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Jumping and pushing through the cruel optimism of racial justice work in schools

Saltando e avançando através do otimismo cruel do trabalho de justiça racial nas escolas

Sauter et avancer dans l'optimisme cruel du travail de justice raciale dans les écoles

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Abstract

During the Coronavirus pandemic in 2020, the public execution of George Floyd by a white police officer brought global attention to structural racism. In England, this prompted some students and staff to confront racism in their schools. In response, institutions sought structured programmes to address race inequality and avoid complicity in racism. This paper explores the experiences of teachers and school leaders in England participating in the two-year Anti-Racist School Award programme at Leeds Beckett University. The study examines participants' motivations, knowledge, and lived experiences as they pursue recognition for their schools' efforts to combat structural racism. Using in-depth interviews, reflections, and a focus group, findings highlight how professional and personal resources vary, particularly within the tense social climate following Floyd's murder and the rise of racist and xenophobic rhetoric in politics and media. Key themes include participants' engagement with the Anti-Racist School Award process, perceptions of the current crisis compared to past racial crises, and the tension between viewing racism as a relic of the past versus acknowledging its ongoing presence. The study concludes with three recommendations for sustaining motivation and navigating the challenges of anti-racism work, emphasising the importance of maintaining an anti-racist perspective in educational leadership.

Keywords: racism, anti-racism, race, education, schools

Resumo

Durante a pandemia do Coronavírus em 2020, a execução pública de George Floyd por um agente de polícia branco chamou a atenção mundial para o racismo estrutural. Em Inglaterra, este acontecimento levou alguns estudantes e profissionais a confrontar o racismo existente nas suas escolas. Em resposta, as instituições procuraram programas estruturados para combater a desigualdade racial e evitar a cumplicidade com o racismo. Este artigo explora as experiências de professores e dirigentes escolares em Inglaterra que participaram, durante dois anos, no programa do Prémio Escola Antirracista da Universidade de Leeds Beckett. O estudo examina as motivações, os conhecimentos e as experiências vividas pelos participantes, ao mesmo tempo que procuram obter o reconhecimento dos esforços das suas escolas no combate ao racismo estrutural. Recorrendo a entrevistas de profundidade, a reflexões e a um grupo de discussão focalizada, os resultados destacam a forma como os recursos profissionais e pessoais variam, particularmente no clima social tenso que se seguiu ao assassinato de Floyd e ao aumento da retórica racista e xenófoba na política e

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nos meios de comunicação social. Os temas principais incluem o envolvimento dos participantes no processo do Prémio Escola Antirracista, as perceções sobre a crise atual em comparação com crises raciais passadas e a tensão entre perspetivar o racismo como uma relíquia do passado e reconhecer a sua presença contínua. O estudo conclui apresentando três recomendações para manter a motivação e enfrentar os desafios do trabalho antirracista, sublinhando a importância de manter uma perspetiva antirracista na liderança educativa.
Palavras-chave: racismo, antirracismo, raça, educação, escolas

Résumé
Lors de la pandémie de Coronavirus en 2020, l'exécution publique de George Floyd par un policier blanc a attiré l'attention du monde entier sur le racisme structurel. En Angleterre, cet événement a conduit certains étudiants et professionnels à se confronter au racisme existant dans leurs écoles. En réponse, les établissements ont cherché à mettre en place des programmes structurés pour lutter contre l'inégalité raciale et éviter la complicité avec le racisme. Cet article explore les expériences d'enseignants et de chefs d'établissement en Angleterre qui ont participé au programme Anti-Racist School Award de l'université Leeds Beckett sur une période de deux ans. L'étude examine les motivations, les connaissances et les expériences vécues des participants, tout en cherchant à faire reconnaître les efforts de leurs écoles pour lutter contre le racisme structurel. À l'aide d'entretiens approfondis, de réflexions et d'une discussion de groupe, les résultats mettent en évidence la variation des ressources professionnelles et personnelles, en particulier dans le climat social tendu qui a suivi l'assassinat de Floyd et la montée de la rhétorique raciste et xénophobe dans la politique et les médias. Les principaux thèmes abordés sont l'implication des participants dans le processus du Prix de l'école antiraciste, la perception de la crise actuelle par rapport aux crises raciales passées et la tension entre le fait de considérer le racisme comme une relique du passé et la reconnaissance de sa présence persistante. L'étude conclut en présentant trois recommandations pour maintenir la motivation et relever les défis du travail antiraciste, en soulignant l'importance de maintenir une perspective antiraciste dans le leadership éducatif.
Mots-clés: racisme, antiracisme, race, éducation, écoles

Introduction

During the Coronavirus pandemic in the Spring of 2020, the brutal public execution by a white[1] police officer of a Black citizen, George Floyd, in the USA brought the concepts of structural racism and decolonisation into sharp focus for some students, teachers and leaders of schools in the UK (Miller, 2023; Stewart-Hall et al., 2022; Walker et al., 2022), and compelled them to want to *do something* about racism in their institutions. Among the many responses to the seemingly suddenly revealed realities of structural racism in our public institutions, schools sought out structured frameworks that could support them on their journey to learn about racism (Stewart-Hall et al., 2022; Walker et al., 2022); 'tackle' race inequality (Miller, 2019); and distance themselves from being complicit as racists (Applebaum, 2013; Lentin, 2018). This paper focuses on how twelve educators in the two-year Anti-Racist School Award programme engaged with structural racism within their institutions. The Anti-Racist School Award was designed by the director of The Centre for Race Education and Decoloniality (CRED) at Leeds Beckett University (LBU), Professor Vini Lander, in response to requests for guidance on anti-racism work in schools following the murder of George Floyd. It is delivered by professional associates (including the author) and the programme is available for schools across the UK and beyond.

[1] To decentre whiteness, I deliberately use lower-case for white, and to demonstrate the ways in which Black and Global Majority folk and People of Colour have been marginalised, I use upper case for these.

As the paper's title suggests, an inherent 'cruel optimism' of racial justice work (Meer, 2022) may mean accepting the permanence of racism while trying to improve conditions where gains can be made (Bell, 1992). This means that Award leaders must acknowledge that racism is not a coincidental and unfortunate output of human social life but is permanently embedded throughout school processes, policies and procedures (Bell, 1992; Warmington, 2024). Key themes arise from Award leaders: how they came to the programme; what those motivations mean to them in a perceived climate of crisis; how the current climate is contextualised in relation to past crises; whether racist attitudes are 'olde worlde' and anti-racism a new dawn; and how they stay motivated despite conflicting pressures.

The purpose of the study is to increase understanding in the field of education and critical race scholarship of the realities of developing anti-racist praxis in the field of education. Drawing on Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Whiteness Studies, the findings are examined to demonstrate how, beyond initial interest convergence driving a response to racism, a firmer foundational understanding of race, racism and anti-racist possibilities is necessary. The article will set out the theoretical frameworks underpinning the study and interpretation of the findings before describing the aims, methods and approach of the study. The research findings are discussed through five key themes arising from the interpretation of empirical data gathered from Anti-Racist School Award leaders. The conclusion draws together the study findings and the theoretical frameworks to suggest three key recommendations for schools hoping to engage meaningfully in anti-racism work as integral to school processes, practices, cultures and policies.

Theoretical framework

This study draws on CRT as a powerful lens through which to conduct qualitative research and analyse research findings. CRT emerged from a critique of legal studies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000) and has been coherently integrated into other disciplines to question oppressive social structures and offer strategies for change. CRT in education provides a theoretical and analytical framework that questions and disrupts how whiteness, race and racism function as core components of practices, policy, processes, discourses and structures in schools. Racism and its intersections with other marginalised identities shape the experiences of those racialised as Black and Global Majority heritage[2] differently from those racialised as white (Bell, 1992). CRT refutes claims of objectivity, meritocracy, 'colour-blindness', race-neutrality and "challenges notions of 'neutral' research or 'objective' researchers, and exposes deficit-informed research that silences, ignores and distorts epistemologies of People of Colour" (Yosso, 2005). Several of CRT's central tenets are particularly demonstrated in this study and outlined as follows:

Race as a social construction refers to imagined physiological, psychological and behavioural tendencies ascribed to differentiated races. Despite attempts to claim otherwise through scientific endeavours, no

[2] I use the term People of Colour; especially when referring to sources and literature from America. I also use Black and Global Majority, which has a disruptive function, reminding us of the reality of white people as a minority in global terms, and exposing the disproportionate power and resource-hoarding which accompanies white domination as a result of colonialism (Campbell-Stephens, 2021). Similarly, I use racially minoritised to emphasise the state of being minoritised as a racialised subject.

biological or natural phenomenon separates the human race into different races based on skin colour, facial features or hair texture (Winant, 2001). However, while race has no basis in scientific fact, it has significant social meaning and tangible, far-reaching social implications. Race as a social construction, not a biological reality, is central to CRT (Back & Solomos, 2000; Omi & Winant, 2014).

The permanence of racism centres on racism as a permanent, structurally embedded and ongoing feature of modern life. This means that CRT scholars must accept that while "yearning for racial equality is a fantasy" (Bell, 1992, p. 74), persistent resistance to racism matters for the dignity of People of Colour – and liberation from the stranglehold of racial inequity for all. Rather than aiming for an overly optimistic post-racial state, anti-racism efforts should focus on disrupting the status quo. Combatting feelings of despair ensuing from this cruel optimism can be sought by finding 'pockets of possibility' and hope (hooks, 1995; Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2021; Meer, 2022; Smith & Lander, 2022).

White ignorance denotes the way that white people typically do not see themselves as racialised. This is particularly relevant in the context of the UK's white-dominated education sector, which consistently ignores its own white racialised identity, regarding it as insignificant. Overlooking the "histories and legacies of European colonialism and imperialism, as well as the testimonies and scholarship of those who experience racism in their everyday lives" (Bain, 2018, p. 4) ensures that continued white ignorance remains central to the production and reproduction of racism.

Interest convergence denotes the observed phenomenon that whiteness will only shift from this position – albeit momentarily and in small ways – when its interests converge with those seeking change (Bell, 1992).

Key to linking the theoretical framework with the findings of the study is the understanding that racism is so ingrained that it looks ordinary and natural; as a consequence, the strategy for Award leaders often becomes "one of unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 11) for colleagues to see and comprehend. The Award process facilitates this 'unmasking' and 'exposing' process in situ as a prerequisite to developing racial justice and decolonising strategies.

The study

Anchored in a phenomenological perspective, this small-scale study explored data gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews of 90–120 minutes with twelve participants (Table 1); a subsequent written reflection exercise from five; and a focus group of six. Participants were all at various stages of leading their schools through the Award programme. The study is framed within the contextual realities of schools in England during the 2020s, which are influenced by history, geography, demographics, and national, regional and local politics. Specifically, over a third of English school pupils are of Global Majority heritage, and key racially minoritised groups have consistently underachieved over decades as a result of racism and of race being "systematically downgraded as a policy concern" (Gillborn et al., 2016, p. 4). Similarly, the teaching workforce is predominantly white in the UK (Worth et al., 2022), and teacher education has actively reproduced white ignorance about race, racism and anti-racism since at least the 1990s (Bain, 2018; Lander, 2014).

The epistemological approach of this study is underpinned by prioritising "the collective generation and transmission of meaning" (Crotty, 1998, p. 58) by both the researcher and participants, emphasising understanding how we are shaped by our cultural experiences and honouring research participants' ability to engage critically with this. The in-depth interviews were analysed to identify patterns and key themes using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. The first two steps were to become familiarised with the data and use open coding to identify broad codes. In a third step, these codes were refined using axial coding techniques, identifying how participants may say the same things differently and highlighting the most pertinent themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To support the fourth and fifth steps of reviewing and determining the significance of these themes, transcripts of the interviews were not only shared with participants for validation following the in-depth interviews, but participants were also invited to complete a reflection exercise by commenting on what stood out for them. Before the final step of reporting the findings, a small focus group of participants engaged critically with the emerging themes of the research findings and gave their views. Presenting the initial themes to the focus group allowed for a deeper exploration of participants' perspectives and interpretations of these themes, helping to clarify their understanding and views.

TABLE 1

Research participants

	Self-selected racialised identity	M/F	Age	Role	School Phase	Area in England	Urban/ Rural
P1	Mixed White British & Black-Caribbean	F	35–44	Teacher	Secondary	NE	U
P2	White British	F	25–34	Teacher	Primary	NW	R
P3	Black Caribbean	F	55–64	Teacher	Primary	East Mids	U
P4	White British	M	55–64	Headteacher	Primary & Secondary (Independent)	NE	R
P5	Black British-African	F	45–54	Teacher	Secondary	SE	U
P6	Black British-Caribbean	F	35–44	Deputy Headteacher	Secondary	SE	U
P7	British-Pakistani	M	25–34	Teacher	Secondary	East Mids	U
P8	White Irish	M	35–44	Senior Leader	Secondary	East	R
P9	White British	F	45–54	Headteacher	Primary	SE	U
P10	White British	F	35–44	Headteacher	Pupil Referral Unit	SE	U
P11	White British	F	55–64	Teacher	Primary (Independent)	SE	R
P12	White British	M	18–24	Teacher	Primary	East Mids	U

Findings

Did you jump or were you pushed? Were you jumped or did you push?

Asking *'How did you come to be leading anti-racism work across your school – did you jump or were you pushed?'* elicited varied responses, many referencing George Floyd's murder as a prime motivator or a moment of awakening. For some, gaining the Anti-Racist School Award indicates commitment and provides recognition. For others, accountability means ensuring anti-racist praxis is embedded and the school environment can be a safer place for racially minoritised staff, students and their families. For leaders whose white ignorance (Bell, 1992) means they have not had to notice before, the violence of race and racism can eventually 'jump' them without necessarily pushing them to act immediately. P8 recounts:

> It was right around the time of George Floyd… I remember the headteacher saying specifically, 'We need to hold fire on doing assemblies, we need to hold fire on doing this… because we don't really know how to talk about it. We don't know how we need to deliver this. And we don't know how parents are going to respond to this. (P8, white Irish man, secondary, senior leader)

For some Award leaders, the violence of racism now 'seen' by some members of majority-white school leadership, presents an opening for action which is led by a predominantly white leadership team[3]. P1 explains how racism that she noticed over a decade at the school was brushed off by colleagues as over-sensitivity or misunderstanding intentions. Following the events of Spring 2020, as her school started to pay attention to racism, colleagues began sharing videos of lived experiences of racially minoritised people they found on social media platforms with the staff team. The school leadership scheduled a compulsory meeting where colleagues were asked to share personal experiences of racial discrimination with other staff members. P1 was jumped by what she described as a sudden and inappropriate interest in colleagues' racial trauma:

> And I thought, well, maybe I'm overreacting, maybe I should share my experiences… those people in that room are gonna go in there and they don't want to hear my story. And then they'll go away and be like, "Oh, how did I feel about that?" And then I don't want them to come up to me the next day, or any of my colleagues, they will be like, "Oh, that was really awful".
>
> Or there was also this thing, they said that if you don't want to talk about it, we could get somebody else to read it out, and so I was like, "So you think I want you to stand up in front of me… and relive my trauma and say it? Like, what would you do? Would you leave out the N-word? Would you say it?" And I was just like, "No, it's not okay". (P1, white & Black-Caribbean woman, secondary, teacher)

Although understanding lived experience is necessary for racial justice transformation, being positioned as 'racial experts' in this way can be harmful to racially marginalised colleagues when sharing their negative experiences. It "recentres whiteness by sacrificing the needs of the marginalised to the needs of the systemically privileged" (Applebaum, 2013, p. 19). Badenhorst (2021) describes a form of "predatory white anti-racism" as a state of addictive atonement which propels "white people to become more caring,

[3] National Foundation for Educational Research data from the *Racial equality in the teacher workforce* report shows that 96% of headteachers in England are from white ethnic backgrounds compared with 83% of people in the wider population. In addition, 86 per cent of publicly-funded schools in England have all-white senior leadership teams (Worth et al., 2022).

empathetic, and responsible in thought and action" and which is triggered by hearing about the suffering of People of Colour. "The paradox here is that the suffering of Black and Brown peoples that serves as impetus for change among white People is required to ensure such change" (p. 293). There is a fine line between engaging in what is sometimes described as voyeuristic 'trauma porn' as a bid to overcome white ignorance (Bell, 1992) and knowing about lived experiences of racially minoritised colleagues to ensure that they will be safe from harm going forward.

Everything, everywhere, all at once[4]: Racism as a moment of crisis in institutions in perpetual crisis

For many involved in the long haul of anti-racist activism, holding the tension between resisting the notion of racism as a moment of crisis and accepting it as permanent (Bell, 1992; Warmington, 2024) means engaging in a paradoxical optimism and pessimism, imagining a different present and future while holding onto pockets of hope and possibility (Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2021; Smith & Lander, 2022). One participant described himself as "absolutely the right person to lead on the anti-racist school award" (P8) in terms of his seniority in the school, yet confessed to his white ignorance by lacking any knowledge about racism, instead learning while leading others. It dawned on him that:

> There's a long way to go here, obviously, which I think was the whole point [of the Award process]. Following our coaching call, I realised actually, we're not where I thought we were, but it's okay. I think that was the main thing that I took out of that second coaching call was it's okay not to be at that point yet, because it's a journey…So I need to realise it's not a two-year process. It's not an 18-month process, obviously. And that, to me, wasn't clear at the start. I think that sometimes you can get bogged down by saying, 'Oh, we're going to do a two-year award and then achieve the award and then great, see you later', and I've realised that that's 100% not the way this is, there have to be things that are going to be embedded forever. (P8, white Irish man, secondary, leader)

The pursuit of racial justice may never truly come to an end, yet it carries with it a promise of hope and a determination to continue, even with the awareness that success may remain forever out of reach. A consciousness of the "*Cruel Optimism of Racial Justice*" (Meer, 2022) requires realism and a mode of praxis which can both acknowledge the permanence of racism (Bell, 1992) and contain feelings of prolonged, collective mourning and melancholia arising in those committed to fighting for racial justice (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003). By contrast, describing herself as being shaped by her upbringing as a Black British-Caribbean heritage woman in England committed to social justice, a different Award leader says:

> This is what makes me so hopeful for the future. Because we are living in a time when the young people have led this, like these organisations have been led by young people's movements and all, like they have been at the forefront of so much of this. (P6, Black British-Caribbean woman, secondary, deputy headteacher)

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) street protests throughout the summer of 2020 injected Award leaders with new cognisance of a perceived systemic racism crisis and an awakening to the affective and psychic impact of race and racism – not only on Black men at the hands of American police but in our schools, by

[4] This is the title of a movie in which "a middle-aged Chinese immigrant is swept up into an insane adventure in which she alone can save existence by exploring other universes and connecting with the lives she could have led" (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022).

our own hands, on our students and colleagues. Saying she was not aware of being deemed 'Black' until arriving in the UK from the Caribbean, another participant realised:

> Well, really, racism is so embedded that it's shocking. It's in the fabric of every single thing, and just going through it you start unravelling. I myself didn't realise how much we take for granted that racism is prevalent. Even as a Black person, you know, there's some things that you're not even looking at it. The Award opened my eyes… (P3, Black Caribbean woman, primary, teacher)

This awakening stimulated questions around nationhood; whiteness and white supremacy; decolonisation and institutionalised racism within schooling, health and the policing system; the clearly-amplified racial inequalities impacting People of Colour during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as issues surrounding forced migration and racialised refugee processes (Finney et al., 2023). This brings some Award leaders to acknowledge that racism is not a coincidental and unfortunate output of human social life, but is permanently embedded in "state-sanctioned and/or the extra-legal-production and exploitation of group differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death, in distinct yet densely interconnected political geographies" (Wilson-Gilmore, 2007, p. 261). Listening to those who have been engaged in anti-racist activism for decades made one Award leader realise that reacting to perceived crisis is nothing new, and the need to organise is vital:

> We went to the talk with Gary Younge[5] and Leila Howe…[6] one of the editors of *Race Today*. And she just spoke about, like, how organised they were in the 1970s. And kind of in terms of the work that they were doing, the writing and the academic side of things, but they had the fire in their bellies to kind of get this done. And like there's almost a lack of organisation now, because it's led by young people who want to be activists, but don't necessarily have the guidance and the structure to be able to do it. (P6, Black British-Caribbean woman, secondary, deputy headteacher)

Historical testimony of racial justice movements can put into perspective a sense of temporal crisis for those newly committed to anti-racism work while also reinforcing the abundance of evidence that racism and all forms of racial violence and subsequent resistance are not incidental historical moments which stand out in world political history, but are indeed pivotal to the formation of modern political life itself (Meer, 2022).

We're justified and we're ancient[7]: Racism is another time and place

In response to the transcript of our in-depth conversation, one teacher supplied a written reflection on her experience as a parent, a teacher and an anti-racism leader in her school. She ties together the past, the present and the way that government policy appears not to respond to recent history:

[5] Gary Younge is a British journalist, author, broadcaster and academic.
[6] Leila Hassan Howe is a British editor and activist, who was a founding member of the Race Today Collective. She worked for the Institute of Race Relations and became editor of the Race Today journal in 1986.
[7] The title of a song by The KLF which is a statement of identity and rebellious intent, but also denotes an act of God which moves a person from a state of sin to a state of grace or righteousness.

> I always have in the back of my mind, what I would do if one of my children experiences racism both in and out of school. And more recently, with the Stephen Lawrence 30th anniversary,[8] I worry about racist attacks, on my son in particular. How is that event not part of the national curriculum? Why does the government not want to address the events that have happened in modern British history? It will be three years since George Floyd was murdered in a few weeks. And again, what has changed? Why do people have to lose their lives for something to happen? (P1, white & Black Caribbean woman, secondary, teacher)

Historical accounts of resistance to racism within the UK education sector (Shafi & Nagdee, 2022; Tomlinson, 2008; Troyna & Carrington, 1990) such as the response to the racist murder of London schoolboy Stephen Lawrence, bear witness to how time and again those pursuing racial justice may start with a moment of perceived temporality of crisis in which teachers and leaders are struck by the harm and viciousness of racialisation while forming an understanding of its entanglement in all aspects of all lives (Lawson, 2021).

For some teachers, racism itself belongs to the past, and it is as if some geographical places in the UK remain as if preserved in aspic, to historical times gone by, where the 'anti-racist modernisation' messages have not reached some corners of the country. Through dialogue, teachers and leaders can compare their worldviews and gauge how up-to-date their knowledge is about race, racism and anti-racism, 'adjusting their lenses' (P2) accordingly. P2 explains her understanding thus:

> But I think it's just because we're talking and it's open and it's honest. And, like, I felt it's challenging their thoughts and beliefs as well… I think people are beginning to adjust their lenses and sort of see things in a different way. Yeah, it really has been fantastic. It really feels like we're becoming a more modern school. We've always prided ourselves on being modern. (P2, white British woman, primary, teacher)

Anti-racism can be perceived as 'modern', even exciting in its newness. However, these knowledge gaps, although seen as the result of being 'open' and 'honest' are described as "incidental rather than an integral part of an ideological, systemic and dynamic *wilful* white ignorance" (Stewart-Hall et al., 2022, p. 145). Reinforcing the link between being anti-racist and being modern, this young teacher attributes her white ignorance as related to the geographic location of an upbringing isolated from modernity:

> I wonder if that's coming from my background. If I'm totally honest, because obviously, I grew up in a very 'olde worlde' you know, the farmer cut through my dad's WiFi the other day with his plough sort of thing. That's as far in the country I am, you know, where my parents live... And *here* is more multicultural, more modern… I just perceive it as more modern. I think that is my perception with all the recent events like George Floyd, Black Lives Matter.[9] I mean, that is modern history, isn't it? (P2, white British woman, primary, teacher)

For this teacher, her childhood home enjoyed hardware elements of modernity, such as an internet connection. However, concepts integral to modernity did not reach there through internet connections or otherwise – and if they do, they are ploughed up by the local farmer. Instead, there are places which are

[8] Stephen Lawrence was a Black schoolboy who was murdered at a London bus stop in a racially motivated attack on 22 April 1993. Following years of campaigning by his parents, The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report was published in 1999 defining and identifying structural and institutional racism as societal issues which affected schools.

[9] Black Lives Matter or BLM is a grassroots movement which grew out of hurt and fury following the murder of a string of unarmed Black people by police in the USA and an African American young man, Trayvon Martin who was murdered by a white terrorist and self-described vigilante, George Zimmerman. In 2013, this moment of protest grew into a more formalised movement and by 2020 with the murder of George Floyd, there was a surge of protests under the BLM banner worldwide.

conceptualised by her as both more modern and where history is made, and these places are urban and multicultural in character. P4 similarly refers to the geographical rural location and agricultural character of the land surrounding his school as a reason for being cut off from modern multicultural Britain despite serving an increasingly racially diverse population:

> It's a very old farming community, there's not much movement of population really. So you know, their family, their friends, their immediate neighbours are likely to be, say, the same sort of ethnicity. So, again, there's nothing there that particularly indicates that they're hostile to others. But I think inevitably, they may not be very well-informed about some other groups. (P4, white British man, primary & secondary, headteacher)

For some, the world around them is perceived to be modernising its views on anti-racism. By contrast, others can physically interact with the present while remaining ideologically arrested, drawing on knowledge which belongs in the past, like the paintings on the walls of Hogwarts School of Wizardry in the Harry Potter fantasy series.[10] When exploring how staff knowledge about race, racism and anti-racism has changed, a notion of 'modernising' staff who have been part of the traditional fabric of a rural independent school arises:

> In this common room, it's got quite a few, say, stalwarts in it… You know, we've got some colleagues who've been at the school 30 or 40 years, they are as much a part of the school as the fixtures and fittings really. Some of my colleagues, I think it would be fair to say, you know, might be seen as quite old-fashioned in the ways that they viewed things. (P4, white British man, primary & secondary, headteacher)

The anti-racism process for this school involves updating veteran staff operating within an increasingly multicultural and, thus, assumed modern school. As yet the system updates or refurbishment process to their worldview, curriculum or pedagogy have not managed to travel across time and space to reach them, and remain as old as the fittings and fixtures of the physical building.

Professionalising anti-racism work

Taking stock through audit and subsequent incremental movement towards a 'professionalised' anti-racism (Mockler, 2013) and embarking on a personal-professional learning journey of *becoming* anti-racist (MacManimon & Casey, 2018; Scanlan, 2010) requires a racial literacy teacher education curriculum bridging knowledge gaps (Smith & Lander, 2022), and reflection time which can boost educators' own race identity cognisance (Kohli, 2019; Stewart-Hall et al., 2022). Time to "unlearn, learn, relearn and reframe" (Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021, p. 57) and gain 'deep understanding' through professional development could be seen as essential for whole-school anti-racist transformation (Walker et al., 2022). This can lead to the "deep expertise" required to eradicate inequities through challenging racialised power structures and the social construction of race (Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021, p. 61; Walker et al., 2022).

Learning that is 'evidence-based', consistent, and having 'a framework' matters for one Award leader who describes her experience:

[10] In the Harry Potter book series, some portraits, especially those of the school's headteachers, are able to interact with the living world but often appear to be sleeping when visitors are present. These portraits have been taught useful memories and pieces of knowledge by the headteachers while they were alive, and these are then shared through the centuries with those that now occupy the office of the headteacher (Rowling, 2015).

> [I'm] trying to support staff in our schools to develop their racial literacy. Because… systemic racism exists everywhere, and… building block by building block, little by little trying to address it, and ensuring that children within our school… know that they will be listened to, and that their feelings will be acknowledged, and that we will do our best to try to address any inequality or any injustice that they see. And not just any injustice, but you know, like making sure that we can, we are dealing with it properly, and that there's a framework and that they can actually address it. (P6, Black British-Caribbean woman, secondary, deputy headteacher)

Interest convergence (Bell, 1992) means that gaining the Award legitimises anti-racism work as a worthwhile professional quality mark. Similarly, using recognisable bureaucratic measurement tools makes the Award attractive to formalise, embed and show the benefits of anti-racism work in schools. A Black woman and sociology teacher, working in a school which is enriched by racially diverse communities and whose staff at all levels also reflect the student population, P6 continues:

> I told the [white] head teacher, I said, I'm not going to be the mouthpiece, and he respected it. But I said, this is too personal for me. And at the time, like I was marching [on BLM protest marches]. And we were getting in trouble, like for going on marches [during state-enforced Covid social-distancing measures]... but I said, "Sorry, this is bigger than this. So we have to". And I said "I have to do it, we have to do it". All of the assistant heads at the time [agreed], 'we're going to do this together. Because it cannot just be the Black person talking about [this]... we started the working party then… the BLM Working Party is what it started as. We were looking at decolonising our curriculum, so we started a lot of the work. And then we saw the [Award] accreditation, and that we could have quality assurance for the work that was actually happening because measuring impact is so difficult. (P6, Black British-Caribbean woman, secondary, deputy headteacher)

Since "leadership shapes context and context shapes leadership" (Miller, 2018, p. 121), raising awareness of racial justice issues was already part of this deputy headteacher's personal and professional identity. Although this work has been embedded in efforts described as decolonising the school curriculum for several years, the 'George Floyd moment' was seen as an opportunity to act collectively. It made an explicit link between anti-racist practice and decolonisation efforts – the Award was a way to formalise this work with external validation. At first, she resisted leadership of the Award when asked, not wanting to act as a "representative of her race" (Puwar, 2004, p. 64), but she later seized the opportunity for professionalised accreditation and acknowledgement through the Award.

Although "successfully tackling institutional racism/race discrimination requires huge investments in time, the personal commitment of leaders, and human and financial resources" (Miller, 2020, p. 12), this was not always seen by leadership as a prerequisite. However, a staff member had the responsibility to work towards the Award. In one large secondary school, the teacher leading the Award had difficulty convincing leadership that his lived experience as racially minoritised was not enough to equip him to do this anti-racism work. He explains:

> Am I trying to placate, or make it look like the school is doing work towards something if they're not willing to put the funding and the time into it? And therefore it's this most likely customary role or am I actually able to make meaningful change? And if it is a customary role, that's not something I kind of want to be complicit in, I'd rather it'd be clear that school is not doing that work. Not just kind of be the face of it… I don't like the idea of kind of doing things for appearances and doing something that doesn't have a meaningful impact. So that's something that I've grappled with. (P7, British-Pakistani man, secondary, teacher)

Explaining the term 'customary role', this teacher described an interest convergence which places him as 'just the face' and which undermines efforts to embed *permanent anti-racism* as a force against the permanence of racism (Bell, 1992):

> Customary is the idea of, from my perspective, being the face of something. So from a PR side, it looks good. Oh, the school's working towards something… making positive change, but in reality, from the structural point of view, there aren't many changes, and if I leave, it won't be maintained. (P7, British-Pakistani man, secondary, teacher)

In contrast to the leadership at P7's school, a white headteacher in another school feels confident that having time, finances and seniority to do this work is vital. Her view echoes the difficulties faced by some Award leaders with more junior roles:

> Well, I think that's probably why it needs to be led by somebody in senior leadership, because it does take time, and it does take somebody that has the sort of authority to make decisions and put new things in place. I think it'd be quite difficult to do it if it wasn't run by the [Senior Leadership Team]. (P9, white British woman, primary, headteacher)

In a majority-white sector such as UK education, where the privilege of seniority goes hand-in-hand with whiteness, not only is racial literacy important, but the "continuous effort on the part of whites to forge new ways of seeing, knowing and being" anti-racist is essential (Yancy, 2017, p. XXXVIII). As such, a good grounding in racial literacy, time, space and resources to engage in this work will aid meaningful impact.

Pushing back, looking backward

The response to the murder of George Floyd in 2020 came during a period of increasing mainstreaming of racist rhetoric and xenophobia in the political environment and the media across Europe, which had become particularly acute leading up to and following the Brexit referendum in the UK in 2016. This research shows that ways of *staying with the trouble* (Haraway, 2016) of anti-racism become increasingly complex when Award leaders are tasked with whole-school culture change around racism prompted by a sense of new crisis and urgency. Anti-racism work was met with perceived competing priorities of the COVID-19 pandemic, a growing teacher recruitment and retention challenge, and a cost-of-living crisis – all calling school leaders back to a status quo where white supremacy orders society and schooling. In some instances, individuals who highlight issues of structural racism as part of their efforts for the Award are perceived as the problem by those who initially tasked them with leading anti-racism work in their school. One Award leader felt she had to leave her school for this reason. She was clearly deeply negatively affected by her experience:

> And that was all about the fragility, actually, because it wasn't about, I wasn't accusing them of being racist when I spoke to them. When I went to resign. I said, "You know, I know what racism is like". And I said, "I'm not, you know, I'm not accusing you of being racist". And I think that's what it was. And I said, when I resigned, "We should have had a discussion about it. The whole thing about race and the Award is about having difficult conversations. And we didn't talk about anything". I just had to *apologise for being divisive*… But because of their own fragility, insecurity, lack of understanding about the Award, they just took it personally. And I had to *apologise*… And by then I was just like, I've got to leave. (P5, Black British-African woman, secondary, teacher)

Often, those working towards racial equity in their institutions hit a 'brick wall' whereby racism can be obscured by the pursuit of an institutional self-image (Ahmed, 2012) of there being 'no problem here' (Gaine, 1987) so the self-image as 'not racist' remains intact (Lentin, 2018). Furthermore, racism is not only the "word nobody likes" (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. xix), but here it is the insinuation of an *accusation* of racism from which the school recoiled, even having actively committed to being anti-racist in principle through the Award. To be an anti-racist organisation requires acknowledging that structural racism is embedded throughout and not being surprised by its presence. Only through learning to see it, can an organisation dismantle it (Freire, 1970; hooks, 2010).

Despite confidence in her anti-racism, one Award leader was surprised by the prevalence of racism in her school when staff were asked to share their experiences of it:

> My greatest surprise was that because I have always considered myself to be anti-racist, I haven't actually considered people that are racist. If you're a racist, then you're wrong 'un. I was simplifying my thought processes. But when I did that training, and all the staff were coming up with all the different things that they were saying, my mind literally was blown. I don't know what I was expecting, that maybe two people would have experienced one thing each, I don't know. But it literally blew my mind that every single member of staff who was not white had experienced a catalogue of microaggressions or outright racism. And it really shocked me and that's what drove me, I think, to force it into the open. (P9, white British woman, primary, headteacher)

In addition to this, what began perhaps as an act of liberalist indignation in the immediate aftermath of George Floyd's murder and *the right thing to do*, or being "motivated by doing good" (Miller, 2023, p. 11) anti-racism work has become increasingly interpreted as subversive and radical, and outside of the remit of teacher impartiality (Department for Education [DfE], 2022; Hakak, 2025; Solomon, 2002; Tikly, 2022). One colleague saw the role to lead anti-racism at his school advertised internally and spoke with others about their intention to apply:

> My understanding is no one applied for it. It's a big school. Yeah, we are a very big school. We have over 2,400 kids, over 100, 120, 130 teachers, something like that. The conversations I had with the teachers was they said that it felt like it was a poisoned chalice or something that they can't really win at or do well at just on the basis of how kind of contentious the debate is around race and politics and things like that. (P7, British-Pakistani man, secondary, teacher)

Schools in England are bound by the Public Sector Equality Duty (DfE, 2014) to eliminate discrimination; ensure equality of opportunity; and foster good relations, in relation to nine protected characteristics including race. However, anti-racism is deliberately singled out and labelled as a contentious and political issue by the DfE (2022) through its impartiality guidance for teachers. The document explicitly names BLM, CRT and any association with organisations which draw on them as outlawed. This creates reticence and a sense of threat among educators, who are unsure of the boundaries concerning their anti-racism work and now see it as a 'poisoned chalice' – one teacher in this study even had to resign. Black and Global Majority heritage teachers, in particular, face an additional threat of battle fatigue convincing their white colleagues that the everyday racism they experience even exists and needs addressing in our schools and wider society.

Conclusion

An upsurge in interest by some schools in England in anti-racism work was triggered by global events in 2020 (Miller, 2023; Stewart-Hall et al., 2022). The study shows that structured and guided work has been pivotal to the growth of a new generation of anti-racism leaders in schools who are both learning and leading whole-school culture change in a rapidly developing yet permanently racist education system and an increasingly hostile political climate in England. Findings from the Anti-Racist School Award study can be translated into three key recommendations for schools:

1. Understand the motivations for engaging in anti-racism work

The findings demonstrate that as a school community, and as individuals within the school leading anti-racism work, 'deep understanding' (Walker et al., 2022) of the motivations for engaging in this work can support greater cognisance of interest convergence and of how race and racism are socially constructed (Meer, 2022; Omi & Winant, 2014); and how they operate and are reproduced within public institutions such as schools. First and foremost, individuals should critically engage with and be grounded in their positionality around race and identity, and understand how this shapes them (Yancy, 2017). However, locating the site of struggle with the individual must not thwart an understanding of the social construction of race and the reproduction of racism, as this will weaken the potential for collective action against racism (Shafi & Nagdee, 2022; Tikly, 2022).

Therefore, alongside a personal engagement with positionality, understanding the motivations of their school for engaging with anti-racism work can be pivotal (Applebaum, 2013; Miller, 2023; Picower, 2009). A critical understanding of both personal and organisational reasons for wanting to work against structural racism can help schools and leaders avoid falling into well-trodden paths to traps such as saviour complexes and 'doing good' (Miller, 2023) or expending effort on distancing themselves from being perceived as complicit (Applebaum, 2013) or "not racist" (Anzaldúa, 1990; Lentin, 2018).

2. Teacher racial literacy: Standing on the shoulders of giants

Educators leading anti-racism work lack knowledge about history, social movements and conceptual basics of racial literacy (MacManimon & Casey, 2018; Scanlan, 2010; Smith & Lander, 2022). The study demonstrates how complex a process it is trying to supplement one's own understanding while also leading others toward anti-racist praxis. Teacher racial literacy could support educators' work in identifying racist structures, systems and processes, strategising a way forward, and developing anti-racist praxis in themselves and others (Kohli, 2019; Smith & Lander, 2022; Stewart-Hall et al., 2022). Time for unlearning and reframing (Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021) should be given to all aspects of teaching, including reconsidering pedagogy and curriculum through an anti-racist and decolonised lens.

We stand on the shoulders of giants: where there has been racism, there has been resistance and strategic organising in opposition to the permanence of racism which shapeshifts and iterates to always remain available as a societal organising tool (Ahmed, 2012; Shafi & Nagdee, 2022). As such, anti-racism efforts need to be informed to be iterative and agile, based on a clear understanding of the formations and operations of racisms. A key element of racial literacy – and not situating racism as elsewhere or fixed in the past (Lentin, 2018) – is knowledge about the specifics of race, racism and anti-racism over time and in the context of the UK.

3. Investment is key

Investment through funding, time and resources (material and personnel) is essential for anti-racism efforts to take off, and be sustainable and successful in the long term (Gaine, 2000; Miller, 2023; Ouseley, 1992; Solomon, 2002). Anti-racism cannot be a passion project of a few staff members with skin in the game or in their spare time. The study demonstrates that when anti-racism is a 'customary role' (P7) or is delegated to someone without the requisite time, power and funding (P9), it is destined to fail, and even cause harm to those attempting to tackle racism (P5). It requires persistence and stamina (Haraway, 2016) as well as being a whole-school endeavour (Miller, 2023) and part of professional standards for all school staff. It cannot be solely top-down or only driven from the bottom up (Miller, 2023; Stewart-Hall et al., 2022; Walker et al., 2022). Anti-racism as a strategy for whole-school culture change cannot happen without significant and sustained investment.

With these three key recommendations, anti-racism as integral to school processes, practices, cultures and policies could become a reality where individuals and institutions can stay with the trouble despite the cruel optimism of racial justice work.

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