'Why don't we teach loving who you are?' Exploring the need for a positive racial literacy programme for young children

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Abstract: The early years setting is often where young children have their first solo experience of socialising, making friends and meeting unfamiliar adults. It can also be the place where they first experience racism. Further, while research highlights the presence of racial bias and exclusion in early childhood, there is limited understanding of how practitioners address these realities in everyday practice. This paper presents Proud of the Skin I'm In, a racial literacy development programme developed across Wales, England, and the United States to support conversations about race, identity and belonging in early years settings. While the program includes multiple components, this paper focuses on educator reflections gathered during a focus group exploring its feasibility and potential value. This qualitative study draws on a 90-minute online focus group with six early years practitioners from England, Wales, and the United States, which was analysed thematically to explore their perspectives. We find that practitioners welcomed structured opportunities to engage with race but expressed concerns around confidence, implementation, and the tendency for racial identity work to fall disproportionately to minoritised staff. We argue that supporting young children's racial identity cannot be left to individual goodwill. It must be embedded into everyday pedagogy through intentional practice, shared responsibility, and sustained institutional support—ensuring all children are recognised, affirmed, and encouraged to take pride in their identity.

Introduction

The early years setting is where young children develop a sense of their identity, socialise and meet others. It can also be where they first experience racism (Dulin-Keita et al., 2011; Sullivan et al., 2021). Research tells us that Black and minoritised children encounter racial discrimination from peers or adults, which contributes to low self-esteem and negative self-image (Anderson et al., 2024). Although there is a body of scholarship on racial bias and early childhood, less is known about how practitioners themselves understand and respond to racial identity in their everyday practice. This article addresses that gap by examining early years educators' reflections on a racial literacy programme.

Our unique contribution is to present findings from the initial feasibility stage of *Proud of the Skin I'm In* (PoSii) programme, focusing specifically on practitioner perspectives. Rather than offering a full evaluation of the programme, this paper centres on educator voices to explore both the perceived value and the challenges of embedding racial identity work in early years practice. In doing so, it highlights how racial literacy can be operationalised in everyday pedagogy and makes the case for treating racial identity development as a core educational responsibility.

PoSii was developed across Wales, England, and the United States as a racial literacy and identity development intervention designed to support early years educators and children in having meaningful conversations about race, identity, and belonging. It is a six-week intervention intended to enhance self-esteem, racial literacy and positive racial identity in all young children. The programme features practitioner training and utilises a baseline to measure the impact on children and educators.

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While PoSii has multiple components, this paper does not assess its full implementation. Instead, we focus on a 90-minute focus group with six educators in England, Wales, and the United States, which explored their interpretations of racial identity, their responses to the proposed framework, and the opportunities and barriers they anticipated in delivering such a programme. This early-stage feasibility study, therefore, provides valuable insight into how practitioners make sense of racial identity work and the institutional conditions that support or constrain it.

In what follows, we first situate our positionalities and provide an overview of PoSii before outlining the methodology used in this feasibility phase. We then present and analyse educator reflections thematically, drawing attention to the affective, practical, and political dimensions of racial literacy work in early years education. We conclude by considering the implications of these reflections for policy, practice, and future research.

Situating Ourselves and Introducing the PoSii Programme

We write this paper as two Black educators and scholars committed to social justice in early childhood education, with a particular emphasis on anti-racism. Shaddai is a Black man with a background as an early years practitioner who now works in UK higher education. His research explores the intersections of educator identities and race (Tembo, 2021a), the ways young children explore and enact power through play (Tembo & Bateson, 2025), and the significance of grassroots movements in advancing anti-racist practice in early education (Tembo et al., 2025). He also regularly delivers professional development with educators to support racial literacy and anti-racist practice. Jones is a Black woman and teacher educator in the United States who has long embedded racial identity development within her teacher education courses. She also provides professional development for educators and parents to foster healthy racial identity in the early years. She is the Director of Defending the Early Years (DEY), a US-based nonprofit advocacy organisation focused on early childhood. DEY has published the Fostering Healthy Identity in Young Children: Affirming Race, Ethnicity, and Culture in the Early Years framework—a widely accessible tool designed to support educators, advocates, and parents in understanding and facilitating racial identity development in young children (we use the term parents to refer to all primary caregivers, including guardians, foster carers, and others who assume a primary caregiving role in a child's life). The framework emphasises understanding how children are socialised, recognising the processes through which racial identity develops, and promoting healthy racial, ethnic, and cultural self-concepts (Jones, 2025b). Our own positionalities shape both the development of the PoSii programme and the lens through which we interpret practitioner responses, particularly around discomfort, resistance, and the emotional labour of race work.

Our collaboration led to the development of the *PoSii* programme—*Proud of the Skin I'm In*—a targeted racial literacy intervention for use in early years or pre-K settings across Wales, England, and the United States. PoSii is provisionally designed for delivery in small groups (up to six children) and offers a structured six-week intervention focused on racial identity, self-esteem, and belonging. It is underpinned by the belief that all children—regardless of racial identity—benefit from understanding race and developing a positive sense of self in relation to it. For Black and minoritised children, the programme supports pride, resilience, and resistance to societal prejudice. For white children, it cultivates social responsibility, accountability and a critical awareness of power and difference.

Practitioners participating in the programme take part in an initial training session in their respective countries, which introduces them to the aims, structure, and pedagogical approach of the PoSii sessions. The training is designed to strengthen both racial literacy and confidence in facilitating dialogue around identity with young children. This responds to research indicating that many educators feel unprepared or anxious when discussing race with children and that professional development can meaningfully increase their confidence and capacity to engage in this work (Han et al., 2010). Practitioners are then invited to identify a group of children from their own settings who they feel would particularly benefit from the intervention, using their professional knowledge and judgment. Importantly, PoSii is not racially prescriptive: children of all racial backgrounds are eligible to participate, and the intention is to promote

shared understanding and belonging across differences. The sessions are intended to be delivered weekly over six weeks, each lasting approximately 45 minutes. A *PoSii Handbook* accompanies the intervention, providing step-by-step session guides, story-based learning materials, and reflective prompts to support delivery. As part of the research component, participating practitioners are asked to assess children's development in relation to racial identity and racial literacy at two points—before and after the intervention—using a bespoke *PoSii Baseline Profile*. This formative tool is designed to capture shifts in self-esteem, racial awareness, and social-emotional skills through observation and practitioner reflection.

Literature Review

In line with Jesson et al. (2011) guidance on traditional literature review approaches, we adopted a narrative review strategy, drawing on various sources across disciplines to synthesise conceptual and empirical insights on racial identity development in early childhood. We find that the literature on racial identity development is vast and primarily dominated within the fields of psychology and counselling. Most racial identity development models begin in adolescence (Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2012). Though there has been a growth in anti-bias and social justice education in early childhood (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2009), most research on racial identity with young children focused on racial awareness in Black children (Swanson et al., 2009), the development of racial bias and prejudice, and parental racial and ethnic socialisation (Aboud, 2008; Katz & Kofkin, 1997). This points to a gap in the literature on how racial identity itself begins to form during early childhood and how early years settings play a role in that process. Thus, we will highlight key findings in these areas and cover the scant literature on racial socialisation in early childhood environments.

Development of Racial Awareness in Young Children

Contrary to the widely held assumption that children do not notice race and have no understanding of racial classifications, many studies have found that children develop an awareness of racial differences at a very young age (Aboud, 2008; Corsaro & Fingerson, 2003; Davidson & Fouts, 2024; Farago et al., 2019; Hirschfeld, 2008; Katz & Kofkin, 1997; Murray & Mandara, 2002; Quintana, 1998; Spencer, 1984). Studies on how infants respond to novel faces of different races provided evidence to support a birth processing system that attunes to race-based facial dimensions during an infant's first three months (Kelly et al., 2005). Kelly and colleagues state, "We believe that preference for own-race faces observed in 3-month-olds represents the perceptual beginnings of categorisation based on ethnic differences and may provide a basis for 'other-race effect'" (2005, p. 6).

A follow-up study by Bar-Haim et al. (2006) found that the same-race bias in 3-month-olds could not be explained as a simple colour preference. Using both photos of men and women of various races and coloured oval shapes, Bar-Haim and colleagues found that the babies displayed less interest in the ovals compared with the adult faces (2006). They also note how racial environments heavily influence infants' development of their own race faces. White and Black African babies who lived in primarily same-race communities developed a stronger preference for their own-race faces compared to infants who had more experience in cross-race environments. Thus, they advocate for additional research on how exposure to other-race faces can decrease the own-race bias that is prevalent during infancy and can contribute to race biases as children get older.

The ability to discriminate between their own race and other races does not mean that a three-month-old knows what race is or knows their own race, nonetheless what the research tells us is that at a very young age, children are aware of race and can distinguish between faces based on race (Hirschfeld, 2008). As infants grow and develop, their awareness of race leads to their ability to sort people into racial groups and use those racial categorisations to interpret and reason about their behaviours by age 3 (Hirschfeld, 2008). By age 5, they will have gone beyond ascribing positive attributes to members of the dominant race and begin to ascribe negative attributes to subordinate racial groups (Hirschfeld, 2008). Developmental science argues that this awareness is connected to cognitive limitations that force a reliance on physical and external features to categorise and group individuals and things (Quintana, 1998). Thus, racial attitudes are not believed to develop at this age as much as categorical grouping based on observable differences in

prominent physical features. At the same time, while developmental theories like these help explain when and how children begin to notice and categorise differences, they do not explain the *social* meanings children attach to race. Importantly, too, they remain in thrall to logics of developmentalism (Burman, 2016). For this, sociocultural perspectives are necessary.

Racial Bias and Prejudice Development in Early Years

To develop a fuller understanding of racial identity in the early years, we draw on both developmental and sociocultural approaches. Developmental theories explain how racial categorisation emerges as a cognitive process. However, these perspectives can present identity formation as an overly neutral or linear process without accounting for how dominant ideologies and social and cultural norms affect the meanings children attach to racial categories. Sociocultural frameworks, including critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), make clear that racial identity is not just about noticing difference but about understanding power, belonging, and representation.

Katz and Kofkin (1997) have outlined a framework for early racial development with four main stages: awareness, identity labelling, preference, and stereotyping. Identity development in young children begins with their ability to label various parts of their identity correctly. In a longitudinal study on how race and gender develop through the four components, Katz and Kofkin (1997) documented evidence of a progression in this aspect of development from 16% correctly labelling themselves based on race at 24 months to 56% at 36 months. They note that white three-year-olds correctly self-labelled their race 77% of the time compared to 32% for Black children. Though they dismiss the possibility of cognitive factors explaining these differences in race identity development, they explore a host of socio-cultural factors that could explain their findings. Preferences were studied by showing children photographs of other children (evenly divided by gender and race) and asking them to select the child they preferred to play with. They found that:

> At 30-months all children demonstrated a same-race preference when choosing a playmate and photograph of unfamiliar peers. The majority of black children (69%) and white children (65%) selected a same-race playmate. At 36 months, a significant shift occurred. The number of white children exhibiting a preference for same-race playmates increased (to 82%), while the number of black children preferring same-race playmates decreased dramatically (to 32%). Thus, by 36 months, the majority of both black and white children chose white playmates. At 60 months, the race difference in same-race preferences persisted, although the effect was weaker. Almost two-thirds of all children selected a white playmate at 60 months (Katz & Kofkin, 1997, p. 59).

The researchers attribute differences in the children's environment noting that the white children had less exposure to cross-race playmates and 90% of the time played with a same-race friend. Whereas the Black children who chose a white playmate were more likely to play with non-Black children compared with Black children who chose a same-race playmate from the picture task. These results point toward the unequal social valuation of racial identities and the early internalisation of racial hierarchies. As Klarsgaard (2024) demonstrates in her ethnography of Danish kindergartens, young white children's interpretations of skin colour are not innocent wonderings but are embedded in power relations shaped by normative whiteness. Similarly, Tembo and Bateson (2025) refers to such moments as 'precursive' racialisation—subtle but powerful habits formed in play that are rooted in colonial norms and social scripts about who belongs and who does not. We understand such moments as affective experiences: embodied and felt encounters through which children and educators come to sense inclusion, exclusion, and (racial) difference. As Tembo (2021b) explains, race often surfaces in early childhood spaces through ordinary but affectively charged interactions, where atmospheres of belonging or dissonance 'stick' to particular bodies (Ahmed, 2004). This perspective aligns with a growing field of scholarship on affect and racialisation (Vila & Avery-Natale, 2020; Zembylas, 2015), which highlights how race is not only socially constructed but affectively lived in ways that shape children's capacities to be and become.

The next step in racial identity in the early years is the formation of stereotypes that develop after racial awareness and the ability to categorise the self and others based on race. Findings that race stereotyping is highest in kindergarten and then decreases between ages 6 and 7 (Katz & Kofkin, 1997), lead some to theorise that cognitive limitations are at play (Aboud, 2008; Quintana, 1998). As they gain the

cognitive ability needed to develop concrete operations they are less likely to engage in stereotyping which is believed to be more of a function with how pre-operational children categorise people and things. Others argue that the decline in stereotyping is likely the result of their ability to hide bias and respond in socially accepted ways (Katz & Kofkin, 1997). Nonetheless, Katz and Kofkin (1997) argue against ignoring biases and stereotypes even if they appear to decrease as children get older because – as evident in the heavily racialised society we live within in the West - they do not entirely disappear and cannot be random since white children only demonstrate a pro-white bias. This pro-white bias must be understood within the context of systemic and symbolic power. As Delgado and Stefancic (2017) argue, racism is ordinary, embedded in everyday practices and institutions, and thus becomes invisible to those it privileges. Children absorb this ordinariness through what is present and what is missing in their early environments, including the absence of explicit conversations about race or the overrepresentation of whiteness in books and leadership roles in their settings. This process aligns with Harro's (2000) 'Cycle of Socialisation', which explains how children internalise dominant social norms and roles through repeated exposure to institutional messages that reward conformity and discourage difference.

Racial bias was found to shift from an own-race preference at age 3 to pro-white bias at age 5 for both Black and white children (Katz & Kofkin, 1997). Given the plethora of studies that evidenced a pro-white bias in children between the ages of 3 and 7, Aboud (2008) used four propositions from the social-cognitive developmental theory of prejudice to explain this phenomenon. Age changes rely on assumed cognitive constraints that disappear after age seven allowing children to move from rigid biased stereotypes and apply multiple dimensions to a person (i.e,, good and bad, black and white, tall and short). Parents and friends are found not to provide models which children copy, but instead provide information, implicitly or explicitly, as young children co-construct meanings and interactions based on race. Children are believed to process information through a sequence that begins with a focus on the self, and then groups, and then to individuals. Thus, prejudice and bias are likely to be strong as young children focus on the self and then decrease as they are able to shift to groups and individuals. Affective-perceptual-cognitive processes also stem from age changes and can impact a child's prejudice and bias (i.e., fear of the unknown- affective, attending to visual racial cues and ascribing oneself based on those cues-perceptual, and considering inconsistent points of view- cognitive) (Aboud, 2008). Though helpful, such theories benefit from integration with sociocultural analysis, which pushes us to ask not only when bias emerges but why certain racial meanings become dominant. As Klarsgaard (2024) shows, white children's racial preferences are shaped not by abstract categorisation alone but by their positioning within a broader racialised system that privileges whiteness and renders it invisible. Jones (2025a) similarly highlights how adult silence and institutional avoidance contribute to children's internalisation of racial norms—not just through what is said, but through what is never spoken aloud. Though there are some criticisms of social-cognitive theory to explain the development of prejudice and bias in young children, it provides a foundation for building interventions at various stages in the early years. However, to fully understand racial bias and prejudice development in early years, it is important to go beyond cognitive explanations and consider how power, representation, and institutional silence shape children's racial meaning-making. Sociocultural perspectives, therefore, offer a reminder that bias is not only learned individually but produced through everyday norms, absences, and hierarchies that operate within early years settings.

Parental Race and Ethnic Socialisation

Given the strong influence parents have as a child's first teacher, many have studied the impact of parental racial and ethnic socialisation. Though most studies have focused on African American parents (Caughy et al., 2002; Hughes & Chen, 1997), other studies included Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Hispanic families (Hughes, 2003; Lesane-Brown et al., 2010), another included Korean parents (Anderson et al., 2014), and some included white families (Farago et al., 2019; Hamm, 2001; Lesane-Brown et al., 2010). Parental racial and ethnic socialisation is defined in the literature as how parents instil cultural, racial, and ethnic pride in their children (cultural socialisation) and prepare them for racial discrimination and bias (preparation for bias) (Caughy, et al., 2002; Farago et al., 2019; Hughes, 2003; Hughes & Chen, 1997). A few studies included the promotion of mistrust as a type of parental socialisation engaged in by African

Americans. In contrast, only one study examined the color-evasive practices of white families as a type of intentional or unintentional racial socialisation (Farago et al., 2019). All studies found evidence of high parental racial and ethnic socialisation in African American families, leading many to argue that Black parents have a responsibility to engage in racial socialisation to support the healthy development of a Black child in a world where Blackness is discriminated against (Caughy, et al., 2002).

Though most studies that examined the impact of parental socialisation focused on older children, one study specifically looked at behaviour and cognitive impact on preschool children. A study with 200 Black families from Baltimore, Maryland, in the USA, explored the relationship between parental racial socialisation and having an African-centered home environment and children's behavioural competence and cognitive development (Caughy et al., 2002). The authors contend that their findings support other studies with older children that "cultural socialisation has consistently been associated with better academic achievement in African American adolescents" (Caughy, et al., 2002, p. 1622). In their study, a home rich in African American culture was associated with an increase in problem-solving skills and higher factual knowledge, while fostering racial pride was associated with a decrease in behaviour problems (Caughy et al., 2002).

In their literature review, Farago et al. (2019) focused explicitly on ethnic-racial socialisation of young children and examined both parental and teacher socialisation. They note the overall finding of a colour-evasive or colour-mute approach taken by most white parents, including silence, explicit avoidance, or only engaging in vague or superficial discussions. In addition to parental racial and ethnic socialisation that included cultural socialisation and preparation for bias, they also included the promotion of mistrust and egalitarianism. Though promotion of mistrust is often associated with Black parents and rarely reported, it remained prevalent in the literature, while others included silence or lack of communication about race within an egalitarian approach, that "encourages children to focus on individual characteristics, as opposed to characteristics about being a minority, to thrive in society" (Farago et al., 2019, p. 133). They note how racial and ethnic socialisation in the early years can serve as a protective factor for children of colour, along with better cognitive functioning and fewer mental health issues.

Racial Socialisation in Early Childhood Environments

Outside of the home, early childhood settings are the first environment where children receive implicit and explicit racial and ethnic socialisation. Early years settings and schools often reinforce messages about racial hierarchies by teaching discourses of Whiteness that overrepresent White people in curriculum materials, omit people of colour, foster stereotypes, portray Whiteness as protecting against Black criminality, and instill Whiteness as morality and white people as wholesome (Farago et al., 2019). Thus, even if the predominantly white teaching force in the USA (Farago, Sandars, & Gaias, 2015) indicates an unwillingness and a discomfort in addressing race, unhealthy racial socialisation messages are abundant in schools, even if implicitly stated. For Black children who routinely receive positive racial socialisation messages at home, attending a school where race is ignored and pro-White racial socialisation is implied causes conflictual racial socialisation that can create tensions with the school environment. Farago et al. (2019) note that a sense of racial superiority is likely to develop in white children who do not receive explicit conversations about the impact of race and racism, highlighting how "the absences of messages around race may in fact send an inadvertently strong message about race" (p. 135).

When it comes to how early childhood educators engage in racial socialization, the literature is scant. Some have looked at how using the anti-bias framework (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2009) in early childhood classrooms aligns with the types of racial socialisation parents engage in (Faragoet al., 2016; Farago et al., 2019). Though the anti-bias framework for early childhood includes goals related to positive racial identity, a study by Davidson and Fouts (2024) found that early childhood educators were able to foster discussions related to phenotypic characteristics like skin colour, and similarities and differences, but were not prepared to and often silenced conversations about stereotypes, racial discriminatory behaviour, superiority and inferiority. Thus, we echo the call for additional support in early childhood teacher preparation that focuses on fostering healthy racial identity (Farago, 2024) and preparing young

children to recognise and resist racism and anti-Blackness (Jones, 2024).

An exploratory study of parents and educators specifically examining how they support BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) children found similar patterns with parental racial-ethnic socialisation (Farago, 2024). Black and white parents and educators engaged in racial socialisation that increased representation through books, discussions, media, art, and educating themselves (Farago, 2024). Similar to parents, these participants described instilling racial pride and fostering a healthy racial identity in their work with young children (cultural socialisation), discussing prejudice and racism (preparation for bias), and encouraging and modelling respect for diversity (egalitarianism). Parents engaged in a higher level of all forms of racial socialisation compared to educators, leading the author to suggest a lack of support from employers and families might cause hesitation, especially given the current climate attacking diversity, equity, and inclusion (Farago, 2024).

In summary, racial and ethnic socialisation continues to be an important topic studied by various researchers. Though more research is needed on young children in early learning environments, what we do know about the impact of racial identity development in adolescence bolsters our commitment to supporting early childhood educators in doing this work. If adequate racial socialisation has been found to mitigate the negative effects of perceived racial discrimination in African American youths (Harris-Britt et al., 2007), and have positive psychosocial, academic, and health risk associations in ethnic minority youth (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014), then we know that fostering healthy racial identity development in the early years is crucial to ensuring optimal whole child development. The following section presents findings from our study with educators in Wales, England, and the United States, offering insight into the challenges and possibilities of implementing a racial literacy programme in early years education.

Methodology

The data we share in this project is drawn from the initial feasibility stage to assess the value of a structured programme of this kind with six educators, two of each from England, Wales and the United States. Importantly, this paper does not assess the full implementation or impact of the PoSii programme, but focuses on practitioner reflections and feedback on select components, particularly the structure, delivery model, and perceived feasibility. These educators were selected purposively with the intention of creating a sample with participants from each country, and with the available time and general knowledge and understanding of racial identity development, to participate in our study. Of the six educators, all self-defined as women, two were from a minoritised racial background, and the level of experience with young children ranged from five to twenty-five years. We have pseudonymised names but not the location of the participants to enable us to understand geographical differences (see table 1).

Table 1
Participant list

Pseudonym	Geographical Area
June	USA
Sabrian	Wales
Rowena	UK
Anna	Wales
Kayleigh	UK
April	USA

We conducted an online focus group discussion, moderated by us, with the intention of gathering a reasonable amount of data within a much shorter time frame than had we conducted individual interviews. The use of a focus group also enabled consideration of themes arising in the moment from across the

sociopolitical contexts in which these educators were situated (Cohen et al., 2018). We sought to gather participant's professional perspectives on two key areas. The initial area focused on establishing the educators' broad understanding of the term racial identity to determine whether there was a shared or divergent interpretation and to justify the necessity of an intervention such as PoSii. We posed a series of semi-structured questions designed to elicit their perspectives on the relevance and significance of racial identity development in early childhood settings. Educators were asked to define how they understood the concept of racial identity and reflect on the need for specific interventions. They also shared their observations of children's racial identity development in their settings, including interactions between children that highlighted racial awareness, bias, or exclusion. We also invited discussion on current strategies and activities used to support racial identity development, any gaps in training or resources they felt needed addressing, and the challenges they faced when engaging young children in discussions about race and identity.

The second area of discussion sought to gain a specific evaluation of the proposed PoSii programme, inviting educators to assess its structure, feasibility, and potential impact. We presented the core elements of the intervention and asked for their initial thoughts, particularly regarding the suitability of a whole-class model versus small-group delivery. We also sought feedback on the adequacy of the proposed two-hour training session, aiming to gauge educators' confidence in implementing the programme following this preparation. The discussion extended to logistical considerations, such as the feasibility of delivering the six-week programme within their current schedules and any anticipated challenges in selecting and engaging children. Educators were also asked to provide insight into the usefulness of the PoSii handbook and suggested additional elements that might support implementation. Finally, participants reflected on the potential long-term benefits of the PoSii programme for their school or setting and suggested adaptations for future iterations.

We sought ethical approval through our university institution, which enabled us to proceed so long as participants could not be identified or that disclosure of their identity outside of the research would not put them at risk of harm. Nonetheless, mindful of the sensitive nature of discussion around race and racism, we made clear at the outset that this space was in which we, as researchers, were not there to pass judgment, but instead understand their perspectives on our areas of interest. We sought to create a space where they were educating us about the challenges they faced so we could provide support in the future. In total, the focus group discussion lasted for 90 minutes.

Findings and Analysis

In analysing the data, we have chosen to engage in thematic analysis structured around the areas of inquiry we were interested in understanding. Thematic analysis was selected because it allows us to identify patterns in meaning, especially during a focus group where multiple participants are responding to the same questions. Participant responses were analysed using open coding to identify any unit of data relevant to the study. We then grouped the codes into broader themes and returned to the data to see how those themes emerged across responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

This section is therefore structured in two parts. The first part reflects the broad discussion we had about anti-racism and racial identity, what that meant to the participants, and how they perceive these issues to show up in their practice. The second part then shares insights from the discussion around the specific *PoSii* materials and the overall aims of the project.

Understanding Racial Identity

We opened the discussion on the role of racial identity development for the purposes of understanding how consistently the term was interpreted and what aspects of it they deemed essential when working with young children. For June:

> Racial identity, for me, is really about being able to be your **authentic self** and to **flourish** in whatever space you're in academically. And for your voice to kind of be honoured, which is something I try to do in the classroom. And when you, I think when you don't have that kind of space, it can really lead to - I was truant in a lot at school because

I didn't feel safe there in terms of who I could be - it kind of leads to a lot of dysfunction that may not necessarily be so obvious.

Her account here, highlighting the role of authenticity, flourishing and voice, closely aligns with the existing literature surrounding racial identity and well-being. Given existing accounts of children masking - consciously or otherwise – aspects of themselves for fear of prejudice and discrimination (Harro, 2000; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Klarsgaard, 2024), foregrounding the need for children to develop authenticity in being who they are serves for June as a key aspect of racial identity. Reflecting on this, Kayleigh shared that:

> Just hearing June talk reminded me of a presentation we created to deliver to staff about what it's like for children when they first arrive in a setting. We use Duplo blocks as a metaphor—for example, imagine the setting is a red nursery. A white British child arrives with all of their red blocks, so they're ready to fit in and start playing straight away. But then a (racially) diverse child arrives with colourful blocks, and they're expected to leave their blocks at the door before they can enter. That means leaving behind their own identity and sense of belonging, which is closely linked to racial identity. And if you're in a place that is so unfamiliar, everything's red and toys ever, all the systems you're not familiar with, you're not gonna thrive. And you're not gonna feel a sense of belonging.

Kayleigh's example usefully highlights the cultural backpacks that children carry with them into nursery settings and the normative rules that can make it difficult for them to develop a sense of belonging. Elsewhere, Tembo (2021c, p.3) has written about the nature of whiteness impressing upon spaces as an affective formation of power, as "a palpable feeling of being affected, debilitated, and of being put out of place". This framing resonates with both June's account of truancy due to feeling unsafe and Kayleigh's depiction of the "red nursery," which symbolises a setting in which non-white identities are marginalised or rendered invisible. When the atmosphere of a setting reflects normative whiteness, the affective experience of children from minoritised backgrounds may be one of discomfort, confusion about oneself, or emotional withdrawal – "you're not gonna thrive". This absence of recognition can affect not only how minoritised children see themselves, but also how they are perceived by their peers. As Anna reflects, fostering a climate of mutual understanding among all children is crucial in supporting racial identity development:

> I think that's *so important, isn't it,* to feel safe in your own skin and be understood? and then from like what I've seen in the classroom and that - it's other children's understanding as well. You know? If children are off for different celebrations and things like that, that the other children don't understand why so then they're like, well, 'why are they different? Why haven't I got that?' So I think it's like a whole mutual understanding is needed for all the children like we do teach different cultures, but probably not enough for them to understand.

This insight is salient in thinking through the value of racial identity development for *all* children, particularly those who are racially white. In Gaine's (2005) *We're all White, Thanks,* he directly challenges the pervasive myth that race is irrelevant in predominantly white schools or communities (see also, Farago et al., 2019). His findings indicate that white children are not blank slates when it comes to racial knowledge; rather, they are often carriers of what he calls "learned misinformation" - a patterned set of negative stereotypes and myths about minoritised groups that circulate in white-dominated spaces. Crucially, Gaine (2005) argues that promoting race equity in mainly white settings is not just about supporting the few minoritised pupils who may be present (important though that is); it is also about preparing *all* children to live equitably in a multiracial society. This point reinforces Anna's position: that understanding racial identity is a collective responsibility to challenge the broader cultural conditions that permit ignorance, othering and/or exclusion to persist.

Encounters with Racial Identity

We then encouraged participants to share moments from their practice where issues around race and racial identity had shown up and how they had been responded to by themselves and other educators. To begin again with June, who shared an encounter in the wake of George Floyd's murder in 2020:

> I've had four-year-olds after the Floyd and various other murders. I had several Black and Brown students of African descent and Latino. They were four years of age, and they said they sat with me and they said, 'Why do white people hate us, Miss?'" So, you know, we had—that opened up a dialogue. I dropped everything and so we had a discussion about race and identity and the tragedy and sadness of witnessing these events. But I think it is very challenging and

it can be sometimes hard to have those kind of difficult conversations … When I went to my staff meeting and said that they had said this… some of the teachers just got very defensive in the group and shut down other dialogue.

This moment June shares offers a direct insight into the ways in which minoritised children have already come to understand themselves and others within a racialised society. This should come as no surprise given the existing literature on internalised inferiority (Chavis & Johnson, 2023; Reck et al., 2024) and raises several questions about how the perceived feeling of hate emerged in the child's consciousness and can then be challenged. The child is perhaps fortunate at this moment that June felt comfortable to engage in a difficult conversation since elsewhere, plenty has been written about the reticence of educators to speak with children about racism (Farago, 2024; Farago et al., 2019). Similarly, Rowena's reflection reveals how, in the absence of meaningful organisational commitment, it is often left to practitioners themselves to take on the work of initiating conversations and supporting young children's racial identity:

I mean, I remember one of my settings where it was Black History Month and the only book they had was Handa's Surprise and the manager said 'Oh it's Black History Month. Let's grab Handa's Surprise and put it in the front so all the parents can know, we are celebrating black history,' and then that was it. There were no activities; there was nothing really teaching the children anything. It was just happening that book to show parents that that's, you know, recognise it's Black History Month. So, I felt like it was my duty to support them and bring in activities, bring stuff from my home as collecting all my hair products, brushes just to have them in the role play area and just do, you know, ignite that conversation of the children.

Rowena's account offers a salient example of tokenism, a term now widely recognised in the literature to refer to superficial gestures that signal inclusivity without any meaningful engagement, educational intent or acknowledgement of cultural context (Farago et al., 2019). The use of Handa's surprise represents a surface-level engagement, a non-performative act, that centres optics over outcomes. Rowena reveals that the book was displayed not as a tool for meaningful dialogue with children, but as a performative signal to parents: "so all the parents can know we are celebrating Black History." Further, though it is important not to essentialise all Black people, Rowena's identity as a Black woman seems to imply a sense of personal responsibility through her stepping in to bring personal items from home, and creating culturally relevant materials. This is a burden that, as the literature has consistently shown, is disproportionately carried by educators of colour, who often feel compelled to fill the gaps left by institutional silence (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Indeed, it echoes June's account above, where she describes abandoning the planned lesson to engage with a group of four-year-olds. Like Rowena, June is a Black woman educator – together their experiences reveal how they have taken on the labour of racial identity work. April's account, though in a different way, appears to affirm the same dynamic:

I've noticed there's been this lovely willingness from families of diverse backgrounds to share more of their home culture or their racial identity... and I wonder at times... I don't want them to have an unfair amount of labour around that... I would love to get to a place where a family could not feel like they have to do that. You know? That they could rest in knowing that we are going to do that work and take care.

Again, we see the theme of those with lived experiences of racism being called upon to shoulder the burden of anti-racist practice. As Dabiri (2021) reminds us, solidarity must not rely on saviourism. Instead, it should be grounded in coalition, where the work of anti-racism is shared and responsibility is distributed across positionalities. Coalitions, she argues, are not about speaking for others, but about recognising how all of our freedoms are entangled - and therefore, how all educators, regardless of background, have a stake in creating racially just early years environments.

POSII Project: Small Group vs Whole Class

A key tension in the development of the PoSii programme has been whether the intervention should be delivered to the whole class or within small groups. While partly a logical issue, it also speaks to pedagogical considerations when implementing programmes with young children in nursery settings. The focus on free, child-led, play that is broadly – in spite of resistance - in place across early years environments in the Western world necessitates that a small group approach would be more appropriate. It would suit the sensitive nature of conversations around racial identity, where the educators could respond more meaningfully to children's cues, questions, and emotions in a space with fewer distractions for the children than when they are in a large group. At the same time, however, the use of small groups also raises concerns

about exclusion and visibility—particularly if children are selected based on teacher judgement of "need," potentially reifying ideas about who does or does not have a racial identity worth exploring (this in part informs our rationale to strengthen educator racial literacy as part of the programme – discussed in Farago et al., 2016). This tension was evident in the focus group discussion, where practitioners voiced both the value of small group work and the challenge of ensuring all children benefit from the intervention. Both Sabrina and Anna strongly endorsed the small group format:

> Sabrina: I personally think when you work with them in the small group, you get things out of them that you wouldn't get in whole class teaching... they're the ones who might have different issues or issues that you wouldn't expect… I personally would say this project needs to be in small groups and for it to be successful.

> Anna: Especially with the younger children, you get so much more out of a smaller group

Along similar lines, Kayleigh reflected that:

> From my experience in preschool, the children won't get enough of a quality interaction if it's a whole group thing and it needs to be done in a really nurturing way and a small group and that's why I asked about the vision of this program because it's unfair just to deliver it to five or six when everybody needs it.

In an ideal world, then, the discussion reveals that while all should be able to participate in the programme, they should not all participate at the same time. This raises questions about the feasibility of training all educators within a particular setting to be able to deliver the programme and also strengthens the argument that racial identity learning is needed for all children, given the widely acknowledged need for anti-racist practice coupled with the lack of existing support for educators.

Baseline

Baseline data has long played an important role in evaluative research (Liamputtong, 2019), especially within studies that gauge change over time. In early childhood contexts, baseline data can usefully supplement qualitative insights and track the extent to which key developmental, social, and emotional indicators shift in response to a targeted intervention. In our project, we created a baseline profile to capture children's social-emotional development, wellbeing, and emerging racial identity – drawn from established curriculum frameworks (Department for Education, 2024) and the existing literature (Jones, 2025). The tool allows educators to assess each child using a 0 to 5 scale, with 0 indicating the lowest observed level and 5 reflecting confident, consistent demonstration of a particular disposition. The baseline includes 24 items grouped under three broad domains:

- Social and Emotional Skills (e.g., forming friendships, sharing, empathy)

- Positive Racial Identity (e.g., recognising skin tone, valuing difference, cultural sensitivity)

- Wellbeing (e.g, making choices, valuing self and others)

Educators completed the profile twice, once at the start and again at the end of the six-week intervention, and we had also planned that they would write 'reports' at the end of each session to document any key moments and write their own reflections. Alongside these, the project also incorporated a Likert scale baseline completed by educators. This was designed to capture their starting points in relation to racial literacy, confidence, and preparedness to engage with race and racial identity in their settings. Participants were asked to respond to a series of 14 statements using a five-point scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The statements covered a range of competencies and dispositions, including:

- Confidence in understanding and teaching racial literacy

- Ability to facilitate age-appropriate conversations about race

- Willingness to engage in professional dialogue around race and diversity

- Comfort in responding to children's and parents' questions about racial identity

- Regular use of inclusive materials and planning of diversity-related activities

- Critical reflection on one's own racial identity and its influence on pedagogy

For example, educators were asked to respond to statements such as "I feel confident in addressing questions about race from young children in my classroom" and "I actively reflect on my own racial identity and how it influences my teaching practices." The aim of this baseline was twofold: first, to support reflective practice and prompt awareness of areas for personal and professional growth; and second, to enable the research team to assess how the intervention impacted educator confidence and engagement over time During our conversations, however, we focused predominantly on the baseline designed for young children. It became clear that while educators valued the opportunity to observe and reflect on children's developing racial identities, there were some important concerns around how developmentally appropriate it was and how it might be used by educators with differing levels of understanding:

> Kayleigh: I just think some of our three-year-olds… they wouldn't grasp it or have a deep enough understanding of it to get the outcome you desire, unless you repeat it and do it again.

> Sabrina: We need to think about the timing because there's no point in doing it at the beginning of term. You need to do it when you know your children a little bit better.

> April: Maybe going into the baseline, like digging into that more on the front end, because I think that's the part I feel less confident about.

> June: What does zero look like and what does 5 look like? Because when you're a teacher, you need some kind of guideline... If zero is the child sits there and says nothing, and five is the child is running around screaming.

In different ways, these reflections highlight the complexity of assessing racial identity in early years settings. Each pointed to the need for more clarity in scoring, examples of observable behaviours, and flexibility in when and how the baseline is used. Baselines are not uncommon in early years contexts to assess other areas of development. Still, when coupled with race it may present a unique challenge, potentially perpetuating underlying discomfort or hesitancy about engaging with young children in this area. Therefore, while the tool holds potential as a formative measure, our data reveals that its implementation, if it is to be a success, depends on the quality of integration into existing practice, supported by robust training to strengthen understanding and appropriate time and space for practitioner reflection.

Conclusion

It is clear from our review of the literature and our findings from our participants that racial identity development begins in the early years. Though young children are unable to think about race abstractly, their journey from racial awareness to using race to evaluate the behaviours and actions of others provides evidence that the foundation for their developing racial identity begins at birth. Social cultural theories, like Harro's cycle of socialisation (2000), reminds us that despite cognitive limitations children may have, micro and macro level systems are influencing the development of their racial identity in healthy and unhealthy ways. Thus, the field of early childhood education must assume the responsibility of fostering healthy racial identity in the early years. Just as early childhood teachers are expected to support children's language, cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development, we contend that nurturing positive racial identity development should be a common expectation.

Making racial identity development a common aspect of high-quality early years education means providing education and training to early childhood educators. However, they would first need to learn and reflect on their own racial identity development before they can be expected to understand, recognise, and nurture it in others (Han et al., 2010). In a study on how white kindergarten teachers' racial identity development influenced their perspectives on teaching diverse students, Han and her colleagues found that "…White racial identity development is an essential component for teachers to understand who they are as teachers" (2010, p. 8). Using Helms' white racial identity development model statuses, they noted how their beliefs about teaching diverse students were influenced by their white racial identity stage. For example, teachers identified in the first stage of contact espoused colour-evasive beliefs or downplayed the importance of racial identity in young children. While teachers who were in the immersion/emersion stage

displayed a deeper understanding of culturally diverse students and increased awareness of their cultural competency (Han et al, 2010). Just as we cannot expect a teacher who is unable to recognise and name their own emotions to support healthy emotional development in children, we cannot expect teachers who are unaware of their racial identity development to support the positive racial identity development in others.

These practitioner concerns also reflect wider policy gaps. In the UK, Tembo and Bateson's (2024) review of early years guidance in England and Scotland finds that anti-racist practice is rarely named or supported through policy, with educators often left to rely on their own moral compass rather than any clear institutional directive. Wales's Curriculum for Wales offers comparatively more substantial commitments to inclusion and children's rights, and initiatives such as the Diversity and Anti-Racist Professional Learning (DARPL) programme provide concrete support for embedding anti-racist principles in practice. Yet at present it remains too early to know what long-term impact these efforts will have on classroom practice and long-term change. In the United States, meanwhile, anti-racist work remains vulnerable to political shifts. In some states, recent backlash against diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives has resulted in legal restrictions or targeted efforts to silence conversations about race in education.

We acknowledge that this study has certain limitations, including a small sample size and a focus on early-stage educator reflections rather than long-term implementation or outcomes. These limitations reflect the exploratory nature of this phase of the project and will be addressed in our forthcoming pilot study, which will involve the full delivery of the PoSii programme in selected settings. This next stage will explore its impact on children, assess practical challenges over time, and evaluate how racial literacy practices can be embedded across whole settings.

Importantly, the findings of this early study highlight several practical steps. For educators, they underline the need to integrate conversations about race and identity into everyday pedagogy, rather than only waiting for 'teachable moments' or leaving the responsibility to minoritised staff. For leaders and managers, they emphasise the importance of collective approaches—embedding racial literacy into professional development, staff supervision, and curriculum planning. For policymakers, they point to the urgency of providing clear frameworks and guidance that recognise racial identity development as a core aspect of children's wellbeing, alongside social and emotional learning.

Despite the rise in far-right attacks on diversity, equity, inclusion, and anti-racism (Giroux, 2025; Jones, 2025b) we remain committed to ensuring all children receive an early education that nurtures their identity and provides the foundation needed to become competent, well-adjusted adults. Thus, we call for additional research that explicitly examines racial identity development in the early years including building upon theories of anti-racism in early childhood education (Escayg, 2019) and evaluating training and interventions. We especially hope to see research that embraces sociocultural aspects that emphasise how young children experience racial identity and make sense of racial socialisation messages. The social construction of race does not wait until we are adults to impact our lives, and we should not wait until children are older to provide them with the knowledge and skills needed to not just survive but to thrive in a racialised world.

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Authors' Declarations

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