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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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'Deep understanding' for anti-racist school transformation: School leaders' professional development in the context of Black Lives Matter

Sharon Walker[1,†] | Ian Bennett[2] | Pavenjit Kettory[3] | Clare Pike[4] | Lee Walker[5]

[1]School of Education, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK

[2]Downshall Primary School, London, UK

[3]William Torbett Primary School, London, UK

[4]William Torbett Primary School and Coppice Primary School, London, UK

[5]Chadwell Primary School, London, UK

Correspondence

Sharon Walker, School of Education, University of Bristol, Helen Wodehouse Building, 35 Berkeley Square, Bristol, BS8 1JA, UK.
Email: sharon.walker@bristol.ac.uk

Abstract

In June 2020, the world witnessed an upsurge in Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations following the murder of George Floyd, an African American, by a White American police officer. The international response called for the global community to reassess the value of black lives blighted by racist social systems. The mass sentiment acted as a catalyst for educational institutions, including those in the UK, to mount a response. It is in this context that a School Partnership Group representing primary and secondary schools in East London embarked on developing a workshop series for the professional development of school leaders. The sessions were aimed at school transformation through anti-racist educational approaches. In this article, we present a discussion of the workshop series held in the academic year 2020–2021, which brought school leaders together in a reflective community of practice. Drawing on data from focus group conversations carried out following the end of the series, this paper argues for school leaders' professional development that prioritises 'deep understanding' supported by reflective communities of practice as a pre-requisite for effective anti-racist practice and sustained school transformation.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a collaboration between Dr Sharon Walker, an academic researcher, and primary school leaders (headteachers) in East London. This 'working party' of headteachers (four of the paper's authors), representing four primary schools out of thirteen in the Redbridge Connect School Partnership Group (SPG), guided the development of and participated in a series of six workshops for school leaders between September 2020 and July 2021. The workshops were motivated by the global Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations of June 2020 and were aimed at tackling racism and fostering school environments committed to achieving equitable outcomes for all pupils regardless of their ethnic background. This paper reflects on this professional development experience.

The workshop series did not begin as a research study. However, as the project developed it became clear during conversations between Dr Walker, who subsequently facilitated the workshops, and the working party that an overarching question was driving the project:

> How can we best support school leaders in instigating transformative change in their school communities and environments on issues relevant to race and racism?

This paper engages with this question, particularly the notion of *transformative change* essential to framing the project. Also essential to framing the project is the understanding of race as a 'social and political reality, and not a biological fact' of human difference (Hill, 2008, p. 13). Moreover, racism is understood as the unfair or ill-treatment of those individuals and communities, usually Black and Brown people, whose lives are racialised as being of less value to the point of suffering disadvantage; these processes are systemic and embedded in societal structures (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Gillborn, 1999).

Drawing on key themes arising from focus group conversations with some of the workshop participants at the end of the series, who were available to talk about their experiences, this paper offers insights into the school leaders' experiences of personal and collective learning. Based on their reflections on the six sessions, it argues for professional development that prioritises what we describe as 'deep understanding' supported by reflective communities as a pre-requisite for effective anti-racist practice and sustained school transformation. The idea of 'deep understanding' is in line with Lopez and Jean-Marie's (2021) call for 'deep expertise' in addressing anti-black racism in education (p. 61).

We begin by contextualising the project in the events of 2020 and histories of race and racism in UK education. This includes a discussion of the relevance of BLM to the project, the context of Redbridge schools and the potential difficulties with directly addressing anti-blackness in UK schooling. The paper then outlines the development of the workshop series, considering its framing and approaches. This draws attention to the notions of 'deep understanding' and transformative change. We then present a discussion of the focus group conversations, which demonstrate the connections made by participants between the workshop experience and their capacity to take forward school change. The paper does not provide a well-honed framework or guidelines for implementing professional development for school leaders aimed at anti-racist practices. Instead, it is an invitation to join us on our learning journey as we seek to challenge continuous patterns of racist outcomes in schooling.

BLACK LIVES MATTER IN EDUCATION

Black Lives Matter emerged in 2013 after the killing of an African American teenager, Trayvon Martin, by a White vigilante, George Zimmerman, who was subsequently acquitted of murder. What began as a moment—a hashtag (#BLM) on social media—soon grew into a movement (Mayorga & Picower, 2017). BLM expressed the outrage of Black communities in the U.S. to the impunity of police officers for killing unarmed Black people. In June 2020, following the murder of George Floyd, an African American, by a White American police officer (now ex-officer), the global significance of the movement became apparent as the world witnessed an upsurge in BLM demonstrations across continents demanding recognition of the value of Black lives.

BLM's development into a chapter-based movement with chapters in the U.S., Canada and the UK, has led to an expansion beyond its critique of the police and criminal justice to other sectors such as employment and education. Whether the expansion in its focus has weakened the movement's impact is beyond the discussion of this article (see Rojas, 2020, for a full discussion). However, its relevance to education has been well articulated and demonstrated in grassroots action such as the Black Lives Matter at School movement in the U.S. Discussing BLM at School, Hagopian (2021) describes BLM as 'hopp[ing] on the yellow bus, walk[ing] through the schoolhouse door, occupy[ing] the gymnasium, rally[ing] in the auditorium, ripp[ing] up the textbooks, and [taking] over the daily lesson plans' (p. 1).

In the UK, Tikly (2022b), in his critique of the recently published *Report of the Commission on Racial and Ethnic Disparities (the 'Sewell Report')*, reminds us of the wealth of evidence from research which shows that Black students are routinely thwarted in UK education systems (see also Tikly, 2022a). For example, students from Black Caribbean heritage and White/Black Caribbean heritage backgrounds are over-represented in bottom learning sets and exam tiers. They are also over-represented in Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision. These types of disparities reach across generations. Coard (1971), for example, showed how the UK education system *makes* the West Indian child sub-normal. Similarly, Gillborn highlights the continual creep of eugenicist thinking in education systems through discourses of intelligence and giftedness, which play into tropes of Black intellectual deficiency, hence, negatively impacting teachers' expectations (Gillborn, 2010).

This evidence, both quantitative and qualitative (i.e., taking into account the lived experiences of racism and racial bias in educational settings), stands in stark contrast to the conclusions of the Sewell Report, published mid-way through the workshop series, which minimised institutional racism as a deleterious factor in educational outcomes. Instead, the UK was presented as a beacon of racial justice to other White majority countries (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021). Responding to the conclusions, Doreen Lawrence, the mother of Stephen Lawrence, a Black teenager who was murdered in an unprovoked racist attack in April 1993, described the report as 'giving racists the green light' (Syal, 2021). Baroness Lawrence's response echoed many others which saw the report as undermining a fundamental outcome of Stephen's murder and his family's struggle for justice—the naming of institutional racism by the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry (the 'Macpherson Inquiry') as influential in the police's handling of the case (Macpherson, 1999 para. 2.8).[1]

While the Macpherson Report firmly placed issues of racism as systemic in nature on the public stage, arguably, the idea that UK social systems were rigged against them and that racism could not simply be attributed to the attitudes of a few, was far from a revelation for those from Black and Asian communities. In education, for example, and in keeping with the earlier reference to Coard's (1971) concerns, Black and Asian communities had witnessed a continuous wave of anti-immigrant policies, which saw unfavourable outcomes for their children in schooling. As far back as the 1960s and 1970s, for example, the government's

school bussing policy saw the dispersal of Black and Asian students among schools since their concentration in any one school was viewed as having a 'destabilising effect' (Bonnett & Carrington, 2000, p. 490; Warmington, 2014).

Such policies reflected a wider social and political climate of anti-immigrant sentiment, punctuated by changes in immigration rules to limit the rights of dark-skinned people seeking to enter the UK (Bhambra, 2017), and clashes on the streets between White with Black and Asian minority ethnic groups—the 1958 and 1985 race riots in Nottingham, London (Notting Hill in 1958 and the Broadwater Farm estate in 1985), and the Bradford riots of 1995 and 2001. Additionally, the publication of the 'Rampton Report' in 1981—an interim communication of the then Labour government's inquiry (established in 1979) into the underachievement of West Indian children in schooling—drew attention to teachers' racial biases in student outcomes. The subsequent resignation of Rampton under pressure from the new Conservative government and the publication of the final report, the 'Swann Report', with its move away from an anti-racist focus to a type of inclusive multiculturalism (Modood & May, 2001), set the landscape of shifting political and policy responses to the Black and Brown 'other' in UK schooling.

As a result of the above, all of the school leaders taking part in the workshops were aware from their practice and engagement with the wider cultural, political and social sphere, of the various ways racism plays out in education, so much so, that the BLM demonstrations of June 2020 resonated with them. As Mayorga and Picower (2017) argue, even though people may not have understood the details behind the movement—its organisers, beginnings, or demands—they connected with what the authors describe as a BLM 'mood'—a 'broader consciousness that is determined to fight' (Mayorga & Picower, 2017, p. 213). This sense of a need to respond to the BLM mood inspired action in many domains, including education (see Díaz, 2020; Downs, 2020, for a critique of how responses can act to centre White interests).

Furthermore, BLM does not only bring attention to racism more broadly but specifically to anti-black racism. Warren (2021), in his discussion of resisting negative characterisations of Black people and the possibilities this affords for education, describes anti-blackness as 'an invisible cultural logic that urges a deep disdain for blackness and Black life' (p. 8). Dumas and ross (2016) also capture the idea of disdain in describing anti-blackness as 'an antagonism, in which the Black is a despised thing-in-itself … in opposition to all that is pure, human(e), and White' (pp. 416–417). They describe anti-blackness as a social construction and essentially as a 'lived experience of suffering and resistance' (p. 416). For Dumas and ross, critical race theory (CRT), although crucial in its theorisation of racism and white supremacy, lacks a theorisation of blackness and anti-blackness. They argue that this is particularly striking given the foundational voices underpinning the development of CRT and its application to the field of education, for example, Carter G. Woodson and W.E.B. Dubois, who, respectively, explore Black education and miseducation, and the Black experience of 'double-consciousness' whereby Black people view themselves through the hateful gaze of White-eyes.

Arguably, the centrality of anti-blackness should be deemed a specificity for theorisation in CRT; that is a Black Critical Theory, which Dumas and ross (2016) argue is inherent to CRT. It should also be central to educational interventions inspired by and framed in terms of BLM. At its base, Black lives should be centred. However, Lopez and Jean-Marie (2021) note that there is a lack of 'theorizing in education on the specificity of anti-Black racism, or the broader terrain of antiblackness' (p. 53). Despite this, they argue (quoting Dumas, 2016) that addressing anti-black racism cannot be an add-on to the practices of school leaders and teachers, and it cannot be incorporated into broad school actions on intolerance, racism, and even White privilege. Key to the effort of addressing anti-blackness is the need

for educators to 'draw on their agency to unlearn, learn, relearn and reframe' (p. 57). This resonates with the experience of gaining a 'deep understanding' advocated by this paper.

As mentioned, the framing for the workshop series was Black Lives Matter. As stated by a focus group respondent:

> I think when everything happened with George Floyd and there seemed to be a massive drive after that for, okay what are leaders doing in school, how can we really foster that antiracist education and antiracist curriculum? (Respondent 6)

Reflecting on the workshops, and how we approached the design and delivery, we are aware that anti-blackness was not centred; we moved away from this framing to a broader anti-racist one. We are not excusing ourselves for this shift. However, our experience raises issues that may prove helpful for others developing a BLM framing in professional development and practice. First concerns the location of the schools involved. Data from the 2011 Census shows, in keeping with London more widely, that the proportion of Redbridge residents born in England had fallen by 12% between the 2001 and 2012 census, with 37% of the population born outside of the UK with the largest number in India (*Redbridge - 2011 Census Results*, n.d.). More recent data shows that students of South-East Asian heritage make up just shy of 50% of pupils in Redbridge primary schools, with students from Black backgrounds making up 8% (London Borough of Redbridge, 2021). In addition, depending on the school's location in the borough (its ward),[2] the majority of pupils might come from white working-class backgrounds or working-class South-East Asian backgrounds (some wards are more affluent, making the intersection between ethnic background and socio-economic groups relevant to pupil outcomes). Arguably, in a policy climate of equality, diversity and inclusion, it is a challenge for school leaders to justify directing resources at a specific ethnic group, especially when they are not a majority presence in schools. As one focus group participant expressed reflecting on their response to the June 2020 demonstrations:

> … having those conversations around Black Lives Matter, [teachers] were quite aware of what was going on and it was something that they wanted to talk about, and we maybe weren't … I don't know, weren't sure at that point how to discuss it or how far you should go or … you know, that kind of uncertainty. (Respondent 7)

Reinforcing these concerns, recent guidelines on political impartiality published by the UK's Department for Education is the latest government response to the introduction of perspectives from Black Lives Matter, Critical Race Theory, 'anti-capitalist' organisations (e.g., the environmental protest group, Extinction Rebellion) and critical discussions on social justice in UK schools (Weale, 2022; Wood, 2020; Yeomans & Dathan, 2022). In light of this government pushback, concerns have been raised about the silencing effect on teachers (Hazell, 2022). Similar moves have been made in the U.S. with 35 states introducing a total of 137 bills since January 2021 preventing what teachers can teach around race, U.S. history, gender and sexual orientation (Gross, 2022). Gross (2022) argues that this has resulted in a minefield for teachers as they risk being censored for breaching bill requirements. For school leaders and classroom teachers, uncertainty and fear to act are therefore inevitable in a politically charged environment. As the school leader above notes, expressing uncertainty, 'I don't know, weren't sure at that point how to discuss it or **how far you should go or … you know**' [bold added].

Our final workshop content, therefore, was arguably inadequate in light of BLM calls for a focus on Black lives. We were aware of this diversion, uncertain of how to achieve a singular focus on Black pupils, and conscious of leaning towards a broader race lens aimed

at all pupils. The next section outlines the development of the workshop series, which also highlights further challenges.

DEVELOPING THE WORKSHOP SERIES

Aims, content and knowledge

Initial workshop planning by the facilitator, Dr Walker, and the working party took place in the summer of 2020. The facilitator was connected to a member of the working party so the group were aware of her involvement—theoretically and practically—with issues of race and racism in education. We represented diverse ethnic backgrounds—2 White British, 2 Black British and 1 British Asian.

The workshop series was advertised as grounded in the momentum gained from the BLM demonstrations.

> *Critical pedagogy for school transformation*
> This series of workshops is an opportunity to think about school transformation in light of the impetus gained from the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. BLM has re-ignited the need for all sectors of society, including education, to scrutinise the role of race and racism in structuring our everyday lives.

In discussion with the working party, the following learning outcomes for the series were identified:

- school leaders to have a deeper knowledge and understanding of theories, concepts and debates on issues of race and racism in UK education;
- school leaders to express increased confidence in engaging school stakeholders and implementing initiatives/actions in their school environments on issues related to race and racism;
- to develop and establish a reflective community of school leaders to support plans for developing an anti-racist focus in schools.

Although we had an idea of the content that we wanted to cover and what we wanted school leaders *to know*—the knowledge they would gain from participating, this developed iteratively as the project progressed. According to Miller (2021), in his paper discussing anti-racist training for school leaders, this is to be expected as there is not a one-size-fits-all for addressing institutional racism in schooling. However, our initial ideas chimed well with the areas of knowledge he proposes, drawn from insights across the literature. In particular, enabling school leaders 'to talk confidently about race and racism' and 'build[ing] racially inclusive institutional processes, structures and cultures' (p. 13). The former emphasises school leaders' *understanding* of racism and how it operates, and developing a shared language that is understood by all in the school community. The latter involves a commitment to creating sustainable change, which addresses fundamental school processes such as policies and recruitment, and engages a range of stakeholders, including pupils.

The three-hour sessions were designed to cover perspectives from theory and concepts such as critical race theory, intersectionality, anti-racist education, critical pedagogy, colourblind racism, decolonising and coloniality; and developing a shared language around the meaning of race, racism, etc. Each session was informed by insights from academic research, current data on school achievement, and the experiences of pupils from Black, Asian and

minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. Sessions also drew on statistical evidence from across sectors, which strongly signals institutional racism as a significant factor in determining life chances (see, for example, the EHRC, 2016). Archival sources—images, reports and newspaper articles—from the 1960s onwards, were also explored in a session facilitated by a historian.[3] This session contributed to contextualising the 'current moment' in a long history of race and education in the UK.

Participants had opportunities for discussion—whole group and small group. These opportunities were facilitated by a code of conduct, which was discussed in the first session. This presented guidelines and rules for supportive exchange, including listening when different views were in tension. It also encouraged respect for confidentiality within the context of professional exchange. The use of audio-visual material was incorporated in sessions to support conversations. Gap tasks were also provided, for example, reading material (short articles, blog posts etc.) and podcasts for engagement between sessions. Participants were able to access workshop materials at any time via a shared drive.

School leaders from the thirteen schools in the Connect SPG, which includes two secondary schools, were invited to participate in the workshops. The invitation was also extended to school leaders from the other SPGs in the borough comprising 51 schools. In total, between 15 to 20 school leaders attended the sessions, including executive headteachers, and representatives from special schools, secondary schools and the local authority.[4] Due to Covid 19 restrictions, the sessions took place online via Zoom.

Although the project was not initially conceived as a research study, from the outset, the working party was committed to capturing the shared experience. For example, through meeting minutes, session recordings, documenting learning during workshops in 'real-time' using shared online platforms, and after-session evaluations distributed using online survey software. This process of capture was supported by Dr Walker in her role as facilitator and academic researcher. Part of this capture to facilitate reflections on the workshops involved three semi-structured focus group conversations carried out in January 2022 with 11 of the participating school leaders (7 from White backgrounds, 2 from Black backgrounds, 1 from a South Asian background and 1 from a dual heritage White/Black background).[5] One of the focus groups was made up of the working group members. Although focus group invites were sent to all workshop participants, not all were able to participate due to availability, for example, prior commitments. Some also withdrew on the day of their scheduled focus group due to unexpected events during the school day to which they had to attend.

All focus group participants had been in leadership roles for a minimum of 10 years, with many over twenty years. Focus group questions centred on participants' personal as well as professional reflections on the content of the workshops, learning in a community and having extended time for discussions. The focus group conversations were led by Dr Walker.

The focus groups were analysed using a general inductive approach, which, it was felt by the authors, was most helpful for the size of the dataset (Thomas, 2003). During the coding process, we were also mindful of the steps employed in thematic analysis to guide the inductive development of codes (Xu & Zammit, 2020). The British Educational Research Association's (BERA) ethical guidelines were observed (BERA, 2018). In addition, focus group participants were made aware of their rights as research participants before focus group conversations, including anonymity,[6] the right to withdraw and how their contribution would be used. These aspects were particularly pertinent as all participants were aware of how such initiatives were in the political spotlight in the UK and other national contexts as highlighted above. More pressingly, they were also aware of online attacks on teachers perceived as 'woke', 'dangerous' and 'child abusers' (Fazackerley, 2021 para 1).[7]

All focus group participants provided consent for their contributions to be used as part of the study. This was discussed at the start of the focus group conversations and consent was provided by email. Other workshop participants were also informed about issues of

anonymity etc. by email (an information message) and offered an opportunity to ask questions. Consent was also provided by email.

APPROACHES—ANTI-RACIST AND REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

From the outset, the working party agreed that professional development should begin with school leaders to drive the agenda. Arguably, Miller (2021) would support this decision. He argues that despite a 'dearth of literature on what educational and/or other institutions do to tackle institutionalized racism', school leaders/leadership are uniquely positioned to influence and lead school communities in developing a greater awareness and responsiveness to issues pertinent to race and racism (p. 8). However, while making a helpful observation, Miller fails to address external factors—the political and social contexts in which schools operate. Tomlinson (2005) draws attention to the significance of such factors. For example, she argues that both Conservative and Labour governments in the late 1980s and 1990s exerted ideological priorities and political manoeuvres to push back on multicultural and anti-racist aims in education. This included recommendations from the Macpherson Report to implement a curriculum concerned with promoting cultural diversity and tackling racism.

In relation to Tomlinson's observation, workshop participants alluded to the 'external' challenges school leaders face despite their unique positioning. Discussing multicultural school policies and curriculum in the 1980s and 1990s, questions were posed such as 'what went wrong in the past as at the time, we thought we were getting it right?'. As part of these conversations, participants reflected on the introduction of what Tikly (2022b) refers to as the 'highly content-driven approach' (p. 11) of the national curriculum introduced in 1988 compared to what they described as the 'progressive' curriculum content and initiatives of, for example, the Greater London Council.[8] Again, Tikly (2022a) and Tomlinson (2019) would view such recollections of revealing of how political and ideological priorities are continually a 'third actor' frustrating the aims of school leaders in implementing anti-racist and related practices. Both authors view the national curriculum as carefully construed to push back on multi-cultural and progressive aims (compared to assimilationist and conservative), repeating a tendency in the educational sphere. Arguably, such tendencies in political manoeuvring have also been witnessed in more recent times—the early 2000s—in the introduction of citizenship education and education for community cohesion. These changes responded to a need to support teachers in educating students for participation in a diverse society, as stipulated in National Curriculum documents, while providing them with little guidance on how to achieve this aim (Tomlinson, 2005). However, as Tomlinson (2005) notes in relation to citizenship education, new initiatives such as this often did not include important targets such as '… gender and ethnic equality and anti-racism' (p. 166).

As well as discussing 'external factors', workshop conversations also highlighted how different educational approaches can act as enablers or obstacles in achieving racial justice. The workshops adopted an anti-racist stance but not with the aim of pitting it against multi-cultural education, for example, since to differing degrees, as pedagogical and policy imperatives on the UK educational landscape for several decades, they have both challenged individual and institutional racism, and Euro-centric curricula (Bonnett & Carrington, 1996, referencing Kehoe & Mansfield [1993]; Modood & May, 2001). In his discussion of multicultural education versus anti-racist education in Canada, Kehoe (1994) describes anti-racist training in transformational terms due to its ability to unveil and challenge unjust societal structures. He states that an anti-racist approach:

- *Examines the historical roots and contemporary manifestations of racial prejudice and discrimination*.

- *Explores the influence of race and culture on one's own personal and professional attitudes and behaviour.*
- *Identifies and counteracts bias and stereotyping in learning materials.*
- *Develops new approaches to teaching children using varying cognitive approaches to diverse learning styles.*
- *Assesses the hidden curriculum and making it more inclusive and reflective of all students' experiences.*

(Para. 8, also see for further examples)

In addition, a key feature of anti-racist education is its direct attention to racism (Blakeney, 2005; Kehoe, 1994). Kehoe (1994), referencing McGregor (1993) and Tator and Henry (1991), argues that antiracist education confronts institutional racism in education head-on, 'focus[ing] on the cognitive aspects … confront[ing] prejudice through the discussion of past and present racism, stereotyping and discrimination in society. It teaches the economic, structural and historical roots of inequality' (para. 9). Blakeney (2005) further advances efforts to achieve anti-racist education. He describes antiracist pedagogy as a 'paradigm located within Critical Theory utilized to explain and counteract the persistence and impact of racism using praxis as its focus to promote social justice for the creation of a democratic society in every respect' (p. 119). For Blakeney anti-racist pedagogy concerns developing a consciousness related to racial dynamics—how race operates in society in conjunction with notions of power, ethnicity and class.

The possibilities presented by an anti-racist, critical approach to transforming school curricula, policies and ethos is potentially powerful. As a result, as noted, these critical approaches were adopted for the workshop sessions. As Miller (2021) notes, anti-racist training for school leaders should be designed to develop 'race conscious' and 'anti-racist leaders' (p. 15). It should also provide opportunities to 'develop "anti-racist" language and practice, based on appropriate skills, attributes and knowledge' (p. 9). The development of 'race conscious' practitioners was a central focus of each session as participants developed knowledge of key concepts and issues, for example, discerning the differences and similarities between the constructs of 'race' and 'ethnicity' and the implications for everyday policy categorisation. Attributes were also targeted—addressing individual participants 'core self: personality, values and beliefs' (Miller, 2021, p. 16, see also for a discussion of the development of skills, which was beyond the scope of the workshops). Miller (2021) argues that the development of attributes requires school leaders to have opportunities to reflect on who they are and what is important to them.

To be certain, before the workshop series started and throughout its course, the combination of an anti-racist approach coupled with the development of the above attributes favoured nurturing a community where individuals could learn, speak openly and reflect together. McArdle and Coutts (2010) show the synergies between reflective practice as conceptualised by Schön (1983) and communities of practice. The synergy brings together reflective practice by individual practitioners with collective sense-making and action. The aim is to enhance practice through shared exchange, learning and development. They argue that bridging the two, reflection and community, 'is a new emphasis on the teacher as an agent for change and a source of renewal within schools and the wider educational community' (p. 211).

It is in a community of reflective practice that workshop participants expressed the experience of gaining 'deep understanding'. In the following section, examples from focus group conversations demonstrate the significance of this opportunity—school leaders having time to fully engage with learning about race and racism. Their accounts underline that time is

needed for teachers not only to reflect on their core selves (Miller, 2021) but to examine, explore and identify structures and processes of race and racism (Kehoe, 1994).

Arguably, such learning and understanding are needed in professional development committed to taking forward a focus on anti-racist education. Furthermore, Jules and Scherrer (2021), centring a focus on anti-blackness, present a broader vision of educational possibilities. This involves a 'deep understanding' of the need for an ontological turn that thinks outside of the Western episteme, and which draws attention to the constructs of the subject (White) and object (Black) in categorisations of difference. They point to the shattering of these categories such that Black humanity is valued as equal within constructs of what it means to be human. Incorporating such insights into professional development goes beyond daily school practices caught up in regulatory systems of performativity inspired by Neo-Liberal education policies (Ball, 2003). It requires school leaders to be immersed in the melee of unsettled race relations of power stirred up by BLM (Mayorga & Picower, 2017) to achieve new possibilities for Black lives to be human (Dumas & ross, 2016). This type of transformative change is only possible when school leaders, as stated earlier, are given the time to 'unlearn, learn, relearn and reframe' as an imperative to effective action (Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021, p. 57). Participants' reflections during focus group conversations shows that the workshop sessions gave them personal and professional opportunities to gain new insights, to unlearn many of their past understandings relevant to race and racism, and to reframe their thinking and practice.

CENTRING SCHOOL LEADERS' 'DEEP UNDERSTANDING' FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

Gaining 'deep understanding'

Focus group participants stressed how the workshops helped them to engage with extended reflection and learning on issues of race and racism. Several expressed that their motivation for attending the series was a personal realisation of their learning journey and a wish to deepen their understanding:

> Yes, so like I said, I was very aware of my incompetence, so the workshops for me were about developing understanding so that I could actually feel more competent to be able to lead an organisation and, yes, lead by example and be able to have integrity about what I was doing rather than to be walking through oblivious to what was going on. (Respondent 8)

> … so, for me, it was a self-growth and a … it was really good last year to, sort of, hear the full spectrum for everyone, to see maybe some things I wasn't quite on the nail with … So, for me, it was a self-growth and understanding, so then back in school I have got the right message and I can be on the right track. (Respondent 2)

A part of gaining a deeper understanding was an encounter with their core selves; exploring their values and beliefs (Miller, 2021). Here, there is a concern with the personal aspect of the school leaders. In other words, enabling them to engage beyond the professional. As several school leaders comment:

> … I don't understand the extent of the issues because I've just grown up in it, so you then begin to normalise things. But, actually, to be able to unpick what's not supposed to be normal, to be able to have those conversations yourself confi-

dently with other people, it's a case of having to start somewhere for me as an individual. I live it, but it doesn't mean that I will be able to express it to others. (Respondent 10)

… ask[ing] ourselves some tricky questions, some hard questions … I think that was probably the most … yes, that was the most significant driving factor [for attending the workshops] behind it, was trying to find … trying to make sure that we are putting the mirror on ourselves and reflecting. (Respondent 6)

A focus on individuals' personal experiences should not be viewed as a distraction from their professional role and responsibility as school leaders. Instead, as two focus group participants note, it enhances their practice by going beyond the requirements of everyday school expectations:

Yes, we can tick the boxes and we can make sure that we've got better staff representation. We can make sure that our curriculum is more representative. We can do all of those things, but I don't believe that they are going to change things unless we actually change our understanding and change our vocabulary. (Respondent 8)

So, it's changing the thinking, which then influences what you say and do, and that influences the children's thinking and changes their thinking. (Respondent 5)

The school leaders described the sessions as providing them with the opportunity to engage with concepts that are becoming commonplace in education, but as suggested by their comments, are little understood:

So, I knew that the curriculum … or I felt, I should say. I felt that the curriculum was biased in terms of the viewpoint that it gives. However, I didn't know that there was a phrase called decolonising the curriculum, I didn't even know that that was something that could be done to the curriculum or that other people were thinking about it. (Respondent 1)

I think for me, I think it's allowed me to ask lots and lots of questions that I had not asked myself before. (Respondent 9)

I suppose, for me, it was about the sessions provided a bit more context and it's provided an opportunity to explore an aspect which you wouldn't normally discuss because actually, I can't expect people to make sense of it. (Respondent 10)

Respondent 10 notes that while understanding may be lacking or assumed, these areas of knowledge are not 'normally discussed'. More, a general sense of uncertainty is implied—'I can't expect people to make sense of it'. 'People' suggests a reference to others in the school community.

These reflections highlight the importance of school leaders, and by extension, classroom teachers, having dedicated time to develop their personal and professional understanding of different areas of knowledge on race and racism. Respondent 8 comments on 'carving' out time, protecting it, even:

So, for us as school leaders it's about carving that time, being brave with that money, being brave with that commitment, and that's where I think the power of this group and the other groups … we know we're not alone in this. (Respondent 8)

Respondent 8 also raises the issue of funds. In this part of the conversation, she comments on how difficult it is to plan in an educational policy environment where unexpected government changes are common, resulting in the need to redirect funds elsewhere. So, both time and money need protecting.

As discussed earlier in this paper, fundamental to a reflective experience to develop 'deep understanding' is working in a supportive community, which collectively develops a shared understanding and means of communicating for action:

> So that we start to pool those things so that the wider education voice becomes much louder and much more understood, and that shared dialogue isn't a shared dialogue amongst those colleagues who came to round one of … [the] wonderful sessions, it's actually that we develop a vocabulary that is used in education to talk about race and we've got a common understanding and we work that way. (Respondent 8)

The next section describes how learning in a community of practice supported participants to gain a 'louder voice' and a 'common understanding'.

The support of a community of reflective practice

The school leaders greatly benefited from working in a community of practice. This not only helped in strengthening their understanding but also in reflecting on their current and future practice:

> So, your learning becomes deeper because you're hearing from a whole different range of people from all different backgrounds and diversities and their experiences. Then when you're actually listening to some people talking about things you think, yes, I didn't really understand to that depth actually. (Respondent 2)

> I think needing to have the conversations with people outside my own school before I started having them in school, so I had the support and opportunity to talk things through with others. (Respondent 3)

As well as gaining new perspectives from listening to others from diverse backgrounds talking about their experiences—'talking about things', participants also discussed concrete areas of practice and policy during sessions, for example, reviewing school policies and reflecting on curriculum material. Comments by Respondents 10 and 6 exemplify other similar observations and how the shared experience of the workshops can be carried back into the school environment:

> By me having my deputy now going through cohort two … so she and I will be able to have that conversation together with staff. I think that will make it an easier conversation to have because actually, we're coming at it from two very different viewpoints at that point. (Respondent 10)

> … so one of the things we've done this year is enabled three of our senior leaders to engage in the programme … so that the whole of the senior leadership team … will have had the opportunity to have experienced what we experienced last year in order to broaden their own understanding … Then from that point, we as an SLT [Senior Leadership Team] can decide okay, right, now we've all

got this shared understanding and shared knowledge, where can we go with it now? (Respondent 6)

In light of these observations, a new cohort of school leaders, and several classroom teachers, are participating in the workshop series this academic year (2021–2022), as mentioned by Respondent 6, so that colleagues can support each other within schools. Working collectively, either with the reflective community or back in school helped participants feel confident and supported:

> I think the really important thing is the conversation, opening up that conversation, feeling confident enough to discuss in a safe place, you know, what we're talking about. (Respondent 4)

The next section demonstrates further the impact on the school leaders' confidence.

'Deep understanding' and the impact on confidence

Focus group participants reported on the sessions as instrumental in augmenting their confidence; they felt better prepared and able to engage with others in their school communities:

> Yes, I think it was a really supportive experience and gave me the confidence. So, even this week I've approached someone [in the school community] who offers challenge in terms of race, always in a supportive way … [to]become a … governor … So, I think I wouldn't have had the confidence to do that before, so I think so much good has come out of those sessions. (Respondent 4)

> Even, you know, we had governors on Wednesday night this week and I talked about that [reviewing recruitment practices through an ethnicity/race lens] with the governing body as well, and that wouldn't have happened. (Respondent 3)

> I think where it came to light for me was where I had a conversation with the race and equality team … I was able to talk quite openly about some of the things that we've changed because of our workshops. (Respondent 9)

School leaders' increased confidence to take forward change in their schools became evident in the last workshop session, where participants reported on some of the practice and policy changes taking place as a result of their shared learning experience. Some of these examples are outlined below.

'Deep understanding' translating into school change

During the last workshop session, participants shared examples of the work taking place in their schools inspired by their involvement in the workshops, for example, developing anti-racist rather than equality statements, reviewing core texts in the English curriculum and delivering staff INSET (in-service training). Other examples were also highlighted in focus group conversations, for example:

> Yes, we started to look at it from a curriculum point of view and we've done some INSETs around, you know, BLM and about what the movement is. We've done

an inset on decolonising the curriculum, so our staff are on the journey with us, with that shared understanding of what the aim is. (Respondent 7)

For one focus group respondent, there was a concern to avoid presenting any benefits gained from the session as a type of bolt-on to current practice:

I think it is about … I suppose, for me, moving forward with this it's about people understanding that it's not a bolt-on because if you bolt something on, if the bolt comes off then actually it's going to roll away and also if you bolt something on they're going to see it as extra work. (Respondent 10)

Similar concerns were raised at other points throughout the year. As mentioned earlier in this paper, although the workshops enhanced participants' understanding of relevant concepts, theories and issues, they also left them with questions on how best to share and implement learning. As several focus group respondents noted:

I think in terms of as a school, one of the things that we know we need to do is, yes, as leaders we're having that training and that support, but actually, how do we then empower our staff team to then empower the children. (Respondent 1)

We haven't done any, kind of, deliberate, direct stuff with staff yet because I'm not sure what that will look like. I've not reached that point in my own thinking yet in terms of how to navigate that. (Respondent 6)

The school leaders constantly express the value of the workshops for their personal and professional development and practice. Therefore, the imperative to consider models of dissemination and conceptualisations of processes of change is pressing. This work is already being addressed. Firstly by supporting a second cohort of school leaders to participate in the workshops. Secondly, many of the school leaders are sharing learning from the workshops with their staff in a cascade type model of teacher development (see Kennedy, 2014, for example; and Turner et al., 2017, for a discussion of the model's possibilities and drawbacks). Also, a model of action research is being discussed, which will be supported by an advisory group of experts in race and education and different areas of school life, for example, curriculum, policy and the school environment such as displays.

CONCLUSION

But, in terms of everything else it is, I think, an endless … I think it's an endless journey. Not one that doesn't have a, you know, an unreachable end, but there's always going to be something else to do. (Respondent 7)

This paper has allowed us to reflect on and share our experience of developing and delivering a workshop series inspired by the Black Lives Matter demonstrations of 2020. We have outlined the process of development and delivery, including the challenges and successes as expressed by workshop participants. We have argued that achieving anti-racist school environments requires time and opportunity for school leaders to gain a 'deep understanding' of issues supported by a reflective community of practice. This is particularly pertinent, not only for anti-racist goals but for those fully grounded in efforts to undermine anti-blackness in schooling. This is because the change sought by both

requires an investment in terms of school leaders' learning that exceeds the usual performative, tick-box culture that dominates schooling. However, as shown in this study, many school leaders are eager to move beyond this to achieve transformative futures for pupils, where the impact of racialised understandings of human difference on educational chances becomes truly obsolete.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Written informed consent was obtained from the workshop participants, including the focus group participants, for their anonymized information to be published in this article.

ORCID

Sharon Walker https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0643-6265

ENDNOTES

[1] The Macpherson Report defined institutional racism as 'the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people' (para. 6.34).

[2] Redbridge has 22 wards. Wards survive old systems of governance where small areas had their own elected political representative or self-governance within the wider city.

[3] This session was supported by historian, Dr. Chris Jeppesen, a researcher at the University of Cambridge at the time of the workshop series.

[4] Session numbers fluctuated between 15 and 20 participants as individuals dealt with unanticipated commitments.

[5] The workshop project administrator is included in this number as they were present throughout the project often contributing to discussions as well as providing logistical support.

[6] It is for this reason that details on gender and the type of leadership role e.g. headteacher, deputy headteacher, are not provided.

[7] Woke describes a person who is 'aware, especially of social problems such as racism and inequality' (Cambridge Dictionary Online, n.d.).

[8] The Greater London Council was formed in 1957 replacing the London County Council. It was responsible for local government in the Greater London area (32 boroughs) from 1965 to 1986.

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