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Disrupting unlawful exclusion from school of minoritised children and young people racialized as Black: using Critical Race Theory composite counter-storytelling

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ABSTRACT

Utilising Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the analytical lens and CRT composite counter-storytelling as the method, this paper seeks to illuminate the experiences of minoritised children and young people racialised as Black in relation to encounters with the exclusionary practice called 'off-rolling'. We conceptualise off-rolling as a hidden process of exclusion in education, and the stories shared in this paper bring into sharp focus the educational, relational and emotional impacts of camouflaged exclusionary practices. We offer four composite stories of exclusion to demonstrate how some of the most vulnerable, excluded, and marginalised young Black people from English urban cities experience further marginalisation because off-rolling, we argue, places learners in a space (both physically and educationally) located beyond care and inclusion. Storytelling is mobilised as a central method in CRT for challenging and exposing exclusionary practices, as it foregrounds the knowledge and lived experience of people of colour and we explore the processes of constructing such counter-stories. As an encouragement to reflection and critical conversation about unlawful exclusion and racial disparities, this paper was written with three goals in mind. The first is that it may inspire educators of colour to tell counter-stories that name their own reality and experiences of exclusion. Second, that in reading and responding to counter-stories, white educators will be encouraged to develop their own racial literacy. Finally, the third goal is that the call to action is answered from within and beyond the confines of academia, where inclusion and racial justice in education can no longer be left to wait.

KEYWORDS

off-rolling; counter-storytelling; Critical Race Theory (CRT); racialised; minoritised; racial justice; professional development

Introduction

While there is currently little known about the processes and mechanisms of 'off-rolling' and wider forms of unlawful and hidden exclusionary practices across the UK (Power and Taylor 2021) in England, its prevalence and impacts for Black and minoritised children, young people and their families are even harder to discern. Off-rolling is defined by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) as

the practice of removing a pupil from the school roll without using a permanent exclusion, when the removal is primarily in the best interests of the school, rather than the best interests of the pupil. This includes pressuring a parent to remove their child from the school roll. (Owen 2019)

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In this paper we explore the relationship between racial disparities in exclusionary practices like off-rolling, special educational needs and alternative provision by critically examining four composite counter-stories, written to enable a reflective analysis of the experiences of Black and minoritised children and young people when they are excluded, not only from school in the form of 'official exclusion' but from the formalised exclusionary systems that it is often claimed are intended to safeguard them (DfE, 2022). We tell the stories of four characters called Samia, a teacher, and her pupils Marlon, Brandon and Halima. We offer these stories and reflections on the ideas, concepts and experiences built into the stories as a provocation to reflect on the ways that exclusionary practices relate to racial injustices. Our analysis is intended to explore what these stories might mean for educators wanting to understand the intersections between racial injustices, exclusion and off-rolling – whilst accepting that other educators may draw very different conclusions from these composite stories. We feel this feature is a key strength of counter-storytelling because it can be generative and challenging for individuals as well as providing a framework for the disruption of normative narratives about education and schooling for communities (Miller, Liu, and Ball 2020). In the specific examples examined in this paper, the exclusion from school and transition into alternative provision put children at considerable risk – demonstrated in England in 2019 by two Serious Case Reviews (SCR) into the murders of two Black children (CHSCP 2020; Grierson 2020). One SCR stated that school exclusion was a 'catalyst for a deterioration in behaviour' (CHSCP 2020, 7) and that in deciding to exclude unlawfully, the schools in question failed to keep these children safe. The stories that form the composites in this paper were shared by educators of colour over time about the students they worked with on 'Outreach' and reintegration programmes for excluded students, designed to support their 'second chance' placements back in mainstream education. The stories were shared in conversations within professional and community organising spaces with the authors and there are no references in this paper to real places, people or dates. They are illustrative stories and therefore for ethical purposes are not intended to recount 'real' events in and of themselves, but rather offer a different type of engagement with exclusion (Martinez 2016). The roots of this paper emerged from our desire to reflect on forms of professional development to support educators who do the difficult work to prevent exclusion from school, as well as those that work with the aftermath of exclusion in their school communities. We recognise that many professionals who work with Black and other minoritised children and young people when they are being excluded do not have opportunities to share their stories and experiences. When they do share their thoughts to process what has happened (particularly if the exclusion was potentially unlawful – see Done et al. 2022 for the examples of this that Educational Psychologists have observed) such accounts can be discounted, suppressed or ignored. Counter-storytelling can thus serve as an important function to bear witness to racial injustice in education contexts and the harm caused in the course of such processes. We also recognise that there is considerable debate about the 'status' of such stories when thinking about more traditional research methodologies for investigating exclusion. However, Solórzano and Yosso's (2002) influential paper troubles the over-reliance of research paradigms that are usually used to explain pupils' experiences of racism. We concur with Braun and Clarke's (2022) argument that 'positivist creep' in storytelling methodologies distorts the important function of counter-storytelling – that is that different stories, told differently, written differently and experienced differently have the potential to challenge the stories we usually 'buy into' as educators (Solórzano and Yosso 2002, p.28). A key strength of this methodology in our view is that it offers a strategic and connective means to link personal experiences and community memories in ways that single biographies cannot do.

Racialised histories of 'hidden' exclusions and off-rolling in England

In England in 1971, Bernard Coard published his groundbreaking pamphlet 'How the West Indian Child is made Educationally Subnormal in the British School System: the scandal of the Black child in schools in Britain', which galvanised Black parents and educationalists into action in the decades that

followed, spurring on the growth of the Black Supplementary Schools movement, – a form of self-help and a way to fight racial discrimination. Coard shed light on the ways in which immigrant children were disproportionately moved to special schools following racially biased assessments of educational needs. In addition, the authorities misled Black parents into believing these placements would enhance the education of their children. At the time of Coard's writing, around 34% of the school population in ESN schools were from Black Caribbean backgrounds. This knowledge led to the Sin Bins campaigns² and demonstrated how racial injustices, writ large in exclusion practices in education, have generated activism going back 50 years or more, before the words 'off-rolling' were ever used. Coard and the community campaigners who supported the publication and dissemination of the 1971 pamphlet reported that in the late 1960s a leaked report produced by the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) stated that one in three children in ESN schools were from a migrant group, with 80% of these being made up of children from an African-Caribbean background (Coard 1971).

The picture over 50 years on remains deeply problematic and is in fact, in many respects, worse with Black Caribbean children being permanently excluded around three times the rate of White British pupils (DfE 2021) and overrepresented in special education and alternative provisions (House of Commons Education Committee 2018). In addition, a 2018 Oxford University study found that there continues to be a striking disproportionality with SEN (Special Educational Need) identification for Black Caribbean over-represented for MLD (Mild Learning Difficulties) and SEMH (Social Emotional Mental Health) that 'remain substantial even after pupil background controls for age, sex and socio-economic deprivation' (Strand and Lindorff 2018, 4). In 2021 as in Coard's days as a teacher in ESN schools, the true scale of the problem in numbers of pupils falling through the cracks via off-rolling and unlawful exclusions and other exclusionary practices remains unknown, with suggested numbers in the 'tens of thousands' each year (IPPR 2017, 7). A study by the EPI (2019) found that approximately 1¹ in 10 students made an 'unexplained exit' from mainstream education in 2017, totally 69,000, and that out those, the pupils most likely to vanish are pupils who are Black, disabled, in care, on free school meals, those previously excluded and those with a mental health diagnosis. There is strong research evidence that points to what Karen Graham calls the 'British School-to-prison pipeline' and more specifically of a PRU-to-prison pipeline (Bei, 2019; Graham 2016; Perera 2020; Wallace and Joseph-Salisbury 2021), denoting a disturbing prevalence of Black, poor, disabled excluded pupils being pushed out of mainstream education by punitive practices that disproportionately impact Black youth and markedly lead to their fast-track criminalisation and excessive rates of incarceration (Bei 2019; Graham 2016; Perera 2020; Wallace and Joseph-Salisbury 2021). England has the largest prison population in Europe and greater race disparity in its prisons than the US, with 90% of England's of young people in young offenders' institutions having experienced school exclusions. As Wallace and Joseph-Salisbury (2021) argue, the patterns of racialisation highlighted by Coard in 1971 remain 'locked in place' and now manifest in contemporary analyses of exclusion statistics, alternative provision places and Special Educational Needs provision.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Counter-storytelling

For it is not difference which immobilises us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken. (Lorde 2001)

Critical Race Theory (CRT) was developed out of a series of significant historical events linked to the struggle for civil rights. CRT's first tenet is the centrality of racism in society as an everyday experience for people and that racism is normal, not unusual, and deeply embedded in legal, political, economic and social structures and institutions. CRT scholars draw epistemological meaning from experiential knowledge and storytelling of racialised people located at the bottom of the racial order (Bell 1987). CRT challenges hegemonic, Eurocentric ideologies, including liberalism, objectivity and colour-

evasiveness. It is an analytical lens deeply rooted in a social justice agenda, committed to examination and challenge of power relations and power structures. Counter-storytelling is a fundamental tenet of CRT. In relation to practices such as off-rolling that are hidden, obscured and often invisible to parents, families and pupils, and in the highly racialised context that educators of colour working with excluded young people, counter-stories are presented to demonstrate occurrences of institutional and systemic neglect as a matter of collective responsibility for the suffering of racialised, and often disadvantaged and disabled, children and young people and their families. They can be used to amplify and emphasise minoritised voices, perspectives, and experiences. As a method it makes it possible for minoritised narratives to come to the fore to dispute the majoritarian narratives that are commonly normalised as universal truth. For example, in the case of narratives about exclusion, there is a strong discourse that moving children out of a placement is a benevolent thing to do for a 'fresh start'. What is less examined is the way in which decisions about who gets the 'fresh start' or under what auspices decision are made. CRT counter-stories are not fictional and they are both a rhetorical device and analytical tools that "add necessary contextual contours to the seeming 'objectivity' of positivist perspectives (Ladson-Billings 1998) and are counter to hegemonic knowledge production and meaning-making. Counter-stories are emancipatory for people of colour and other marginalised groups in that in 'naming one's reality' and using one's 'voice' (Ladson-Billings 1998) subordinated and racialised groups are speaking back to power for the purpose of leading to transformative action. The counter-stories offered here are a different type of engagement with exclusion to support an alternative way of understanding the experience of racialised children and young people.

Constructing counter-stories: hearing, transformation and healing

In our work in supporting educators, we found that they would often share experiences they have found difficult or problematic when they were involved in school exclusion. In understanding that a key tenet of counter-storytelling is in telling different stories, we started to think about the ways that stories of off-rolling were told in one-to-one conversations and we could not find examples in empirical research at the time (Done and Knowler 2021). The silencing effect of off-rolling prompted us to think carefully about the importance of sharing what we had heard over the years in our encounters with educators.

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) suggest a staged process in developing counter-stories. The first stage of *construction* involves discussion and sharing of our experiences. Since off-rolling was new terminology at the time and empirical research limited, we began talking in the academic year 2020–21 to discuss examples of the phenomenon we had heard about in our own work with educators. The next stage was *compilation*. This involved the first author drafting and redrafting the composite stories and making decisions about the characters to be included. We were careful to ensure there was coverage in terms of the different experiences, but also that multiple voices would be heard across the four stories. We then engaged in a process of *examination* of the draft stories that involved reading and rereading so that we could notice emotions and reactions that came up, what Solórzano and Yosso (2002) call 'finding and unearthing'. We wanted to ensure that each story would map and explore different aspects of off-rolling practices that we had heard about or encountered. At the heart of the stories, we wanted to foreground the dilemmas and tensions that Samia experienced in her outreach work. Finally, in a stage we call *polishing and connecting*, we made deliberative and intentional stylistic choices to demonstrate the importance of reflection and reflexivity in working to challenge and resist off-rolling. For example, Samia's story is written in the third person to introduce a recognisable colleague and to prompt reflection on 'real experiences' that would resonate. There was also a sense of encouraging the reader to 'look back' and to ask themselves whether they could connect with this human face of exclusion. We looked for places where we had recounted normative explanations or had perhaps slipped into hyperbole. We wanted to combine elements of fiction and reality to provide a rich and powerful account of what happens in the 'real world' of schools.

Lindemann (2020) prompted us to reflect on the writing of the stories asking whether the stories are too comfortable? Have we made language of oppression and violence too sanitised? The stories are often incorrectly conceived as having a 'devil's advocate' function but this does highlight the problematic tension of having to construct these counter-stories to justify and explain/re-explain the harmful impacts of exclusion in a way that the majoritarian narratives never need to do, since they are accepted as 'true' and unproblematic

The issues of ethics was at the forefront of this work from the beginning. We were acutely aware that in telling and creating counter-stories we would be presenting and exploring uncomfortable accounts of exclusionary practices. We wanted these events to be recognisable rather than the people, places or outcomes and so the creation of composite characters helped us to introduce complex and contested ideas without the need to expose individuals to harm. In a traditional model of educational inquiry, we would have identified a 'sample' group and invited participants to share their experiences via a research interview or an online questionnaire. We suspect many educators would choose not to do this and therefore their stories and experiences would be lost. We are also aware that reporting peoples' stories without their permission is not ethical and therefore, the staged approach described above is designed to support the construction of stories that are not 'owned' by one person – rather, construction of the stories relates more strongly to themes and ideas, rather than the individual who told them. For example, in Marlon's story it is the problematics of dual placements and low expectations for minoritised pupils that is the connecting concept – whether Marlon exists or is 'real' is not the point.

We acknowledge, like Miller, Liu, and Ball (2020) that this method can appear 'fuzzy' and that the status of the stories as 'real' or 'fiction' can be problematic when considering questions of what counts as 'evidence' in exclusion research (Daniels, Porter, and Thompson 2022). We recognise that the multiplicity of uses for counter-storytelling requires that the purposes and objectives of these composite stories need to be thought about with care. For example, stories such as the ones presented below can be used as a theoretical framing, as analytic tools, a method of elicitation and representation (Miller, Liu, and Ball 2020, 277). In the context of educator professional development their potential to provoke dialogue about difficult and contentious aspects of exclusionary practices is important, in our view. We offer brief reflections after each of the pupils' stories as a starting point and invite readers to reflect on their own analysis of what the stories mean to them.

The stories that follow recount hidden practices of educational inequity, obfuscation, inaction, institutional subterfuge, complicity, survival and resistance. They are also stories in which all the people involved were told lies and half-truths, mislead and misplaced. The teacher, Samia, is introduced in the first story to explain her 'not knowing'/'not realising' what was meant by 'outreach' and the way that she was ultimately implicated, and thus potentially complicit, in maintaining the cover of legitimacy and benevolence for a system and culture responsible for unlawful exclusionary practices that contribute to the (re)production, marginalisation and the exclusion (material, administrative and/or symbolic) of an educational other. The resulting experiences of institutional racism captured in counter-narratives were voiced by Black students and their teachers of colour over many years. They were shared in spaces where difficult truths and lived experiences are routinely shared and plans for countering oppressive systems, policies and practices strategised and executed. It is, therefore, important to note the real fear and anxiety, particularly amongst education professionals such as teachers and educational psychologists, about speaking up, which routinely results in suppression, silencing and prevention of these stories from ever being aired publicly. This paper attempts to make a modest contribution to remedying the harms done, speaking back to power for hearing, transformation and healing.

Introducing Samia

Samia enjoyed teaching at the Pupil Referral Unit³ (PRU) and had decades of teaching experience, always met and exceeded all of her professional targets and in general worked twice as hard – both

out of love for teaching and to make up for being a first-generation migrant woman of colour with English as a second language. Samia completed several postgraduate studies to develop her expertise and was very well liked by the students. The PRU had a majority body of dedicated and experienced staff of colour but none had managed to make the management team year in year out. None progressed into leadership and even the students would often comment about this puzzling reality. Samia, in truth, did not mind too much not having progressed into school leadership. She was a real inclusion champion, who preferred being in the classroom and close to the students, many of whom mainstream teachers called 'unteachable'. When the new head of service suggested Samia's skills and experience would be useful in supporting the reintegration process with the new Outreach Programme, Samia was ecstatic. To Samia this was the long-awaited opportunity to see some of her students who had gone back to mainstream education – a process she often wondered about having heard from the PRU's management that there was an urgent need to reduce the bounce-back rates. (rate of return to AP following reintegration)*

Erasing Marlon

Samia met Marlon not long after Marlon was admitted to the PRU by his third secondary school in the Winter term of his Year 11. A few months before Marlon's mum received notification the family may have to move again. Marlon had a chronic medical condition that impacted his attendance significantly since primary. In spite of this and the frequent house moves due to the family being in temporary accommodation and the reported public housing shortages that severely impacted his childhood, Marlon achieved good grades in each of the schools he attended, was very popular with his peers and teachers who all spoke highly of him, had ambitious of going into law or business, was very gifted in a number of sports and subjects and had no reported disciplinary issues.

Marlon told Samia during their first meeting that it was not the first time the family was forced to move and the children face the prospect of changing schools and begin the process of settling in new surrounding, but it was the first time the council had informed the family of five that lived in a one bedroom bed and breakfast property not far from Marlon's school, that no suitable accommodation could be found locally and that the family had two choices: either relocate 350 miles away in a bigger (but still temporary) home, away from all family, friends, support systems and all that was known and familiar, or become intentionally homeless, resulting in the council discharging their legal responsibility to house the family.

Faced with a heart-breaking decision, it was decided that to as to not disrupt Marlon's GCSEs he should stay and move in with a great aunt. She was elderly, lived alone and could do with some help and company, but Marlon would still have to take two buses and a train and travel across several postcodes twice a day to get to and from school and be away from mum and the three younger siblings with whom he was very close. Meanwhile, the rest of the family was forced to move to a small coastal and economically deprived town, with very few people of colour, away from all family, friends and support systems. It was a very difficult transition for everyone, Marlon said. Marlon was happy to not be moving school again but missed his family a great deal. Marlon had a long-term medical issue that caused him to frequently miss school. It was a condition often brought about by chronic stress and anxiety Marlon was told and although he could manage it most days, flares up would occur on a regular basis, every few weeks, without warning. Samia was told that he had no behaviour issues and the school said there had been no concerns ever other than attendance. When Marlon joined in Year 11 the mainstream school asked the PRU to take him on dual registration. He would be physically educated in a mainstream setting but his name would not appear on the mainstream school's register and his exam results do not count towards the school overall performance. Samia was told to check in on Marlon every few weeks, provide support as required but was not told much else. One of the senior leaders, the safeguarding lead at the PRU said to Samia in passing and whispered that the new outreach programme she was being sent to might be 'a bit dodgy'. Samia at the time admits not understanding what this meant. She was happy to be able to visit children in mainstream schools, particularly the ones she had taught in the PRU, and to be

able to provide a continuum of care and support, determined everything that could be done should be done to keep them there and prevent Marlon from returning to the PRU.

This story highlights many examples of the ways that racialised children and young people are subjected to what we would call a 'domino effect' of small and seemingly insignificant exclusionary practices. This story also illustrates the complex relationship between presenteeism and exclusion. The threat of exclusion for poor attendance is extremely problematic given the protective nature of remaining connected to school – Marlon had no disciplinary issues and for all intents and purposes was not excluded in any formal sense. Yet, these exclusionary practices and the decision-making, that on the surface makes it look like Marlon was being supported, failed to take account of the structural reasons behind his non-attendance such as social housing shortages, current Local Authority policies of placing families far away from their communities and families and gentrification. This story also highlights the contemporary ways that Black families have historically been separated now, as they were four hundred years ago; that this is now seen as so commonplace and an inevitable effect of housing policies, that it is not even noticed by Samia. The comments made by a senior colleague with safeguarding oversight – that the outreach programme might be 'dodgy' – amplifies concerns that simply visiting children who are otherwise 'ghosts' on mainstream school registers does nothing to protect their right to an education and to ensure that there is more than simply 'checking' a pupil is physically present.

Excluding Brandon

Samia first met Brandon at the PRU in Year 10 where she was his English teacher for two terms. Brandon was on the PRU's named 'success stories'. In reality, Brandon needed virtually no PRU interventions whatsoever and presented with none of the educational, social or economic challenges that Samia regularly saw at the school. Brandon was relatively easy to place at a local mainstream secondary school and he joined one of the local secondary academy schools that he joined in the summer of his Year 10. To Samia he was in truth a dream student: polite, cooperative, always ready for learning and respectful. His quiet demeanour and shyness made him what sometimes educators refer to as one of the 'invisible students'. Nothing much was said at the PRU about the reasons for his exclusions, he did not talk about it and Samia did not ask. It was important to her to not know and give her students a fresh start each time she met them. Brandon completed all his work and generally kept his head down, only making one friend at the PRU. As is common, Brandon's family did not want him to attend the PRU but felt they had no other option and when threatened with permanent exclusion they accepted the place with the promise he would be back in mainstream in quick succession if he was able to prove he could. That he did, meeting and exceeding all expectations placed on him during the two terms at the PRU.

When Samia was told Brandon would be one of the students she would be supporting on the new Outreach programme she was overjoyed. It would be an opportunity to give one-to-one support to one of the students that had been no trouble at the PRU, the type of student she often felt guilty about having less time for. Brandon's new mainstream school pastoral lead had said he seemed to have settled in well but they were concerned he did not seem to be mixing much and that Brandon and his family had failed to complete the post-16 pathways paperwork that was expected from all Year 11 students. They explained to Samia they were worried he had not secured a college place and may become a NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training). Samia thought this was strange given how brilliant, compliant and motivated to succeed Brandon had been at PRU and excited to be going back to mainstream education.

Brandon was visibly elated to see Samia and without much probing he disclosed he was just biding his time at his new school. He talked about feeling like his new teachers did not really care and were just going through the motions. That they had not invested in getting to know him and above all he felt his PRU history and label cast a large shadow over him, one that he could not shake, even though no one ever said anything overtly, he felt it. When Samia asked him what his post-GCSEs plans were, Brandon lit up saying he had been accepted at a specialist and prestigious sports college and boarding school, for

which he had been scouted and that his family and him were very pleased for the opportunity. Samia was relieved and excited to hear this excellent news. Equally confused, she asked Brandon why then his Head of Year was not informed (which led to his name getting flagged up on the school's 'at risk' of becoming NEET – Not in Education, Employment or Training – list). Brandon candidly admitted he just had not bothered to notify his mainstream school of the good news because he thought they did not really care about him and had treated him as an outsider since the start. Samia felt anger on hearing this and wished there was something she could do to put it right, but, with only weeks left in the school year, she knew it was likely an impossibility. Furthermore, Brandon was counting the days and wanting as little to do with the school's staff as possible.

Brandon's story highlights for us some of the impacts of so-called 'zero-tolerance' approaches to education and the ways that 'exteriority' (Ball 1993) plays such an important role in the off-rolling mechanism. We have heard numerous stories over the years from educators who observed that their school will work hard to protect its reputation and will not always work in the same way to build trust and repair relationships with pupils who have been excluded. The story also points to some of the enduring myths of education such as *second chances* and *choice* – the stigma of exclusion in Brandon's story means that he is not offered victimhood in a way that would explore his experiences and the implication here is that schools can absolve themselves because Brandon has left them 'no alternative'. A key aspect in this story is that the 'threat' of a permanent exclusion means that Brandon's family moved him into an alternative provision without asking the school for an explanation as to why this was suggested.

Off-rolling Halima

Halima lived with her stepmother, father and three younger siblings when she joined the PRU in the Autumn term of her Year 10. She came from a practising Muslim family of East African origin and wore a hijab to school every day. Halima was generally very quiet and appeared reserved (as many new students are on arrival Samia remarked). She seemed to be hesitant about getting to know other students and her new teachers and not particularly at ease with the PRU environment, all of which was perfectly understandable. PRUs are not known for their good reputations and are not usually where any family would choose to send their child if they had an option, Samia explained. In her lessons with Samia, however, Halima would present quite differently: she would be quite forthcoming in expressing her views, but seemed to do so in what felt like unnecessarily oppositional to Samia, who admitted she did not always handle Halima's comments and non-verbal cues with in the most positive way, initially. At one point, the interactions in class were so fraught and tense between them over mundane issues Samia thought, that other students seemed to anticipate the weekly 'showdown' with glee and amusement. A student bold enough to challenge a teacher is usually a cause of great entertainment in most schools. After several negative exchanges, Samia was determined she needed to do more with Halima, to get to know her and her world and find out what was behind it all. Samia really wanted to know where the angst that felt so personal in lessons was coming from, and who Halima really was behind the classroom performances. At first Halima did not seem keen to stay behind in class to 'talk' to Samia after lessons, but over time, she started to enjoy the time and personal attention Samia was willing to give to her. They talked about their respective mothers and mother–daughter relationships became a recurring theme during their chats. They came to find out they had plenty in common culturally, similar struggles with difficult parents and the intersectional experience of growing up in Europe as racialised women from African and Muslim families. Samia recalled that quite quickly Halima became a different student. Halima shared her dream of wanting to become a midwife, that she missed her mum whom she loved and really admired (a hairdresser) but had a complicated history with, that living with a stepparent was difficult, that she desperately wanted her father to be proud of her and felt she failed and disappointed him deeply when she was permanently excluded and wished to be closer to him, but was afraid to deviate from who she was expected to be at home. Halima would often lie or hide what she was doing after school and at

weekends, where she was going and with whom. In truth, Halima admitted she found school really difficult, particularly writing but had not felt comfortable to tell anyone and would instead fly into a rage with teachers or other students when not coping. She thought she might be dyslexic but was not sure. The PRU had offered 'anger management' sessions with one of the PRU mentors but counselling with a qualified professional was never even discussed, nor was a referral to get her learning needs identified. The PRU had two in-house full-time mentors who would see all students on a rota as the key intervention, usually every 3–4 weeks. Halima got on with it even though she admitted those conversations were not the support she really needed.

Halima was eventually offered a 'second-chance' at a neighbouring secondary school towards the end of Year 10. The PRU had declared Halima 'ready for mainstream'. After about three months however, Halima's new school contacted the PRU complaining the placement was 'not working out' and that there were concerns Halima might 'get herself excluded again'. Samia was delighted to be asked to visit Halima and the first visit was arranged for the January of Halima's Year 11. The school (not Halima) had requested the support as Halima was 'getting into trouble a lot', 'hanging out with the wrong crowd' and 'getting into fights', Halima was 'being aggressive and confrontational' with her teachers. The first time Samia met with Halima there were many tears. Halima said she felt like an outsider and that teachers were 'just not giving her a chance'. She talked about struggling with all the new rules and expectations and particularly with keeping up with the curriculum. She had asked for extra help but not received it. Two months before her GCSE exams were due to start, Halima and her father were told she would be allowed to sit her exams at the school but that she would 'better off' attending a local Alternative Provision to do a childcare course. Both Halima and her father were unsure about this 'offer' with just weeks remaining in the school year but felt they were left with no other viable options: it was either accept the AP course or face another imminent permanent school exclusion. Halima attended the course briefly before disengaging altogether. The college reported Halima getting into confrontations there with other students within the first week. Samia's support included tuitions, mediation with the college management's team, advocacy on behalf of Halima and her family but none of it could keep Halima in education.

In Halima's story ideas about stigma, belonging, inclusion, re-integration, lies and cover-ups are explored. The story makes the link between inherently discriminatory policies and practices such as zero-tolerance approaches to pastoral care, the relationship between whole-school cultures and belonging and uniform policies that are discriminatory and racist. These school-based issues interlock with structural barriers such as housing, health, welfare, employment, school funding, teacher education, SEND, assessment to (re)produce specific outcomes for Black and minoritised children. The story illustrates that racial justice in education is in urgent need of an intersectional approach, which should begin with centring race. The intersections between race, gender, class and dis/ability mean that Halima's unmet and overlooked learning needs and disability play a significant role in her exclusion from education, and Samia's feelings of helplessness within a system that does not seem to 'work' for young people like Halima.

Critical and urgent work for anti-racist practitioners

These counter-stories and many more like them must be told so that systemic policy, practice, processes and cultural change can follow. Samia's role in these examples and her realisations as she worked with Marlon, Brandon and Halima demonstrate the fine line between support and collusion. Anyone in education that reads these stories and fails to reflect, take stock and move into action to disrupt these everyday occurrences of institutional and systemic neglect bears a share of the collective responsibility for the immense suffering for racialised and other minoritised children and young people and their families and for the long-standing and spiralling inequities of our times, along race, gender, class, and disability lines. In this way, Samia's stories ask difficult questions about her implication (Rothberg 2019) in exclusionary practices. Her story highlights the intersectional factors that emerge through a CRT analysis of the counter-storytelling in this paper, and we would

encourage antiracist educators to consider the following aspects when reflecting on how to disrupt hidden exclusionary practices.

One example can be seen when Samia encounters problems related to school attendance and we would want to reflect on the contradictions between 'official' narratives and rhetoric in education and the ways that institutional practices and outcomes for racialised children are problematic, particularly around their exam years. For us, this links to what Showunmi and Tomlin (2022) call 'sophisticated racism' where processes that, on the surface are supposed to be supportive, in fact have the opposite effect for racialised young people. We begin to see Samia questioning reintegration as a response to exclusion and her thinking around whether reintegration is even possible within the current system, given there are many intersecting mechanisms that produce realities that prevent genuine 'fresh starts' for racialised young people such as zero tolerance behaviour policies, exclusion stigma, adultification. We can see that Samia is beginning to become aware that for reasons she perhaps can't yet articulate, re-integration and inclusion processes take shape differently for racialised children of colour. We think this demonstrates her coming to terms with the idea that there are specific manifestations of racial inequities in schools and that this is troubling.

These reflections strongly relate to the wider tension for Samia of how she can safely and effectively challenge the dominant stories of exclusion – for example, can off-rolling and other exclusionary practices realistically be eradicated whilst neoliberal education policies and practices dominate the ideological landscape in (and beyond) education? It is crucially important for educators 'to talk back' against exclusionary practices and find ways together to explore how school communities become more courageous educators and intolerant to racial injustice in education and whilst this would entail a certain level of risk for all who talk back, for educators of colour the stakes and risks of such challenges to master-narratives and to the normalised status quo are not to be downplayed. School communities should think about what can educators do to disrupt racist and unequal outcomes in exclusionary practice and inclusion and the explore in professional learning why is it fundamental for educators to interrogate educational outcomes in relation to power, knowledge and difference, bearing in mind the burden should not for the most part fall on educators who are themselves impacted and harmed by racism. Specifically, on the Black child in education, Samia's story demonstrates racialised and gendered majoritarian stories told about Black children that place them at greater risk of exclusion and off-rolling. A next step for Samia would be to ask, with the support of colleagues, how this narrative can be dismantled. Most fundamentally, for antiracist teachers like Samia, the counter-storytelling demonstrates her getting to grips with making Black children's lives matter in education – their experiences and hers heard for the purpose of moving closer to racial justice and social change in education.

Concluding thoughts

If teachers do not or cannot find their critical voices to reflect upon and challenge dominant discourses that perpetually reproduce racial injustice in education, then the storytelling is left to others who have vested interests and the means to maintain majoritarian narratives that protect those vested interests that have never served marginalised groups. This paper was written with three goals. The first is that it may inspire more educators of colour to tell counter-stories that name their own reality and reject any and all logics of so-called common-sense stories rooted in anti-Blackness. The second, that in reading and responding to counter-stories, white educators will be encouraged to develop their own racial literacy (Joseph- Salisbury, 2020) and racial resilience to commit to ongoing work through discomfort. And beyond that, white educators reject dominant narratives about themselves and the othered in education, in the search for truth and meaning, opting to instead lean into people of colour's counternarratives, into stories from the bottom – to join the voices challenging exclusion. The third goal is that the call to action is answered from within and beyond the confines of academia, where inclusion and racial justice in education can no longer be

left to wait. These goals link to the importance of educators developing partnerships with Black and minoritised parents. The last fifty years should have taught educators of colour not to rely on pleas to or the goodwill of those running the system to effect the changes Black children and young people and other minoritised people need.

Just as was the case half-century ago and since, researchers, educators and policymakers must accept that future progress for our children on all fronts depends on our actions, our initiatives, our building up and energetically deploying our social capital, and our striking alliances with all those who are prepared to join us in this struggle to achieve quality education for all (Coard 2021). The need for educators to think critically about education, inclusion and racial justice and develop the courage to challenge racism has never been more urgent. One of the ways in which we can nurture and galvanise the roots of the grass by building solidarity spaces in education where critical consciousness, resistance and radical actions leading to radical change can have a home.

Notes

1. This paper was developed from a shorter chapter submitted for Done, E.J. and Knowler, H. (2022) International perspectives on exclusionary practices in Education: how Inclusion became exclusion. Palgrave/Macmillan.
2. See <https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/the-black-women-s-movement-black-cultural-archives/SAICVgWeiBZ-Ig?hl=en>
3. A Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) is an alternative provision for pupils. There is much variation about how they are used and who goes to PRUs but they are usually considered to be a short stay provision for pupils who have either been excluded from school or for those who cannot attend mainstream schools.

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