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Black Lives Matter in Early Childhood Education, why is it important and who is it important to?

Abstract

This report is concerned with the importance of early years practitioners utilising an advocacy role to promote Black Lives Matters (BLM) education within early years settings. In particular, this report addresses the question of whether early childhood education practitioners are equipped to promote BLM education through anti-racist pedagogy. Emphasis is devoted to the practicing of anti-racist approaches with the intention of promoting children to act as agents of change. The author concludes by emphasising the value of BLM education for children, practitioners and society at large, and provides recommendations for early childhood education practitioners engaging in critical race learning.

Key words: Advocacy; Agents of change; Black Lives Matter; Early Childhood Education; Persona Dolls

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to recognise the importance of early years practitioners utilising an advocacy role so as to promote Black Lives Matter (BLM) education within early years settings. This report aims to identify the importance of BLM education for both black and white children.

BLM is a social movement, with the intention to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities systemically and by vigilantes. BLM intends to combat acts of violence, create space for Black imagination and innovation, and centre Black joy. BLM is inclusive of black LGBTQ+, disabled, undocumented immigrants, people with criminal records, women, and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. BLM is a movement which strives for Black lives to no longer be subjected to systemic inequality and oppression within society (Black Lives Matter, 2021).

The challenges faced by Black children in the UK

Children's charity Barnados (2020) discuss the many ways systemic racism affects black children in the UK. Barnados (2020) challenge the conception that racism is explicitly visible and obvious, and perpetuated by individuals through physical and verbal abuse. While validating that this visible abuse is existent, Barnados (2020) highlight how other elements of racism are widespread but often more difficult to recognise, identifying how major institutions within the UK operate in discriminatory ways against Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people including children; this is systemic or institutional racism.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) (2015) identify Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean, and Black African groups as the most in poverty groups in the UK. Bartels (2017) acknowledges this disparity in poverty rates to be the result of systemic racism. Grimshaw and Rubery (cited in Lehndorff, 2012) identify changes to tax credits and the freezing of child benefit to be contributing to child poverty, thereby increasing risk factors within lone parent families. JRF (2015) identify a contributing factor to child poverty within Black Caribbean and Black African groups to be linked to substantial levels of lone parenthood.

50.1% of Black Caribbean's with children are reported to be single parents and 38.4% Black Africans.

Farquharson and Thornton (2020) develop a further understanding of the effects of systemic racism when exploring the effects of racism on health during the Covid-19 pandemic. They emphasise the oppression perpetuated on minority children for over 400 years. This ongoing oppression creates generational inequality as it increases the challenge of social class migration between each generation. Intergenerational trauma, social determinants, and cultural mistrust are identified as the three main areas which enable the existence of health inequalities. Farquharson and Thornton (2020) highlight racism's role in influencing policies creating structural racism's role in health inequality, urging policy change and accountability to be taken into consideration in order to combat the disparities existent for minorities within healthcare.

From a more holistic perspective, Tran's (2016) research indicates that people who have experienced poverty within their early years are at the greatest risk of failing to reach their developmental potential. Stack and Meredith's (2017) discussion of the implications of financial hardship to parent's mental health may contribute to this risk of failing to reach developmental needs. Condon et al (2020) groups parental mental illness to adverse childhood experiences with potentially life-long consequences for health and wellbeing. According to Sylvestrea and Mérettec (2010), parents who struggle with their mental health may adopt Maccoby and Martin's (1983) fourth parenting style, 'uninvolved' or 'neglectful' parenting. Morin and Gans' (2018) research suggests associated outcomes for children with uninvolved/neglectful parenting style include impulsive behaviours and inability to regulate emotions. This indicates potential for intergenerational trauma response as a consequence of poverty enhanced by the austerity program.

As Barnados (2020) highlighted, this poverty is significantly impacted by the effects of institutional and systemic racism. Therefore, it is important to adopt an anti-bias perspective when considering the poverty related challenges faced by many Black children in the UK. An example of how these risk-factors are influenced by systemic racism is Graff's (2014) emphasis of how the common absence of Black fathers, and in turn high number of lone parent families, is linked to the intergenerational trauma faced by Black people as aftermath of their ancestor's enslavement. This notion is supported by Reynolds (2009), who reinforces the impact of historical factors influencing men's fathering experiences.

Gregory and Roberts (2017) further the understanding of the challenges faced by many Black children in the UK when highlighting the disparity in discipline between Black and white children within education settings. Black children are reportedly punished at a significantly higher rate when compared to white children. Okonofua and Eberhardt (2015) note this disparity in response to children's behaviour and identified this to be result of teacher's unconscious bias. Tate and Page (2018) explain unconscious bias to be quick judgements and assessments made without an individual realising. It is explained that these biases are often influenced by an individual's background, cultural environment, and experiences. While many allow acceptances of 'unconscious bias' due to the belief the host of these biases is unaware of the presence of the bias, and its full impact, Tate and Page (2018) argue that racism is merely hiding behind 'unconscious bias'. They instead argue that bias is linked to Charles Mills' 'Racial Contract' and its 'epistemologies of ignorance'. They propose that unconscious bias has become a performative means of addressing racism as 'unconscious', which diminishes white supremacy and is rooted in white fragility.

Katz's (2003) research identified that it is not only practitioners who present unconscious bias but also infants as young as six months old

both discriminate racial differences and exhibit categorisation based on racial cues. Katz (2003) identifies parents' beliefs and racial biases to contribute to those of their children. In addition to the effects of systemic racism, many Black children are also subjected to macro and micro racism (Sue et al, 2019). Macro racism is defined as explicitly visible and obvious, and perpetuated by individuals through physical and verbal abuse (Barnados, 2020). Nadal et al (2014) defines micro as "every day" and "Subtle". Wing et al (2007) offer some examples of micro racisms, for example: asking a Black person where they are from; telling a Black person they defy stereotypes of their race for example, "You don't talk like you're Black.", colour-blindness for example "I don't see your colour.", a white person asserting that they cannot be racist as they have Black friends, a white person assuming a Black person may engage in criminal behaviour. Despite the daily prevalence of micro racism, Nadal et al (2014) emphasise the lack of research contributing towards the understanding of what is micro racism. This lack of research persists despite the effects of inequality and discrimination contributing to what Essien (2019) refers to as discrimination shaping experiences in early childhood.

Dijk (2018) uses labelling theory to explain why experiences of stigma may be shaping experiences for children (Essien, 2019). Stigma is defined as a negative label which, through self-fulfilling prophecy and internalisation, may change a person's self-concept and social identity (Dijk, 2018). Solomon (2017) found that negative labels influence children's developing identities, creating adverse effects on their decision-making, behaviour and relationships. Having a negative self-concept is associated with low self-esteem. Verkuyten and Thijs (2004) highlight how ethnic and racial minority children often suffer from low self-esteem as a result of discrimination and internalised prejudice.

Early childhood education practitioners, are they equipped to promote BLM education?

Despite Katz's (2003) findings surrounding the early emergence of racial bias, Lee et al (2017) note the potential of practitioner intervention to combat the early occurrence of implicit racial bias.

Zsuzsa (2017) emphasises that early years practitioners should act as an advocate for young children, and that this role must include a recognition of inequalities in society and the child's voice. Liebovich and Adler (2009) suggest that early years practitioners should be political, activists and change agents who work to develop persuasive communication skills and locate and offer appropriate resources. Boyd (2018) reflects on the strong advocacy for community ethics based on social justice, peace, and equality paramount to the beliefs of many early childhood education pioneers.

Despite the benefits of promoting children to become agents of change, Brown and Anderson (2019) suggest that many adults including parents, teachers and researchers are uncomfortable with the idea of talking to young children about race. Robert (2016) adds that some parents and early childhood education practitioners wonder how long they can delay conversations surrounding race.

Matias (2016) highlights the prominence of white middle-class women as teachers, raising the concern that these practitioners are not often equipped to conduct anti-racist pedagogy. Matias (2016) links this prominence to Lukes' (1974, 2005) model of hegemonic power which relates to Marxist ideologies by viewing historically held values and beliefs of disadvantaged groups to result in these groups accepting their disadvantage and subsequently see no point in challenging it. Gould's (1994) notion of tactical concession however notes that recognition of hegemonic dimension of power may lead to tokenistic policies being put in place to appease and maintain equilibrium. This could include equality policies within early childhood education

settings; King and Chandler (2016) may identify such policies as non-racism, which is defined as the passive rejection of explicitly visible forms of racism, as opposed to anti-racism. While explicit forms of racism should be rejected, a practitioner should aim to impose an anti-oppressive approach as to challenge hegemonic power and racism.

Hegemonic power can be challenged by a reflexive practitioner utilising an anti-oppressive approach by following McLaughlin's (2006) main characteristics of user involvement: consultation, collaboration and user-led. This resonates with Kishimonto (2015), who argues that practitioners must engage in self-reflection to develop an awareness of their social position and begin to effectively implement anti-racist pedagogy. Matias (2016) and Yeung et al (2013) recommend white early childhood education practitioners engage with critical whiteness pedagogy so as to increase knowledge of critical race issues including systemic racism and white privilege. With increased understanding of racial issues, Zsuszsa (2017) states that early year's professionals would be better equipped to advocate for black children.

Ultimately, Kishimonto (2015) provides three components to anti-racist pedagogy. Firstly, incorporating the topics of race and inequality into course content, secondly teaching from an anti-racist pedagogical approach, finally anti-racist organising within the setting while linking efforts to the community. Although these three components would be beneficial to positive anti-racist pedagogy, practitioner engagement in critical whiteness pedagogy must come first (Yeung et al, 2013).

King, Gregory and Robert's (2016) acknowledgment that many early childhood education practitioners wish to delay conversations about race and, Brown and Anderson's (2019) suggestion of adults' feelings of uncomfortableness surrounding conversations with children about race, may contribute to the prevalence of anti-racist approaches with early childhood education (King and Chandler, 2016).

Cultivating agents of change

Rearson (2005) conveys the importance of early childhood education environments as spaces to deconstruct racism rather than maintain the ideology of colour-blindness which is associated with non-racism approaches to pedagogy (King and Chandler, 2016). Colour-blindness refers to Bonilla-Silva's (2006) four frames of colour-blind ideology: Abstract liberalism, naturalisation, cultural racism, and minimisation of racism. Abstract liberalism involves using ideas associated with political liberalism and economic liberalism in an abstract manner to explain racial matters. For example, white people discrediting black people's experiences and instead insisting that there are equal opportunities. Naturalisation refers to white people implying that racism is acceptable as it is a natural occurrence for people to gravitate towards people of their likeness. Cultural racism relies on culturally based arguments to explain the standing of minorities in society. Minimisation of racism suggests discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities' life choices.

Hagerman (2015) asserts that children are not colour-blind and with this urges early childhood education practitioners to not take a colour-blind approach to practice. As highlighted above, practitioners should be presenting in an advocacy role for children (Zsuza, 2017). Advocating for children supports UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), Article 12 – the provision that children have a right to express their views and have them taken seriously in accordance with their age and maturity – "has proved one of the most challenging to implement." The UNCRC add that their resource guide "Every child's right to be heard" should be used as a major contribution to achieving change (UNESCO, 2011). Despite the importance of practitioners advocating for the voice of the child, the current Early Years framework (DfE, 2020) does not mention the voice of the child.

For a practitioner who values the voice of the child, early childhood education settings can become a site for democracy. This resonates with The United Nations General Assembly (2016) resolution “Education for Democracy”. Boyd (2018) discusses the connection between historical pioneers and early childhood education for sustainability. Early childhood education pioneer John Dewey inspired much emphasis on current democratic practices within early years settings. Dewey argues that, as children are affected by societal institutions, they should be entitled to a share in producing and managing them (Dewey, 2001). Magnolia (2016) highlights established links between human rights, democracy, and development, referring to recognising the contribution of Global Citizenship Education towards democracy (UNESECO, 2016).

Practicing with an anti-racist approach with the intent of promoting children to act as agents of change, Silva and Langhout (2012) recognise how integrating a critical perspective to practice can result in discussions of power, privilege, can empower children to become agents of social change within their community. While democratic early childhood education environments are particularly beneficial for promoting anti-racism in early childhood, Wasmuth and Netecki (2017) highlight the lack of democracy present in English early childhood education. Dudley et al (2019) emphasise the extreme intervention used by early childhood education practitioners and the power imbalances present within early childhood education settings - factors which may contribute to the lack of democracy within early years settings. Power imbalances and lack of agency for children goes against the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) and in turn may contribute to English children’s lower wellbeing as highlighted by UNICEF Child Wellbeing in Rich Countries (2013) report which identified The UK 16th out of 29 countries regarding wellbeing, however 24th out of 29 countries regarding education.

Wasmuth and Netecki (2017) conject that the reason early childhood education as a democratic environment is not projected more globally is due to neoliberalism and capitalism. The hierarchy which is present in many early childhood education institutions sets the foundation for children to exist in capitalist society as adults. Kasser and Linn (2016) suggest socio-cultural focus prioritises engraining skills which will endorse profit and power over values which support the nurturing of children. Wasmuth and Netecki (2017) suggest the Global Education Reform Movement is acting as a capitalist agent manipulating early childhood education practitioners to uphold neoliberal thinking within education settings. This resonates with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory when considering the macrosystem which contains cultural and political elements which indirectly affect children (Hanley, 2019).

Wasmuth and Netecki (2017) suggest that early childhood education as a democratic environment creates potential for social systems to be challenged. This links to the idea of early childhood education as a space to cultivate agents of social change (Silva, Langhout, 2012). Michael and Bartoli (2014) recognise how childhood is a space for shaping racial socialisation for white children. Ideally, this socialisation will promote white children's abilities to build productive and genuine relationships with the people of colour, and to recognise the effect that race has on their experience. Relating to the idea of children as agents of change (Silva and Langhout, 2012), Michael and Bartoli (2014) address how socialisation in the early years can empower children to challenge an unjust racial system as opposed to being passive participants within this system. This relates to Rearson (2005), who discusses the development of social justice allies and in doing so identifies white people as the cause of racism and therefore should act to eradicate it.

Sue et al (2019) furthers understanding of the white ally by demonstrating reactions/interventions allies may present when responding to witnessing micro racisms: make the invisible visible, disarm the micro racism, educate the perpetrator, and seek external reinforcement or support. Alder et al (2013) convey how early childhood education practitioners can develop critical thinking in children to create agents of change as opposed to children who may act as bystanders to racism.

Tools used to cultivate agents of change

The Persona Doll can be used as a positive resource for children during their early years, as a supportive pedagogical approach in scaffolding the thinking children (Maryam et al, 2020). The Persona Doll is underpinned by the work of Derman-Sparks and Brunson Phillips (1996).

Persona Dolls are used to encourage tolerance, anti-bias approaches, democracy, participation and to challenge issues related to social inequalities. Persona Dolls are created from cloth to become realistic, culturally and gender appropriate dolls (Brown, 2008). Each doll is given a persona or identity, with an individual personality incorporating factors including: cultural, social class backgrounds, family situations, abilities, disabilities, fears and interests. The stories that are told about each Doll's life may include issues related to social inequalities such as racism, gender, AIDS stigma, social class, poverty, abuse, and disability (Brown, 2008).

The use of the Persona Doll within anti-racist pedagogy enables open-ended discussions surrounding complex issues to develop based on experiences of the Doll. Involving children in such conversations allows scaffolding (Maryam et al., 2020) to occur to help support children to empathise with those who experience social inequalities. Such conversations incorporates democratic practices which are embedded through the ideas of Pioneer Dewey (Luff, 2017) and

Malaguzzi's Reggio Emilia philosophy (Rinaldi, 2006). This active engagement with children resonates with Sustainable Development Goal 10 'Reduced Inequalities' (UNESECO). Children are scaffolded to understand the consequences of prejudiced attitudes and discriminatory behaviour. By providing children with accurate information regarding social inequalities they can develop their own fundamental foundation of beliefs and values. This can empower children to stand up to bias by providing them with the confidence to challenge any discrimination they may encounter (Michael and Bartoli, 2014).

Brown (2001) discusses how engagement with Persona Dolls provides children with a safe space for conversation which enables the opportunity to talk about their own identities, life experiences and feelings. Children are encouraged to assist the doll in resolving problems. For children who have experienced social inequalities such as exclusion, bullying or prejudice the practitioner is then able to navigate strategies to support (Brown, 2008). The diversity of each doll provides representation for Black children. Again, this positive representation supports Black children in developing positive ethnic-racial identities (Moses et al., 2019). Moses et al (2019) illustrate the importance of positive ethnic-racial identities for Black children, suggesting strong ethnic-racial identity may act as a protective factor for children who have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences.

Racial Encounter Coping Appraisal and Socialization Theory (RECAST) is one model which practitioners may be able to use as a tool to navigate offering support to Black students who may be experiencing emotional difficulty because of racial stress (Stevenson, 2014). RECAST aims to provide children with the skills and confidence to challenge racial stressors. Anderson and Stevenson (2019) reiterate the importance of practitioners understanding of critical race issues so as to prepare themselves to support Black children holistically.

Mosley (2010) refers to critical race literature pedagogy as a tool which can transcend understanding of race for both practitioners and children. Dixon (2018) discusses how representation of minority groups within children's literature can positively influence children's perceptions. Winkler (2009) claims that between ages three and five children begin to apply stereotypes and categorise people by race. During the early years, children are prone to transductive reasoning (Piaget, 1936, cited Macblain, 2018), which is when a child fails to understand the true relationships between cause and effect. This can lead children to believe if people look alike, they must be alike in other ways. Representation in children's literature depicting children from minority groups enables children to see people as multidimensional. This is achieved by focusing on multiple attributes of each character at once. Encouraging children to view people as multidimensional can help curtail bias (Winkler, 2017).

White children it may find it difficult to resonate with the experiences of Black people, thus representation of Black people within children's literature provides opportunity for open-ended conversations to be stimulated (Mosley, 2010). Children's egocentric tendencies (Piaget, 1936, cited in Macblain, 2018) may influence this challenge to understand the experience of Black people. By involving children in conversations regarding inclusivity, scaffolding (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976) can occur to help support children to empathise with Black people regarding their experiences with racism. Talking about the experiences of Black people with children should include providing them with accurate information. However, it is important to note that if the practitioner is white, they should ensure their perspective is coming from Black voices (Newton, 2017). Morgan (2019) suggests this can be achieved by hiring more black teachers. This again allows scaffolding to take place (Wood et al 1976), enabling children to develop their own fundamental foundation of accurate information and understanding.

Black Lives Matter early childhood education for Black children

Blackwell (2010) argues that much anti-racist pedagogy is preoccupied with bringing consciousness surrounding racism and white privilege to white students as opposed to creating benefits for Black students. While it is important to raise such consciousness and cultivate agents of change and social justice allies (Sue et al., 2019), it is important for this to not be done at the expense of retraumatising Black children (Blackwell, 2010). Tynes et al (2019) highlight the effects for Black children experiencing racial fatigue in response to increased visibility of racism. While race should not be ignored (Epstein, 2010), it is important for the practitioner to focus on Black joy (BLM, 2021) rather than racism so as to prevent racial fatigue and retraumatisation (Tynes et al, 2019).

Johnson, Lachuk and Mosley (2012) emphasise the benefits of critical race literacy in promoting use of positive racial language amongst Black children. Dixon (2018) discusses the importance of diverse representation in children's literature for Black children to be based on inclusivity and perception. Positive representation in children's books allows Black children to feel included in a society, reinforcing positive views of themselves and what they are capable of achieving. Critical race literacy supports prevention of internalised prejudice based on the negative perceptions of Black people from both their peers and society (Verkuyten, Thijs, 2004).

Conclusion

While discussions surrounding race with children may be found to be uncomfortable for many adults (Brown and Anderson, 2019), the importance of BLM education within early childhood education is undeniable as we recognise the benefits for both children, practitioners, and society (Michael and Bartoli, 2014). It is

recommendations that early childhood education practitioners engage in critical race learning to develop their own knowledge of racism and white privilege, dispel unconscious-bias and enhance their ability to cultivating both agents of change and strong ethnic-racial identities (Zsuzsa, 2017; Alder et al., 2013; Moses et al., 2019). Furthermore, early years settings should work to employ more black practitioners (Morgan, 2019). This not only provides students with representation of black people, but allows a more authentic implementation of BLM education, where white educators could be more susceptible to implementing tokenistic education.

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