

Anti-Racism in the Early Years

For Libraries Rising Hybrid Conference

Delivered in person, Birmingham, UK.

Dr Shaddai Tembo

Critical Early Years

12th May 2026

**CRITICAL
EARLY
YEARS**

Who am I?

Shaddai (pronounced Shad-eye).

- **Senior Lecturer** and **Researcher** at Bath Spa University and the Open University
- Former **early years practitioner** and **family support worker**.
- **Trustee** for the Fatherhood Institute and formerly Early Education.
- **Writer** and **Speaker** at Critical Early Years.
- Proud **Dad!**



Plan for the session

- What's The Point?
- Why Do We Need It?
- Definitions: What Does It Mean?
- Toward a Race-Aware Pedagogy
- Five stages of anti-racist practice – for library organisations



Different starting points

Addressing the issues of **anti-racism** can still sometimes feel **threatening or worrying** to educators.

Some people are:

- **not sure** what this entails;
- Many simply **do not know where to start**.
- others feel that they are **already working in a way** that encompasses these things;
- some practitioners are **worried about getting it wrong** and **upsetting people**;
- some people feel it **does not apply** to their practice;



Anti-racism: what's the point?

Three common concerns...

1. 🙄 🚫 "But **I just don't see race.**
Why don't we treat everyone the same?"
2. 🧒 ? "**Aren't children a bit young**
to be learning about these issues?"
3. ❤️ "**Our staff and children are all white,** so it's not an issue that affects us."



Anti-racism: what's the point?

1. "But I just don't see race. Why don't we treat everyone the same?" 🙄 🚫

To say, "I don't see race" is to say, "I don't see injustice".

- **Colour-avoidance** overlooks, or conveniently ignores, how we are submerged in a system where the effects of race saturate everyday society, including education.
- However, the **paradox of anti-racism** is important to understand. **We need to discuss, examine, and understand it more – to make it matter less.**



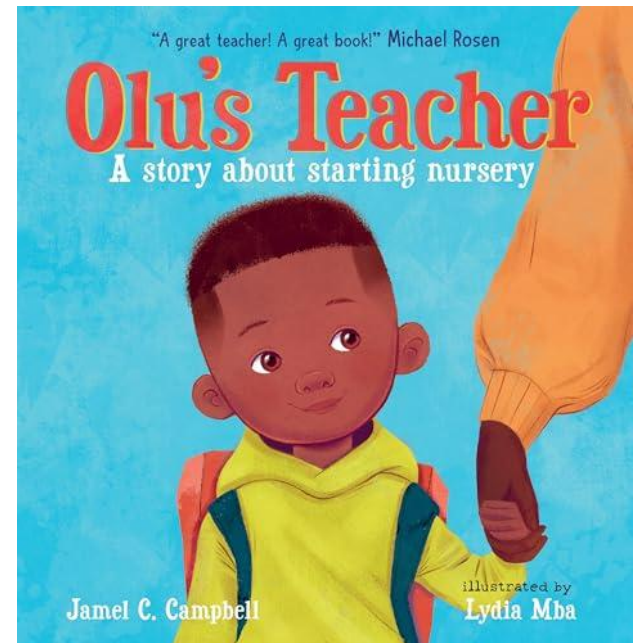
Joy Labinjo, We Don't See Colour We Don't See You, 2020

Anti-racism: what's the point?

2. "Aren't children a bit young to be learning about these issues? 🧒 ?"

- Research shows that children **from 3 months+ begin to develop an understanding of others** on the basis of how they look and on the colour of their skin.
- Moral panics around anti-racism reflect a broader position of **childhood innocence**.

Childhood innocence means protecting children from certain information to avoid stress or trauma. However, this **belief may lead to the denial of existing inequalities**.



Understandings of difference start early

- **Research has shown that even by the time babies are three months old**, they tend to look longer at faces from their own racial group or familiar racial groups compared to faces from other, less familiar racial groups.
- **This differentiation only improves with age**, so by around **two years old** children will begin to use those markers to classify social groups and to identify themselves as part of their own ongoing identity formation.
- By **three and four years old, children of all races tend to hold pro-white biases** that can lead to racialised preferences in terms of friendship and for resources.



Interviewer: Why is she the bad child?

Child: Because she is black



Katz, P. A. (2003) 'Phyllis A. Katz: Address for Award for Distinguished Senior Career Contributions to the Public Interest', *American Psychologist*, 58(11), pp. 897-909.

Anti-racism: what's the point?

3. "Our staff and children are all white, so we're alright" 💜

Exposure to difference is a positive experience for all young children.

- ❑ Limited exposure to diverse cultures and perspectives can lead to a narrow worldview.
- ❑ **White children** who do not learn to recognise and challenge racism may unconsciously support and maintain these systems.



Anti-racism: what's the point?

3. "Our staff and children are all white, so we're alright" 💜

Anti-racist practice in very white settings but about:

- **broadening children's understanding** of the world
- supporting **empathy, fairness, and critical thinking**
- **preventing narrow or hierarchical ideas** from becoming normalised

we're all white,
THANKS
the persisting myth about 'white' schools
Chris Gaine



Anti-racism: what's the point?

Three common concerns...

1. "But I just don't see race.
2. "Aren't children a bit young?
3. "Our staff and children are all white

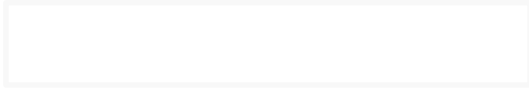
Research has shown that these views are still **commonplace**.

Reflection

Why do you think they continue to exist in our society today?







Anti-racism: what's the point?

Anti-racism: why do we need it?



Anti-racism: why do we need it?

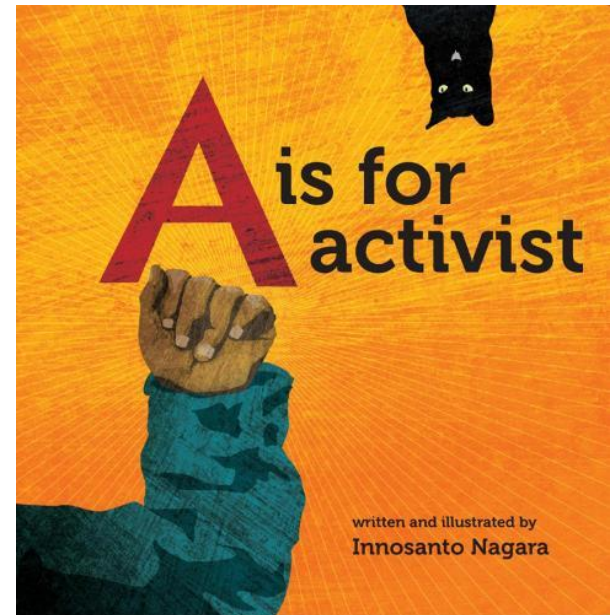
Why now?

- **Broader political climate**, equalities more contested, still considered controversial.

- 🕒 *6 years since George Floyd's murder*
- ⚔️ *Broader culture wars*
- 🚩 *Rise in nationalist rhetoric*

- **Anti-racism is still misunderstood**

- 💰 Only about resources?
- 🚫 Only about responding to direct discrimination?
- 😬 Scared about 'getting it wrong'



The Data

- **Across England - Racist abuse is being sanctioned in primary schools at increasing rates**, with suspensions rising from around 200 cases in 2020–21 to over 600 by 2023–24 (DfE, 2025).
- **Beyond individual incidents, exclusion practices show persistent racial disproportionality**, with Black children at significantly greater risk of, and over-represented within, school exclusions. (Stewart-Hall, 2023).
- **These racialised patterns are not confined to education:** Black children are 6.5 times more likely than white children to be strip-searched by the police .(Runnymede, 2024)



Wealth intersecting with race

Such outcomes sit within wider structural inequality, where for every £1 of White British wealth, Black African and Bangladeshi households hold around 10p.

- This reflects **long-term exclusion from wealth-building systems** and **unequal access to assets** shaped by housing markets, credit systems, migration, and racial discrimination — not effort or aspiration.
- **Homeownership is the main gateway to wealth.** White British households are far more likely to own property; Black African and Bangladeshi households are far more likely to rent long-term.
- **Even when incomes are similar**, Black African and Bangladeshi households are much more likely to have little or no wealth to fall back on.



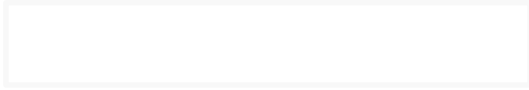
The Ethnic Wealth Divide in the UK: Mapping Disparities Across Time, Age and Immigrant Generations

Eleni Karagiannaki

CASE Report 165

December 2025

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Anti-racism: what's the point?
Anti-racism: why do we need it?
Anti-racism: what does it mean?



What is race?

Race is a *social construct*.

- Referring to the ways societies group and assign meaning to people based on perceived physical characteristics such as skin colour and facial features.

Ethnicity is a broader term.

- It refers to the grouping of individuals who share a common culture, language, history, and set of traditions.

Racism is a form of discrimination.

- It creates and maintains inequality, disadvantaging people because of features related to their race.



What is race? Child-friendly

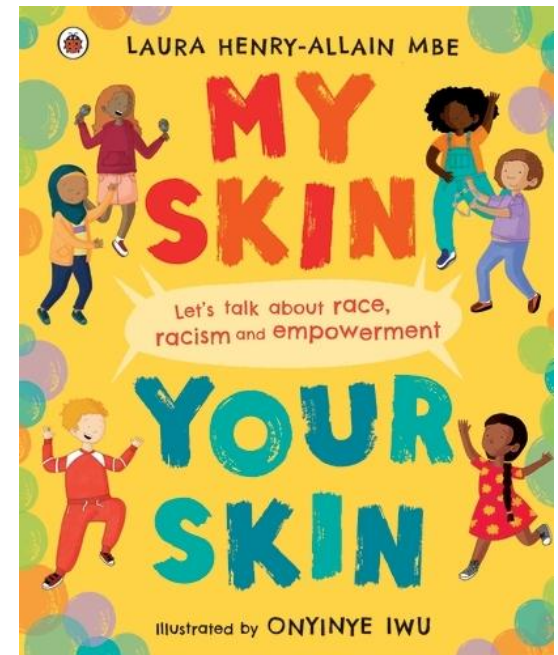
“People look different in lots of ways, like having different skin colours, hair, and faces. ”

“A long time ago, some grown-ups made up ideas to sort people into groups based on how they look. **We call this race.**”

That made some people think one group was better than another — but that isn't true.”

“Racism is when people are treated unfairly because of how they look or where their family comes from.

It can happen when people are mean to someone, and it can also happen in rules or systems that don't treat everyone the same.”



Anti-racism: what does it mean?

Anti-racist practice is an approach aimed at **identifying, challenging, and dismantling** all forms of racial inequality against Black and minoritised people in educational spaces.

- Involves an **awareness** to the presence (and absence) of race in everyday society.
- Involves an **ongoing commitment** to taking steps to challenge all forms of racial prejudice and discrimination.

Where there is an anti-racist approach, everyone wins.



Anti-racism: what's the point?
Anti-racism: why do we need it?
Anti-racism: what does it mean?

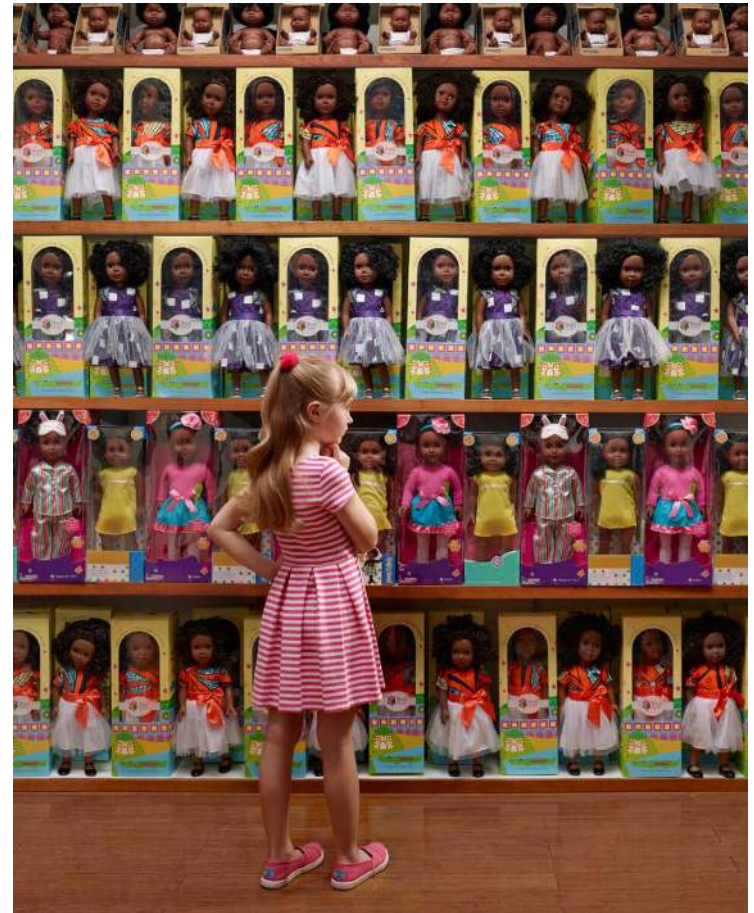
Toward a Race-Aware Pedagogy

“The willingness to self-evaluate is crucial to any process of unlearning racism and white supremacy” (bell hooks ,2013, p.147)

Moving toward a race-aware pedagogy

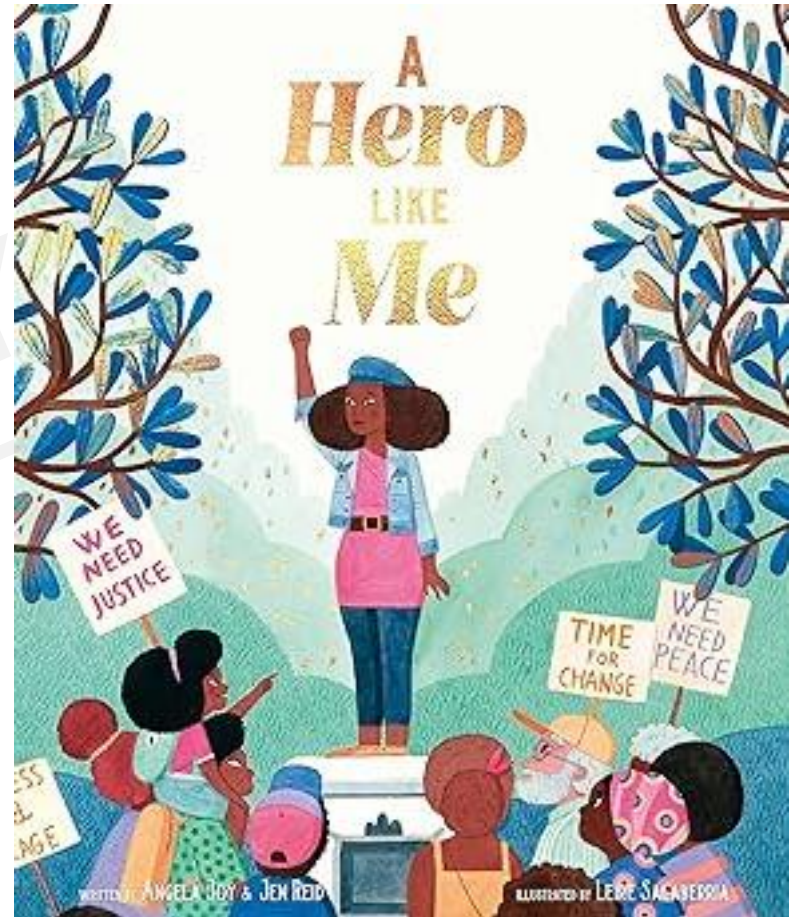
- Picture books can offer children **mirrors, windows and sliding doors** (Bishop, 1990)
- Look for resources **'that flip the script'**, celebrate Black and minoritised people, and that are produced by them, too.
- However – be mindful of treating them as **a quick fix.**

Engagement with resources often depends on the adult's expertise.



Chris Buck: "Let's Talk About Race"

Moving toward a race-aware pedagogy



Moving toward a race-aware pedagogy



Credit to Easton Community Children's Centre
Forthcoming in Tembo, S. Social Justice Early Years Pedagogy. Sage.

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Responding to comments in the moment (**reactive** practice)

Sometimes practitioners need to respond **in the moment** — particularly when play:

- ❑ excludes or marginalises a child
- ❑ reinforces harmful stereotypes
- ❑ causes visible distress or harm

What this *might* sound like (depending on context)

There is no single “correct” response. Practitioners need to weigh:

- ❑ children’s ages and understanding
- ❑ relationships and power dynamics in the group
- ❑ whether harm is being reinforced or questioned

Responses *might* include:

- “That word can hurt people. In our nursery, we don’t talk about people like that.”
- “Let’s think about why you have that idea — is it fair?”
- “Let’s pause — it looks like someone might be feeling left out.”

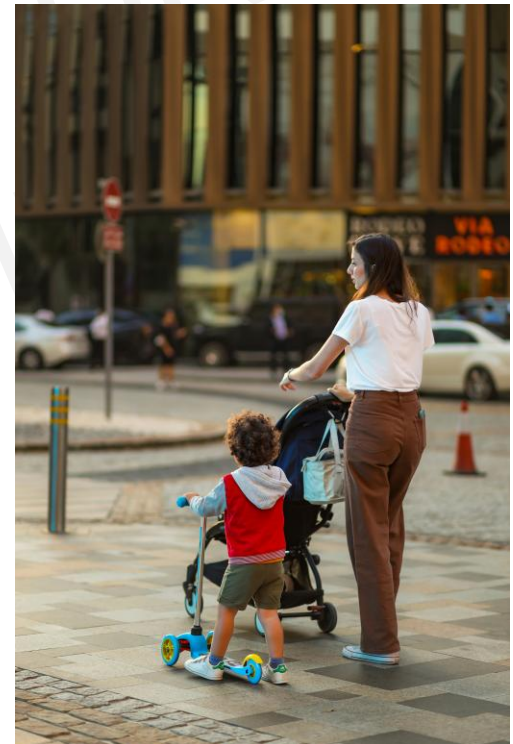
Shaping the conditions (**proactive practice**)

What this can look like

- Offering books and resources that show diverse identities as *ordinary*, not exceptional
- Talking regularly about fairness, difference, and feelings — not only when something goes wrong
- Creating play environments that invite multiple roles, storylines, and ways of belonging

Proactive practice reduces the need for intervention later, because children already have:

- broader reference points
- shared language
- greater capacity to include one another



Shaping the conditions (**proactive practice**)

Proactive anti-racist practice is **not** about questioning or spotlighting individual children, particularly those who are racialised or minoritised.

What proactive conversations can look like

- Talking about skin colour, difference, and fairness through books or group play — not in response to a specific child
- Using “we” language (“Some people are treated unfairly because of how they look”) rather than “you” language
- Talking about **joy**, framing difference in positive terms.
- Revisiting ideas over time, rather than having one-off, high-pressure conversations



From Individual to Collective Practice – for library organisations

Anti-racism is not just about what one person does, but how our actions sit within the wider culture and systems around us.

- Individual roles, beliefs, and practices interact with organisational norms and community expectations.
- This means we need to look at both personal responsibility and the context we work in.
- The “five stages” framework helps us to see how these levels connect — and where our setting is positioned.



Inadequate 🚫	Well-meaning / poorly informed 😬	Basic awareness 😊	Challenging Racism 💡	Proactive anti-racism 🌟
<p>Staff are “<i>doing their best</i>” but avoid meaningful anti-racism development.</p> <p>Staff may say “<i>we welcome everyone</i>” but do not examine who actually feels represented, safe, or invited.</p> <p>Belief that none or few extra resources are required to meet needs.</p> <p>Collections, displays, events, and storytimes reproduce mainly white, Eurocentric norms.</p> <p>Closed culture with silence around racism.</p> <p>CRITICAL EARLY YEARS</p>	<p>Some, but not all, staff are keen to value racial difference.</p> <p>Token measures.</p> <p>Anti-racist books may appear during Black History Month but not across the year.</p> <p>Learning is individual rather than collective.</p> <p>Staff worry about “getting it wrong,” leading to inaction.</p> <p>Reactive approach.</p>	<p>Some attempts are made to provide an anti-racist environment.</p> <p>Work may focus on visible diversity without deeper attention to racism, access, community relationships, or how children/families experience the library.</p> <p>Practice is surface-level rather than systemic.</p>	<p>Anti-racism is firmly on the agenda.</p> <p>Most staff engage in conscious learning about racial inequality.</p> <p>Clear responsibility and accountability for anti-racist practice.</p> <p>Zero tolerance of prejudice and agreed procedures in place.</p> <p>Open culture encourages conversations about racism.</p> <p>Collections, displays, events, outreach, and partnerships are reviewed critically.</p> <p>Caregivers are actively involved</p>	<p>All staff are confident in their practice</p> <p>Anti-racism is woven through the org's collections, programming, recruitment, partnerships, communication, and evaluation.</p> <p>Diverse books and stories are normalised all year round, not treated as special topics.</p> <p>The organisation regularly reviews who is reached, who is missing, and what needs to change.</p>

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Looking ahead: what matters next?

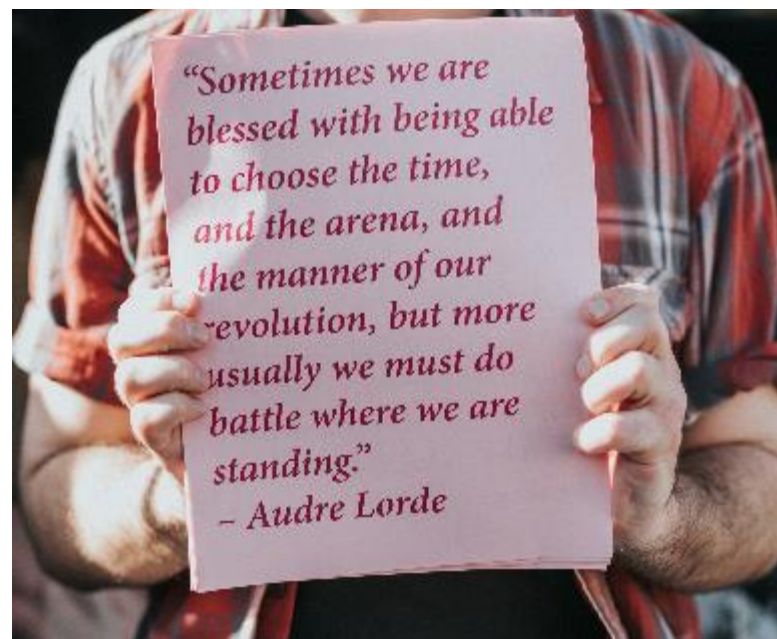
1. ■ **What areas of anti-racist practice would you like to work on or develop further?** (e.g. collections, displays, storytimes, reader recommendations, outreach, partnerships, staff confidence)
2. ■ **What feels most challenging or difficult right now?** (e.g. staff confidence, parental responses, leadership support, uncertainty about 'getting it right')
3. ■ **Looking ahead, what feels like a realistic long-term step you would want to work towards?** (This might be small, partial, or still forming.)



Summing up

- What's The Point?
- Why Do We Need It?
- Definitions: What Does It Mean?
- Toward a Race-Aware Pedagogy
- Five stages of anti-racist practice – for library organisations

Closing Round: What are your thoughts and feelings as we end this session? What has 'stuck' with you? What are you still curious about?



**Thanks for
participating 🙌**

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Dr Shaddai Tembo

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