Understanding Anti-Black Racism to Support the Mental Health and Well-Being of Black and Racialized Students

Enhancing Equity Literacy in Ontario School Mental Health Leadership Teams

It is important to acknowledge that all Ontario students, families and school board staff have been navigating unprecedented circumstances throughout the global pandemic. We all continue to adapt to the ever-changing landscape.

Extended school closures due to COVID-19 resulted in a sense of collective loss. That has including loss of routines, relationships, learning, opportunities for socialization and employment. All have heightened feelings of isolation, stress and worry, affecting our overall mental health and well-being.

Beyond this, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light and even magnified deep-rooted economic, social and racial inequities – ones that have disproportionately impacted already marginalized communities.

In Ontario, students and families experienced and witnessed added layers of poverty; family violence; discrimination; transphobia and homophobia; anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, and anti-Asian racism; and barriers related to disability, including mental illness and addictions. These realities hinder access to social, emotional, and academic supports.

Systemic racism and oppression is not new. Yet racial inequities have been exacerbated and brought to the forefront. We have seen the mobilization for racial justice in Canada and around the world, as with the Black Lives Matter movement and related protests and calls to action. Equity and the social determinants of health (i.e. health, financial, racial, gender based, housing, etc.) are deeply connected to mental health and well-being.

While this resource has a focus on anti-Black racism, it can also help to support a broader understanding of racism, bias and stereotype, and their impacts on mental health and well-being.

Attending to the social, emotional and academic development of students is complex and layered. The mental health and well-being of students and staff during, through and after the pandemic is top of mind. It invites opportunities to:

* collaborate with families and community partners
* develop learning environments and experiences that are identity affirming
* foster the social, emotional, and academic skills needed to create caring, mentally healthy and just school communities – and by extension societies

What is racism and anti-Black racism?

Race: The concept of distinct races is a social construct that was used to justify slavery and genocide of Black and Indigenous people. This notion was challenged more than 100 years ago by American sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois. He was concerned that race was being used as a biological explanation for what he understood to be social and cultural differences between different populations. Du Bois spoke out against the idea of "White" and "Black" as discrete groups, claiming that these distinctions ignored the scope of human diversity.

"Black" as a form of social location or positive self-identification: Students who self-identify as Black, often do so as a positive affirmation. Race as a social construct, has positioned the Black race as "lesser" than the White race. Hence, some White people may be uncomfortable using the term "Black" (e.g. Black students), as they may feel that they are perpetuating a negative social construct. This discomfort may be one of the nuances that adults can explore as they unearth their own biases.

Racism: A belief that one group is superior to others. Racism can be openly displayed in racial jokes, slurs or hate crimes. It can also be more deeply rooted in attitudes, values and stereotypical beliefs. In some cases, people don't even realize they have these beliefs. Instead, assumptions have evolved over time, become part of systems and institutions, and become associated with the dominant group's power and privilege.

Anti-Black racism: Anti-Black racism is prejudice, attitudes, beliefs, stereotyping and discrimination directed at people of African descent. It's rooted in their unique history and experience of enslavement and its legacy. Anti-Black racism is deeply entrenched in Canadian institutions, policies and practices, to the extent that it is either functionally normalized or rendered invisible to the larger White society. In the current social, economic, and political marginalization of Black Canadians, anti-Black racism manifests as unequal opportunities, lower socio-economic status, higher unemployment, significant poverty rates, and overrepresentation in the criminal justice system.

Anti-racist: Refers to practices aimed intentionally at dismantling racism.

Equity-focused: Refers to strategies aimed at improving equity in experiences and outcomes for all students and adults, across race, gender identity, ethnicity, language, disability, sexual orientation, family background, family income, and other characteristics.

Overt racism: Recognized as overt expressions of racism such as racial slurs, racist jokes, Blackface/Brownface, and racial violence (e.g. mass mosque shootings, cross-burnings by the KKK, police brutality, etc.). These are generally seen as socially unacceptable.

Covert racism: A form of racial discrimination that is disguised and shows up in subtle ways such as implicit biases, microaggressions, and racially coded language. Often, people are unaware of the racism that informs these things, and what they say and do can be regarded as socially acceptable, when it should not be, as it reinforces racist attitudes and beliefs.

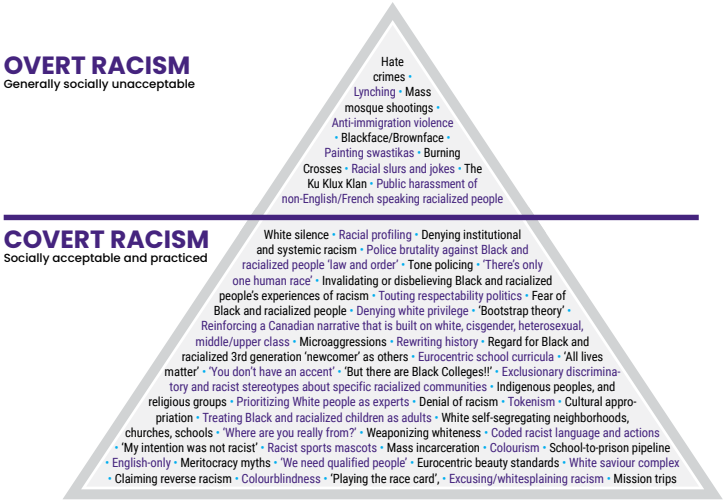
White privilege: We all experience a combination of privilege and marginalization. That doesn't mean that you haven't faced adversity or hardship, experienced challenges, or worked hard. However, it does mean that you have certain socially granted unearned privileges and protections, and thus a responsibility to recognize and use your power and privilege to support, amplify and be an active ally for, and with, marginalized groups.

> **"Speaking of Whiteness is not a critique of White people as individuals. Whiteness is rather seen as an invisible social process by which power and privilege is exercised in a society divided by colour, as well as other social markers."**
>
> — **Dr. Frances Henry and Carol Trator**
> **The Colour of Democracy: Racism in Canadian Society (2009)**

Overt and Covert Racism At-A-Glance

OVERT RACISM
Generally socially unacceptable

Hate crimes, Lynching, Mass mosque shootings, Anti-immigration violence, Blackface/Brownface, Painting swastikas, Burning Crosses, Racial slurs and jokes, The Ku Klux Klan, Public harassment of non-English/French speaking racialized people



COVERT RACISM
Socially acceptable and practiced

White silence, Racial profiling, Denying institutional and systemic racism, Police brutality against Black and racialized people 'law and order', Tone policing, 'There's only one human race', Invalidating or disbelieving Black and racialized people's experiences of racism, Touting respectability politics, Fear of Black and racialized people, Denying white privilege, 'Bootstrap theory', Reinforcing a Canadian narrative that is built on white, cisgender, heterosexual, middle/upper class, Microaggressions, Rewriting history, Regard for Black and racialized 3rd generation 'newcomer' as others, Eurocentric school curricula, 'All lives matter', 'You don't have an accent', 'But there are Black Colleges!!', Exclusionary discriminatory and racist stereotypes about specific racialized communities, Indigenous peoples, and religious groups, Prioritizing White people as experts, Denial of racism, Tokenism, Cultural appropriation, Treating Black and racialized children as adults, White self-segregating neighborhoods, churches, schools, 'Where are you really from?', Weaponizing whiteness, Coded racist language and actions, 'My intention was not racist', Racist sports mascots, Mass incarceration, Colourism, School-to-prison pipeline, English-only, Meritocracy myths, 'We need qualified people', Eurocentric beauty standards, White saviour complex, Claiming reverse racism, Colourblindness, 'Playing the race card', Excusing/whitesplaining racism, Mission trips

Image adapted from: Source: Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence (2005) "Building a Multi-Ethnic, Inclusive & Antiracist Organization-Tools for Liberation Packet for Anti-Racist Activists, Allies, & Critical Thinkers"

International and Canadian context

The United Nations has declared 2015 to 2024 the International Decade for People of African Descent. Canada adopted the declaration in 2018 and has made a commitment to address systemic anti-Black racism throughout Canadian institutions.

> **In proclaiming this Decade, the international community is recognizing that people of African descent represent a distinct group whose human rights must be promoted and protected. Around 200 million people identifying themselves as being of African descent live in the Americas. Many millions more live in other parts of the world, outside of the African continent. Whether as descendants of the victims of the transatlantic slave trade or as more recent migrants, they constitute some of the poorest and most marginalized groups.**
>
> *— International Decade for People of African Descent, United Nations 2015-2024*

Ontario's context

According to the paper Anti-Black Racism in Ontario Schools: A Historical Context, segregation of students was present prior to 1850, and made legal that year. The Common Schools Act of 1850 separated schools based on race and religion. Tax rate regulations made it impossible for Black families to refuse to pay rates for white schools, while Black schools had more limited access to buildings and supplies/books.

The education available to Black children was substandard. Yet, when Black children scored lower in academic testing the results were explained as a result of genetics/race, not poor learning conditions. Black families viewed education as a path towards a better standard of living, yet their access to quality education was thwarted repeatedly.

Between 1850-1885, Black parents challenged segregated schools and several lawsuits were put forward. These challenged the fact that Black parents were forced to pay tax rates for White schools their children could not attend.

The segregation of schools was finally and successfully challenged in 1964. That's when the first Black MPP, Leonard Braithwaite submitted a motion to repeal the Act that permitted racially segregated schools. The last segregated school closed on Colchester, Ontario in 1965.

Mental Health in Ontario

Ontario is deeply invested in supporting mental health using a system-wide approach. Beginning with school-aged children and youth was a natural starting point.

Much progress has been made over the past few years in helping educational systems better understand:

* the connection between mental health and well-being and academic achievement
* the duty to accommodate students' mental health-related needs

Schools are now seen as an excellent environment to prioritize student mental health and deliver mental health services for children and youth. Despite many advancements, the mental health needs for all students have not fully been met, especially the mental health and wellbeing needs of marginalized students. Often their needs are more poorly understood, poorly served, under-resourced, or delivered in ways that are not culturally relevant, responsive, respectful or reciprocal. Among those who have been most marginalized are Black children and youth.

To respond to the mental health needs of Black children and youth, we must first understand how anti-Black racism contributes to collective trauma for many Black students. Understanding the impact of anti-Black racism on Black mental health is a natural evolution, and an essential component of a comprehensive approach to supporting the mental health of every student.

Black Mental Health Day

The proclamation of Bill 178, the Black Mental Health Day Act (2020), has helped set the stage for all to learn and understand more about the impact of systemic racism. We need to work together to enact meaningful systemic change, to include Black students and address the historical impact of bias, discrimination and trauma on their mental health and well-being. Anti-Black racism pervades all aspects of school systems, resulting in unequal treatment of Black students. There is no "neutral" stance in the face of injustice; we must all learn about the role we play in the discrimination of Black students, and move forward in our equity-focused work to support the mental health and well-being of all Black students.

> **"Racism is a socially-contracted mental illness that is not always direct or blatant, but rather, can be insinuating and subtle. It can be concealed by the manipulation of language used to dissimulate and deceive."**
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> **— Dr. Lorne Foster, York University, Ontario**

We need to gain a broader understanding of the current and historical social context, and reflect on our own biases and privileges, and how they impact us as individuals and professionals, and how this in turn impacts our students.

Ontario has formed the Anti-Racism Directorate to address the various forms of racism that exist in provincial institutions. This effort works to eliminate systemic racism in government policies, decisions and programs, and advance racial equity in Ontario for Black, Indigenous and racialized populations.

The approach we take to dismantle racism, and its associated mental illness, must be explicit and intentional. Such an approach is needed as racism can be subtle and concealed by the mechanisms that perpetuate it.

The impact of anti-Black Racism on the mental health of Black students

Systemic issues in education

Education systems in Canada were developed from a White-dominant racial lens. The colonial legacy lives on today. As such, school boards are part of a system of racist policies and practices that permeate all aspects of school life.

The impacts of anti-Black racism on the mental health of Black students include (but aren't limited to) under-diagnosis, misdiagnosis, denial of service, lack of culturally relevant services, and race-related stress exacerbating or creating mental health problems or illnesses[1]. Despite their incredible resilience, Black students experience a huge toll and are "pushed out" of education at much higher rates than their White peers.

The focus should not be on helping marginalized and oppressed Black students develop more resilience. Instead, we must address the oppressive systems and policies that have directly caused Black students to be marginalized.

The disparity in academic opportunity for Black students compared to White students is significant. In the 2017 report "Towards Race Equity and Education," Dr. Carl James and Tana Turner report major disparities. Of the 2006-2011 student cohort, 39% of Black students were enrolled in applied courses vs. only 16% of White students. In contrast, 53% of Black students were enrolled in academic courses, vs. 81% of white students. The report points out that by the end of their secondary school career, 42% of Black students have been suspended at least once, vs. only 18% of White students. The level of disparity invites us to examine the systemic forces that perpetuate these divides.

Communities have also raised concerns about lack of inclusive curriculum; under-representation of Black and other racialized educators and leaders; failure to address racial discrimination and harassment; disproportionalities and disparities in special education; lowered academic expectations; and suppression of Black student aspirations.

To best support the mental health and well-being of Black students, we need to work with our community partners. Most of our current systems and services do not recognize the diversity that exists within the Black community. Nor do they fulfill the diversity of services needed to have a culturally relevant and responsive system supporting Black student mental health. This work includes collecting race based data to better inform a more representative and responsive system of mental health services.

1 Williams, D. R., González, H. M., Neighbors, H., Nesse, R., Abelson, J. M., Sweetman, J., & Jackson, J. S. (2007). Prevalence and distribution of major depressive disorder in African Americans, Caribbean blacks, and non-Hispanic whites: Results from the National Survey of American Life. Archives of General Psychiatry, 64(3), 305–315. https://doi.org/10.1001/archpsyc.64.3.305

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Racial trauma

> **"…Rarely is unmasking and treating the hidden wounds of racial trauma a focal point of intervention. Instead, conventional approaches attend to family problems, individual psychological issues, behavioral problems, affect disorders, and substance misuse. These are salient factors but skirt issues of race which are powerful dynamics in the lives of youth of color…Internalized devaluation is a direct by-product of racism, inextricably linked to the deification of whiteness and the demonization of non-white hues. It is perpetrated throughout society, including in the very systems with the stated mission of serving youth."**
>
> **— Hardy & Qureshi, 2012**

In the article entitled "Healing the Hidden Wounds of Racial Trauma", Kenneth V. Hardy describes racial oppression as a traumatic form of interpersonal violence "which can lacerate the spirit, scar the soul, and puncture the psyche". Despite this profound impact on the mental health of Black persons, race, racism and racial trauma are rarely the focus of mental health understanding or intervention.

Hardy invites us to consider how the sense of self is diminished and, in some cases, severely impacted through the culmination of recurring experiences with internalized devaluation. Through repeated experiences with "internalized devaluation", it becomes very challenging for Black youth to develop a positive sense of self.

A Black youth's emotional-psychological milieu can be inundated with repeated race-related messages (implicit and explicit) such as: *you are not as attractive as…not as smart as… too dumb to…not intelligent enough to…not college material… 'pretty articulate for a Black kid'.* When that happens, one's sense of self will inevitably reflect those messages.

As board mental health leadership teams navigate a mentally healthy return to school, consider the different ways your board can address the specific needs of Black student mental health and the impact of racial trauma.

Reflect:

* What are the learning needs of educators, school and system leaders in understanding anti-Black racism and its impacts on Black student mental health?
* How are Black and racialized students and families engaged in conversations about their experiences with anti-Black racism in school (online or in person) and in the community?
* What specific steps will you take to address the concerns identified by students, educators, and families?
* How are schools supporting students who are experiencing community violence (state sanctioned or otherwise)?
* What conditions will the school system put in place to address microaggressions when they happen?
* How prepared is the school system to provide culturally relevant school mental health services, including access to Black self-identified regulated mental health professionals?
* Which Black self-identified and allied community organizations might you partner with and engage to support Black and racialized student mental health?

Talking about anti-Black racism

Why talk about anti-Black racism?

During the pandemic, young people have been separated from their social circles, and had increased exposure to social media and news. Having a discussion with students about anti-Black racism will support an inclusive classroom and return to school. It lets students know that educators and school systems are aware of the social context, and not afraid to discuss and confront anti-Black racism.

Providing Black students with supportive spaces and opportunities to express their feelings and talk openly about their lived experiences with systemic barriers at school and in the community. That demonstrates a commitment to addressing anti-Black racism and can begin a healing process with Black students.

Acknowledging Anti-Black Racism exists, and that it has an impact on the health and well-being of Black-Canadians, can help to counteract the impacts of anti-Black racism.

Why not talk about racism in general?

Ontario Black students have been over-represented in the most negative ways possible (e.g. highest suspension, expulsion rates/lowest graduation rates). Discussing anti-Black racism with students helps to address the historical imbalances that Black students have faced. It also builds a bridge to working with students, their families and the broader community to eradicate systemic forms of anti-Black racism in our school communities.

Talking about anti-Black racism will benefit all racialized and marginalized students and help to develop allies in all students.

What does it mean to be an ally, and how to become one?

> **"What is important about being an ally is that being an ally requires action. It requires naming, exploring and seeking to change injustices that we witness against marginalized communities. Being an ally is not supposed to be a comfortable process, it is a critical process in which we must examine our own social locations (our identities and how we are positioned relative to experiences of oppression and privilege), how we benefit from racism and how we can address racism that we see at multiple levels in our society, whether at the institutional level or the individual level (for example, racist ideas of comments from family or friends).**
>
> — Student, University of Guelph

Being an ally means acknowledging your power and privilege and leveraging them to remove anti-Black racism from within ourselves and our systems. Allyship also has longer lasting effects than advocacy. It means working with people (as opposed to working for them), along with individual personal exploration, which ideally results in lasting systemic change.

Continuing along this continuum of change is the concept of being an "accomplice" or "co-conspirator" in anti-racist work, meaning those who are not Black doing anti-racist work alongside one another (KOJO Institute, 2020).

Supporting mentally healthy conversations about anti-Black racism

Many Ontario students will be engaged in conversations and activities around race and racism, especially Black students, and rightfully so. In our return to school plans, we will focus on creating mentally healthy, safe and genuine spaces to have these discussions.

In challenging the status quo and planning for meaningful systematic change, we need to prepare ourselves to help facilitate these processes. As adults supporting students at school (no matter how schooling will look in the fall and beyond), we all play a role in confronting systemic racism and working to build more just societies.

A commitment to positive change also requires us to look inward at our own biases. We must recognize the complexity and deep-seated nature of this problem, which itself requires multiple voices and perspectives. This is a time for school boards to collaborate with the broader community and recognize the importance of deconstructing our systems and revisioning them to include and support everyone. We need to do so by acting in concrete ways. This requires us all to do some work, especially for those of us who are not Black.

As learning communities, we can:

* support and create mentally healthy spaces to encourage discussion
* listen, believe, and act on what we hear students and their families saying
* disrupt the powerful unexamined ideas that support systemic racism,
* engage in learning that is not comfortable and can take an emotional toll

Feelings of discomfort are normal. They help us to better understand ourselves, the roles we play in perpetuating anti-Black racism, and how we can eliminate it.

Mental health leaders and School Mental Health Ontario leadership have come together to produce a resource aimed at Supporting Mentally Healthy Conversation about Anti-Black Racism with Students. Board Mental health leadership teams, in partnership with equity and inclusion teams, can use this resource to:

* help set up mentally healthy re-entry plans for students
* facilitate courageous conversations around anti-Black racism and the impact on mental health and well-being
* support caring staff members in discussing and reflecting on anti-Black racism, working towards a mentally healthy return to school and planning for substantive systemic change against racism to improve mental health outcomes for Black and racialized students.

When preparing to engage in conversations about race and anti-Black racism, at a system or school level, we need to reflect on our own biases, privileges and social location. Our own intersecting identities have a direct impact on how we interact with and treat everyone. This groundwork is essential to support educators with conversations about race and anti-Black racism with their students. Here are some resources to further your own self-examination:

* CASEL.org Webinar Learning Series on Racial Injustice and SEL
* What Does it Mean to Be White? Developing White Racial Literacy , R. DiAngelo
* White Fragility R. DiAngelo
* 25 Books About Being Black in Canada
* 'What white privilege?' 'Why can't you be more civil?' Some FAQs about racism and answers you may find challenging
* https://www.ontario.ca/page/ontarios-anti-black-racism-strategy
* Brief video explaining anti-Black Racism and White Supremacy., Kamau Bell, Journalist for CNN. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wV2-Rg9EygY
* CASEL: Reunite, Renew and Thrive: SEL Roadmap for Reopening School
* Black Health Alliance

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