

# Black Voices Matter: Racial Trauma, Challenging Systemic Oppression and Shifting the Narrative

Dr Dannika Agyeman

Educational Psychologist, London Borough of Waltham Forest

Dr Hannah Lichwa

Educational Psychologist, London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham

As educational psychologists (EPs), we are driven by improving outcomes and opportunities for children and young people. The resurgence of the “Black Lives Matter” movement prompted us to reflect on issues relating to the impact of systemic racism in the UK, experiences of EPs from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds, and the role of the EP in challenging the dominant narrative.

This paper will discuss the current social climate, specifically anti-Black racism and how this may lead to experiences of racial trauma among Black people. We will also discuss institutional racism in systems including education and its link to the school to prison pipeline. Professional and personal reflections will be shared, as well as thoughts about working in a predominantly White profession. Throughout this piece, the authors will be keeping in mind the lived experience of children and reflecting on how the issues discussed, can relate to EP practice.

*Keywords:* educational psychology, intersectionality, racial trauma, school to prison pipeline, systemic oppression, systemic racism, exclusion, disproportionality

## Position and Context

In response to recent events, including the spotlight on police brutality, and discussions about ingrained racism within institutions that we are part of in our every-day work, as EPs we felt it was important to reflect upon the different systems we work in, and how these issues and events have impacted us as EPs, and the communities we work with.

The Black Lives Matter movement is not new to 2020. However, this movement happening during a pandemic has presented us with a unique situation. Being forced to press pause on our typical daily lives, has given the world more time to listen to the messages from the movement. More people are reading, watching, and educating themselves on issues relating to race that they previously shied away from.

In relation to issues of racism and systemic oppression, the USA is frequently spoken about, and often dominates the discourse. However, it is important to remember that the UK has its own story that isn't often told. Black<sup>1</sup> people are nearly twice as likely to die during (or immediately

after) police custody in the UK and five times more likely to experience excessive use of force during these interactions than their White counterparts (Inquest, 2020). Joy Gardner, Sheku Bayoh, Smiley Culture, Sarah Reed and Mark Duggan are just some of the lives claimed as a result of police brutality in the UK (Black Cultural Archives, 2020). Closely linked to this, “Stop and Search” is a huge problem in the UK, with (per 1000 people) people from Black backgrounds being 34 times more likely to be stopped by the police than individuals that identify as White (HM Government, 2020b) and 27 times more likely to be stopped by police than Mixed (White and Asian; White and Caribbean, White and African), and Asian individuals. Although the UK is very aware of the systems that exist in the USA, it is important to remember they are present here too.

As practising educational psychologists working in the UK, we work across multiple systems, including multiple levels of the education system, and, personally, we have always been aware of the need to challenge systemic racism in our work. Recent events with the murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd have resulted in worldwide protests and a level of discourse around these issues that we have not seen for a long time. It is encouraging to see and hear the conversations going on around the world, with companies pledging to “do more” to tackle issues of diversity, and individuals educating themselves on issues

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The authors have chosen to use the phrase “minority ethnic” as many of the research papers used pertaining to those from African, Caribbean, South Asian, South East Asian backgrounds refer to non-White individuals in this way. While we acknowledge that “minority ethnic” includes a vast range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, we have chosen to use this so that all readers have this shared understanding.

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout this article, we are using “Black” to describe those of African and Caribbean heritage.

such as White privilege, that they may have not done before. Systemic racism and the oppression of people from Black backgrounds is still alive, and it is of great importance that, as psychologists, we actively challenge those in systems we work with.

### Experiencing Racism as Trauma

The world is currently experiencing two pandemics, COVID-19 and racism, both of which disproportionately affect people from Black backgrounds. Children, young people, families, teachers, and other professionals EPs may work with (not forgetting EPs themselves) from Black backgrounds are likely to be experiencing significant traumatic experiences during this time.

Writing about racial trauma in *Psychology Today*, in light of the recent murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery and the associated Black Lives Matter movement taking place worldwide, Dr Dara Winley writes, “Black people are not only enduring the cumulative effects of racism but of the country’s thousands of COVID-19 cases. They are the most likely group to die from COVID-19 symptoms compared to their White counterparts” (Winley, 2020, p. 1). The recent UK Government (Public Health England, 2020) report highlighted that the likelihood of dying from COVID-19 was four times higher in Black males and three times higher for Black females. There is no evidence to suggest that there is a biological link between dying from COVID-19 and being Black, therefore we must look closely at why this link is present. The Office for National Statistics found that the difference in the virus’s impact was caused not only by pre-existing differences in communities’ wealth, health, education and living arrangements. It discovered that after taking into account age, measures of self-reported health and disability and other socio-demographic characteristics, Black people were still almost twice as likely as White people to die a COVID-19-related death.

The American Psychological Association (2020) describes trauma as “an emotional response to a terrible event”. Trauma can consist of one-time, multiple or long-lasting repetitive events over time. The effects manifest differently according to the individual. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014), just some of the reactions to trauma are listed in Table 1.

Race-based discrimination or experiences can create adverse psychological outcomes: racial trauma (Daniel, 2000). Experiences of racial injustice, both directly or indirectly (i.e., when one bears witness to racial injustice) can lead to trauma or secondary trauma respectively (Jernigan & Daniel, 2011). Exposure to traumatic events via the media is associated with negative psychological outcomes. Recent research by Tynes et al. (2019) found a significant association between exposure to Traumatic Events Online (TEO) and poor mental health outcomes for adolescents from African-

**Table 1**

#### *Reactions to Trauma*

- 
- Exhaustion
  - Confusion
  - Sadness
  - Anxiety
  - Dissociation
  - Confusion
  - Numbness
  - Physical arousal
  - Blunted affect
  - Anger
  - Fear
  - Shame
  - Sleep disturbances
  - Emotional dysregulation
- 

American and Latinx<sup>2</sup> backgrounds. In this study, TEO was defined as “seeing images or videos of others from their ethnic group being beaten/arrested/detained”, “or a viral video of a Black person being shot by a police officer” (Tynes et al., 2019, p. 4). Results showed that race-related TEO is associated with increased depressive symptoms and PTSD symptoms, with the most pronounced effects being observed in girls. Tynes et al. (2019) postulated that viewing race-related trauma may increase rumination around these events, especially as media exposure has been found to keep an acute stressor alive in one’s mind. Trauma does not end at the time or place that a traumatic event happens; it leaves a long-lasting emotional and physiological impact on the body. The imprint left by trauma has ongoing consequences for how people are able to manage in their present surroundings. When something reminds traumatised people of the past, their right brain reacts as if the traumatic event were happening in the present. But because the left brain is not working very well, they may not be aware that they are re-experiencing and re-enacting the past — they are just furious, terrified, angry, ashamed or frozen (Van Der Kolk, 2003). We must, therefore, think about how this influences an indi-

<sup>2</sup>A gender-neutral term for an individual of Latin American heritage.

viduals' capacity to function optimally in the workplace or educational settings.

The resurgence of issues around racial injustice being spoken about on a global level may be the first time children and young people have been confronted with the gravity of racism. The Black Lives Matter movement and associated demonstrations and the extent to which racial injustice has been highlighted in the media, social media and at home, is a terrifying and sad realisation that their lives hold a different value because of their race. They may also have been exposed to fascists rioting, being violent and being openly racist for the first time.

As EPs, we are thinking: How will schools support the curious minds of children around these issues? How will schools and other educational professionals support Black children who may be experiencing racial trauma on varying levels? What safe space will be created for these children to grapple with these societal issues with an empathetic adult who is willing to listen and hold space despite the potential presence of discomfort?

### **Institutional Racism and Systemic Oppression Within Education**

In exploring Critical Race Theory (CRT) and its relevance to the Education system, Gillborn (2006) states that racism in society is normal and so ingrained in society that it looks ordinary to those within that culture. CRT highlights that it is essential that the term *racism* is not only used to describe overt, crude acts of race hatred but also includes the more subtle, "hidden operations of power" that ultimately lead to one or more "minority ethnic" groups being disadvantaged.

Institutional racism within the UK education system is not a new issue. It has been researched and written about by academics in the UK from as far back as 1971 (Coard, 1971). Children and young people categorised as being from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds are over-represented in systems that deem them vulnerable (i.e., high risk factors, low protective factors), such as attending alternative provisions and specialist schools.

In relation to the reasons for requiring specialist support, Black children specifically, are more likely to be referred for needs that relate to their social, emotional and mental health (SEMH). Research has found that these pupils are 2.3 times more likely to be identified as having Special Educational Needs (SEN) due to SEMH needs, referred to then as behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (Department for Education, 2016; Strand & Lindsay, 2009). Coard (1971) found that a disproportionate number of Black children were being educated within special schools in comparison with mainstream schools and were also underachieving within mainstream schools. Pupils from Black backgrounds continue to underperform at GCSE level, as observed since Coard's writings; however, this is most pronounced in Black

Caribbean pupils, with Black African pupils having better outcomes (HM Government, 2019).

A number of factors have been found to contribute to these statistics, such as the impact of teacher perceptions on setting and streaming in schools which directly impacts entrance to higher tier exam papers (of which Black pupils are least likely to be entered for (Strand, 2012). Research has found that teachers' perceptions of a pupil's academic ability are distorted by perceptions of a pupil's behaviour (Bennet et al., 1993), regardless of whether the pupils actually present with behavioural issues. Macpherson (1999) cites that increased school exclusions for this group and the National Curriculum's failure to meet the needs of a diverse multicultural society as other potential explanations.

### **Criminal Justice System: "The School to Prison Pipeline"**

As mentioned previously, teacher perceptions and approaches to the children they teach have significant impact on those children. Research in both the UK and the USA has indicated that Black children receive harsher punishments from teachers compared to their White counterparts (Runnymede Trust, 2010; Skiba et al., 2002). In the UK, students from Black backgrounds are overrepresented in school exclusions (Department for Education, 2016), and this a comparable pattern in the criminal justice system at all levels (Bowling & Phillips, 2006). Mixed White and Black Caribbean, and Black Caribbean pupils also had high exclusion rates and were both nearly three times more likely to be permanently excluded than White British pupils (Department for Education, 2016; Strand & Lindsay, 2009). In the 2017–18 school year, permanent exclusion rates in secondary schools were 0.58 per cent for Mixed White and Black Caribbean pupils and 0.50 per cent for Black Caribbean pupils (HM Government, 2020a). This data also shows that from 2006 to 2018 the rate for pupils from Black and Mixed backgrounds was higher than the national average (HM Government, 2020a). As a result of higher exclusion rates, these children tend to be educated in Alternative Provisions.

Data from the Criminal Justice System (CJS) sadly reflects the data from school exclusions. According to the 2011 census, 3.3 per cent of the UK population were identified as Black, and 0.8 per cent as Mixed White and Black Caribbean. However, the number of young people in custody who were Black was 27.8 per cent in the year 2018/19, having doubled from 12.5 per cent the previous year (HM Government, 2020c). When comparing the ethnicity data from the overall population to the custody statistics, there is clear evidence of disproportionality. It is important to note, however, that the census refers to eleven ethnic groups, whereas the data from the CJS uses four (White, Black, mixed, other).

Together, the above information demonstrates what has been described as the "school to prison pipeline". This has

received attention in recent literature, media reports and was also part of a campaign in 2018 (see Figure 1) that aimed to highlight the disproportionate outcomes for particular groups of pupils.

### The Power of Language in Shifting the Narrative

Social constructionism theory postulates that language is the key modality through which meaning is constructed. Therefore, there are no incontrovertible truths, simply the stories about the world around us that we share with one another and that we tell ourselves. Language, therefore, builds our identities, relationships and has the power to both maintain the status quo or bring about change (Macready, 1997).

Thinking about the power of language and the earlier research highlighting the impact of teacher perceptions on pupils' outcomes, as EPs we should be paying close attention to the narratives around particular groups of children and be prepared to challenge these when needed. From direct experience working within schools, noticing the language that is often used to describe children and particular behaviours raises a number of questions. When does the narrative around particular children shift? Why is it that people start to change the language they use to describe behaviours, and why do people try and give different (and more justifiable) reasons for non-Black children's behaviours? Why are words like, "violent", "loud", "disruptive" and "aggressive" used to describe Black children so freely? These are all things that we as EPs need to be aware of and actively challenge.

### Professional Reflections: Dannika

Before becoming an EP, I was a member of the SEN department of a secondary school in inner London. We ran a summer school programme to support Year 6 pupils on the SEN register with their transition to Year 7. I distinctly remember a White colleague sharing a view of a child she had never met as she pointed out his name on the register to a few of us. She said something along the lines of "Watch out for this one, I hear he's a handful/piece of work". This was back in 2013 so the exact words are fuzzy but the feeling is crystal clear. I remember thinking to myself, "this is how it happens" as I looked at this boy's name which was an unmistakably African name. This is how the perceptions of just ONE teacher gets transmitted across the staff body, in this case, before the child has even set foot in the school, and these perceptions have the potential to create a bias against this child and (as we have seen already) could have very real consequences for that child's future in that school. I did end up meeting this boy, and it turns out that he was somewhat excitable but seemed to happily engage well in learning and was polite.

I wonder how many times we have met or been referred a pupil like this and they have either been described as

"a livewire, but bright", "boisterous", or "disruptive and talkative" or simply "behavioural issues" scrawled on the referral form. Do the descriptions of this kind of pupil change based on race? As psychologists, we are good at unpicking the particular behaviours being described as we gain an understanding of the child's needs, but how good are we at spotting when descriptions of a child's needs are loaded with racialised stereotypes? And, more importantly, what can we do with that?

### Professional Reflections: Hannah

During an EP training placement, I spent time in a large secondary school and received a request to be involved with a group of pupils. Reading the information provided about the pupils, I noticed a range of very powerful terms being used: "aggressive", "manipulative", "intimidating", all to describe pupils who were 14 to 15 years old. Entering the meeting, I had questions I was keen to explore, but, before I could begin, the head of year started by telling us they didn't have long for the meeting, so we would have to make it as quick as possible. This then propelled the school staff to start talking about how challenging this group of pupils was, referring to them as a "gang" on numerous occasions. The school staff then continued to talk about how these pupils, "just needed a Black role model" as "they are all probably from single-parent families so need someone to look up to". To add context, all the staff present in the meeting were White, as was my supervisor, so that optimism I walked into the meeting with quickly faded. Not only was I the minority ethnic person in the room, but I was also the only, "unqualified" professional, as I was a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP). Sadly, I did not feel confident enough to challenge in the moment, probably due to the shock of what I was hearing, and also the significant power imbalance in the room.

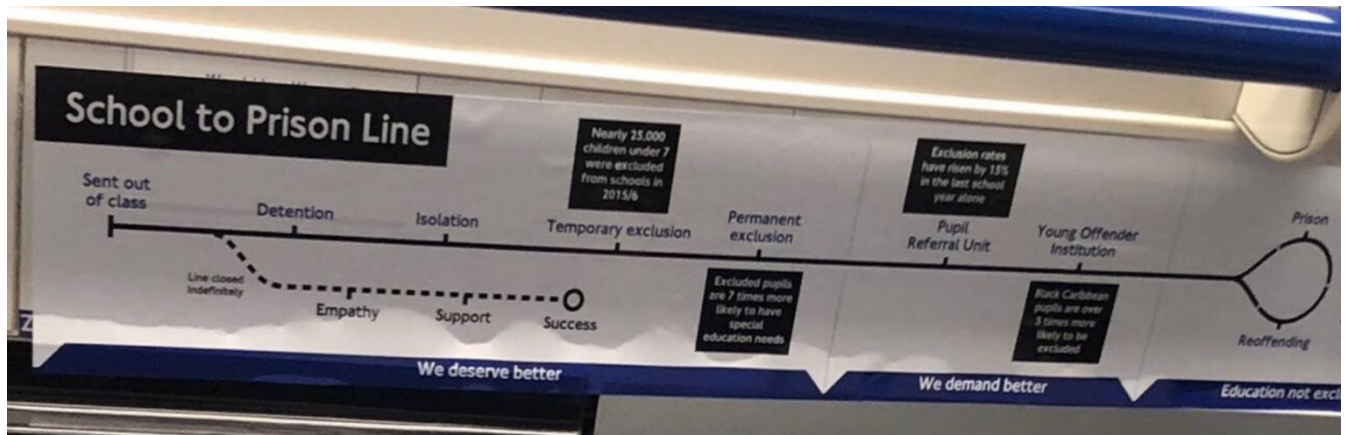
Following the meeting, I shared my concerns with colleagues, who had varied responses but ultimately allowed me to feel empowered to request a meeting with the head teacher to share my concerns from this experience. I also worked with a number of the pupils in this group individually, and, from meeting with these pupils, it was clear that their stories were not understood and the narrative around them was created **without their voices**. Some of these pupils had experienced a significant number of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), and the "behaviours" staff were reporting made sense when understood within context. The words used to describe them built up a picture of these pupils which led to the adults viewing them as a "problem" rather than vulnerable young people who required support.

### Representing the Population We Serve?

As a profession, the statistics show that educational psychology is lacking in diversity. According to the statistics from the Health Care and Professions Council (HCPC), in

Figure 1

Photo of “School to Prison Line” campaign on Transport For London (TFL) (photo sourced from TES.com)



2018 there were 4,787 practising EPs in the UK (Lyonette et al., 2019). However, requests from our regulatory bodies to gain statistics about the race of practising EPs were not successful as we were informed this data was not available. The lack of this data raises some questions: Why is ethnicity data not routinely collected? Does the lack of data mean there are missed opportunities to reflect on the diversity of the workforce? Does the lack of diversity in the workforce impact EPs ability to see when issues pertaining to race might be impacting on a young person’s experience of education? Does the lack of diversity within the workforce impact how confident EPs are in talking about race? Can EPs effectively advocate for children and young people where one of the interacting factors leading to the presentation of the “problem” is the CYP’s race and/or experience of racism? What about if a child is experiencing difficulties with their self-view arising from conflicts between their ethnicity and the ethnicity of their caregivers (i.e., children in care)?

When thinking about the ethnic backgrounds of EPs, it is important to reflect upon what this might mean for the children, young people and families we work with. How do we ensure we are reflective practitioners? How do we ensure that issues of racial inequality are discussed and addressed? Do we feel comfortable to raise issues that may be specific to a community we are not a part of? The Social GRRRAAC-CEEESSS (Burnham, 2013) is a tool that is used within therapeutic spaces and settings to encourage practitioner reflexivity. As EPs, we naturally champion “education” and “ability”, but what about “race” and “ethnicity”? How comfortable are we to discuss these aspects of identity during consultation? During the intensive doctorate programme, we are taught to challenge systems that aren’t inclusive for learners with additional needs or disabilities across all three years and throughout our careers. We also think a lot about socio-

economic status, family dynamics and exposure to ACEs. Do we need more explicit teaching about race and ethnicity to be better at challenging issues related to it? How can we ensure that exploring issues related to race is a routine aspect of our questioning during consultations? Or does this require more personal reflection? As EPs, TEPs and prospective applicants to the profession, we are driven by improving educational outcomes for children, but are we willing and able to do this when the issue that we need to tackle is racism?

It is important to reflect upon the topic of intersectionality. Intersectionality was a term first described by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989. Intersectionality is a theoretical framework for understanding how different aspects of a person’s social and political identities might combine to create unique modes of discrimination and privilege (Crenshaw, 1989). With this in mind, as EPs we must think about the multiple aspects of the identity of the children and young people we work with: Are there multiple layers to the oppression? How do we ensure that all aspects of a young person’s identity are considered?

### Wearing a “Mask” to Work

Working within teams and systems where minorities are underrepresented comes with a range of challenges for EPs from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds. Many EPs in this group can often experience feelings of “imposter syndrome” (Langford & Clance, 1993). Imposter syndrome is a psychological pattern in which people doubt their own achievements and despite external evidence of their success, will incorrectly attribute this to luck or as a result of them deceiving others. Working in teams that lack in representation can make people feel as though they stand out, and, as a result of this, individuals may adapt aspects of their behaviours to try and fit into the spaces they are in.

Among some of the challenges that EPs from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds can face in their daily professional lives are microaggressions. Sue et al. (2007) proposed a classification of racial microaggressions and noted three types that often occur in clinical practice. Firstly, Sue described, “micro-assaults” which are described as conscious and intentional actions or slurs. Next, “micro-insults”, which are verbal and nonverbal communications that will convey rudeness and insensitivity in order to demean a person’s racial heritage or identity. In the professional world, an example of this could be asking someone from a Black or minority ethnic background how they got their job, implying that they may have been employed as part of a quota system. Finally, “micro-invalidations”, which were described as communication that excludes or minimises the thoughts, feelings or experiences of a person from a Black and minority ethnic background. Examples of this can include, dismissing a colleague when they share an experience of racism or asking someone where they are *really* from.

For many professionals working in predominately White workplaces, including EPs, microaggressions can happen multiple times a day. Unsurprisingly, microaggressions are often a result of unconscious biases. If individuals aren’t aware that they hold such bias, how can they change their actions? It is also of great importance that individuals take responsibility for their own learning and, in many cases, unlearning and do not expect those from Black backgrounds to educate them.

Whenever the need for some pretence of communication arises, those who profit from our oppression call upon us to share our knowledge with them. In other words, it is the responsibility of the oppressed to teach the oppressors their mistakes. I am responsible for educating teachers who dismiss my children’s culture in school. Black and Third World people are expected to educate White people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men. Lesbians and gay men are expected to educate the heterosexual world. The oppressors maintain their position and evade responsibility for their own actions. There is a constant drain of energy which might be better used in redefining ourselves and devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future (Lorde, 1984, pp. 114–115).

#### **Personal Reflections: D**

I, like my co-author, speak from personal experiences of growing up in a society exposed liberally to covert and overt forms of racism. I speak from experience in terms of my own experience of racism in schools, being made to feel small for

politely correcting a teacher on how to pronounce my name as a Year 7, avoiding or bracing myself for holidays within England that aren’t big cities because people are likely to stare, being asked to pose for a picture abroad with another tourist (because they haven’t seen many Black people), being trolled on the internet by racist keyboard warriors and numerous other microaggressions. I speak from my experience as an EP, having a one-to-one initial consultation with a White parent (angry with the school and the Local Authority) who decided to fully re-enact her son’s use of the “n” word (“because he was frustrated”) and had the audacity to say the full word in her re-enactment. I, like many other Black people also experience covert racism in being “othered”, not seeing myself represented in the society that I call home or, if represented, it is all too often portrayed in a negative or stereotypical light — something that gives rise to the ignorant views we see in society today. I have felt “othered” when being the only Black person in a semi-professional space (work drinks) and experiencing a White male curiously patting my hair (which was in an updo with braids — a style typical among Black women) and feeling irrationally overcome with embarrassment that was not my own doing, yet not having the words to point out how and why that was wrong. These experiences are so frequent among Black people within the workplace or educational settings that they have sadly become commonplace.

The statistics and studies described above around the children and young people we serve, we have grown accustomed to seeing in our daily practice as EPs, our previous roles within Education as well as our own experience of the Education System. My own ethnicity, my awareness of the systems that have come together to disadvantage many of the Black children we work with are as clear as day to me, yet, within our profession, the widely regarded, well-researched theories and frameworks we use and the silence around institutional racism (thus far) do not lend themselves well to us as individual EPs being able to address these explicitly and come up with a solution. Schools often mimic the wider societal issues occurring at a given time; there is a realisation for me that work must be done on whole systems to be able to tackle such an insidious and far-reaching issue. This must be a team effort.

#### **Personal Reflections: H**

Living and working within the UK has presented a range of both personal and professional challenges for me. The UK often talks about how “diverse” and “multicultural” our society is, but, sadly for many of us, this is not reflective of our experiences. Based on my experience of education throughout secondary school, my current role as an EP is not where society would have expected me to be. From receiving fixed-term exclusions, regularly being sent to “isolation” and having the same, “bright, but too outspoken and loud”



or “would do better if she just calmed down” comments in reports year after year, I was not exactly predicted to be one of the only people in my year group to gain three degrees. These messages of being “too much, too outspoken and too loud” are messages that have stuck with me throughout my education and professional life. I often experience feelings of imposter syndrome and feel like I have to adapt some aspects of myself to “fit in” in spaces where minorities are underrepresented for fear of being the things that I was punished for at school.

As EPs, we are in a position where we can influence those around us and facilitate change. Working in systems where systemic oppression is present, as EPs we need to work on amplifying Black voices, not silencing them.

### Moving Forward: What Can We Do?

- Support educators to examine potential protective factors. For example, adults could foster a sense of ethnic affirmation through ethnic-racial socialisation as a means to promote a healthy self-concept.
- Support educators to ensure that their curriculum is culturally responsive. Creating an inclusive curriculum involves ensuring that what is being taught is accessible to all students whatever their background; students are reflected in the curriculum and the curriculum equips students with skills and knowledge to succeed in a diverse world.
- Use your privilege to challenge potentially negative narratives — don’t be silent!
- Be curious, ask questions and educate yourselves — knowledge is power.
- Do not worry about making people feel awkward or uncomfortable, because those feelings are temporary, and systemic racism needs to be constantly challenged to make a change.
- Finally, remember that it is a privilege to be learning about racism, rather than experiencing it.

### Final Thoughts

As EPs we are often in positions where we can facilitate change for children, young people, their families and the systems in which they are in. So, think of children and young people moving on an escalator towards their goals and aspirations and ask yourselves: What are you doing to remove barriers to ensure that the escalator is moving at an equal speed for all children?

**Figure 2**

“Equality Hurdles” by Emanu (Image sourced from <https://www.emanu.se/>)



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