

Black teachers' experiences of reporting racist incidents in English schools: lessons for school leaders

Tryphosa Bennett^a Alexandra Brown^a Terra Glowach^b Tanisha HicksBeresford^a Rafael Mitchell^c DeMarco Ryans^a Amy Saleh^b and Indikah Smith^d

^aIndependent Researcher; ^bUWE Bristol, School of Education and Childhood, College of Health, Science & Society, Bristol, UK; ^cSchool of Education, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK; ^dEdD Research Student

ABSTRACT

In 2020, the Runnymede report *Race and Racism in English Secondary Schools* found that clear anti-racist policies were needed to address the institutional and systematic disadvantaging of racially minoritised staff and students. This article explores Black teachers' experiences of reporting racist incidents in English schools as a basis for considering the ethical, legal and policy responsibilities of those in positions of senior leadership. Using a counter-story approach, we present a composite narrative based on Black teachers' experiences and focus on school leaders' responses to reports of racist incidents. This provides a critical vantage point for considering how those in positions of leadership can deliver on commitments to the safety and well-being of racially minoritised staff and students. Implications for policy and practice are presented at the school and national level.

KEYWORDS

School leadership; school policy; safeguarding; racism; teacher wellbeing

Introduction

This study, conducted by a team of teachers and university-based researchers, draws on Black teachers' experiences of reporting racist incidents in English schools, as a basis for considering the ethical, legal and policy responsibilities of those in positions of leadership. Despite the legal provision for racial equality in the UK, education policy and practice in England has often fallen short of commitments due to a restricted interpretation of schools' responsibilities (Crozier 2023; Warmington et al. 2018). We start by considering schools' responsibilities with respect to two key policy areas: 'safeguarding' and the Equality Act 2010, before exploring some of the tensions in practice with reference to empirical evidence from schools in England.

The legal and policy context for addressing racism in English schools: Safeguarding and the Equality Act 2010:

'Safeguarding' is a term used in England to refer to a school's responsibility to promote young people's safety and wellbeing and protect them from maltreatment such as physical and emotional abuse (DfE 2023a, 2023b). Since 2015, the Department for Education (DfE) has issued regular guidance to schools in a publication titled *Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE)* (ibid.). The guidelines specify that all school staff are responsible for safeguarding the welfare of children by identifying concerns and preventing these from escalating (2023: 136). In the event of abuse,

All staff should be able to reassure victims that they are being taken seriously and that they will be supported and kept safe. A victim should never be given the impression that they are creating a problem ... Nor should a victim ever be made to feel ashamed for making a report. (ibid., p. 8)

With explicit reference to racism, KCSIE refers to schools' legal responsibilities under the Equality Act (2010) to 'eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation' (p. 25). To this end, schools are required to establish formal behaviour policies which include measures to prevent 'prejudice-based and discriminatory bullying' (p7). While safeguarding is the responsibility of everyone working in a school, school leaders have an obligation to ensure that appropriate school-level policies are in place and that all staff are aware of them. Ofsted, the inspectorate in England, is charged with monitoring schools' compliance with safeguarding and other national regulations. According to the *School Inspection Handbook* (Ofsted 2023), a school's culture around safeguarding is an obligatory focus of evaluation; school leaders are expected to 'actively seek and listen to the views and experiences of pupils, staff and parents' and 'protect pupils from serious harm' (Section 367, p. 86). Ofsted requires schools to share data on racist incidents with inspectors but does not specify what constitutes racism or a racist incident; this is, therefore, subject to school-level discretion. Similarly, guidance is not provided around measuring 'harm' and so determining whether or not an incident has caused 'serious harm' is subject to the judgments of individual school leaders and inspectors.

The Equality Act (2010) is a key element of the English policy landscape and its implications are clarified in *The Equality Act and Schools* (DfE 2014). The Act states that it is unlawful to discriminate against pupils with regard to sex, race, disability or other protected characteristics. Schools must ensure that pupils are not 'singled out ... [or given] less favourable treatment' on the basis of race, and schools must ensure there are 'no practices which could result in unfair, less favourable treatment' (18). By way of an example, the guidelines explain that it is unlawful for schools 'to impose stricter disciplinary penalties on African Caribbean boys than they do in similar circumstances to children from other backgrounds' (ibid.). The choice of this particular example is not coincidental, and despite the provisions of the Equality Act, national data indicate that this

group faces disproportionate behavioural sanctions: Black Caribbean pupils are nearly four times more likely to receive permanent exclusions relative to the school population as a whole (Demie 2021).

One concept which has been advanced to explain disproportionality in the treatment of Black children is that of ‘adultification’, whereby certain groups are perceived as ‘less vulnerable and more adult-like’ (Davis and Marsh 2020, 255). Black children in England are particularly susceptible to adultification bias in public services, such as schools, social care and policing, and this is reflected in the application of disciplinary over safeguarding measures (Davis 2022; Davis and Marsh 2020). One high-profile example of this is the case of ‘Child Q’, a Black child who was strip-searched by police following a request by teachers at her school. The search ‘involved the exposure of Child Q’s intimate body parts ... on school premises, without an Appropriate Adult present and with the knowledge that Child Q was menstruating’ (CHSCP 2022, 2). A safeguarding review deemed that this strip search constituted harm against Child Q, amounting to ‘a traumatic incident [with] profound ... repercussions on [her] emotional health’ (CHSCP 2022, 3). The review found that racism was likely to have been an influencing factor in this incident.

What emerges from this account are tensions between policy and practice; a legal context which is, in many ways, conducive to racial equality, and a social reality in schools which often falls short of these obligations. Why and how does this happen? It is to this issue we now turn.

Recognising racism: racial literacy and the education workforce

Reflecting on education policy in England, Warmington et al. (2018) characterise the period between 1993 and 2013 as one in which ‘race equality in education policy built-in momentum, touched the policy mainstream – and then failed’ (p.410). The early years of this century saw progress following the publication of Macpherson’s (1999) report, a public inquiry into the police’s handling of the racially-motivated murder of Black teenager, Stephen Lawrence. Reviewing practices in policing, schools and other public services, Macpherson found that ‘institutional racism’ was pervasive, referring not only to explicit racism and direct discrimination at the policy level, but also to ‘unwitting discrimination at the organisational level’ (Macpherson 1999, 43). The Macpherson Report provided a definition of a racist incident as ‘any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person’ (Macpherson 1999, 362), and recommended that this was adopted across government agencies. This definition of racism is of particular relevance for the present study, as it seeks to confront institutional racism by foregrounding the experiences and voices of victims. The Macpherson Report identified a troubling pattern of racist incidents in English schools, and also a reluctance among school leaders to acknowledge this as it ‘might adversely reflect upon the image of the schools’ (p. 361). It was

recommended that schools systematically record racist incidents and report these to parents/guardians, school governors and Local Education Authorities, and publish an annual report of racist incidents in school, to be reviewed by Ofsted (2023, 382). Following these recommendations all Ofsted inspectors received compulsory training around inclusion which included reading, and being tested on, anti-racist research (Warmington et al. 2018).

By the 2010s, the focus on institutional racism was waning (Tikly 2022). Education and social policy discourse were 'de-racialised' in line with the myth of a 'colour-blind', 'post-racial' society (Warmington et al. 2018, 423). This is reflected in the previously discussed guidance to schools (e.g. DfE 2023a, 2023b; Ofsted 2023) which fail to define what is meant by racism or a racist incident, leaving this to the judgment of school leaders. There is an onus for school leaders to actively consult pupils, staff and parents (Ofsted 2023), but the lack of clarity around what constitutes racism, and assessing the severity of harm which results from this, is an obstacle. Indeed, concerns have been raised about the general capacity and willingness of people racialised as white to recognise racism, given the silence around this in formal education (Bain 2018; DiAngelo 2016; Mills 2007). Caribbean philosopher Charles Mills (2007) developed the notion of 'White ignorance' to describe a 'phenomenon whereby contemporary and historical realities of racism are subject to the widespread, systematic and pernicious production of ignorance, as opposed to knowledge' (Bain 2018). White ignorance has been described as a 'group-based cognitive handicap' (Mills 2007, 15) when it comes to recognising discrimination against racially minoritised groups, leading to the dismissal or silencing of concerns about racism. These areas of ignorance can be countered through the development of counter-hegemonic racial literacy (Chávez-Moreno 2022; Saleh 2025), a means of 'perceiving and responding to the racism that generates a repertoire of discursive and material practices' (Twine 2010, 92). However, the development of racial literacies is not a required element of pre- or in-service teacher education in England.

While there is not a straightforward relationship between racial literacy and ethnicity, school staff racialised as Black have the advantage of lived experience from which to draw when recognising and confronting racism (Boakye 2022; Miller and Callender 2018; Tereshchenko, Mills, and Bradbury 2020; Thomas 2022). Nevertheless, there is an under-representation of Black teachers in the education workforce in England. Despite Black people comprising 4.6% of the working-age population, only 2.5% of teachers are black; conversely, 72.5% of the working-age population is white, but white teachers account for 90.3% of teaching staff, and 96% of headteachers (DfE, 2023a, 2023b).

These ethnic disparities in the workforce have implications for maintaining dominant mis/understandings of race and racism (Picower, 2009). England has seen national-level efforts to diversify the education workforce (DfE, 2018). However, there are also ethical issues around the recruitment of Black

teachers into a school system which places inequitable burdens on their psychological health due to unchallenged racism (Education Support, 2023; Glowach et al., 2023c; NASUWT, 2017; NEU, 2018). Barriers to the retention and progression of Black teachers are a prominent theme in the present study, introduced below.

To summarise, school leaders in England have a legal responsibility to protect black students from racist maltreatment by actively listening to, and taking seriously, the testimony of racially minoritised staff and students. However, this responsibility is obscured by policy and inspection frameworks which leave the judgement of what is, and is not racism, to the discretion of school leaders – a position which is largely held by white people, and for which there are no formal standards or required education around racial literacy. This study will draw on the experiences of Black teachers who have a privileged vantage point for recognising racism and its effects in schools (Ladson-Billings and Donnor, 2008; Mills, 2007; Wynter, 1992), to explore how school leaders use their discretion to evade, or fulfil, their safeguarding responsibilities. The study will demonstrate why explicit policy guidance regarding race and safeguarding is necessary for the wellbeing of both students and staff racialised as Black, in a context marked by varying levels of racial literacy. In foregrounding the experiences of Black teachers, this study provides evidence which can inform policy and practice for addressing racism which is compromising the safeguarding of Black children and negatively impacting the psychological health, retention, and progression of Black teachers.

The development of this study

This article results from collaborative work by members of the 'Bristol Decolonising Network' (BDN), an informal learning network of teachers, teacher educators and others working in education in Southwest England and further afield. The BDN was started via WhatsApp by a small group of teachers and academics in 2021, connecting educators for the purpose of sharing resources, organising anti-racist forum events and developing collaborative outputs (see Glowach et al., 2023a; Glowach et al., 2023b).

The idea for this study emerged when teachers in the BDN repeatedly expressed concerns about school leaders' responses to reports of racist incidents. The corresponding author (TG) invited university-based colleagues, racialised as Black and White, to be co-researchers, leading and participating in a study of this issue. Between them, it was decided that the guiding questions of this study would be:

- How do Black teachers describe their experiences of reporting racist incidents in English schools?
- What are the implications of these experiences – ethically, legally and in policy terms – for those in positions of leadership in English schools?

After gaining ethical consent from the University of the West of England, the corresponding author recruited teachers from the BDN via email to participate in this collaborative study. Several teachers, racialised as Black and working in secondary schools across England, came forward.

Grounded in Critical Race Theory, university-based colleagues agreed on a 'counter-storytelling' approach (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002) which refers to accounts of the experiences of marginalised groups as 'a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege' (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002: 32). By telling the stories of Black teachers who are physically *inside* schools but also 'positioned on the outside' due to their racialised identities and experiences, a counter-story approach gives space for 'experiential and embodied forms of knowledge as legitimate in understanding racism' (Callender, 2020: 1086).

The corresponding author sought informed consent from participants to take part in the study which involved forming written accounts of their experiences of reporting racism and attending an in-person oral story-telling session based on the same theme. The written accounts served two purposes: first, so that participants could choose to read from this on the day, rather than speak from memory; second, to ensure their testimonies were accurately recorded as these were the primary source of data.

Though the day was organised by university-based colleagues, it was facilitated in collaboration with one of the teacher participants. It included grounding and well-being activities, such as a nature walk, which created space for connection with the body, mind, community, history, and environment as a form of resistance against the racial trauma that might be re-lived through storytelling (Kinouani, 2021). It was decided beforehand that the role of White university-based colleagues during the oral story-telling sessions would be to listen, take notes, and begin identifying commonalities rather than make verbal contributions. Meanwhile, Black university-based colleagues actively participated in the story-telling sessions. Towards the end of the day, all attendees reflected collectively and came to an initial agreement on the ways in which Black teachers' experiences of reporting racism in English schools align and intersect. From this, we all decided that a composite narrative (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002) could effectively amalgamate these testimonies, while offering a layer of anonymity for the participants and the institutions they refer to.

In a composite narrative, 'the authors create composite characters and place them in social, historical, and political situations to discuss racism' while offering both 'biographical and autobiographical analyses' (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002:33). While Black teachers 'possess collective and individual identities and 'are an aggregate of self-definitions along with the definitions offered to them from others' (Williams, 2018: 10), it was decided that a single composite character could be created to reflect the teachers' collective racialised identities

and experiences of reporting racism in English schools. The authors recognize this decision is a limitation of this study as it does not allow for critical analyses of other aspects of their identities, including gender, neurodiversity, and beliefs, which are lacking in the research literature (Wallace, 2020).

Following this day, each teacher participant sent their written accounts to one of the university-based authors (AS), racialised as Black, who led the development of the composite narrative, drawing from this data as well as their own experiences of teaching in English secondary schools. During the data immersion phase, they read and re-read the written accounts, in conjunction with notes made on the day of storytelling and continued identifying overlapping and pertinent themes to convey. The composite narrative went through a series of iterations to ensure fidelity to teachers' experiences since the purpose was not to develop an imaginary character that engages in fictional scenarios; it is grounded in real-life experiences (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). As such, direct wording from the teachers' written accounts has often been used. Throughout this process, university-based colleagues arranged several points at which all authors were invited to read the draft narrative, convene online, and suggest any revisions to be made. The agreed version was reviewed by all authors alongside key policy and literature to draw implications for school leaders (presented in the closing section of this article). In presenting evidence from this study, the aim is not to make statistically generalisable claims, but to provide a contextualised account of teachers' experiences which can offer the reader insights that may apply to other contexts of practice, i.e. naturalistic generalisation (2010).

In the next section, the findings of this study are presented through the composite narrative; it is divided into four phases which represent different schools and points in linear time across the career of a single Black teacher. This is a composite character that has been shaped by Black participants in this study, whose experiences with and responses to racism are 'valid, appropriate, and necessary forms of data' (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). It opens with an epigraph which is a mental reflection from this character at the end of their career before going back in time to their first placement as a student teacher.

The journey of a black teacher navigating white spaces: a counter-story

There is an ineffable pain that occurs when one is asked to trace with a vernacular needle, all the ways in which racism plasticises one's flesh, wounds one's body and transforms one's mind into a theatre that replays traumatic events, with ease. With and without provocation. – Anon

Phase one

Anticipation and excitement emboldened my steps as I approached the school on the first day of my final teacher training placement. I was greeted by a

smiling face, the department head who had come to escort me to the assembly hall where children were sat in their tutor groups.

“You’ll love it here”, I was told, “The staff are like one big family, and the kids are lush.”

Scanning the growing crowd of staff and students, I began to feel like a Black dot in a sea of mostly White faces while anticipation gave way to apprehension.

Inclusion, acceptance, and respect were recurrent buzz words in the principal’s welcome message, offering mild reassurance.

*

The first two weeks in the staffroom gave a lasting impression of the ‘family’ I had moved in with.

Your hair is amazing! How long does that take?

My daughter’s partner is Ghanaian so you can imagine how gorgeous my grandchildren will be!

Just finished a lesson on the transatlantic slave trade with your tutor group. I was super impressed at how well the two Black children handled the content. Can you thank them for me?

There was no malice, but, feeling strangely exposed, I stumbled through these brief, awkward interactions with forced smiles and nods before deciding to reduce my visits there. I was even less prepared for what I encountered with the students.

*

It was a Friday afternoon after the bell had announced the end of the school day. I gathered *To Kill a Mockingbird* novels students had left scattered about the desks in a hectic rush to leave. As I neared the back of the room, I noticed markings on the wall that I was sure had not been there before. On closer inspection, I saw the N-word written several times along with a hang-man illustration. Each time I read it, I could hear it, taunting me. I became intensely aware of myself fixed to the classroom floor as a strange mixture of shock and shame washed over me. What was I supposed to do with that?

I had read the school’s behaviour policy, but it seemed redundant in this scenario. Culprit: unknown. Time of incident: unknown. Target: couldn’t be sure. I went to seek advice from the department head who listened, wide-eyed. They strode down the corridor and entered my classroom to look. Embarrassed, I hung back as a string of regretful expressions were issued. It was decided that the principal should be informed without delay.

I went to the principal. We’d had a pleasantly awkward first meeting at a twilight session in my first week at the school. Paired during an icebreaker task, we

exchanged stories about our own schooling experiences. Now, as I took my seat in their office, I made a passing remark about that first encounter. We laughed briefly at the memory before moving on.

Sitting in their office I was aware of how apologetic I felt that my Blackness, my otherness, had created a problem in their school. Nevertheless, the words 'inclusion', 'acceptance' and 'respect' inscribed on the wall above the principal's head, yet again, offered mild reassurance. Several potential scenarios went through my mind:

I went to the principal, and they were calmly furious that this had happened to me, but they held space without inserting themselves so that I could explain how I felt.

I went to the principal, and they dispelled any notions that this was my fault or my responsibility, instead taking responsibility for what had happened in one of *their* classrooms to one of *their* teachers.

I went to the principal, and they led the investigation to identify who was responsible for the language scrawled in my room and initiated a disciplinary and restorative process to ensure the child understood why it was harmful and had the opportunity to be accountable for their actions.

Except, none of these things that needed to happen, happened.

Instead, I was questioned on how I'd let it happen.

Instead, I was asked to photograph the evidence and then clean it.

Instead, I was tasked with investigating the matter myself and reporting back when I'd identified who it might be.

It was apparent to me that this wasn't going to be taken seriously, that it was my problem, not the school's, so I did none of those things and the word was left to fester on the classroom wall.

Phase two

It's not fair!

Why are we always the ones to get in trouble?

Listening to Black and Brown children's routine reports of racism was a part of my job description that I didn't foresee in a school that prides itself on being ethnically diverse and observing all occasions for minoritised groups. The school's model of inclusivity – diversity groups, days, and assemblies – was incredibly superficial. As well as being approached by children on their own volition to report incidents of racism, they had also been sent to me by other teachers ready to relinquish this responsibility. One of these incidents is etched in the memories of my nerves.

On break duty, I was approached by two Black children who told me about an after-school sports match the week before where a White child had used racial slurs against some Black and Brown opposition players from another school. The two Black children from our school had spoken up about it, warning their White

teammate not to use racist language. The White child, surprised at being called out by their friends, responded defensively, telling them it wasn't directed at them and not to take offence. Neither side backed down.

The two Black children had reported this to their sports coach who said they would inform the head of year the next day. Yet, a week had passed, and nothing had been done. This didn't surprise me. It was this same sports coach who had once brazenly expressed how 'Black boys are intimidating because they laugh so loud and hang around in packs.'

First, I reassured these Black children by supporting their decision to call it out and report it. Then, I told them to leave it with me before approaching their head of year to ask what the outcome of the incident would be.

'What incident?' was the head of the year's response.

Seeing this as a clear failure by the sports coach to report it, I informed the relevant SLT members. They wanted to know what might have provoked this White child, the insults that might have been thrown in their direction. I was asked to investigate what had 'actually happened'.

I held my tongue, knowing this was beyond my remit, and agreed to collect official statements.

At lunchtime, I asked the Black students to write their accounts of the incident. Then I approached the White child to get the same. I was met with hysteria.

They're making me out to be a racist! I'm not a racist!

This hysteria catches the attention of SLT who carefully escort the child, like a package marked 'fragile', to the designated safeguarding lead. I am told this child is so distressed they refuse to return to lessons. Then, I am asked to call their parents to explain the nature of their distress.

Nothing is said about the safety or well-being of the Black children who came to me in the first place. There is no acknowledgement of any threat to my safety, nor, at the least, any discomfort, as a Black teacher making this call.

*

I never made that call to the parents. Instead, I handed the Black children's statements over to SLT and asked them to handle it.

Phase three

At times, I have been silent, not wanting to rock the boat, hinder my progression or be labelled 'aggressive'. This time round, I was ready to face anything head-on.

The senior leadership team was aware of the issues they faced around dealing with race and racism; we had spoken about it when I interviewed, and this honest conversation partly swayed my decision to accept the job. They seemed keen to move forwards and were looking to appoint staff who aligned with their vision of becoming an anti-racist school.

Within six months of joining, I had designed a tutor programme around anti-racism and racial literacy, and trialled parts of it with my tutor group to get their input. It landed well and gave them a space to narrate their experiences. They were fed up with microaggressions, ignorance, fragility, and avoidance of racial issues from certain groups of teachers. It was pointed out that all staff should undertake some training, whether or not they would be delivering the tutor programme.

I approached the principal to share this feedback and expressed a desire to lead a whole school CPD series on anti-racist practice. I would be drawing on the voice of the students, relevant theories, and my own lived experience to do this. It was agreed, and I was given a few twilight sessions. Because many of my interactions with staff had been veneered with over-politeness, I couldn't be sure of how the training would be received, so I invited feedback at a midway point.

From many staff members, I received praise, gratitude, and encouragement. By others, I was undermined, attacked, and ostracised. Anonymous evaluation forms revealed these people's true thoughts, but I also overheard them in the staffroom.

It would have been better to cover all types of discrimination.

Maybe we should avoid using terms like 'White privilege'. It encourages reverse racism.

It is race baiting and, quite frankly, getting into the territory of radicalisation!

Some staff had taken it upon themselves to report their concerns directly to the principal, so a meeting was arranged to discuss some of these. The principal's immediate response was to ask if I wished to stop the CPD altogether, or exclusively present to SLT.

An escape from negative feedback from a few disgruntled staff wasn't what I was looking for, so I said I would complete the series and deliver it to all staff.

*

Following that, I was met with forced smiles and eyes that averted mine in the corridor.

I found out that one member of the administrative staff had deleted an email addressed to me from an outside agency wanting to explore race and the curriculum; this colleague thought it best that I didn't engage with them, considering what had been happening at the school.

A member of my department went through the effort of printing a list of vacancies in other schools and placing this on my desk with a post-it note saying something about 'great opportunities'.

This same person joked about my hair looking 'a bit wild' in front of other staff.

I just wanted to go to work every day and feel safe.

I went to HR to see what my options were. They said I could file a grievance, though they dissuaded me from doing this by implying that it is an 'admin heavy' process and I may not get the result I want. I blinked expectantly in the pause that followed, but a weak smile on a tilted head was the only response from the other side of the desk. I got up and returned to my classroom.

*

Weeks later, something strange happened. I was waiting for my tutor group to arrive for registration, but nobody came. Hearing chants drifting in through my third-floor window, I went over to see what was going on. Crowds of children had congregated on the school field.

'I take it you know all about this,' blurted out a voice from behind me.

I whipped round to see the vice principal looking flustered.

'I don't know anything. What's happening?' I asked.

'It's a protest and one child has said *you* instigated it!' they proclaimed.

Before I could interject, the vice principal ranted about students protesting the decision by some of the teachers to not deliver the anti-racist programme I had designed for tutor time. They demanded to know why teachers opting out was not being challenged by SLT.

With raised brows, I waited for them to finish, though, in my mind, I hadn't gotten past the presumption that I was involved.

'We need to stop all this immediately. It's absurd. Can you come down to the field?' they asked.

My eyes narrowed.

I replied, 'In what capacity?'

Phase four

INSET day. I sat there, half-listening. Different teachers presented what equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) would look like in their subject areas that academic year. There was a real buzz of excitement circulating the room – but it couldn't catch me.

Heard it all before.

When the afternoon session concluded, I swiftly made for the exit, leaving the excited chatter for the quiet and stillness of my car.

I reflected on the previous academic year. The receptionist who repeatedly confused me with another Black member of staff.

The Black students *still* populated the 'reflection room'.

Students that *still* came to my classroom wanting to talk to someone that 'gets it'. It felt safe to share, laugh, and reason with each other. That space was sacred. But survival isn't enough.

*

One December afternoon, I leant by the window in my empty classroom, being lifted by the soulful sounds of a playlist I had compiled for 'free' periods. The minutes rolled by as I stared out at the empty playground bordered by an old wire fence. The sound of a door slamming open jerked me out of my reverie.

A series of cusswords reverberated across the corridor. I followed the sound until my eyes fell upon a Black child, chest heaving, being hauled away by a member of SLT. The class teacher stood silently, white fists clenched, red blotches steadily deepening on their face and neck. Our eyes met for a fifth of a second before they lowered theirs and withdrew into the classroom.

At the end of the day, a group of children came to relay the events to me.

The teacher had asked their class to analyse the trailers for 'Blue Story'¹ and 'Top Boy'² before considering what can be learned about 'the Black British experience'. The child made a disapproving comment about the task which the teacher overheard and reacted against. This led to a confrontation in which the teacher accused the child of defiance, while the child accused the teacher of ignorance. The task was quickly derailed as the class watched the power struggle ensue. At that point, the teacher contacted SLT to have the child removed.

*

In the staffroom the next morning, I heard that the child had been given a day's internal suspension, but the teacher had approached SLT to request that the child not return to the class for the rest of the week.

It was agreed.

I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, doing little to relieve my constricted chest or calm a tempest of emotions. In my mind, I saw again the image of this Black child being hauled away from their classroom.

That week, I typed a letter of resignation, and signed it off with the following:

It was impossible to breathe here. – Jarel Robinson-Brown (2020)

Discussion

In this section we consider incidents within the composite narrative in relation to the existing literature in this field across three major themes: (1) the policy-practice gap, (2) avoiding responsibility and accountability for responding to racism, and (3) 'the privileging of White interests' (Gillborn, 2005: 485).

The epigraph, being the voice of the narrative's Black teacher in the present day, draws immediate attention to the psychological impacts of institutional racism throughout their teaching career. This poetic testimony reflects a phenomenon that Williams (1987) describes as 'spirit murder', referring to the 'deeply painful and assaultive' offense of racism, which has been likened to a crime that is difficult to prove (1987: 129). Whilst this counter-story may 'raise

awareness and understanding of the impact of discrimination' (Lumby and Moorosi, 2022: 244), our *particular* concern is with the ethical, legal and policy implications of this narrative for those with senior leadership positions in schools.

Inclusivity in schools: the policy-practice gap

School leaders in this narrative espouse commitments to inclusivity but demonstrate limited understandings of racism which focus on interpersonal acts of discrimination, meaning they often fail to recognise the ways in which racial practices and relations are generated and reproduced on a structural level (Hall, 1983). In Phase One, the Black teacher is simultaneously hypervisible and invisible (Lander and Santoro, 2017); the former occurs as a result of being in a largely White placement school, an unsought context since racism thrives in these sites (Brandt, 1986; Tereshchenko, Mills and Bradbury, 2020), while the latter is due to the White liberal stance of most staff who take on a 'colourblind' approach and do not see the impropriety of their efforts to be inclusive in the staffroom. The department head's assuredness of the inclusive school culture combined with their shock at the racist words on the wall is just another example of this paradox, especially as they are unable to make the connection between their decision to teach *How to Kill a Mockingbird* and White children feeling emboldened to repeat its racist language (BBC News, 2021). Rather than teach Black British literature which has the power to honour and affirm Blackness (Saleh 2025), the department's choice of text presents black characters as either servants or silent victims of violent murder.

In Phase Two and Four, each school prides itself on its ethnic diversity and multiculturalist approach, what Troyna (1983) refers to as the three Ss: 'saris, samosas, and steel bands', where White children are encouraged to learn about the cultures of racially minoritised children in the hope that this would dispel racism. However, frequent accounts of racist incidents amongst children, overt and covert manifestations of racism from staff, along the inability of school leaders to deal with racism and its impacts clearly exemplify a limited interpretation and implementation of safeguarding practices and nullify the inclusive ethos (Crozier, 2023). The school leaders in Phase Three say they are committed to being an anti-racist school and may consider themselves to be what Miller (2021:18) calls 'accidental activists', meaning they are facing up to the issue of racism and are committed to acting, but do not necessarily have a clearly defined plan. Yet, their responses to incidents faced by the Black teacher are that of what Miller calls 'passive sympathisers' (18) which describes leaders who are aware of racism but do nothing to address or tackle it, nor seek help with how to do so. Phase Three illustrates how resistance to anti-racist work and the preservation of dominant ideologies about race can exist even when schools have expressed a commitment to race equality (Picower, 2009; Rollock, 2012).

Responding to racism: avoiding responsibility and accountability

The narrative illustrates that the Black teacher and Black children are viewed as 'a problem' that others are unsure of how to deal with, a reality that Black people in White spaces are accustomed to (DuBois, 1994: 1). The school leaders avoid taking responsibility for responding to racism, despite the legislation around safeguarding and equality in schools discussed in this article's introduction. In Phases One and Two, the responsibility is passed on to the Black teacher, reflecting the fact that racially minoritised teachers are often expected to take on pastoral responsibilities for students from similar backgrounds (Tereshchenko, Mills and Bradbury, 2020). While research has shown that Black students tend to feel a greater sense of connectivity and care from Black teachers, this tacit responsibility allows White teachers to remain in ignorance, while Black teachers receive negative reactions from advocating for racially minoritised students (Francis, 2019; Tereshchenko, Mills and Bradbury, 2020).

In both phases, the Black teacher deploys 'agentic strategies, including silence as a means through which to navigate white education spaces' (Callender, 2020: 1095). This is shown through their decisions not to personally investigate the racist words on the classroom wall in Phase One, nor to call the parents of the White child in Phase Two. Though this is an act of self-preservation, 'silence can re-enact systems of power and privilege, resulting in the muting of' (1092) Black teachers and students, alongside a continued avoidance of responsibility from White teachers and leaders. In Phase Three, the principal seeks to protect the Black teacher from criticism by suggesting they refrain from delivering the anti-racist CPD, rather than taking responsibility for racist behaviours of staff members. Then, HR tries to 'protect' the Black teacher from the 'admin-heavy' process of filing a grievance but offers no alternative, leaving the Black teacher to process their own trauma. Ironically, the Black teacher is asked by a school leader to take a level of responsibility for the student protest, which can be seen as a byproduct of the 'passive sympathiser' responses to racism from the leadership team (Miller, 2021: 18).

(Un)conscious bias: the privileging of white interests

As mentioned in the introduction, when it comes to safeguarding, Ofsted stipulates that school leadership 'put pupils' interests first' as well as 'actively seek and listen to the views and experiences of pupils, staff, and parents, taking prompt but proportionate action to address any concerns' (2023). Yet, in Phase Two, the initial report of a racist incident is not acted upon by the White sports coach, and when the incident is reported to SLT by the Black teacher, it is treated with suspicion. This can be seen as an example of adultification bias since the White child, who is in distress at being caught out, is centred and treated as a victim. Meanwhile, the Black children – the *actual*

victims in this scenario – are left to safeguard themselves (Davis, 2022). The school leaders also prioritise the opportunity to involve the White child's parents, whereas the parents of the Black children are likely to find out from their children rather than the school. This decision may reflect historical stereotypes about Black parents, mothers in particular, being difficult or disengaged from their children's schooling (Leath et al., 2020; Rollock et al., 2011). This is yet another way in which Black children are denied a crucial form of safeguarding. As documented in the independent safeguarding review of Child Q (see Introduction), the pupil's mother was not contacted by the school before being handed over to the police (CHSCP, 2022: 2), and the mother's response to this decision clearly indicates that if she had been contacted, she would have stopped the search (13).

That Black children are forced to navigate hostile school environments where racism, scrutiny and surveillance are maintained has been previously established (Callender, 2020; Love, 2014; YMCA, 2020). In Phase Four, an example of this occurs when a White teacher interprets a Black child's honest critique of a task as pure defiance which ultimately leads to their forceful removal and short-term exclusion from the class. This punitive response reveals that the teacher perceives the Black child as a threat to their authority which they seek to keep in place; in reality, the Black child holds very little power in this dynamic. Moreover, the Black child has already suffered a sense of ego-depletion (Baumeister et al., 1998; Haslanger, 2014) from having to carefully manage their emotional responses, not only to the problematic task, but also to the teacher who is unable to perceive any issue, due to a lack of racial literacy. By the point at which the Black child is heard issuing 'a string of cusswords', they are no longer able to exert the same level of self-control as their willpower is fatigued from the White teacher 'denying them credibility, respect, and trust' (Haslanger, 2014: 116). Yet, the decision by SLT to support the teacher's request to exclude the Black child from their class for the rest of the week protects and reaffirms the existing power dynamic.

Pushing practice forward: recommendations for school leadership

For school leaders to begin taking responsibility for effectively dealing with racist incidents, school leaders first need critical self-awareness, so they can situate themselves 'within rather than outside an analysis of race' (Dunne et al., 2018: 171), recognizing ways in which they may be, in fact, part of the problem through 'their own complicity in (re)producing racism' (Joseph-Salisbury, 2020: 9). In Miller's (2021: 16) ecological model of professional development, he encourages school leaders to ask: 'Do ... leaders see it as their duty/responsibility to tackle institutional racism?' and consider how they might go about doing this amid systems which operationalise Whiteness and obstruct anti-racism (Bartoli et al. 2016; Stewart-Hall et al., 2023).

While this article has presented the counter-stories of Black teachers, school leaders can also use the testimonies of racially minoritised students to support professional learning in schools, if these are read collectively, with clear direction to prioritise the children's welfare above defensive evasions (Ryan, 1998). International research on challenging racism in schools (e.g. Khalifa et al., 2019) has highlighted the value of school leaders establishing processes to support self-reflection amongst staff, and developing inclusive communication practices aimed at connecting with and empowering communities. Similarly, Walker et al.'s (2023) study with school leaders in England demonstrates the importance of school leaders developing a 'deep understanding' of anti-Black racism through reflective communities of practice which extend beyond their immediate setting, as 'a pre-requisite for effective anti-racist practice and sustained school transformation' (2022: 156).

The narrative reveals the various identities Black teachers embody and negotiate professionally and personally (Williams, 2018); their personal toil in telling these stories must be acknowledged. It provides important insights for school leaders in recognising racial inequities which are often reflected in current educational norms and ways in which these might be addressed. A lack of personal awareness, community partnerships, and racial literacy does not excuse school leaders from enacting safeguarding and equality legislation. Ofsted and school governors must hold school leaders accountable for their legal and moral obligations to protect racially minoritised staff and students from harm, otherwise, these obligations will continue to be treated as discretionary.

The authors of this study, therefore, recommend the following:

1. The DfE ensure school safeguarding guidelines (KCSIE) provide a clear, victim-centred definition of racism, such as the definition proposed by the Macpherson Report.
2. The student, staff and parent views on race and inclusivity are included in the Ofsted inspection framework, and that Section 367 (on safeguarding) be updated to reflect the same explicit attention to racism we are recommending in KCSIE.
3. School leadership undergo and provide mandatory education for school staff on racial literacies, e.g. research-informed guidance around adultification and victim support.

Notes

1. 'Blue Story' is a 2019 film, inspired by true stories, about two friends who end up on rival sides of a South-East London postcode gang war.
2. 'Top Boy' is a television series, set in East London, which illustrates people struggling to survive against the odds in a crime-riddled housing estate.

Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge support from Malcolm Richards, Janet Orchard and Arathi Sriprakash during the course of this study. This study was made possible through a Research England Enhancing Research Culture grant, awarded by the University of Bristol.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Research England.

Notes on Contributor

Tryphosa Bennett (Independent Researcher), Alexandra Brown (Independent Researcher), Terra Glowach (University of the West of England), Tanisha Hicks-Beresford (Independent Researcher), Rafael Mitchell (The University of Bristol), *DeMarco Ryans* (Independent Researcher), *Amy Saleh* (University of the West of England), and *Indikah Smith* (EdD Research Student).

References

- Bain, Z. 2018. "Is There Such a Thing as 'White Ignorance' in British Education?" *Ethics and Education* 13 (1): 4–21.
- Bartoli, E., A. Michael, K. L. Bentley-Edwards, H. C. Stevenson, R. E. Shor, and S. E. McClain. 2016. "Training for Colour-Blindness: White Racial Socialisation." *Whiteness and Education* 1 (2): 125–136.
- Baumeister, R. F., E. Bratslavsky, M. Muraven, and D. M. Tice. 1998. "Ego Depletion: Is the Active Self a Limited Resource?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74:1252–1265.
- BBC News/Teesside teachers urged not to read out racist slur in books'. 2021. "Teesside Teachers Urged Not to Read Out Racist Slur in Books." BBC News, 11 October. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tees-58842159>.
- Boakye, J. 2022. *I Heard What You Said*. London: Picador.
- Brandt, G. 1986. *The Realisation of Anti-Racist Teaching*. London: Falmer.
- Brown, J. R. 2020. "A Letter to my Nephew." In *The Book of Queer Prophets*, edited by Ruth Hunt, 104–108. London: Harper Collins.
- Callender, C. 2020. "Black Male Teachers, White Education Spaces: Troubling School Practices of Othering and Surveillance." *British Educational Research Journal* 45 (5): 1081–1098.
- Chávez-Moreno, L. C. 2022. "Critiquing Racial Literacy: Presenting a Continuum of Racial Literacies." *Educational Researcher* 51 (7): 481–488.
- CHSCP. 2022. "Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review: Child Q."

- Crozier, G. 2023. "Reproducing Racism and Maintaining White Supremacy: Experiences in School and University." In *Racism and Education in Britain: Addressing Structural Oppression and the Dominance of Whiteness*, edited by G. Crozier, 135–166. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Davis J (2022) *Adultification Bias Within Child Protection and Safeguarding*. Report, HM Inspectorate of Probation, UK, June.
- Davis, J., and N. Marsh. 2020. "Boys to men: The Cost of 'Adultification' in Safeguarding Responses to Black Boys." *Critical and Radical Social Work* 8 (2): 255–259.
- Demie, F. 2021. "The Experience of Black Caribbean Pupils in School Exclusion in England." *Educational Review* 73 (1): 55–70.
- Department for Education. 2014. "The Equality Act and Schools."
- Department for Education. 2018. "Statement of Intent on the Diversity of the Teaching Workforce – Setting the Case for a Diverse Teaching Workforce."
- Department for Education. 2023a. "Keeping Children Safe in Education 2023."
- Department for Education. 2023b. "School Teacher Workforce."
- DiAngelo, R. 2016. "White Fragility." *Counterpoints* 497:245–253.
- DuBois, W. E. B. 1994. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Dover Publications.
- Dunne, L., V. Kay, R. Boyle, F. Obadan, and V. Lander. 2018. "'I Love a Curry': Student-Teacher Discourse Around 'Race' and Ethnicity at a UK University." *Journal of Education for Teaching* 44 (2): 162–174.
- Education Support. 2023. "Mental Health and Wellbeing of Ethnic Minority Teachers." Report, Education Support, UK, January.
- Francis, D. 2019. "Male Leaders of African Caribbean Heritage: Leading with Justice and Care to Enhance Black Male Student Achievement." In *Race, Education and Educational Leadership in England: An Integrated Analysis*, edited by P. Miller, and C. Callender, 27–38. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Gillborn, D. 2005. "Education Policy as an act of White Supremacy: Whiteness, Critical Race Theory and Education Reform." *Journal of Education Policy* 20 (4): 485–506.
- Glowach, T., T. Hicks-Beresford, and R. Mitchell. 2023a. "Decolonizing the Curriculum in English Secondary Schools: Lessons from Teacher-led Initiatives in Bristol." In *Decolonizing Education for Sustainable Futures*, edited by Y. Hutchinson, A. A. Cortez Ochoa, J. Paulson, and L. Tikly, 136–150. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Glowach, T., R. Mitchell, T. Bennett, L. Donaldson, J. Jefferson, L. Panford, A. Saleh, K. Smee, B. Wells-Dion, and E. Hemmings. 2023b. "Making Spaces for Collaborative Action and Learning: Reflections on Teacher-led Decolonising Initiatives from a Professional Learning Network in England." *The Curriculum Journal* 34 (1): 100–117.
- Glowach, T., M. Richards, and R. Mitchell. 2023c. "More Ethnic Minority Teachers Are Needed in UK Schools – But Teaching Can Affect Their Mental Health and Wellbeing." *The Conversation*. https://theconversation.com/more-ethnic-minority-teachers-are-needed-in-uk-schools-but-teaching-can-affect-their-mental-health-and-wellbeing-198201?utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=bylinecopy_url_button.
- Hall, S. 1983. "Teaching Race." *Early Child Development and Care* 10 (4): 259–274.
- Haslanger S (2014) *Studying While Black: Trust, Opportunity, and Disrespect*. *Du Bois Review* 11(1): 109–136.
- Joseph-Salisbury, R. 2020. *Race and Racism in Secondary Schools. Report*, Runnymede, UK, June.
- Khalifa MA, Khalil D, Marsh T and Halloran C (2019) *Toward an Indigenous, Decolonizing School Leadership: A Literature Review*. *Educational Administration Quarterly* 55(4): 571–614.
- Kinouani, G. 2021. *Living While Black*. London: Ebury Press.

- Ladson-Billings, G., and J. K. Donnor. 2008. "Waiting for the Call: The Moral Activist Role of Critical Race Theory Scholarship." In *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*, edited by N. K. Denzin, S. L. Yvonna, and L. Tuhiwai Smith, 61–84. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Lander, V., and N. Santoro. 2017. "Invisible and Hypervisible Academics: The Experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic Teacher Educators." *Teaching in Higher Education* 22 (8): 1008–1021.
- Leath, S., A. D. Marchand, A. Harrison, A. Halawah, C. Davis, and S. Rowley. 2020. "A Qualitative Exploration of Black Mothers' Gendered Constructions of Their Children and Their Parental School Involvement." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 53:124–135.
- Love, B. L. 2014. "'I see Travon Martin': What Teachers Can Learn from the Tragic Death of a Young Black Male." *The Urban Review* 46 (2): 292–306.
- Lumby, J., and P. Moorosi. 2022. "Leadership for Equality in Education: 50 Years Marching Forward or Marching on the Spot?" *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 50 (2): 233–251.
- Macpherson, S. W. 1999. *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry: Report of an inquiry by Sir William Macpherson*. Report, HMSO, UK, February.
- Miller, P. 2021. "Anti-racist School Leadership: Making 'Race' Count in Leadership Preparation and Development." *Professional Development in Education* 47 (1): 7–21.
- Miller, P., and C. Callender. 2018. "Black Leaders Matter: Agency, Progression and the Sustainability of BME School Leadership in England." *Journal for Multicultural Education* 12 (2): 183–196.
- Mills, C. W. 2007. "White Ignorance." In *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, edited by S. Sullivan, and N. Tuana, 13–38. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- NASUWT. 2017. *Visible Minorities, Invisible Teachers: BME Teachers in the Education System in England. Report*. Birmingham: NASUWT.
- Naturalistic generalization. 2010. In A. J. Mills, G. Durepos, E. Wiebe (Eds.) *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research* (pp. 600–601). SAGE Publications, Inc., <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412957397>
- NEU. 2018. *Visible and Invisible Barriers: The Impact of Racism on BME Teachers. Report*. London, UK: NEU, September.
- Ofsted. 2023. "School Inspection Handbook."
- Picower, B. 2009. "The Unexamined Whiteness of Teaching: How White Teachers Maintain and Enact Dominant Racial Ideologies." *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 12 (2): 197–215.
- Rollock, N. 2012. "Unspoken Rules of Engagement: Navigating Racial Microaggressions in the Academic Terrain." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 25 (5): 517–532.
- Rollock, N., D. Gillborn, C. Vincent, and S. Ball. 2011. "The Public Identities of the Black Middle Classes: Managing Race in Public Spaces." *Sociology* 45 (6): 1078–1093.
- Ryan, J. 1998. "Critical Leadership for Education in a Postmodern World: Emancipation, Resistance and Communal Action." *International Journal of Leadership in Education Theory and Practice* 1 (3): 257–278.
- Saleh, A. 2025. "Tell It How It Is: Princess & The Hustler in the Secondary English Classroom." *English in Education* 1–18.
- Solórzano, D. G., and T. J. Yosso. 2002. "Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research." *Qualitative Inquiry* 8 (1): 23–44.
- Stewart-Hall, C., P. Rabiger, V. Lander, and V. Grant. 2023. "Resisting Whiteness: Anti-Racist Leadership and Professional Learning in Majority White Senior Leadership Teams in English Schools." *The Curriculum Journal* 34 (1): 138–155.
- Tereshchenko, A., M. Mills, and A. Bradbury. 2020. *Making Progress? Employment and Retention of BAME Teachers in England, Report*. UCL Institute of Education, UK, December.
- Thomas, A. 2022. *Representation Matters: Becoming an Anti-Racist Educator*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

- Tikly, L. 2022. "Racial Formation and Education: A Critical Analysis of the Sewell Report." *Ethnicities* 22 (6): 857–881.
- Troyna, B. 1983. "Multiracial Education: Just Another Brick in the Wall?" *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 10 (3): 424–428.
- Twine, F. W. 2010. *A White Side of Black Britain: Interracial Intimacy and Racial Literacy*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Walker, S., I. Bennett, P. Kettory, C. Pike, and L. Walker. 2023. "'Deep Understanding' for Anti-Racist School Transformation: School Leaders' Professional Development in the Context of Black Lives Matter." *The Curriculum Journal* 34 (1): 156–172.
- Wallace D (2020) The Diversity Trap? Critical Explorations of Black Male Teachers' Negotiations of Leadership and Learning in London State Schools. *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 23(3): 345–366.
- Warmington, P., D. Gillborn, N. Rollock, and S. Demack. 2018. "They Can't Handle the Race Agenda: Stakeholders' Reflections on Race and Education Policy 1993-2013." *Educational Review* 70 (4): 409–426.
- Williams, P. 1987. "Spirit-murdering the Messenger: The Discourse of Fingerpointing as the Law's Response to Racism." *University of Miami Law Review* 42 (1): 127–158.
- Williams, T. M. 2018. "When Will we Listen and Heed? Learning from Black Teachers to Understand the Urgent Need for Change." *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 42 (1/2): 3–17.
- Wynter S (1992) *Do Not Call Us Negros: How 'Multicultural' Textbooks Perpetuate Racism*. Aspire.
- YMCA. 2020. *Young and black: The young black experience of institutional racism in the UK, Report*. YMCA, UK, October.