

Racism is old-fashioned, antiracism is modern: An error occurred while checking for an antiracism system update!

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Abstract: This small-scale phenomenological study investigates the paradoxes inherent in anti-racism work within UK schools, Early Years, and Childhood settings, especially following the global resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement after the murder of George Floyd in 2020. Applying a Critical Race Theory and Critical Whiteness Studies lens, the study explores the experiences of Anti-Racist School Award leaders navigating significant challenges in predominantly white staff environments across England. Data were comprehensively gathered through an anonymous online survey (n=25), in-depth interviews (n=12), written reflections on interview transcripts (n=5), and a focus group examining key emerging themes (n=6). Findings highlight how racism is often perceived as an old-fashioned phenomenon external to contemporary schooling, while anti-racism is framed as a progressive, modern endeavour. This temporal framing, coupled with persistent white ignorance and institutional inertia, hinders deep structural change and reinforces whiteness as the default operating system within education. Critiquing the limitations of performative anti-racism, the article calls for a more sustained, systemic approach to dismantling racial inequities. It advocates for mandatory racial literacy training for all staff, embedding anti-racist frameworks into curriculum development and leadership structures, and establishing accountability measures to assess long-term progress beyond mere recognition or awards. Without such fundamental shifts, anti-racism risks becoming an uninstalled 'system update', leaving the structures of racial injustice intact.

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Introduction

This article investigates the complexities of anti-racism work in United Kingdom (UK) education, particularly in the wake of the global resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement following the murder of George Floyd in 2020. In the UK, institutional pledges were made in what became the *post-George Floyd Moment* and various institutions, including Early Years and Childhood settings sought formal recognition as "anti-racist" through structured programmes and policy frameworks. However, these initiatives often fall short of addressing racism as an entrenched and evolving social phenomenon. In response, the Centre for Race, Education and Decoloniality (CRED) at Leeds Beckett University developed an optional Anti-Racist School Award programme for schools. The two-year programme provides designated Award leaders in schools with a self-assessment diagnostic tool, annual coaching sessions, various resources and online training modules. For the evaluation process, the school must complete a final self-evaluation document and submit evidence of impact to be assessed by CRED for a Bronze, Silver or Gold Award. While many institutions have sought formal anti-racist recognition, these initiatives frequently encounter resistance stemming from deeply ingrained systemic issues.

Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations

To thoroughly interrogate these complexities, the study applies the interconnected theoretical lenses of Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000) and Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) (Blaisdell & Taylor Bullock, 2023; Leonardo, 2009; Picower, 2009). While originating in the

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US, insights from both have been effectively applied to understanding education in the UK for the past two decades (Gillborn, 2005, 2006). These frameworks are paramount for understanding how whiteness functions as the hegemonic and often invisible norm within society, particularly given the overwhelmingly white-staffed UK education system (Department for Education [DfE], 2024).

Critical Race Theory

The study underscores the “permanence of racism” (Bell, 1992) key to CRT, conceptualising it not as an aberrant or unusual phenomenon, but as a structurally embedded and constantly enmeshed aspect of all societal facets, including schooling. This perspective directly challenges the notion that racism is merely an individual failing or something brought in from outside by “bad white racists” (Applebaum, 2007, p.254), which “good white anti-racists” (Leonardo, 2009) in schools often aim to root out and expel. The study explores how Award leaders learn to understand racism as structural and permanent and yet simultaneously hold onto notions of racism as an external, antiquated issue, distinct from the present and isolated in time or geography.

Critical Whiteness Studies and White Ignorance

CWS complements CRT by illuminating how racism, often perceived as a historic relic, persistently operates as a structural force, largely unseen due to pervasive white ignorance (Mills, 2007). Thus, white people do not perceive themselves as racialised subjects nor as having to notice or understand racialised hierarchies and oppression as anything to do with them. Anti-Racist School Award leaders struggle with notions of white complicity and with recognising the enduring presence of institutional racism. Situating these struggles within CWS scholarship exposes the limitations of focusing solely on individual intention or ignorance when discussing white complicity in racism, which can result in a system that can identify racism as a historical artefact but struggles to recognise its current manifestation within institutional policies and practices.

Moreover, this article extends Mary Douglas’ anthropological theory of “dirt as matter out of place” (Douglas, 1966), demonstrating how racism is often perceived by Award leaders as a “slippery concept” (Bonnett, 1996). Even when identified as structural, it is frequently re-categorised as anomalous or ambiguous, akin to something external that needs to be expelled from the ‘clean’ school environment. The challenges are further compounded by a temporal framing of racism, wherein it is depicted as something imported from the past, carried into the present through the ignorance or backwardness of specific individuals or communities. This perception fosters a false dichotomy between the modern anti-racist and the old-fashioned racist. However, as Lentin (2020) argues, racism is not merely a set of outdated beliefs but a structural feature of modern society, thus continuously reproduced within educational environments, policies, and curricula. Through the experiences of anti-racism leaders, the study examines how schools navigate this “temporal” dimension of racism. Leaders describe racism as a force that flows through time and space, surfacing in modern institutions despite efforts to eradicate it. This time-travelling racism is further complicated by white ignorance, which, as Bain (2018) demonstrates, is endemic in school settings and extends beyond white individuals. Leaders of anti-racism initiatives must contend with engaging colleagues and communities whose worldviews are often shaped by racial ideologies frozen in the past.

This study leverages the experiences of the Anti-Racist School Award leaders to critically examine how schools navigate the complexities of this temporal dimension of racism and the limitations of approaches that frame modern anti-racism as a form of “wokeism” or intrusive ideology. Ironically, wokeism, far from being a modern idea, refers to a phrase which has been in the African American vernacular since the 1930s when the saying ‘stay woke’ came into common use. Woke denotes being alert to racial prejudice and discrimination. The term has also been used sarcastically on the political right to suggest that wokeism is an oppressive and moralistic ideology designed to promote intolerance of modern social norms (Cammaerts, 2022). Such superficial framing silences vital conversations about race, leading to shallow solutions such as “celebrating diversity”, rather than challenging deeper systemic inequities. The study aims to contribute to ongoing discussions in education around the complexities of anti-racism work, offering insights into the difficulties of moving from awareness to meaningful action within

education settings. By highlighting the limitations of performative anti-racism, this article ultimately advocates for a more robust and sustained systemic approach to dismantling racial inequities in schools. Without such fundamental shifts, anti-racism risks remaining an uninstalled 'system update', leaving the structures of racial injustice firmly intact.

Method

Adopting a mixed-methods qualitative research design, the study is inherently grounded in social constructionist approaches and the analytical lenses of CRT and CWS. It is specifically characterised as a small-scale phenomenological study, aiming to deeply explore and understand the lived experiences and perceptions of Anti-Racist School Award leaders as they navigate the complexities of this work within their educational contexts. This approach was chosen to capture the nuanced subjective realities and interpretations of racism and anti-racism as experienced by these leaders.

CRT and CWS served as an epistemological accountability framework emphasising that the participants were regarded as collaborative thinking partners, capable of understanding "openness, closeness and distance, the co-construction and situating of knowledge, trustworthiness and integrity, power relations, and ethical dilemmas [which] are given primacy in the qualitative methodology" (Raheim et al, 2016, p.1). Both the researcher's and participants' positionality and worldview are shaped by social constructs, influenced by their cumulative lived experiences, socialisation and thought processes, as well as by shifts that emerge through engagement in the research itself. Specifically, the researcher's dual role as both a coach for the Award since its inception in 2021 and as a researcher, educator, anti-racism scholar and activist significantly informed the study. Identifying as a cisgender woman, educator, mother, and someone racialised as white - while at times perceived as a Jewish 'other' - is acknowledged as informing the researcher's positionality, perspectives, and preconceptions (DeCuir-Gunby, Chapman & Schutz, 2018). This personal anti-racism journey and evolving racial literacy, which involved developing a stable racialised identity through confronting ingrained white ignorance and understanding white complicity, allowed for greater empathy and insight into similar learning curves and challenges faced by Award leaders.

Data were gathered from Award leaders at a time when approximately 250 UK schools were engaged in the programme. The collection methods were strategically designed for data triangulation to provide a comprehensive understanding of experiences, ensuring the robustness and trustworthiness of the findings as follows:

Anonymous online survey (n=25): This tool gathered initial insights into broader perspectives and collective challenges among Award leaders. It also provided participants with an insight into the potential discussion points should they wish to take part in further elements of the study.

In-depth interviews (n=12): Ranging from 90-120 minutes, these semi-structured interviews allowed for a deep and rich exploration of individual experiences, motivations, and nuanced understandings of racism and anti-racism. To further enhance both trustworthiness and collaboration between researcher and participants, the transcripts were shared with participants for validation of their recorded perspectives and reflections on what stood out to them.

Written reflections on interview transcripts (n=5): A subset of interview participants provided written comments on their transcripts, offering additional layers of personal insight and serving as a further measure of participant validation.

Focus group (n=6): This group session, lasting 120 minutes, enabled participants to critically engage with the emerging themes from the individual data as well as the theoretical frameworks of CRT and CWS; it facilitated collective interpretation and further clarified their understanding and viewpoints, thereby contributing to the credibility of the findings.

Participants had a variety of professional roles, and came from a range of education settings serving children from ages 3-18, located across England, covering both state schools (publicly funded) and

independent (private fee-paying) schools. The participant demographic, predominantly white women, mirrored the education workforce, especially in primary and Early Years settings (See Tables 1. & 2.) and highlights the significance of examining anti-racism within predominantly white-staffed environments.

Table 1
Anonymous survey respondents' roles by race and gender

Role by race and gender	Black & Global Majority		White		Dual Heritage	
	Man	Woman	Man	Woman	Man	Woman
Executive Headteacher/Headteacher			2	3		
Senior Leader		1	2	7		
Teacher	1	2	2	3		2

Table 2
Interview participants' roles by race and gender

Role by race and gender	Black & Global Majority		White		Dual Heritage	
	Man	Woman	Man	Woman	Man	Woman
Executive Headteacher / Headteacher			P4	P9 P10		
Senior Leader		P6	P8			
Teacher	P7	P3 P5	P12	P2 P11		P1

The small sample size can be contextualised against national data on the composition of teaching and leadership in England's state schools which reveals that in 2023, 15% of teachers belonged to 'ethnic minority' groups (DfE, 2024). When excluding white 'ethnic minorities', this figure drops to 11%. In 2021, 96% of schools had white headteachers, and 86% had senior leadership teams composed entirely of white individuals (Worth, McLean & Sharp, 2022). Additionally, an analysis of the School Workforce Statistics in 2023 (DfE, 2024) indicated that 4% of headteachers were racialised as Black and Global Majority, alongside 6% of deputy headteachers and 8% of assistant headteachers, when white minorities were excluded. When compared with pupil demographics, the underrepresentation of educators who are not racialised as white is particularly striking. In 2021, over 8 million pupils were enrolled in English schools, with 72% (5.9 million) categorised as white; 11% (900,000) as Asian (including South Asian and non-Chinese East Asian groups); and 6% (520,000 mixed-race and 460,000 Black) grouped together by the DfE. (It is important to consider how census data classifies students with a 'Mixed' racial identity. This category assumes a blending of Black or Asian ancestry with white ancestry and is often collapsed into the Black category rather than the white category. This classification echoes historical eugenicist racial constructs, such as the 'blood quantum' laws established by white settlers in 18th-century America and the 'one-drop rule', which defined individuals as Black if they had at least one Black ancestor (Omi & Winant, 1994) i.e. at least one drop of 'Black blood'). Additionally, 2% (170,000) of pupils belonged to ethnic groups not classified under census categories, while 0.5% (37,000) were recorded as Chinese (DfE, 2022).

The data analysis was rigorously supported by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework for thematic analysis. Throughout this process, the analytical lenses of CRT and CWS were continuously applied, ensuring that data were interpreted not merely descriptively, but critically, to expose underlying racial dynamics and power structures. Specifically:

Familiarisation: The initial immersion in the data was guided by the theoretical frameworks, sensitising the researcher to concepts such as white ignorance, the permanence of racism and manifestations of whiteness as the norm.

Open coding: Initial codes were generated with an awareness of how participants conceptualised race, racism and anti-racism, identifying explicit and implicit references to race critical and systemic issues versus individualised and race-evasive explanations.

Axial coding: This crucial step involved refining codes and identifying relationships between them (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). CRT and CWS theories directly informed the interpretation of these relationships, allowing for the construction of themes that highlighted how whiteness is positioned as a hegemonic norm; how racism is often misconstrued as historical or external; and how white complicity or resistance manifested. This ensured that the analysis moved beyond surface-level observations to address the study's central paradoxes, contributing to the findings.

Reviewing and assessing themes: The developed themes were critically evaluated against the full dataset and continuously interrogated through the lens of CRT and CWS to ensure they accurately represented the structural nature of racism and white ignorance.

Participant validation: Sharing the interview transcripts with participants and inviting written reflections coupled with the focus group discussions served not only as a validation process for trustworthiness, but also as an opportunity to further refine theoretical interpretations. Participants' deeper insights (e.g. about their own 'awakenings' to racism) directly informed the emerging themes and the understanding of white ignorance, thereby impacting the analysis and findings.

Reporting: The final themes presented in the discussion were shaped by this theoretically informed, iterative analytical process, aiming to provide insights that contribute meaningfully to the understanding of anti-racism work in educational settings.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained and consent to participate was agreed by all participants.

Findings and Discussion

The findings from the study demonstrate some key themes which will be discussed next. This section deploys a CRT and CWS lens, consistent with the study's grounded methodology, to illuminate the complex racial dynamics inherent in Award leaders' understanding of race and racism, and the influence this has on leading their schools through the Award process and towards becoming an anti-racist school.

The discussion particularly addresses the central paradoxes identified in this research, where anti-racism efforts often struggle against the persistence of white ignorance, institutional inertia, and a race-evasive framing of racism as a historical rather than a structural issue. Findings highlight how racism is frequently perceived as an old-fashioned phenomenon, external to contemporary schooling, while anti-racism is conceptualised as a progressive, modern endeavour. This temporal framing along with the tendency to view racism as "dirt as matter out of place" (Douglas, 1966) often hinders deep structural change within education settings.

The following section therefore explores the interconnected themes emerging from the data analysis illustrating how Award leaders grappled with the paradoxes and challenges of anti-racism work. Drawing on the rich narratives of the participants, it highlights how leaders navigate conceptual tensions and how their evolving understanding of race and racism shapes their engagement with the Award process and progress towards an aim of becoming anti-racist schools.

White Ignorance and Racial Literacy

British schools serve increasingly multicultural populations, with census data (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2023) demonstrating that over a third of pupils in English schools are racially minoritised. However, research evidence demonstrates that teacher racial literacy has not only been omitted as a prerequisite for professional practice but is actively discouraged in favour of notions of "colour-blindness", race evasion and myths of meritocracy (Callender, 2019; Gillborn et al., 2017; Lander, 2011). Similarly, schools are staffed and led predominantly by people racialised as white (DfE, 2024). The post-George Floyd Moment in 2020 stimulated a global awakening to racial hierarchies and structural racism. Award leaders

generally cite this as the impetus which pushed their schools to notice race and racism and want to address it for the first time via an Award programme. All but one of the twelve in-depth interview participants referenced this as a catalyst and 20% of the anonymous survey responses spontaneously named George Floyd explicitly or referred to “events of 2020” as drivers to start the Award process. P5 recounts during the in-depth interview:

And then it's just made me, with the whole George Floyd thing and what's come about, being like, 'Okay, you know what? Enough. Enough is enough'. Because, like many schools, everyone put out a pledge, everyone said what they're going to do, everybody was fired up and had meetings and groups, etcetera. *P5, Black British, woman, teacher*

To colleagues who are racially minoritised, racism had been a daily reality in their lives in different ways, and yet it was notable how different this experience was for white colleagues. P6 was indignant, realising how little ‘the world’ seemed to know about racism:

It was overwhelming, where it was like, 'In 2020, the world realised that racism existed!' *P6, Black British-Caribbean, woman, leader*

P2's white experience correlates when she explains:

You sort of live in this like white bubble as such, we've, you've just got no idea. I mean, you know, it happens, but you don't know the extent. *P2, white British, woman, teacher*

Wondering why it took so long, and why this was not addressed in her own schooling 30 years ago nor in any professional education, P1 writes in her reflection exercise following our in-depth interview:

It's abundantly clear that the education system back in the 1990s was not fit for purpose in educating people about race and racism. Now 30 years on, the problem is still the same.

There is no set guidance on how schools should educate students on race, racism, ethnicity and so on. This leaves the internet to be the learning resource for the many. And whilst this can be a very useful tool it can also be a damaging one. *P1, Black-Caribbean and white British, woman, teacher*

Some were concerned that as white professionals addressing a majority-white school community of staff and pupils, they would not be able to speak about race and racism out loud:

[It] was right around the time of George Floyd and we had discussions that had been brought up around that...I remember the headteacher saying specifically, 'We need to hold fire on doing assemblies, we need to hold fire on doing this shotgun, you know, everyone needs to have an assembly and talk about this', she said, 'Because we don't really know how to talk about it. We don't know how we need to deliver this. And we don't know how parents are going to respond to this'. So, I think that it kind of shone a light on the fact that we didn't really know a huge amount about how to respond and how to support students or staff, anybody else when something like this had happened. *P8, white Irish, man, senior leader*

It is not a coincidence that education professionals are ignorant of race and racism. Mills (2007) describes white ignorance as a prioritisation of the production of ignorance. It is the political commitment to white supremacy and whiteness-as-the-norm, over knowledge of racism and white supremacy as the organising principles of social systems. As such, the political system of white supremacy is occupied with manufacturing ignorance, false narratives, and distorting facts as a way to produce and reproduce white supremacy. *Wilful* white ignorance (Bain, 2018) has been central to initial teacher education and ongoing continuing professional development (CPD) of educators, deliberately ignoring the histories and legacies of European colonialism and imperialism, and *systematically downgrading racism as a policy concern* (Gillborn et al., 2017). In response to a survey question about knowledge about race and racism a white participant explains:

How deeply embedded racialised concepts are throughout our society. I feel almost daily I am recognising and reflecting on racist terminology and actions in our world. Challenging this can feel insurmountable. *White woman, senior leader*

P11 addresses her white ignorance during an in-depth interview that she learned she was white on a course:

I identified as that because I went on a course [laughs]. And they told me how to identify [laughs]. *P11, white British, woman, teacher*

White ignorance is not limited to white people but rather is inherent in the whole social system whereby “members of the polity are socialised into white racial ideology, [and] even members of oppressed social groups may be prone to white ignorance” (Bain, 2018, p.11). P5 realised that she needed to bridge gaps in her knowledge when she and a colleague started to complete the Award self-assessment diagnostic for the first time:

I think we were both like, when we realised the scale of that diagnostic thing...we went 'Oh, my goodness, this is just huge'. And then once we actually got into it, I had to really immerse myself in it. And I had to really read up on the different areas, you know, it took a lot of work to get my head around that whole process, that, beginning there, because obviously, that's the foundation. P5, *Black British, woman, teacher*

Similarly, P6 notes that she was probably ignorant about the extent to which racism is embedded everywhere, but has addressed her racial literacy through reading research:

It's so deep-rooted. It's so entrenched in everything. And I've probably believed it before but I've now got an evidence-base to kind of like, say, you know, this research, and this is what happened and you know...It's deeper than we could have ever imagined...And I now know more about, you know, where the issues are and so it just kind of highlights it to me, whereas before I was probably ignorant about where it was happening. But I did think, you know, it's everywhere.

And you know, people think you're being quite radical when you're saying, like, 'racism permeates every area of our society' in the same way that, and that's a belief of mine, obviously. In my lessons I have to be [laughs] try and be as impartial as possible and offer it as a, you know, a *standpoint*, but that it's my personal belief is that it has always, and I've just now I've got more knowledge about how entrenched it is in every area. P6, *Black British Caribbean, woman, leader*

P6 is cautious to ground her knowledge about racism through an “evidence-base” of research, yet perhaps also understanding the white silences being broken, positions it as a *standpoint* and a personal belief presented in as “impartial” a way as possible (P6). Whiteness and racism are never spoken about explicitly, yet are positioned through primary socialisation and schooling as the hegemonic and desirable norm. Even when racism might be visible to those who are racially minoritised, it seems to be invisible to those racialised as white. White people ignore racialised hierarchies, not considering themselves as racialised subjects.

Leading an Award process as a person racialised as white poses questions about who are the rightful “race knowers” (Leonardo, 2017) for this work. One anonymous survey respondent, who identified as “White Other”, shared in an open-text response that her motivation for leading the Award stemmed from witnessing “othering” of staff from European countries, which she perceived as unfair. This experience of finding herself a newly inducted racialised subject highlights the complexity of whiteness as a lived experience, where individuals may be categorised as white yet still be perceived as “other”, thus not fully accessing all the privileges associated with whiteness (Harris, 1993).

An in-depth interview with another participant, P8, sees him pondering about his right to lead this work as someone who is white:

P8: I think students are like, 'What the frick does this boy know? He's a white Irish man trying to tell us about race in England...and 'Shouldn't such and such be doing it?' Maybe because they're Black, or because they're from a minority background or something like that. So, I think that the students probably automatically would have thought, shouldn't such and such be doing it, which is why I tried to explain I think I am actually the right person for this job, because we're on a learning curve together.

PR: Have you delved into any of the sort of history of, you know, there's that book, isn't there? *How the Irish Became White?* Because there's quite a history in England...

P8: Oh right. Well, I suppose actually, yes, you know what, I've actually never thought about it. I mean, I've thought about it, but not in terms of this, but I suppose yeah. When, when you look back at the, I suppose persecution of the Irish as well, over the years, actually, I have never thought to connect that to what we're doing here...No Blacks, No dogs, No Irish...I've never thought about that before! P8, *white Irish, man, senior leader*

Despite his Irish heritage and explaining earlier the ways that his Irish accent sets him apart as white “other” in relation to the English children he teaches, P8 has not considered his own racialised identity. The history of anti-Irish prejudice in post-war Britain is known to him but does not correlate with *what*

we're doing here (P8). Race is not a mere concept or a way to select one's identity on a questionnaire, but a "group of contradictory forces, facts and tendencies" (Du Bois, 1940, p.67). To understand racism, comprehension of the iterative process of racialisation as not only socially constructed (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000) but contextual, deeply embedded in power relations and imposed through social rule (Wolfe, 2016) is necessary.

Mills (2007) conceptualises the racial contract as a framework through which whiteness serves as a prerequisite for inclusion within the ruling elite. This framework shapes an individual's self-perception concerning their proximity to whiteness and the associated privileges (Harris, 1993). However, racial classifications are fluid rather than fixed, as they are determined by the perspective of the categoriser. Despite attempts to anchor race in physical, cultural, religious, and ethnic markers (Du Bois, 1940), its meaning remains subject to change. This is evident in the historical example of Irish immigration to England, where the Irish were gradually assimilated into whiteness over time (Ignatiev, 1995). The case of Irish inclusion in whiteness highlights how whiteness is socially constructed and presented as an objective reality, despite being an ideological construct enforced through systems of subordination (Harris, 1993, p.1730).

One of the key processes to counteract white ignorance is developing robust racial literacy which exposes the ways that racism is a permanent, structurally embedded and institutionally reproduced inevitability of our education system. Guinier (2003) defines racial literacy as the ability to comprehend and critically analyse the role of race in society while proactively challenging dominant power structures on both individual and institutional levels. To achieve this, actively de-prioritising the significance of race and an understanding of racialised hierarchies and racism is counterproductive, as it diminishes our ability to critically interpret the racialised world and develop effective strategies to combat racism (Sealey-Ruiz, 2011, p.118).

Paulo Freire (1970) understands that any form of liberatory education means learning about how inequitable societal structures work, and working together to name the problems to change them. Bain (2018) concurs that, "Naming white ignorance and its machinations is a necessary first step in the struggle for racial justice" (Bain, 2018, p.18). To be racially literate means moving beyond regarding race as solely pertaining to those who are racially minoritised, but instead to understand what the technology of race *is* and *does* (Lentin, 2020). Race can therefore be seen as a "diagnostic device, an analytical tool, and an instrument of process" (Guinier, 2003, p.202); and racism can be regarded as a permanent structural device rather than an individual and interpersonal problem to be rooted out and solved. A "participatory problem-solving" approach (Rogers & Mosley, 2006, p.207) such as Freire's liberatory education (1970) and Guinier's racial literacy model obliges us to address racism directly instead of ignoring it (Guinier, 2003, p.207).

The Permanence of Racism: Just What is Racism Doing in a Nice Place Like This?*

CWS scholarship highlights limitations of focusing solely on individual ignorance or intentions when considering the role of whiteness and white complicity in reproducing racism. Award leaders may identify racism as a historical artefact and struggle to recognise how racism manifests within institutional policies and practices. Key to CRT scholarship is understanding racism as permanent and a central organising principle of modern life. Building racial literacy and learning to accept that race still matters (Lentin, 2020) can mobilise seeing racism *in situ* within policy, practices and processes. To be anti-racist means a permanent commitment to practising in a state of hypervigilance to the presence of structural racism (Applebaum, 2007), and being cognisant of racism as ever-present even if it may seem invisible to those racialised as white and socialised to whiteness-as-the-norm. While Award leaders can understand and articulate the permanence of racism (Bell, 1992; Warmington, 2024), it remains an unstable and slippery concept (Bonnett, 1996). Now "knowing" she is white, P11 still asserts:

I actually think I'm just me and I think most people are just them. And I think it's partly because I'm me and because

* See Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1998) article *Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education?*

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I will challenge people's thinking and that's not because I'm white middle class. That's because I'm an interfering old bag and I will challenge people's thinking if I need to [laughs] so yeah, I think some of it is to do with my identity. But some of it is true of my personality as well. *P11, white British, woman, teacher*

P11 reserves her right to white innocence (Bonilla-Silva, 2010), and race-evasive narratives by being “just me” (Jupp et al., 2016). Indeed, “White people often voice anti-racist sentiments in the abstract while maintaining their racially advantageous position in practice” (Blaisdell & Taylor Bullock, 2023, p.1454). Anti-racism requires decentring whiteness-as-the-norm, yet whiteness can be hard to resist (Stewart-Hall et al., 2022).

Foundational knowledge about race and racism is important for anti-racism work. However, many Award leaders struggle with notions of white complicity and with recognising the enduring presence of institutional racism. Applebaum's (2007) framework of moral responsibility unpacks the difficulties educators have in recognising racism as a permanent and embedded feature of their settings. To comprehend what racism is doing in our nice schools, Award leaders need to understand what it means to be culpable, without being liable for racism. One way to comprehend this, Applebaum asserts is to understand white complicity:

White complicity connects individuals to systems in which the privileges of some are relationally predicated upon the unjust exclusions of others. White people perform and sustain whiteness continuously, often without conscious intent, often by doing nothing out of the ordinary. Moreover, white complicity is not exclusively a matter of doing or not doing but often a matter of just being (Applebaum, 2007, p.456).

Everyone working in education settings, including racially minoritised educators, is required to “perform and sustain whiteness” as the system is occupied with centring whiteness-as-the-norm. Thus, there can be “no participation without implication” (Kutz, 2000, p.122). Applebaum understands that while we bear responsibility for the harms of structural injustices, we can “discharge this responsibility” (Applebaum, 2007, p.464) through organised, collective action towards becoming racially just organisations. P12 feels that he has had some success here:

But in terms of asking people to be uncomfortable and to face their own complicity in racism and injustice it's difficult. And the fact that they are my colleagues is another area that I've had to consider. But I think the one thing that has driven me is, it's not about me, it's not about how I feel, it's not about how they feel, it's about the greater good in a sense. The impact that it's actually had was, I did a staff meeting a few weeks ago, to talk about the Award, or what it was, what it entailed, why we were doing it, but also to introduce this racial literacy that we looked at.

And after the staff meeting, I got a lot of positive feedback. And a lot of staff came to me during the meeting and after and said, 'You know, you've really made me think and you've really actually inspired me to look into this myself and to think about what is it that I need to do in the classroom, or what is it I need to do in school or in my personal life.' And it's been really reassuring to get that response. When I expect the opposite, in a way. *P12, white British, man, teacher*

P4 takes a different approach, framing racism as personal complicity he can model:

We are talking about the things that are quite central to us as people and how you view yourself as a reasonable human being, or you view yourself as a kind person, how you view yourself as a teacher, and what you think you are imparting to young people.

So I think the very nature of the sort of material that we're talking about, is quite personal. So it's an opportunity to sit down with people and get to a certain extent, open your heart to him and say, 'Okay, this is, these are the failings I can see in myself, these are things that have gone wrong in the past, I can see that this doesn't work very well'.

So, yeah, I mean, it's a really good opportunity to be honest with people as I say, to reflect on your own shortcomings, you know, where they are. And I think it gives a good sense of camaraderie really, in working towards something that people see as a worthy outcome. *P4, white British, man, headteacher*

When white ignorance (Bain, 2018; Mills, 2007; Tomlinson, 2022) is framed as “personal shortcomings” (P4), it can divert attention from the systemic nature of racism and its harmful effects on the racially minoritised. This reframing can foster a sense of camaraderie or reassurance through “white confession” (Bonnett, 1996), rather than challenging and dismantling racialised power structures (Tatum, 1997). P4's approach risks keeping the conversation within a space of comfort, and centred on achieving a ‘worthy outcome’ (P4) and the Award. White fragility (DiAngelo, 2018), guilt (Tatum, 1997), and the instinct to preserve white comfort can ultimately hinder meaningful anti-racism work.

Racism is such a permanent feature of everyday life that it can remain invisible to whites, unable to conceptualise racism as anything except extremism, bad thinking and interpersonal violence (Bell, 1992; Gillborn, 2016; Warmington, 2024). Applebaum (2007) poses the question:

How do white people reproduce and maintain racist practices even when - especially when - they believe themselves to be morally good? What allows them to see themselves as part of the solution and to deny that they are part of the problem? (Applebaum, 2007, p.454).

When white anti-racist practitioners fail to reconstruct their sense of self in response to new understandings of whiteness and the permanence of racism, a tension emerges between their anti-racist stance and their white identity (Helms, 1990). This dissonance can manifest as a desire to disassociate from whiteness and its connection to systemic oppression (Giroux, 1997), sometimes leading to feelings of self-loathing or aversion toward other white individuals and the privileges associated with whiteness. However, recognising the permanence of racism in our schools means understanding whiteness as a system of privilege and power (Ladson-Billings, 2001). As such, "The process of managing change for race equality requires committed and effective managers who are capable of identifying, challenging and eradicating racism from the institution" (Ouseley, 1992, p.127). Spending valuable time feeling defensive or worrying about being labelled as racist rather than recognising how permanent racism permeates every area of social life leaves "The institution with all its power structures relatively untouched" (Ouseley, 1992, p.128).

Racism is Old-Fashioned, Anti-Racism is Modern, Dirt is Matter out of Place

Early efforts to tell a tale of race as biology are often historically located in the justification of the dehumanisation, subordination and genocide associated with European colonialism and imperialism (Hesse, 2016). As such, the phenomena of fixing race in this era of the past, coupled with the silencing of race talk provides fertile ground for racism to be perceived as lingering old-fashioned notions, rather than a contemporary, structurally embedded "complete racialisation of daily life" (Leonardo, 2009, p.405). Despite Award leaders describing the 2020 awakening to the modern realities of contemporary racism, working towards the Anti-Racist School Award becomes conceptualised in some cases as a time-travelling movement on a continuum from the racist past; to the "not-racist" present (Lentin, 2020); and an anti-racist tomorrow - even a post-racial future. This perception fosters a false dichotomy between the "modern" not-racist present and the "old-fashioned" racist past.

Correlating a personal career history and the journey towards anti-racism taken over the last decade, P10 reflects:

Yeah, I think I've definitely become increasingly aware of how racism manifests itself in areas that I don't think, maybe 5 or 10 years ago, that I was thinking about in the same way...I mean it's a continuing piece of work, but looking at it with a bit of a different lens now...And, it wouldn't be truthful to say that that was my thinking earlier in my career. I was aware of racism in schools, absolutely. But I don't think I would have spent time really kind of critically thinking about it in every interaction and every policy and every kind of part of the curriculum...And similarly when I reflect back...processes that I've been involved with...they don't sit comfortably now. P10, *white British woman, headteacher*

P10 retrospectively examines recent history as if through a time-travelling telescope, applying "a different lens" (P10) shaped by a more modern race-critical perspective. She acknowledges that race permeates every aspect of the school's operations and remains vigilant now. In hindsight, she identifies instances where she overlooked racial dynamics due to operating from an outdated and less effective race-aware framework thus demonstrating the importance of ongoing critical reflection to uncover and address racism, preventing its resurgence in the future.

P2 describes her school as *on a journey* with anti-racism. Her language is often visceral as it references landscapes that encapsulate racist thought. She describes her newly acquired racial literacy as 'swimming against the tide'. She is certain that racism belongs in the past and elsewhere. Through her written reflection on our in-depth interview, she says:

I did also reflect on our chat a few days after, before reading the transcript, and it dawned on me how many racist incidents we still have in today's modern society and how this really shouldn't still be happening. We assume people know what racism is but people almost don't seem to know any better, or are just swimming with the tide.

P2, white British woman, teacher

Although they “pride themselves in being a modern school” (P2) she was puzzled about how racism and racist incidents seem to linger, soiling the attitudes and behaviours of staff, pupils and their families despite their modern, ‘clean’ school.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) explains that “dirt” is a socially constructed notion and as such, mundane items such as shoes, which are not dirty in themselves, can become seen as dirty when placed on the kitchen table for example. Dirtiness, therefore, is more a contextual labelling of something than it is the property of the thing itself. Similarly, CRT conceptualises racism as a structuring principle of everyday life, as ordinary and necessary as a pair of shoes. Therefore, structural racism can be expected in all schools. However, instead of being understood as part of the inherent structural norms of schooling which needs a strategy “of unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p.11), racism is conceptualised as ‘matter out of place’ coming “in” like dirt, or being seen as disgusting and disruptive when identified in schools. Once racism is identified, Award leads fixate on expelling it back outside and locating it as belonging to the “bad white racists” (Applebaum, 2007) who contaminated the formerly ‘clean’ school environment with it.

In dealing with racist graffiti in the school toilets, one example can be seen in how P8 tries to trace *how* racism was brought in from outside. He deploys handwriting analysis, and involves the police who link the graffiti with similar activity in the nearby area:

The policeman...genuinely thought that some of the students here were probably connected to all of this stuff that was going on outside. And he was, well, there was a big enough concern about it, that he had a full operation as such, an investigation going into it. So it's massively opened my eyes to how much bigger it is than just being in here. I can only imagine what was being discussed behind closed doors, the language that we get from the parents, sometimes I just think, is it any wonder that your children are coming in and then using these things? So it's thrown into light, particularly for me...how this community, I would say, is not very forward-thinking. I really don't think and it's opened up a lot about the community that I'd have never have thought before. *P8, white Irish, man, senior leader*

Racism is brought in from outside via the ancient woodland near the school and from the past by “not very forward-thinking” families who are “bad white racists”. Alana Lentin (2020) summarises the link between racism as coming in from the past and racism as beliefs held by backward-thinking individuals:

Because racism is viewed as being fixed securely in history, the expression of less enlightened knowledges, any lingering racist beliefs are seen as the preserve of less progressive people. We hear this mindset in the oft-repeated liberal claims that white people are less racist than in the past, a measure gauging what people are willing to say about their beliefs rather than the extent to which race continues to structure sociality. Racism is generally construed both as uniquely historically specific and as detachable from history...or as both frozen and motile (Lentin, 2020, p.64).

To move beyond being anchored in historical moments - Holocausts, colonialism, apartheid and segregation - and to demonstrate that *things are better now* (Picower, 2009), there is a tendency to argue for a focus on preventing the racist past from creeping into the present or scuppering their envisioning of an anti-racist tomorrow. In some cases, *people* become stuck in the past, and they must be coaxed into the present with newer ideas. P4 believed that the older you are, the greater proximity you have to the racist past. He is surprised:

Some of my colleagues, I think it would be fair to say might be seen as quite old-fashioned in the ways that they viewed things...I think the greatest surprise has been, you know, a lack of entrenchment, and the fact that you know, again, it may be unfair but I sort of looked around and thought, 'Ooh, you know, in this in this [staff] common room, it's got quite a few, say, stalwarts in it'. We've got some colleagues who've been at the school 30 or 40 years, they are as much a part of the school as the fixtures and fittings really. And they have been really open to sort of, to discussion and change, I think as much as the younger colleagues. *P4, white British, man, headteacher*

P4 believed younger staff would be racially literate and less resistant to anti-racism when he introduced it. However, there is ample evidence that teacher training does not include a grounding in basic racial literacy (Callender, 2019; Lander, 2011, Picower, 2009), let alone “a lot of EDI” (P4). He continues:

And, you know, again, I just thought, 'Well, okay, for the very youngest colleagues, the ECTs [Early Career Teachers] are just out of training. You know, they would have, they would have taken on board, a lot of EDI [Equality, Diversity

and Inclusion] and all sorts of different things as a student'. But there wasn't really much difference between the older and the younger colleagues, to be honest....So that was perhaps, a little bit, something I didn't expect.
P4, white British, man, headteacher

Findings from the anonymous survey suggest that getting other people on board is the hardest obstacle on the anti-racist 'modernisation journey' to becoming an accredited Anti-Racist School. When asked to describe the changes seen in other people's understanding of race, racism and anti-racism in the survey, changes in thinking and confidence were mentioned by 66% of teachers and leaders. While silences seem to have been broken, imagined dichotomies remain between the 'non-racist school' and the 'racist community' among survey respondents:

Staff find it easier to talk about the subject. *Black woman, teacher*

We have done a staff training for Teachers and Teaching Assistants, and this will lead to the Teachers teaching lessons on it in class. People are now talking about it more around school. *White woman, teacher*

Training we have delivered to staff has really made them consider what racism is and the impacts - some of our staff did not understand the pervasiveness of it and the experiences of our students. *White woman, senior leader*

Understanding why some things are offensive has definitely improved in the community. Staff [are] actually addressing racism. *Black woman, senior leader*

Other people's understanding has changed (to a greater or lesser extent depending on the individual), however, everyone had different starting points so the impact has been greater on some people than others. *White woman, senior leader*

P4 has a dilemma around modern 'woke' ideas about anti-racism that may "frighten the horses" (P4). He ponders about his rural school, located in "an old farming community", with its ageing "stalwarts":

I mean, it's about finding a way to get people on board, I think was the programme, without seeming to raise all sorts of issues of, you know, for want of a better word, *wokeism*, and all those sorts of things and steering sort of well clear of that kind of entry into the ideas. So, it's about finding a good way into that. Rather than, I think, going straight in there saying, right, you know, we need to 'decolonialise' the history syllabus or something like that.
P4, white British, man, headteacher

People can become stuck in geographically *past places*, and require coaxing into the twenty-first century without a metaphorical beating with the ideological stick of "wokeism" (Rabiger, 2025). Racism is often seen as "stuck in the nineteenth century" and "a set of practices" produced by the ideology or "folk idea" of race which was invented during the colonial era (Lentin, 2020, p.9). Also naming the particular geographical location as responsible, P2 refers to her rural upbringing as the source of her prior ignorance:

It's very sort of *Olde Worlde* I'd say, back in [name of place in rural England]. It's very, you know, everyone knows everyone and you go to the pub and stuff like that whereas here is more multicultural, more modern. I wonder if that's coming from my background. If I'm totally honest, because obviously, I grew up in a very *Olde Worlde* you know, the farmer cut through my dad's WiFi the other day with his plough sort of thing [laughs heartily]. That's as far in the country I am, you know, where my parents live. And here, I just perceive it as more modern. I think that is my perception with all the recent events like George Floyd, Black Lives Matter. I mean, that is modern history, isn't it? *P2, white British woman, teacher*

P2 envisions the process of 'adjusting their lenses' as if using binoculars, a telescope, or a wide-angle camera lens, allowing them to shift perspective from their historical vantage point in the *Olde Worlde* to a clearer view of the present. While this teacher's childhood home was equipped with modern technology, including an Internet connection, contemporary ideas did not always make their way there - sometimes quite literally, as fibre-optic cables were occasionally severed by a neighbour's plough. In contrast, certain places are perceived as hubs of modernity and historical progress, often associated with urban, cosmopolitan, and multicultural settings. Anti-racism, in this context, can be seen as a hallmark of modernity - something novel and even exciting. Gaps in knowledge are characterised instead as happenstance rather than part of the functioning of white ignorance (Bain, 2018; Rabiger, 2025; Stewart-Hall et al., 2022).

In some cases, this notion of racism as a set of practices (Lentin, 2020) means that some people are so old they are immovably stuck in the past. New ideas cannot be handled by them at all, no matter the efforts

made by others. P9 removes a colleague from working with a young Black child because despite direct instruction their practice remains racist:

And those sort of mindsets are the trickiest ones to shift. And I haven't succeeded with her. I haven't succeeded. I've succeeded in changing some of her *behaviours*, but I haven't succeeded in changing *the way she looks at things*. And I'm not going to because she's retiring at the end of this academic year. So nothing that I say or do now will make the slightest bit of difference. I will keep saying and doing it. But it won't change. And it's just assumptions, it's assumptions from people that are hard to shift". P9, *white British woman, headteacher*

Racism appears here as "universal, ahistorical, and a question of individual morality, rather than being structurally engendered" (Lentin, 2020, p.64). This disconnect between structural and attitudinal means acceptance that racism is within us, without an explanation of how it got there, how it has become and remains a sociocultural phenomenon for four hundred years or more. For P9's colleague, it is as though their cognitive framework, akin to an outdated computer operating system, is too obsolete to process such a fundamental update.

Whiteness functions as a deliberate investment in maintaining a hegemonic norm (Mills, 2007; Okun, 2022), and despite attempts to reprogramme mindsets through improving racial literacy and adopting anti-racist principles, it can continue to operate as the dominant operating system. Resistance to change manifests in various ways (Case & Ngo, 2017; Gaine, 2000; Ouseley, 1992), including an inability or reluctance to move beyond ingrained hegemonic understandings of race and racialised differences, regardless of the training or evidence provided to challenge the "white imagination" (Blaisdell & Taylor Bullock, 2023; Matias et al., 2014). While training in anti-racism may lead to behavioural adjustments, deeply embedded attitudes and assumptions often remain unchanged, even as those within the school believe they are modernising their perspectives.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study has explored the tensions, contradictions, and challenges that arise when schools in the UK attempt to implement anti-racism initiatives within a system that remains structurally embedded in whiteness. Some Award leaders acknowledge that while white ignorance is structurally reproduced, they do actively work to dismantle it, despite systemic barriers. Many educators leading anti-racism initiatives encounter resistance, not necessarily in outright rejection, but in the form of systemic inertia - an inability or unwillingness to process and implement the necessary "update". Just as outdated computer operating systems struggle to integrate new software, schools and educators often lack the structural capacity, racial literacy, and institutional commitment to move beyond surface-level interventions. White ignorance and race-evasive ideologies persist, ensuring that racism remains ever-present, even as schools seek to position themselves as "modern" and anti-racist.

The findings unequivocally demonstrate that despite motivation to spearhead anti-racist change, meaningful progress is hindered by deeply ingrained white ignorance, race-evasive ideologies, and institutional inertia. A central paradox highlighted is the persistent belief among Award leaders that racism belongs to the past, while anti-racism is framed as a modern and progressive endeavour. This temporal framing and false dichotomy create significant barriers to meaningful change, as it allows racism to be viewed as an outdated relic rather than an ongoing and deeply entrenched structure within schooling. The conceptualisation of racism as an outdated or external issue - rather than a permanent and structural feature of modern schooling - further complicates efforts to address systemic inequities.

To move beyond superficial interventions and achieve genuinely transformative anti-racism work, the study offers the following concrete suggestions for educators and other stakeholders:

Implement mandatory and embedded racial literacy throughout initial teacher education and continuing professional development. To counteract the active discouragement of teacher racial literacy and stable racialised identity development teacher professional standards should mandate an ability to comprehend and critically analyse the role of race in society, enabling them to proactively challenge dominant power structures on individual, institutional and structural levels. This is a necessary first step

in naming and addressing white ignorance.

Systematically integrate anti-racist frameworks. Anti-racism must transition from being an optional endeavour or post-George Floyd ‘initiative’ to a structural necessity. This requires embedding anti-racist frameworks into initial education programmes (Smith & Lander, 2022) into curriculum development, leadership structures, recruitment, retention and development of staff. Such integration ensures it is not a fleeting trend or performative gesture but a structural component of the school’s operating system, crucial for disrupting institutional racism more effectively.

Establish robust accountability measures and embrace discomfort. To move beyond performative anti-racism and address systemic inertia, schools and relevant programmes must establish robust accountability measures that assess long-term progress in dismantling racial inequities, rather than focusing on achieving awards or public recognition. This necessitates a permanent commitment to learning to identify, challenge and design racism out of the system, even when it involves asking colleagues at all levels to face their own complicity and discomfort.

Proactively challenge white ignorance and avoid superficial re-framing. It is crucial to recognise that white ignorance is not accidental but a product of a political commitment to white supremacy, which actively manufactures ignorance and distorts facts. Anti-racism efforts must specifically address this by challenging the framing of white ignorance as mere “personal shortcomings” or through “white confession”, as this diverts attention from the systemic nature of racism and hinders meaningful work by fostering comfort over dismantling power structures. Furthermore, schools must proactively address and reframe critiques that position anti-racism as “wokeism” or an intrusive ideology, as such narratives silence important conversations and lead to superficial solutions.

Recommendation for Future Research

While the study highlights potential for shifts in racial literacy and awareness, and moments where educators deepen their understanding of racism as a structural force, the enduring challenge lies in sustaining these critical reflections and effectively translating them into long-term institutional change that resists the powerful pull of white comfort and performative allyship. Therefore, future research should delve into how schools can cultivate and maintain a continuous state of critical vigilance towards structural racism, investigating specific strategies and mechanisms that successfully embed anti-racist principles so deeply within institutional structures and practices that they overcome systemic inertia and lead to the dismantling of racial inequities rather than merely offering the illusion of progress. This could involve longitudinal studies examining the evolution of racial literacy and institutional practices over extended periods, or comparative analyses of schools with varying levels of sustained anti-racist impact.

Ultimately, if anti-racism work in education is to be truly transformative and avoid becoming another fleeting trend, it must move beyond rhetoric to actively learn to see and dismantle the power structures which sustain racial inequities. Without this fundamental shift in how anti-racism is embedded within school structures, the error message will remain: ‘System update failed!’, the ‘update’ will remain uninstalled, and racial inequities will persist under the guise of progress.

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