

2024-03

Race and the space in between: Practitioner reflections on anti-racist practice in one Froebelian early years setting

Bamsey, V

<https://pearl.plymouth.ac.uk/handle/10026.1/21283>

10.1177/1476718X231195696

Journal of Early Childhood Research

SAGE Publications

All content in PEARL is protected by copyright law. Author manuscripts are made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the details provided on the item record or document. In the absence of an open licence (e.g. Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher or author.

Race and the space in between: Practitioner reflections on anti-racist practice in one Froebelian early years setting

Journal of Early Childhood Research

1–14

© The Author(s) 2023



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/1476718X231195696

journals.sagepub.com/home/ecr

Victoria Bamsey 
University of Plymouth, UK

Lynn J McNair 
University of Edinburgh, UK

Hattie Campbell
University of East London, UK

Miss Isabella Vašinová
Under 5's Centre, Scotland

Abstract

The rise of 'Black Lives Matters' has brought to the fore a need to unsettle early years praxis that positions race as separate from the individual, as a problem to be solved through the tokenistic provisioning of resources. In this paper, we explore how a team of early years practitioners were able to bridge the space between themselves and the multicultural community in which they worked. An interpretative onto-epistemology supported the crafting of the research design as a case study that provided insight into multiple meanings through participants' narratives during weekly informal anti-racist reflective meetings, focus group discussions and individual interviews. "Political correctness", social justice and children's rights emerged that highlighted the importance of intra-actions arising between practitioners, their history, society and the environment. Consequently, new conceptualisations of race and anti-racist praxis emerged that transformed their practice and their way of being in the world.

Keywords

anti-racism, early years, intra-action, race, transformation

Corresponding author:

Victoria Bamsey, University of Plymouth, Rolle Building, Drake Circus, Plymouth, Devon PL4 8AA, UK.

Email: victoria.bamsey@plymouth.ac.uk

Introduction

As four researchers interested in investigating early years praxis, the current discourse in the UK on Black Lives Matters (BLM) and decolonisation, has led us to question how race is conceptualised in the early years and what this means for everyday practice. Of particular concern is the potential othering of race as a thing to be addressed that is separate from the practitioner, operationalised through the inclusion of culturally sensitive books in the book corner, role play resources and dressing up clothes. Rather than seeing race as a problem of practice to be resolved, we argue that it is the space between the practitioner and different cultures that becomes important.

There is a need to move away from subject-object dualism that applies a tokenistic approach to inclusion (books, posters and resources) to instead focus on the intra-actions that arise through practitioners' engagement with families. Whilst resources might provide a catalyst for thinking, it is how we think and intra-act within the world, how our histories and experiences within society and in relation to the environment, frame our thinking (Vygotsky, 2004). The language of intra-action used here (rather than interaction), accounts for 'how practices matter' (Barad, 2007: 90). It represents a move away from a simplistic reflection on practice, to recognise the entangled nature of human activity, where meaning arises in the space between the individual, society and the environment. In this way, the language of intra-action provides a framework for thinking about race that (re)positions race as part of everyday activity.

Indeed, our writing consolidates our histories and experiences as researchers. It brought us together as advisors for the Quality Assurance Agency Early Childhood Studies Subject Benchmark Review, and our mutual interest in early years praxis has fostered this development. We are four authors; two are British, white, middle-class, Christian women, one identifies as a feminist and the other as an Eastern European, white, spiritual, young professional. We recognise that our collective interest in the subject, and subsequent research, drew us together through a polarity of 'familiarity and strangeness' which is also a process of 'being in between' (Davey, 2006: 15). Thus, diffracted meaning and the language of intra-action refers as much to us as researchers, as it does to the theoretical lens from which we also view the study itself. The tacit knowledge we share formulates our academic motivations to challenge the privileged narrative and the troubling, implicit, sometimes unspoken, often hidden knowledge, of normalised racism and racialised experiences in early years praxis (Garrick and Chan, 2017). As we meander through the disruptive research process together, we discover new meanings that emerge from race and the space between the individual and their experiences.

This research was located in Scotland where multiculturalism is known to be a feature of the social and political life of early childhood spaces. This may be 'attributed to Scotland's demographic structure and the particular migration histories that underpin it . . . [which] shapes distinctive attitudes and identities' (Bond, 2020: 114). The early years setting in which this research took place follows the Froebelian principles of unity and connectedness, the importance of respecting the self and others in the local, national and international world, and the need to celebrate the uniqueness of children (Froebel, 1926). In this research, 12 participants linked to the setting joined the study as members of an anti-racism discussion group invited by one of the authors (in her role as Head of Centre). For six months, participants engaged in reflection and debate about white privilege, decolonisation and power relationships.

The group created guiding ethical principles of practice focusing on informed consent, anonymity (pseudonyms are used throughout) and benevolence. These principles enabled each team member to feel safe in the research spaces created, whether face-to-face or online, to articulate their ideas freely and without prejudice. In so doing, the practitioners found themselves on a journey of discovery. They became part of the research questioning why they were a white, middle-class team

working in a multicultural community. On closer inspection, the nature of this study decentred the 'subjective experience' of participants, such that they became aware of a 'profound dependence' on cultural realities outside of their own, and in doing so, a 'rich vein of ethical thinking' and discussions emerged (Davey, 2006: 9).

This paper explores the influences of racism and anti-racist practice in the early years through the experiences of these 12 practitioners. We begin as Vygotsky would with a turn to the past as this provides a context for early years practice today. We then examine how intra-actions within society, influenced by policy and power, shape how race is conceptualised within the field of education. Finally, we turn to our practitioners and how their critical explorations have enabled a connection to self and emotions that moves concepts of race beyond 'other' to become 'with'.

Historical conceptualisations of race and anti-racism

Conceptualisations of race and anti-racism in Britain today have been formed over time, with links to enlightenment thinking and white exceptionalism as a justification for colonialism and slavery (Braidotti, 2019). Race has been defined by physical characteristics, as 'skin colour, hair texture, or facial features' (Fitzgerald, 2017: 9). In this sense race has been positioned as residing within the individual as a problem to be resolved, rather than a socially constructed concept that contributes to emerging structural inequalities in society.

Racialisation thus refers to the act of categorising and giving a racial character to someone, it becomes both a description of race and a causal concept that leads to racial discrimination. The concept of race exists because human beings 'continually create and recreate it through the process of racialisation' (Ossorio, 2011: 180). Anti-racism, is rooted in Critical Race Theory where history and tradition is viewed through a socio-cultural lens (Ono-George, 2019). This approach aims to transform the dominant, Eurocentric, white-male privileged education practices that exclude and reinforce biased knowledge.

The language of intra-action (Barad, 2007) combined with an anti-racist pedagogy (Ono-George, 2019) work together to position race as embodying social justice, children's rights, equity and freedom. These pedagogies create a sense of belonging and knowledge of the common world, they offer 'situated perspectives' on the impact of racialized realities on human identity (Braidotti, 2019: 48).

Policy and power

In the 'Report of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (2021)', the UK Government contended that whilst racism still exists as isolated case-by-case incidents, racist behaviour in the UK should not be institutional or widespread. Instead, the report claims that 'too often "racism" is being used as the catch-all explanation for disparities between cultures' (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021: 5). However, Heath and Richards (2020) claim that racism remains ingrained in society's fabric. As evidenced in the European Social Survey (2014), biological racism exists, with some citizens of the UK believing that certain races are inherently superior to others and that some ethnic groups are thought less intelligent. Work undertaken by Stasio and Heath (2020) shows evidence of discrimination in the job market. In the early years sector, there are hidden narratives of racial inequality in everyday practice (Tembo, 2021). If we are to challenge these assumptions of race and racialisation, then there is a need to unpack normalised educational practices; to 'stay with the trouble' (Haraway, 2016: 2), remaining attuned to the present rather than to blame or hide from the past.

Racialisation in education has become a causal concept for the disadvantage that starts in the early years. Indeed, Moss (2019) argues that early years practitioners should have a deeper level of engagement in policy formation. He points out that to be effective, policies should be meaningful and cannot be mechanical and enforced. Without practitioner buy-in to policy, the resultant documentation remains inaccessible and far removed from practice, open to interpretation by educators, parents and inspectorate bodies.

A pedagogy of praxis

Anti-racist praxis in the early years has developed from the history of colonisation. It is commonly featured in educational policy, positioning racism as a problem in the past that is no longer widespread but resides within the individual with a focus on equal opportunities.

The early years' frameworks for the four nations of Britain all refer to the importance of equality of opportunity but provide little guidance as to what that should look like in practice (Department for Education, 2021; Department of Education, 2013; Scottish Government, 2009; Welsh Government, 2015). Indeed, discussions concerning race and decolonisation can be problematic for educators, industry professionals and early years practitioners, regardless of ethnicity, race, or other identities. There is a depth and intensity to the subject that extends far beyond changing curriculum content in education. Žižek (2009) suggests that we should not tolerate colonisation as a historical issue but rather expose it for its inherent 'inequality, exploitation, and injustice' (p.119). Decolonising the curriculum is about challenging the '(re)production' of colonial knowledge, not simply about the content of learning (Sian, 2019: 98).

The journey to racial equality and decolonisation in educational practice is far from linear. Sian (2019) described the path to equality in education as 'difficult terrain' (p. 23), while Fanon (2001: 27) called it a 'violent phenomenon' that only transforms through demand. To 'stay with the trouble' (Haraway, 2016: 2), decolonisation and anti-racist praxis constitute a complete social, political and structural disorder experienced as 'terrifying' in the consciousness of 'colonisers' (Haraway, 2016: 2). Part of that consciousness is being critically aware. In practice, this means giving time and space to be reflexive and to engage in frank and open discussions about the concepts and practices of colonisation, race and racism. This investigation into practitioners' conceptualisations of race and anti-racism suggests that social change requires a 'logic of symbolic defiance' through 'everyday forms of resistance' (Scott, 1992: 196). Indeed, Gramsci (2014) explores everyday resistance through the concept of hegemony, revealing the tension between dominant power discourses and privilege and the reality of working in a multicultural community. Politicians and higher education institutions dispense knowledge without considering the differing individual needs and backgrounds (Gramsci, 2014).

This study reveals that practitioners need space and time to develop self-knowledge and self-awareness to combat these positions of power and social justice in education. Moreover, within these spaces we may be armed to collaboratively negotiate the political within the theoretical, enabling practitioners to transform and take on roles as strategic leaders. The authors consider these spaces as acts of decolonial practice that can empower practitioners to discern their professional selves as political and as instruments of power, challenging hegemonic reproductions of colonialism. The research, therefore, provides a basis for 'intellectual and moral reform', which Gramsci (1971: 133) argues, should occur by working both in and outside existing educational systems.

Methodology

As educational researchers, we were interested in exploring how race is conceptualised in practice today, in how practitioners construct their understanding of race and the implications for their

practice. An interpretive onto-epistemology supported the case study research design to gain insight into multiple meanings through participants' stories and discussions. The 12 participants worked together in one Scottish, inner-city Froebelian early years setting, although their length of service varied from 1 month to 20 years. Of the 12 participants, 10 identified as female and two as male, ranging from their mid-twenties to late fifties. Although the study was located within a diverse community, all participants identified as white. The group consisted of two Scottish (using the pseudonyms Rachel and Daniel), one Spanish (Maria), two Czech (Ian; Sabina), one Lithuanian (Lina), two Australian (Elaine; Roberta) and four English participants (Claire; Lara, Juliet; Sam).

Three strands to this research took place over 6 months, weekly informal anti-racist reflective meetings, formal focus group discussions and individual interviews. The Covid-19 pandemic meant that online platforms were used predominantly and where possible social distancing measures were in place for face-to-face meetings.

Practitioners established anti-racist reflective meetings to examine their professional work and experiences after the murder of George Floyd (46) in Minneapolis, Minnesota and the BLM uprising in 2020. The more formal focus group discussions then provided a place for those early years' practitioners to reflect upon the weekly meetings, to safely discuss and confront their conceptualisations of race, a place where new narratives could emerge and where identities were given space to develop. Nakayama and Krizek (1995: 291) describe this as 'the discursive space of white', a 'place' to explore 'spaces' that enabled white-identified practitioners to grapple with unsettling new internal conflicts and challenges.

A helpful example was from one participant who shared how their motivation for joining the study was because of the BLM movement. As such, BLM serves as an illustration from which the meeting of those forces emerged in the demand for change (Fanon, 2001). The study explored disruptive forces and common-sense narratives on racism and anti-racist practice, offering thought-provoking insights.

In addition to the focus group discussions, interviews took place over one calendar month with all 12 practitioners. The emphasis was to provide a safe space to explore how the anti-racist reflective meetings influenced the practitioner's view of colonialism, white privilege, social justice and power. As researchers, we were aware that discussing race, anti-racist practice and the space between the individual and their practice can be emotive. We were keen to use a method that brought out the best in the participants and enabled us to be flexible to suit the participants needs. For transparency, the researchers recorded and transcribed the interviews orthographically (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

Recording the participants in this way helped capture how they thought about race and the language they used to express their thoughts. The researchers revealed tacit thoughts on anti-racist practice, uncovering opinions, nuances, implied consent and values. Thus, the interview process revealed not only information about the culture of the early learning and childcare setting but also elicited the practitioners' personal beliefs and values about anti-racist practice. The interview process also enabled us to probe the subjective reality constructed by the participants, such as their perspectives on power and its distribution. For further illumination and to check for trustworthiness the data was later compared with the narratives from the anti-racist reflective meetings and the more structured focus group discussions.

The University of Edinburgh ethics committee authorised this study, demonstrating the institution's commitment to integrity, governance and high research standards. This research also complies with the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) ethical vision towards 'democratic values' where 'any persons involved in or touched by the research. . . should be treated fairly, sensitively, and with dignity' (pp. 5–6). To this end, the University of Edinburgh and BERA's (2018) framework for ethical conduct hold compatible guiding principles of accountability, respect and care for others.

The researchers treated the study participants with the highest regard and took precautions to protect the integrity and reputation of the setting and participant expectations of fair treatment. Power differentials were made explicit by group members (e.g. those who held the power to employ others), and the researchers were sensitive to these obvious ethical issues where participants could potentially be positioned as vulnerable. Again, researchers were cognisant that should the process appear to cause emotional or other harm, they should act promptly regarding the duty of care.

In summary, this research adopted an ethical stance in which researchers and participants engaged in constant negotiation and renegotiation in all areas of the study, but particularly with respect to the inherent power relations. The ethical principles were agreed with the group at the start and as Lara stated, ‘these principles that guided us. I thought they were really key, I kind of feel, in the way they were reiterated’.

Findings and discussion

As already set out, the participants in this study were a predominantly white middle-class team, considering how they might be more accessible to their diverse community of families and children. They deconstructed their enacted professionalisms through a process of change which Gramsci (2014) describes as an ‘attainment of a higher awareness in understanding one’s function, rights and obligations’ (p. 57).

Whilst the weekly reflective meetings started with a view to developing anti-racist practice, they provided a space for practitioners to be open about their beliefs and experiences and to explore ideas they would not ordinarily share in their daily lives. Through a thematic analysis of the data collected (Braun and Clarke, 2013), issues of politics emerged that shaped how race was conceptualised, of political correctness, social justice and children’s rights. What became clear was that weekly meetings were not just spaces for reflection on ‘what is’, but a space for change; to consider ‘what might be’, that transformed practice as we now explore.

“Political correctness”

The concept and challenge of considering “political correctness” was a recurrent theme within the participants’ narratives, as there was a perceived need to avoid language, policies or practices that may discriminate or negatively stereotype specific groups of people. The term ‘political correctness’ emerged in the US during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 60s, it is often viewed as a desire to avoid offence, but it may also conceal meaningful change by creating a barrier to fully engage with equality and diversity (Hollinshead, 2014). In more recent years political correctness has become contested bringing resentment, a ‘suspicion of normal people, who become the object of a patronising liberalism’ (Bishara, 2020: 14). It can distort history and as a result there is a danger of “political correctness” doing the ‘opposite of what it aims to do, cleansing history of its actual racism’ (Bishara, 2020: 16).

For the practitioners in this research there was a need to move ‘beyond a rhetoric of politeness, political correctness, tolerance or persuasion, and towards authentic change’ (Thein and Sloan, 2012: 322). Participants expressed their concern for issues of race in terms of equity, access and social justice. An example here was Juliet’s question over race within the staff team when she stated:

I felt it was really important to say, why do we have no practitioners of colour?. . . I really want that question to be raised in front of [the Head of Centre]. Cos she’s the person who employs everybody.

Juliet's concern brought to light the desire for more than linguistic modification and demonstrated a sophisticated awareness of privilege and power. "Political correctness" does not address the lived and subjective experiences of racism (Osgood, 2012: 84). 'Simplistic' attempts to respect and acknowledge diversity (through books, posters and role play resources) can become tokenistic, serving only to conceal 'abuses of power and processes of othering' (p. 85). As Ian stated:

If we take everything back to why this group started, and that would be . . . racism against black people and people of colour mainly, because that's something that is incorporated into society and politics and everything.

Lara's reflections on her reaction to a children's book about 'Red Indians' (now considered a racial slur), was later discussed with her black partner Daniel, and related during the weekly reflections. Here the importance of not suppressing material that may offend, but using it as a catalyst for thinking, was raised so that meaningful discussions might emerge.

[Daniel said that getting] rid of that, that, that, that, because that's offensive material. . . . that misses the history . . . you take people on that journey rather than just, oh let's get rid of that right away. And actually, that was really good for me because, when I see that everyone was really horrified by that, he certainly made me much more conscious of . . . I hate to do this tokenistic thing. . . you know like, where we're starting to really dig a bit deeper at the books.

By facilitating a safe space for reflection these practitioners became more confident in themselves and more able to question practice. They were able to break free from the shackles of political correctness to consider how their intra-actions through each other, the environment and families, could challenge not only racism but privilege, power, morality and social justice.

Social justice

One thread of thinking that extended from the theme of political correctness was *social justice* as the practitioners moved to challenge concepts of power, discrimination and oppression. As Mill (2020) explored 'we should treat all equally well . . . [those] who have deserved equally well of us' (p. 98). In terms of early years pedagogy this is about respecting and valuing difference, diversity and human dignity not just philosophically but as part of educational research and practice (Hawkins, 2014).

The practitioners in this study, whilst making themselves more aware of the philosophical underpinnings of social justice, were more interested in the real-life social justice issues of the nursery. Whilst they read widely around the subject of social justice, listened to podcasts and watched videos, they connected all their findings to the real-life experiences of the children and adults of the early learning and childcare community and the wider society:

You know we just become so passive and accepting of our privilege and the kind of society that we live in and that's not good enough . . . I felt really lucky to be able to have those conversations with you all, it felt like a real . . . it says so much of us as a team, that we all wanted to talk about those things and like you said, that people turned up, committed, and gave up time, you know it's actually really hard work to sit there in the evening at the end of the day and talk for two hours. And I think that says a lot about our team that we really wanted to do that and that we were committed to that. . . I mean the biggest thing I have taken from this is how the things that we are learning and the things that we want to put into practice are about social justice (Juliet).

Implicit in the above quotation was the discourse(s) regarding anti-racist practice with colleagues. Finding time to meet to discuss social justice concerns was not an easy task for the participants as the nursery operated 52 weeks of the year from 8am to 6pm. This meant that the practitioners could only meet in the evening, after a long day at work. Nevertheless, time was set aside and provides testimony for their commitment to embedding anti-racist and social justice principles into everyday practice. As Claire stated, 'the idea of social justice and all the discussions we had em. . . you know being *actively* anti-racist in our setting'. The word 'actively' used here illustrates that talking about the issues was not enough, action was needed. There was a willingness by the practitioner to see the early learning and childcare practices as 'sites of justice, not merely injustice' (Cribb and Gewirtz, 2003: 28).

The practitioners in this study were emotionally bold and intellectually challenging of both themselves and of each other. They began their, sometimes uncomfortable, journey by internally scrutinising themselves, which revealed their preconceptions, tolerances and biases as demonstrated by the statements below:

It [the opportunity to meet and talk] made me look at my childhood and the country where I was born. And born into Australia, a country that was colonised by British people; inhabited by aboriginal [and Torres Strait] Islander people from more than 40,000 years you know. And I didn't understand at the time that I was a . . . I didn't understand my privilege (Elaine).

Through the discussions I became more aware of my thinking about certain people, situations. This made me realise that I did, much to my own shame, have certain biases. The podcast [David Gillborn] really helped me uncover my prejudices. . . it was good to speak openly about them. . . and you know. . . not feel blamed or shamed (Lara).

However, despite the challenges they faced both personally and professionally, there was a collective determination to be change agents, to disrupt disadvantage and proactively engage with social justice. The practitioners in this study discovered that they were all harbouring unconscious bias (social stereotypes formed outside of conscious awareness), unconscious preferences on the basis of gender, race, sexual orientation, ability/disability, or other aspects of identity. Through facilitating a safe space for discussion these biases were brought to the fore.

I realised that in treating all children the same, white children and children of colour, I was 'colour blind'. Not good. I am much more aware now. I now realise that, in thinking I was doing the right thing I was not respecting children's individual identities . . . I thought long and deeply about this. . . I was, felt, . . . deep concern that I may have not 'seen' some children (Lara).

As Epstein (1972: 3) argued: 'We can educate the next generation to solve many of our problems if we are courageous enough to free them from our own prejudices and anxieties'. Accomplishing this, calls for a deep appreciation of the 'self' as well as a sound awareness of social justice.

In the early years [cultural relativism] is really important because there are so many different cultural aspects around having children and raising children. And you know it's really important that we are respectful (Juliet).

Juliet's statement provides insight into the multi-faceted concerns and conceptions about culture and the individual experiences of ethnically diverse children. The practitioners in this study have made an empirical contribution to understanding the politics and culture of their nursery. Through their practice-focused analysis of anti-racist practice they built upon their understandings of social

justice and the tensions that emerged when such issues are not addressed directly. They were keen that their journey was not fixed, but that they should ‘stay with the trouble’ (Haraway, 2016: 2). Collectively they agreed this was not a journey that would end and that they could widen their search for knowledge:

It would be really interesting to ask families about our approach towards race. . . Like, you know, you can’t just like specifically like ask people of colour to speak on behalf of [the nursery], but I think it would be so interesting to actually know. I don’t know if anyone has asked or spoken to any of the families . . . I don’t know if anyone else feels like that but yeah. . . I think it’s only way, how to truly evaluate how or what we’ve done (Rachel).

These personal and professional experiences/confessions from the practitioners illustrated through sharing their educational (and life) biographies, were disturbingly coloured by privilege. The ongoing debates and philosophical scrutiny revealed a keenness to expose understandings of socially just and unjust ways of being and how this knowledge could make a difference to their practice. They were keen to hear each other’s thoughts and were appreciative of their colleagues’ commitment to discovery. The practitioners also held a shared belief that the concept of social justice and the rights of the individual child was central to early learning and childcare practice.

Children’s rights

Throughout the weekly meetings a focus on the unique child, their history and experiences formed the basis for staff to question practice, ensuring that each child was not homogenised, and that their unique differences were celebrated (Froebel, 1926). Children are sometimes seen as separate to adults and yet the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) ‘affirms that children are born with fundamental freedoms and the inherent rights of all human beings’ (Fernando, 2001: 8).

Friedrich Froebel beautifully encapsulated the rights of the child when he wrote: ‘Every child should be accepted as an indispensable and essential member of the human race’ (Lilley, 1967: 57). Froebel wrote as a polemicist for children, whose main aim was to make adults notice children, their individuality, their uniqueness. He was entirely opposed to children being ‘seen and not heard’, wanting all children to be taken seriously and their views listened to. Elaine embodied this notion of ‘seeing’ all children when she described her responsibilities for the well-being and status of the children in her care:

I feel that I do, and I have to see it [colour]; and that it’s my responsibility to see it; for the children that I work with so that I have a more fuller picture of their life; and perhaps to think about the challenges or things that they may have had to experience.

Here, Elaine supported the child’s rights to their cultural identity, and a need to celebrate children’s differences as part of an inclusive and diverse early learning and childcare environment, where rights are accorded to the child. As Elaine went on to explore; considering each child through an individual lens means that practitioners (and others) do not make ill-informed decisions based on the child’s characteristics.

In contrast, the following quotation illustrates how one practitioner traversed back and forth, between the dominant ideology of whiteness and of being responsive racially:

I think the biggest thing for me was the concept of being colour blind and not celebrating the differences between children and I think into sort of gender stereotypes. You know that part influences that if a child

says, they are brown; that child is different from me. Not being like; “no we are the same”. I am thinking, understanding, that it shouldn’t be [a] silenced subject. The way to deal with it isn’t ignore or sort of neutralize it. It’s to celebrate different people, have different skin colours, have different cultures and if a child asks a question about that you respond in a positive way, rather than – the state[ment] when I was a child was “mummy that child is brown” and response “be quiet, it’s rude”. It was like, I was being racist as a child but instead of being “oh yes they are brown, they have more melanin. They are from a different culture, different, you know what I mean? I think that was the biggest thing, not to be scared to celebrate and to talk about differences (Rachel).

Rosenberg (2004) writes of ‘optical delusion’ where, through a fog of a colour-blind ideology, practitioners avoid discourses about race with the intention of safeguarding racial privilege. However, by omitting discussions about race and subsequently avoiding the structural problems in the early years community and wider society, practitioners are ‘thereby masking an insidious form of racism’ (Rosenberg, 2004: 257). As Rachel’s statement highlights, some practitioners, perhaps in an attempt to safeguard children, avoid granting meaningful agency to children when they ask questions/point out their observations, or engage in conversation about race. Ideas of safeguarding do not necessarily stand up to closer scrutiny, as they can be connected to a perceived lack of capacity in the child. When children are young there is a ripe opportunity for practitioners to engage in creating inclusive and enabling environments, where sensitive, often difficult, conversations with children about race can take place. Children have the right to discuss matters of race, as well as other sensitive topics, and not have their thoughts oppressed, and practitioners need to develop ways to discuss such sensitive topics with children.

In the following quotation Sam begins from the philosophical premise that children are rights-holders, he connects his critical theorising to the work of Froebel:

I always think that people need to name stuff for themselves, and I guess that fits with our Froebelian practice, we want the children to be the initiators, don’t we? We want the children to do the initiation of the stories and of the work as it were. Because then we can tune into something that’s already got a power for them. We don’t tell children what is going on for them.

Central to this quotation are the concepts of equality and power, necessary corollaries of and to, children’s rights. Additionally, pre-requisites for children’s rights are also raised, in that the practitioner views the child as rational and autonomous. Sam believes the child is endowed with evolving capacities to exercise their rights, can lead on (initiate) matters of concern and/or of interest to them.

What this succinct example of practitioner statements indicates is that when considering children’s rights there are three distinct viewpoints, children as rights-holders, child protectionists and the autonomous child. All the practitioners in this study arrived at the same end point in that children’s rights of equality and non-discrimination must be respected.

Transforming practice

Throughout this study practitioners engaged in thinking about how their conceptualisations of race, of ‘anti-racism’, of political correctness, social justice and children’s rights impacted on their work with children and families. We argue that these acts of engagement ran deeper, that reflections would, as reflections simply displace the same elsewhere (much like looking in a mirror). Instead, a deeper level of thinking took place that changed their view of race and anti-racism, and transformed their practice through a process of intra-action (Barad, 2007); intra-actions arising between

each other, through their own history and praxis, and with the pressures of the society and the environment in which they lived and worked.

I had to think a little bit . . . more critically about race and about being anti-racist. It's made me want to learn more and join online events specifically [about] . . . intersectionality . . . queer politics, in like within feminism and um and within people (Elaine).

Instead of reflecting upon race as a thing separate to the individual, these intra-actions transformed the way the practitioners engaged with concepts of race and anti-racist practice and it was this transformation that accounted for how their practices changed. These intra-actions are described by Barad (2007) as diffractive; a diffractive methodology (strategy for investigation) that casts light on difference. There was respective engagement with patterns of thinking, engagement with the world in terms of politics, society, social media, readings and each other, the practitioners wanted to make a difference in the world and to take responsibility for their actions and ways of being.

Our pedagogical practice has been much more inclusive because of this experience. And then much more aware and much more knowledgeable and highly skilled and think[ers]. Because we started speaking about a positioning of children . . . and children's agency and all of that through those discussions (Lara).

A diffractive methodology acknowledges how intra-actions can be troublesome, it encompasses a critical practice of engagement with ideas and praxis, 'a commitment to understanding which differences matter, how they matter, and for whom' (Barad, 2007: 90).

[This experience] It just made me really aware of how different my life is to the life of someone who experiences racism. And they kind of, and how that affects every single thing, everyday. And also my responsibility not [to] turn away from that (Juliet).

It's not just like a statue of like Henry Dundas in the square that we need to be talking about. It's like the ingrained behaviours that like live on and through us (Rachel).

Through diffracted intra-actions race was repositioned not as a thing to be acknowledged that was separate from the individual and their practice, but became part of praxis, arising from the space in between the individual and their intra-actions with families within society. As a consequence, they were able to transform their way of being in the world and ultimately their intra-actions with families in the nursery.

Conclusion

This research attempted to illuminate conceptualisations of anti-racism and anti-racist practice in early years' education, in terms of how a team of Froebelian early years' practitioners, categorised as white, might bridge the gap between themselves and their diverse multicultural community of children, parents and families. These findings were based on the contributions of 12 early years practitioners augmented and co-articulated through the situational identities of group members. It came as no surprise, therefore, that integrating these ideas within an early years education setting was both challenging and disruptive.

Participant contributions opened unexpected avenues of knowledge, and from these various lived experiences significant themes were identified which we categorised as "*political correctness*",

social justice and *children's rights*. These themes prompted practitioners to reflect on the importance of active and purposeful anti-racist practice. These were terms used by participants to draw from their developing awareness of how unconscious white privilege, could embed itself in early years' pedagogy and perpetuate inequalities for children and parents in their community of practice. As such, group dialogue was understood through critical and self-critical debate in the safety of those discussions.

This research highlighted many ethical dilemmas for group members as although they were an all-white team of practitioners, the value of their own group differences became apparent. This further meant grappling with group identities as well as the very difficult terrain of anti-racist practice, privilege and power within their Froebelian nursery. As Nietzsche observed 'one is never finished with profound experience. Similarly, good conversations have no end' (Davey, 2006: 1). Whilst the weekly anti-racist reflective meetings have paused, the intra-actions arising in the space in between practitioners, families, colleagues and their experiences continue. With each intra-action new conceptualisations of race and anti-racist praxis emerge that transform not only how individuals think about and position themselves in the world, but also how they work with children and their families.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the children, families and staff at the under fives centre who contributed to and supported this research.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval has been granted by the University of Edinburgh ethics committee

ORCID iDs

Victoria Bamsey  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3339-1496>

Lynn J McNair  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5730-0704>

References

- Barad K (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bishara A (2020) A note on political correctness. In: Bishara A (ed.) *On Racism and Political Correctness*. Doha: Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, pp.12–16.
- Bond R (2020) Multicultural Scotland. In: Keating M (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Scottish Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.98–117.
- Braidotti R (2019) *Posthuman Knowledge*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Braun V and Clarke V (2013) *Successful Qualitative Research. A Practical Guide for Beginners*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*. London: BERA.

- Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (2021) *The report of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities*. Online: Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-report-of-the-commission-on-race-and-ethnic-disparities> (accessed 26 September 2021).
- Cribb A and Gewirtz S (2003) Towards a sociology of just practices: an analysis of plural conceptions of justice. In: Vincent C (ed.) *Social Justice, Education and Identity*. London: Routledge Falmer, pp.15–30.
- Davey N (2006) *Unquiet Understanding: Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Department for Education (2021) *Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage. Setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five*. London: Department for Education. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework--2> (accessed: 1 June 2021).
- Department of Education (2013) *Learning to learn. A framework for early years education and learning*. ni.gov.uk: Department of Education. Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/de/a-framework-for-ey-education-and-learning-2013.pdf> (accessed 26 September 2021).
- Epstein C (1972) *Affective Subjects in the Classroom: Exploring Race, Drugs and Sex*. Scranton, PA: Intext Educational Publishers.
- European Social Survey (2014) Immigration (ESS1 2002, ESS7 2014). European Social Survey. Available at: <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/themes.html?t=immigration> (accessed 26 September 2021).
- Fanon F (2001) *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Farrington C. London: Penguin Group.
- Fernando JL (2001) Children's Rights: Beyond the Impasse. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 575: 8–24.
- Fitzgerald K (2017) *Recognising Race and Ethnicity: Power, Privilege and Inequality*. New York: Routledge.
- Froebel F (1926) *The Education of Man*. Translated by Hailmann WN. London: Edward Arnold.
- Garrick J and Chan A (2017) Knowledge management and professional experience: The uneasy dynamics between tacit knowledge and performativity in organizations. *Journal of Knowledge Management* 21(4): 872–884.
- Gramsci A (1971) *Antonio Gramsci: Selections From the Prison Notebooks*. Translated by Hoare Q and Smith GN. London: Lawrence and Wishart Ltd.
- Gramsci A (2014) *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*. Translated by Forgacs D. India: Akar Books.
- Haraway D (2016) *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. London: Duke University Press.
- Hawkins K (2014) Teaching for social justice, social responsibility and social inclusion: A respectful pedagogy for twentyfirst century early childhood education. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 22(5): 723–738.
- Heath A and Richards L (2020) How racist is Britain today? What the evidence tells us. *The Conversation*. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/how-racist-is-britain-today-what-the-evidence-tells-us-141657> (accessed 26 September 2021).
- Hollinshead K (2014) Communication, clarity and correctness – The power of equality language. *Race Equality Teaching* 32(3): 39–42.
- Lilley IM (1967) *Friedrich Froebel: A Selection From His Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mill JS (2020) *On Liberty, Utilitarianism, Considerations on Representative Government, and the Subjection of Women*. New York: Independent Publishers.
- Moss P (2019) Alternative narratives in early childhood: An introduction for students and practitioners. In: Olsson LM and Vandenbroeck M (eds) *Contesting Early Childhood*. Milton Park: Routledge.
- Nakayama TK and Krizek RL (1995) Whiteness: A strategic rhetoric. *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81: 291–309.
- Ono-George M (2019) Beyond diversity: Anti-racist pedagogy in British History departments. *Women's History Review* 28(3): 500–507.
- Osgood J (2012) *Narratives From the Nursery: Negotiating Professional Identities in Early Years*. Abingdon: Routledge.

- Ossorio P (2011) Myth and mystification. The science of race and IQ. In: Krinsky S and Sloan K (eds) *Race and the Genetic Revolution: Science, Myth, and Culture*. Chichester: Columbia University Press, pp.173–194.
- Rosenberg P (2004) Colour blindness in teacher education: An optical delusion. In: Fine M, Weis L, Powell-Pruitt L, et al. (eds) *Off White Readings on Power, Privilege and Resistance*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp.257–273.
- Scottish Government (2009) The early years framework. gov.scot: Scottish Government. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/early-years-framework/pages/1/> (accessed 26 September 2021).
- Scott J (1992) *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. London: Yale University Press.
- Sian K (2019) *Navigating Institutional Racism in British Universities*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Stasio VD and Heath A (2020) *Are Employers in Britain Discriminating Against Ethnic Minorities?* Oxford; Utrecht: Centre for Social Investigation; European Research Centre on Migration and Ethnic Relations.
- Tembo S (2021) Black educators in (White) settings: Making racial identity visible in early childhood education and care in England, UK. *Journal of Early Childhood Research* 19(1): 70–83.
- Thein AH and Sloan DL (2012) Towards an ethical approach to perspective-taking and the teaching of multicultural texts: Getting beyond persuasion, politeness and political correctness. *Changing English* 19(3): 313–324.
- Vygotsky L (2004) Imagination and creativity in childhood. *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology* 42(1): 7–97.
- Welsh Government (2015) *Foundation Phase Framework*. Cardiff: Department for Education and Skills. Available at: <https://www.earlyyears.wales/sites/www.earlyyears.wales/files/foundation-phase-framework.pdf> (accessed 26 September 2021).
- Žižek S (2009) *Violence*. London: Profile Books.