

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“Glimmers of Hope”: Practitioners’ Perspectives of Racial Literacy with Young Children in England

Received: 02 December 2025; Revised: 09 April 2026; Published: 25 May 2026

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Abstract:

After the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, racial justice seems to have fallen back into performative racial liberalism. Racialised outcomes are evident in the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector (0-5 years). However, the opportunity of these foundational years is often overlooked in its potential to help address these inequalities. This study aims to give practitioners a voice and explores the gap between theory, policy, and practice by seeking out the perspectives of ECEC Practitioners interacting with our youngest generation. By taking an interpretivist approach through open-ended interviews and questionnaires, this study seeks to understand the meaning practitioners make of racial literacy in anti-racist practice with young children and highlights the barriers and successes from the practitioners’ perspective. The image of a river emerged as depicting the upstream struggle of practitioners’ journey of anti-racist practice. The barriers are categorised as: fear, confidence, and Whiteness; time and capacity; and lack of guidance at the national and local policy levels. The successes experienced by the participants, or ‘glimmers of hope’, are heart knowledge; self-reflection; and the opportunity to reflect within a community. The potential of reflective communities emerges as critical in the purposeful and continuous excavation of racialised inequalities in pursuit of equity and racial justice.

Keywords: racial literacy, anti-racist practice, early childhood care and education, diversity and inclusion, reflective communities

1. Introduction

The resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 brought to the fore of White Western consciousness an understanding that racial equality is further away than is often assumed (Fairchild & Lander, 2021; Bamsey et al., 2024). However, as time has passed and everyday life has resumed in England post COVID-19 pandemic, the urgency and impact of the Black Lives Matter movement seem to have slipped down the agenda and been diluted within the rhetoric of equal opportunities once more (Tadam & Cane, 2022; Williams, 2022). This study will not devote space to the depth of evidence to support the claim that racism is still a problem, both personally and systemically, in England. Instead, it begins from a perspective that acknowledges Critical Race Theory's (CRT) view that racism is endemic in British society (and beyond) (Bell, 2002; Khalifa et al., 2013). CRT centres an understanding that race is a man-made phenomenon that negatively impacts a large proportion of people (Rabaka, 2021). It then provides a lens to actively search out and unravel those racialised strings



that still influence the outplaying of society and often go unnoticed in the status quo (Crawford, 2017; Taylor, 2009). From this position, it is plausible to understand that racist foundations underpin our education and ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) systems (Patterson et al., 2008; Boutte et al., 2011; Summer, 2014) and therefore require critical analysis and evaluation to proactively decolonialise the practices that can be a form of slow violence (Nixon, 2011) (and literal violence) enacted on children and staff in the sector (Bernard et al., 2023; Oto et al., 2023). Critical Whiteness Theory is an offshoot of CRT that uses a perspective that can recognise the subtle ways in which racial groups are held against and othered by hegemonic Whiteness, highlighting micro-aggressions and structural inequalities (Gillborn, 2005; Del Real Viramontes, 2021). It holds a light up to the socially constructed layers of power and privilege that work alongside feelings of superiority and fragility to uphold a status quo of assumed universal and normalised truth (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995; Owen, 2007).

Racial literacy (Laughter et al., 2023) can be conceptualised as a mechanism for advancing anti-racism (Abawi & Berman, 2019; Kendi, 2019) and decolonisation (Strobel, 1997; Bamsey et al., 2024). Sealey-Ruiz (2021) suggests that racial literacy is both a skill and a theory that can be harnessed to examine, expose and unravel the racialised systems at work in our society. In other words, to engage in meaningful activism, a person must first be able to read and decode the racialised context and nuances of a situation or system (Laughter et al., 2023; Oto et al., 2023). Bargallie et al. (2024) caution that racial literacy is not proposed as a solution to racism but rather as one of the tools that equip people to talk productively about race and racism. As Tembo (2021) explains, we cannot ignore the subject any longer, we must learn how to talk about it before we can tackle it. Racial literacy is an important skill that educators need to first develop in themselves, in order to disrupt the racialised messaging perpetuated through society and educational systems and in turn foster this in young children (Seltzer & O'Brien, 2022). Despite much scholarly work over the past two decades, racial literacy is still not a term often used in ECEC practice in England with children aged 0-5 years (Nash et al., 2018; Chávez-Moreno, 2022). Matias (2016) argues that it could be seen as a form of neglect to allow children to manoeuvre in the racialised sociopolitical landscape that they are not equipped to recognise or navigate. This allows structural inequalities to persist, negatively impacting all children (Gillborn, 2005). It places the imperative on ECEC as an early intervention to foster skills such as racial literacy, moving towards a more fair and equitable society (Nash et al., 2018; Chávez-Moreno, 2022). In the words of Ladson-Billings (2006, p.40), "although we may have only a year-long interaction with students, we ultimately have a lifelong impact on who they become and the kind of society in which we all will ultimately live".

2. Literature Review

2.1 Racial literacy

Racial literacy first arose from the work of Guinier (2004, p. 114) in legal studies in the USA, where she introduced the concept of deciphering or reading the "dynamic interplay among race, class, and geography". Guinier's (2004) emphasis on racial literacy was in direct combat with the growing sense of racial liberalism. Racial liberalism postulates that the work of anti-racism is well underway and a matter of interpersonal challenge rather than deep-seated structural inequalities, which allows for the



treatment of the symptoms of racism without addressing the disease itself (Guinier, 2004; Mills, 2008). In the UK, Twine (2004) advanced the concept of racial literacy at a similar time, through her work with parents raising children of different racial identities than their own. Whilst Guinier's (2004) work focused on the macro-level systems, symbols and spaces that nullify epistemologies that counter hegemonic Whiteness, Twine (2004) takes a more micro lens to shed light on the skills and strategies individuals use to resist and expose racism (Laughter et al., 2023). Racial literacy is conceived as both a conceptual framework for perceiving or decoding the racialised reality, whilst simultaneously being the skill needed to navigate and challenge the shape-shifting nature of racism within that reality (Guinier, 2004; Nash et al., 2018).

Racial literacy can be positioned as a tool for enacting the themes of CRT that supports acting to expose racism in the interpersonal, societal, and structural realms (Blaisdell, 2018; Oto et al., 2023). Institutional racism conceptualises the way that collective policies, practices and customs can result in advantages for Global Minority children and disadvantage Global Majority children (Boutte et al., 2011). Gilborn (2005) discusses that institutional racism is not often caused by racist intent but it is also not accidental. There is a value judgement that the outcomes are not important enough to warrant changing the system and disrupting the status quo for those who are advantaged by the systems. Racial literacy offers insight into the less explicit and subtle forms of discrimination that most practitioners are not equipped to recognise (Daniel, 2023). Epstein and Schieble (2019) recognise the need for a conscious dismantling of these systems that is enabled by self-reflectivity. This constant state of "learning rather than knowing" (Guinier 2004, p.115) allows for an interpretivist paradigm that opens the door for individual truths to emerge. Warren (2021) argues that humans tend to believe their reality is the only valid reality, which becomes problematic when the held reality is over-represented, to the detriment and repression of other realities. Wynter (1994, cited in Warren, 2021) uses the term supracultural fallacy to describe how these hegemonic norms become ingrained in the structures, policies, and practices of systems such as education and harm those with minoritised realities. Racial literacy has been theorised in pluralistic ways. Chen et al. (2025, p. 344) argue that it cannot be confined to "concrete examples of application". However, there is a consensus that racial literacy can be used as a framework and practical skill that allows the thinker to go in search of and decode the powerful and complex ways that constructs of race impact social, political, and educational experiences. Critics such as Oto et al. (2023) have warned that racial literacy is often misinterpreted to involve the exploration of racism as a personal or structural phenomenon on a theoretical level without the emphasis on action, therefore falling back into racial liberalism. Racialised identity and bias are understood to form through a process of socialisation; therefore, recognised as not fixed but malleable, susceptible to moulding and unlearning (Nash et al., 2018). Racial literacy becomes an "interactive process in which race functions as a tool of diagnosis, feedback, and assessment" (Guinier, 2004, p.115) that must then lead to action (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021; Laughter et al., 2023).

2.2 Potential barriers to racial literacy

Children cannot be expected to embark on this journey of racial literacy without the guidance of adults who recognise and promote the skills and sensibilities involved (Flynn et al., 2018). This requires considerable self-reflection on internalised bias, patience, and humility (Williams, 2022), as well as the ability to reflect on the structures and institutions around them to challenge inequalities (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). The emphasis on fostering racial literacy in children has the potential to place



responsibility for resolving injustice on the next generation; however, it requires practitioners to embark on the difficult work in the present (Joseph-Salisbury, 2020). Epstein (1972, p.3) argued, “we can educate the next generation to solve many of our problems if we are courageous enough to free them from our own prejudices and anxieties”. Nonetheless, this was in the 1970s, and we risk allowing more generations to inherit our racially unjust world because we have not been courageous enough to do the work (Epstein, 1972; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). The dominant discourse of Whiteness that practice and policy are rooted in is critiqued as a barrier to progressing anti-racist work in education. Within the ECEC sector in England sits the universally accepted discipline of developmental psychology. However, when interrogated through a CRT lens, the White-Eurocentric nature of the theorists and their epistemologies and methodologies is exposed as attempting to homogenise children (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2014; Fairchild & Lander, 2021; Broughton, 2022). Scholars argue that this preoccupation with developmental psychology is a form of modern colonisation that maintains the privilege of Global Minority people over marginalised Global Majority groups (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Broughton, 2022). These colonised perspectives on child development can cause adults to delay the urgency of talking to children about race (Sullivan et al., 2021).

Often, a colourblind ideology is applied to children, stating that they do not see colour, thereby stalling the need for intervention (Flynn et al., 2018). However, there is substantial research that refutes this claim (Earick, 2008; Jordan & Hernandez-Reif, 2009; Kaufman & Wiese, 2012). From as young as three months, infants are evidenced as seeing colour (Bar-Haim et al., 2006; Liu et al., 2015; Sugden & Marquis, 2017). Children are also subject to the human proclivity to categorise, and therefore any negative images, attitudes, or biases they perceive in their environment at an individual level are often generalised to the entire category (Skinner et al., 2017; Skinner & Perry, 2020; Waxman, 2021). The Van Ausdale & Feagin (2001) year-long study of 3 and 4-year-olds in a preschool demonstrated how young children make sense of race through their everyday experiences and picked up negative associations that were not explicitly taught to them. This discredits the idea that children are too young to talk about race and highlights the need to avoid the silence and provide children with the opportunity to question their initial understandings before they solidify into the rudiments of racial bias. The colourblind argument may be positioned as protecting children from the complex issue of racism. However, the counter question then becomes ‘protects who?’, as race is already a reality for the Global Majority child (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015). Children pick up racialised messages in their environment, so staying quiet on these topics allows misconceptions and stereotypes to develop unchecked (Derman-Sparks, 2008; Boutte et al., 2011). As Boutte et al. (2011, p.335) state, “racialised outcomes do not require racist actors”.

2.3 Practices to foster racial literacy

Scholars have found storytelling practices to help promote racial literacy in children, aligning with one of the central tenets of CRT (Beneke & Cheatham, 2019; Curenton et al., 2022; Daly, 2022). Black Art, such as literature, poems and songs, can help to promote Black joy and introduce topics of resistance to the dominant White narrative (Williams, 2022). Appropriate books provide an opening for conversations about race, offer insights into different perspectives, and model language and frameworks for communicating on sensitive topics (Wanless & Crawford, 2016; Curenton et al., 2022; Seltzer & O’Brien, 2022). However, Beneke and Cheatham (2019) warn that texts should not be relied on too heavily for all the answers, and that a critical stance is still required to discern the messages on



the page. Many practitioners begin the journey into anti-racism by auditing their books and resources to introduce resources that reflect the children attending their settings, as well as those who are different from them, a concept known as ‘mirrors and windows’ (Style, 1988; Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Wanless & Crawford, 2016; Jackson, 2023). When providing environments for children, it is vital to consider the messages they transmit, as consciously or not, these are political spaces that reproduce and reinforce dominant narratives in society (Siraj-Blatchford, 1994; Moss, 2025). However, the presence of diverse resources is not a fix. It still requires a proactive stance from practitioners and embedding in a critical pedagogy, as resources cannot act in isolation to counter the racialised messages in society and therefore fall back into racial liberalism (Chin, 1999; Clarke & Watson, 2014; Mills, 2017, Fairchild & Lander, 2021).

Often people rely on proximity to Global Majority communities to avoid the development of racial bias in children (Waxman, 2021). Studies such as Hwang et al. (2021) show that a diverse community can mean children are less avoidant of difference at a young age. However, Qian et al.'s (2017) study of individuation training with 88 children across two preschools illustrates that racial bias in children is not reduced by mere exposure but requires a systematic, repeated intervention that associates individual characteristics and identity with individuals. As American activist Malcolm X expressed: “The [parent] is the first teacher of the child. The message she gives that child, that child gives to the world” (cited in: Bhaskar & Devi, 2023, p.314). Particularly, work with White parents could be beneficial in opening conversations of critical Whiteness that begin to break the silence that enshrines normalised Whiteness (Clarke & Watson, 2014). Nash et al. (2018) emphasise the importance of early intervention and the opportunity for critical communities of practitioners and parents to come together and proactively challenge beliefs and assumptions that restrict the advancement of equity. Skerrett’s (2011) examination of teachers’ racial literacy across three secondary schools in the US and Canada expressed the desire of teachers to have their schools to support antiracism through curriculum and policy. This would promote a culture where students and teachers felt empowered to develop their knowledge and skills within the learning community. Similarly, Blaisdell (2018) conducted a multi-year study with a school’s equity team in the US, who met monthly to pursue the school’s equity goals. He noted the presence of White discourse often derailed the conversation and ended up reverting narratives to prioritise White comfort. Blaisdell (2018) proposed four principles that could guide reflective communities to foster racial literacy. These were: ground racial literacy development in your local context; allow time to develop and embed (years); centre the work around the most racial literate (not the least); and forefront a revisionist narrative that is aiming for change (not passive discussion). Practitioners have a unique opportunity to include parents on this journey and link with diverse communities to share experiences and knowledge that affirm Global Majority identities (Williams, 2022). Priest et al. (2016) argue however that most parents and teachers only talked to their children about issues of racism when incidents arose in their lives or the media, indicative of a reactive rather than proactive approach. Epstein and Schieble (2019) also highlight the need to be reflexive and open to hearing parents when they are the ones to communicate racialised experiences or viewpoints that challenge current practice, in keeping with the tenets of CRT, which emphasise decentring White experiences and honouring Global Majority voices (Carlton Parsons, 2017).



3. Methodology

3.1 The study

This interpretivist study aimed to explore the opportunity of racial literacy as a form of early intervention in England and a tool to counter the messages children receive from birth that allow established norms of racial hierarchy to persist. It asked:

- 1.) What is the current understanding of racial literacy from the perspective of practitioners and leaders of practice with young children?
- 2.) What are the perceived barriers to fostering racial literacy in young children?
- 3.) What is perceived as working to foster racial literacy in young children?

The interpretivist paradigm allows for multiple co-existing realities that are constructed by the human as opposed to the positivist stance that sees reality as external to the knower (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). This suited the aims of the study as it searches for the individual 'truths' held by practitioners and leaders in ECEC settings. Through these questions, the study sought to investigate how racial literacy is enacted in practice with young children in an urban city in the south of England, exploring the potential disconnect from the work that scholars have called vitally important (Chávez-Moreno, 2022; Seltzer & O'Brien, 2022; Laughter et al., 2023). During the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020, I caught a glimpse of a racialised world, previously shielded from my vision through White privilege and naivety. This has set me on a path as I strive to understand better the nuance and complexities of race that impact our world, education systems and myself, racialised as White.

3.2 Methods and participants

Due to the researcher's position as an Early Years Practitioner in an ECEC setting in the area (providing day care and education for children 0-4 years), most participants were contacted through this connection. The study also reached participants external to this setting through connections with an Early Years Forum for Anti-Racist Practice (EYFARP), which has been running for one year, of which the researcher is a co-founder and facilitator. This reach beyond the individual setting and expanded the study's triangulation by introducing perspectives from different settings and areas of the city (Savin-Baden & Howell, 2012). The first strand of the study involved an open-ended questionnaire to practitioners in the ECEC setting and attendees of the EYFARP. This allowed participants to answer in their own words, sharing their lived experiences from their perspective (Denscombe, 2014; Yin, 2015). The questions focused on practitioners' professional experience of training and policy around racial literacy and anti-racism and their personal feelings around the importance of the topic and insights into what helps and hinders the work. The questionnaire is estimated to have reached approximately 40 potential participants and received 10 responses, achieving a return rate of 25%. The questionnaire participants are hereafter referred to as participants 1-10. Participants' racial identities were collected as a factor that may affect participants' perspectives (Denscombe, 2014); however, they did not influence the sampling process. Given the small participant sample, it is considered appropriate to summarise these identity markers to mitigate the risk of breaching anonymity. The group of 10 participants who responded to the questionnaire included six White British, two White European, and



two non-White or mixed heritage practitioners. Of the group, eight identified as female, one as male, and one as undisclosed; six had 10 years or more experience in ECEC and four had less than 10; five held a level three qualification, two held level six, and three held level seven.

The second strand of the study was to explore the perspectives of those leading in anti-racist practice in ECEC in the city. This was achieved through 3 semi-structured interviews, which gave participants the freedom to discuss anything that was significant to them (Bell, 2010). Due to the in-depth nature of the interviews, fewer participants (3) were sought, as they provided a rich, lengthy dataset (Seidman, 2019). To identify interview participants in positions of experience and influence in ECEC settings, a purposive sampling method was used to invite those who had previously demonstrated consideration of race in their practice. These knowledgeable participants were also situated in three different settings, working in diverse capacities to lead ECEC practice across the city. This added to the credibility of the study as the findings are not bound to a singular context but cover varied environments and perspectives (Cohen et al., 2018). The trustworthiness in the interpretation of the data is also strengthened through multiple participants, as it mitigates researcher bias through familiarity with one personality or organisational culture (Bhattacharjee, 2012). Of the interview participants, two identified as White British and one as mixed heritage; two held a level seven qualification and one a level six; all three had greater than 10 years' experience in ECEC and identified as female. To protect the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms are used; henceforth, the interview participants are known as Ruby, Stella and Elise.

3.3 Ethical considerations

Throughout the study's design and implementation, ethical considerations remained paramount (Denscombe, 2014; McDermid et al., 2014). Informed consent was first sought from gatekeepers who could facilitate access to the target participant samples (Homan, 2001). Secondly, the informed consent of the individual participants was sought through the information letters, outlining the study, rational, confidentiality measures and their right to withdraw. As many of the participants had a previous relationship with the researcher, the study sought to navigate and address these power dynamics by retaining reflexivity throughout, allowing the researcher to modify their behaviour and procedures as applicable (Etherington, 2004; Denscombe, 2014; Johnson et al., 2020). The researcher considered her positionality as a cisgender, middle-class White woman and ECEC practitioner in the research design to position herself as a learner rather than a knower (Cohen et al., 2018). The researcher needed to address their axiology from the outset, acknowledging with the participants that the aim of the study was not to assess their level of racial literacy or cast judgement, but to gather information on people's real experiences to deepen understanding in the field.

3.4 Analysis

The study conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) identifying patterns of meaning in participants' perspectives across the entire dataset. This allowed flexibility to develop patterns inductively without a theoretical framework, whilst also enabling deductive coding using a critical framework, such as CRT, to search for social meaning around specific topics (Clarke et al., 2015). Once the questionnaire and the interview data were combined and manually thematically coded by the researcher, a thematic analysis tool with Artificial Intelligence (AI) assistance was used to organise the dataset (Delve, 2024). No new AI-generated insights were adopted, and any perceived analysis or



interpretation was checked and either considered or discarded by the researcher to remain consistent with the original codes. Patterns and themes developed from the coded data were then analysed by the researcher in reference to similarities or contradictions with each other and the literature (Seidman, 2019; Lochmiller, 2021). A simple discourse analysis was also applied to explore tacit meaning in speech and word choices (Anderson & Holloway, 2020). The analysis employed inductive reasoning to develop meaning from the individual perspectives of the participants, which could lead to eventual transferability (Cohen et al., 2018), although this will always be limited to the small-scale, qualitative nature of the study (Pring, 2015). Qualitative research values people’s subjective experiences and meaning-making processes and recognises depth rather than breadth of understanding (Leavy, 2023). This study does not presume to generalise across the sector but represents the situated phenomenon with the intention to highlight the voices of the practitioners embodying the work in practice. The small-scale nature of the study limits its scope but allows for a depth of insight, practical relevance and contextual sensitivity that is essential in an emotive and politicised topic such as racial literacy.

4. Findings and Discussion

Table 1. Themes and Subthemes Developed from the Data

| Themes and Subthemes Developed from the Data | |
|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Theme | Subtheme |
| Journey | Everyone is on their own journey of understanding the depths of the racialised world |
| Barriers | Fear, confidence and Whiteness |
| | Time and capacity |
| | Lack of guidance from a national and local policy level |
| Successes | Heart knowledge |
| | Self-reflection |
| | The opportunity of reflective communities |

4.1 The journey

The data showed that only half (5/10) of the questionnaire participants had heard of the term racial literacy before the study; however, the way most participants spoke about the topic suggests awareness of the concept of anti-racist practice. The overarching theme that stands out in the data regarding understandings of racial literacy is that of a journey. Across the dataset, this essence of motion is captured through a simple discourse analysis that highlights the use of present progressive verbs in the language, such as “learning” (Participant 1), “building” (Participant 3), “seeking” (Participant 10), “re-learning” (Elise), and “becoming” (Stella). This concept of journey and movement evokes the imagery of water flowing through a river. However, this journey is not a smooth one; the river appears to be struggling to flow uphill, there is no final destination in sight, and it even widens the further it flows.



This symbolises the challenges in developing racial literacy and the notion that the more one learns on this journey, the more one sees there is to learn. This is encapsulated by Stella’s explanation:

“[the] journey of coming to a place of some kind of understanding and some kind of being able to hold it and then you learn something different and that unsettles it again” and “there is always more that needs to be done”.

This illustration reflects the writings of scholars such as Oto et al. (2023) and Sealey-Ruiz (2021), who conceptualise racial literacy as a fluctuating, ongoing, active process rather than a destination. Stella shows her understanding of this as she challenges that racial literacy is not something that is given but something that can start to “build”. Everyone also has different entry points on this journey. Some people may dive (or be pushed) in with a splash and experience feelings of “shock” (Ruby) or as if someone has “pulled the rug from under [them]” (Stella). The reported sudden and destabilising reaction of Stella and Ruby could be a result of their racialised identity as White and the experience of living within a layer of White privilege that had previously shielded them from a racialised reality. Others may have a more gradual toe-dip approach, or for many people racialised as Black, have been submerged since infancy. The river analogy also allows consideration of the barriers that may act as dams or rip currents, causing stagnation or pushback that make the work harder. On the other hand, the tools and practices that support the journey of racial literacy could be conceptualised as buoyancy aids that support us to continue. These concepts will be explored in the next section through the themes that developed during the thematic analysis of the questionnaire and interview data.

4.2 The barriers

Within the narrative of barriers, the main theme that emerged was fear and lack of confidence expressed by the participants. Questionnaire participants confessed fears of “getting it wrong” (Participant 9), having the correct “language and way to address topics appropriately” (Participant 10), a “lack of knowledge” (Participant 7), and not feeling as “equipped as I’d like to be” (Participant 4). This is reflected in the literature that recognises that practitioners are often paralysed by the fear of getting it wrong, offending people or being called a racist for recognising race (Matias, 2016; Flynn et al., 2018). This fear can lead to a colourblind approach, which shies away from issues of race. Participant 2 describes the barrier:

“Adults’ hesitancy and concern about ‘getting it wrong’. Seeing it as a ‘taboo’ subject, rather than a learning opportunity that can be enjoyable. Adults not seeing the negative impacts that it can cause.”

Through the CWT lens, it could be observed that Whiteness has a role in the fear and discomfort that many White practitioners face. As expressed by Elise:

“non-White children, they’re always very aware of their race, I think, and obviously, I’m not White, so I don’t know ... but in a way that I think White children are not”.

This is supported in CWT literature (Clarke & Watson, 2014) that illustrates how the universalised discourse of Whiteness allows people racialised as White to ignore issues of race and systemic oppression. Two of the questionnaire participants implied that racism should be addressed only when it is explicit, saying “it can be discussed if the need arises” (Participant 9) or “if brought up by a child or a situation emerges” (Participant 3). This is symptomatic of a reactive stance and is at odds with



current literature that advocates a proactive strategy (Mills, 2017; Nash et al., 2018; Laughter et al., 2023). Critique of this sentiment could highlight a layer of White privilege that shields practitioners from the urgency of tackling racism and recognising it in the everyday (Anderson et al., 2022).

Another barrier or rip current that makes anti-racist practice harder is the time and capacity to invest in the work. This was discussed throughout the interviews by the participants identified as leaders promoting this practice. Stella expresses a tension in her role consulting for a range of settings. She describes it as a “moral dilemma, about not talking about this with settings because they just don't have capacity to do it. Because all the limitations of the sector at the moment”. “Rising costs and stagnant funding rates” (House of Commons Education Committee, 2023, p.3), in addition to challenges of staff recruitment and retention (Hardy et al., 2023) in the ECEC sector, will contribute to the limitations Stella speaks of. The COVID-19 pandemic was also included as a factor influencing practitioners' capacity. Elise highlighted a passing attention to anti-racism during the pandemic noting “it feels like people only [had] the time to unite about that (Black Lives Matter) because of COVID”, symptomatic of racial liberalism failing to challenge the status quo (Mills, 2008). The interview participants all highlighted that there are other “wonderful” (Ruby) subjects and pieces of training that settings are happy to focus on “all day long” (Elise) rather than leaning into anti-racism, which is likely to “muddle and challenge and upset your sense of self” (Stella). They acknowledge that, in a sector already stretched for capacity, it is hard for practitioners to take on the additional emotional and practical demands of this work, which limits deeper engagement (Blaisdell, 2016). Elise also calls into question the “real lack of autonomy” of Early Years Teachers working in high-pressure environments set on achieving traditional curriculum goals. This is a result of neoliberal policies that prioritise comparable test scores and hegemonic, data-driven ways of knowing (Khalifa et al., 2013; Joseph-Salisbury, 2020). Elise comments that “we've got midterm plans, medium term plans” “our day is jam packed” which leaves space for “no sort of deviation” into anti-racist practice and many Early Years Teachers would choose to stick with lessons and texts they are familiar with rather than investing time to include diverse perspectives. Again, it emerges that the route of least resistance falls back into colourblind practices (Boutte et al., 2011; Fairchild & Lander, 2021).

National and local policies in England, including wider institutional systems, were also an emerging topic in the data. The interview participants acknowledged the historical backdrop of race, which continues to shape current structures. Ruby notes:

“I think it's historical in society, it's the way all of our systems are set up, kind of without any regard to race ... that impacts everything in Early Years in our curriculum, and the way that we set up for ECEC is a very White system. And so that breeds exclusion of anybody that doesn't fit into that box.”

The historical context of racism from which all systems have evolved lives on in the institutions of society, including education, a key tenet of CRT (Khalifa et al., 2013; Crawford, 2017). Questionnaire Participant 8 also acknowledged the “micro-aggressions within settings, both from the education system and all those involved”. The White-Eurocentric norms of developmental psychology underpin current English ECEC systems, upholding the notion of childhood innocence and the idea that young children are not developmentally capable of understanding abstract ideas pertaining to race (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Park, 2011; Broughton, 2022). The government's official stance denies the existence of institutional racism in the UK (Sewell et al., 2021). Pilkington (2021, p.400) argues that the Sewell



report is the “latest manifestation of a strategy to delegitimise anti-racism”, in the pushback from the right wing against the Black Lives Matter movement. Within this context, it is difficult to imagine the necessary cultural and societal shifts that would have an impact on racial inequalities (Howard & Navarro, 2016). Stella notes that to stand up against the party line and create any meaningful change would take “some very brave politicians” but is most likely to come “from the bottom up”. This emphasises challenging systems at the local level. Throughout the data, there is a continual longing for more guidance from the government and official channels. The literature reflects this need for a joint approach to tackle structural inequalities (Howard & Navarro, 2016; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021; Oto et al., 2023).

4.3 The successes

This section now shifts the focus to the factors and practices that offer hope for supporting racial literacy—the buoyancy aids within the river analogy. The first factor that emerged from the data was the notion of heart knowledge above head-knowledge. Ruby explains about her work leading practitioners:

“I think unless they have that deeper understanding of why it's important and... about understanding the systems and the society and the inequality, I don't think they feel they have the drive to do it, to make the difference.”

The language of “drive” (Ruby & Stella) and “fire” (Elise & Stella) speaks to a more profound personal commitment that motivates a person even in the face of adversity. In jest, Elise imagines giving out “free cookies” as an incentive for anti-racist work, encapsulating the understanding that it is hard to coax people into this challenging and vulnerable work. Whilst acknowledging the importance of external teaching, Stella cautions that, foundationally, practitioners need to “hear lots of different voices talking about it” and begin “forming their own opinions” to consolidate their commitment to the work. The risk in relying on this heart knowledge is that those with the deepest understanding of racialised inequalities are likely to be those with lived experience, which may result in the work defaulting to practitioners of the Global Majority (Blaisdell, 2016; Fairchild & Lander, 2021). An essential practice on this journey is self-reflection, particularly but not exclusively, for those racialised as White.

Much of the literature emphasises the significance of self-reflection in enacting anti-racist practice (Flynn et al., 2018; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021; Williams, 2022). Critical self-reflection supports practitioners in overcoming their discomfort in addressing their role in upholding racist structures and prejudice and reduces the prevalence of racial liberalism (Epstein & Schieble, 2019; Tedam & Cane, 2022).

Participant 1 wrote about their journey of self-reflection as they kept “thinking about practice, resources, and our own underlying assumptions and unconscious biases in practice”. Participant 5 also commented on the training they had received on antiracism noting, “it had a big impact on me personally as I’ve become much more aware of my own unconscious bias”. We are products of our culture, which comes with perspectives, values, hopes, and dreams alongside prejudice, stereotypes, and biases (Banks, 2016). In essence, the practitioner seeks to liberate themselves from the dominant discourse of normative, superior Whiteness. An extension of this self-reflection and heart knowledge is a need for professional reflection in the ECEC setting to dig deeper into practice. Research has shown that most anti-racist



work in education is driven by individuals, but that all professionals, regardless of ethnicity, are needed to develop anti-racist practice (Joseph-Salisbury, 2020; Seltzer & O'Brien, 2022). A deeper understanding of how social and professional identities mediate practice is needed to take it beyond tokenistic expressions of anti-racism (Beneke & Cheatham, 2019; Fairchild & Lander, 2021). Priest et al. (2016) noted that teachers were more likely to engage in anti-racist practice when they felt supported by their communities and settings. Nash et al. (2018) advocate for these critical communities that proactively challenge the status quo. Participant 3 recognised the need for professional reflection in the development of racial literacy, suggesting the necessity of a,

“non-judgemental, safe space to explore, question and evaluate current practice, our own view of racial issues, personal experiences and listen to constructive criticism and positive feedback”.

Participant 7 also wished they had engaged in this type of reflection earlier in their career saying, “I would have done things a lot differently”. Bamsey et al. (2024, p.125) recognised that these professional discussions were where practitioners “discern their professional selves as political and as instruments of power, challenging hegemonic reproductions of colonialism”. Whilst maintaining a safe space for people wherever they are on their racial literacy journey, Blaisdell (2018) warns against allowing Whiteness to derail the conversation and privilege the perspectives of people racialised as White. A robust commitment to excavating power in practice and across the broader educational field will bring forth the decolonisation that scholars advocate (Freire, 1970; Blaisdell, 2018; Broughton, 2022).

Despite all participants noting they had received some anti-racist training before, all questionnaire participants recognised the need for continued training and the importance of fostering an open dialogue. Participant 1 emphasised the value of “sharing literature and reflections with other practitioners and leaders” in building confidence in racial literacy. This is supported by the literature that warns a one-stop approach to anti-racist training will not be enough to dismantle the systems that uphold White superiority and inequity in our ECEC spaces (Summer, 2014; Oto et al., 2023). Two examples of communities focused on professional reflection and ongoing attention to anti-racist practice were identified in the data. Firstly, Elise describes being part of a network for teachers “classed as minorities”. The city-wide group comes together to receive training and coaching and to share experiences that encourage Elise to feel supported in her efforts and less alone. Secondly, as a facilitator of an EYFARP, Ruby shared her perspective of the forum as a critical community that gathers practitioners from across the city to invest in their anti-racist journeys. She speaks of:

“Huge glimmers of hope. And I think that actually it coming from the bottom is really important because people feel more comfortable to talk about it with their peers. ...It's really working to build confidence in leaders and practitioners. ...Yeah, it's really encouraging that people are wanting to be on the journey despite all of those barriers that they have.”

Although these external networks are important spaces to encourage and share knowledge and experiences, Summer (2014, p.199) cautions that “a small group of anti-oppression educators [cannot] carry out a revolution on behalf of all the others”. Emphasising the imperative of individual members to continue the discussions and reflections with the whole staff team in ECEC settings. Ruby describes



the significance of this, starting at the “bottom” with practitioners who do the work on the ground with the children every day. However, she also expresses the need for anti-racism to be a priority at higher levels of the system, in local and national government. This sentiment, shared by CRT in the literature, recognises the far-reaching effects of colourblind policy (Guinier, 2004; Houston, 2019; Joseph-Salisbury, 2020; Fairchild & Lander, 2021).

5. Conclusion

This study set out to explore the opportunity of racial literacy as a form of early intervention and a tool to counter the messages children receive from birth that allow established norms of racial hierarchy to persist. It aimed to explore the current understanding of racial literacy in the ECEC sector from the perspective of those seeking to enact it, and it was quickly evident that the data centred on practitioners’ own journeys of racial literacy, who hold the key to practice with children. The overarching theme that emerged from the data was that racial literacy is a journey, meaning patience and time are key components in supporting its development in practitioners. A lack of guidance and understanding of the issues, along with the fear of getting something wrong, creates barriers that stall progress. However, the successes of the participants offered glimmers of hope that brave and thoughtful practitioners could come together to instigate change through a bottom up approach. The findings of the study conclude that there is opportunity for practical application in using reflective communities of practitioners, who meet together to support each other to progress through the barriers and maximise successes, digging deeper into the interconnected nature of our world. If each ECEC setting had a purposeful reflective community of practitioners dedicated to searching out ways in which racial inequalities impact their practice, it could increase understanding of race as integral to decision-making at all levels of practice and policy rather than an optional side category. It is a recommendation that anti-racist training for practitioners should be ongoing and reflective to avoid a tokenistic tick-box approach that falls into racial liberalism. Policy creators at local and national levels are urged to pay more attention to the amassing collection of academic writing, strengthening the call for action to address inequalities at all levels and the opportunity of racial literacy as a tool within proactive antiracism.

There are limitations to the current study that affect its generalisability, such as the sample size. A broader participant base would provide a larger dataset and additional anonymity measures that may be preferable to encourage wider participation. All participants, whether in the EYFARP or the ECEC setting, reported awareness of anti-racist practice, with half noting that they had heard the term racial literacy before. This is likely due to the ECEC setting’s ethos of cultural inclusion, or to the attendees of the EYFARP who have self-registered and already shown an interest in anti-racism. This is likely to be a non-representative sample of the wider cohort of practitioners across the city or England. However, it allowed for a deeper discussion of race, as participants were already familiar with the concept and its importance. The three interviews were conducted with leaders in the field situated in three different settings, which allowed for some form of triangulation. However, this could be strengthened by reaching out to a broader range of professionals including those offering training on racial literacy and those tasked with developing policy at a local or national level.

The study sought the perspectives of practitioners on the ground with the children, tasked with enacting the anti-racist practice often advocated in the academic realm. It honours the important and often underappreciated work that practitioners do every day to nurture and educate our children—the



future generation of workers, leaders and change-makers. Exploration of the concept of racial literacy has highlighted the vital role practitioners play in supporting children in developing their conceptualisations of a racialised world and their understandings of justice and equality. The study offers their opinions into the conversation and illustrates the ‘glimmers of hope’ witnessed to promote and encourage personal and professional journeys in racial literacy.

Declarations and Acknowledgement:

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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About the Author:

Beth Wilkinson has almost 20 years’ experience as an early childhood education and care (ECEC) practitioner and, holding a Master’s degree in early childhood education, now works as a trainer and researcher in the sector. Her work explores racial literacy and anti-racist practice in the early years, with a particular interest in the gap between policy, theory and day-to-day practice in ECEC settings in England. She co-founded and facilitates an Early Years Forum for Anti-Racist Practice, supporting reflective professional communities and sustained dialogue. Beth’s current interests include practitioner learning, critical Whiteness, and developing practical resources that help educators engage young children in conversations about race, equity and belonging.

