CONVERGE
Reimagining Canada's Mental Health Systems, Together

Research Power Hour with Dr. Bukola Salami

Integrating African knowledge systems into mental health promotion for Black children in Alberta: *What Black children and parents tell us about where well-being lives*

Black children in Canada face barriers to culturally responsive mental health support, yet African knowledge systems are largely missing from mental health promotion. **Dr. Bukola Salami** studied the mental health of Black children in Alberta to understand how African knowledge systems could be integrated into mental health promotion.

It's established that:

- Black communities are growing quickly and younger than the national average
- Anti-Black racism is linked to depression, anxiety, stress, and PTSD symptoms
- Mental health care is often inaccessible
- First contact with mental health systems often happens during a crisis, not as prevention

But current research is missing:

- The voices of Black children
- Strengths-based and culturally grounded approaches to health promotion
- African knowledge systems as part of mental health promotion
- How informal and formal supports can work together

The Study

- Participatory action research with 44 participants: 24 Black children ages 7–17 and 20 Black parents
- Arts-based approaches for younger children, semi-structured interviews for older children and parents

Findings

- What made a setting supportive is whether children felt recognized, trusted, and heard
- Formal services were rarely used: children preferred trusted adults, and parents described barriers to access
- African knowledge systems already support children's well-being through principles like communal care, relational personhood, spirituality, expressive traditions, and intergenerational wisdom

Family

- Everyday care is the first line of support: talking, affection, cooking, playing, etc.
- Families negotiate respect, responsibility, and voice
- Families need support to hold cultural values like respect for elders *and* children's voices

Belonging

- Children find belonging in friendships, culture, visible identity, Black-focused spaces, faith communities, and shared interests
- Belonging requires trust, recognition, fair treatment, and safety, not just shared race, culture, or faith

Agency

- Children have agency and aren't passive recipients of support or harm
- Many actively define themselves against stereotypes
- Agency has limits – children need adults and institutions to listen and respond

Recommendations

- *Policymakers and funders* should treat culturally affirming community spaces as mental health infrastructure, and create sustainable funding beyond clinic-centred models
- *Health and social services* should build trust before expecting disclosure, work alongside trusted adults, grow a culturally responsive workforce, and reduce cost and wait time barriers
- *Schools* should respond meaningfully when children report racism, and support Black Student Associations, accommodations, and access to activities
- *Faith and community organizations* should strengthen confidentiality and mental health literacy, and create peer spaces for children and supports for parents