Centring Black, Indigenous and Marginalized Perspectives in Mental Health Promotion at School: Examining and Decentring whiteness

A strong sense of identity and belonging is a critical part of good mental health. Schools have a special role in helping young people develop their sense of self, through welcoming and affirming learning environments and supportive interactions. Many school boards across the province have been engaging in practices designed to centre Black, Indigenous and marginalized students so they have access to learning environments, curricula, and services that are affirming, supportive, and meaningful. This is important work. It can also be challenging work, because creating learning environments and supports that are developed with, or informed by, the various lived experiences of students and their intersectional and developing identities, may represent a significant departure from past practice.

When we centre the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and marginalized students and their communities, we decentre whiteness that permeates our education system and wider society. Many of the structures, processes, and daily practices that we use in education are grounded in western thinking and have arisen from histories that have been centred upon white dominance and privilege.

This close examination of the past and current practice can present or remind us of uncomfortable truths, for a variety of reasons. Reconciling truths with current practice can be emotional work that may at times give rise to feelings of pain, anger, reminders of past experiences, defensiveness, or even denial. This work will look different for each of us, depending on who we are, and the roles we have, but is critical so we can centre the voices and experiences that have not been historically (and currently) prioritized, honoured, and celebrated.

NOTE: the word "Black" is capitalized when referencing Black people. Black is a name for a racialized social group, and capitalizing it is a recognition of a particular shared set of histories, cultures, and connections. The word "white" remains lowercase as it lacks a similar shared culture and experience. Capitalizing white also risks lending legitimacy to white supremacist ideology and other stereotypes (Canadian Press, 2020; Dumas, 2016).

What does decentring whiteness in school mental health mean?

Whiteness has been socially constructed to unfairly confer unequal power and influence to white perspectives. White perspectives are historically rooted in colonialism and Eurocentrism. Placing white perspectives at the centre of society resulted in marginalizing other ways of knowing and being. At the center, the power and influence of whiteness pervades all aspects of society and defines the standard by which everything else is measured and practiced, including school mental health. If whiteness continues to go unnamed and unchallenged as the default, the diversity of other ways of knowing and being continues to be marginalized.

Decentring whiteness is a process of moving whiteness from the centre of society (see whiteness above) while at the same time re-centring diverse perspectives. This intentional action requires naming the ways in which whiteness is centred by continuously interrogating and challenging existing structures, processes, and practices, while using the power, influence, and privilege we have to amplify diverse ways of knowing and being. Without intentional action to re-centre historically and presently marginalized perspectives, whiteness will continue to occupy the centre. Re-centring the diversity of ways of knowing and being will enrich our learning environments and school mental health practices, to help affirm every student's identities — especially those who have been historically, and are currently, marginalized and oppressed.

Centring Black, Indigenous and marginalized students requires intentionally including and centring different worldviews and cultures. This can include, but is not limited to:

▶ Highlighting achievements of Black, Indigenous and marginalized people.

▶ Including customs, foods, images, and examples from different cultures as part of instruction and school events.

▶ Acknowledging languages other than English and French.

▶ Recognizing days of significance at school.

▶ Accurately relaying historical facts related to colonialism and its impacts.

▶ Amplifying the work of partner cultural/faith/community organizations.

This ongoing process and commitment require us to investigate how whiteness is normalized and centralized in our schools, learning environments, and practices, and to expand our thinking to engage with diverse ways of knowing and being, to the benefit of every student.

Proximity to whiteness refers to how much white privilege someone has. Whiteness is not only about skin colour. It is also how our society prioritizes and welcomes traits associated with whiteness (i.e., how someone talks, dresses, where they live). Proximity to these attributes can also give someone more privilege, even if they are not white.

For example, post-secondary education and the use of academic language are attributed to whiteness. This affords people better access to predominantly white spaces such as academia and business, regardless of their skin colour. As a result, people who use academic language are perceived differently from those who do not.

> **NOTE**: Having certain privilege(s) does not mean you won't go through any hardships in life, but any hardships you do go through won't be because of that identity marker that provides you privilege.

Begin with cultural humility

Learning environments play an important role in Black, Indigenous and marginalized students' sense of belonging and overall mental health and well-being. The first step in decentring whiteness to create affirming learning environments, is to practice cultural humility. Through cultural humility we look deeply at our own identities to construct affirming messages in the spaces we co-create, the relationships we build, and the interactions we have with every student.
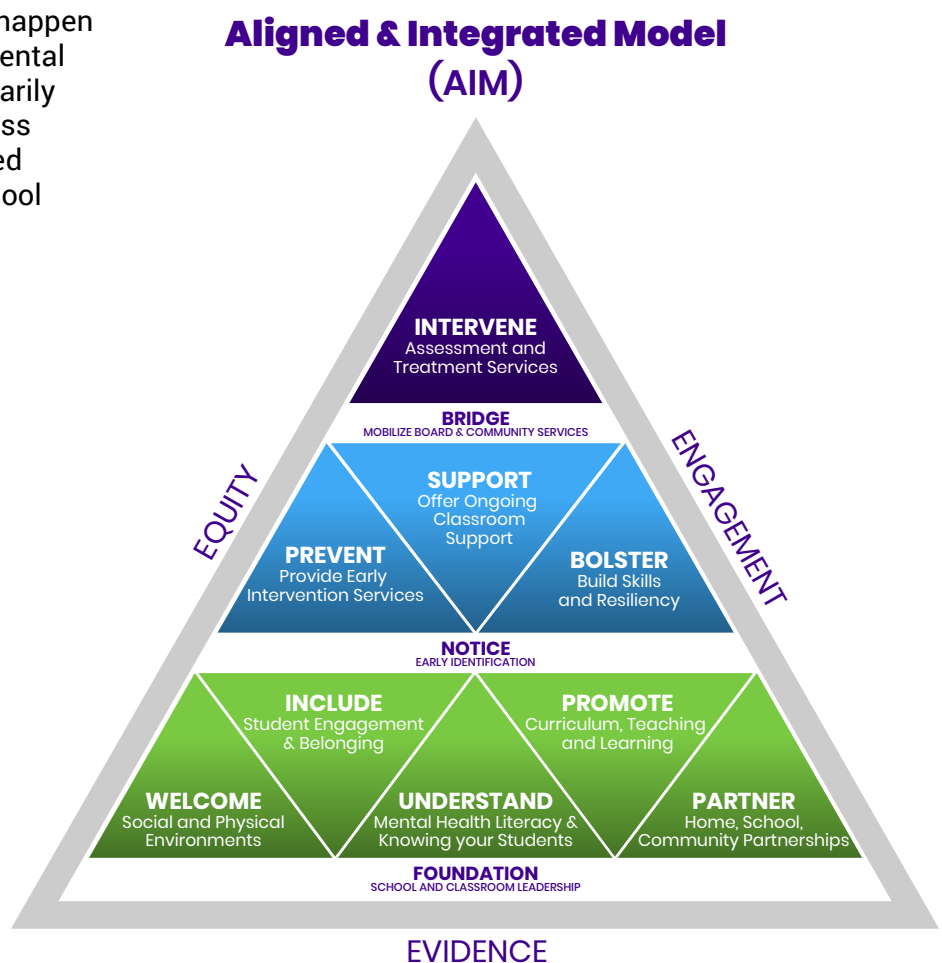
Read on: Cultural humility tool for School Staff

Ways to centre Black, Indigenous and marginalized students

In a society where whiteness is everywhere, creating environments for Black, Indigenous, and marginalized students to be happy, safe, free, and connected, to show honest emotion and to be their full authentic selves, is essential. This includes the ability to have discussions and sustain spaces that focus on the specific needs of Black, Indigenous and marginalized people. While this may occur through specific affinity groups and community connections, when we decentre whiteness, these supportive spaces become part of the school community and classroom life.

While decentring whiteness must happen across the continuum of school mental health care, this resource will primarily focus on mental health and wellness promotion, or tier one of the Aligned and Integrated Model (AIM) for School Mental Health and Well-Being.

Some of the everyday supports that school staff provide students at this foundational tier include: welcoming and including students, understanding students and building their knowledge of mental health, promoting mentally healthy habits and partnering with parents/caregivers, students and other staff to create a supportive environment.

Aligned & Integrated Model (AIM)

EQUITY

ENGAGEMENT

INTERVENE
Assessment and Treatment Services

BRIDGE
MOBILIZE BOARD & COMMUNITY SERVICES

SUPPORT
Offer Ongoing Classroom Support

PREVENT
Provide Early Intervention Services

BOLSTER
Build Skills and Resiliency

NOTICE
EARLY IDENTIFICATION

INCLUDE
Student Engagement & Belonging

PROMOTE
Curriculum, Teaching and Learning

WELCOME
Social and Physical Environments

UNDERSTAND
Mental Health Literacy & Knowing your Students

PARTNER
Home, School, Community Partnerships

FOUNDATION
SCHOOL AND CLASSROOM LEADERSHIP

EVIDENCE

Below are some actions you can take to better centre Black, Indigenous, and marginalized student perspectives. Consider your role in the school environment as you reflect.

WELCOME
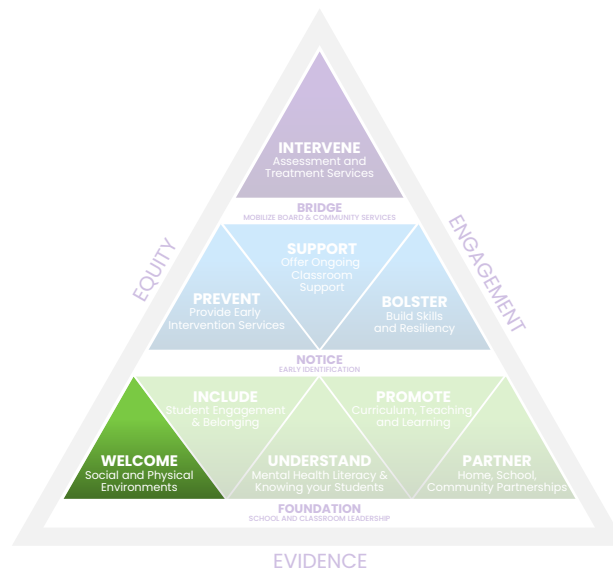
The learning environment you co-create with students sets the tone for centring the identities and experiences of every student. The ways that students are greeted, the images they see, the language you use, all contribute to their sense of belonging and wellness.

What does this look like in practice?

▶ How can I convey to every student that I acknowledge them and value them?
(e.g., greet or positively acknowledge each student as they enter the learning environment).

▶ How can I better understand the lived realities of every student?
(e.g., learn about the interests and strengths of each student).

▶ How can I show that I value the contributions of cultures and practices that may be different from my own? (e.g., intentional focus on contributions of Black, Indigenous, and marginalized individuals and communities).

▶ How can I co-create a comfortable learning space for Black, Indigenous, and marginalized students? (e.g., explicitly invite, feature, and amplify Black, Indigenous and marginalized student voices).

▶ How can I decentre whiteness in our learning environment?
(e.g., acknowledge and celebrate diverse cultural observances).

Read on: Supporting mentally healthy conversations about anti-black racism with students; Mentally healthy classroom reflection tool

INCLUDE
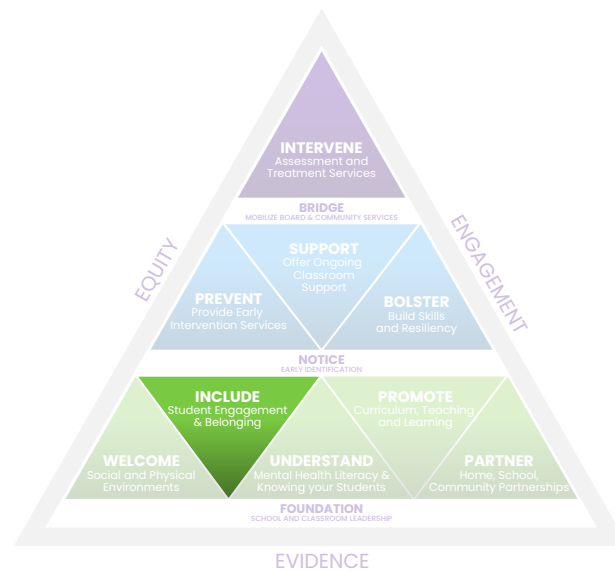
The school environment plays an important role in a student's sense of belonging and overall mental health and well-being. A sense of belonging comes from being included, acknowledged, and supported. Inclusive learning environments invite students to bring their whole selves into the space, and send affirming messages that their identities will be welcomed, celebrated and supported. Black, Indigenous and marginalized students can feel lonely and misunderstood unless inclusive, mentally healthy learning environments are intentionally and thoughtfully co-created.

Youth experience spotlight: youth impacted by racism, oppression, and marginalization are forced to find the strength to protect themselves against the microaggressions and daily discrimination they may experience. For example, reminding themselves of their worth to combat the negative messaging they receive.

What does this look like in practice?

▶ How can I include students in the creation of their learning environment (e.g., working together to establish shared expectations for our space that prioritize inputs from students who come from historically marginalized identities).

▶ How can I reflect on my own biases with humility? (e.g., consider how our own backgrounds and cultural perspectives influence our judgement about what are 'appropriate', 'normal', or 'superior' behaviours, values, and communication styles).

▶ How can I encourage participation and engagement of Black, Indigenous, and marginalized students in the learning environment (e.g., identify how you and/or the space may be creating barriers to their participation, such as group discussions that presupposes a shared experience).

▶ How can I ensure that our learning environment is supportive for Black, Indigenous and marginalized students? (e.g., in a healthy and supportive learning environment, incidents of racism and bullying are identified and dealt with swiftly, and those impacted are supported generously).

▶ How can I centre Black, Indigenous, and marginalized students, while at the same time acknowledging that students with other or intersecting identities also need support (e.g., when we decentre whiteness, and centre, lift, and amplify Black and Indigenous students, we are also creating space for others with marginalized identities).

Read on: Listen, Believe & Act: Support for students who have been disproportionately impacted in schools; Tools for student groups: developing accountable and healthy group expectations

UNDERSTAND
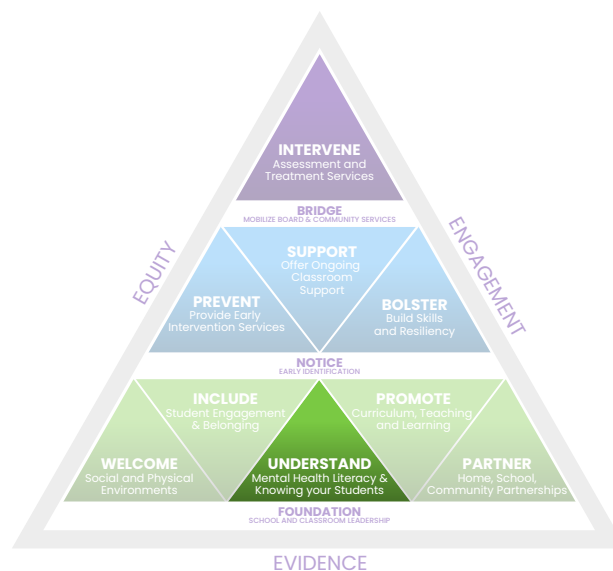
Schools are very fast-paced, and as a school staff member, you manage various pressures throughout the day in support of students. How we view and use time has a great deal to do with *what* and *who* we prioritize. In white culture, time increasingly comes with a sense of urgency and scarcity (i.e., the idea that there is never enough time). This creates an environment where we often don't have time to think about our own well-being or the well-being of students. When we decentre whiteness, we may notice that this frees up space for other things. Of course, daily realities require time and attention, but sometimes, when we examine where the sense of pressure appears (e.g., striving for perfection, internal deadlines that could be softened, perceived perceptions of others), it is possible to consider other approaches.

At the heart of the magic of school is the power of relationships. When we put time and energy into understanding our students and cultivating a welcoming and inclusive space, students have healthy foundations for learning and growth.

What does this look like in practice?

▶ How can I understand the experiences of students who have backgrounds very different from my own? (e.g., take time to learn about the history of education in Canada, the legacies of colonialism, slavery, and residential schools, and how racism pervades our society in subtle, overt, and systemic ways).

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▶ How can I learn more about mental health and my role generally? (e.g., consider participating in self-directed learning or attending workshops hosted by SMH-ON).

▶ How can I introduce identity-affirming mental health promotion practices into my classroom? (e.g., visit the SMH-ON website for ready-made resources such as lesson plans, virtual field trips on stress and coping, and everyday mental health practices).

▶ How can I understand what a student might be trying to tell me with the behaviour I observe in the classroom? (e.g., when you notice a change like this, take time to connect with the student at a quiet time to listen for cues about what might be causing a student to behave aggressively or to appear withdrawn or disengaged or alternatively, to appear sociable, engaged, enthusiastic, or calm).

▶ How can I create a trusting relationship with students who may be carrying heavier burdens than most? (e.g., being an ally and trusted adult takes time and understanding, and a recognition that a student may be experiencing systemic and deeply personal issues that impact their mental health and classroom achievement such as missing and murdered Indigenous sisters and friends, police brutality, poverty, racism, and marginalization).

**Read on:** Supportive Resources for Adult Allies

PROMOTE
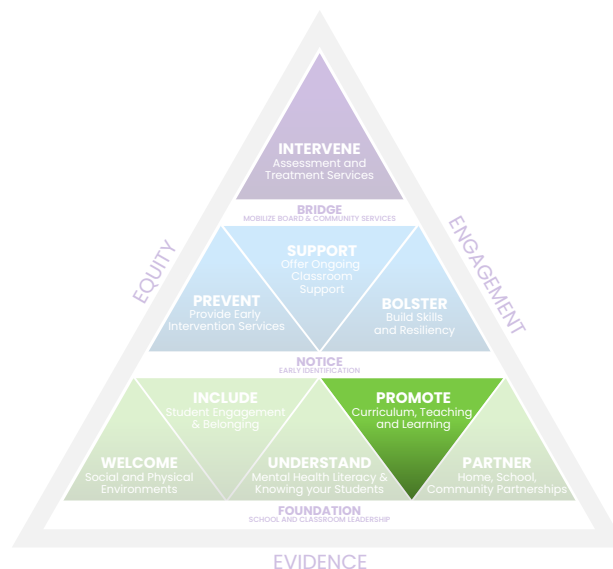
School staff are in an excellent position to promote student wellness each day. There are many resources available that can be selected and adapted to meet the needs of your students, like Virtual Field Trips on Stress Management Strategies and Everyday Mental Health / Faith and Wellness strategies. In using any of these materials, it is important to review the resources, and to nuance their use to best meet the needs of the students you serve. This includes using examples and images that amplify diverse experiences, histories, and ways of knowing as resources are presented. When adapting for the students you support, it is important to avoid a focus on harm and struggle, instead being sure to highlight the strength, joy, and power of Black, Indigenous and marginalized communities' experiences.

What does this look like in practice?

▸ How can I promote a sense of pride and identity for Black, Indigenous and marginalized students? (e.g., teach the truth, and provide strong examples of success, joy, and resilience, that offer balanced examples of Black, Indigenous and marginalized peoples experiences).

▸ How can I appreciate individual differences in experiences amongst Black, Indigenous and marginalized students (e.g., provide space for different perspectives from students, acknowledging that experiences are not universal, and that there are many differences within and across cultures and communities).

▸ How can I ensure that the mental health promotion resources that I use in my classroom will be supportive for every student? (e.g., young people are very interested in mental health, and many would value opportunities for student leadership in reviewing, shaping, and sharing classroom resources).

▸ How can I adapt mental health literacy resources to honour different ways of understanding health and wellness across cultures? (e.g., build knowledge through consultation with community partners where possible, and bring forward materials through a lens of cultural humility, acknowledging that not every idea will work for everyone and that students can draw on their own ideas and supports to adapt the ideas).

▸ How can I introduce culturally specific ways of caring for mental wellness? (e.g., partner with community members, like Indigenous knowledge keepers, who can bring forward ideas for land-based wellness and traditional teachings).

PARTNER
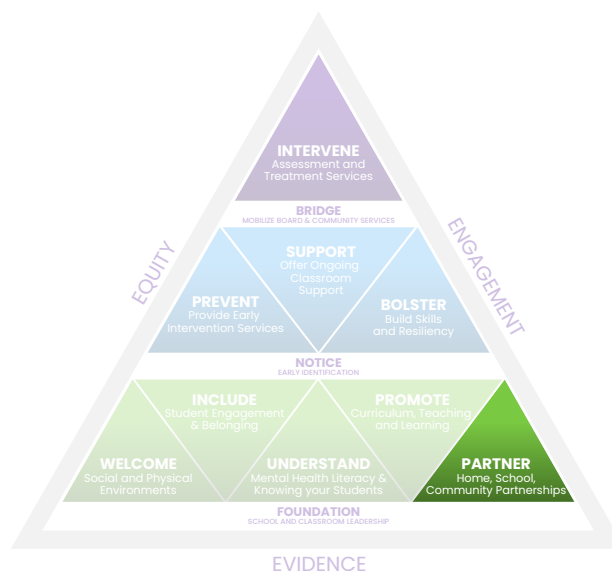
Partnering with parents, caregivers, families, other school staff and community/cultural/faith groups creates opportunities for shared dialogue and learning about culture, language, and experiences. Frequent communication with parents and caregivers strengthens this important relationship and

can enhance comfort with the school environment amongst parents and caregivers who may have experienced harm within the education system. This also opens the door for shared learning and working as a team to support each student's wellness at home, school, and in the community. Further, community organizations have programming and supports that are very relevant for student mental health and wellness, that can be amplified in the learning environment with good preparation and support.

What does this look like in practice?

▸ How can I co-create comfortable experiences for Black, Indigenous, and marginalized parents and caregivers (e.g., when meeting parents and caregivers, take time to build rapport and make connections on good news items).

▸ How can I learn more about the students I serve without being intrusive? (e.g., when talking with parents and caregivers, include questions about their child's strengths, interests, worries, and supports that help them to feel their best).

▸ How can I signal to parents and caregivers that I value their expertise and knowledge? (e.g., regular communication and active listening to ideas and concerns conveys an acknowledgement of the powerful and helpful role parents and caregivers have in supporting students' mental health).

▸ How can I leverage the wisdom and strength of community partners in supporting student wellness? (e.g., learn about existing partnerships with the school/board, and consider additional connections that students and parents/caregivers might recommend for new and diverse learning in the classroom).

▸ When a community partner is joining the learning environment on a topic related to mental health and wellness, how can I ensure that the space is supportive for everyone? (e.g., careful planning for mental health related topics is always important so preparing students ahead of time and working with any partners to adapt their content for the needs of students is very important).

Read on: See the Decision Support Tool for Mental Health Awareness Activities to learn more about safe and supportive ways to prepare for mental health activities in the classroom.

Additional resources for creating healthy, affirming, and supportive spaces at school: Learn, Think, Act: What Does Racism Have to do With Me? Student Poster

> **A future without racial discrimination and injustice is a mentally healthier and safer future for everyone. Let us keep imagining a tomorrow of Black and Indigenous liberation in our schools and communities and continue to push for that future.**

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