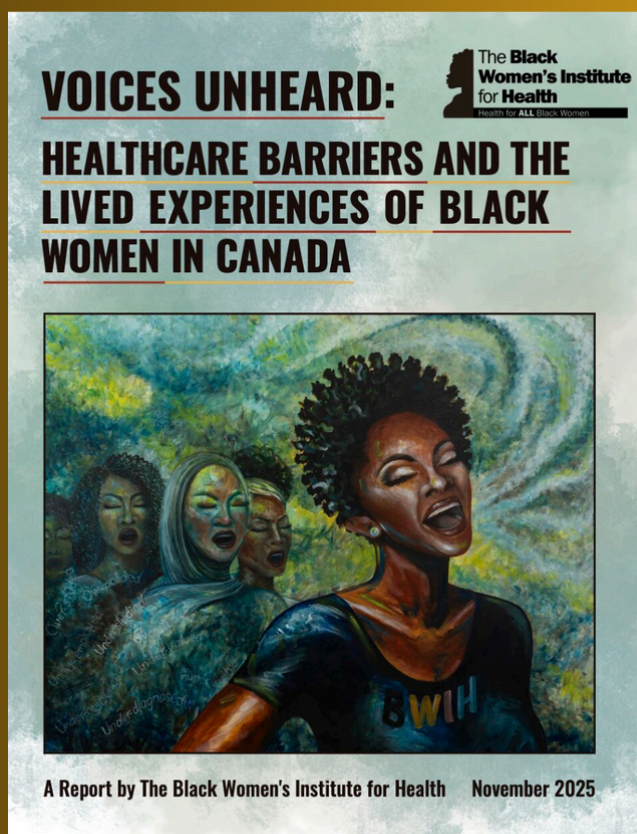
To learn more about Jennifer's work, please [click here](#) for her abstract

CITATIONS OF BRILLIANCE

Citations of Brilliance celebrates the achievements of Black graduate students in professional and research programs, as well as the broader Black community in higher education. From innovative research projects and publications to leadership and community impact, this segment highlights excellence and the contributions shaping academia today.



[Activist Leadership for Inclusive Schools: Canadian Insights](#)
Authors: Abawi, Campbell, Eizaadriad, & Tuters



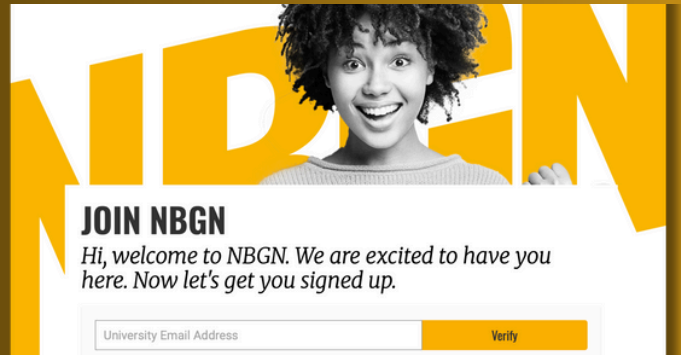
[Voices Unheard: Canada's First National Health Survey of Black Women and Girls](#)
Authors: The Black Women's Institute for Health

DISSEMINATE THE KNOWLEDGE



The Black Lens is a monthly newsletter dedicated to sharing and celebrating Black scholarship, creativity, and stories in Canada. Help us grow this community by subscribing and sharing it within your networks. The more we connect, the stronger and more supportive our community becomes, amplifying Black voices and experiences together.

[Become an NBGN member today!](#)



[Follow our Instagram](#)



[Follow our LinkedIn](#)



IN THE NBGN PIPELINE



The National Black Graduate Network (NBGN) is proud to host its first online event, The Black Lens: A Conversation on Demystifying the Doctoral Journey, on Tuesday, November 18th, 2025. This conversation invites Black graduate students across Canada to share their lived experiences, reflections, and insights as they navigate the complexities of the doctoral journey in higher education.

[Register for the event!](#)

The NBGN invites 500-word reflections, poems, or visual art on the theme “Navigating Academia as a Black Graduate Student.” We welcome authentic pieces that explore the lived experiences of Black graduate students across professional and research programs (MA, MSc, PhD, EdD, MD, JD, etc.).

Reflections may touch on belonging, mentorship, community, identity, or resilience within higher education. Selected submissions will be featured in The Black Lens, highlighting Black graduate voices across Canada.

Submit your response to [this form](#)

