What white people did next: Insights on building an anti-racist early years forum

Shaddai Tembo[1], Beth Wilkinson[2], Erin Blessitt[3], Isabel Ruddick[4]

Abstract: This collaboratively written paper explores the formation and purpose of the Bristol Early Years Forum for Anti-Racist Practice, a grassroots initiative led by early years educators in the UK. Through collaborative autoethnography, the authors reflect on their motivations, positionalities, and the tensions involved in leading anti-racist work within a predominantly white profession. Drawing on Critical Race Theory, racial literacy, and Emma Dabiri's (2021) framing of coalition over allyship, the paper interrogates the limitations of racial liberalism and developmentalist thinking in early childhood education. It argues for the political urgency of anti-racist practice in the early years and examines how white educators might engage in more meaningful ways. This paper contributes to the limited body of literature on white educators' roles in anti-racism and offers insight into the transformative potential of community-based professional development.

Introduction

The Bristol Early Years Forum for Anti-Racist Practice (BEYFARP) was established in 2022 when Beth and Isabel (henceforth Izzy) reached out to Erin with a desire to collaborate following anti-racism training they had each attended. Each of us, white women, had observed the difficulties in embedding and maintaining anti-racist practice and we wanted to create something to support practitioners on their journeys, regardless of how racially or culturally diverse their settings are. In June 2023, Beth reached out to Shaddai, a Black man, who has since joined the forum to support with facilitation, knowledge and understanding of anti-racism. The forum now meets three times each year to talk, learn and reflect together. We value equal participation with dedicated time for group discussion. Each session has a theme and is intended to follow sequentially from the last, taking people on a journey over the year. We start with self-reflection, emphasising the role of critical self-reflection before we move through practice with young children and parents, including ways to engage in conversations, how to effectively use resources and create an enabling environment for anti-racist practice. In the final session, we discuss the role of policy as an important backbone to scaffold our practice and ensure that action is embedded and ongoing. Attendees receive a workbook with guidance and reflective questions to support their learning, and between sessions, we share resources and ideas and encourage connection and community via our mailing list. The intention is overall that attendees leave equipped with renewed motivation and practical ideas for change.

This is a collaboratively written article that reflectively examines the role and purpose of BEYFARP; it contributes to the limited body of scholarship on white educators leading grassroots anti-racism initiatives in early childhood settings. This is salient because, while there has been significant attention towards racial justice in recent years in England, little research exists on white educators, such as those co-authoring this article, transitioning from rhetorical support for racial justice toward substantive action. As a springboard, and as reflected in the title of our paper, we draw on insights gathered from Emma Dabiri's (2021) *What White People Can Do Next* as our heuristic model, our conceptual compass (Tracy, 2020), to

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[1] Bath Spa University, School of Education, Bath, United Kingdom, e-mail: s.tembo@Bathspa.ac.uk, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8821-5476

[2] Easton Community Children's Centre, Bristol, United Kingdom, e-mail: bwilkinson@eastonccc.org.uk, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0002-3866-7129

[3] Hotwells Children's House, Bristol, United Kingdom, e-mail: erin.blessitt@gmail.com, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7579-5707

[4] Easton Community Children's Centre, Bristol, United Kingdom, e-mail: iruddick@eastonccc.org.uk, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6458-4128

think-with the data we produce. The aims of this paper are threefold. Firstly, we intend to explore the motivations and processes behind the formation of a forum for anti-racist practice by white early years educators in the UK. Secondly, we aim to investigate the opportunities and challenges that white educators may face when leading anti-racist work, using collaborative autoethnography to highlight personal and collective insights. Finally, in a broader sense, we wish to critically analyse the societal and educational implications of white educators transitioning to activism, considering the political nature of their work within this context. We use the term 'Global Majority' throughout to refer to people who identify as 'Black, African, Asian, Brown, Arab, multi-heritage, indigenous to the global south or who have been routinely racialised as 'ethnic-minorities' (Campbell Stephens, 2022). Although any term that attempts to homogenise groups into a singular experience is problematic, it also serves a purpose in allowing discussion of non-white experiences without centring whiteness (Byran, 2024). Throughout this article, the term "we" refers to the four co-authors of this collaboratively written piece, unless otherwise specified.

Literature Review

Foregrounding the Need for Racial Literacy

The resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 brought to the fore of white Western consciousness a recognition that racial equality is further away than many had previously assumed (Bamsey et al., 2024; Fairchild & Lander, 2021). Though, as 'normal' life has continued since the COVID-19 pandemic, the urgency and impact of the Black Lives Matter movement seems to have slipped down the agenda and become diluted within discourses of 'equal opportunities' (Tedam & Cane, 2022; Williams, 2022a). This is an observed pattern, progress in social justice movements often results in short-lived victories, as power structures either absorb and co-opt the language of change or work to swiftly restore and maintain the status quo (Bell, 1980; Blaisdell, 2018; Saito, 2020). Concurrently, in public discourse, racism remains constructed in the social imaginary as either a historical feature or only evident on an interpersonal level (Fairchild & Lander, 2021). However, taking a Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) perspective highlights that racism is firmly present in our contemporary era and woven into the fabric of society, holding power at a range of affective, structural and institutional levels (Bamsey et al., 2024; Heath & Richards, 2020). Our schooling system in England is not exempt from perpetuating institutional racism, with our youngest generations of children continually being shaped through environments that prohibit anti-racist practices and contribute to the reproduction of structural barriers within British society (Broughton, 2022; Williams et al., 2023). Here, racial liberalism prevails whereby educators have been shown to pay lip-service to professed ideals of equity but continue in the tick-box exercise of equal opportunities without dismantling the systems that uphold racialised privilege and racialised 'othering' (Laughter et al., 2023; Summer, 2014; Tedam & Cane, 2022).

In this context, anti-racism becomes both a call to action and a guide through which we can re-examine, critique, and challenge existing systems in the pursuit of racial justice for all children (Matias, 2016; Fairchild & Lander, 2021). Freire (1970) argued that education can be a tool of resistance capable of transforming oppressive structures, positioning educators at the heart of the struggle for equity. For Freire, educating young children is inherently political. In a similar vein, Durkheim (1858–1917, cited in Barnes, 1977) viewed education as a process of socialising children into the dominant norms of society, shaping them into 'ideal' citizens. Here, the curriculum is seen as a curated selection of knowledge drawn from the dominant culture, reflecting broader political intentions (Winter & Mills, 2020; Osgood, 2009). While some may claim that anti-racism in education is *too* political (Daniel, 2023), we take the position that the choice to disengage from such work is in itself a political act—one that often serves to uphold the status quo (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015). As well the aforementioned anti-racist, social justice and critical theory scholars, we are aligned with those in the English context who have long argued that early years practitioners must more consciously engage with their political identities (Moss, 2007) and embrace anti-racist practice as a form of activism in the wider pursuit of social justice (Fairchild & Lander, 2021; Gaine, 2005; Lane, 1999; Siraj-Blatchford, 1994).

Within this framing, we take the position that racial literacy is a tool as part of anti-racist approaches

that particularly lends itself to work with young children since it is concerned with developing the insight, confidence and language by which educators can recognise and challenge the racialised world (Chávez-Moreno, 2022; Oto et al., 2023). In other words, cultivating racial literacy in the next generation of empowered children offers the possibility of a more just, anti-racist society. However, we know that work with young children often depends on the knowledge, understanding and motivation of individuals entrusted with their education; as Howard's (1999) book title states, '*You can't teach what you don't know*'. In our UK context, we are mindful of the lack of emphasis on anti-racist practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage framework (Department for Education, 2024, pp.7) that claims to "seek" equality of opportunity and anti-discriminatory practice with little guidance on how to achieve it (see Tembo & Bateson, 2024). Therefore, the capacity to foster racial literacy relies – perhaps precariously - on a combination of deep, brave, personal and professional reflection to persist in "imagining creatively new and effective ways of bringing equity to a system that was not designed to be equitable" (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021 p.283). We therefore interpret racial literacy as in direct opposition to 'racial liberalism', which postulates that the work of anti-racism is well underway and a matter of interpersonal challenge rather than deep-seated structural inequalities (Guinier, 2004; Mills, 2008). The theory of racial liberalism includes approaches that claim to address racism but fail to enact the principles of CRT and anti-racist education that seek out and actively challenge it (Otoet al., 2023).

Yet if racial literacy is to be meaningfully enacted in early years settings, it must contend not only with the ideological limitations of racial liberalism but also with long-standing beliefs about childhood itself—particularly the pervasive narrative that children are too innocent, or too developmentally immature, to engage with issues of race (Nash et al., 2018). However, there is considerable research to refute this claim (Jordan & Hernandez-Reif, 2009; Kaufman & Wiese, 2012). From as young as three months, infants are evidenced as processing differences according to racial markers and forming race-related preferences (Liu et al., 2015; Sugden & Marquis, 2017). As these children grow older, they are subject to the human proclivity to categorise. Therefore, any negative images, attitudes or biases they perceive in their environment on an individual level are often generalised to entire categories (Skinner & Perry, 2020; Waxman, 2021). This discredits the idea that children are too young to know about race. Indeed, Gorski and Swalwell (2015) argue that the notion of corrupting children's innocence takes root as a fallacy of a white hegemonic discourse, as the effects of racism are often not something Global Majority families have the privilege of ignoring. Another barrier to racial literacy is the early years profession's dependence on developmental psychology, notably the Piagetian perspective that children are not developmentally capable of understanding abstract concepts until the concrete operational stage at 7-11 years (Seltzer & O'Brien, 2024), including ideas pertaining to race and understanding that people may see the world differently (Park, 2011). Piagetian theory remains a dominant influence (Burman, 2016), despite many studies demonstrating young children's adeptness in recognising race (Waxman, 2021) and ability to use it to categorise and understand their social worlds (Clark & Clark, 1947; Dunham et al., 2013; Olson et al., 2012). Therefore, continuing to rely uncritically on developmentalist paradigms not only misrepresents children's capacities but also upholds the ideological limitations of racial liberalism by preserving the fiction of childhood innocence.

CPD as a Site for Anti-Racist Practice

While across the existing literature, there is plenty of discussion around the need for racial literacy, here we question the most effective forms in which that can take place. One-off training approaches, for instance, have been shown to be ineffective in creating tangible change as they rarely allow for discussion about long-term structural equity (Joseph-Salisbury, 2020; Oto et al., 2023; Tedam & Cane, 2022;). Instead, we align our understanding with others who argue that there is greater scope for the enhancement of racial literacy when individuals come together to support each other and reflect together (Bamsey et al., 2024; Nash et al., 2018; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021; Williams, 2022b; Oto et al., 2023). To this end, the scholarship around Continuous Professional Development (CPD), described by Machado and Oliveira-Formosinho (2024, p. 1) as a "continuity of activities undertaken by practitioners with the aim of enhancing their professional knowledge, skills and practices" appears salient. In their systematic review of the literature on CDP in early

years contexts, Machado and Oliveira-Formosinho (2024) cover a range of initiatives, including 'communities of practice', 'collaborative inquiry' and 'reflective practice intervention' with the intention of understanding themes in terms of their purpose and objectives. Building theoretical knowledge, recognising the role of the educator as a social change maker, and promoting critical reflection of the child's learning are all identified by these authors as central to any CPD approach. They do not mention the potential for CPD initiatives to facilitate racial literacy or utilise the language of a 'forum', but there are clear resonances with what a community focused on this issue may offer educators and the young children they care for.

Notably, our review of the literature revealed that there is a lack of existing literature on CPD forums explicitly focused on anti-racist practices in early years communities in the UK. The absence matters because it suggests that, despite growing recognition of racial inequality within education, there is little structural investment and action in sustained, sector-specific approaches to addressing it. This is particularly concerning given how frequently racial literacy is described in the literature as a *journey*—one that unfolds over *time* and requires *continual* reflection and *growth* (Flynn et al., 2018; Joseph-Salisbury, 2020; Macdonald et al., 2023). Anti-racist practice, by its very nature, resists segmentation. It requires educators to confront discomfort and uncertainty (DiAngelo, 2018; Laughter et al., 2023) and to do so repeatedly. As Daniel (2023) argues, systemic change cannot be achieved through sporadic or superficial interventions. It demands deep, sustained commitment. Abawi et al. (2021, p. xxi) make this clear when they write that:

> Systematic change begins at the micro, grassroots level; it depends on the emancipation of the mind, followed by a revolution within the heart. This must be attended by struggle, resiliency, and sacrifice as individuals and organizations take action, in solidarity with communities, to centre equity as a sustainable priority for institutional policies and practices and to reflect the needs of vulnerable identities and communities.

Abawi et al.'s (2021) challenge effectively highlights why CPD must evolve beyond content delivery to become a site of transformation and reflect the possibilities for anti-racist practices in this way. Without this, efforts toward racial equity in the early years will remain fragmented and far from the systemic change that we understand as necessary and long overdue.

What Role do White Educators Play?

If scholarship on anti-racist communities is in short supply, there is even less research that explores how white educators are engaging in this work, highlighting a significant gap in understanding how they might contribute meaningfully to anti-racist practice within early years contexts. This matters, given that white educators make up a sizeable proportion of the profession in which, as we noted earlier on, racial liberalism remains the dominant ideological position.

We know, too, that whiteness can insulate (white) people from the urgency to address race and allow fears of vulnerability to stop them from leaning into the instability and uncomfortable nature of engaging in racial inequity (Epstein & Schieble, 2019; Summer, 2014;). Therein lies a tension, then, between meeting white educators where they are at - in order to model and support anti-racist growth (Macdonald et al., 2023) - and resisting the tendency of whiteness to dominate or recentre itself in the process (Blaisdell, 2018). This includes recognising impact as much as intent and questioning how discourses of 'care' in the early years can serve to dilute and depoliticise anti-racism, making it more palatable than powerful (Blaisdell, 2016; Toshalis, 2012). When white educators do not engage at all, the responsibility for anti-racist labour can fall disproportionately on Global Majority practitioners—who may already be navigating personal trauma, racial fatigue, and institutional vulnerability (Flynn et al., 2018). Further, if only Global Majority educators are seen to be leading anti-racist work, there is the risk of shoring up a divide that frames anti-racism as an issue about which only they hold authority and that only affects them, thus absolving white educators of accountability and obscuring the extent to which we *all* suffer the consequences of a racist society.

Amidst these tensions, a growing body of literature is beginning to articulate what meaningful engagement from white educators might look like—not as performative allyship, but as intentional and

sustained participation in anti-racist coalitions. In Brooks's (2022, p. 188) text, '*Anti-Racism For White People: From Inactivism To Activism*' he discusses the same point that "(white people) cannot be silent, but equally you are not a saviour—you cannot do activism *at* or *for* people, it must be done with people". This concept is also explored by Dabiri (2021) who challenges white people to move beyond *allyship*, which she criticises as often seeking to act on behalf of a *less fortunate* group or as a form of performative liberalism that fails to convert intentions into action. She proposes *coalition* as the alternative to move beyond sympathetic acting for the good of others, toward seeking out the foundations of oppression that disadvantage many groups and that can inspire action under shared goals that benefit most people.

This emphasis on shared struggle resonates with Bell's (1980) theory of interest convergence and with more recent calls to embrace co-conspiracy (Hawthorne & Yglesias, 2022), where anti-racist action is interpreted as collaborative, not charitable. The coalition framing offers an alternative to the figure of the "good white person" who somewhat naively attempts to "transfer your 'privilege' to a 'black' person" (Dabiri, 2021, p.11), and prompts a deeper interrogation of the systems from which privilege is drawn. Dabiri's (2021) critique points to the limitations of inclusion-based approaches that seek to bring marginalised people into unjust systems, rather than dismantle and rebuild those systems in the name of equity (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). Brooks (2022) suggests that whiteness can be leveraged to dismantle systems, whilst acknowledging that this is often a roadblock for the work as these are systems that white people continue to benefit from. As Khalifa et al. (2013) argue, authentic activism is never the easy option, it comes at a cost. Legal scholar Bell (2002, p. 43) makes a similar argument:

> Courage is our tool in vanquishing fear, but it's not always an easy tool to use, truth be told, it's rarely glamorous. It's a daily decision to wake up and try to do the right thing, no matter how big the reward or how great the fear.

In this way, Bell (2002) and Dabiri (2021) converge. Both offer important reminders that coalition-building and anti-racist struggle require daily courage, not performativity, shared responsibility, not symbolic gestures. For white and, indeed, all educators, Dabiri's (2021) framework offers a critical springboard: one that encourages reflection, dialogue, and an ongoing commitment to action grounded in solidarity. It is this framing of anti-racism that we seek to think-with in the following sections, as we explore the development of our own forum for anti-racist practice.

Methodology

Collaborative Autoethnography

In writing our paper, we turn to the principles of Collaborative autoethnography (CAE) (Chang et al., 2013; Holman-Jones et al., 2016; Lapadat, 2017) as our research approach. CAE combines autobiography with ethnographic inquiry, to document and analyse the personal stories of the forum's founders. Sometimes known as 'joint' or 'collective' autoethnography' or 'biography', this approach enables each participant to contribute their individual motivations and perspectives underlying the formation of the forum before coming together to attune to each other's narrative experiences and reflect upon both similarities and differences. CAE troubles the conventional researcher-researched power dynamic that can often be at play in qualitative inquiry and instead foregrounds a more relational and participatory ethics that enables the *researched* to assume the role of the *researcher*. Though still relatively uncommon in the social sciences, Chang et al. (2013, pp. 22) advocate for its pragmatic nature as a means for each of us to turn "the lens inward to make personal thoughts and actions visible and transparent to the audience". In doing so, we foreground the value of critical self-reflection, however vulnerable or uncomfortable, in creating collective meaning.

Furthermore, we situate CAE as more than a means of simply enabling us to 'know' more about our experiences of the forum and instead align our interpretation with Toyosaki and Pensoneau-Conway (2016, pp.560) who describes this approach as one that can help us to also "evaluate (axiology), become (ontology), and do (praxeology) our selfhood—our sense of being—in the world". For them, this doingness of collaborative autoethnography aligns with social justice approaches that attend to our everyday performances in actualising social change in tandem with others. As such, CAE provides us with a

methodological framework through which we document and actively engage with the ethical and political responsibilities of white educators committed to anti-racist practice. In this way, we are writing against racial injustice within early childhood spaces as "a problem we—a collective of intersubjective selves—have and for which we all are response-able and response-willing to each other in resolving" (Toyosaki & Pensoneau-Conway, 2016, pp. 570). By co-constructing our narratives, and foregrounding relational accountability, we embrace CAE as both a process of meaning-making and a praxis of anti-racist solidarity.

Listening Method

To generate our data, we considered multiple approaches, including co-writing and spoken discussions, before deciding on a structured process that combined individual interviews, shared listening, and a focus group discussion to explore themes emerging from our experiences. Since Shaddai was not part of the forum's formation, he conducted the interviews with Izzy, Erin and Beth before participating in the analysis and subsequent focus group discussions. The interviews were guided by a series of agreed-upon 'narrative frames' (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008) designed to explore key aspects of the forum's development and impact. These frames invited each of us to reflect on our individual sense of how and why the forum came to fruition, including the perceived influence of the broader sociopolitical climate on its emergence. Interviewees were also encouraged to share their personal insights on the purpose of the network, as well as how their own identities—racial, gendered, and otherwise—intersected with their engagement in this work. The interviews also provided an opportunity to discuss challenges in building and maintaining the network, identifying key moments or stories that had 'stuck' with participants.

In analysing our interview data, we drew from Woodcock's (2016) 'listening guide' approach to inform our interpretation, which involved all of us independently listening back to each of the interviews. First, we each engaged in listening for the plot, identifying key themes and patterns that emerged across the narratives. This involved attending to elements such as emotional resonance, repeated words and phrases, striking images, contradictions, and omissions—what was left unsaid as much as what was articulated. Next, we considered our listener responses, reflecting on the moments where we experienced tensions, felt lost, or made connections with the interviewee's account. We recognised that our personal values, assumptions, and social constructs inevitably shaped our interpretations, and we remained attuned to the ways in which these influenced our reading of the data. We then engaged in listening in relation to the aims of this paper, critically evaluating how the narratives aligned with, or deviated from, our initial intentions. This helped us determine which aspects of the interviews directly contributed to our inquiry into white educators transitioning to anti-racist activism and which digressions, while valuable, required further interrogation. We also paid close attention to noticing themes across narratives, looking for recurring patterns, shared experiences, and points of divergence that could help us understand the collective dimensions of the forum's formation and ongoing work.

Importantly, we recognised the need to situate our narratives within the theoretical framework that underpins this paper. Given that *What White People Can Do Next* (Dabiri, 2021) serves as a conceptual anchor for our discussion, we considered how the author's arguments could help us make sense of our own experiences and those of our participants. As such, we reflected on how the book's ideas resonated with, challenged, or expanded our understanding of the themes emerging from the interviews. This engagement allowed us to evaluate our experiences through a structured lens that we believed would strengthen our analysis. In doing so, we aimed to ensure that our interpretation of the data remained rigorous, reflexive, and meaningful. Having completed our individual reviews of each other's narrative interviews, we then came together for a focus group discussion to share our reflections on the listening process. By the end of the focus group, we had reached a consensus on a set of overarching themes that would form the foundation for our next section on findings and analysis. This thematic framework serves as both a reflection of our personal and collective journeys and a contribution to broader discussions on the role of white educators in anti-racist practice.

Ethics

CAE is generally regarded as an inherently ethical research approach due to its emphasis on sharing

narratives to strengthen understanding and critique dominant norms (Lapadat, 2017; Sparkes, 2024). In another world, this paper may have alternatively taken the form of Shaddai acting as the sole author and analytical voice. In a neoliberal academic system governed by metrics and the fetishisation of individualism (Breeze et al., 2019; Morley, 2024), this might have been the more efficient and institutionally rewarded route — yet it would have silenced the collective, collapsing our dialogic process into a single voice and betraying the collaborative ethos that underpins this work. Following Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), this decision can also be read as a matter of care: an insistence on thinking-with rather than thinking-about (p. 76). However, this process also carries some issues, particularly concerning the vulnerability of researchers and the potential for implicating others in shared narratives. Given these considerations, in addition to seeking ethical approval from Shaddai's institution, we established several explicit ethical commitments to guide our work. Firstly, we agreed from the outset that all co-authored written outputs from this project will require a four-person tick, meaning explicit agreement from each of us before they are considered final. This meant that our voices were equally valued and that no individual perspective could be misrepresented. It also reflects our shared responsibility for the integrity of the work. Secondly, to maintain a supportive and reflective space, we implemented a practice of "checking in" at the start and end of each interview. This echoes calls to embed care practices and emotional safety into collaborative research spaces (Ellis et al., 2011). These check-ins were intended to serve as an opportunity to acknowledge emotions, surface any concerns, and reaffirm our commitment to co-creating a safe environment.

We have also committed to maintaining a clear and shared understanding of why we are writing this paper. Recognising the dual purpose of this work—as both a reflective exploration of our experiences and a contribution to broader anti-racist efforts in early childhood education - keeps us grounded in the values that brought us together. This clarity helps navigate the ethical complexities of autoethnography, ensuring that our motivations align with the principles of justice and equity that underpin the forum. We engaged in regular discussions to consider the potential impacts of sharing our narratives, both on ourselves and on others implicated in our stories.

Data and Analysis

We agreed on a set of themes that had arisen from our individual interviews and focus group discussions. Our decision to focus on themes reflects the range of issues that we felt resonated with us and that we deemed most valuable in capturing the complexity of our shared experiences, commitments, and challenges in engaging with anti-racist practice, rather than them being a result of the frequency with which they arose in discussion. They therefore represent both the personal and political dimensions of our work, offering insights into the emotional, relational, and structural aspects and are presented at length with only minor amendments to strengthen clarity. Further, in places, we move between collective authorship— using 'we'—and individual naming, referring specifically to Izzy, Erin and Beth. This reflects both the collaborative nature of our work and the distinct positionalities each of us brings. In moments where *we* (all) speak, we do so to emphasise the shared thinking and dialogic processes that underpin the forum. At other times, we name individuals explicitly to highlight particular reflections or experiences that were personally significant or contextually specific. There are also points in the analysis where Shaddai's interpretation is presented independently from Izzy, Erin and Beth's, for instance, in moments where the formation of the forum is discussed. In total, we share six key areas in relation to the aims of our paper, each of which will be discussed in this section.

Findings

Rationale

A key driver for establishing the forum was a shared recognition of the fleeting nature of anti-racist momentum, particularly in the wake of the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020. We acknowledge that our own engagement was, in part, catalysed by this moment of heightened visibility - an uncomfortable reminder of our complicity in not acting sooner, despite the longstanding need for sustained anti-racist practice in early childhood education. With Manning (2020), we recognise the need for the work

to continue even when the attention to it wanes. Dabiri (2021) and others (Bell, 1980; Blaisdell, 2018; Saito, 2020) similarly critique the way social justice movements generate a wave of moral urgency - especially among white people - that is intense but ultimately short-lived. This performative engagement, while appearing progressive, rarely translates into structural change. These observations were echoed in our reflections of the early years sector, where we had witnessed initial enthusiasm give way to silence and disengagement.

> Izzy: "We noticed that everybody was like, *'Yes, Black Lives Matter'*, and then it just dropped into silence. So much moral outrage in society, and then suddenly it kind of dies down a bit."

There was also a growing awareness that anti-racism, like many initiatives in early childhood education, risked becoming a 'trend' - another issue that rises briefly to the surface before being replaced. In our early conversations, we grappled with how to ensure anti-racist practice was not treated as an 'optional extra,' but embedded as a core commitment.

> Erin: "That one [anti-racism] can't go—that this one has to stay, and this one has to just become normal."

We situated our forum as a response to this wider professional and political context; one shaped by our understanding of, existence within, and empathy for the sector as a whole. We were aware of the complex pressures faced by early years practitioners (Social Mobility Commission, 2020) and wanted to create a space that acknowledged this reality, without lowering the bar for meaningful change.

> Erin: "We really understand the expectation that we're putting on people."

> Beth: "We're mindful of people's priorities and juggling things, but also, we don't just shy away saying, 'Oh, you're busy, don't worry.'

A recurring theme in our discussions was the need to strike a balance between pragmatism and urgency to create space that was both accessible and accountable. One analogy, first used by Beth and later echoed by Izzy, became central to how we thought about our role as facilitators: the idea of giving a 'kick and a cushion.'

> How hard do you kick in if you've only got that person for an hour and a half? Who has been burned out and thinking about a billion things, and it's the end of the workday to then go, 'Oh, by the way, you also need to reimagine everything that you do.' How hard do you go in and expect them to come back the next time?"

This gentle-yet-disruptive approach became part of our working philosophy toward stronger racial literacy—acknowledging that meaningful change requires discomfort but also care. It also reflects our belief in the power of collective practice. As Erin put it, "we've put energy into being *with* people and doing stuff *with* people." This value on relational, co-constructed engagement aligns with Dabiri's (2021) call for coalition over performativity—foregrounding solidarity, dialogue, and action as necessary antidotes to the fleeting gestures that so often characterise responses to racism.

Positionalities

As we have discussed in the literature review (Dabiri, 2021), white educators have tended to take up a position of passive sympathy towards people from the Global Majority rather than directly engage in meaningful action. Often, taking action has produced a level of discomfort that stymies progress and ultimately leads to stasis. The individual interviews revealed that questions around positionality and purpose were key considerations in developing this forum.

> Beth: We had lots and lots of discussions about being three white women and how to navigate that in terms of keeping (participants) safe in (relation to the forum perpetuating racism) - I think that was huge for us. We had so many discussions about it. and especially. talking about racism, when you have no understanding of how that feels personally ... But. After the events of 2020, it was very difficult because (Global majority people) were… the best way to describe it is tired, like tired of talking about it, "it's been raised and now everybody's asking me questions and I'm tired of it." So then was the time for us to step in and be like, *"Look, this actually isn't your problem. It's a white person's problem"*.

> Izzy: It's something that we thought a lot about, like *who were we* to start this discussion or stick our heads out in this area? One of the hardest things in this is that there are no hard and fast answers. There's no one way to do it. I think what we've read in one of the free guides that was coming out in 2020 was that if white people don't take action

something or they don't take on this, then you're asking people of colour to shoulder the burden all themselves and It's not a Black person's problem - it's a white person's problem. And those sorts of things were ringing in my ears.

Erin: *How can we do this in a way that we really clearly do not situate ourselves as experts because we are three white women?* It needed a lot of conversation, and I think we all felt that quite strongly straight from the off, and we really thought carefully about how we worded that introduction to the forum. We just knew it had to be one of the first things that we said, I was like, acknowledge, acknowledge who we are because I think that, you know, kind of name it to tame it by acknowledging our vulnerability

All three of us wrestled with our own racial identity and its place in leading an anti-racist forum. We recognised the structural privilege whiteness grants us, and our fears of stepping into a space where we might cause harm. However, Izzy, Erin and Beth also emphasised that dismantling racism should not be left solely to the racially minoritised people. Returning to our literature review, this is notable in light of what Dabiri (2021) says when she discusses the importance of white people moving beyond allyship and towards coalition-building. Instead of positioning themselves as saviours or speaking on behalf of others, Dabiri urges white people to recognise their stake in challenging the systems that uphold racial injustice. In this way, the above reflections resonate with Dabiri's (2021) call for shared responsibility and collective struggle—an approach that reframes anti-racist work as a necessary act of solidarity and justice.

Leveraging White Identity

We – Izzy, Erin and Beth - each discussed how our white racial identity may afford certain forms of access, influence, and protection when engaging in anti-racist work. This highlights the privileges afforded to us while at the same time revealing how whiteness can be strategically leveraged to disrupt dominant norms and carry messages that might be resisted if delivered by practitioners of the Global Majority.

I think the fact that we're white makes it feel safer for white people to come (to the forum events). I think they feel more comfortable to sit and talk about anti-racism with somebody who looks like them. I think that's a big factor of it, and I think, you know, the *systems above us are predominantly white.*

It's like that term 'anti-racist practice', we're kind of naming it, we're calling it out, and I'm reflecting on [another early years speaker], a conversation I had with them. That they don't call it anti-racism, they call it cultural inclusion. Because they have faced, as a (person from the Global Majority), the backlash, the negative correlations of the people stepping away from a (Global Majority person) telling me I'm doing things wrong. So, they purposely position themself in a softer place of cultural inclusion, which is more palatable to the average white practitioner. and actually, that's the way they've found that they can come in from a more palatable position. To reach people, to have a greater impact and I think, yeah, *maybe I think our white identity allows us to come in with a stronger message*, because we're not being perceived, maybe, as a stereotype.

I was thinking that although it's an uncomfortable space, there's also a level of detachment that I think can give us a bit more… We're less vulnerable in that space than the fact that we don't have the lived experience of the trauma of those experiences. So, when I put myself out there, I'm being vulnerable for being exposed as racist or not having the answers or doing something wrong which is part of it, but I'm not liable to the triggering of past experiences or facing personal attacks by putting myself out there so I feel like yeah, I almost have that layer of detachedness because I don't have the lived experience.

Together, these reflections speak to the complicated duality of whiteness in anti-racist work. On one hand, Izzy, Erin and Beth's racial identity affords them a level of legitimacy in the eyes of other white practitioners, which may be employed to open up difficult conversations about race, racism and racial literacy and challenge colour-avoidant discourses. Shaddai himself has direct experience of such challenges as a Black educator, in which he has been asked to consider 'accessibility' in anti-training – a covert manoeuvre signalling a broader discomfort with naming racism explicitly that also speaks to the way in which the early years sector is often framed as unable, unwilling, or - at worst - not intelligent enough to engage with the realities of racial injustices against the Global Majority. The implication that the workforce needs messages to be 'softened' reinforces a deficit narrative, positioning those working in the early years as somehow incapable of grappling with the political realities of structural racism. On the other hand, Izzy, Erin, and Beth remain aware that these same privileges afforded by whiteness to come in with stronger messages about racism are embedded in the very systems they are seeking to dismantle. Their insights point to both the strategic possibilities and the ethical tensions of occupying this space.

Lived Experience

The three of us (Izzy, Erin and Beth) further considered the nature of training and the balance of power that is often present, explicitly or otherwise, in these professional development contexts. In our case, as white women leading work on anti-racism, we were acutely aware of our lack of lived experience, while also mindful that our positionality could be strategically used to open space for critical dialogue and engagement. We did not wish to position ourselves as 'experts' since, as Izzy notes, this dynamic felt counterproductive to the kind of transformative, relational labour we felt anti-racist practice requires:

> I think with other training it's easy to see the person leading it as the expert and just say "well what should I do, write it down, go and implement it". But it's such a personal journey that we didn't want to create it as a training, and we didn't want it to be a one-off thing, but like a journey that people come with us on.

Reflecting back on the formation of the forum, Beth recalled the discussions around what to call it, noting that we were not delivering training in alignment with what attendees may have previously experienced.

> Beth: We wanted to make that very clear, that we have no experience comparable to racism. So, we were very clear that we wanted it to be a network or a forum.

This deliberate positioning reflected our awareness of our whiteness and the importance of not claiming expertise in experiences that are not ours to speak from. However, this approach is somewhat complicated by Dabiri's (2021) critique of the increasing centrality of lived experience in anti-racist spaces. She questions whether "expertise, insight and experience [are] now solely determined by degrees of racism endured" (p.93), cautioning against a framework where authority is conferred only through victimhood. Her reflections are pertinent here in recognising the dangers of white people dominating anti-racist spaces and also in troubling the inverse: where individuals who may have valuable insights or structural expertise refrain from contributing, fearing their lack of personal experience of racism disqualifies them from speaking. Reading through Dabiri (2021), we have come to realise that in naming our forum as such, as opposed to a training programme, we attempted to hold space for a more collective, relational model of engagement—one that resists both the centring of whiteness and the flattening of anti-racist work into a hierarchy of suffering.

From Shaddai's viewpoint, though not brought up in the interviews, this may account for the decision to bring him on board: not to compensate for their lack of lived experience in a tokenistic sense, but to extend the forum's capacity for richer, more plural engagement. His own decision to join the forum resonates with what he and Bateson (2022) describe as "liminal relationality" - a collaborative way of knowing, being and doing that acknowledges the messy, uncomfortable, and yet transformative potential of cross-racial partnership. In that paper, caution is raised against reproducing colonial dynamics in which Black colleagues are instrumentalised to validate white-led initiatives. Instead, they call for relational praxis that foregrounds mutual vulnerability and the constant re-negotiation of power – in the same way that Dabiri calls for 'a sense of mutuality rather than charity' (2021, p.147). As Izzy notes, "if you've got somebody that's black or brown and is willing to talk about their experiences, that's great, *but we can't rely on that*".

Activ-ish

The issues raised so far feed into broader questions about the role of activism within early years practice. Given his position in the profession as an advocate for a range of social justice issues, Shaddai was particularly interested in how the label of 'activist' resonated with Izzy, Erin, and Beth. Though each of us is rooted in early childhood practice, it is important to acknowledge the privilege afforded by Shaddai's current position within higher education - particularly the time, resources, and critical distance it offers to engage with the structural challenges facing the profession. For Shaddai, the need for activism is often taken as axiomatic, shaped by an awareness of the wider inequalities that frame early childhood work and its entanglement with broader societal issues. This positioning arguably informs their more confident embrace of the activist label, in contrast to the more hesitant or ambivalent responses from the others. Though this is not always the case – here, access to academic discourse and structural critique has perhaps

contributed to a more expansive, politicised understanding of activism than that which emerges through the everyday demands of practice. As outlined in the literature review, early years work has increasingly been recognised as inherently political—a form of everyday activism embedded in practice and policy (Freire, 1970). However, it became clear during our discussions that the three founders expressed some hesitation in fully identifying with the term 'activist'. Erin, for instance, recalled a lecturer once encouraging trainee early years teachers to "plague the hell out of people who make decisions for young children," interpreting this as a call to advocate for children's rights and to push for structural change. Izzy similarly reflected:

> Early years is activism because you're not doing it for the money, are you? Those who stay in it… There's some sort of foundational belief that you can make a difference or make it the best it can be in an awful situation.

Yet in lieu of fully embracing the label, a shared sense of having "activist tendencies" began to emerge in the focus group discussions—a tentative proximity to activism, rather than a bold claim to it. As Beth noted:

> The word activism—if we were talking about a different topic, I might feel more comfortable with saying that I was an activist. But anti-racism… I feel so out of my comfort zone. I don't feel like an expert.

Similarly, for Erin:

> I can recognise *tendencies of activism*; I could maybe think about that more comfortably.

This reluctance to adopt the label may reflect the complex dynamics of engaging in anti-racist work as white educators, where expertise feels fragile, and the work is marked by ongoing learning, unlearning, and discomfort. This echoes our earlier reflections in the paper, where we deliberately positioned ourselves against the idea of expertise in anti-racist work, particularly in light of our - Izzy's, Erin's and Beth's positionalities as white women and the importance of relational, rather than instructional, approaches to change. It may also be shaped by local context. Bristol, as a city with a visible history of protest and radical activism—including the toppling of the Colston statue in 2020 (Tinsley et al., 2024) —arguably informs expectations about what activism should look like (Scott, 2021). In this context, the quieter, relational forms of activism that occur within early years spaces may appear less legitimate or recognisable by comparison. Archer (2022) usefully conceptualises these forms as "micro-resistances"—subtle, everyday actions that challenge dominant norms within policy and practice. There is also a risk and privilege in naming oneself as an activist at all. As Tembo and Bateson (2022) also note, anti-racist work often happens at the margins, in what they describe as "fugitive" spaces, suggesting that effective resistance does not always require visibility, but rather careful, relational negotiation within systems that may not welcome it.

Joy

> Shaddai: Before we wrap up, I just want to focus on joy. A lot of this work is difficult and vulnerable, and a strategy for coping with that is joy when we're together and also joy in the context of not seeing Black and minoritised children entirely in deficit terms and celebrating black joy and those sorts of things. So, I wonder how important joy is as a coping strategy? What are your reflections on that?

This invitation from Shaddai to reflect on joy brought something powerful into the conversation that had often been affectively present if not always named. Amidst the weight of anti-racist practice, joy emerged in our conversations as an equally vital thread - not as a distraction from the work, but as an integral part of it. Joy, we came to understand, can be figured as both a sustaining force for educators and simultaneously a form of resistance in itself as a refusal to let oppressive systems dictate our work with children.

> Erin: I don't think I could do this. I don't think I could do the wider work that I do unless I also spent a good chunk of my week literally mostly on the floor with the children. Being joyful and facilitating their joy. So that, for me, is the balance… the purpose of why we're doing it all is still the purpose of where I'm doing all of it—is still for young children. I think that's how it all ends up feeling OK in my head.

Joy, in this framing, became a guiding heuristic—reminding us that anti-racist work is about creating better worlds for children. It is not only about challenging what is wrong but nurturing what is possible. It is in those everyday moments—on the floor, in play, in laughter—that the purpose of this work is grounded

and renewed. We were further reminded of this when sharing examples from practice, such as witnessing children engaging in meaningful, affirming conversations about skin colour and identity. As Beth recalled:

"We've put a lot of work in for a lot of years now, and hearing the organic conversations that are happening in the preschool room—that is amazing. There was this little boy... they were reading a story about brown skin being beautiful, and another child said something about it being yucky. The educators responded, they challenged it, reinforced kindness... And then at group time, a child made a comment with pride in his voice, '*I am Black. My skin is Black. My baby is Black. My family are all Black... and we are wonderful.*' It was like—this is a space where you've just heard something that could really cut you, but we've nurtured a space where that joy can come out. And I think that's big.

For Izzy, joy is inherently political:

Joy being that resistance... like, for a system that's always trying to put you down. And thinking about when we celebrate or parade in Black History Month or something—that being like a political act. This is joy in the face of adversity.

In the midst of racism, joy is a form of resistance that centres children of the Global Majority through the sustained normalising of positive and healing narratives (Williams, 2022b). It reminded us, too, of moments where children's awareness and agency surpass adult expectations—where they bring their own understandings of justice, shaped by their lives beyond the setting, into the collective space of the classroom.

When Black Lives Matter actually happened, they did a group time in the preschool—it was led by another practitioner, not here anymore—but the children started talking about the march. Like, 'my mum was there' and 'I was there.' So, she just facilitated this massive thing—got big pieces of card and they all wrote about kindness to each other. And we put them all up on the fence outside. It was really like, yeah—in the face of this thing, it was the children.

These narratives serve as a reminder that anti-racism is as much a project of imagination and collective joy as it is of critique. It highlights who the work is for and why it must continue. Joy, in this context, keeps us grounded, connected, and motivated to persist.

Conclusion

This paper set out to explore the motivations and processes behind the formation of a forum for anti-racist practice by white early years educators in the UK; investigate the opportunities and challenges that white educators may face when leading anti-racist work and critically analyse the societal and educational implications of white educators transitioning to activism, considering the political nature of their work within this context. Through a collaborative autoethnographic approach, we have traced the forum's development from an initial response to a moment of heightened racial awareness in 2020, to a sustained and evolving community of practice. Through our writing, we have thought carefully about that tension between urgency and empathy—what we've come to name in forum sessions as the "kick and the cushion". We question how we can challenge people with enough force to prompt action, while also creating space that feels safe enough for them to return and how we might balance discomfort with care, especially in a sector where people are already facing a number of challenges in their daily roles. The intention of this paper has not been to answer this question but instead to stay with the tensions it raises as part of a commitment toward overcoming stasis surrounding anti-racist practice. We have also examined how whiteness shapes and constrains anti-racist work, offering access for and influence for white people while simultaneously posing ethical tensions. Our reflections speak to the importance of ongoing critical self-awareness and accountability as essential components of anti-racist work led by white educators. In this way, we have sought to challenge the notion that anti-racism is solely the responsibility of practitioners from the Global Majority, instead emphasising the shared coalitional duty of dismantling racist systems. As Brooks (2022, pp. 188) reminds us: "(white people) cannot be silent, but equally you are not a saviour—you cannot do activism at or for people, it must be done with people." This principle has guided the forum's evolution and remains central to our ongoing efforts.

We would also like to acknowledge some caveats to this paper. The reflections and insights presented here are drawn from a small group of educators working within a specific geographical and

professional context. They serve as case studies in their own right, and as such – while we hope there are clear lessons that can be learned for others wishing to engage in this work – we make no claims of generalisability. Secondly, while some readers may come to this paper expecting a blueprint for developing a forum this has not been our intention. In future outputs, we firmly intend to consider the practical nature of running a grassroots forum. However, here, rather than present a step-by-step model, we have sought to illuminate the reflective, relational, and often uncomfortable yet necessary work that scaffolds the creation and sustaining of a forum attendant to anti-racism. We write this paper as a contribution to the wider conversation about what white educators can do next.

We wish to encourage white educators to stay with the discomfort and persevere through uncertainty as the work of race equality needs everyone to play a part. Within this, we acknowledge the power of collaboration and the necessity to bring voices together to form a united resistance "to centre equity as a sustainable priority" (Abawi et al., 2021, p. xxi). We continue to seek pathways to raise anti-racist practice on the agenda in the Early Years sector, to embrace the power of the grassroots movement to build momentum and challenge systems that uphold inequity. We honour the practitioners who are already engaging in anti-racist practice and their commitment to the journey, making a difference to the lives of the children they work with. In the words of Hawthorne and Yglesias (2022, p.6), "alone we know a little, but together we know a lot. This work doesn't belong to any one person or group, it's everyone's work to do together."

Declarations

Authors' Declarations

Publisher's Declarations

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