

**“They Didn’t Take It Seriously”: A Qualitative Exploration of Black Students’
Experiences of Navigating Racism in UK Education Systems**

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“Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,” says the Lord Almighty (Zechariah 4:6).

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CRT: Critical Race Theory

RTA: Racial Trauma in Action

ESSA: Every Student Succeeds Act

ONS: Office for National Statistics

HEART: Healing Ethno-Racial Trauma

DfE: Department for Education

EHRC: Equality and Human Rights Commission

Ofsted: Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills

PIA: Professional Inter-Adultification

CASP: Critical Appraisal Skills Programme

IPA: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

NA: Narrative Analysis

TA: Thematic Analysis

RQ: Research Question

RBTSM: Race-Based Traumatic Stress Model

LGBTQ+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and other sexual orientations and gender identities

UKB: United Kingdom Beast

SLT: Senior Leadership Team

PSHE: Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education

GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S IDIOMS

Independent/public schools: In the United Kingdom context, independent schools (also referred to as public schools) are fee-paying institutions that operate independently of direct government funding.

State schools: State schools are government-funded educational institutions that provide free education to pupils.

Grammar schools: Grammar schools are state-funded secondary schools that select pupils based on academic performance.

UK Beast: The term “United Kingdom beast” is a derogatory, racialised and misogynistic label, circulating within online discourses in the UK, used to dehumanise Black women. It positions them as aggressive, hyper-masculine, undesirable, or animalistic.

Clamp down: Used to describe stricter or more punitive disciplinary responses from school staff.

Kick-off: Used to refer to becoming visibly angry, argumentative or confrontational.

Abstract

Background: Racism within schools in England represents a significant yet insufficiently addressed form of institutional harm. Black students experience racism within educational settings during critical stages of identity development, with implications for psychological well-being, sense of belonging, and academic engagement. Despite statutory equality policies, little research has centred on Black students' perspectives on how racism is navigated within school systems, particularly in relation to formal reporting processes and institutional accountability.

Aims and Methodology: A critical realist qualitative framework was used, employing reflexive thematic analysis, to explore the impact of school-based racism on Black students aged 13–18; to examine their relationships with formal reporting channels; and to identify student-informed priorities for institutional change. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with a purposive sample of 26 Black young people.

Findings: The findings highlight how racialised stereotypes positioned Black students as risky, disruptive, or less deserving of psychological understanding. Participants described engaging in calculated self-protection, including emotional suppression, behavioural monitoring, and relational withdrawal, to navigate racism in school environments. Institutional responses to racial harm were frequently experienced as ambiguous, minimising, or unclear, contributing to epistemic uncertainty and fractured trust. At the same time, young people articulated psychologically informed visions of change, emphasising relational safety, racial literacy, culturally responsive safeguarding, increased representation and whole-school accountability.

Conclusions: This research positions racial harm in schools as an institutional process rather than isolated interpersonal incidents. By centring Black students' voices, the study highlights the gap between anti-racist policy commitments and lived implementation. The recommendations discuss advancement for systemic reform across school policy, reporting mechanisms, safeguarding practices, and staff training to prevent racial harm and rebuild institutional trust.

Chapter One: Introduction

“Education either functions as an instrument to bring about conformity or freedom.”

(Paulo Freire, 1970).

Education has long been regarded as a transformative force, a space where knowledge, growth, and empowerment converge. Yet, as Freire (1970) argues, education also holds the potential to reproduce systems of conformity and control. For some Black students, the classroom is often a site where both possibilities coexist: a space for learning and self-discovery, but also one where racialised experiences of exclusion, surveillance, and harm are enacted. Rather than viewing these tensions as fixed or inevitable, this thesis is motivated by a call to action, to resist passivity and to transform structures that perpetuate inequality. This positioning reflects the values that underpin the motivation for this thesis.

I feel privileged to be in a position to write this thesis, recognising that such an opportunity comes despite the systemic and interpersonal barriers I have encountered throughout my education as a Black, immigrant woman. Holding the intersecting identities of a Black woman, trainee clinical psychologist, and doctoral researcher instils in me a deep awareness of the ethical responsibility I carry in representing and advocating for Black students' voices. I regard this research as both a professional duty and a personal commitment to ensure that the insights shared by these students inform real and lasting transformation within educational systems. My commitment to equity, advocacy, and social justice informs this project and shapes my understanding of the power and responsibility that accompany the privilege of academic authorship. Through this work, I aim to contribute to educational practices that do more than acknowledge inequality, practices that actively safeguard, empower, and affirm Black students.

Chapter Overview

In this chapter, I begin by positioning myself in relation to the research and outlining the personal and professional motivations that underpin my work. I then introduce and define the key terminology used throughout the thesis, clarifying the conceptual and linguistic choices that frame discussions of race, racism, and education. Following this, I provide a brief historical overview of Black communities within the education system in England, considering how the legacies of colonialism and migration have shaped present-day schooling.

I go on to examine the current educational landscape, focusing on the persistent racial inequalities that continue to influence Black students' experiences, access, and well-being within schools. I also discuss the broader social and institutional structures that perpetuate racism and explore how these intersect with safeguarding practices. Finally, I outline the theoretical and policy frameworks that inform this research and conclude by introducing the rationale for the following chapter's meta-ethnography, which synthesises existing literature on Black students' experiences of racism across educational settings. This sets the foundation for the empirical study that follows, which explores how Black students experience, navigate, and respond to racism within schools in England.

Positionality of the Researcher

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is central to this research, recognising that my interpretations are inevitably shaped by my own values, experiences, and social positioning. As qualitative researchers such as Charmaz (2014) and Braun and Clarke (2019) argue, it is impossible to stand completely outside of one's research; instead, knowledge is co-constructed through the dynamic relationship between researcher and participants. I therefore approach this study as an active participant in the meaning-making process rather than a detached observer.

Throughout the project, I engaged in ongoing self-reflection to examine how my beliefs and identity as a Black woman and trainee clinical psychologist influenced my analytic choices and interactions with participants. Transparency was maintained by documenting reflexive notes and discussing emerging interpretations within supervision. Consistent with contemporary qualitative traditions, I chose to write in both the first and third person, using the first person to acknowledge my role in shaping this work, and the third to maintain clarity and accessibility for academic and professional audiences.

My relationship to the research project

My journey toward this research began in 2021, when I first learned of the tragic case of Child Q, a 15-year-old Black British girl who was strip-searched by police on her school premises, while menstruating, following the racial profiling by her teacher. This incident, which garnered national attention (Gamble & McCallum, 2022), illuminated the severity of racism and disproportionality within educational systems. The story was deeply disturbing and profoundly disheartening. While police brutality against Black individuals is not new, what

struck me most was that this injustice began within the school walls, a system meant to protect, nurture, and safeguard children.

Schools are among the first and most significant institutions that shape young people's lives, and yet, for many Black students, they can also be places of harm. The injustice experienced by Child Q awakened something in me, the activist, the researcher, and the child whose own experiences had once gone unheard. I am a first-generation Nigerian immigrant who moved to England at the age of 10. I transitioned from being a child who loved learning and felt safe and seen in school to one who was suddenly othered because of racism. My teachers failed to recognise signs of dyslexia, instead attributing my struggles to cultural or linguistic differences. My peers subjected me to racial slurs and exclusion. I was no longer simply allowed to exist as a child; my Blackness became a burden I had to navigate, a daily negotiation that my White peers were spared.

These early experiences shaped my understanding of how racism operates both structurally and interpersonally, and how its effects persist well into adulthood. They have also fuelled my determination to bring about change. Through this doctoral research, I seek to give voice to the experiences of Black students whose stories often remain unacknowledged. My aim is for this work not only to amplify these voices but also to ensure they inform the transformation urgently needed within educational systems, so that no child's dignity or safety is ever compromised again.

Insider Positioning in the Research

My position as a Black woman researching the experiences of Black students situates this work within the tradition of insider research. Conducting research from within the community being studied offers unique advantages, including enhanced trust, empathy, and access to participants' authentic narratives (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Shared cultural understanding and lived experience can foster richer dialogue, reduce the burden of explanation, supporting richer dialogue around experiences that are often minimised or misunderstood, particularly when exploring sensitive issues such as racism and belonging in education. However, insider positioning also presents challenges, as personal identification with participants' experiences can blur the boundaries between empathy and over-identification. To manage this, I engaged in ongoing reflexive practice, acknowledging moments when my own experiences resonated with the data while maintaining critical distance to ensure analytic rigour and transparency. By embracing both the strengths and complexities

of insider positioning, I aimed to conduct research that is both intellectually grounded and emotionally attuned to the realities of the community it represents.

Reflexivity and Power Dynamics

As an insider researcher, I recognised that shared identity with participants did not erase the inherent power asymmetry within the research process. While my positionality as a Black woman created a sense of mutual understanding and trust, I also occupied a position of relative authority as a doctoral researcher interpreting participants' narratives. Reflexivity, therefore, became central to this project, not only as a methodological tool but as an ethical stance. I maintained an awareness of how my social position, emotional responses, and assumptions could influence interactions and interpretations. Through reflexive journaling, supervision, and ongoing dialogue with peers, I critically examined my role in the co-construction of meaning, ensuring that participants' voices guided the direction of the analysis.

Managing Bias and Maintaining Rigour

To safeguard the credibility of the research, I adopted strategies to identify and manage potential bias while maintaining analytic rigour. I engaged in bracketing (Fischer, 2009), intentionally setting aside personal preconceptions to approach the data with openness. Interpretive decisions were documented systematically, and emergent themes were reviewed and refined in consultation with my supervisors and research team (two Black undergraduate psychology students) to enhance transparency, confirmability, and check for bias. Credibility was further supported through close engagement with the data, the inclusion of direct quotations to evidence interpretations, and consideration of alternative explanations. By combining reflexive awareness with methodological transparency, I aimed to produce findings that were both authentic to participants' lived realities and robust in their analytical integrity.

Language and Key Terminologies

Language plays a central role in shaping how social realities are constructed, understood and contested. The terms used throughout this thesis are not neutral descriptors; rather, they are embedded within historical, political and institutional contexts. Clarifying how key concepts are defined is therefore essential for transparency and epistemological positioning. The following terms are used consistently throughout this thesis and are defined below to support conceptual clarity.

Black

The term Black is used in this thesis as a socio-political and racialised category rather than a homogeneous ethnic identity. In the United Kingdom (UK) context, *Black* has historically functioned as a political identity emerging from shared experiences of racialisation, marginalisation and resistance, particularly within education and other public institutions (Warmington, 2014). While the term encompasses diverse national, cultural and migratory histories, including, for example, Black African and Black Caribbean identities, it is used here in recognition of how these groups are frequently positioned similarly within structures of schooling and policy discourse (Gillborn, 2008).

The term is capitalised to reflect its political and collective significance rather than a descriptor of skin colour alone (Joseph-Salisbury, 2020). This usage acknowledges that Black students' lives are shaped by intersecting dimensions of identity, including ethnicity, gender, class and migration history.

Race

In social science, *race* is conceptualised as a social and political construct rather than a biological category (Gillborn, 2008; Omi & Winant, 2015). Although historically used to categorise people based on perceived physical characteristics, race is now widely understood as a socially produced system of classification that organises power relations and structures inequality (Gillborn, 2008). Critical race scholars argue that while race lacks biological validity, it remains socially real in its consequences, shaping lived experience, identity, and access to material and symbolic resources (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Racialisation

Racialisation refers to the social, political and institutional processes through which meanings are attached to perceived racial differences, shaping how individuals and groups are categorised, positioned and treated within systems of power (Omi & Winant, 2015). Rather than assuming race as a fixed biological attribute, the concept of racialisation emphasises that race is actively produced and reproduced through discourse, policy, representation and everyday social practice (Murji & Solomos, 2005). Racialisation, therefore, highlights the dynamic and structural nature of race-making processes, drawing attention to how institutional systems participate in producing and sustaining racial hierarchies.

Racism

Racism refers to the systemic, institutional and interpersonal processes through which racial inequalities are created and sustained (Gillborn, 2008; Bonilla-Silva, 2018). It encompasses not only overt acts of prejudice or discrimination but also the routine, taken-for-granted policies, cultural norms and practices that advantage White groups while disadvantaging racially minoritised communities (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). In educational contexts, racism operates structurally through patterns such as differential exclusion rates, attainment gaps and curriculum marginalisation, as well as interpersonally through expectations, stereotyping and everyday racialised interactions (Gillborn, 2008; Warmington, 2014). In this thesis, racism is conceptualised as embedded within systems rather than solely located within individual attitudes, which allows for a more comprehensive analysis of inequality within schools (Gillborn, 2008). This position is consistent with Gilroy's (2013) argument that racialised ways of understanding and organising social life are deeply woven into the formation of British national identity, rather than operating as external or exceptional phenomena.

The Historical and Socio-Political Context of Black People Globally

The transatlantic slave trade, commencing in the sixteenth century and extending into the nineteenth, forcibly removed millions of African men, women and children and subjected them to conditions of abuse, bondage and dehumanisation (Berlin, 1998). This system was ideological as much as economic: enslaved people were constructed as inferior and, crucially, those who attempted escape or resisted captivity were often pathologised. A notorious example is the so-called "drapetomania", first described in 1851 by physician Samuel A. Cartwright (Fischer, 2022). This pseudo-diagnosis framed the desire for freedom among enslaved Black people as a mental illness. This pathologisation of resistance has left enduring legacies in how Black bodies, minds, and lives are valued or devalued in institutional systems (Edwards-Grossi & Willoughby, 2024).

In the UK context, these global histories matter because the UK's Black population is rooted in histories of enslavement, colonialism, post-war migration (including the Windrush generation) and more recent movement from African and Caribbean countries. (Phillips & Phillips, 1998; Small, 1994). As of the 2021 Census, approximately 2.4 million people in England and Wales (about 4.2% of the population) identified as Black, Black British, Caribbean or African (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2022). <https://diversityuk.org/census-2021->

data-reveals-ethnic-make-up-of-uk-population/?utm_source=chatgpt.com Regional diversity is significant: for instance, in London, roughly 13.5% of residents identified as Black in 2021 (ONS, 2022). These figures illustrate not only growth in the size and visibility of Black communities in the UK but also the increasing complexity of educational, social and institutional systems as they engage with greater diversity.

Understanding the historical backdrop of slavery and racialisation helps to situate contemporary disparities in education, health, and institutional safeguarding not as disconnected events, but as part of a continuum of structural oppression and marginalisation (Gilborn, 2008; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1998). For example, the legacy of slavery and the pathologisation of Black resistance, such as the pseudo-diagnosis of drapetomania, helped legitimise institutional control of Black bodies, a form of control that continues to manifest today through differential treatment in schools, policing, and mental health systems (Edwards-Grossi et al., 2024; Fernando, 2017; Williams et al., 2013). Within schooling, this legacy is often visible in how Black students are disciplined, monitored, or misinterpreted, where their expressions of resistance or self-protection are framed as “problematic” rather than as acts of agency (Gillborn, 2010; Rollock, 2007).

Consequently, disparities in academic attainment, school-related safeguarding, exclusion rates and mental health outcomes among Black students cannot be fully understood without reference to this broader socio-historical and political context. For this thesis, in which I explore Black students' experiences of racism in secondary schools across England, the recognition of this legacy is foundational. It frames racism not as isolated incidents but as embedded within systems shaped by centuries of colonial, racialised and educational injustice.

Segregation in the Aftermath of Slavery

Although the abolition of slavery marked the legal end to human ownership in the UK, it did not dismantle the racial hierarchies or segregationist ideologies that sustained it. Across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, segregation was both formalised and normalised in many societies through systems such as Jim Crow laws in the United States (US) and colonial education structures within the British Empire (Anderson, 1988). Black people were systematically excluded from White institutions and relegated to separate schools, often underfunded and staffed with fewer resources, reinforcing structural inequality.

In the UK, while explicit legal segregation did not exist, systemic and institutional forms of racial exclusion were evident, particularly within education. Following the post-war migration of Caribbean families, the Windrush generation, Black children were disproportionately labelled as “educationally subnormal” (Coard, 1971). Many were placed in separate schools or special education classes that limited academic opportunities and reinforced racist stereotypes about intellectual ability (Richardson, 2005). These practices mirrored the racialised schooling systems of the colonial and segregation eras, embedding structural disadvantage into British education. Understanding these legacies is critical, as they continue to shape patterns of attainment, exclusion, and representation of Black students today (Gillborn, 2008).

Intentional and Unintentional Segregation: Educational and Health Inequalities

Segregation has persisted into contemporary society in both explicit and structural forms. Intentional segregation refers to deliberate efforts to separate Black and White populations, historically justified through racist ideologies that reinforced notions of inferiority (Braveman et al., 2022). Unintentional segregation, by contrast, arises through structural factors, such as housing policies, school zoning, and socioeconomic inequality, that perpetuate racial and class divisions even in the absence of overt discriminatory intent (Dorling, 2018; Rosiek, 2019).

In the UK, schools are embedded within wider landscapes of structural and spatial inequality. Dorling (2018) argues that contemporary Britain is characterised by deepening social and geographic divisions, shaped by housing policy, income inequality, and the uneven distribution of resources. These divisions structure the local contexts in which schools operate. Research in education shows that schools located in areas of socioeconomic deprivation are more likely to be under-resourced and to experience higher staff turnover and exclusion rates (Gillborn, 2010; Strand, 2014). Importantly, Gillborn (2010) demonstrates that these conditions do not operate in race-neutral ways. Racialised groups, particularly Black students, are disproportionately exposed to punitive schooling practices and unequal educational outcomes, even when socioeconomic factors are taken into account. In this way, broader structural inequalities intersect with racism within education, producing racial disparities.

Furthermore, segregation in educational contexts has direct implications for safeguarding and the emotional safety of Black children. Schools serving racially minoritised communities are more likely to operate within systems marked by surveillance, deficit

narratives, and punitive disciplinary responses rather than relational support (Gillborn et al., 2018). When Black pupils are concentrated in under-resourced environments or positioned as minorities in predominantly White schools, they are at heightened risk of experiencing racism, isolation, and adultification, where they are viewed as less vulnerable and more responsible for their behaviour compared to their White peers (Epstein et al., 2017). These systemic patterns weaken safeguarding structures by normalising differential treatment and minimising the psychological harm of racial trauma. Understanding segregation, therefore, highlights that Black children's protection cannot be divorced from the structural conditions in which schooling takes place; safeguarding failures often emerge not from individual incidents alone, but from institutional environments shaped by historical and ongoing racial inequality.

Poor Mental Health Outcomes for Black People and Intersections with Systems of Oppression

In the UK, Black people are more likely to encounter mental health services through crisis or coercive pathways, often involving the police or emergency services rather than primary or community care (Bhui et al., 2018; NHS Digital, 2022). They are also significantly more likely to be subject to compulsory detention under the Mental Health Act, with recent data showing Black people detained at rates more than three times higher than White people in England (UK Government, 2023). These inequalities have been linked to structural racism within mental health systems, including racialised patterns of diagnosis, treatment, and access to care, and have contributed to longstanding mistrust of services among Black communities (Keating et al., 2004).

The legacy of racialised psychiatry, dating back to slavery and colonialism, has framed Black people as “dangerous,” “uncooperative,” or “resistant,” which continues to influence diagnostic and treatment practices today (Fernando, 2017). Consequently, Black people are approximately four times more likely to be detained under the Mental Health Act, and are more likely to be misdiagnosed with schizophrenia, experience overmedication, and receive fewer psychological interventions than their White counterparts (NHS Race & Health Observatory, 2022). These inequities highlight how mental health services operate within wider structures of racial power.

Mental health disparities are further compounded by broader systems of oppression, including policing and criminal justice. Experiences of racial profiling, stop-and-search, and excessive use of force expose Black communities to chronic stress and institutional mistrust

(Home Office, 2024; Runnymede Trust, 2023). High-profile deaths such as the murder of George Floyd in the US and the fatal shooting of Chris Kaba in London illustrate how racialised state violence operates across contexts and sectors (Hardeman et al., 2020; Associated Press, 2023). Taken together, these experiences reflect sustained exposure to racial harm that extends beyond isolated incidents and accumulates over time. From a life course perspective, racism operates as a socially patterned exposure that shapes health trajectories across developmental stages (Gee et al., 2012). The “weathering” hypothesis further proposes that chronic exposure to structural racism accelerates physiological deterioration through cumulative stress processes (Geronimus, 1992), with empirical evidence demonstrating elevated allostatic load among Black populations (Geronimus et al., 2006). Such processes provide a framework for understanding how systemic racism contributes to enduring mental and physical health inequities.

Racial Trauma as a Framework for Understanding Harm Across the Lifespan

The cumulative psychological consequences of these systemic inequities are increasingly conceptualised as racial trauma, also referred to as race-based traumatic stress. Racial trauma describes the psychological and physiological distress that arises from repeated exposure to racism, racial discrimination, and structural injustice, including both direct and vicarious experiences such as microaggressions, stereotyping, exclusion, and violence (Carter, 2007). Unlike single-incident trauma, racial trauma is chronic and cumulative, embedded within social contexts that routinely minimise, deny, or invalidate Black experiences of harm (Helms et al., 2012).

Across the lifespan, racial trauma is associated with a range of adverse mental, emotional, and physical health outcomes. Psychologically, it has been linked to anxiety, depression, hypervigilance, emotional dysregulation, and symptoms resembling post-traumatic stress (Williams et al., 2019). Physiologically, prolonged activation of stress-response systems increases vulnerability to hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and premature mortality (Lewis et al., 2015). Repeated experiences of discrimination can undermine self-esteem and identity (Carter et al., 2010) and are associated with a reduced sense of belonging within educational settings (Goodenow, 1993), shaping how individuals relate to themselves and to institutions over time. Trauma scholarship highlights that harm is shaped not only by the original event but by how institutions respond to it. When experiences are minimised or left unrepaired, trauma is reproduced within existing power dynamics rather than contained (Afuape, 2011). This is

particularly relevant to schools, where the impact of racism depends not only on what happens, but on how it is acknowledged, interpreted, and addressed.

From a developmental psychology perspective, early exposure to racial trauma can have enduring effects on emotional regulation, attachment, and identity formation. Research on adverse childhood experiences highlights how chronic stress during childhood alters neurobiological development and stress reactivity (Felitti et al., 1998). Emerging research further demonstrates that racial discrimination functions as a distinct and compounding adverse childhood experience for Black youth, significantly increasing risk for internalising mental health difficulties such as anxiety and depression (Bernard et al., 2022). For Black children, racialised stressors intersect with developmental vulnerability, disrupting the formation of a secure sense of self and contributing to difficulties with trust, self-efficacy, and belonging that may persist into adulthood (Bottiani et al., 2017; Bowleg, 2017).

In adulthood, unresolved racial trauma often manifests as hypervigilance, imposter syndrome, and identity conflict, particularly within professional or academic environments where racial representation remains limited (Williams et al., 2019; Murray, 2023). These outcomes reflect both the internalisation of racial oppression and its ongoing reinforcement through structural inequalities. Understanding racial trauma as a cumulative and developmental process underscores the importance of early, preventative, and culturally informed interventions within systems that shape children and young people's lives.

Managing Racism in Schools: Current Research and Practice

Schools represent a critical institutional context in which racial trauma is both produced and, potentially, addressed. For many Black children and young people, schools are sites where racism is encountered daily through overt discrimination and microaggressions (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019; OHCHR & UNESCO, 2005). These experiences not only undermine academic engagement but also shape long-term attitudes toward authority, safety, and self-worth (Jones et al., 2022). Beyond interpersonal encounters, schools operate as disciplinary institutions in which surveillance, behavioural regulation, and normative standards shape how students are observed and evaluated (Foucault, 1977). When such disciplinary mechanisms intersect with racialised assumptions, Black students may experience heightened scrutiny and differential regulation.

Research on exclusionary discipline shows that Black students are disproportionately suspended and expelled, with these practices contributing to trajectories that increase the likelihood of later contact with the criminal justice system (Skiba et al., 2014). Beyond disciplinary practices, UK research demonstrates how institutional decision-making may contribute to racial inequalities in educational outcomes. Strand (2012) found that Black Caribbean students were systematically underrepresented in higher-tier science and mathematics assessments, even after accounting for prior attainment and a range of socioeconomic and motivational factors. These findings suggest that educational decisions made within schools may systematically constrain Black Caribbean students' access to higher levels of academic achievement, thereby contributing to the attainment gap between Black Caribbean and White British students. More recently, Wallace and Joseph-Salisbury (2022) argue that such patterns persist within contemporary schooling, with institutional practices continuing to position Black Caribbean children within enduring deficit narratives of attainment and behaviour, reflecting the ongoing reproduction of racialised understandings of ability within the English school system. Similarly, research has highlighted how Black students, particularly Black girls, frequently navigate educational environments in which their achievements are undervalued, and their experiences of racism are often rendered invisible, with intersecting racialised and gendered expectations shaping how their capabilities are interpreted within schools (Mirza, 2005).

However, despite this evidence, research consistently demonstrates that schools respond inconsistently to racism. Although the Equality Act (2010) places a legal duty on schools to prevent discrimination and promote equality, racial incidents are frequently minimised, reframed as generic bullying, or ignored altogether (Lander, 2011). UK-based research highlights the urgent need for mandatory anti-racist training, accountability structures, and trauma-informed safeguarding practices that explicitly recognise racism as a source of harm (Runnymede Trust, 2023; Joseph-Salisbury, 2020; Elliott et al., 2021).

Emerging UK research in higher education further illustrates the longer-term consequences of inadequate institutional responses to racism. A thematic synthesis of Black students' mental health and wellbeing in UK universities identified ongoing racialised stress, mistrust in institutions, and limited culturally responsive support, highlighting how experiences of racism often become chronic sources of psychological distress rather than isolated incidents (Stoll, 2022). Similarly, Arday (2018) argues that structural inequalities within universities shape Black and minority ethnic students' mental health experiences by rendering racism

insufficiently recognised within institutional wellbeing frameworks, leaving students to navigate racial trauma without adequate institutional acknowledgement or support.

Qualitative research has further illuminated how these structural dynamics are experienced in everyday university life. Osbourne et al. (2021) found that Black students attending predominantly White UK universities frequently described heightened racial visibility, hypervigilance, and feelings of not belonging, with participants reporting that they "never feel so Black" as when positioned within overwhelmingly White institutional environments. These experiences extended beyond interpersonal interactions to encompass institutional cultures that reinforced marginalisation through subtle exclusions and the absence of meaningful representation. Building on these findings, Osbourne et al. (2023) introduced the concept of *acceptable racism* to describe forms of racism that become normalised, minimised, or dismissed within university settings. Participants described encountering racial microaggressions and discriminatory practices that were often regarded as too ambiguous or commonplace to warrant institutional intervention, contributing to distrust in reporting mechanisms and reinforcing perceptions that universities were unwilling or unable to address racism effectively.

Evidence suggests that these institutional shortcomings have persisted across changing social contexts. Examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Arday and Jones (2022) found that Black students experienced disproportionate educational, social, and psychological burdens, with existing racial inequalities amplified rather than created by the crisis. Their findings demonstrate how structural disadvantage shapes students' capacity to engage with higher education during periods of disruption, illustrating that inequalities are embedded within institutional systems rather than arising solely from individual circumstances. More broadly, scholarship on dismantling racism in higher education argues that universities often reproduce whiteness through institutional norms, curricula, and organisational practices, requiring systemic rather than individualised approaches to anti-racist change (Arday & Mirza, 2018). Accounts of minority ethnic students' struggles to challenge racism similarly point to patterns of institutional silence, defensiveness, and resistance when racism is raised (Wong et al., 2021). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that racism within higher education extends beyond isolated acts of prejudice to encompass institutional processes that shape students' wellbeing, belonging, and opportunities. These findings raise important questions about how racism is conceptualised and addressed within educational systems. To understand why institutional

responses remain inconsistent, it is necessary to consider theoretical models that conceptualise racism not as isolated incidents, but as structurally embedded within social institutions.

Models of Understanding Racism

Several theoretical models offer complementary ways of understanding how racism operates across social, institutional, and psychological levels. Critical Race Theory (CRT) informs the theoretical orientation of this study; however, it is not used as a singular framework. It is considered in conjunction with complementary psychological and systemic frameworks to develop a multi-level understanding of how racism is produced, experienced, and responded to. Together, these frameworks provide a layered account of how racism is maintained, how it produces harm, and how healing and resistance may be supported.

Critical Race Theory

CRT developed in the US during the 1970s and 1980s as a response to the slow progress of civil rights legislation in dismantling racial inequality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT argues that racism is not just a matter of individual prejudice but a normal feature of social structures and institutions (Crenshaw, 1991).

Within education, CRT has been used to highlight how schools reproduce racial inequalities through curriculum bias, low teacher expectations, and disciplinary policies that disproportionately target Black students (Gillborn, 2008). More recent analyses have applied CRT to regulatory and policy documents, demonstrating how forms of guidance framed as neutral can marginalise or dilute discussions of race (Wilson-Thomas & Gabi, 2025). Such work illustrates how racial inequity is sustained not only through interpersonal interactions but through institutional texts and governance structures. A major strength of CRT is its focus on counter-storytelling, amplifying the lived experiences of marginalised people to challenge dominant narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

However, CRT focuses primarily on how racism is embedded within social and institutional systems and pays less attention to the emotional or psychological consequences of racism for individuals. While CRT is valuable for identifying structural inequalities, it does not fully account for how racism is experienced at the level of mental health and well-being. In addition, some scholars have questioned the direct transferability of CRT to the UK context, noting that the framework emerged from analyses of racism within the US legal system and may require adaptation when applied to different national and historical contexts (Gillborn,

2008). The next model, therefore, offers a more multi-layered perspective on how racism operates both structurally and psychologically.

Levels of Racism

Nazroo et al. (2020) conceptualise racism as operating across three interconnected levels: structural, institutional, and interpersonal. Structural racism refers to the macro-level systems: economic, political, and cultural, that sustain racial inequality over time. Institutional racism is enacted through organisational policies and practices that produce unequal outcomes, while interpersonal racism occurs through individual interactions and behaviours (Jones, 2000; Nazroo et al., 2020).

This model's strength lies in its ability to show how racism functions as a systemic process rather than a series of isolated incidents. It is particularly useful in identifying how education, policing, and healthcare systems reproduce racial disparities even in the absence of overt prejudice. Studies in the UK have demonstrated how structural and institutional racism affect outcomes in education, health, and employment (Nazroo et al., 2020; Stopforth et al., 2022; Runnymede Trust, 2023). The next model extends this understanding by exclusively focusing on the psychological impact of racial trauma.

Race-Based Traumatic Stress Model

The Race-Based Traumatic Stress Model (RBTSM) explores how experiences of racism can lead to psychological distress and trauma (Carter, 2007). This model recognises that racism can cause symptoms similar to those seen in post-traumatic stress, such as anxiety, fear, avoidance, or emotional exhaustion. Importantly, it explains that racial trauma can result not only from major incidents of racism but also from the accumulated effects of repeated exposure to subtle and overt discrimination (Carter et al., 2010).

The RBTSM is valuable because it moves beyond describing racism as an external event and focuses instead on its internal impact, how it affects mental health, coping, and identity (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019). It legitimises racial trauma as a real and measurable form of psychological harm. Research in the UK echoes this, with Black individuals reporting higher levels of stress and poorer mental health outcomes linked to racism and discrimination (Wallace et al., 2016; NHS Race and Health Observatory, 2022). While RBTSM helps us understand the emotional costs of racism, it provides less insight into the processes of healing, resilience, and

community recovery. The next model addresses this by focusing on collective healing and empowerment.

Healing Ethno-Racial Trauma Framework

The Healing Ethno-Racial Trauma (HEART) Framework (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019) offers a culturally informed approach to understanding and responding to racial trauma. It builds on liberation psychology and social justice principles, viewing healing as both an individual and collective process. HEART promotes four key elements: identity affirmation, community connection, resistance practices, and systemic action (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019). A major strength in the HEART framework is that it centres hope, empowerment, and agency. It encourages individuals and communities to reclaim cultural identity and collective strength as part of the healing process (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019). It also acknowledges that racism is not a single event, but a continuous source of trauma passed through generations. While the HEART framework was developed primarily in North America, its principles are highly relevant to the UK context, where Black communities continue to experience racialised trauma through education, policing, and mental health systems (Fernando, 2017). Understanding how such trauma emerges within institutional contexts requires attention to the racialised biases and structural processes that shape everyday interactions within these systems.

Adultification Bias and Racialised Harm in Educational Systems

Racialised bias within professional and educational systems has been increasingly recognised as a key mechanism through which structural racism shapes the experiences of Black children. The Professional Inter-Adultification (PIA) Model (Davis, 2022) offers a valuable framework for understanding how racialised and intersectional biases continue to shape professional responses across education, policing, and safeguarding systems. Adultification bias, whereby Black children are perceived as more mature, less innocent, and less deserving of protection, is conceptualised within this model as a structural and institutional phenomenon rather than an individual failing. Davis (2022) argues that organisational practices, professional norms, and broader societal narratives intersect to produce differential treatment and denial of care for Black children.

Within educational settings, adultification bias manifests when teachers interpret Black students' behaviour as disruptive, aggressive, or threatening, rather than as expressions of distress or unmet developmental need. Empirical research demonstrates that Black students are more likely to be disciplined, excluded, and perceived as less innocent than their White peers,

even when controlling for behaviour (Gillborn, 2008; Rollock, 2007). These patterns illustrate how racialised harm persists within systems that are formally committed to equality and safeguarding, revealing the limitations of policy frameworks that fail to address the relational and interpretive processes through which racism operates in everyday practice.

Research further highlights the central role of schools in shaping students' identity, sense of belonging, and socio-emotional development (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Valiente et al., 2020). Developmental theories provide a useful framework for understanding how these experiences influence psychological outcomes over time. Drawing on the Transactional Model of Development, human development is understood as emerging through dynamic, reciprocal interactions between individuals and their environments (Sameroff, 2009). Within this framework, racism in schools operates across multiple interacting systems, including teacher–student relationships, school policies, institutional cultures, and wider societal norms. Teachers' interactions with students and parents are particularly influential in shaping self-concept and belonging, both of which are closely linked to emotional and psychological well-being (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Goodenow, 1993; Campos-Gil et al., 2020). For Black students, experiences of marginalisation, exclusion, and racialised discipline undermine their sense of belonging and are associated with educational attainment and poorer mental health outcomes, including anxiety, depression, and emotional distress (Byrne et al., 2020; Graham et al., 2019; Hill, 2022; Tillson & Oxley, 2020; Williams et al., 2019).

Together, these models provide a layered understanding of racism. By combining structural, psychological, and healing frameworks, the present study aims to capture both the harm caused by racism and the potential for systemic change. In recognising the models that explain how racism operates, causes trauma, and how healing can take place, it becomes essential to locate these frameworks within the current UK context. The following section explores the UK climate in greater detail, outlining the policies, practices, and research that continue to shape the experiences of Black students in the UK today.

Current UK Racial Climate and Policy Context

The UK has made gradual progress towards addressing racial and ethnic inequality across sectors such as health, housing, and education (Byrne et al., 2020). Over a decade after the introduction of the Equality Act (2010), there is increased institutional and public awareness of discrimination and equality issues, alongside heightened social and political engagement following the Black Lives Matter movement (Hodgkinson et al., 2021). However, while

legislative frameworks signal a commitment to equality, they often adopt a single-axis approach that fails to account for how multiple social identities intersect to shape lived experience. Moreover, framing racism primarily as individual discrimination risks obscuring its reproduction through institutional discourse and ideological structures (Henriques et al., 1998). As a result, structural inequalities and discriminatory practices continue to permeate systems designed to protect children and young people.

The wider social and political climate in the UK is increasingly shaped by racialised public discourse, anti-immigrant sentiment, and far-right mobilisation, which frequently frame refugees and migrants as central to perceived social problems. Over the summer of 2024, the UK experienced a wave of far-right-linked racial violence, with an estimated 29 anti-immigration demonstrations and riots occurring across at least 27 towns and cities (Downs, 2024). These events involved attacks on mosques, hotels housing people seeking asylum, and other sites associated with migrant communities, drawing attention to how immigration discourse intersects with racial hostility in the UK public sphere. Scholars have long argued that anti-immigration politics in Britain often operate as a racialised form of boundary-making, in which hostility toward migrants reflects broader anxieties about race, belonging, and national identity (Hall et al., 1978).

This socio-political context intersects with policy frameworks that relate directly to schools and children's welfare. Several statutory frameworks place explicit responsibilities on schools and related agencies to safeguard children and promote equality. The Crime and Disorder Act (1998) establish duties for public bodies, including schools and local authorities, to work collaboratively to prevent crime and reduce harm, positioning safeguarding as a shared, multi-agency responsibility. In education, the Department for Education's (DfE) Keeping Children Safe in Education guidance (DfE, 2023) outlines schools' legal obligations to protect children from harm and clearly outlines forms of harm that undermine children's safety, well-being, and development.

Regulatory and oversight bodies further reinforce these responsibilities. Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) School Inspection Handbook and Equality Objectives 2023–2027 emphasise the duty of schools to promote equality, eliminate discrimination, and foster inclusive environments in which all pupils can thrive (Ofsted, 2023a; Ofsted, 2023b). Similarly, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has repeatedly highlighted the persistence of racial inequality in education, calling for

a comprehensive and coordinated race equality strategy that moves beyond symbolic commitment to meaningful systemic change (EHRC, 2016). More recent EHRC monitoring indicates that racial harassment and bullying remain prevalent in UK schools, despite existing policy frameworks, raising concerns about inconsistent implementation and accountability (EHRC, 2025).

National data consistently show that Black students are the least likely to attain upper-second or first-class degrees and are among the most likely to discontinue their studies prematurely (Bhopal, 2017; HESA, 2024; Smith, 2017). These educational inequities intersect with broader racial disparities in mental health, compounding vulnerability to distress and reinforcing cycles of disadvantage (Shim, 2021; Synergi Collaborative Centre, 2018). Collectively, this body of research underscores the urgent need for work that centres the voices of Black students and critically examines how educational environments, despite policy frameworks, continue to both harm and marginalise those they are intended to protect.

Although statutory frameworks are intended to safeguard all children, the gap between formal policy commitments and a racialised public climate suggests that legislative intent does not reliably translate into equitable practice for Black children. Critiques of race equality policy argue that these limitations are not merely matters of implementation. Ali (2021) suggests that contemporary initiatives often function to “manage” racism through procedural compliance and diversity rhetoric, while leaving underlying power relations intact. Similarly, Bhopal (2018) argues that the myth of a post-racial society enables institutions to frame racism as largely resolved, thereby protecting white privilege and deflecting attention from structural inequities. Furthermore, racism risks becoming administratively contained rather than structurally transformed. Such managerial approaches risk neutralising decolonial calls to transform curricula, the knowledge and perspectives prioritised in education, and institutional culture, helping to explain the persistence of racial inequities despite extensive policy frameworks.

Summary

In summary, the historical and socio-political legacies of slavery, segregation, and systemic racism have profoundly shaped the educational and psychological experiences of Black people. From the transatlantic slave trade to current school culture, institutions have continually reproduced racial hierarchies that marginalised and pathologised Black identities. The enduring impact of these systems is evident in the overrepresentation of Black individuals

in coercive mental health pathways, the persistence of racial trauma across generations, and the unequal safeguarding and educational opportunities afforded to Black children in the UK. Understanding these dynamics is essential to situating the current study within a broader context of structural inequity and resistance.

The following chapter builds on this foundation by critically synthesising the qualitative evidence on Black students' experiences of racism in educational settings. Through a meta-ethnographic approach, it sought to illuminate how the interplay of race, power, and systemic structures continues to shape the lived realities of Black students and how their voices can inform the urgent transformation of educational practice and policy.

Chapter Two: Meta-ethnographic Review

Chapter Overview

This chapter undertakes a comprehensive and critical examination of empirical literature that explores the racialised experiences of Black students across diverse educational contexts, ranging from secondary education to doctoral study. Through an in-depth synthesis of key findings, the chapter analyses how race shapes academic experiences and outcomes, while evaluating the methodological and theoretical contributions of existing research. The synthesis concludes by identifying conceptual and empirical gaps within the literature, thereby providing a clear rationale for the present study's aims and research questions.

Introduction

A systematic literature review entails a methodical and rigorous approach to identifying, appraising, and synthesising empirical evidence that meets predefined inclusion criteria, with the purpose of addressing a specific research question (Anderson et al., 2020). Such reviews serve to illuminate areas of limited understanding within the existing body of knowledge, thereby establishing a rationale for future research endeavours aimed at advancing the evidence base (Paul, 2020).

A recent systematic review by Ibezim et al. (2025) offers an important contribution to understanding Black students' experiences in UK higher education, identifying recurring themes of racial microaggressions, institutional marginalisation, underrepresentation within curricula, and the emotional labour associated with navigating predominantly White spaces. However, the scope of this work is confined to the university context. This focus overlooks the experiences of Black students in secondary education, where issues of racism and racialisation may emerge earlier in students' academic trajectories. Exploring the perspectives of school-aged students is particularly crucial given their status as minors within institutions that hold a statutory duty to safeguard their well-being. Although the review is framed around the experiences of Black students, the studies included employed broader ethnic classifications such as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic, which risks obscuring the specificity and heterogeneity of Black students' lived experiences within educational settings.

Following an extensive search, no other meta-ethnographic study has yet been published that synthesises qualitative evidence on the lived educational experiences of Black

students across both secondary and higher education settings. While qualitative syntheses and systematic reviews exist (e.g., Ibezim et al., 2025; Griffith, 2023), they do not adopt the interpretive and theory-building orientation of meta-ethnography, nor do they span the full educational trajectory of Black students from adolescence to doctoral study. A small body of qualitative research has examined Black students' experiences in education through the voices of students themselves; no synthesis has yet integrated findings across both male and female participants and across different stages of education.

This meta-ethnography seeks to synthesise and reinterpret qualitative research exploring how Black students experience and make sense of education across different stages of schooling, from secondary through to higher education. Rather than assessing effectiveness or outcomes, the review adopts an interpretive stance aimed at understanding the meanings, tensions, and contradictions embedded in these experiences. The overarching research question guiding this synthesis is: *How do Black students' lived experiences within educational settings reveal how education systems reproduce or challenge racism?*

This question invites a critical exploration of the relational, institutional, and structural forces that shape educational experiences, while centring the voices of Black students as knowledge holders. Through this lens, the meta-ethnography aims to generate new theoretical insights into how race, identity, and power intersect within educational systems, and to consider implications for educators, policymakers, and researchers committed to equity and social justice.

The present meta-ethnography contributes an integrative interpretation of how race and systemic factors shape Black students' experiences across key stages of education. By translating concepts across studies, it offers deeper theoretical insights into patterns of marginalisation, resilience, and identity negotiation, thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of how racialised experiences evolve within educational systems designed to safeguard and support young people.

Methodology

A meta-ethnographic approach (Noblit & Hare, 1988) was adopted to provide a synthesis of existing qualitative research relevant to Black students' experiences in education settings. This approach involves the following phases: getting started by identifying the topic area that qualitative research will inform, deciding what is relevant to the initial interest, reading the studies, determining how the studies are related, translating the studies into one

another, synthesising interpretive translations and expressing the synthesis to develop analytical conceptual theories and models.

Meta-ethnography was chosen over other qualitative synthesis approaches, as it is informed by objective idealism, allowing the researcher to transcend the findings of individual studies and produce higher levels of interpretative synthesis (Sattar et al., 2021). This was appropriate for this study as it recognises independent realities of discrimination, whilst also acknowledging them as part of a larger interconnecting system (Korth, 2022).

Search Strategy

In accordance with PRISMA guidelines, a preliminary scoping search was conducted to determine whether any existing qualitative syntheses or meta-ethnographies had been published within this area of inquiry. The scoping search included key databases such as the Cochrane Library and the Centre for Reviews and Dissemination, enabling identification of previously completed reviews and refinement of the subsequent search strategy. An electronic database search was conducted in March 2025 using the following databases: CINAHL Ultimate, MEDLINE Ultimate, APA PsycArticles, and APA PsycINFO. Alerts for relevant papers were set up before data synthesis. Searches were completed using different terms related to variations of these four main components: “Black children”, “school”, “racism” and “students’ experiences” (see Table 1). Additional search terms were identified by examining key terminology in relevant studies and consulting the research team.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 2) developed using the SPIDER tool for qualitative research (Cooke et al., 2012) were limited to English-language academic journals. The records identified from the search were all UK and US studies. Research studies conducted before 2011 were excluded to account for broader societal changes that occurred after the UK Equality Act (2010) and the US Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015).

Students across various educational settings, including postgraduate students, were included, as the focus is on being a Black student, irrespective of age. Studies involving primary-aged children were excluded because adolescence is a key developmental period for racial identity formation and meaning-making around experiences of racism (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014; Seaton et al., 2008). Focusing on secondary school enabled the synthesis to centre

accounts in which young people were better able to articulate and reflect on racialised experiences related to identity, belonging, and wellbeing.

Table 1: Search strategy used in EBSCO host in March 2025

Databases searched	CINAHL Ultimate, MEDLINE Ultimate, APA PsycArticles, APA PsycInfo	
Search no.	Search Term	Results
1	<i>“Black youth” or “Black high school students” or “Black adolescents” or “Black girls” or “mixed-race” or “Black children*” or “mixed-race White and Black”</i>	11, 042
2	<i>School or “middle school” or “disciplinary alternative schools” or “race-based educational experience*” or “schools as racial spaces” or “public education system” or “charter schools” or “higher education”</i>	7, 708, 824
3	<i>“Racial discrimination” or “structural racism” or adultification or “adultification bias” or racism or “structural racism” or “institutional racism” or “interpersonal racism” or “anti-black racism” or “anti-black” or antiblackness or anti-blackness or dehumanisation or exclusion or “involuntary disciplinary” or inequality or “White Saviourism, Colourblind Racism, and AntiBlackness”</i>	314, 021
4	<i>“Students or “students experiences” or treatment or “unfair treatment” or “school experience*” or “counternarrative of students' experiences”</i>	8, 664, 568
	<i>#1 AND #2 AND #3 AND #4</i>	9880

Screening

In total, 2591 papers were electronically identified from the databases. Duplicates were removed, followed by screening of titles and abstracts for relevance, and 25 studies were retrieved and assessed for eligibility. A total of twelve studies were found eligible from the database search and through manual screening of the references of the eligible studies. (Bailey et al., 2021; Dortch & Patel, 2017; Gadson et al., 2021; Griffith et al., 2017; Griffith

et al., 2022; Hope et al., 2015; Joseph et al., 2016; Luhanga et al., 2023; Mawdsley et al., 2023; Okoroji et al., 2021; Stanley et al., 2023; Truong et al., 2016). The review included studies that adopted a variety of qualitative designs using focus groups and interviews.

Table 2: *Inclusion and exclusion criteria*

Category	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
S Study sample	- Black students - All genders	- Children aged 5 and under
PI Phenomena of Interest	- Students' views on school staff members' interactions with Black	- Studies that captured the experiences of Black students solely through a third party i.e. a parent or guardian - Experiences of racism outside school settings
D Design/Data source	- Students' interviews and focus groups	- Studies that captured experiences solely through school reports and disciplinary data for school suspension or expulsion
E Evaluation	- Includes Black students' views	- Studies without direct quotes from Black students
R Design/Methodology	- Qualitative - Mixed methods that differentiate qualitative data from quantitative data	

Data extraction and synthesis

Determining how the studies are related

The twelve studies were reviewed to identify the recurring themes. A template was produced (see Table 3) to extract meaningful data from the twelve studies. The studies were further examined, whereby similar concepts were identified and analysed by juxtaposing the first and second-order constructs.

Translating the studies into one another

The identified themes were managed through repeated reading and analysing recurring concepts present in 25% of the studies, except for the 'vicarious racism' theme, which was identified in 17% of the studies. The cross-comparisons of the themes are presented in Table 4. The themes were then translated into one another to develop the third-order construct. A reciprocal synthesis of the twelve studies, using eight core themes, gave interpretive explanations of the experiences of Black students in education settings. The key concepts were: 'prejudice', 'adultification', 'double marginalisation', 'lack of belonging', 'vicarious racism', 'relationship to report channel', 'normalisation of racism', 'student disengagement', 'acts of resistance' and 'network of resilience'.

Synthesising the translations

A reciprocal translation was conducted, as the studies were not refutational. The key themes were then synthesised into three overarching categories. The key themes were synthesised into three broader categories: inequitable treatment, ripple effects of racism, and survival strategies (see Figure 2). A higher-order interpretation, also referred to as the line of argument synthesis (Noblit & Hare, 1988), was created, linking and emphasising the hidden concepts within individual papers.

Reflexivity

I have been fully transparent regarding my positionality as the researcher in the previous chapter and how these experiences inevitably shaped my awareness and interpretation of the research topic. Throughout the meta-ethnographic analysis, I engaged in reflexive practice to acknowledge and monitor the potential influence of my perspectives. When personal reflections arose during the interpretation of data, I sought to ensure that my conceptual re-interpretations remained firmly anchored in the original studies. This was achieved through

bracketing, the deliberate process of setting aside one's assumptions, beliefs, and experiential knowledge to approach the data with openness and analytical rigour (Fischer, 2009).

Study Characteristics

The literature review identified twelve studies that met the inclusion criteria, each examining Black students' experiences of racism within educational settings across secondary and higher education. Collectively, the studies included a total of 183 participants, spanning an approximate age range of 11 to 40 years, and were conducted across the US, Canada, and the UK. All studies employed qualitative methodologies and centred the voices of Black students by directly exploring their lived experiences; one study also incorporated the perspectives of mentors alongside student participants (Griffith et al., 2017).

Quality appraisal

The twelve included studies were appraised using the Adapted Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP; 2018) checklist to assess methodological rigour, credibility, and relevance (see Table 5). Following Cochrane guidance, studies were not scored or excluded, as the use of numeric scoring lacks empirical validity for qualitative research and may penalise studies that are methodologically sound but insufficiently detailed in their reporting (Long et al., 2020). Each study was therefore examined against the ten CASP criteria: clarity of aims, appropriateness of design and methodology, recruitment strategy, data collection, researcher–participant relationship, ethical considerations, analytic rigour, clarity of findings, and overall value. The appraisal process served to enhance transparency regarding the methodological strengths and limitations of the included studies.

Across the body of evidence, the studies demonstrated generally strong methodological coherence. Research aims were clearly defined and closely aligned with chosen designs, most frequently interpretative phenomenological analysis, thematic analysis, or narrative approaches. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were the predominant data collection methods, which were well-suited to capturing the depth and nuance of Black students' lived experiences in educational settings. Several studies also provided rich contextual descriptions, enhancing transferability and enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings across educational stages and cultural contexts.

Figures

Figure 1: Flow diagram for Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews

(PRISMA; Page et al., 2020)

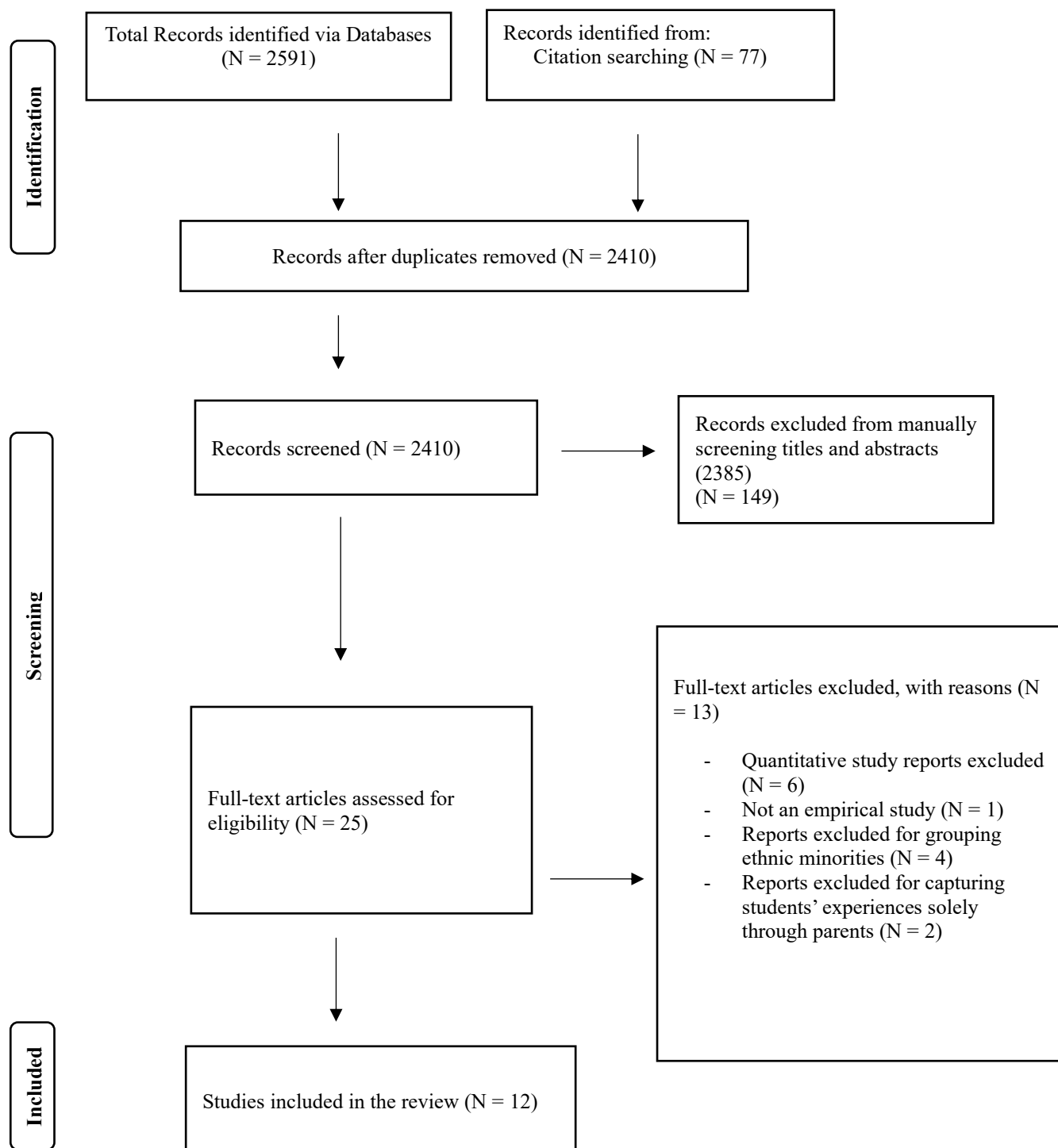


Table 3: *Review Study Characteristics*

Author (year), country	Purpose	Sample & setting	Data Collection	Design
Bailey (2021) US	To explore Black adolescent males' perceptions of racism, their internalisation of racial oppression, and how these experiences impact their academic lives	10 Black adolescent males	Semi-structured interviews	Constructivist grounded theory
Hope (2015), US	To understand Black high school students' issues of racial discrimination and inequality in their schools	8 Black high school students (males n = 6, females n = 2) aged 14 – 17 years old	Semi-structured interviews	Inductive thematic analysis
Joseph (2016), US	To explore Black female adolescents' experiences of racism in school	18 Black female students recruited from two high schools in the Southwestern US	Surveys and interviews	Consensual Qualitative Research
Dortch (2017), UK	To explore the experiences of Black undergraduate women in science, technology, engineering, and maths, and what a sense of belonging means to these students	3 Black female undergraduates at a predominantly White UK University	Semi-structured interviews	Phenomenological inductive analysis
Gadson (2021), US	To develop a taxonomy of gendered racial microaggressions experienced by Black adolescent girls, using a Black feminist and intersectionality framework	33 Black adolescent girls aged 14–17	Semi-structured focus group interviews	Dimensional analysis
Griffith (2017), US	To explore Black undergraduate students' experiences with race-related stressors, their coping responses, and the role of natural mentors at a predominantly White institution	12 Black college students + 10 natural mentors (total 22)	Semi-structured interviews	Thematic analysis

BLACK STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF NAVIGATING RACISM IN UK SCHOOLS

Author (year), country	Purpose	Sample & setting	Data Collection	Design
Griffith (2022), US	To explore Black adolescents' experiences with school staff	25 Black adolescents recruited from middle schools, high schools and community centres in the Southeastern US	Semi-structured interviews	Thematic analysis
Luhanga (2023) Canada	To explore the experiences of Black undergraduate nursing students in nursing programmes, what barriers they face, how they cope, and what might improve their retention and success.	18 participants (current and former Black nursing students) in two undergraduate nursing programmes in a western Canadian province. Purposive and snowball sampling were used	Individual interviews plus a follow-up focus group.	Thematic analysis
Mawdsley (2023) UK	To explore the lived experience of Black pharmacy students in a UK degree programme	16 Black students from one UK pharmacy degree programme, purposively recruited.	Interviews and focus group discussions	Thematic analysis
Okoroji (2021) US	To explore how Black middle-school adolescents experience and respond to discrimination in school settings, using a lens of CRT and phenomenology	Nine self-identified Black middle-school students in U.S. school settings	Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions	Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis
Stanley (2023), US	To understand Black male doctoral students' lived experiences and the sociocultural factors that helped to foster their resiliency	Five Black males in clinical and counselling psychology doctoral programs	Phenomenological interview	Thematic analysis
Truong (2016), US	To examine the role of vicarious racism in the experiences of doctoral students	26 doctoral students (females n = 17, males n = 9, private institutions n = 10, public institutions n= 16)	Semi-structured interviews	Transcendental phenomenological approach

Table 4: *Cross-comparison of studies by concepts*

Concepts	Bailey (2021)	Hope (2015)	Joseph (2016)	Dortch (2017)	Gadson (2021)	Griffith (2017)	Griffith (2022)	Luhanga (2023)	Mawdsley (2023)	Okoroji (2021)	Stanley (2023)	Truong (2016)
Prejudice	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•		
Adultification		•	•		•		•			•		
Double marginalisation		•		•	•	•				•		
Lack of belonging			•	•		•		•	•	•		•
Vicarious racism							•					•
Relationship to report channel					•		•	•	•	•		•
Normalisation of racism	•	•										•
Student disengagement			•				•				•	

BLACK STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES OF NAVIGATING RACISM IN UK SCHOOLS

Concepts	Bailey (2021)	Hope (2015)	Joseph (2016)	Dortch (2017)	Gadson (2021)	Griffith (2017)	Griffith (2022)	Luhanga (2023)	Mawdsley (2023)	Okoroji (2021)	Stanley (2023)	Truong (2016)
Acts of resistance	•	•	•			•		•	•		•	•
Networks of resilience								•	•	•	•	

Many studies demonstrated methodological strength through the use of theoretically informed frameworks, such as Critical Race Theory (CRT), Black Feminist Thought (e.g., Gadson, 2021), and intersectionality frameworks (e.g., Dortch, 2017), which grounded the analyses in established critical perspectives. This theoretical alignment enhanced interpretive depth and contributed to the study's credibility and authenticity. The inclusion of reflexive accounts by coders further strengthened confirmability, demonstrating awareness of how positionality and identity may shape interpretation. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and institutional review board approval, were addressed in the majority of studies, illustrating adherence to sound ethical standards. Ethical reporting was also inconsistent, with only a few studies explicitly referencing debriefing procedures or risk of harm mitigation.

Some methodological limitations were also identified. Some studies presented limited detail regarding sampling procedures or data saturation, making it difficult to fully assess the adequacy of sample size (e.g., Truong, 2016; Bailey, 2021). Selection bias was evident in studies where participants self-selected based on prior engagement with discussions on race or inequality (e.g., Hope, 2015), which may have resulted in the overrepresentation of more racially conscious voices. In addition, only a minority of studies critically examined the relationship between researcher and participants, a key component of qualitative reflexivity (Fischer, 2009). The absence of such reflection may limit transparency and compromise the trustworthiness of findings.

Reporting of analytic procedures varied across studies: while some offered detailed accounts of coding and theme development, others provided minimal explanation, which can limit the ability to assess the depth of interpretive analysis.

Despite these limitations, all studies demonstrated coherence between their research aims, data collection, and analytic approaches, meeting the threshold for inclusion in this synthesis. Taken together, the studies were judged to be of moderate to high quality. They provided valuable, contextually rich accounts of Black students' educational experiences across secondary, undergraduate, and doctoral levels. Consistent with methodological recommendations in the literature, an inclusive approach was adopted to prioritise conceptual richness over procedural perfection (Aveyard et al., 2019; Sandelowski et al., 2002).

Table 5: *CASPS Quality Appraisal for Review Papers*

Author (year), country	Qualitative Appraisal Criteria									
	Key: Y = Yes N = No ? = Cannot tell									
	1) Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	2) Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	3) Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	4) Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	5) Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	6) Has the relationship between the researcher and participants been adequately considered?	7) Have ethical issues been taken into consideration	8) Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	9) Is there a clear statement of findings?	10) How valuable is the research?
Bailey (2021)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Hope (2015)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Joseph (2016)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Dortch (2017)	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Gadson (2021)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Griffith (2017)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Griffith (2022)	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Luhanga (2023)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Mawdsley (2023)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

BLACK STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF NAVIGATING RACISM IN UK SCHOOLS

Qualitative Appraisal Criteria										
Key: Y = Yes N = No ? = Cannot tell										
Okoroji (2021)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Stanley (2023)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Truong (2016)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Synthesis of Main Findings from Meta-ethnography

Inequitable treatments

Prejudice

A pervasive theme across studies was the perception of prejudice embedded within teachers' expectations of Black students' academic abilities. Several studies described experiences of overt and covert discrimination, with students reporting being stereotyped by teachers as less intelligent than their White peers (Griffith et al., 2017; Griffith et al., 2022; Hope et al., 2015; Joseph et al., 2016; Luhanga et al., 2023). In some instances, students also recounted facing discriminatory behaviour from other pupils during lessons, which was often left unchallenged by staff (Okoroji et al., 2021). Teachers were perceived as offering less encouragement and support to Black students compared to their White counterparts (Joseph et al., 2016). One participant described being misidentified by a teacher as belonging in a lower academic set, after being assumed to be in the wrong class despite her name appearing on the class register. This highlights how racialised assumptions about academic ability influenced teachers' judgements before any formal checks of class placement were made. (Gadson et al., 2021).

Students frequently attributed such prejudicial treatment to racial bias and expressed feelings of disappointment and hurt that those entrusted to nurture their development held diminished expectations of their potential (Bailey et al., 2021). This prejudice was not limited to academic assumptions but extended to racial profiling and broader stereotyping. For example, some students felt criminalised by teachers due to their clothing choices (Joseph et al., 2016). Importantly, discriminatory experiences were not confined to classroom teachers; other staff members and institutional structures were also implicated. One study documented a microaggression experienced by a Black university student, in which a staff member questioned her presence on campus and implied that her admission was based on being Black rather than academic merit (Dortch & Patel, 2017). Another highlighted disparity in access to resources and opportunities between Black and White students, suggesting systemic inequities within educational settings.

Adultification

Several studies under review highlighted instances of disparate treatment in classroom behavioural management, with multiple students recounting experiences of being treated less humanely, falling within the classification of adultification (Gadson et al., 2021; Griffith et al., 2022; Hope et al., 2015; Okoroji et al., 2021). A recurring theme emerged, depicting students as the focal point of behavioural challenges in classrooms and labelling them as the problem, which led to more frequent and severe punishments than their White counterparts (Gadson et al., 2021). Hope et al. (2015) described this phenomenon as propagating racialised messages that Black adolescents are deviant. Studies indicated that Black students expressed an acceptance of punishments if they were uniformly enforced across the student body. However, these students perceived a negative bias in the application of punishments towards them (Griffith et al., 2022; Hope et al., 2015).

Double marginalisation

Some studies documented experiences of double marginalisation, in which students faced inequitable treatment arising from the intersection of race and gender (Dortch & Patel, 2017; Griffith et al., 2017; Hope et al., 2015). One study described a Black male student's awareness of racialised and gendered disciplinary practices, as he observed receiving harsher punishment for identical behaviours compared to a White female peer (Hope et al., 2015). Conversely, Black female students reported experiences of gendered racism within academic settings, including perceptions of teacher favouritism towards male students, reduced engagement in classroom discussions, and disproportionate disciplinary actions. Some participants also recounted unintentional, yet racist remarks related to their physical appearance, particularly concerning their hair or hygiene (Griffith et al., 2017).

At the higher education level, Dortch and Patel (2017) described how undergraduate Black women felt marginalised by both White men and women, reporting exclusion from study groups and a subsequent sense of isolation. These students also expressed feelings of hypervisibility and over-policing in relation to dress code violations, contrasting their experiences with the relative leniency afforded to White female peers (Gadson et al., 2021). Collectively, these studies illustrate how intersecting identities compounded students' experiences of discrimination. Many participants perceived that being both White and female conferred a more privileged and socially accepted position within educational environments, whereas being Black and male was viewed less favourably (Okoroji et al., 2021).

Ripple effects of racism

Lack of belonging

A lack of belonging emerged as a common phenomenon experienced by Black students across the reviewed studies (Dortch & Patel, 2017; Griffith et al., 2017; Joseph et al., 2016; Luhanga et al., 2023; Mawdsley et al., 2023; Okoroji et al., 2021; Truong et al., 2016). Experiences of microaggressions within school environments were frequently associated with feelings of being unwelcome and excluded, negatively affecting students' sense of belonging (Dortch & Patel, 2017; Griffith et al., 2017; Joseph et al., 2016). Several studies also reported that students felt isolated due to their underrepresentation within educational settings and expressed a desire to fit in with their peers (Dortch & Patel, 2017). Some students described adapting their accents and mannerisms around White peers in an attempt to assimilate, which led to a sense of losing part of their identity (Mawdsley et al., 2023; Okoroji et al., 2021).

Interpersonal racism further reinforced this lack of belonging, with students reporting that their White peers often looked down on them or only treated them with respect when they demonstrated academic achievement. This dynamic left many students feeling that they had to work harder to be accepted (Luhanga et al., 2023). Some studies found that, to fit in, students avoided associating with other ethnic minority peers. At a systemic level, institutional silence surrounding racism was identified as compounding these experiences, reinforcing feelings of isolation and signalling a lack of acknowledgement or support from educational institutions (Luhanga et al., 2023; Truong et al., 2016).

Vicarious racism

Direct experiences of racism were identified across all the studies under review. Notably, two studies highlighted that students were not only affected directly but also vicariously, either through learning about others' experiences of racism in their academic environment or by witnessing such incidents (Griffith et al., 2022; Truong et al., 2016). Observing racism directed at faculty members within their own institution diminished the perspective that achieving a high level of professorial status granted immunity from racism (Truong et al., 2016). This vicarious exposure had profound psychological and emotional effects on the students, leading to feelings of despair, depression, and anger, ultimately fostering a sense of mistrust towards those in positions of power at their institutions (Griffith et al., 2022; Truong et al., 2016).

Relationship to report channel

Half of the reviewed studies described students grappling with hesitation when reporting experiences of racism (Gadson et al., 2021; Griffith et al., 2022; Luhanga et al., 2023; Mawdsley et al., 2023; Okoroji et al., 2021; Truong et al., 2016). This reluctance appeared closely tied to the intersection of race and power, as students expressed feeling intimidated by White individuals in positions of authority (Luhanga et al., 2023; Mawdsley et al., 2023). A lack of trust in institutional systems further contributed to their silence, with some students perceiving that teachers tended to protect one another rather than address complaints of racism (Okoroji et al., 2021). Consequently, students described dreading the prospect of approaching staff due to fears of negative repercussions for challenging racism, particularly in light of cases where faculty members had left their positions following racial tensions (Truong et al., 2016).

Concerns about potential retribution and the difficulty of evidencing subtle or covert racism meant that reporting was often seen as a last resort (Griffith et al., 2022). Students who did report incidents frequently described feeling “invisible, overlooked, and outnumbered” after being dismissed or disregarded by teachers (Gadson et al., 2021). Truong et al. (2016) reported one instance in which a student who challenged racism was labelled a “troublemaker” and threatened with removal from their programme, further reinforcing a culture of fear and disempowerment (Okoroji et al., 2021). Additionally, some students reflected that their reluctance to speak up stemmed from the emotional burden of revisiting racial trauma, which intensified their sense of vulnerability (Luhanga et al., 2023).

Survival strategies***Normalisation of racism***

The reviewed studies identified a range of coping mechanisms that Black students adopted in response to experiences of racism. Some students described coping through resignation, accepting racism as a normalised aspect of their educational environment (Truong et al., 2016). Others expressed an awareness that racism was a pervasive and enduring challenge they would likely face throughout their lives, leading them to adopt a pragmatic stance of “moving on” as a means of emotional self-preservation (Bailey et al., 2021).

Researchers also highlighted that some students externalised their experiences of racism, consciously attributing discriminatory encounters to broader systemic issues rather than internalising blame. This cognitive reframing allowed them to recognise that their

experiences were not isolated incidents, but manifestations of institutional and structural inequalities embedded within educational systems (Hope et al., 2015; Truong et al., 2016).

Student disengagement

The reviewed studies indicated that experiences of racial discrimination often led to academic disengagement among Black students. Several students reported responding to such experiences by avoiding classes, leaving tasks incomplete, or reducing participation in learning activities. These behaviours frequently resulted in declining academic performance and, for some, long-term educational consequences (Griffith et al., 2022).

For certain students, the impact of discrimination was so profound that it influenced their decision to withdraw from educational programmes altogether, citing feelings of being unwelcome or perceived as academically inadequate by teachers (Joseph et al., 2016). Stanley et al. (2023) described these responses as “self-restrictive behaviours,” wherein students consciously suppressed their authentic emotions and classroom participation, becoming increasingly hypervigilant about how they were perceived by others. Such responses highlight the internalised toll of racism, illustrating how discriminatory experiences can undermine both academic engagement and psychological safety within educational environments.

Acts of resistance

Across the reviewed studies, some students demonstrated resistance to racism through intentional efforts to challenge stereotypes and negative assumptions. These students engaged in proactive strategies to counter deficit-based narratives, such as amplifying positive classroom behaviours that teachers valued, choosing to remain calm, respectful, and well-behaved to defy racist stereotypes (Hope et al., 2015; Joseph et al., 2016). For some, this resistance was motivated by the lack of racial diversity in their classrooms, which heightened a sense of responsibility to represent their race positively and influence their peers' perceptions of Black people (Mawdsley et al., 2023; Luhanga et al., 2023).

In one study, a participant expressed a desire to raise their future children to treat everyone equally, reflecting a generative form of resistance aimed at dismantling stereotypes through intergenerational change. Other expressions of resistance included upholding academic success as a means of challenging racist assumptions, refusing to be silenced, and advocating for equality (Joseph et al., 2016). For some students, the prejudice they encountered

served as motivation to succeed academically and disprove racial stereotypes (Bailey et al., 2021; Griffith et al., 2017).

Another form of resistance identified was a commitment to countering internalised racism within the Black community. Some students articulated a desire to “save” other Black individuals from adopting deficit-based beliefs about themselves, recognising that these beliefs were shaped by systemic inequalities rather than inherent flaws within Black communities (Stanley et al., 2023). Finally, collective mobilisation emerged as a powerful expression of resistance, with students forming peer advocacy and support groups alongside other ethnic minority students. These networks provided spaces for connection, mutual support, and collective empowerment in the face of systemic racism (Truong et al., 2016).

Networks of resilience

Alongside strategies such as disengagement and normalisation, several studies highlighted the centrality of relational and spiritual support as key survival mechanisms for Black students navigating racism in educational settings. In contexts where institutional care and responsiveness were minimal, students sought solace and strength from culturally familiar sources of support. Family members and partners were described as providing emotional validation and encouragement, offering a sense of stability when students felt devalued or dismissed by educators (Luhanga et al., 2023).

This sense of connection was mirrored in the solidarity found among Black peers, who were perceived as safe, understanding, and empathetic sources of comfort (Okoroji et al., 2021; Stanley, 2023; Mawdsley et al., 2023). Within these peer networks, participants described experiencing authenticity and reassurance in shared understanding, affirming that they were not alone in their struggles.

Faith and spirituality also emerged as sustaining forces, providing students with frameworks to make meaning of adversity and maintain hope amidst persistent exposure to racism (Luhanga et al., 2023). Across the studies, familial bonds, same-race friendships, and spiritual practices functioned as vital relational scaffolds that counteracted experiences of exclusion and reinforced a sense of self-worth. Collectively, these networks transformed coping from an individual act of endurance into a collective expression of resilience grounded in cultural connection, shared identity, and mutual care.

Line of argument synthesis

A line of argument synthesis (proposed in Figure 3) involves the translation of the themes identified across the studies to create a narrative that links them together (Noblit & Hare, 1988). The synthesis reveals Black students' experiences of inequitable treatment, characterised by 'prejudice', 'adultification', and 'double marginalisation' with the school staff and the educational institution.

These inequitable treatments led to ripple effects, impacting individuals' sense of belonging, those vicariously connected to them, and their engagement with the formal report channel of information. In response to these inequitable experiences and their repercussions, students adopted survival strategies as coping mechanisms against discrimination. The identified survival strategies involved the normalisation of racism, student disengagement, acts of resistance and the development of networks of resilience.

The normalisation could be a response to an awareness of the broader systemic context of their experiences, leading to disengagement from school and acts of resistance. The survival strategies of normalising racism and student disengagement reinforce the status quo by perpetuating an ongoing cycle of inequitable treatments, establishing a bidirectional relationship between inequitable treatments and survival strategies. Embedded within these responses was a network of resilience, a relational and spiritual system of support that enabled students to endure and reframe their experiences. Grounded in family, same-race peers, faith, and collective mobilisation, this network provided affirmation, belonging, and emotional validation. Through these connections, coping shifted from individual endurance to collective resilience rooted in cultural identity and mutual care, serving as a counterbalancing force that buffered the psychological impact of racism and fostered empowerment within oppressive educational contexts.

Figure 2: *Overview of key concepts and synthesised broader categories*

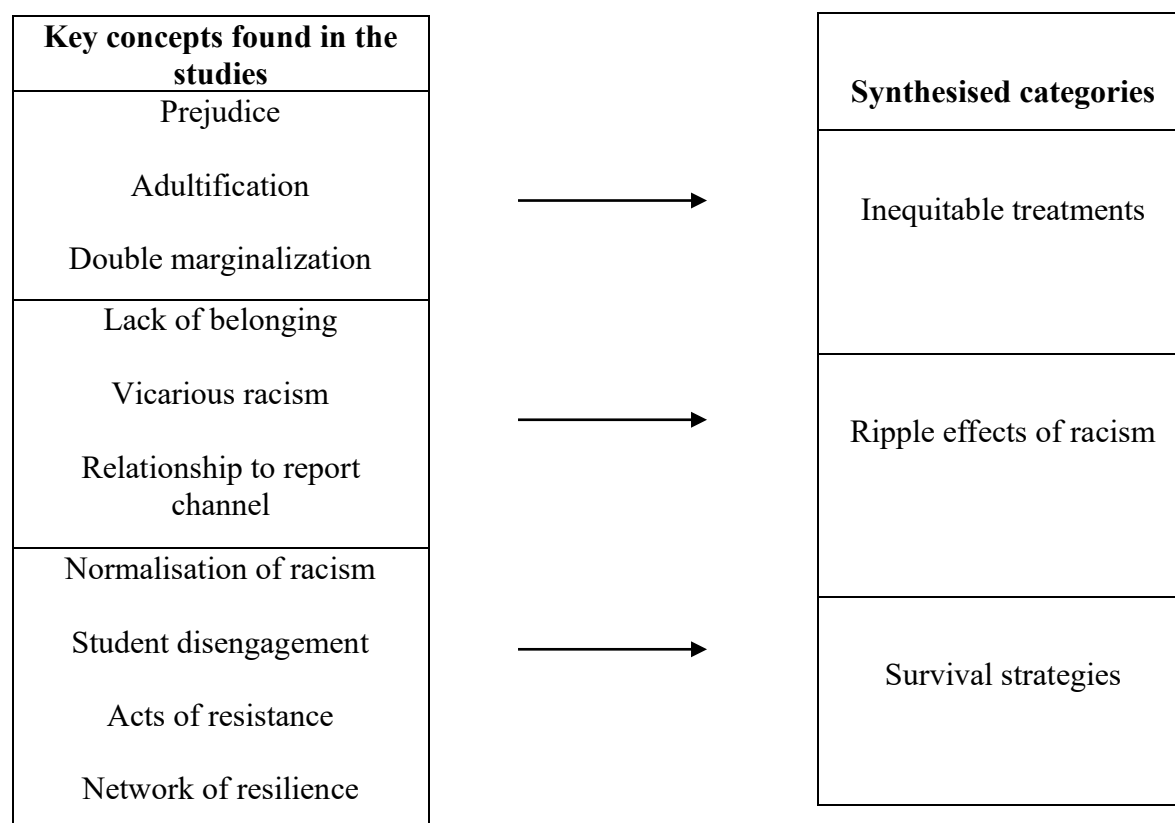
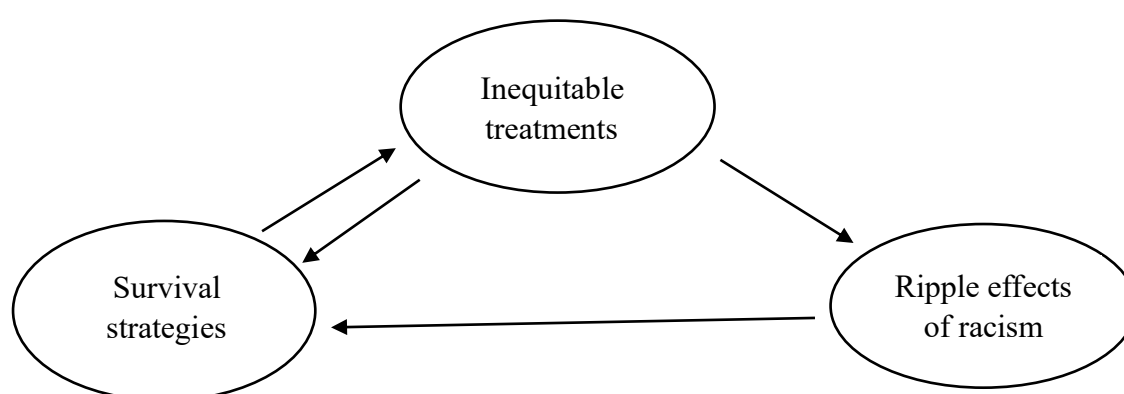


Figure 3: *Line of argument synthesis*



Evaluation and conclusion of meta-ethnography

This meta-ethnography synthesis of twelve studies highlights the key concepts shaping the experiences of Black students across educational settings in both the US and the UK. The analysis reveals a pattern of inequitable treatments, including prejudice from school staff, adultification (evident exclusively among studies with participants under the age of 18), and the intersectionality of race and gender, resulting in a double marginalisation. Recognising the impact of individual interactions with their environment on broader life development, the findings suggest that inequitable treatments in educational settings may perpetuate societal inequalities (Sameroff, 2009).

Furthermore, the review unveils the ripple effects of racism, including a lack of belonging, which some students coped with by adopting the survival strategy of disengaging from their academic pursuits. This aligns with prior research highlighting the role of a sense of belonging in fostering positive school engagement, serving as a protective factor against limited educational attainment, employability, and health challenges (Grace, 2020; Griffith, 2023; Hill, 2022).

The exploration also brings to light the phenomenon of vicarious racism as a secondary impact of discrimination. Existing research indicates that vicarious racism may elicit mental health challenges, underscoring the role of school-based racism as a contributing factor to broader health inequalities (Chae et al., 2021; Heard-Garris et al., 2018; Pieterse et al., 2010).

Additionally, the review exposes another ripple effect of racism, an adverse relationship with formal reporting channels, which was fuelled by dynamics of power, fear of inaction or retaliation and lack of trust in reporting systems. The reluctance to report stems from a heightened awareness among students that the racism they encounter is systemic and institutional, making individual action unhelpful. This phenomenon aligns with the ideologies of CRT of the power imbalances and structures at play in everyday racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2011).

Finally, the review found that the repercussions of inequitable treatments, along with their cascading effects, prompted the adoption of survival strategies. These strategies were characterised by a dual response: an acknowledgement of the systemic structures in operation and a refusal to accept oppressive conditions (Rosales & Langhout, 2020). This dynamic gave rise to four distinct concepts: normalisation, student disengagement, acts of resistance, and networks of resilience.

While normalisation, by itself, may not challenge the ingrained norms perpetuating racism, it may be linked to the recognition of racial experiences as by-products of broader systemic structures. This heightened awareness and acceptance of racism as an institutional dimension could serve as a precursor either to student disengagement rooted in a sense of helplessness or to acts of resistance actively challenging systemic inequalities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2011). Acts of resistance manifest as individuals seek alternative ways to combat discrimination without directly confronting the system perpetuating it (Truong et al., 2016). The studies under review exemplify such alternatives, where students intentionally counteract stereotypes and negative labels by amplifying positive behaviours, upholding values of equality, engaging in collective mobilisation, and speaking up against racism. These efforts to eliminate discriminatory practices align with the pursuit of self-actualisation, the pinnacle of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943).

Interwoven within these coping responses is a network of resilience, a relational and spiritual foundation that supports students' capacity to endure and reframe their experiences of racism. This network, encompassing family, peers, faith, and cultural connectedness, extends coping beyond individual adaptation to a collective process of empowerment. Rather than merely responding to oppression, the network of resilience represents a counterforce that nurtures belonging, affirms identity, and sustains hope within hostile educational contexts.

The line of argument synthesis posits that inequitable treatments led to a ripple effect, influencing not only individuals directly affected but also those in their immediate surroundings and their relationship to formal reporting channels. Consequently, this cascade gives rise to survival strategies, some of which, inadvertently, may perpetuate inequitable treatments through the mechanisms of normalisation and student disengagement. The reciprocal nature of the relationship between experiences of inequitable treatment and the adoption of survival strategies aligns with developmental systems theory, which underscores the dynamic interactions between individuals and their environment (Ford & Lerner, 1992).

Clinical implications

The line of argument synthesis can be seen as a visual to understand and explain how schools reflect wider societal norms and experiences of Black individuals. This perspective underscores the potential for schools to act as agents of change to diminish inequality. The review's findings shed light on the role of schools in perpetuating racial disparities and inequalities in domains such as health, social class, and the criminal justice system. The

findings provide educators with invaluable insights into the experiences of Black students within educational settings. The findings also emphasise the need for schools to address and reform practices that sustain inequalities proactively. Such measures may include, but are not limited to, training school staff to recognise adultification bias, increasing staff awareness of the intersectionality of race and gender, fostering a school culture that nurtures a sense of belonging among Black students, and creating an educational environment that empowers students to advocate against injustice without the fear of facing repercussions.

A major limitation of this meta-ethnography is the limited number of papers eligible for the review, due to the limited research separating Black individuals from other Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups. It is important to recognise that racial groups encounter different inequalities within education systems, illustrated by 2016/2017 UK data revealing significantly higher rates of permanent exclusion for Black students compared to other ethnicities, as well as disparities in GCSE grades and acceptance to Russell Group Universities (Byrne et al., 2020). Consequently, future research must focus specifically on amplifying the voices and experiences of Black students and refrain from categorising them alongside other ethnic minority groups.

Additionally, the use of the CASP tool to assess the reviewed studies presented challenges in guiding the synthesis of this meta-ethnography, as it is primarily designed for appraising individual studies. This raises concerns about the reproducibility of the synthesis, given the absence of a consensus on criteria and the limited generalisability inherent in meta-ethnographies. Notably, the tool falls short of adequately addressing the significance of reflexivity, a crucial aspect of this meta-ethnography where the researcher's interpretation may be susceptible to personal biases, potentially influencing the validity of the synthesis. Finally, it's worth considering that the study's findings may have been influenced by variables such as the school's geographic location, the racial makeup of the staff, and the ratio of Black to White students. These factors could potentially impact the levels of racism experienced and warrant further investigation in future research.

Gaps in the Literature

The meta-ethnography revealed a limited body of research exploring Black students' lived experiences of racism within UK school settings across multiple sites of schools. Existing studies predominantly originate from the US and Canada, with relatively few focusing specifically on the UK context. While some research has uncovered experiences of Black

students in education (e.g., Ibezim et al., 2025), there remains notably underrepresented research with practical ideas of change informed by Black students' voices. This gap is critical given that experiences of racism during adolescence occur at a formative developmental stage in which racial identity, self-concept, and belonging are still emerging.

Furthermore, the synthesis indicated that most existing studies emphasise the occurrence and impact of racism, yet provide limited insight into how Black students psychologically navigate, interpret, and respond to these experiences. There is also a paucity of research examining students' lived experience, grounded perspectives on institutional changes intended to address racism, such as formal reporting channels and safeguarding procedures. Where these processes are discussed, they are often described from policy or educator perspectives rather than through the lived experiences of the students directly affected. Consequently, current understandings remain incomplete, overlooking the agency and psychological insight of young people within systems tasked with their protection.

The Rationale for the Current Research Project

This thesis responds directly to the gaps identified through the meta-ethnographic synthesis. The limited exploration of Black students' voices within UK secondary schools underscores an urgent need for research that centres their perspectives and experiences. Schools are key institutions with statutory duties to promote equality and safeguard students from harm, yet little is known about how these duties are experienced by Black students encountering racism.

By examining how Black students make sense of, navigate, and respond to racism in educational settings, this research seeks to move beyond documenting experiences of discrimination toward understanding the relational, systemic, and procedural dynamics that shape those experiences. The study also aims to illuminate how institutional responses to racism, particularly reporting and disciplinary mechanisms, are perceived by students, and how these processes may either reproduce or challenge racial inequalities within schools.

There is limited UK qualitative research exploring how Black students navigate experiences of racism within UK secondary education systems. This study offers a qualitative exploration of the conditions of UK secondary education systems and examines how these conditions influence the ways Black students navigate racism. In doing so, the study seeks to illuminate how institutional contexts may contribute to the gap between anti-discrimination policy and its implementation in everyday educational practice.

Aims of the Research and Research Questions

This research aimed to explore how Black students navigate their experiences of racism in school settings. Three sub-questions were explored:

1. *What are Black students' accounts of the impact of racism in secondary schools across England?*
2. *What are Black students' relationships to formal reporting channels following racist experiences in schools?*
3. *What do Black students identify as priorities for change in schools, and how might these inform intervention design and implementation?*

Chapter Three: Methodology

Chapter Overview

This chapter outlines the methodology employed in the study, structured into three distinct sections:

Background and Philosophical Assumptions: This section explores the foundational principles of qualitative research, including the underlying philosophical assumptions and the researcher's positionality.

Method: This section details the procedures used in participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis, ensuring the study's methodological rigour.

Quality in Research: This section discusses the strategies implemented to ensure that the research is of high quality and adheres to ethical standards.

Part One: Background and philosophical assumptions

Philosophical positioning

A crucial aspect of selecting a research method is the consideration of the philosophical assumptions underpinning the method, as well as the researcher's perspective (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It is essential to explicitly state the assumptions being made, particularly given the wide variety of philosophical approaches that can inform different research frameworks (Charmaz, 2006). This process involves situating the method within its philosophical context, thereby highlighting both the philosophical and practical implications for psychological research (Annells, 1996). It has been argued that addressing questions of ontology (concerning the nature of what can be known) and epistemology (concerning how knowledge can be acquired) is especially valuable when clearly defining the philosophical stance of research inquiries (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Ontology

Ontology deals with the nature and characteristics of reality. Ontological perspectives can generally be placed on a continuum ranging from realism to relativism (Rawnsley, 1998). Realism suggests that a single reality exists, governed by scientific laws. Critical realists, however, argue that while reality is objective, it can be influenced by individuals within constraints imposed by social structures (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991). This view assumes that an objective reality exists independently of our perceptions, but that this reality is interpreted through the lens of language and social context (Oliver, 2011). On the other hand, relativism posits that multiple realities exist, each uniquely defined by the individual and their social environment.

In this instance, I adopted a critical realist stance, recognising the presence of an external reality beyond individual perceptions and acknowledging the systemic manifestations of racism deeply ingrained in historical and social structures (Delgado & Stefancic, 2011).

Epistemology

Epistemology addresses the nature of knowledge, how it is acquired, and the relationship between the researcher and the subject under investigation. Generally, epistemological perspectives can be situated along a continuum ranging from positivism to constructionism, often aligned with corresponding ontological positions (Broom & Willis, 2007). Positivism, grounded in a Western realist framework, posits that an objective reality

exists and can be accurately examined and measured through scientific methods. In this view, the knowledge derived from participants is accepted as an accurate reflection of their experiences. Therefore, researchers are advised to foster an environment in which participants feel comfortable and able to express the truth of their experiences (Willig, 2012). However, critics of positivism challenge the notion of researcher objectivity, arguing that it fails to adequately account for the complex social dynamics at play in research. In response, a post-positivist approach, aligned with a critical realist ontology, suggests that while methodological rigour is essential for maintaining objectivity, the knowledge produced is only an approximate representation of reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

In contrast, constructionism is associated with a relativist ontology, suggesting that reality cannot be measured objectively, as knowledge is co-constructed through interactions and language shared between the researcher and participants (Gergen, 1985). This perspective gained prominence with the rise of qualitative research methods, in which researchers adopted a more interpretative stance, aiming to understand participants' lived experiences by identifying social patterns that shape the construction of knowledge (Broom & Willis, 2007).

Recognising racism as a structural, historically grounded reality within education systems, this study adopts a constructionist epistemological stance to explore how young people make sense of and articulate their experiences of racism. This stance does not suggest that racism itself is merely a matter of perception; rather, it recognises that experiences of racism are interpreted and expressed within specific social, historical, and relational contexts. Guided by Critical Race Theory (CRT), this research adopted a critical realist perspective. CRT provides a lens for understanding the systemic and pervasive nature of racism, recognising its deep roots in historical and social structures (Delgado & Stefancic, 2011). Critical realism, in turn, acknowledges the existence of an external reality independent of individual perceptions, while also considering the influence of social and historical contexts on these perceptions. This dual focus allows the research to address both the individual experiences of racism and the broader systemic factors that shape these experiences.

The Rationale for a Qualitative Approach

Deciding between quantitative and qualitative research methods is also shaped by the research objectives and the advantages of each approach. Different ontological and epistemological perspectives underpin each approach. Quantitative methods are generally associated with a realist and positivist philosophy, where the goal is to validate knowledge

through experimental control and manipulation. In contrast, qualitative methods are often rooted in relativist and constructionist philosophies, with the primary aim of exploring and understanding knowledge (Foss & Ellefsen, 2002). However, in practice, the boundaries between these methodologies are often blurred, and some research tools (e.g., questionnaires) may straddle both paradigms, serving diverse philosophical assumptions.

Qualitative research offers two key benefits: it allows for a deeper comprehension of participants' experiences. It can generate new hypotheses about a concept (Greenhalgh & Hurwitz, 1999) before it is further examined using quantitative techniques (Pope, 1995). This study aimed to explore how Black students navigate their experiences of racism in schools. By inviting participants to reflect on their subjective experiences, qualitative methods enabled the collection of rich, detailed data that quantitative approaches may not capture (Hennink et al., 2020). A qualitative approach was therefore considered most appropriate for contextualising participants' complex, lived experiences and understanding how they make sense of them (Padgett, 2016). However, qualitative research has limitations, including the influence of researcher and participant subjectivity and typically smaller sample sizes, which can limit generalisability compared to quantitative methods. Nevertheless, it remains well-suited to exploring under-researched phenomena and amplifying marginalised voices.

An explorative qualitative research approach was employed for the current investigation. The research aims informed the rationale for adopting a qualitative methodology, as qualitative methods are particularly advantageous for generating rich descriptions and thus cultivating an in-depth understanding of the existing phenomena (Creswell, 2012). The aims are exploratory due to the lack of research on the impact of school-based experiences on Black students and how they shape their relationship with formal reporting channels.

Consideration of Alternative Methodologies

In selecting an appropriate qualitative methodology, careful consideration was given to approaches that prioritise lived experience, meaning-making, and social context. Given the study's aim to explore how Black students experience, interpret, and navigate racism within educational institutions, while also examining the systemic conditions shaping those experiences, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), Narrative Analysis (NA), and Thematic Analysis (TA) were considered.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IPA is grounded in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, with a strong emphasis on detailed exploration of individual lived experience (Smith et al., 2009). Its idiographic commitment prioritises in-depth analysis of relatively small, homogeneous samples, focusing on how individuals make sense of particular phenomena within specific contexts.

Although IPA's interpretative focus aligns with the study's interest in sense-making, its idiographic orientation was not fully congruent with the aims of this research. The present study sought to identify patterned meanings across a heterogeneous sample of Black students differing in age and gender. Rather than focusing on depth within individual cases, the analytic objective was to explore shared structures of meaning regarding institutional racism and participants' reporting pathways. Furthermore, the use of focus groups, where meaning is co-constructed dialogically, sits less comfortably with IPA's individualised analytic frame. For these reasons, IPA was deemed less suited to addressing the broader, systemic and patterned dimensions of the research questions.

Narrative Analysis

Narrative Analysis centres on how individuals construct and organise their experiences into stories, paying particular attention to structure, audience, and the socio-cultural resources available for storytelling (Riessman, 2008). This methodology would have enabled a detailed examination of how participants narrated racism and positioned themselves within those accounts.

However, the primary interest of this study was not the structure of participants' narratives or the performative aspects of storytelling, but rather the identification of recurrent patterns of meaning across accounts. While narrative approaches are well-positioned to explore identity construction and story form, they are less oriented toward mapping shared thematic patterns across multiple participants in a way that supports systemic interpretation. Given the study's aim to interrogate institutional processes and collective patterns of racialised experience, a thematic approach was considered more appropriate.

Thematic Analysis and Typological Considerations

Thematic Analysis (TA) offers a flexible method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, TA

is not a singular method; it encompasses distinct typologies with differing epistemological assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Coding reliability and codebook approaches to TA often operate within more positivist paradigms, emphasising coding consensus, reliability checks, and the minimisation of researcher subjectivity. Such approaches were not aligned with the epistemological stance of this study. Adopting a critical realist ontology alongside a constructionist epistemology necessitates acknowledgement that meaning is co-constructed, interpretation is theory-laden, and researcher subjectivity is an analytic resource rather than a bias to be eliminated.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), as articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), was therefore selected. RTA is situated within a “Big Q” qualitative paradigm and is compatible with critical realist frameworks. It recognises that themes do not passively emerge from data but are actively generated through the researcher’s engagement with the material. This was particularly important given the study’s grounding in CRT, which assumes that racism is systemic, historically embedded, and structurally reproduced. An analytic method was therefore required that allowed for both inductive sensitivity to participants’ accounts and theoretically informed interpretation of systemic processes.

Rationale for Reflexive Thematic Analysis

RTA was selected because it allowed the identification of patterned meanings across a heterogeneous group of participants while retaining analytic depth. It enabled both semantic analysis (remaining close to participants’ explicit descriptions) and latent analysis (interpreting underlying assumptions, power relations, and institutional dynamics). This dual-level engagement was essential for exploring how racism was experienced interpersonally while also examining its structural operation within school systems.

The study adopted a combined inductive and theoretically informed approach. While coding was grounded in participants’ language and accounts, interpretation was sensitised by CRT and critical realist assumptions regarding the structural nature of racism. This approach reflects the study’s philosophical positioning: racism is understood as a systemic reality, yet knowledge of it is mediated through socially situated meaning-making processes.

RTA’s flexibility also made it well-suited to focus group data, as participants’ accounts were co-constructed within group dialogue, allowing for attention to both shared patterns and

the relational dynamics shaping meaning-making. The method, therefore, aligned with the study's interest in both individual interviews and collective data from the focus groups.

Strengths and Limitations of RTA

A key strength of RTA lies in its epistemological flexibility and its compatibility with critical and contextualist frameworks. It allows for interpretative depth without requiring commitment to a purely relativist ontology. For a study grounded in critical realism and CRT, this flexibility enabled exploration of both subjective experience and systemic conditions. Additionally, RTA supports analytic movement from description to interpretation, facilitating examination of latent processes such as institutional defensiveness and adultification.

However, RTA has been critiqued for its flexibility and the absence of rigid procedural rules, which may lead to variability in how themes are constructed (Nowell et al., 2017). As themes are actively generated rather than discovered, analytic transparency becomes crucial. Furthermore, RTA relies heavily on the researcher's interpretation, raising questions about subjectivity and analytic influence. Within a critical realist framework, this is not viewed as a methodological flaw but as an inevitable and acknowledged feature of qualitative inquiry. Nevertheless, it requires sustained reflexive engagement to ensure that interpretation remains grounded in data rather than imposed upon it.

Another limitation concerns the breadth of thematic approaches. While RTA enables identification of patterns across participants, it may not offer the same idiographic depth as IPA or the detailed structural analysis of narrative form provided by NA. However, given the study's aim to illuminate patterned institutional processes rather than singular case narratives, this was considered an appropriate trade-off.

Part Two: Method

Participants

Sampling strategy

A purposeful sampling method was adopted, which allowed for the selection of individuals with specific characteristics and unique experiences to contribute insights to the research. The sampling dimensions included direct and vicarious experiences of racism, taking into account gender, age, and individuals self-identifying as Black African, Black British, Black

Caribbean or mixed heritage with Black. The educational range of participants spanned from secondary school age to higher education levels, such as sixth form and college.

Inclusion/ exclusion criteria

To be eligible to participate in the study, participants must fall within the age bracket of 13 to 18 years, to capture the school experiences of the participants. Eligible participants needed to have either directly encountered racism (unfair or harmful treatment based on a person's race or ethnicity, including both direct discrimination and indirect or systemic forms) within school settings or experienced it vicariously by witnessing instances of racism in their school environment. This inclusion criterion was integral to addressing the research questions, which revolve around the accounts of the impact of experiences of school-based racism and participants' relationships with reporting racism experienced within school settings through formal channels of information.

The eligibility criterion also includes participants self-identifying as Black African, Black British, Black Caribbean or mixed heritage with Black. This deliberate focus on Black heritage recognises the differences in experiences of inequalities among different minority ethnic groups, as highlighted by Gov.UK (2022). A key requirement was that the experiences of racism had to be situated within the context of school settings. This exclusion criterion was applied to align with the research question, which is concerned with understanding experiences of racism specifically within the school environment.

Data collection

Measures

This study adopted a qualitative design using semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions to generate rich, experiential data. Both formats were guided by a flexible topic guide consisting of open-ended questions (see Appendix A for interview schedule). The use of semi-structured methods enabled the researcher to maintain a clear focus on the research aims while also allowing space to explore issues introduced by participants.

Semi-structured interviews were selected because they provide a balance between structure and flexibility. While key questions ensure consistency across participants, the format also permits the researcher to probe emerging areas of interest and adapt to shifts in the direction of the conversation (Smith, 1995). This responsiveness allows unanticipated yet meaningful insights to surface, including perspectives that may not have been fully considered

during the development of the interview schedule (Charmaz, 2002). Such flexibility is particularly important in qualitative research that seeks to foreground participants' lived experiences.

Participants were offered the choice of taking part in either an individual interview or a focus group. Given the sensitivity of the topic, this approach aimed to maximise comfort and autonomy. Focus groups can be especially valuable when participants share common experiences, as interaction between group members can stimulate reflection, validation, and the co-construction of meaning (Kitzinger, 1995; Morgan, 1996). For some individuals, discussing experiences alongside peers who have faced similar circumstances may feel more containing and less isolating. At the same time, offering individual interviews ensured that those who preferred a more private, one-to-one setting were given the option to do so.

Although participants were encouraged to speak freely, both interviews and focus groups followed the same semi-structured guide to ensure a degree of consistency across data collection methods while still allowing flexibility in how discussions unfolded. On average, the interviews and focus group sessions were one to two hours, which allowed time for narratives, follow-up discussions, and engagement in conversational dialogue.

Individual interviews and focus groups both generated rich qualitative data; however, these methods can produce different forms of knowledge. Focus groups involve interaction between participants, meaning ideas may be co-constructed through group discussion, whereas individual interviews tend to foreground personal reflection. As such, some researchers caution that findings from these methods may not always be directly comparable (Namey et al., 2016). During analysis, I remained attentive to these differences, considering how the interactional dynamics of focus groups may have shaped the data. Nonetheless, because both methods were guided by the same topic schedule and research questions, they were analysed within a shared coding framework.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through online posters, which were distributed via school-based connections, community organisations working with minoritised groups, and social media platforms (see Appendix B for posters). Schools and organisations were selected through a combination of purposive and convenience sampling. Initial recruitment focused on schools and community organisations within the Southeast of England that had existing links with the researcher or colleagues. Recruitment was subsequently expanded through professional and

personal networks and organisations known to work with minoritised young people, including churches, youth clubs, and youth councils, to maximise access to participants who met the inclusion criteria.

During the initial recruitment stage, approximately 40 schools and organisations were contacted via email and telephone within the Southeast of England. Although this was the starting point, the intention was not to focus solely on one geographical region. A country-wide recruitment strategy was adopted for several reasons. First, restricting recruitment to the Southeast of England risked producing a demographically homogeneous sample, both in terms of socioeconomic profile and the ethnic and cultural composition of participants, which could have limited the transferability of the findings to young people in other parts of the UK. Second, the existing literature highlights persistent and well-documented difficulties in recruiting participants from minoritised groups into research (NHS Accelerated Access Collaborative, 2023; Waheed, 2015), and these challenges are not evenly distributed across the country; the demographic composition, density, and accessibility of minoritised communities vary considerably by region. A sample drawn from a single region, therefore, risked compounding this underrepresentation rather than mitigating it, as the specific communities accessible to the researcher locally may not have been representative of minoritised groups nationally. Expanding recruitment across the UK allowed for a more varied sample in terms of geography and socioeconomic background, supporting a richer and more transferable understanding of the research topic across different regional and community contexts.

To support broader national recruitment, the study was disseminated by sharing the study poster through personal and professional networks (e.g., colleagues with connections to young people, teachers, and school staff), posting on social media platforms, and circulating the advert through community organisations working with minoritised groups, churches, youth clubs, and youth councils. As recruitment expanded nationally through these channels, it was not possible to determine the total number of individuals and organisations who subsequently viewed or shared the recruitment materials. In total, 60 individuals expressed interest in participating in the study. Although the study was disseminated through multiple channels, the majority of participants reported first encountering the study through social media or via their youth council connections. Of these 60 individuals, 34 did not respond to subsequent contact attempts to arrange participation, and a total of 26 participants were therefore recruited to the study. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached, following 14 individual interviews and two focus group discussions.

Prospective participants were encouraged to initiate contact with the researcher, ensuring participation was entirely voluntary. Individuals expressing interest were contacted by email and asked to complete a demographic form to determine their eligibility according to the inclusion criteria (see Appendix C). Clear and transparent communication was prioritised throughout the recruitment process, with opportunities provided for participants to ask questions before deciding whether to take part. Eligible participants were then provided with a detailed information sheet (see Appendix D).

Written consent was obtained electronically from participants, and parental consent was also obtained for participants under the age of 16 (see Appendices E and F). Following confirmation that participants met the inclusion criteria, and prior to participation, parents or carers of participants under the age of 16 were contacted using the email address and telephone number provided on the demographic form. Parents were informed that their child had expressed an interest in the study and were provided with a participant information sheet and digital consent form. Written parental consent was obtained before interviews or focus groups were arranged, ensuring that parents had sufficient opportunity to review the study information and ask questions before deciding whether their child could participate. Participants were also given opportunities to ask questions before deciding whether to take part.

At the start of each interview and focus group, verbal consent was reconfirmed, including permission to audio-record the discussion. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point during the study, and the researcher would offer opportunities to pause or discontinue participation should participants become uncomfortable or distressed.

Participants were invited to choose between participating in a one- to two-hour individual interview or a focus group discussion. The setting for data collection was determined by the recruitment source, either school-based or community organisation-based. All individual interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, allowing flexibility for participants located across the UK. The focus group discussions took place in the participants' schools. Although participants were free to choose between an individual interview or a focus group discussion, in practice, only single-school cohorts opted for the focus group format. This is likely because these participants had been recruited as part of the same class or year group and therefore already had an existing peer relationship, making group discussion a more comfortable option. Focus groups were organised by age (13–15 years and 16–18 years) to facilitate discussion among peers of a similar age, with groups ranging from four to eight participants.

To ensure that safeguarding procedures were followed, a trusted adult affiliated with the school was present during face-to-face focus group discussions. Participants were reminded of confidentiality at the beginning of each interview and focus group and informed that they were not required to answer any questions that made them uncomfortable. Verbal consent to record the discussion was obtained following initial introductions. Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed, and transcription and coding occurred concurrently with data collection.

Reflections on the data collection process

The recruitment process itself reflected some of the institutional dynamics explored in this study. One school declined involvement on the basis that “racism was not a problem” in their setting. This response was notable, not only because it pre-emptively foreclosed inquiry, but because it mirrored the minimisation and institutional defensiveness later described by participants. In this sense, barriers to recruitment became data, revealing how racism can be rendered invisible at an organisational level.

Recruitment through formal school channels proved particularly challenging. I contacted numerous secondary schools directly via email and did not receive a single response. In an effort to navigate this barrier, I worked closely with a local wellbeing team that was independent from schools but held established, trusted relationships with them. The team were highly supportive of the research and actively disseminated study information and posters on my behalf, which I had hoped would provide a more effective route into school communities. However, despite this endorsement and existing relationships, schools did not respond to them either, and I was ultimately unable to recruit participants through this avenue.

This experience highlighted the role of institutional gatekeeping in shaping whose voices are permitted entry into research spaces. The absence of engagement functioned as a form of silence. This mirrored, in subtle ways, participants’ own accounts of blocked communication and organisational inaction when raising concerns about racism. In contrast, community organisations, including church groups and youth groups, were significantly more responsive and instrumental in facilitating participation. These spaces appeared more willing to actively support young people’s involvement and to create opportunities for their experiences to be heard.

One notable exception within the school system was a Black secondary school teacher who was also head of the Psychology department at her school. She actively supported

recruitment and advocated for the study within her school, despite encountering structural barriers. Her engagement contrasted with that of other teachers I had connected with, who, while supportive in principle, did not appear to hold sufficient institutional power to facilitate access. This disparity illuminated how power operates within educational systems and how individual commitment alone may not be enough to overcome structural constraints. The recruitment process, therefore, echoed the study's findings regarding protected power, restricted organisational processes, and the gatekeeping of voice.

My positionality as a Black trainee clinical psychologist also shaped the data collection process. My own lived experiences of navigating racialised spaces informed what I was attuned to within interviews. For example, in an early interview, when asked how she wished others would see her, a participant shared that she wished people were not “scared” or “intimidated” to talk to her. Drawing on my own experience of sensing an unspoken barrier in interactions with White peers, a sense of needing to demonstrate that I am “safe” or non-threatening before being known, I was curious about the origins of this perceived intimidation. By gently exploring this, the participant articulated that this perception was rooted in her Blackness and that White peers experienced her as intimidating before knowing her personality.

This moment illustrates how shared social positioning enabled sensitivity to what was left unsaid. My insider status shaped the questions I felt compelled to ask and the meanings I was able to notice. Throughout the research process, I documented these reflections in a reflexive diary, recognising that my interpretations were inevitably shaped by my biography, theoretical commitments, and relational positioning within the research encounter.

Data Analysis

The transcripts were analysed using RTA as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019). RTA involves a non-linear process of engagement with the data, moving back and forth between stages rather than a strictly linear progression through fixed stages. While Braun and Clarke describe six phases of analysis, familiarisation, coding, generating initial themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report, these phases overlapped and informed one another throughout the analytic process. A quality assessment of the RTA was also completed against Braun and Clarke's (2006) 15-point checklist (see Appendix G).

Phase 1: Familiarisation

Analysis began during and immediately after data collection. Following each interview and focus group, I recorded initial reflections in a reflexive journal, noting emotional responses,

early patterns, tensions, and questions. Audio recordings were listened to in full before transcription was revisited, and transcripts were read repeatedly to deepen immersion. During this stage, I attended to what participants explicitly articulated and to what appeared implicit, contradictory, or emotionally charged. This prolonged engagement enabled sensitivity to recurring patterns across groups, as well as attention to nuance within individual accounts.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

Coding was conducted in NVivo software. Initial codes were developed through close engagement with the transcripts and reflected both semantic (explicit) content and latent (interpretative) meanings (see Appendix H). Coding was not treated as a mechanical categorisation process but as an analytic activity shaped by my theoretical positioning and reflexive engagement with the data.

Given the study's grounding in CRT and developmental frameworks, the analysis was both inductive and theoretically informed. While many codes were grounded in participants' own language, others were shaped by conceptual sensitivities to issues such as adultification, institutional defensiveness, racialised surveillance, and epistemic injustice. Coding was fluid and adaptive; as my interpretations evolved, earlier codes were revised, collapsed, expanded, or redefined.

Phase 3: Developing Candidate Themes

Following coding, I began grouping related codes to explore broader patterns of shared meaning (see Appendix I). This involved moving beyond surface similarities to consider conceptual relationships between extracts. Visual mapping and written analytic memos supported this stage, allowing me to examine how codes clustered together and what organising ideas might connect them.

At this stage, numerous provisional theme groupings were developed. These were not treated as final but as working interpretations to be interrogated further.

Phase 4: Reviewing and Refining Themes

Candidate themes were reviewed against the coded extracts and the full data set to ensure coherence and distinction. I examined whether themes meaningfully captured the complexity of participants' accounts and whether they sufficiently addressed the research questions. Some themes were merged where conceptual overlap was evident, while others were divided to better represent important distinctions (See Appendix J).

This phase required returning repeatedly to the transcripts to check that interpretations remained grounded in participants' words. It also involved ensuring that themes did not simply describe content but captured patterned meaning across the dataset.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

Themes were then refined to articulate their central organising concepts. This involved clarifying what each theme captured, what it did not capture, and how it related to other themes within the overall analytic narrative. The naming of themes aimed to reflect both participants' language and the interpretative depth of the analysis.

Throughout this process, reflexive journaling continued, enabling me to critically consider how my positionality as a Black trainee clinical psychologist shaped my interpretation. Reflexivity continued to function as a methodological resource rather than a bias to eliminate.

Phase 6: Producing the Report

The final stage involved weaving together analytic commentary and data extracts to construct a coherent narrative that addressed the research aims. The write-up sought to balance participants' voices with interpretative analysis, situating findings within broader theoretical and empirical literature. Attention was paid to illustrating both shared patterns and tensions within the data, consistent with a critical realist approach that acknowledges an external reality of systemic racism while recognising that participants' accounts are socially constructed interpretations of that reality.

Coproduction

The analytic process incorporated structured reflexive dialogue with two Black, female, undergraduate psychology students, both 20 years of age. Their involvement was not positioned as a reliability check or independent coding exercise, but as a form of critical engagement intended to deepen interpretation, enhance reflexivity, and ensure that the developing analysis remained grounded in participants' accounts.

The undergraduate collaborators were recruited via an invitation circulated to first-year undergraduate psychology students at the University of Essex. Interested students contacted me directly and received an information sheet informing them of the purpose of the study and their involvement (see Appendix K). Prior to engaging with the data, we met in person to discuss the project and to reflect on the lenses we each brought to the analysis. This included

acknowledging our own experiences of racism within UK educational settings and considering how these experiences might shape our attentiveness to particular patterns and meanings within the data.

The two collaborators brought distinct experiential standpoints. One had attended a state secondary school in London and described longstanding experiences of racism. The other had migrated to the UK from an African country during secondary school and reflected that she did not initially interpret her experiences through a racial lens. She described only later, particularly during the Black Lives Matter movement, acquiring the language to name these experiences as racism and microaggressions. These differing trajectories enriched analytic discussions, as they illuminated how meaning-making around racism can be shaped by social context and access to political discourse.

Subsequent meetings were conducted individually via Microsoft Teams to allow each collaborator space to reflect freely without influence from the other. All transcripts had been anonymised using pseudonyms prior to these discussions. Rather than asking the students to independently code the data, I invited them to engage critically with extracts and my developing interpretations. They were asked to consider whether the analytic claims felt grounded in the data and whether alternative readings were possible. Guiding prompts included: Does this interpretation reflect the quote? Is anything important missing? Does anything feel overstated? And could this extract be understood differently?

Where collaborators identified alternative perspectives, these were explored reflexively and incorporated into subsequent refinements of the analysis. This process did not aim to produce consensus in a positivist sense; rather, it functioned as a dialogical space in which interpretative decisions were scrutinised and strengthened. Independent coders contributed to this process by engaging with developing themes and helping to attune the analysis to what the transcripts were disclosing. For example, in discussing the subtheme “the distortion of Black girlhood,” a coder highlighted how similar emotional expressions may be interpreted differently depending on the racial identity of the student, noting that a White girl might be understood as “having a bad day,” whereas a Black girl might be perceived as having “an attitude” or being “aggressive.” This observation helped clarify that the analytic focus should centre not on anger itself, but on the racialised interpretation and differential treatment of emotional expression within school contexts. Additional examples of how coder reflections informed the analysis are provided in Appendix L.

Engaging undergraduate collaborators in this way aligned with the study's broader commitment to centring Black perspectives within knowledge production. Importantly, as undergraduate students, they were closer in age and educational stage to many of the participants than I was as a doctoral researcher. This relative proximity to secondary and early post-secondary educational contexts meant that their reflections were shaped by more recent lived experiences of school systems, peer culture, and racialised dynamics within those spaces. Their contributions supported analytic depth while remaining consistent with the epistemological assumptions of RTA, in which meaning is understood as co-constructed and interpretative rather than objectively verified.

Reflections of data analysis process

Immersing myself in the data transcripts enabled me to remain close to participants' accounts and to attend carefully to the meanings being constructed within the discussions. Throughout both data collection and analysis, I maintained a reflective journal in which I documented immediate impressions, emotional responses, theoretical associations, and emerging analytic ideas. The purpose of this process was not to eliminate my influence, which, from an RTA perspective, is neither possible nor desirable, but to make it visible and available for scrutiny.

I kept a physical journal with me during the analytic period, as reflections frequently emerged outside of formal coding sessions. When analytic insights arose, I returned to the relevant transcript sections to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' words rather than drifting into abstraction. This iterative movement between reflection and raw data helped to anchor the analysis within the dataset.

Given my personal and professional proximity to the topic, I paid particular attention to moments where my own experiences resonated strongly with participants' accounts. Rather than attempting to suppress these reactions, I documented them and revisited the transcripts to examine whether my interpretations were sufficiently supported by the data. When reflections from earlier interviews or focus groups surfaced during analysis of subsequent interviews, I recorded them separately so that each transcript could be engaged with on its own terms before patterns were considered across the dataset. This process supported a balance between idiographic attention to each discussion and the later development of shared themes.

Part Three: Quality in Research

Quality assurance

In the following section, a critical appraisal of the study will be presented. Criteria such as validity, reliability, and replicability, which are typically associated with quantitative research, are rooted in positivist epistemology and are therefore not appropriate for qualitative research (Smith, 2003). In contrast, qualitative quality is more commonly evaluated through the concept of trustworthiness, which includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study adopts trustworthiness as an overarching framework for qualitative quality and uses the CASP (2018) checklist to operationalise the critical appraisal of the current research (see Table 6).

Table 6: *Critical Appraisal of the Current Study using CASP (2018) Criteria*

Qualitative Appraisal Criteria			
Key: ✓= Yes X= No	Criteria	Evidence for meeting the CASP criteria	
1. Is there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	✓	The aims and research sub-questions were clearly stated in Chapter Two.	
2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	✓	A qualitative methodology was appropriate to explore how Black young people navigate their experiences of racism in secondary schools in England, using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. This allowed the researcher to maintain a clear focus on the research aims while also allowing space to explore issues introduced by participants.	
3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	✓	The meta-ethnography highlighted a gap in UK qualitative research exploring how Black students navigate experiences of racism within UK secondary education systems, particularly regarding clear action needed by schools that are informed by the voices of Black young people. A qualitative methodology was the most appropriate to addressing the	

Qualitative Appraisal Criteria		
Key: ✓= Yes X= No	Criteria	Evidence for meeting the CASP criteria
		research aim and gap in the literature. RTA was chosen due to it's compatibility with the framework.
4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	✓	The study utilised purposive sampling.
5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	✓	Data was collected both virtually via video call and in person, depending on the participant's preference, which allowed for data collection across multiple schools in the UK.
6. Has the relationship between the researcher and participants been adequately considered?	✓	As a Black trainee clinical psychologist, I occupied an 'insider-outsider' position (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), sharing aspects of identity with participants while also holding the role of researcher. I addressed this by explicitly outlining my positionality in the introduction and maintaining reflexivity throughout the study. Ongoing supervision, reflective journaling (Appendix M for reflexive log), field notes, and data checking with the undergraduates were used to critically consider how my perspectives and the researcher-participant relationship may have influenced data collection and interpretation.
7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	✓	Ethical considerations were integrated throughout all stages of the study, with a section in this chapter dedicated to highlighting the consideration of ethical issues. A comprehensive risk assessment examining potential environmental, contextual, and emotional risks was completed and approved by the relevant Ethics Committee before data collection.

Qualitative Appraisal Criteria		
Key: ✓= Yes X= No	Criteria	Evidence for meeting the CASP criteria
8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	✓	Data analysis followed a transparent process consistent with the chosen qualitative methodology. Transcripts were read repeatedly to ensure immersion, and coding was conducted iteratively to develop themes grounded in the data. Reflexive practices, supervisory discussions, and co-production with the undergrads supported my analysis process of the data. An audit trail, including analytic notes and theme development, was maintained.
9. Is there a clear statement of findings?	✓	The key findings are clearly summarised in relation to the main themes at the beginning of the discussion chapter, with themes presented in a coherent and structured manner.
10. How valuable is this research?	✓	This research contributes to a deeper understanding of Black students' experiences within educational settings, centring voices that are often marginalised in psychological research. The findings have implications for clinical psychology practice, educational policy, and systemic change, particularly in relation to culturally responsive support and anti-racist practice. The study also highlights areas for future research and service development.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the confidence that can be placed in the truth of the research findings. To ensure credibility in this study, I employed member checking and co-production by presenting the findings to a representative group of Black students to consider the accuracy and resonance of the interpretations. This process helped ensure that the findings reflected participants' experiences and perspectives, while reducing the risk of misrepresentation.

Peer debriefing was also utilised, involving engagement with peers and individuals knowledgeable in the field of race and education to review and critically reflect on the findings and interpretations. This process allowed for the identification of potential biases, assumptions, or oversights, thereby strengthening the credibility of the study.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of the study may be applicable to other contexts or groups. In this research, transferability was supported through the provision of thick description, offering detailed accounts of the research context, participant characteristics, and the educational settings in which the data were generated. By clearly describing the conditions under which the findings were produced, readers are able to assess the relevance of the study to other schools or student populations.

Transferability was further strengthened through careful contextualisation. The research explicitly situated participants' experiences within specific sociocultural, historical, and institutional contexts, enabling readers to consider how these dynamics may operate similarly or differently in other educational environments.

Finally, purposeful sampling contributed to transferability by intentionally recruiting participants with varied experiences and backgrounds within the Black student population. This approach sought to capture a breadth of perspectives, thereby enhancing the potential relevance of the findings beyond the immediate sample.

Dependability

Dependability involves ensuring that the research process is logical, traceable, and clearly documented. It relates to the consistency of the study's findings over time and under similar conditions. Dependability in this research can be achieved by an audit trail, which involves keeping a detailed account of all the research decisions, processes, and steps taken

throughout the study. This included documentation of data collection methods, changes in research focus, and the rationale behind these decisions. Dependability was also achieved by employing a code-recode strategy. After coding a portion of the data, the researcher took a break and then recoded the same data after some time. Comparing the initial and recoded data can help ensure consistency in the coding process, thus enhancing the dependability of the findings. Finally, dependability was strengthened through dependability audits, having an external auditor, such as a research supervisor with expertise in qualitative research, review the research process and findings, which helped to ensure that the research was conducted systematically and that the findings were consistent with the data collected.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the findings of the study are shaped by the respondents and not the researcher's bias, motivation, or interest. To ensure confirmability, the present researcher maintained a reflexive journal to record thoughts, decisions, and reflections on how personal biases, perspectives, or experiences may be influencing the research. This transparency allows others to see how the researcher's subjectivity has been managed.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity involves the researcher's awareness of their potential impact on the research and the participants, as well as how the research may be influenced by their own identity, experiences, and biases. Reflexivity in this study included a positionality statement whereby I explicitly stated my positionality, including my own racial background, experiences, and any personal connections to the issues being studied. It also included continuous reflection; throughout the study, I regularly reflected on how my interactions with participants, their choices in data collection, and their analytical decisions were shaped by their own identity and biases. Lastly, engaging with existing literature on racism and Black students' educational experiences helps situate my findings within broader academic debates. Reflexivity also involves recognising how my reading and interpretation of the literature might be influenced by my own perspectives.

Position statement

The research team consisted of a Black female with values aligned with community psychology and social justice, a Black female supervisor with expertise in systematic reviews and a White Irish Clinical Psychologist supervisor with an interest in promoting equality and

diversity. As the primary researcher, I was attuned to some experiences in the data, as a Black female who has grown up attending predominantly White schools. When informal personal reflections came up during the data analysis, I ensured that the re-interpretation of the concepts produced was consistent with the original data through the process of bracketing my experiences.

Ethical consideration

Ethical approval for this study was granted (see Appendix N) by the University of Essex Health and Social Care Ethics Committee on 25th April 2024 (Ethics reference: ETH2526-0173). A comprehensive risk assessment examining potential environmental, contextual, and emotional risks was completed (see Appendix O). The research was conducted in accordance with the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (Oates et al., 2021), which guided all stages of the project. Prior to outlining the research procedure, key ethical principles underpinning the study are summarised below, alongside how each was addressed in practice.

Informed consent

All participants were provided with a detailed information sheet outlining the purpose of the study, what participation would involve, potential risks and benefits, and how their data would be managed. They were allowed to ask questions before deciding whether to take part. Written consent was obtained prior to participation, and parental consent was obtained for participants under age 16. At the start of each interview and focus group, verbal consent was also confirmed, including permission to audio-record the discussion.

Debrief and payment

This project required the participants to speak openly about subjects and experiences that may be difficult for them. There was a full debrief at the end of the interviews and focus group discussions, and information was provided on further available support (see Appendix P for debrief document). Details for the emergency helpline and mental health services were provided to them should they require further support or advice.

Participants received a gift card voucher for their participation for their time participating in the interviews and focus group discussions. The undergraduates involved in the co-production were offered ongoing mentorship and references for their involvement in participating in the procedures of co-producing the research. The researcher provided training

to the undergraduates on the analysis method, and resources were sent to help them improve their skills. Study participants received a £10 gift card voucher as a thank you for their time.

Anonymity

Stringent measures to ensure confidentiality included data anonymisation and secure data storage. Participants were informed that all collected data remained anonymous, with no identifiable information traceable back to them. The limitations to anonymity in focus groups, necessitated by the group setting, were explained transparently. However, participants in the focus groups were assured that in cases where the researcher perceives a participant to be in danger or identifies a safeguarding concern, consultation with the trusted adult from their school who was present during the focus group occurred, and decisions on how to proceed were made on a case-by-case basis.

Harm and Benefits

The study aimed to explore how Black students navigated the experiences of racism in school; as such, the researcher acknowledges the sensitivity of this exploration. Given the potential for participants to experience distress or exhibit signs of mental health issues, such as stress and anxiety, as suggested by the minority stress model (Frost, 2023), a comprehensive debrief form was provided. This form included contact details for various support organisations, prioritising participant protection against psychological harm. Participants were informed of their right to refrain from answering any questions that made them uncomfortable.

Right to Withdraw

Participants were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences and without giving a reason for this until their data had been anonymised and collated with other data items.

Storage of Data

Before engaging in the research, participants received an information sheet outlining the research's objectives. It was emphasised that this research operates independently of their school and teaching staff, ensuring that their decision to participate would not unduly impact their education.

Impact and Importance

Research should extend beyond academic contribution and demonstrate practical relevance for the communities it represents. This study addresses a critical gap in the UK literature by centring Black students' lived experiences of racism across multiple school sites, examining not only interpersonal incidents but the institutional structures that shape how racism is recognised and responded to. I have sought, to the best of my ability, to faithfully represent the voices of all participants, and I hope these findings resonate with those whose experiences have remained unheard or insufficiently protected. The significance of this research lies in our collective responsibility to safeguard children from harm, including racial harm, and to ensure that schools fulfil their duty as spaces of protection, equity, and care.

Chapter Four: Findings

Chapter Overview

This chapter presents the demographics of participants and the findings from the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) of the 14 interviews and two focus group discussions. Verbatim extracts from the participants were used to illustrate how the data were interpreted. Pseudonyms have been used where reference has been made to participants, and identifiable information has been removed to maintain anonymity (see Appendix Q for the table of participants' pseudonyms).

Participant Demographics

The sample consisted of 10 females and 16 males between the ages of 13 and 18 years. Thirteen participants self-identified as Black African, 11 identified as Black British and two identified as Black Caribbean. The sample included participants who attended state schools, grammar schools, boarding schools and independent (public) schools across the North of England, the Midlands and the East region of the UK. Table 7 summarises key demographic information gathered from the demographic questionnaire, grouped with the number of participants shown in brackets and separated from assigned pseudonyms with each demographic category.

Table 7: *Participant Demographic Information*

Demographic information	Number of participants		
Gender	Male (16)	Female (10)	
Age in years	13 – 15 (4)	16 – 18 (22)	
Ethnicity	Black Caribbean (2)	Black British (11)	Black African (13)
Range of Secondary Schools	Independent School (2)	Grammar School (1)	State School (23)
School region	North of England (6)	Midlands (1)	East England (19)

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Ahead of presenting the themes, I briefly outline the reflexive stance that shaped my analysis and writing. While this study attends to racism and institutional responses to racism, I was mindful not to position participants primarily as victims or to reduce their accounts to experiences of harm alone. Across interviews and focus groups, young people shared experiences that were often painful and exhausting. Through ongoing reflective journaling, I became aware of the emotional “weight” I carried as a Black trainee psychologist and researcher, alongside a need to hold in mind the privileges I also occupy (e.g., educational and professional status, institutional access, and relative security). The Wheel of Privilege and Power (IRCC, 2022) served as a reflective anchor, helping me consider how different forms of privilege and disadvantage intersect in shaping both my perspective and the research process.

This reflexive stance was ethically and analytically important in supporting an intention to represent the young people as whole individuals, rather than solely as sites of racial harm. For instance, when invited to describe themselves, participants often foregrounded qualities such as humour, energy, intelligence, and creativity. Bayo called himself “funny, active and handsome,” while Jasmine described herself as “creative, passionate and smart.” These self-portraits reveal a sense of pride and agency that resists reductive framings of Black youth as defined only by discrimination.

In their hopes and wishes, participants also articulated aspirations that speak to care, equity, and collective wellbeing. Isaac expressed a desire for “a system that benefits and supports everyone,” linking personal happiness with justice and fairness. Others, like Kofi and Kingston, grounded their wishes in love and belonging, for their families to thrive and for “everyone to feel like they had a sense of belonging.” Such reflections exemplify the richness of participants’ inner worlds, underscoring why representing them beyond racial harm was both analytic and necessary.

Placing these strengths and aspirations at the forefront is not a way of minimising racism; rather, it is an intentional refusal to allow racism to become the sole organising story about who these young people are. The analysis generated four primary themes, which captured how Black students navigated and understood experiences of racism in UK school settings and their views on institutional change. Within each main theme, a set of subthemes was developed to illuminate the nuanced ways these experiences were understood and experienced (see Table 8 for the table of themes).

Table 8: Table of Themes from the Current Study

Main Themes	Subthemes
“Education really comes down to the root of it”: Education as a site of harm and change	• Seen through Oppressive Stereotypes • The Distortion of Black Girlhood • Racialised Discipline, Surveillance, and Exclusion • Education, Curriculum and Racial Literacy
Carrying the weight of racial harm	• The Cumulative Emotional Weight of Racial Harm • Calculated Self-Protection: Surviving Racism Through Adaptation • Feeling held after racial harm
Institutional Silencing: Restricted Pathways for Reporting Racism	• “You don't feel like your voice matters” Racialised Invisibility • “I feel like it’s just pointless”: Expectations of Institutional Inaction • “I was just scared to just say anything”: The Costs of Speaking • “Who am I going to report it to?”: Blocked Accountability and Protected Power
“They burnt a bridge”: From Fracture to Belonging	• Disengagement, Exclusion, and Fractured Trust in School Systems • “They felt like they had a safe space to perpetuate their racism”: Reclaiming relational safety • Building belonging through inclusive school culture

Theme: “Education really comes down to the root of it”: Education as a site of harm and change

This theme brings together young people’s accounts of how racism operates within educational spaces, shaping both their everyday experiences and their understanding of what needs to change. Participants described being routinely seen through oppressive stereotypes and racialised assumptions. These ways of seeing were experienced as shaping how young people were treated in school, including who was monitored, disciplined, protected, or afforded understanding. For Black girls in particular, participants spoke about experiences of

adultification, and heightened surveillance of their appearance and behaviour, alongside a sense that vulnerability and care were more readily extended to their White peers.

Alongside these accounts of harm, young people consistently framed education as central to addressing racism. Participants located the school curriculum and values as foundational to prevention and change. In doing so, young people positioned education as both a site where racial harm is produced and a space through which it can be challenged.

Subtheme: Seen through Oppressive Stereotypes

Across accounts, young people described entering school spaces already positioned through racialised stereotypes. Participants spoke about being read through assumptions that constructed Black students as loud, disruptive, less capable, or threatening, often before any personal interaction had taken place.

Participants reflected on how assumptions on academic capabilities would be made based on appearance and communication style, and how quickly and often this occurred, describing it as 'automatic' and 'natural':

"So, like the way I dress and the way I speak, a lot of people that act how I act may not excel academically or may not be the best at school. So, people just put me in that category automatically. Which is a natural thing, but it's like I would prefer if people got to know who I am first before they like associated me with certain qualities." (Isaac)

Oluwatosin, who repeatedly emphasised, "you don't know me". His reflections suggest that teachers' perceptions were rooted less in who he was and more in skin colour, operating as a primary basis for judgment:

"There should be no expectation. Like, I just came from primary school... You shouldn't be surprised, or you shouldn't be disappointed based on what I get because you don't know me. You don't know what my standard is and whatnot." (Oluwatosin)

Importantly, young people described stereotypes as manifesting through interactions with teachers. Oluwatosin's sense that teachers "wanted the reaction" suggests that Black students were positioned in ways that made conflict more likely, setting conditions in which they were more readily seen as troublesome:

"I feel like they just thought that Black people were violent... I feel like they wanted the reaction out of me... I feel like they were trying to like purposely make it seem like Black

kids get in more trouble... You're getting me angry on purpose. And now I'm reacting."
(Oluwatosin)

Participants also described a call for a more objective approach to behaviour analysis and classroom discipline, describing a structural difference in disciplinary style whereby Black students were more closely observed and more readily called out for behaviours that were common across the class:

"Teachers... they just are more perceptive to Black people than others... If you took a video of a class and observed them for 40 minutes, you'll see that everyone's actually doing the same things that the teacher's calling out... but it gets picked up on more often and that's because of a perception that socially they're more of an outsider... Or something that needs to be observed more often than not." (Oluwafemi)

Kofi's account reflects an awareness that Black masculinity was socially coded in ways that made gang affiliation or disruption feel like default interpretations, rather than exceptional ones:

"There's kind of more of a stigma against Black males because like people just instantly will assume that like you're really loud or you're involved in maybe something to do with like a gang." (Kofi)

Participants' reflection points to how mental health is not always positioned as a valid or accessible explanatory framework for Black boys. Within this context, behaviour becomes more readily read through moral or disciplinary lenses:

"I feel like in school a lot of them are more careful with the way they treat White boys, like they'll give them chance after chance... They'll always address the situation with White boys like: school therapies or things like that? Anger management issues. But with like Black boys... they (teachers) kind of like can only take so much and then they let the system deal with the Black boys after that, like they never deal with it internally with Black boys." Rachel

The focus group account also collectively constructed a comparative framework in which Black boys' behaviour was positioned as inherently more dangerous than that of their White peers, illustrating how racialised discipline was collectively recognised:

"I would say Black, Black males acting now is considered like more, like dangerous as opposed to like a White man... schools will clamp down more. (Focus group 2)

"When it's (behaviour) compared to a White boy... To be honest, any other race, I feel like it will be seen as boys will be boys." (Focus group 2)

Participants also emphasised that teachers' amplifying skin colour as a marker of character led to collective punishment:

"Like the year above me when I was in secondary school, they had Black students who made a lot of trouble. So now... I'm in the year after them, I feel like in their head they're all thinking... it's going to be like previous years, making trouble all the time. So now they've already started being more hostile towards Black people." (Oluwatosin)

Alongside these patterned perceptions, participants described explicit, repeated racist abuse and hate crimes from peers. The recurrence of this abuse points to an environment in which racism was allowed to continue:

"In year 7... A White student called me the N-word... That same boy called me the N-word a few months later." (Bayo)

Together, these accounts suggest that oppressive stereotypes operated as a racialised lens through which Black students were routinely seen.

Subtheme: The Distortion of Black Girlhood

While participants' accounts highlighted how Black students were broadly positioned through oppressive stereotypes, young people also spoke about how these processes were experienced in specifically gendered ways. Black girls described being constructed as aggressive, alongside heightened surveillance of their bodies and behaviour. These processes were experienced as reshaping Black girlhood within educational spaces.

Participants' accounts suggest that what was read as hostility often emerged before any interaction had taken place, positioning Black girls' emotional expression as inherently problematic. This raises questions about what is being named as "attitude," and whose emotions are allowed to be visible in school spaces. Such interpretations may obscure the emotional realities of navigating racialised environments, where vigilance or anger can function as meaningful responses to ongoing harm:

"They think that I was giving them a dirty look... because I'm Black and they have a stigmatisation that Black people... they think that we've got attitude." (Yemisi)

The focus group discussion amplified this into a shared account, with participants collectively recognising the assumption of hostility as pre-emptive and racialised. In stating "as Black girls," the speaker positioned herself within a shared racialised and gendered identity, shifting the account from personal experience to collective understanding. This identity claim invited alignment from others in the room, reinforcing that the assumption of "attitude" was experienced as systemic rather than individual:

"As Black girls sometimes, they come in and they assume that you already have an attitude before you even get into the room." (Focus group 1)

Jessica similarly reflected on how Black women and girls were quickly positioned through negative, racist labels. The labels point to how Black femininity was read through racialised stereotypes and demeaning identities:

"They would call her 'big mama'... and they would call her 'Shaniqua'... She was labelled as like ghetto, aggressive" (Jessica)

"Well, you always see on social media, especially with like, you know, the UKB (UK Beast) stuff, people are quick to label a Black woman aggressive or angry, anything like that... Black girls are kind of seen as more like mature (not treated as children)... so Black girls are often treated harsher." (Jessica)

She contrasted this with how vulnerability was afforded to White girls. This suggests that Black girls were denied access to vulnerability, whereby their emotional expressions were more readily pathologised or criminalised:

"White girls start crying and all hell breaks loose. The Black girl is seen as like, you know, the violent, aggressive one." (Jessica)

Oluwafemi's account suggests that Black femininity was stripped of softness, with Blackness itself framed as incompatible with femininity. In this way, Black girls were positioned outside dominant constructions of girlhood, their gender read through racialised meanings that recoded assertiveness or emotion as aggression:

"They tried to make Black women feel less of a woman and more Black... Being Black is somehow viewed as a masculine sort of trait... when it's a Black woman, now it's aggressive." (Oluwafemi)

Participants also described how these constructions were enacted through everyday regulation of appearance, through which Black girls' bodies were governed differently:

"We have the tiniest bit of lip gloss on, and we just have a massive problem with it... there was a girl... with a full face of makeup... and they didn't say anything." (Yemisi)

This regulation extended to hair, which was repeatedly described as a site of surveillance. In this context, the regulation of hair and the crossing of bodily boundaries point to a distortion of Black girlhood, where difference was fetishised, autonomy undermined, and Black girls' bodies positioned as objects of curiosity:

"She (her Black friend) was like, no, I don't need him to touch my hair... the teacher said, 'just let him touch it. He likes your hair.'" (Jessica)

"They get offended that I'm saying that you can't touch my hair." (Yemisi)

"The teacher... started touching her hair... my friend was really uncomfortable." (Yemisi)

The language participants used, including references to the "male gaze" and sexualisation, suggests that their accounts were shaped by wider cultural frameworks and discourses for making sense of racialised and gendered experience:

"I personally think Black women might have had a bit harder than Black men because they also have to deal with like the male gaze, which is like, kind of like sexualised and seen as just for sex, which is a bit like tough being Black." (Focus group 2)

Subtheme: Racialised Discipline, Surveillance, and Exclusion

While the preceding subthemes have explored how Black students, and Black girls in particular, were constructed and misrecognised within educational spaces, participants also described how these ways of seeing were enacted through school practices. The following subtheme focuses on how racialised assumptions were translated into everyday forms of discipline and regulation.

Across accounts, young people described adultification and disproportionate monitoring, where Blackness was associated with risk and maturity rather than childhood and protection. Rachel's reflection that teachers "forget that you're 13" points to a withdrawal of childhood leniency, in which Black students were positioned as more responsible, more threatening, and more in need of control. Such positioning has implications not only for discipline, but for development: it suggests that Black young people were less able to occupy a protected child position within school:

"They forget that you're 13... they adultify you... when it's other people, they're just like, 'they're just a child.'" (Rachel)

Participants' descriptions of heightened surveillance where Black peer groups were framed as dangerous. This differential attention suggests that young people learned early that their presence was read through suspicion by authority:

"Once we're in a group, they think that we're going to start a fight... when other girls that are White are screaming... they don't care." (Yemisi)

Rachel linked these school practices explicitly to wider policing cultures, highlighting how educational authority was experienced as continuous with racialised social control. This suggests that school may have functioned as an early site where young people learned their racialised position in relation to power and surveillance:

"You couldn't do that as a Black girl... straight away it'd be like three big maths teachers that will come and grapple you... It's kind of like... three police vans pull up for one Black man... but in school, that's just what I see all the time." (Rachel)

Participants also described collective surveillance on school grounds and beyond school grounds, whereby, when gathered in groups, they were collectively positioned as suspicious. These young people were not only learning how authority responded to them but also learning something about what it meant to be Black in public space and their right to belong:

"Head of year was like, 'I've had people telling me that you guys are making noise on the train... He basically said something about like, it looks like we're a gang, and we had to split into mini groups.'" (Oluwatosin)

"They'll (Black students) get singled out for something that is definitely not an individual quality or an individual action." (Oluwafemi)

While individual interviews described incidents of collective surveillance, the focus group context amplified these into broader claims about shared racialised positioning. Participants moved from isolated events to constructing a collective narrative of Black male suspicion, with phrases such as “I highly doubt that I’m the only one” inviting validation. When others agreed and added their own examples, the account shifted from personal experience to a collectively recognised pattern, illustrating how the group setting facilitated cumulative and socially negotiated meaning-making:

“I think this goes for like a lot of Black males. I highly doubt that I'm the only one that's been through this. Like, you'll be in a group, like predominantly Black group or fully Black group... talking. And then teachers would come. There'll be a White group right next to us, same size. And they'll come to us and say, 'Oh, you guys are like, as if you're in a gang,' and then the White group next to us, predominantly, Nothing. They didn't say anything to them.” (Focus group 1)

Participants’ accounts also extended beyond behaviour into opportunity, suggesting that access to information was unevenly distributed:

“The White kids... they’re usually the first to get told about the opportunities... and then they’re expected to share it with us.” (Isaac)

Subtheme: Education, Curriculum and Racial Literacy

Participants not only described harm, but they also articulated clear views about what needed to change. Participants repeatedly located education itself as central to disrupting these experiences. The following subtheme explores how participants framed education as a key site for transformation. Their calls for education can be understood as attempts to intervene in how racism is recognised, interpreted, and responded to within schools, seeking to change how teachers interpret behaviour and how schools respond to harm.

Participants’ emphasis on racial literacy can be understood in the context of how microaggressions often operate, whereby subtle forms of racism are frequently minimised, making them difficult for schools to recognise and act upon through existing disciplinary systems. Participants’ calls for education and prevention can be read as attempts to shift the conditions under which racism is interpreted:

“I feel like they can educate teachers more on, like, microaggressions... and how to look out for microaggressions.” (Rachel)

"I think teachers need to understand that like they're teaching like a very diverse group and... how they can be mindful that some of the things they say might be offensive or they might not come across well." (Kofi)

Rachel's insistence that racism is a "deeper-rooted problem" reflects an understanding of racism as structural and historically produced. Participants stressed that minimising racism as trivial prevented meaningful accountability and reinforced the idea that racist language, which is a hate crime, could be excused:

"Understand that it's a deeper-rooted problem. They just see it as or someone said the N word because they've heard it in a song or it's never that serious." (Rachel)

Participants argued that flattening racism into "bullying" obscured its specificity, history, and impact. Kingston's account frames education as a process of meaning-making, where understanding the origins and consequences of racial language was seen as essential to prevention:

"Think it comes down to education and really educating everyone on the impact of the way we treat each other. And I think it's done in such a one-dimensional way in today's world, where it's like bullying is wrong, and this is what bullying is, and that's it. I think it really needs to be focused... And I think it's really important that we have conversations like, this is what race is. This is what the impact of this word actually is... I think a lot of people don't know what the N word is, or where it comes from... And I think education really comes down to the root of it all." (Kingston)

Oluwafemi's account positions historical education as an early intervention capable of disrupting how racist assumptions take hold over development:

"I think there definitely should be a historical understanding of things done in the past that affect current sort of racial politics. Because again, that is sort of dispels any ignorance that one might have." (Oluwafemi)

Finally, participants described education as needing to be embedded within schools' value systems. Kingston's emphasis on making values explicit and revisiting them over time reflects a desire for coherence between what schools claim to stand for and how they respond to racism in practice:

"I think if there's a conversation, these are our core values, faith, or kindness, what does this actually mean? We will not accept this, we will not accept that. And those are conversations that are had at the start of everyone's school journey... I think it could be really helpful if you're having conversations in PSHE... Then also within history, if you're learning about slavery..." (Kingston)

Taken together, participants' accounts position education as a central mechanism through which racial harm could be reduced, challenged, and prevented. In framing education as "the root," young people articulated a vision of change focused on transforming how racism can be prevented within education.

Theme: Carrying the Weight of Racial Harm

The theme brings into focus both the cumulative psychological toll of racism and the conditions through which that weight might be reduced. Participants' accounts positioned racial harm as an ongoing condition that produced layered emotional responses.

In response to the cumulative emotional weight, participants described engaging in calculated self-protection: suppressing emotion and monitoring self-presentation. While these strategies functioned as survival, they also reveal the psychological costs of navigating racism, where Black students were required to carry both the harm and the responsibility to manage it.

The theme then turns to their accounts for relational and institutional responses that contain the emotional impact of racism. Feeling held after racial harm is positioned as a reparative school responsibility.

Subtheme: The Cumulative Emotional Weight of Racial Harm

Emotional responses such as anger, sadness and anxiety were described as layered and enduring effects of repeated exposure to racism.

Faith became tearful during the interview and repeatedly referred to crying in relation to the racial harm she experienced, showing the depth of this emotional weight. Faith and Isaac's distress was not only remembered but re-experienced in the research interview, suggesting that these experiences remained highly charged:

"Sometimes just, you know, crying just crying. Sometimes just, like crying. I was just crying, and I know when I'm at home, I just feel comfortable." (Faith)

"Before you know, entering the school gates, it's just a big, there's a heavy weight on my heart where I just don't go in, but I have no choice but to go in." (Faith)

"Yeah, it just made me really sad... Like, after that incident... I didn't really know how to react apart from being sad." (Jessica)

"I don't really want to speak about them... because I don't really like... I don't like remembering... I've tried to flush all of them out and try and move on positively, but yeah, they're very emotional." (Isaac)

This distress was echoed by other participants. Jasmine described feeling "lonely" and "disconnected," positioning racial harm as something that fractured her sense of connection and belonging:

"I felt very lonely, and I felt disconnected to people 'cause after that... I felt very lonely, and I thought that something was wrong... very impactful on me." (Jasmine)

Participants' accounts were emotionally layered response that conveys the exhausting nature of repeated racial harm. Here, racism is constructed not only as an interpersonal injury, but as a psychologically exhausting process that impacts confidence over time:

"I feel angry at them because why are you being racist to humans? They're like you with different colours... Calling me the N-word, but it's just going to make me angry. So my confidence level will like go down... I start to feel anxiety. And yeah. I start to feel a bit sad... I start to feel a bit angry." (Bayo)

"And I feel like it made me like a lot less confident in myself as an individual." (Focus group 1)

Jessica's account illustrates how racism operates psychologically by transforming repeated racialised messages into internalised meanings. Her "maybe they're right" signals a shift where external harassment becomes embedded within the self, pointing to a mechanism through which racial harm can infiltrate identity formation:

It made me really insecure at that point because I was just kind of like, wow, all these people are saying the same thing... I'm like, maybe they're right, you know, maybe I'm not like attractive. (Jessica)

Participants' accounts position racism as leaving them feeling powerless. This powerlessness undermined Participant's agency and reflects being situated within a system structured by racism, where schools were not experienced as neutral protectors:

"You feel powerless when someone does such a thing to you, and you're like, I can't. I can't even do anything... You just feel powerless... Nothing I can do." (Isaac)

"Some things are things that I can't change... control the controllables... do what you can to control what you can control." (Oluwatosin)

Rachel's account links feeling "upset" and "nervous" to becoming "more careful," suggesting that emotional responses were not only internal states, but produced ongoing psychological alertness:

"Obviously, it makes you upset. It makes you nervous, and then it just makes you like more careful." (Rachel)

Cumulative racial harm was constructed as shaping self-concept, as Eurocentric beauty standards and racialised hierarchies communicated messages of inferiority that became internalised through diminished self-worth and altered expectations of opportunity:

"I did have quite a low self-esteem, and I had thought of myself as quite ugly... And like not being seen as a beauty standard and like the beauty standard being, small nose, small lips, that sort of thing." (Jasmine)

Like, sometimes it would be like, I can't wear certain things because maybe they'd say that I'm too dark or something. (Ayo)

"It makes people think that... they're like undeserving or like they don't deserve like particular opportunities just because of how they look. Or maybe they don't deserve to go to school, or like they don't deserve equality and stuff like that." (Kofi)

This subtheme, therefore, foregrounds the cumulative psychological toll of racism, providing a foundation for understanding why ongoing self-protection became necessary.

Subtheme: Calculated Self-Protection: Surviving Racism Through Adaptation

Participants described engaging in ongoing, calculated self-protection in response to the emotional weight of racism in school. Rather than being able to respond freely, many described carefully monitoring their behaviour to avoid being stereotyped, punished, or further

harmed. These practices were framed as necessary strategies for survival within racialised school environments.

Participants' accounts described a developing awareness that expressions of resistance were likely to be punished, and thus, avoidance and emotional suppression became rational adaptations:

"I move forward in the future knowing how to interact with situations better. For example, making sure that I stay away from that person myself and knowing that my school's not going to do anything about it specifically." (Kingston)

"Well, it would just caused her to kick off, and I was like, you know, relax, I'm trying to tell her, like, you can't win with these people. At the end of the day, they're not going to suffer. These teachers are still going to get their salary at the end of the day. You're the one that's going to get a record, you know, you're going to get suspended." (Jessica)

Rachel's reflections positioned racism as accelerating psychological responsibilities, compelling young people to embody calmness and maturity beyond their developmental stage. This suggests a forced developmental leap, where emotional labour and self-management became necessary conditions of safety and survival:

"It just makes you like more on edge. It just makes you have your walls open, be more calculated in the way that you approach a situation. It adultifies you like, it pushes you to have more emotional intelligence than the people, your peers of your age, because of the colour of your skin. Like you just have to be more calculated... with the way that you are, even though like at that point in time you're like a 15-year-old girl, you've got to approach situations like you're like 25." (Rachel)

Participants described suppressing aspects of themselves to remain safe. Being "overly nice" as a way of reducing visibility and misrecognition. These accounts suggest that self-protection involved the ongoing construction of a managed self within school and point toward the development of a performative self-presentation. This process positions calculated self-protection not simply as behaviour, but as something that began to organise identity and ways of relating:

"I would be overly nice to them because I didn't want them to, just attack me... I was just quieter, which is not like me at all." (Jessica)

“So like you, you can't just be in your own world. You've got to always have a smile on your face. Overuse your manners. Please and thank you all the time. I always had to be on 10/10 all the time in class, in the hallway.” (Rachel)

“There's a feeling of I can't show too much of my personality because I feel, I feel like it will be interpreted in a certain type of way...” (Oluwafemi)

Participants also described pressure to overcompensate academically and behaviourally to counter racialised stereotypes. This frames overachievement as a racialised survival strategy, where worth and safety were negotiated through performance:

“I have to try hard in those subjects to be better because obviously I have to be better than them to prove that... I'm not what they think I am, I have to be better than everyone else... I just feel like I just had to outperform everyone.” (Oluwatosin)

“They have to overcompensate like crazy and then maybe they're overcompensating academically... They just had to overcompensate in every aspect of their school life.” (Rachel)

“I feel like in schools like, as a black student, you have to work two times as hard as the average white student” (Focus group 1)

“Nothing comes easy for us, probably because of our skin colour... We have to put in the extra work so that we are heard, that we are seen more.” (Faith)

Bottling up emotions was described as another form of protection, particularly to avoid disciplinary consequences. The interview functioned as a rare relational space where emotions could be expressed, gesturing toward what becomes possible when racial harm is met with perceived safety:

“Bottle up the feelings because I don't want to express my anger to teachers or racist students because then I'll get in trouble, and I don't want to do that. So I'm kind of like, I don't know, it's weird talking about it because normally I just hide it in.” (Yemisi)

While these strategies reflected attempts to survive racialised school environments, they demanded ongoing emotional labour. This not only illustrates the psychological toll of racism but also points to an absence of relational holding, leaving young people to carry racial harm largely on their own.

Subtheme: Feeling held after racial harm

This subtheme captures participants' desire for relational support, positioning emotional support as a potential site of change to reduce the weight of racial harm. Participants described school responses as leaving little room for dialogue. Oluwafemi's emphasis on the lack of "room for conversation" positions schools as spaces that struggled to hold the emotional complexity of racism:

"Just being more open to understanding... there's not a lot of room for conversation, actually." (Oluwafemi)

Faith's repetition of "just support" conveys how basic validation and care were experienced as absent. This reflects limited experiences of being emotionally held, and how fundamental recognition itself had become a central unmet need:

"Support, just support. It was just support, just only support. There was nothing more to me, just support... Make everyone aware, both teachers and students make everyone aware of an issue... Some sort of support, just make everyone aware and there should be support." (Faith)

Kingston's account highlights how feeling held after racial harm was inseparable from feeling safe. Being expected to remain in proximity to the perpetrator was experienced as a continuation of the threat, suggesting that emotional support without protection was inadequate:

"But I guess I would have liked to see more constant intervention with it and checking up... Because he was right behind me in my maths class. Are you okay with him being seated behind you? Making sure that he wasn't in my vicinity within like certain classrooms... I think that would have been better, and sort of checking up weekly and being like, has he said anything else to you." (Kingston)

Ayo's emphasis on articulating loss of confidence and creating "safe spaces" and "check-in groups" constructs holding as enabling psychological processing, rather than simply incident management. This highlights the unmet need for relational environments in which racial harm could be thought about, rather than endured:

"Tell them like how all the experiences made me feel and how I lost confidence and maybe that they should in the future go on to like create a safe space for Black people... like maybe groups or check-in groups." (Ayo)

Jessica's account captures how this absence of ongoing care left young people to carry the emotional impact alone. Her reflections position Black girls, in particular, as required to be "strong" and to "hold so much," which situates the demand for strength as emerging not from resilience, but from the withdrawal of care:

"Like I wouldn't have minded talking to somebody about how I felt like once a week. But after that whole incident, it was kind of just brushed away, like nothing ever happened. Never spoke of it again with any teachers or anything like that. It's like, who do I actually want to speak to? ...any adult that could just like let my feelings out to, which kind of felt like I had to hold. I feel like I had to be so strong at a young age. And I feel like a lot of Black girls feel like that you've got to be so strong, you've got to hold so much" (Jessica)

These accounts call for dialogue, ongoing care, safety, and protected spaces, positioning holding as a set of institutional practices capable of reducing emotional burden and fostering the conditions necessary for building an inclusive school culture.

Theme: Institutional Silencing: Restricted Pathways for Reporting Racism

This theme explores how young people experienced schools as spaces where their voice was constrained. Participants described forms of racialised invisibility that generated expectations of institutional inaction and a sense that speaking up was often futile or risky. Young people also spoke about the relational costs of speaking up, alongside experiences of blocked accountability and protected power within school systems. These subthemes trace institutional silencing as a racialised process, showing how racialised invisibility fed expectations of inaction, how speaking up came with a cost, and how routes to reporting were blocked. These interconnected dynamics illuminate the ways institutional silence was produced and maintained.

Subtheme: "You don't feel like your voice matters" Racialised Invisibility

This subtheme explores how participants' accounts positioned voicelessness as a racialised process in which Black students were hyper visible to scrutiny and discipline, while their voices were dismissed.

Faith's anticipation of being silenced suggests that voicelessness and racialised invisibility was internalised:

"Sometimes it's hard to speak up knowing that you'll be silenced immediately. Just hard to speak up. Yeah." (Faith)

The participant's description of occupying a position of "potential power" did not translate into being heard. These accounts reveal how formal positioning within the school coexisted with racialised marginalisation:

"I think it made me more reserved with the things that I did in my role (as deputy head boy). When I first took on the role, I had lots of ideas that I wanted to put forward and do certain things, especially when I was planning the culture day. But then... I felt like the teachers didn't want us to be as ambitious as it initially seemed." (Kingston)

"I campaigned to be Head Boy... but it felt like everything I was saying wasn't being listened to... In a school system, my voice is not heard, it's not heard at all, even if I'm in a position of potential power." (Isaac)

Despite being a head student, Rachel described being positioned as threatening, and her leadership, behaviour, and history were irrelevant. Her statement frames voicelessness as the point at which contribution no longer counts:

"We're all head students... We'd sat down at the table and then all of a sudden, like because it was White girls, they just assumed that we were just going to put our hands on them. And we weren't because we weren't like that. And we've never, ever been like that. We'd never fought in school or any of the such. So for them to just assume the worst, they like gathered like one teacher came, screamed in our faces, pushed us away. Three men came, it was like 3 men... with like the repercussions that they take is just completely extreme. And they don't they don't even care what you do in the school. They don't care like what you contribute... It's not a nice feeling. You just feel a bit like... it doesn't even matter what you do, you're still going to be treated like that... it just made me feel like, oh, so why am I even in this position if... if I'm not respected... Why am I even being a good kid in the school if you're just assuming that I'm bad anyway?" (Rachel)

Kofi's and Yemisi's accounts position the limited recognition of Black histories, alongside dismissive peer responses as racialised silencing operating through what is collectively acknowledged within schools:

"I mean, during like Black History Month... there's not much like awareness raised. So I guess that can make it feel like you're underrepresented or undervalued and stuff like that because they don't recognise like efforts of Black people that have come before you and stuff like that. But I'd say that makes you question, like, how much your opinion is valued or your voice is valued." (Kofi)

"And they're really dismissive. Like when I'll say like, oh, it's Black history. They'll be like, "okay, well done. You want a medal?" and things like that. But I'm just, I'm trying to tell you that like it's a month of my, I don't know." (Yemisi)

Kofi links voicelessness to "not having anyone to talk to," suggesting that without relational support, one's voice loses impact. His account frames voicelessness as emerging from the absence of allies:

"So if you don't, if you don't have anyone to talk to, it can be quite, not just demoralising, but it can impact you like mentally, academically and physically because maybe you don't feel like anyone's listening to you or you don't feel like your voice matters." (Kofi)

Subtheme: "I feel like it's just pointless": Expectations of Institutional Inaction

This subtheme examines how participants came to anticipate that schools would not meaningfully respond to racism. Across accounts, participants described how repeated experiences of dismissal and performative responses shaped the belief that reporting racism was futile. In this way, institutional silencing operated through the development of expectations that institutional action would not occur.

Participants frequently described deciding not to report racism because they expected that teachers or schools would not act:

"I didn't tell anybody because I didn't really know what anybody would have done. ...If I report it, I don't think the teacher will do anything about it... I feel like it's just pointless." (Bayo)

"It doesn't change like the connotation that like people can just like openly be racist and like nothing happens." (Kofi)

"So, I think racism in schools is like, it's becoming normalised" (Kofi)

Expectations of inaction were reinforced through interactions with staff that participants experienced as minimising, positioning institutional silence as something actively produced through deferral, ambiguity, and lack of follow-up:

“Because they're not going to do anything about it anyway.” (Yemisi)

“Honestly, it's like, ok, this is what they say. ‘Are you sure, Isaac? Are you sure that's how they meant it? Are you sure that's what they meant?’ When they said that, ‘I think you're overreacting. No, they didn't mean it that way. OK, I'll speak to them. OK, I'll bring it up to someone.’ And then weeks, months go by. Years go by and you don't hear anything. It's like you feel like there's no point.” (Isaac)

When participants did report racism, responses did not result in meaningful action. The participants also described a lack of institutional communication about outcomes after reporting racism; reporting operated as a procedural step rather than the beginning of care, protection or accountability:

“At first, we reported it to the head of year, but then we went to the deputy headmaster, and then we eventually went to the headmaster because it became like a pattern. And then it was even happening in like other years, like other than our own year, like the younger years as well. But literally nothing was done.” (Ayo)

By explicitly naming counselling and emotional support, Ayo frames racism as an experience with psychological consequences requiring psychological support:

“We never got an update, and nobody would ever come back to us and say what's happened, or we never even got, not like counselling, we didn't get to speak about it, freely with, like an adult or something.” (Ayo)

Several participants described how the absence of consequences allowed racial harm to continue. Inaction became enabling, where the lack of institutional response communicated permission rather than prohibition; it became another source of harm:

“That same boy called me the N-word a few months later. Yeah. So, I told the school. Yeah, but he didn't get a punishment.” (Rachel)

“I feel like they should take it more seriously. Because the teacher that said the N-word, the teacher, when we told them, they were like, oh, we're going to take this so seriously.”

We're going to speak to the teacher. I was expecting at least the teacher to be like, suspended... Next day, I still see her in school, just teaching as normal.” (Maya)

Participants also described being invited to articulate desired outcomes, only for these to go unmet. Inaction was masked by procedural gestures that sustained the appearance of engagement without altering conditions:

“And so when we reported it, they had like a meeting with all of us and they asked us, what would we like happen? I said, we would like him to receive some repercussions. And they never got back to us about what had happened. And he was just roaming the school free without any sanctions, no nothing. Like he didn't even get like a detention.” (Ayo)

“It was just so crazy because they would make us think that, maybe something was going on behind the scenes, but it just kind of felt performative. Like you're making us think that you're going to do something about all of these things that's happening.” (Jessica)

Focus group participants' use of a “battle” metaphor constructs reporting as a form of combat, framing inaction as the outcome of struggle, where effort, vulnerability, and persistence were met without resolution:

“With the reporting situation... it felt like a battle that I could never win in a sense. Because when I would report about racism, it's almost as if like the people I reported to, they would like find every means just to see it as not racism in a sense... So then it was almost as if I'm just trying for no reason... like I would never be able to win that battle.” (Focus Group 2)

Institutional silencing came to be anticipated in advance, shaping decisions not to report and sustaining the conditions under which racial harm could continue.

Subtheme: “I was just scared to just say anything”: The Costs of Speaking up

This subtheme explores how participants experienced speaking up about racism as socially and emotionally costly. Silence was positioned as an adaptive response to anticipated consequences. Across accounts, reporting racism was associated with fear of retaliation and repercussions:

"It was so awkward because everybody knows that, oh, it was like us that were complaining about it, and we are the reason that they have this assembly. It was just really awkward because, and then everybody was looking around at us." (Ayo)

Across accounts, reporting was also framed as socially stigmatised. Here, racism is not constructed as the transgression, but reporting it is. This shifts responsibility away from perpetrators and onto those harmed:

"But I was embarrassed in the situation. Do you know what I mean? I didn't want to be seen as a snitch or anything. So I was just embarrassed in the situation." (Jessica)

"I mean, I feel like now it's a bit more awkward to report it. I don't know why, because of like the snitching thing. But to be honest, I would not report it now." (Sandra)

Within the focus group, non-reporting was constructed as a socially regulated norm rather than an individual decision. The use of phrases such as "it's pretty normalised" and "you see it as snitching" shifted the account from personal reluctance to collective peer pressure. This framing invited alignment from others and positioned silence as relationally enforced, illustrating how the group context facilitated the articulation of shared barriers to reporting:

"It's pretty normalised these days. To report something, it's labelled as snitching, and that's enough peer pressure for me to not go and say anything, and that can lead to your mental health being affected. That's why it's not common to report because you see it as snitching." (Focus Group 1)

Participants' accounts frame silence as protective. These narratives position reporting as potentially escalating risk rather than reducing it, situating silence as a survival strategy:

"No, I think I was just scared to just say anything at all back then, I was scared of like, the racism." (Maya)

"I don't want to face the repercussions. This big group of White boys, I don't want (them) to start coming for me. Like, what if they don't stop? Nothing's going to happen. They're not going to get in trouble. So it just felt like it wasn't worth it at all." (Jessica)

This subtheme, therefore, highlights how institutional silencing emerged as an active negotiation of risk, shaped by anticipation of stigma, retaliation, and dismissal.

Subtheme: “Who am I going to report it to?”: Blocked Accountability and Protected Power

This subtheme explores how participants constructed school hierarchies as structurally blocking accountability for racism. Participants repeatedly described reporting pathways as unclear and inaccessible, particularly when senior staff were involved. These narratives illuminate how institutional silencing operated through protected power.

Participants' reflections position institutional processes for racism as invisible within the school context, whereby the lack of visibility of the actions required for reporting racism functions to silence disclosures, reinforcing the marginalisation of racism within formal school safeguarding frameworks:

“Maybe make it more aware, especially like in the beginning or in the welcoming lecture that you have, maybe just talk about how you can report it to like some safeguarding or even your personal tutor... I don't even know who you're even supposed to go to, but somebody along those lines.” (Ayo)

Rachel's question, “who am I going to report it to?”, when racism involves senior leaders, positions accountability as structurally impossible rather than individually avoided. These accounts frame power as self-protecting, where the institutional architecture itself blocked routes to challenge racism:

“The thing about reporting it is because, like, it's the people higher up that are doing it. So who am I going to report it to when it's the head teacher that's doing it, or when it's the deputy head teacher?” (Rachel)

“I mean, it's not all teachers that are racist, it's just like it's a certain minority, but they're in places of high power, so they're SLT (Senior Leadership Team). So you can't really report higher than them.” (Yemisi)

“Who are you reporting to? Because you're reporting to the people that are doing it... So, it's like, who can you speak to? There's no outlet to speak to anyone.” (Ayo)

For Sandra, going “higher up” did not promise protection but further exposure to racialised judgment:

“In my old school, where I definitely have more of the experiences, I didn't feel like going higher up because... I felt they had the same sort of mindset. So it was sort of like

who do I actually go higher up to? Because it gets to a certain point where it's just people who don't like me for my identity as well.” (Sandra)

The collective framing of staff as “all... in it together” constructs the school as a unified, self-protective system, positioning young people against an insurmountable institutional force:

“If you brought issues of like teachers saying racist things to you... you would try and bring it up. But because they're all like in it together or something, they would just kind of turn you in and make you kind of doubt what you were saying.” (Focus group 1)

Young people’s accounts function as forms of institutional knowledge. Their narratives reveal how power operates and point towards a systemic pattern of institutional defensiveness:

“And like teachers don't necessarily react to it in a positive way, like they don't deal with the situation, they kind of just let it happen.” (Kofi)

“And she (a racist student) told the teachers that she's sorry. All she said was that she's sorry and they believed that was all that, she said ‘Sorry’. It was all OK, and the people that were angry at her were suspended... that made a lot of people realise that the school system is literally protecting people who are being racist directly... I challenged it. I asked one of the... the Heads of staff. I asked them why nothing was done with it, and then I was put in detention because it got to a point where I was so angry at it. I was like, so if you guys are going to support people that are racist... What am I doing here? Why am I going to your lessons? Why are you guys teaching me? Because that means you're going to teach me the wrong things. If you're doing the wrong things and nothing happened to the girl.” (Isaac)

Participants also described institutional responses that actively protected perpetrators while disciplining those who challenged racism. Racism was minimised or excused, while resistance was treated as the problem:

“What is the point of reporting? And if we take things into your own hands, you get blamed for it.” (Faith)

“A girl in his class. Granted, she may have not known what the N word meant, which I believe she did, because this was year 8. She said it, and he was angry, and he was like, ‘Are you letting her say that she can't say?’ And then he repeated the word, and then he was put in trouble for saying the word, and their excuse was that he knew what it meant,

and he's not allowed to say it. And this White girl (apparently) did not know what it meant, so she was excused. And then it was like, what does that even mean? Do you know what I mean? And it was just. There's a matter of there's nothing I can even do if this is the environment I'm in. Like you don't want to come to school because you're like, they're just going to be racist anyway, there's no point.” (Isaac)

The lack of accountability sustains expectations of inaction and reinforces the conditions under which racism could persist.

Theme: “They burnt a bridge”: From Fracture to Belonging

This theme explores how experiences of racism in school, and the ways these were responded to, were described as “burning bridges” between young people and educational institutions and what would be needed to rebuild this bridge. Participants’ accounts reveal how racial harm fractured trust in teachers and institutions, contributing to withdrawal, disengagement, and a sense of school as unsafe. Moving beyond individual experience, young people’s accounts also generate insight into how school systems might function differently. The participants call for fairness and relational safety with staff as conditions for protection, and these are necessary for repairing damaged trust. The final subtheme turns to how participants imagined bridges might be rebuilt, foregrounding the role of inclusive school cultures in producing belonging through representation, accessible support structures, and spaces for connection.

Subtheme: Disengagement, Exclusion, and Fractured Trust in School Systems

Participants described racism as shaping educational engagement through a gradual (and sometimes sudden) process of withdrawal, exclusion, and relational rupture with teachers. Over time, this eroded motivation and reduced students’ willingness to contribute, connect with staff, or remain in particular lessons. Disengagement was framed as an adaptive response to school environments experienced as unsafe, unfair, or untrustworthy.

This sense of being dismissed or overlooked translated into reduced classroom participation for Yemisi:

“Normally, I like don't put my hand up, which I'd like to, because I know the answer, but I feel like if I put my hand up... they'll either ignore me, which has happened a lot, or like, just like dismiss my answer.” (Yemisi)

Participants also described how racial harm creates “mental noise” that disrupts concentration and learning:

“Racial slurs really get kids to the point that they can't even focus in class because they're just so enraged and irritated that somebody would actually say that.” (Rachel)

“Makes you emotional like you can't. You can't focus in class because you're just wondering. When I leave class now, this teacher's going to shout at me for walking the wrong way to being too loud in the hallways.” (Isaac)

Participants also described how stereotypes about Black students created an internalised sense of starting “behind,” making academic effort feel futile.

“And if they expect you to be loud, be violent, not do so well as like White people and whatnot. You've already started behind, and in your head, you're going to be like, oh, okay, I've started behind now. What's the point of me trying to catch up?” (Oluwatosin)

Participants linked engagement to comfort and safety, describing that discomfort reduced access to classroom material and participation.

“I guess it's about comfortability. I think as a child, it's important that you feel comfortable in the areas that you're in because that enables you to thrive. If you don't feel comfortable, you're not going to be able to access a lesson as well... it's made me less comfortable and less outgoing in terms of connecting with the actual material that I'm supposed to be learning.” (Kingston)

Participants describe how racism at school disrupted educational trajectories:

“I've had a friend... he stopped trying in lessons, and then he fell into one of the bottom sets and stuff like that.” (Kofi)

In some cases, students described wanting escape particular teachers to protect themselves even if it impacted their academics.

“I wanted to move to like any band (school sets) just to get me out of their lessons.” (Jessica)

Within the focus groups, disengagement was collectively reframed as the development of an “anti-school culture,” shifting rebellion from an individual behavioural issue to a patterned response to exclusion and fear. As participants built upon one another’s accounts,

fear of school, altercations, and declining attainment were positioned as interconnected rather than isolated incidents. The group context enabled a shared narrative in which resistance was understood as reactive and relational, rather than inherently oppositional:

“In like primary school again, with that same teacher, most days I wasn't in school because I almost like feared coming to school because of not only teachers but like students as well.” (Focus group 1)

“It had an impact on my educational attainment. I think I developed like a sort of like anti-school culture where I was just rebelling against the school and nonsense, and I didn't really see much value in that.” (Focus group 2)

“Instead of like getting good grades, I would like... be rude. I would like get altercations. I feel like that had an impact because I was spending less time in lesson and not really learning, so it actually had a bad impact on my brain.” (Focus group 2)

Disengagement was also linked to how some Black students were positioned as unable to succeed, shaping thoughts about turning away from education entirely:

“And that's how a lot of these Black boys they start getting into trouble outside because they're like, well, I don't want to go to school anyway, so I'm just going to do what I don't need to do and try and make some money in the streets because I know I'm not going to get anything in from school. 'Cause these teachers aren't going to let me get it.” (Isaac)

Across accounts, participants constructed a shift toward “learning only” as a defensive adaptation to relationally unsafe school environments. Participants positioned themselves as present only to “learn”; learning is reframed as transactional and survival-oriented rather than relational. This suggests that racism did not simply disrupt engagement, but reshaped the meaning of education itself:

“I'm just going to go there to learn, not going into schools to like, build a relationship with teachers and speak. But I'd only want to go into school to learn and then go home, no longer to socialise.” (Isaac)

“I would just be quiet in class. I wouldn't really answer questions. (Jessica)

“Obviously, I was still like learning, but like sometimes students like to talk to their teachers outside of learning. I just didn't want to do anything with like, I just didn't want

to have anything to do with them. So I just left it as you're my teacher, I'm learning from you." (Maya)

Isaac's use of "burnt a bridge" conveys the depth of the rupture he experienced, suggesting a sense of irreversible damage to his relationship with school. His hesitation, "what I believe to be the colour of my skin", suggests that even where unequal treatment is experienced, racism remains difficult to name with certainty. This phrasing shifts the locus of the problem onto his skin colour, rather than the discriminatory practices of teachers:

"So, there have been times where a situation has happened in school, and it's been dealt with incorrectly by the teachers. They've like misread a situation, they've judged my friends and me quickly because of, you know, what I believe to be the colour of my skin... I've not wanted to go to school. I've not wanted to speak to the teachers. I've not wanted to build a relationship with them because they've, well, they've burnt a bridge essentially by judging and handling situations incorrectly." (Isaac)

Rachel's account positions exclusion as the point at which young people are passed from education into wider institutional systems. Her phrase "the system deals with you" constructs a trajectory in which school failure to protect or support exposes them to other systems of control and management:

"So obviously, when you kick like a child out of school. Automatically, that sets them up for failure because they put you into another institute that probably only like, it's not a healthy environment for them to learn anyway... So they end up dropping out of that school anyway, and when you drop out of school, you're young. You only have a couple of ways of making money. And then from there, the system deals with you." (Rachel)

The language of "cycles" and "rabbit holes" frames exclusion as an entry point into a sequence of institutional encounters that are difficult to exit. These framing positions school as a critical gateway into longer-term trajectories of surveillance, discipline, and restricted futures:

"Especially in the area that I live, not a lot of people go to uni around here. There are so many people like that around here that have been kicked out of school. And then the police are involved. And then this person is involved, and then they're in trouble. It's like an ongoing cycle." (Rachel)

"And some of them, it's ended up bad for a lot of them. But it's mainly because of how they were treated in school and how the system just didn't help them. So, there are a lot

of examples. From my area and from local areas around me, where my friends and just people that I've known have been kicked out of school, maybe because they were judged wrong or they've gone down a rabbit hole where they just started being bad because they didn't have any support anyway, so they've gone on a rabbit hole.” (Isaac)

These accounts construct disengagement and exclusion as patterned relational and institutional consequences of racial harm.

**Subtheme: “They felt like they had a safe space to perpetuate their racism”:
Reclaiming relational safety**

While the previous subtheme traced how racism and its mishandling fractured trust, disrupted engagement, and “burnt bridges” between young people and schools, participants also articulated what they believed would be required to repair these ruptures. This subtheme examines how young people constructed fairness and relational safety with staff as necessary responses to the hurt of racism. Across accounts, safety was not framed as emerging from reassurance alone, but from equitable treatment, protection from racialised assumptions, and institutional action.

Participants constructed accountability as requiring both education and consequences. Jessica’s account illustrates how racism was experienced as operating within a context where perpetrators felt safe, while those targeted did not:

“I didn't think I had a safe space to report the issues, but they (racist students) felt like they had a safe space to perpetuate their racism. Do you know what I mean? So you need to make these people understand that there's no place for racism. Because if people think, ‘oh yeah... I can't say that,’ they're not going to say it.” (Jessica)

“Monitor the people who are being a bit racist in the school, monitor them. And if they're being more racist, like give them a harsher punishment.” (Bayo)

Across accounts, “punishment and education” were framed as complementary, whereby consequences were necessary for communicating seriousness, and education was necessary for preventing repetition:

“I think respond with punishment, but also education. I think work experience workshop was a really good idea. I think doing stuff like that could help. I don't care if it feels targeted. Yes, it feels targeted because you said it and you did it and you need to be corrected.” (Sandra)

"Did she just, you know, punish a person? And did she make the person aware of how this can be hurtful for the other person?" (Faith)

Alongside consequences, participants highlighted the importance of procedural clarity and record-keeping, suggesting that harm must first be institutionally named in order to be taken seriously:

"I wish you guys didn't expect us to have the emotional maturity of a 32-year-old woman... I feel like they should log these racial incidents as well. Like you should have these incidents on record." (Rachel)

Similarly, Ayo and Isaac's accounts position follow-up and visible processes as relational acts. Not knowing what happened after reporting was described as intensifying hurt and uncertainty:

"After I'd report a situation, I'd (like to) get a rundown of... like what had happened. I guess that (not having the follow-up) would make me feel more hurt because I never got that before. Like, I never got any type of update." (Ayo)

"Tell us the process of, if something happens, what we can do to deal with it, because there is a lot of safeguarding that goes on in schools... But the safeguarding none of it is really like about racism... So what they can do is they can have assemblies and show the process of what will happen if I report something bad." (Isaac)

Participants also emphasised parental involvement as part of a transparent process, particularly when schools were perceived as not communicating with families:

"Maybe... informing our parents, because I was the one that told my parents about all the issues. I don't think they even spoke to my parents about it, not once. So maybe telling parents as well." (Ayo)

Clarity about consequences was described as increasing students' sense of security, suggesting that predictability itself functioned as a form of protection and relational safety:

"I think there should be more clarity and like the consequences of what is going to happen because obviously if we report it, then we'll be more secure and thinking, oh yeah, this person is actually going to get punished." (Focus group 2)

Some participants framed consistent procedures as needing to be evidence-based, suggesting that formal processes could reduce the influence of prejudice in decision-making:

“I definitely think there needs to be the way the way in which staff are expected to handle situations, probably there needs to be a process to it that actually has some evidence-based things, because I think that immediately, evidence gets rid of prejudice. (Oluwafemi)

Participants also highlighted timeliness as central to procedural justice, suggesting that delays made reporting more difficult and undermined credibility:

“I'd like them to like actually like deal with it in the moment because it gives you the chance, while it's still fresh in your brain to explain what's happened. But then if they let it sit for two weeks, obviously you forgot parts and... you don't remember everything and then it just makes you sound like less reliable.” (Yemisi)

Kingston described the need for a clear “line” between discipline and rehabilitation, positioning accountability as both corrective and transformative:

“I guess I would like to see more, perhaps more consequences for perpetrators of racism... And so I think within schools, it's important that there's a line. I don't know exactly what that line would look like, but there's a line of disciplining and then rehabilitation of people who commit acts of racism.” (Kingston)

In focus groups, some participants framed the seriousness of racism in explicitly criminal terms. In framing racism as warranting formal sanction, participants construct justice as an institutional practice through which relational safety is made possible. Without visible accountability, schools are positioned as unable to offer protection:

“When racism is reported, it should be treated like a criminal offence” (Focus group 1)

“When things are reported, take it more seriously is something they can do. Sanction teachers as well, students should face harsher punishment.” (Focus group 1)

Together, these accounts position fairness, visible accountability, and consistent responses as necessary conditions for relational safety and the rebuilding of trust.

Subtheme: Building belonging through inclusive school culture

This final subtheme turns to how young people imagined schools as places of belonging. Across accounts, participants constructed belonging as something schools are responsible for actively producing. Belonging was positioned as a preventative and protective

condition, associated with representation, relational access, and the availability of culturally attuned spaces and supports:

“Students need to feel like a school is a place of belonging.” (Kingston)

Isaac’s desire for “someone to run to” frames belonging as fundamentally about care and protection, revealing how its absence leaves Black students navigating harm without reliable relational support:

“More role models, more people to speak to, more people to be able to share your culture with... So that will make you feel safe because, even if they may not be high up in the school, it's someone to run to, and it's someone to be like, ‘this happened to me’, and then they will definitely escalate it because they've probably experienced it themselves.” (Isaac)

Participants also described structured relational spaces and staff representation as facilitating comfort and ongoing connection:

“Check-in groups could be good. Again, maybe hire some more POC teachers so that we feel a bit more comfortable.” (Ayo)

Across the focus groups, calls for representation intensified as participants built upon one another’s suggestions. The cumulative nature of the discussion reframed representation as a structural necessity rather than an individual preference, illustrating how the group context facilitated collective articulation of need.

“Yeah. I said some schools should have a diversity of Black safeguarding teachers.” (Focus group 1)

“I think there needs to be... Black representation in high positions in schools, because I feel like Black children would feel more comfortable reporting for someone that looks like them, you know, as opposed to the person that looks like the person that is like insulting them.” (Focus group 2)

“Literally more Black teachers. Because they don't understand where you're coming from compared to another person from our culture.” (Focus group 2)

Beyond staffing, belonging was also described as emerging through social spaces and events that fostered connection and reduced isolation:

"I think that there should be more social events in schools, cause I feel like that really brings people together... It would be nice to have clubs for us if that makes sense."
(Jasmine)

"Probably like maybe like a forum, where like you and other Black students can communicate and talk about the experiences you've had." (Kofi)

As the final subtheme within this theme, these narratives bring the analytic arc from "burnt bridges" and relational rupture to young people's visions of school cultures that could hold, connect, and protect.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Chapter Overview

This chapter explores the research findings in relation to the existing theoretical and empirical literature and the project's aims and research questions, to extend understanding of Black students' experiences of racism in schools across England. It explores the impact of racism on Black students, their relationship to formal reporting systems, and the priorities they identified for school change and intervention. The chapter also considers the implications of these findings for educational practice, institutional policy, and intervention design, alongside reflections on the strengths and limitations of the study. The chapter concludes with personal reflections on the research process.

The current study explored Black students' experiences of racism in school contexts, with the aim of understanding:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What are Black students' accounts of the impact of racism in secondary schools across England?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): What are Black students' relationships to formal reporting channels following racist experiences in schools?

Research Question 3 (RQ3): What do Black students identify as priorities for school change, and how might these inform intervention design and implementation?

Summary

Based on participants' accounts, Black students navigated education as a site of racialised harm and limited agency, developing strategies to survive within school systems shaped by unequal power and blocked accountability. This discussion is structured around four main themes, to which the research questions were addressed: *“Education really comes down to the root of it”*: Education as a site of harm and change, *Carrying the weight of racial harm*, *Institutional silencing: Restricted pathways for reporting racism* and *“They burnt a bridge”*: *From fracture to belonging*. Across these themes, participants' accounts illustrated that the experiences of racism, emotional and relational impact and visions for change were interconnected. Racism was not constructed as a series of isolated incidents, but as a pervasive feature of school life that shaped how Black students were seen, treated, and positioned within educational systems.

The first theme, *“Education really comes down to the root of it”*: Education as a site of harm and change, illustrated how schools were experienced as institutional environments in which racialised stereotypes, distortions of Black girlhood, and racialised discipline operated together, with education being central to disrupting these experiences. Participants' accounts positioned schools as sites where racism was produced, normalised, and sustained through everyday practices, shaping educational experiences. At the same time, education was also imagined as a critical site for intervention, particularly through curriculum change and racial literacy.

The second theme, *Carrying the weight of racial harm*, explored how participants navigated the emotional, psychological, and relational impact of racism. Racial harm was described as cumulative, requiring ongoing emotional labour and adaptive strategies of self-protection. Participants spoke of the emotional toll of racism and the behavioural modification adopted as ways of surviving school environments experienced as unsafe. Alongside this, they articulated a need to feel “held” after racial harm, emphasising the importance of care, validation, and relational support. Together, these findings illuminate how navigating racism involves managing their negative and formative ongoing emotional and relational consequences.

The third theme, *Institutional silencing: Restricted pathways for reporting racism*, examined participants' relationships to formal reporting systems. Reporting was widely constructed as risky and often ineffective. Participants described experiences of racialised

invisibility, expectations of inaction, fear of repercussions, and blocked accountability, including when power was perceived to be protected within institutions. These accounts positioned reporting systems not as neutral safeguarding mechanisms, but as embedded within power relations that frequently limited voice, recognition, and redress. This theme speaks directly to how institutional processes shaped both the impact of racism, young people's decisions about whether and how to seek support and their relationship to power and authority.

The final theme, *"They burnt a bridge": From fracture to belonging*, brought these strands together by examining how racism and institutional responses fractured trust in schools, disrupted engagement, and reshaped how education itself was understood. Participants described withdrawal, disengagement, and exclusion as psychological, relational and institutional consequences of racial harm. At the same time, they articulated clear priorities for change. These included calls for fairness, relational safety, visible accountability, and inclusive school cultures that actively build belonging. Here, young people's narratives moved beyond accounts of harm to offer situated knowledge about how schools might be reconfigured to safeguard Black students.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Black students' navigation of racism, their relationships to reporting systems, and their visions for change are woven together. Racism was experienced as emotionally harmful, destructive to trust and relationships, and institutionally organised. In response, participants developed strategies of adaptation and protection, often alongside increasing loss of trust in schools, reporting systems and incurred psychological damage that they had no support to manage. Their calls for justice, accountability, and belonging can be understood as direct responses to these experiences, offering important insights for the design of interventions and school-wide change.

The findings are interpreted through an integrated use of the theoretical frameworks presented in the introduction chapter, each of which offers a distinct but complementary lens for understanding the structural, interpersonal, psychological, and relational dimensions of Black students' experiences of racism in schools.

"Education really comes down to the root of it": Education as a site of harm and change.

This theme speaks directly to Black students' accounts of the impact of racism (RQ1), while illuminating the institutional conditions that later shape relationships to reporting systems (RQ2) and give rise to young people's priorities for change (RQ3). It establishes the

systemic groundwork for understanding the emotional, psychological, relational, and institutional consequences explored in the themes that follow. This theme positions schools as central sites in which racism is both produced and potentially challenged. Participants' accounts illustrated how racialised stereotypes, distortions of Black girlhood, and disciplinary practices were not experienced as isolated problems, but as interlocking features of everyday school life. The findings contribute to existing literature supporting the Critical Race Theory's (CRT) position that racism is embedded within ordinary institutional processes (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2008). The findings show how young people themselves articulate schools as environments where racial harm and stereotypes were continually made and reinforced. Repeated experiences of racial abuse, which fall under the category of hate crime under the Crime and Disorder Act (1998) and section 66 of the Sentencing Act (2020), teachers' biased expectations, behavioural surveillance and disciplinary responses were mechanisms through which institutional racism was enacted in daily interactions. These findings also support Nazroo et al.'s (2020) model of racism as operating across structural, institutional, and interpersonal levels, demonstrating how macro-level racial inequalities are reproduced through everyday school practices. Importantly, young people's narratives show how institutional racism can lead to psychological impact, through repeated experiences of being objectified, disciplined unfairly, and marginalised (Joseph et al., 2016; Luhanga et al., 2023).

The findings demonstrated the pervasiveness of racialised assumptions within school cultures. Participants' description of racial stereotyping as "a natural thing" highlights the extent to which these experiences have become normalised and, to some degree, internalised. This supports findings from the meta-ethnography in the earlier chapters, which show how some students coped with their experiences of racism by accepting the experience as a normal aspect of school life (Bailey et al., 2021; Hope et al., 2015; Truong et al., 2016). In this way, racism is positioned as a normal part of social perception. This reflects CRT's emphasis on how embedded racism is in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), while also highlighting its psychological reach. When racialised stereotypes come to be understood as "natural," they risk becoming inevitable and difficult to contest. This is further illustrated when participants' attributions of racism are carefully qualified, "what I believe to be the colour of my skin", in an apparent effort to manage the risk of dispute or disbelief. This can be understood as a form of epistemic hedging, in which claims are softened to reduce the likelihood of being challenged (Hyland, 1998). This indicates that experiences of unequal treatment are not always

accompanied by confidence that racism will be recognised or taken seriously. As a result, young people are required to interpret and legitimise their experiences.

Across this theme, participants' accounts can be understood as describing a process in which Black students' bodies, voices, and behaviours were continually interpreted through racialised lenses. Being positioned as disruptive and threatening undermined their sense of belonging and personhood. This resonates with the race-based traumatic stress literature, which conceptualises racial harm as institutionally reinforced (Carter, 2007; Comas-Díaz et al., 2019).

The subtheme concerning the distortion of Black girlhood further deepens this analysis by foregrounding how race intersects with gender, visibility, and the body. Participants' accounts of being sexualised, adultified, labelled as having an "attitude" and "aggressive," and subjected to heightened bodily surveillance suggest that Black femininity was constructed as incompatible with vulnerability and childhood. This reflects existing literature on adultification and the denial of innocence afforded to Black girls (Gadson et al., 2021; Griffith et al., 2022; Hope et al., 2015; Okoroji et al., 2021).

Participants' accounts of being "seen" and "sexualised" echo longstanding critiques of schools as racialised and gendered institutions in which Black girls' bodies are rendered hyper visible and morally scrutinised. Participants' use of terms such as "male gaze" and "sexualised" suggests that broader cultural discourses concerning power, surveillance, and objectification shape their accounts. These linguistic choices resonate with feminist, critical race, and social theories, including Sartre's notion of the 'Look' and Foucauldian analyses of 'surveillance' (Foucault, 1977; Sartre, 1956). Sartre conceptualised the Look as the moment the self becomes aware of being seen and judged by others, producing a shift from subject to object. Frantz Fanon later extended this idea by illustrating how the gaze becomes racialised, where he recounts being singled out by a child on a train, a moment that fixes him within an imposed racial identity under the white gaze. Foucauldian perspectives further illuminate how this scrutiny becomes internalised. Participants described monitoring and regulating themselves in anticipation of judgment, suggesting that schools functioned as sites of racialised surveillance in which visibility was both constant and consequential. Together, these frameworks help conceptualise how Black students experience educational environments where being seen carries psychological and relational risk.

This suggests that young people are drawing, implicitly or explicitly, on socially available interpretive frameworks to make sense of their lived experiences. Their narratives

highlight how Black girlhood is constructed within school contexts as a site of heightened scrutiny, projection, and regulation, with significant implications for bodily autonomy, self-confidence, and adolescent identity development. This analysis aligns with UK critical race and feminist scholarship that has documented the heightened surveillance, regulation, and sexualisation of Black pupils, particularly Black girls, within school spaces (Gillborn, 2008; Bhopal, 2018).

Participants' descriptions of racialised discipline, collective surveillance, and exclusion further position schools as early sites of racialised social control. Being differentially monitored, grouped, restrained, or denied opportunity reflects processes through which Blackness becomes associated with risk, deviance, and danger. Participants' explicit linking of school discipline to policing cultures is particularly significant, suggesting that schools may function as early institutional contexts in which young people learn their racialised relationship to authority. Participant's observation that White boys are offered "school therapies" or "anger management," while Black boys are more quickly handed to be dealt with by the system, highlights a racialised double standard in how behaviour is interpreted. Within this framing, mental health is positioned as an explanatory model for some students but not others, a 'mad' versus 'bad' dichotomy, with Black distress more readily interpreted through disciplinary or punitive lenses rather than as an expression of emotional need. This reflects wider evidence that Black distress is less likely to be recognised as a psychological need, contributing to unequal pathways into mental health support, which may contribute to poorer mental health outcomes. (Chae et al., 2021; Heard-Garris et al., 2018; NHS Race & Health Observatory, 2022; Pieterse et al., 2010).

Importantly, however, participants did not position education only as a site of harm but also as central to prevention and change, addressing RQ3. Their emphasis on racial literacy, historical understanding, and values-based curricula reflects an awareness that racism is learned, reproduced, and therefore interruptible. These calls align with culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018), CRT-informed educational models (Ladson-Billings, 1995), and the clinical implications of the meta-ethnography, which highlighted the need for schools to actively dismantle inequitable practices and cultivate belonging. Participants' focus on education can be understood as an attempt to intervene at the level of meaning-making: to shift how teachers interpret behaviour, how schools name harm, and how everyday interactions are understood. Participants' emphasis on education positions it as central to making racism institutionally visible, interruptible, and open to challenge.

Carrying the weight of racial harm

In relation to RQ1, this theme addresses how Black students make sense of their experiences of racism in UK schools. Across accounts, racism was constructed as an ongoing social condition that accumulated over time, producing layered emotional responses and shaping how young people related to themselves, to others, and to school as an institution. Participants' narratives foreground anger, sadness, anxiety, loneliness, and diminished confidence as enduring consequences of repeated racial harm, often reactivated in anticipation of school or in recalling experiences. Within this context, anger may be conceptualised as an act of resistance (Afuape, 2011), a meaningful response to racialised injustice, reflecting resistance to ongoing silencing and devaluation. In this way, the data directly reflect the processes outlined in the Race-Based Traumatic Stress Model (RBTSM), which conceptualises racism as a form of psychological injury that shapes internal experiences of identity, coping, and emotional regulation (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019). The young people's accounts illustrate how racial harm becomes internalised and persists over time, often reinforced within social contexts such as school. These findings align with models of racial trauma that conceptualise harm as chronic and cumulative, shaped by ongoing social reinforcement (Carter, 2007; Helms et al., 2012; Comas-Díaz et al., 2019). Experiencing such processes during adolescence, a critical period for identity formation, may be particularly salient, shaping how young people come to understand themselves, their social positioning, and their relationships with others.

Participant's feeling a "heavy weight" before entering the school gates positions racism as something that lived on in the body and mind beyond the original encounters. Participants' accounts highlight the intensity of their distress, characterised by emotional distress including sadness, feelings of dread, and powerlessness. This aligns with research linking racism to ongoing hyperarousal, distress, and anticipatory threat (Williams et al., 2019), and can also be read through the weathering hypothesis, which conceptualises racism as producing sustained psychological and physiological strain through repeated exposure to stressors (Geronimus, 1992; Geronimus et al., 2006). Although weathering is most often applied to adult health outcomes, participants' accounts illuminate the early conditions under which such strain may begin to take hold, through repeated experiences of vigilance, invalidation, and emotional labour in school environments. These early exposures to racialised stress may accumulate over time, contributing to longer-term mental and physical health inequalities (Bernard et al., 2022; Gee et al., 2012; Priest et al., 2013; Zhen-Duan et al., 2023). In the absence of appropriate responses to racial harm within education, and given the high thresholds and limited culturally

responsive, trauma-informed approaches within mental health services (Bhui et al., 2018), young people may be left to manage significant and enduring emotional distress without adequate support. This points to a critical gap in both educational and mental health systems in responding to the profound psychological impact of racism. These findings highlight the need for educational and mental health systems to recognise racism as a significant source of psychological harm, and to develop responses that are both trauma-informed and culturally responsive to the lived experiences of Black young people.

Participants also described how repeated racialised messages shaped self-confidence. Accounts of reduced confidence, internalised beauty standards, and questioning one's own worth reflect processes through which external racism becomes psychologically embedded. This suggests a mechanism through which racism infiltrates identity formation during adolescence. This is a developmentally salient finding, given that adolescence is a period in which self-confidence, belonging, and bodily identity are especially sensitive to social evaluation (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Racism, in this context, is not only emotionally painful but developmentally formative, shaping how young people come to understand their bodies, capacities, and legitimacy within educational spaces.

In response to this cumulative weight, participants consistently described engaging in calculated self-protection. Many described monitoring their behaviour, suppressing emotion, avoiding confrontation, or strategically managing their presentation to minimise risk. These practices were framed not as preferences, but as necessities. This positions navigation as a form of constrained adaptation, in which young people were required to manage not only their emotions, but also how they were perceived within racialised systems. Such strategies align with literature conceptualising racial trauma as producing ongoing vigilance, emotional regulation, and survival-oriented coping in response to repeated racial harm (Carter, 2007; Comas-Díaz et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2019). Descriptions of being “overly nice,” constantly smiling, or suppressing aspects of personality suggest that coping shaped how young people related both to others and to themselves. Overachievement also emerged as a racialised survival strategy, with participants describing the need to outperform peers to counter assumptions of inferiority. Drawing on Rosales and Langhout's (2020) notion of everyday resistance, these practices can be understood as subtle acts through which Black students contest deficit-oriented constructions of their ability. However, the invisibility of such resistance risks obscuring the emotional labour and psychological burden involved, reframing structural racism as individual

resilience. This frames academic striving not simply as motivation, but as a defensive practice through which worth and safety were negotiated (Carter, 2007; Comas-Díaz et al., 2019).

Participants also described experiencing adultification within school systems and articulated the necessity of becoming adult-like to survive. This apparent contradiction suggests that institutional adultification may generate internalised expectations of emotional control, vigilance, and self-management. From a developmental perspective, this “forced maturity” risks limiting opportunities for emotional expression, dependency, and relational safety that are typically supported during adolescence (Sameroff, 2009; Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Calculated self-protection, therefore, provides an important bridge between how participants made sense of their experiences of racism (RQ1) and how they later relate to institutional processes, authority, and accountability within school systems (RQ2).

The findings related to RQ3 reveal what participants constructed as missing: being emotionally and relationally held after racial harm. Across accounts, young people shared that school responses offered little space for dialogue, follow-up, or protection. Calls for check-ins, safe spaces, separation from perpetrators, and ongoing support position holding as an institutional responsibility. Where racial harm is met without relational containment, the burden remains located within the young person. Participants’ descriptions of bottling emotions and “having to be strong” suggest that strength emerged not from resilience alone, but from the withdrawal of care.

This has direct implications for understanding both reporting and change priorities. If institutions are experienced as unable or unwilling to hold racial harm, disclosure becomes emotionally risky. Participants’ accounts, therefore, offer lived experiences but also insider insight into the institutional conditions that make reporting unsafe. Reporting is not simply procedural; it requires trust that harm will be recognised, contained, and responded to fairly, underscoring the importance of institutional trustworthiness in enabling disclosure (Alyce et al., 2024). The absence of such relational and institutional safety helps explain why reporting pathways later appear fraught, pointless, or unsafe. This aligns with literature demonstrating that racial trauma is intensified when experiences of harm are minimised or invalidated, contributing to mistrust of institutional support and reduced help-seeking (Carter, 2007; Comas-Díaz et al., 2019; NHS Race & Health Observatory, 2022). At the same time, participants’ later calls for relational safety, transparency, and accountability can be understood as attempts to redistribute responsibility for racial harm back to institutions. Their priorities for

change respond directly to the emotional labour they have been required to perform, envisioning school practices that reduce vigilance, legitimate emotional experience, and create conditions in which young people no longer have to carry racial harm alone. Such calls reflect developmental and transactional perspectives emphasising that safe relational environments are foundational for trust, engagement, and psychological wellbeing (Sameroff, 2009; Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

Since the completion of the meta-ethnographic synthesis in chapter two, further UK-based research has emerged exploring race-related stress among Black undergraduate and postgraduate students (Stoll et al., 2023). Their findings highlight the emotional labour involved in navigating predominantly White institutions, alongside adaptive coping strategies such as strategic self-presentation and emotional regulation. These processes closely mirror the present study's themes of cumulative racial harm and calculated self-protection within school settings. Although this study was not included in the formal synthesis of the meta-ethnography due to timing, its convergence with the current findings strengthens the credibility and contemporary relevance of the analysis.

Institutional silencing: Restricted pathways for reporting racism

Addressing RQ2, the results demonstrate how Black students experienced and interpreted formal and informal reporting pathways following racism in schools. However, participants' accounts extend beyond procedural dissatisfaction. They illuminate institutional silencing as a racialised process through which Black students' knowledge and distress are routinely minimised and silenced. In this way, the findings resonate strongly with CRT's assertion that racism is embedded within ordinary institutional functioning rather than confined to exceptional incidents (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2008).

Across accounts, participants constructed voicelessness as both interpersonal and institutional. They described a paradoxical positioning in which Black students were hyper-visible to discipline and surveillance, while simultaneously invisible as vulnerable young people and agents of change. This duality mirrors what CRT scholars describe as racialised visibility: bodies are seen, monitored, and regulated, while subjectivity, credibility, and humanity are discounted (Crenshaw, 1991; Gillborn, 2008).

Participants in prestigious roles, such as head boy or head girl, reflected, "Why am I even in this position if I'm not respected?" This reflects a complex negotiation of power:

proximity to whiteness or institutional approval can appear to offer protection, suggesting that occupying a “better” or more accepted position may confer security or legitimacy. However, participants’ accounts suggest that such strategies did not reliably shield them from racialisation, highlighting the limits of assimilation as a protective mechanism within structurally racialised systems. Participant’s question, “Why am I even being a good kid... if you’re just assuming that I’m bad anyway?”, further illustrates how racialised stereotypes undermine achievement, and shape identity formation (Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

Participants also located silencing at a cultural level, through the marginalisation of Black histories and the trivialisation of their significance. Participants’ accounts resonate with CRT’s emphasis on epistemic injustice and counter-storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), highlighting how whose knowledge is legitimised within the curriculum shapes whose experiences are subsequently recognised. In this sense, institutional silencing is not limited to moments of disclosure; it is embedded within what schools choose to teach, commemorate, and value. When Black histories are marginal within the curriculum, Black students’ pain is more easily dismissed.

These everyday experiences of invisibility appeared to form the conditions under which expectations of institutional inaction developed. Participants frequently anticipated that reporting would lead to minimisation, delay, or no outcome. When staff responses involved questioning students’ interpretations or failing to follow up, silence was produced. This finding mirrors research indicating that UK schools often lack the confidence, frameworks, or will to address racism as a safeguarding issue (Runnymede Trust, 2023; Elliott et al., 2021).

Importantly, participants’ accounts suggest that reporting systems failed not only in accountability but in care. Participants’ emphasis on the absence of counselling or emotional processing positions racism as a psychosocial injury requiring psychological support. This aligns with the RBTSM (Carter, 2007), which conceptualises racism as capable of producing trauma-like responses that require validation, protection, and meaning-making. When disclosures of racism were met with procedural gestures rather than ongoing support, participants experienced this as compounding harm. Such responses echo broader critiques that educational and safeguarding systems remain poorly equipped to recognise racial trauma as a legitimate form of psychological injury (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019; NHS Race and Health Observatory, 2022).

When racist behaviour was not followed by visible consequences, participants described perpetrators as protected, allowing harm to persist. When some participants resisted or challenged racism, their actions were reframed as defiance and met with punishment. Self-advocacy or collective resistance was interpreted through disciplinary rather than protective lenses. Historically, resistance to racial subordination has been pathologised, most notoriously through the pseudo-diagnosis of “drapetomania,” as outlined in Chapter 1 (Fischer, 2022). While the contexts differ, this historical pattern illustrates how claims to dignity or autonomy can be recast as deviance within dominant systems. In this way, schools were positioned as environments that normalise and reproduce racial stress, reinforcing Carter’s (2007) argument that trauma is sustained by the conditions in which harm is embedded.

The theme also highlights the relational and psychological costs of speaking. Participants described fear of retaliation, peer stigma, and escalation as shaping their decisions not to report. The framing of reporting as “snitching” reflects how school cultures can displace responsibility from perpetrators onto those harmed. This resonates with social-ecological and developmental models that emphasise how environments structure coping options (Sameroff, 2009). Silence here is not apathy, but a rational adaptation within contexts perceived as unsafe. This directly connects institutional silencing to the calculated self-protection described in Theme 2, demonstrating how restricted reporting pathways intensify psychological burden (RQ1).

Finally, participants’ accounts reveal how power operated structurally. Questions such as “who am I going to report it to?” locate the problem not in individual reluctance but in institutional design. Participants described uncertainty about escalation pathways, particularly when initial disclosures were ignored or minimised. This ambiguity positioned young people as responsible for navigating complex reporting hierarchies, despite statutory safeguarding and equality guidance emphasising the importance of clear, transparent, and accessible reporting routes (Department for Education, 2023; Equality Act, 2010).

The gap between policy expectations and lived experience suggests that structural racism can operate through a lack of transparency and clarity in the institutional process of addressing racism, where unclear accountability pathways allow racial harm to be diffused or left unresolved. This aligns with institutional analyses of racism, which highlight how systems reproduce inequality through routine practices rather than solely through individual prejudice (Gillborn, 2008; Nazroo et al., 2020). It also reflects broader psychological analyses of

institutional defensiveness, where responsibility becomes unclear, and accountability is diluted (Henriques, 1998).

Seen in this way, participants' narratives function not only as personal testimonies but as situated analyses of how institutions regulate, contain, and perpetuate racial harm. Their accounts, therefore, offer insight into the organisational mechanisms through which racial inequality is sustained, positioning young people as knowledgeable observers of the institutional systems they are required to navigate.

Together, these findings situate institutional silencing as a central mechanism through which racism is maintained in schools. By silencing disclosure, minimising allegations of harm, and blocking accountability, school systems intensify racial trauma, shape adaptive silence, and undermine trust. At the same time, these experiences generate the justice-oriented demands articulated in later themes: calls for transparent processes, independent accountability, and anti-racist safeguarding practices. In this sense, restricted reporting pathways do not merely fail to resolve racism; they actively produce the conditions that make systemic change both necessary and urgent.

“They burnt a bridge”: From fracture to belonging

This final theme brings the analysis to the point where impacts, institutional processes, and change priorities come together, addressing RQ1: students' accounts of the impact of racism and RQ3: young people's priorities for change, which reads as attempts to rebuild conditions for education to function. Across accounts, racism and the ways it was handled were described as damaging the relationship between young people and school in ways that felt relationally final: “they burnt the bridge.” This can be understood through turning point analysis, which conceptualises certain experiences as critical moments that alter developmental trajectories, identity, and engagement with institutions (Kastrinos et al., 2024). Within this framework, racial harm, particularly when followed by perceived institutional failure to respond, may function as a relational turning point that reshapes how young people anticipate safety, belonging, and fairness within educational environments.

Developmental systems research highlights that engagement with school is closely linked to relational trust, belonging, and perceived fairness (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Sameroff, 2009). When these relational foundations are disrupted, disengagement may represent an adaptive response to environments experienced as unsafe or unreliable. This interpretation also

aligns with racial trauma literature, which demonstrates that harm is intensified when discriminatory experiences are minimised or inadequately addressed by institutions expected to provide protection (Carter, 2007; Comas-Díaz et al., 2019).

Participants' descriptions of withdrawal and disengagement can be understood through a transactional model of development (Sameroff, 2009): when environments repeatedly communicate that you are unsafe, misread, or unprotected, adaptation is likely to take forms that reduce exposure and emotional cost. When participants described continuing attendance while withdrawing from socialising with teachers and peers, education becomes transactional rather than relational. This withdrawal is linked to broader patterns documented in the literature: repeated experiences of racism and invalidation are associated with mistrust in institutions and poorer well-being (Paradies et al., 2015; Priest et al., 2013). Subtle forms of harm that are minimised or denied, such as microaggressions, undermine individuals' confidence that their experiences will be recognised or taken seriously (Sue et al., 2007). These patterns of withdrawal and vigilance echo findings from previous literature, where unresolved racial trauma is associated with hypervigilance, imposter syndrome, and identity conflict in institutional contexts (Murray, 2023; Williams et al., 2019).

This theme also widens the lens from school-level processes to system-level trajectories. Participants' phrase "the system deals with you," alongside the language of "cycles" and "rabbit holes," positions school as a critical gateway: when education excludes or fails to protect, other systems step in. Young people are not only describing personal consequences; they are offering institutional knowledge about how systems connect, illustrating how exclusion, reduced support, and disciplinary pathways can move young people toward increased surveillance and constraint. The "rabbit hole" metaphor is particularly powerful because it captures a perceived loss of predictability and control once drawn into disciplinary or exclusionary pathways; the rules and possibilities appear to shift, making exit increasingly difficult (Griffith et al., 2022).

These accounts resonate with life-course and criminological theories of cumulative disadvantage, which suggest that early institutional responses can shape later developmental trajectories by increasing exposure to surveillance, exclusion, and restricted opportunity (Sampson & Laub, 1997; Moffitt, 1993). Research on the school-to-prison pipeline similarly highlights how exclusionary discipline can position schools as entry points into broader systems of social control, disproportionately affecting racially minoritised young people (Skiba

et al., 2011). When viewed alongside the levels-of-racism framework (Nazroo et al., 2020; Jones, 2000), what may appear as a single school incident can be experienced as part of an institutional pattern that links educational inequality to wider structural disadvantage.

Participants' accounts of withdrawal, disengagement, and fractured trust provide a lens through which wider patterns of racial inequality in education can be understood. National evidence documenting higher exclusion rates, lower attainment, and increased discontinuation among Black students does not simply reflect individual differences in ability or motivation, but the cumulative impact of educational environments that repeatedly communicate racialised stereotypes and risk. The disengagement described in this study, continuing attendance alongside relational withdrawal, reduced help-seeking, and narrowed participation, helps make sense of how such outcomes emerge over time. In this way, participants' experiences offer an explanatory bridge between everyday school interactions and the broader disparities documented across UK education systems (Bhopal, 2017; Byrne et al., 2020; Graham et al., 2019; HESA, 2024).

Considered alongside the earlier findings, these accounts suggest ways in which young people describe what would make repair possible and what would prevent rupture from occurring in the first place. Their calls for fairness, relational safety, and accountability align with a procedural justice logic: safety is not built through reassurance alone, but through predictable, visible action, clear reporting routes, logging, follow-up, timely responses, proportionate consequences, and education to prevent recurrence (Brasof & Peterson, 2018). Importantly, they do not construct "punishment" and "education" as opposites; they frame them as complementary, because each does different relational work. Consequences communicate seriousness, and education aims to shift understanding and reduce repetition.

Participants' accounts further suggest that meaningful change requires schools to move towards creating environments that reduce isolation and vulnerability in the first place. Participants' descriptions of representation, having "someone to run to," culturally attuned support, and spaces for connection position belonging as something produced through everyday school practices. This aligns with developmental research that understands school belonging as arising from experiences of recognition, inclusion, and support, with implications for learning and wellbeing (Goodenow, 1993; Luhanga et al., 2023; Mawdsley et al., 2023; Okoroji et al., 2021). It also resonates with the Healing Ethno-Racial Trauma (HEART) model, which emphasises identity affirmation, community connection, and systemic action (Chavez-

Dueñas et al., 2019). What young people describe, check-in groups, forums, clubs, and visible structures of care, resemble preventative infrastructure rather than reactive support. In this framing, belonging is something schools are responsible for creating. While repair remains important, prevention is protective, reducing the need for constant self-monitoring and withdrawal as primary coping strategies.

Overall, this theme positions “burnt bridges” as both outcome and warning: when racism is normalised or mishandled, trust collapses, engagement narrows, and education becomes a place to endure rather than a place to develop. The young people’s priorities for change, credible accountability, relational safety, and inclusive belonging, can therefore be read as intervention targets that work across time: responding to harm in ways that enable repair and building cultures that reduce the likelihood and impact of harm in the first place. As a final theme, it synthesises the findings into a practical logic: schools cannot simply ask young people to re-engage; they must rebuild the conditions, relational, procedural, and cultural, under which engagement becomes safe and possible.

What Black students identify as priorities for school change, and how these might inform intervention design and implementation.

Implications

This study reveals that racism in schools is not experienced as a series of isolated incidents, but as a patterned institutional condition shaping emotional safety, engagement, trust, and opportunity. Participants’ accounts position schools simultaneously as sites where racial harm is produced and as environments with the potential to interrupt, repair, and prevent that harm. Consequently, the implications extend beyond individual behaviour management toward whole-school practices, policy accountability, and structurally informed intervention design (see Table 9 for the summary of implications). Importantly, the young people in this study did not only describe what was failing; they articulated psychologically and socially informed visions of what would be required for schools to function differently.

Implications for School Practice and Staff Development

Participants consistently described how racism was enacted through everyday interpretations of behaviour and institutional processes. These findings indicate that anti-racism work in schools cannot rely on generic diversity initiatives or isolated training sessions. A foundational step is supporting schools to develop a deeper understanding of how racism

operates within everyday practices and student experiences. Without this, efforts to address it are likely to remain limited. Instead, schools require sustained professional development that supports staff to understand racism as relational, structural, and psychologically consequential.

Training needs to equip staff to recognise Whiteness as an ideological structure (Wood & Patel, 2017), racialised assumptions, adultification processes, and microaggressions, and to reflect on how institutional roles and power shape responses to disclosure. Participants' experiences of being dismissed, doubted, or reframed as the problem suggest that schools risk reproducing racial harm even when attempting to address it. Staff development should therefore include psychologically grounded training that addresses defensiveness and the emotional labour involved in anti-racist practice. While sustained reflective spaces and supervision-informed models would be ideal, more accessible approaches, such as structured digital training packages, may offer a practical starting point.

The findings also suggest that relational safety is central to anti-racist school practice. Young people repeatedly framed safety in terms of consistent, fair, and transparent action. Practice frameworks and policy should therefore emphasise listening, validation, follow-up, and visible accountability as relational acts, rather than administrative procedures. In this sense, anti-racist school practice becomes inseparable from emotionally attuned, trauma-informed education.

Safeguarding, Reporting Structures, and Institutional Accountability

These findings highlight a critical need to reconceptualise racism within school safeguarding frameworks. Racism was experienced as psychologically and relationally injurious and developmentally disruptive yet rarely treated as a safeguarding concern.

Schools, therefore, require explicit, visible, and credible anti-racism safeguarding pathways. Reporting systems must be clearly communicated to students and families, outlining what constitutes racism, who disclosures can be made to, how decisions are taken, and what forms of protection and support will follow. Participants' emphasis on updates, record-keeping, timeliness, and parental involvement demonstrates that transparency itself functions as a form of safety. Without it, institutional silence becomes another layer of harm.

Participants' accounts suggest that a key barrier to effective anti-racist practice in schools is not simply the absence of policy, but the limited visibility of existing frameworks. Young people consistently described uncertainty about what constituted racism, who

disclosures should be made to, and how concerns would be escalated if initial responses were ineffective. When racism is subsumed within generic anti-bullying policies rather than addressed through explicit, standalone procedures, it becomes procedurally unclear, displacing responsibility for interpretation and navigation onto students themselves.

This gap between policy intention and lived experience is particularly striking given that UK education policy already articulates commitments to equality, safeguarding, and pupil voice. The Equality Act (2010) places a statutory duty on schools to prevent discrimination; Keeping Children Safe in Education emphasises clear reporting routes and escalation (Department for Education, 2023); and the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspection framework positions safeguarding and inclusion as core indicators of school effectiveness (Ofsted, 2023). However, participants' experiences suggest that these commitments are not consistently translated into accessible, race-specific safeguarding pathways in practice.

In this context, structural racism operates not through overt policy absence but through policy invisibility, procedural ambiguity and implementation gaps. When neither students nor staff are clear about how racism should be reported, investigated, or resolved, racial harm is more likely to be minimised or left unresolved. This organisational ambiguity creates conditions in which harm can recur, reflecting broader analyses of how institutions sustain inequality through routine practices (Gillborn, 2008; Nazroo et al., 2020). Participants' accounts, therefore, illuminate how systems function in practice, offering insight into the institutional mechanisms that shape protection, silence, and trust.

Curriculum, Racial Literacy, and Preventive Intervention

Young people consistently positioned education as “the root” of both harm and change. Their emphasis on curriculum, historical understanding, and racial literacy suggests that preventative work must be embedded within the everyday knowledge structures of schooling, rather than confined to reactive responses.

Curriculum development should move beyond tokenistic inclusion toward sustained engagement with Black histories and contemporary racial realities. Participants' accounts illustrate how the absence or trivialisation of Black histories functioned as cultural silencing, shaping whose experiences were considered legitimate. Integrating critical, historically grounded racial education across subjects creates the conditions for meaning-making, prevention, and institutional recognition.

Preventative interventions should also focus on early developmental stages. Participants explicitly highlighted the importance of addressing racism before stereotypes and normalisation become entrenched. This supports the implementation of age-appropriate, developmentally informed racial literacy education that equips children to recognise, interpret, and challenge racism, and supports staff to respond coherently.

In this sense, education becomes a psychological intervention, shaping how harm is named, how difference is understood, and how responsibility is located.

Whole-School Culture, Belonging, and Structural Design

A central analytic finding was that young people linked protection, engagement, and reporting to belonging. Participants' calls for representation, "someone to run to," culturally attuned spaces, and structured relational forums position belonging as a preventative condition that reduces vulnerability and isolation.

Whole-school interventions should therefore attend to representation at all levels of staffing, particularly within safeguarding and leadership roles. However, representation alone is insufficient without relational infrastructures that support connection, visibility, and dialogue. Schools need to develop structured spaces where racial experiences can be spoken, processed, and held, and where Black students are not required to carry harm in isolation.

From an intervention perspective, this positions anti-racism work as ecological. Effective change requires coherence between policy, curriculum, staff practice, relational culture, and student voice. Fragmented initiatives risk reproducing the very institutional silencing that participants described.

Clinical Implications

The findings of this study position racism in schools as a psychologically significant and developmentally consequential form of harm. Participants' accounts illustrate how repeated exposure to racism operated as a chronic stressor, shaping emotional regulation, self-concept, vigilance, and trust in authority. From a clinical perspective, these findings strongly support the conceptualisation of school-based racism as a safeguarding and mental health concern. Clinicians working with Black children and young people should therefore routinely actively and directly explore racial stress and school-based racism within assessment, formulation, and intervention. Interventions may include trauma-informed and culturally responsive approaches that explicitly recognise racial stressors, while also supporting young

people to process experiences of discrimination and rebuild a sense of safety and agency (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019; Cénat, 2023).

The data also demonstrate that the psychological impact of racism is often compounded by institutional responses that minimise or defensively manage disclosures. This has implications for how clinicians understand presentations such as anxiety, anger, school refusal or disengagement, which may reflect adaptive responses to relational unsafety but may not be perceived and responded to as such within healthcare settings, therefore adding a further layer of harm.

Overall, these implications highlight that addressing racism in schools depends on making anti-racism structurally visible, procedurally clear, and relationally grounded across school systems. Participants' accounts underscore the need for coherent alignment between policy, practice, and accountability, so that responsibility for racial harm is held institutionally rather than displaced onto young people. Without such alignment, anti-racist commitments risk remaining symbolic, while the emotional and developmental costs of navigating racism continue to be borne by Black students themselves. However, these implications must be situated within the broader organisational context of UK secondary schools, which operate under sustained systemic pressures, increasing accountability demands, and growing complexity in pupil needs. In such conditions, implementation is unlikely to be linear, but rather mediated through competing priorities, resource constraints, and established institutional routines. At the same time, the findings suggest that it is precisely within these constrained environments that clarity, visibility, and relational coherence in responding to racism become most critical, as ambiguity and inconsistency are amplified under pressure and may further undermine trust and safety for racially minoritised students.

Critical Evaluation of the Study

Key Contributions of the Research

To my knowledge, the current study is the first multi-site UK study to explore how Black young people navigate racism in secondary schools across England, and to generate student-informed recommendations for change within schools. While prior research has documented the presence and impact of racism in educational contexts, less attention has been paid to the processes through which Black students make sense of, respond to, and manage these experiences, particularly in relation to how institutional structures and practices shape

their responses. Although policy frameworks such as Ofsted's equality objectives (2023) articulate commitments to equality and legal compliance with the Equality Act 2010, which prohibits discrimination based on race, these strategic objectives primarily emphasise statutory duties and inspector training rather than proactive engagement with structural racism itself. Independent monitoring by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC 2025) also highlights a lack of systematic requirements for schools to record or address racist bullying in practice, reflecting gaps between policy and implementation. CRT's analyses of education inspection frameworks, including Ofsted's regulatory guidance, suggest that race is primarily addressed through statutory compliance with the Equality Act 2010, with limited explicit engagement with racism or anti-racist practice. As a result, these frameworks may struggle to account for the lived, racialised experiences of Black students within everyday educational contexts (Wilson-Thomas et al., 2025).

The present study offers novel insights into how educational systems might better bridge the gap between equality policy and the everyday experiences of Black students navigating racism. By centring student-informed accounts, the study also generates practical insights into how educational systems might better align equality policy with the everyday realities of racism in schools. In doing so, it provides a systemically grounded account of how institutional practices shape responses to racism.

The study also makes a broader conceptual contribution by bringing together areas of literature that have often been considered separately. Specifically, the findings connect racism with trauma, safeguarding, adultification, institutional trust, reporting processes, and accountability, thereby offering a psychologically informed and systemic understanding of racial harm within secondary schools. In doing so, the study highlights how racism extends beyond isolated interpersonal incidents and is shaped by how institutions recognise, respond to, and, at times, minimise racial harm.

Finally, the study makes a practical and critical contribution by challenging forms of institutional discourse centred on diversity, belonging, and inclusion that do not explicitly engage with racism, power, and accountability. The findings suggest that schools cannot meaningfully foster belonging while racial harm remains inadequately recognised or addressed. Participants' accounts point to the importance of moving beyond symbolic commitments to equality towards approaches that are structurally visible, procedurally clear, and relationally grounded. Collectively, these contributions provide an evidence base to inform

anti-racist practice and strengthen institutional accountability within secondary education settings. However, it is important to consider the specific strengths and limitations of this study when interpreting its findings.

Study Sample

The study is strengthened by its purposeful sampling strategy, which intentionally centred Black students with direct or vicarious experiences of racism in school settings. By focusing specifically on Black African, Black British, and Black Caribbean young people, the research avoided collapsing racially distinct experiences into broad “ethnic minority” categories. Recruitment through both schools and community organisations increased access to young people who may have been less likely to participate through school-based routes alone, supporting inclusion. However, despite attempts to engage a broader range of educational contexts, the study was unable to capture the voices of young people educated outside of mainstream secondary provision, such as those in alternative provision or who had experienced permanent exclusion. This represents a limitation, as existing research highlights the disproportionate exclusion of Black students from mainstream education and the longer-term consequences of exclusion, including increased contact with punitive systems beyond school. Evidence from statutory and academic sources has consistently linked school exclusion to pathways of criminalisation, often described as the school-to-prison pipeline, with Black young people particularly overrepresented within this process (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2016; Gillborn, 2008). As such, the findings may not fully reflect the experiences of Black young people whose encounters with racism occur within, or contribute to, trajectories of educational marginalisation and exclusion.

The study’s sample size of 26 participants represents a methodological strength. The sample included a higher proportion of male participants than is typically seen in qualitative research, where female participation often predominates. Participants were recruited from across England and represented a range of educational contexts, including state schools, independent schools, and grammar schools. This diversity enhanced the breadth of perspectives captured and supported the exploration of how experiences of racism may be shaped by differing institutional and structural conditions. However, while the study aimed to capture experiences across adolescence, the final sample was weighted toward older participants, with a substantially larger proportion aged 16–18 compared to those aged 13–15. This skew has important implications for interpretation. Older adolescents may have greater reflective capacity, broader exposure to multiple school contexts, and more developed language for

articulating racism, power, and institutional processes. The relative underrepresentation of younger adolescents limits the extent to which developmental differences across early secondary school can be explored and suggests a need for future research that centres on earlier school stages.

The reliance on voluntary participation also introduces the possibility of self-selection bias. Young people who chose to engage may have been those with particularly salient, distressing, or politicised experiences of racism, or those who already felt motivated to speak about race. While this is consistent with qualitative aims of depth rather than representativeness, it may mean that quieter, less articulated, or differently positioned experiences are underrepresented. In addition, many participants occupied high-achieving or leadership roles within their schools. This may limit insight into the experiences of Black students who are more marginalised within educational systems, including those already excluded, persistently absent, or fully disengaged from formal education.

Study Design

A strength of the study design lies in its qualitative, focus group design, which allows participants to build on one another's accounts, validate shared experiences, and generate insight that extends beyond individual narratives. The use of open-ended, semi-structured questions for both the interviews and focus groups allowed participants to prioritise what felt most salient, centring young people's voices within the analysis. However, it is important to acknowledge that the group contexts of the focus group may inhibit disclosure of personal, traumatic, or contradictory experiences. Power dynamics, social desirability, or fears about being judged may have influenced what participants felt able to share. The presence of a trusted adult, while ethically important, may also have constrained some disclosures about schools or authority.

Another important strength lies in the study's co-productive elements. The involvement of Black undergraduate psychology students in the data analysis introduced additional cultural and experiential perspectives into the analytic process, reducing the likelihood that interpretations were shaped solely through the lens of a single researcher. It supported reflexivity and rigour. Maintaining a reflective journal throughout the research process further enabled me as the researcher to attend to positionality, emotional responses, and analytic assumptions. To mitigate the risk of confirmatory bias, the co-analysis process emphasised

critical dialogue, with differing interpretations explored and reflexive questioning used to interrogate assumptions, rather than privileging consensus.

Finally, as with all qualitative research, the findings are contextually situated and not intended to be statistically generalisable. Participants were recruited through specific community organisations, and their experiences are shaped by local cultures, policies, and demographics. The analysis, therefore, offers theoretical and conceptual transferability rather than population-level claims. Readers are invited to consider how the patterns identified resonate with, illuminate, or diverge from other educational contexts.

Dissemination

This thesis has been submitted to the University of Essex in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Doctorate in Clinical Psychology. Participants who expressed an interest in receiving a summary of the findings will be offered an accessible overview following successful completion of the thesis. The full thesis will also be made publicly available via the University of Essex Research Repository.

Given the applied nature of the research, dissemination beyond academic audiences is a priority. Alongside written summaries of the findings and implications, I created an original art piece illustration as an arts-based representation of the study's core findings (see Appendix R). This was intended to communicate the emotional, relational, and systemic aspects of young people's experiences in an accessible way for a wider audience, including young people, educators, and clinicians.

The findings will be prepared for submission to a peer-reviewed academic journal relevant to race, education, and mental health (e.g., *Journal of Adolescence Research*). In addition, a concise policy-facing summary of key findings and recommendations will be developed, with the intention of sharing this with education professionals, training providers, and organisations involved in education policy and safeguarding. This may include third-sector organisations and policy bodies focused on racial equality in education, such as those contributing to guidance on anti-racist practice, safeguarding, and institutional accountability.

Finally, this research is intended to inform future empirical and applied work by foregrounding young people's accounts as sources of institutional knowledge about how racism operates within school systems. It is hoped that the study will support the development of

preventative, systemic, and developmentally informed approaches to addressing racial harm in education.

Suggestion for Future Research

Future research should extend this work by centring the voices of young people who are excluded from, or marginalised within, mainstream education. Participants' accounts suggest that racialised harm, disciplinary practices, and fractured trust often culminate in withdrawal or exclusion, meaning that some of the most affected young people may no longer be present within mainstream school systems. Research involving students in alternative provision, pupil referral units, or those permanently excluded would therefore be crucial for understanding how racialised harm and institutional responses continue to shape trajectories beyond mainstream schooling (Graham et al., 2019; Parsons, 2018).

Further work should also adopt a more intentional intersectional focus, particularly examining the experiences of Black young people who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and other sexual orientations and gender identities (LGBTQ+). Existing evidence indicates that Black LGBTQ+ students face heightened risks of bullying, exclusion, and mental health distress due to the convergence of racism, homophobia, and transphobia, yet their experiences remain underrepresented in education research (McDermott et al., 2018; Toomey et al., 2012). Exploring these intersecting identities would deepen understanding of how safety, belonging, and recognition are negotiated within racialised school environments.

Finally, future research should move beyond documenting harm toward evaluating institutional change. Participants articulated clear priorities for reform, including transparent reporting pathways, racial literacy, relational safety, and accountability. Longitudinal and intervention-based studies examining school practices before and after the implementation of anti-racist policies or whole-school interventions would provide much-needed evidence on what facilitates meaningful and sustained change. Such work should assess not only incident reporting, but shifts in trust, engagement, belonging, and help-seeking among racialised students (Runnymede Trust, 2023). A further avenue for research would be dialogic or participatory studies that invite teachers, teaching assistants, and school leaders to engage directly with these findings and reflect on their implications for practice. Exploring how school staff interpret, respond to, and potentially challenge these accounts could provide important insight into the institutional processes that facilitate or hinder meaningful change.

Conclusion

This study explored Black students' accounts of the impact of racism experienced in secondary schools across England, how they relate to formal reporting systems following racial harm, and what they identify as priorities for institutional change. As a multi-site qualitative project gathering racialised insights across different secondary schools, the study offers a novel contribution to understanding racism in UK secondary schools.

Across the findings, racism was experienced as cumulative and relational, embedded in everyday behaviour. Participants described navigating its impact through calculated self-protection, emotional suppression, relational withdrawal, and overperformance. Institutional responses to racial harm were frequently experienced as ambiguous, minimising, or procedurally unclear, positioning young people as responsible for interpreting, evidencing, and escalating their own experiences. This epistemic burden fractured trust and reshaped relationships to authority, education, and help-seeking.

The participants articulated coherent, psychologically informed priorities for change, emphasising relational safety, transparent reporting pathways, racial literacy embedded in the curriculum, and visible accountability structures. Their accounts offer institutional knowledge about how schools function in practice and how they might function differently. This research underscores the necessity of conceptualising school-based racism as a safeguarding and mental health concern. The findings challenge schools to move towards structurally visible, procedurally clear, and relationally grounded anti-racist practice. It is hoped that these findings will support the development of school environments in which safety, belonging, and equity are institutionally assured.

Final Reflections

When I began this thesis, I was full of hope. I saw it as an opportunity to use my position and the privilege of doctoral research to create real impact. I wanted to give voice to experiences that are often minimised or dismissed. Somewhere during the interview process, that hope shifted. As I listened to young people across different schools repeat similar accounts of racism and institutional inaction, I felt anger. I felt heaviness. At times, I felt hopeless. It was difficult to sit with the repetition. I began to question whether it was wishful thinking to believe I could contribute to change in this area. Was dreaming of school environments free from racial harm naive? Unrealistic?

I had to remind myself that social change has always required people to imagine what does not yet exist. If those before us had abandoned hope when progress felt impossible, we would not be where we are today. I am inspired by this quote in *Living While Black* by Guilaine Kinouani, “We owe so much of our spirit of survival and resistance to our foremothers... Those who have struggled in the cotton or sugar cane fields of ‘new worlds’ and those who have fought for independence from colonialism”. As a Black woman and someone committed to social justice, giving up is not an option. Even if I do not see the change I hope for in my lifetime, I have a responsibility to hold on to hope and to contribute in the ways available to me.

There were moments during data collection that moved me deeply. Some participants asked, at the end of the interviews, whether I too had experienced racism in school. Those moments made me realise how rare it is to have space to speak about these experiences openly, particularly with someone who may understand them without extensive explanation. While this research was not about my story, I became aware of the relational significance of simply holding space. I felt grateful that the research process created an environment in which they could speak freely and be taken seriously.

At times, I felt a responsibility that extended beyond the role of “researcher.” I felt the urge to affirm them, to tell them how inspiring they were. Managing this required careful ethical reflexivity. I held boundaries around disclosure and reassurance, ensuring that validation did not become leading or therapeutic. Instead, I sought to communicate respect, attentiveness and belief through my presence, my questions and my analysis.

I hope this thesis does more than sit on a shelf. I hope it reaches educators, school leaders, policymakers and clinicians. I hope it validates Black young people who may see their experiences reflected in these pages. If nothing changes, there is value in documentation. There is power in record. If something does change, even small shifts in how schools respond, in how teachers interpret behaviour, in how reporting systems are structured, then these young people’s voices will have contributed to that change.

As you finish reading this thesis, I invite you to reflect: What role do you play in sustaining, or challenging, the systems you are part of? And perhaps most importantly: If young people are already imagining something better, what is stopping us from doing the same?

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Schedule

A Qualitative exploration of Black Students' Experiences of navigating Racism in UK Education systems

Introduction

1. Check in
2. Briefly go over study aims and estimated duration
3. Discuss confidentiality, the right to withdraw, and the right to skip questions
4. Inform participants they can take a break at any point
5. Ask if they have any questions before the start of the interview
6. Check that they are fine with recording the interview

Click Record

Interview questions

- How would you describe yourself in three words?
- How do you think your peers and teachers would describe you?
- What do you wish others knew about you?
- How do you wish they saw you or would describe you?
- What are your goals and dreams?
- Do/did you feel supported in them at school? How? By whom?
- What barriers are standing in the way of your education and goals?
 - What, if anything, can you do to remove those barriers?
- What do you think are the biggest challenges you've faced as a Black student in schools?

- What can others do to help remove those challenges (for yourself or others)?
- Where do you feel like your voice is most heard/valued and where it is most silenced/ignored/devalued?
- What are your experiences of racism within school settings?
- What is your friend's experience of racism in the school?
- What impact has it had, if any, on your academics/ability to engage
- What impact, if any, has it had on your well-being?
- Did you feel able to report these experiences? (Explore their responses further/why they did or did not feel able to report).
- How do you currently feel talking about it?
- If you did report, who did you report it to? How did you feel about reporting it?
- How did you report, and what was the outcome?
- If you did not report, what was the outcome / how did you navigate through the experience? (Explore the reason for not reporting).
- What do you think schools could do better to help you and other Black children feel safe and more heard and able to report such incidents
- How would you want schools to respond when students report racism encountered in school?
- If you were to write a letter to former or current teachers/headteachers from your school(s), sharing what you wish they knew about you/what you needed as a Black student, what would you want to say?
- If you knew what you shared could lead to actual student recommendations for schools, what specific things would you want to see happen?

Concluding questions

- Is there anything I didn't ask that you want to share?
 - About yourself?
 - Or that you want others (educators) to know and understand about your experience(s)?
 - Do you have a statement you would like to give to schools as a Black person?
- Lastly, if you had 3 wishes, what would they be?

Appendix B: Recruitment Poster



JOIN THE CONVERSATION

Are you a Black student who has experienced or witnessed racism in school?

What is the study about?

- We want to hear from Black students about experiences of racism at school
- Share your experiences, whether you saw it or went through it

Who can take part?

You must:

- be between 13 - 18 years of age (parental consent to take part if under age 16)
- identify as Black
- based in the UK

What should I expect?

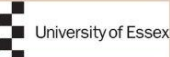
- Duration: 60-90 minutes
- Format: Focus group discussion or one-to-one interview
- Location: Your school, community hub, or online



£10 gift voucher upon participation

If interested, please contact me:

Researcher: Iyunade Onisile (Trainee Clinical Psychologist)
io23792@essex.ac.uk

 University of Essex

v4. 06/07/2025

ARE YOU A BLACK UNDERGRADUATE PSYCHOLOGY STUDENT?



Project Overview

Assist with Data Analysis for a thesis project on Black Students experiences of Racism in schools

Why Join?

- Gain hands-on research experience
- Develop your data analysis skills
- Enhance your academic & research portfolio

Commitment

- 3 hours across three meetings with the researcher
- Option to meet in person at university of Essex or virtually

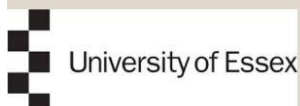


If you would like to apply or you have any questions, please contact me:

Researcher: Iyunade Onisile ✉

io23792@essex.ac.uk

(Trainee Clinical Psychologist) v1 03/02/2025



EXPLORING BLACK STUDENTS' RELATIONSHIP TO REPORTING RACISM IN SCHOOLS



Do you take pride in an inclusive school environment and want to ensure all students are happy irrespective of their colour?

Do you care about:

- Promoting Inclusivity
- Addressing disparity
- Fostering a positive racial environment for students
- Data driven decision making

What to expect

The research will be situated with the University of Essex School of Health and Social care and will be ethically approved.

The student will be invited to meet with myself and other participants for a confidential group discussion lasting 60-90 minutes, at your school.

Who can take part?

Do you have students:

- Between 13 - 18 years of age
- Who identify as Black
- Who are willing to talk about their experiences



£10 gift voucher for participants



If you would like to take part or you have any questions, please contact me:



University of Essex

Researcher: Iyunade Onisile ✉ io23792@essex.ac.uk

(Trainee Clinical Psychologist) v1 20/03/2024

Appendix C: Participant demographic form



Please complete this before taking part in the focus group.

1. Please state your age:
2. Please state your gender (if you feel comfortable to do so):
3. As a self-identified Black person, could you state your heritage. E.g., Black African, Black British, Black Caribbean.
4. Have you ever felt like someone treated you unfairly because of the colour of your skin while you were at school? Yes/No
5. Have you ever seen someone being mean or unfair to someone else because of the colour of their skin at school? Yes/No
6. Please state your current location (town)
7. Please state your school:
8. Please provide your parent or guardian's name and contact details below if you are under the age of 18.

Parent/Guardian name:

Parent/Guardian contact number:

.....

Parent/Guardian email address:

.....

Appendix D: Participant Information Sheet



Project Title: A Qualitative exploration of Black Students' Experiences of navigating Racism in UK Education systems

Who is the researcher?

My name is Iyunade Onisile, and I am a Trainee Clinical Psychologist at The University of Essex. This research is being conducted as part of my Doctorate in Clinical Psychology. I am being supervised by Esther Ariyo and Danny Taggart. I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

The purpose of the study

This research aims to conduct a study exploring Black students' relationship to reporting school-based racism to formal reporting channels of information. The study also aims to provide insight to educators and those in positions of power on how to provide positive racial environments in schools whereby students feel safe to report racial experiences. The study will be considered in the context of wider systemic structures that further oppress Black people, and how higher education researchers and policymakers can address the findings.

How will my information be stored?

The information you provide will be kept securely in a password-protected secure computer file. Your information will be anonymised, and any identifiable information will be stored separately from your responses. The legal basis for using the data collected is your consent. The GDPR states that consent must be freely given, specific, informed, and unambiguous – given by a statement or a clear affirmative action. The Data Controller is the University of Essex, and the contact will be, University Information Assurance Manager (dpo@essex.ac.uk)

Taking part is entirely voluntary

Please be aware that your decision to take part or not take part in this research is entirely up to you. If you do choose to take part then you are still free to withdraw at any time, without

having to give a reason and there will be no negative consequences. It will be emphasised that this research operates independently of your school and that your decision to participate will not unduly impact your education.

Do you have ethics approval?

This study has gained ethical approval from the University of Essex Ethics Committee. They have granted the research safe and ethical to participate in.

What will the study entail?

If you consent to participate in this research, you will be asked to sign a consent form. The consent form will clearly highlight that your data will be kept completely confidential and that you are free to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences.

The study will consist of focus group discussions or individual interviews which will take place at your school if you found out about the study through your schools, local community centres if you found out about the study through your community centre and your local church if you were recruited through your local church or online via Microsoft teams. If you consent to do so, the focus group discussion and individual interviews will be audio-recorded, to aid with data analysis at a later stage. The data will be anonymously stored on a computer. You will be given a unique participant number and if you wish to withdraw your data from the study at any point, please quote this number and your data will be destroyed.

What will happen with my data?

It is hoped the findings from this research will be published in an academic journal. If you are also interested, a copy of the final report will also be sent to you. This research is completely independent of your school and academic progress. Please do not hesitate to contact me should you have any further questions about the study.

Concerns and Complaints

If you have any concerns about any aspect of the study or you have a complaint, in the first instance please contact the principal investigator of the project, Iyunade Onisile, using the contact details below. If are still concerned, you think your complaint has not been addressed to your satisfaction or you feel that you cannot approach the principal investigator, please contact the departmental Director of Research in the department responsible for this project, Professor Camille Cronin camille.cronin@essex.ac.uk. If you are still not satisfied, please

contact the University's Research Governance and Planning Manager, Sarah Manning-Press (e-mail sarahm@essex.ac.uk).

Name of the Researcher/Research Team Members

Iyunade (Lead Researcher/Trainee Clinical Psychologist) io23792@essex.ac.uk

Esther Ariyo (Co-Lead Researcher/University lecturer) esther.ariyo@essex.ac.uk

Danny Taggart (Co-Lead Researcher/Clinical Psychologist/Senior Lecturer)
dtaggart@essex.ac.uk

Lead Researcher

Iyunade Onisile

Doctor of Clinical Psychology, Doctorate Programme

University of Essex

CO4 3SQ

A copy of the consent form and the participant information sheet should be kept by the research participant. Signed consent forms will be stored securely by the researcher.



Parental information sheet

Project Title: A Qualitative exploration of Black Students' Experiences of navigating Racism in UK Education systems

Who is the researcher?

My name is Iyunade Onisile, and I am a Trainee Clinical Psychologist at The University of Essex. This research is being conducted as part of my Doctorate in Clinical Psychology. I am being supervised by Esther Ariyo and Danny Taggart. I would like to invite your child to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether to allow them to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

The purpose of the study

This research aims to conduct a study exploring Black students' relationship to reporting school-based racism to formal reporting channels of information. The study also aims to provide insight to educators and those in positions of power on how to provide positive racial environments in schools whereby students feel safe to report racial experiences. The study will be considered in the context of wider systemic structures that further oppress Black people, and how higher education researchers and policymakers can address the findings.

How will my information be stored?

The information your child provides will be kept securely in a password-protected secure computer file. The information will be anonymised, and any identifiable information will be stored separately from your responses. The legal basis for using the data collected is your consent. The GDPR states that consent must be freely given, specific, informed, and unambiguous – given by a statement or a clear affirmative action. The Data Controller is the University of Essex, and the contact will be, University Information Assurance Manager (dpo@essex.ac.uk)

Taking part is entirely voluntary

Please be aware that your decision to take part or not take part in this research is entirely up to you. If you do choose to take part then you are still free to withdraw at any time, without having to give a reason and there will be no negative consequences. It will be emphasised that this research operates independently of your child's school and that your decision to participate will not unduly impact your child's education.

Do you have ethics approval?

This study has gained ethical approval from the University of Essex Ethics Committee. They have granted the research safe and ethical to participate in.

What will the study entail?

If you consent for your child to participate in this research, you will be asked to sign a consent form. The consent form will clearly highlight that your data will be kept completely confidential and that you are free to withdraw your child from the study at any point without any consequences.

The study will consist of focus group discussions or individual interviews which will take place online, or at your child's school if you found out about the study through their schools, local community centres if you found out about the study through your community centre and your local church if you were recruited through your local church. If you consent to do so, the focus group discussion will be audio-recorded, to aid with data analysis at a later stage. The data will be anonymously stored on a computer. Your child will be given a unique participant number and if you or your child wishes to withdraw your data from the study at any point, please quote this number and your data will be destroyed.

What will happen with my data?

It is hoped the findings from this research will be published in an academic journal. If you are also interested, a copy of the final report will also be sent to you. This research is completely independent of your school and academic progress. Please do not hesitate to contact me should you have any further questions about the study.

Concerns and Complaints

If you have any concerns about any aspect of the study or you have a complaint, in the first instance please contact the principal investigator of the project, Iyunade Onisile, using the contact details below. If are still concerned, you think your complaint has not been addressed

to your satisfaction or you feel that you cannot approach the principal investigator, please contact the departmental Director of Research in the department responsible for this project, Professor Camille Cronin camille.cronin@essex.ac.uk. If you are still not satisfied, please contact the University's Research Governance and Planning Manager, Sarah Manning-Press (e-mail: sarahm@essex.ac.uk).

Name of the Researcher/Research Team Members

Iyunade (Lead Researcher/Trainee Clinical Psychologist) io23792@essex.ac.uk

Esther Ariyo (Co-Lead Researcher/University lecturer) esther.ariyo@essex.ac.uk

Danny Taggart (Co-Lead Researcher/Clinical Psychologist/Senior Lecturer)
dtaggart@essex.ac.uk

Lead Researcher

Iyunade Onisile

Doctor of Clinical Psychology, Doctorate Programme

University of Essex

CO4 3SQ

A copy of the consent form and the participant information sheet should be kept by the research participant.
Signed consent forms will be stored securely by the researcher.

Appendix E: Participant Consent Form for individual interviews and focus group discussion



Participant consent form – Individual interview

A qualitative study exploring Black students' relationship to reporting racism in Education settings

Version number & date: Version 1, 28/01/2024

Research ethics approval number:

Name of the researcher(s): Iyunade Onisile, Esther Ariyo and Danny Taggart.

Please initial box

- | | |
|--|----------------------|
| 1. I confirm that I have read and have understood the information sheet dated for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. | <input type="text"/> |
| 2. I understand that taking part in the study involves an online or face-to-face individual interview which will be audio recorded. | <input type="text"/> |
| 3. I understand that I am required to complete a list of demographic questions prior to taking part in this study. | <input type="text"/> |
| 4. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to stop taking part and can withdraw from the study at any time without giving any reason and without my rights being affected. | <input type="text"/> |
| 5. Once the interview has been completed, anonymised and transcribed, I understand that I will no longer be able to request access to or withdraw of the information I provide. | <input type="text"/> |
| 6. I understand that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded. However, if I disclose information which raises concerns over the safety of myself or others, I understand that the researcher may be | <input type="text"/> |

required to disclose some of my confidential information to an appropriate health professional.

7. I understand that any views expressed by participants during the interview are strictly confidential and are not to be talked about outside of the interview. ☐
8. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my fully anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research. ☐
9. I understand that the information I provide will be held securely on the University of Essex server. It will be anonymised and in line with data protection requirements and will only be accessed by researchers approved by the university. ☐
10. I understand that signed consent forms, audio-recorded consent and the interview transcripts will be retained for 10 years by the University of Essex. ☐
11. I agree to take part in the above study. ☐

Participant name

Date

Signature

Name of person taking consent

Date

Signature

Lead Student Researcher

Iyunade Onisile

Doctorate of Clinical Psychology, Doctorate Programme

University of Essex

CO4 3SQ

Io23792@Essex.ac.uk



Participant consent form - Focus groups

**A qualitative study exploring Black students' relationship to reporting racism in
Education settings**

Version number & date: Version 1, 28/01/2024

Research ethics approval number:

Name of the researcher(s): Iyunade Onisile, Esther Ariyo and Danny Taggart.

Please initial box

12. I confirm that I have read and have understood the information sheet dated for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

13. I understand that taking part in the study involves a face-to-face focus group which will be audio recorded.

14. I understand that I am required to complete a list of demographic questions prior to taking part in this study.

15. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to stop taking part and can withdraw from the study at any time without giving any reason and without my rights being affected.

16. Once the focus group has been completed and the focus group discussion has been anonymised and transcribed, I understand that I will no longer be able to request access to or withdraw of the information I provide.

17. I understand that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded. However, if I disclose information which raises concerns over the safety of myself or others, I understand that the researcher may be required to disclose some of my confidential information to an appropriate health professional.

18. I understand that any views expressed by participants during the focus group are strictly confidential and are not to be talked about outside of the focus group. ☐
19. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my fully anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research. ☐
20. I understand that the information I provide will be held securely on the University of Essex server. It will be anonymised and in line with data protection requirements and will only be accessed by researchers approved by the university. ☐
21. I understand that signed consent forms, audio-recorded consent and the interview transcripts will be retained for 10 years by the University of Essex. ☐
22. I agree to take part in the above study. ☐

_____	_____	_____
Participant name	Date	Signature

_____	_____	_____
Name of person taking consent	Date	Signature

Lead Student Researcher

Iyunade Onisile

Doctorate of Clinical Psychology, Doctorate Programme

University of Essex

CO4 3SQ

Io23792@Essex.ac.uk

Appendix F: Parent Consent Form for focus group discussion and interviews



Parental consent form - Individual interviews

A qualitative study exploring Black students' relationship to reporting racism in Education settings

Version number & date: Version 1, 28/01/2024

Research ethics approval number: ETH2324-0963

Name of the researcher(s): Iyunade Onisile, Esther Ariyo and Danny Taggart.

Please initial box

23. I confirm that I have read and have understood the information sheet dated for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

24. I understand that taking part in the study involves a face-to-face or online individual interview which will be audio recorded.

25. I understand that I am required to complete a list of demographic questions prior to taking part in this study.

26. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to stop taking part and can withdraw from the study at any time without giving any reason and without my rights being affected.

27. Once the individual interview has been completed and the interview has been anonymised and transcribed, I understand that I will no longer be able to request access to or withdraw of the information I provide.

28. I understand that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded. However, if I disclose information which raises concerns over the safety of myself or others, I understand that the researcher may be required to disclose some of my confidential information to an appropriate health professional.

29. I understand that any views expressed by participants during the interview are strictly confidential and are not to be talked about outside of the interview.

☐

30. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my fully anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.

☐

31. I understand that the information I provide will be held securely on the University of Essex server. It will be anonymised and in line with data protection requirements and will only be accessed by researchers approved by the university.

☐

32. I understand that signed consent forms, audio-recorded consent and the interview transcripts will be retained for 10 years by the University of Essex.

☐

33. I agree to take part in the above study.

☐

Participant name

Date

Signature

Parent name

Date

Signature

Name of person taking consent

Date

Signature

Lead Student Researcher

Iyunade Onisile

Doctorate of Clinical Psychology, Doctorate Programme

University of Essex

CO4 3SQ

Io23792@Essex.ac.uk



Participant/Parental consent form - Focus groups

**A qualitative study exploring Black students' relationship to reporting racism in
Education settings**

Version number & date: Version 1, 28/01/2024

Research ethics approval number:

Name of the researcher(s): Iyunade Onisile, Esther Ariyo and Danny Taggart.

Please initial box

34. I confirm that I have read and have understood the information sheet dated for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

35. I understand that taking part in the study involves a face-to-face focus group which will be audio recorded.

36. I understand that I am required to complete a list of demographic questions prior to taking part in this study.

37. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to stop taking part and can withdraw from the study at any time without giving any reason and without my rights being affected.

38. Once the focus group has been completed and the focus group discussion has been anonymised and transcribed, I understand that I will no longer be able to request access to or withdraw of the information I provide.

39. I understand that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded. However, if I disclose information which raises concerns over the safety of myself or others, I understand that the researcher may be required to disclose some of my confidential information to an appropriate health professional.

40. I understand that any views expressed by participants during the focus group are strictly confidential and are not to be talked about outside of the focus group.

☐

41. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my fully anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.

☐

42. I understand that the information I provide will be held securely on the University of Essex server. It will be anonymised and in line with data protection requirements and will only be accessed by researchers approved by the university.

☐

43. I understand that signed consent forms, audio-recorded consent and the interview transcripts will be retained for 10 years by the University of Essex.

☐

44. I agree to take part in the above study.

☐

Participant name

Date

Signature

Parent name

Date

Signature

Name of person taking consent

Date

Signature

Lead Student Researcher

Iyunade Onisile

Doctorate of Clinical Psychology, Doctorate Programme

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Appendix G: 15-Point Quality RTA Checklist (Braun & Clark, 2006)

Process	No.	Criteria
Transcription	1	All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were reviewed against the audio recordings to confirm accuracy and completeness.
	2	All interviews were systematically coded in NVivo, with equal attention given to each data.
Coding	3	Coding was applied across the entire dataset before theme construction, ensuring patterns reflect shared meaning.
	4	Coded data were organised within Excel under candidate themes to ensure comprehensive inclusion.
	5	Candidate themes were reviewed against the original dataset.
	6	Themes were refined to ensure internal consistency and conceptual distinction from one another.
Analysis	7	Analysis moved beyond semantic description to interpret relational, systemic and contextual meanings.
	8	Data extracts are embedded within analytic commentary to evidence interpretative claims.
	9	Themes are presented in a coherent narrative aligned with the research question and theoretical framework.
	10	A balanced integration of analytic commentary and illustrative data extracts is maintained.
Overall	11	Sufficient time was dedicated to all stages of analysis.
Written Report	12	The epistemological assumptions and specific analytic approach are clearly described.
	13	The methodological claims are consistent with the procedures demonstrated.
	14	The conceptual framing and language reflect the study's reflexive epistemological positioning.
	15	Themes are presented as the product of reflexive engagement rather than as emerging from the data.

Appendix H: Example Transcript with Initial Codes

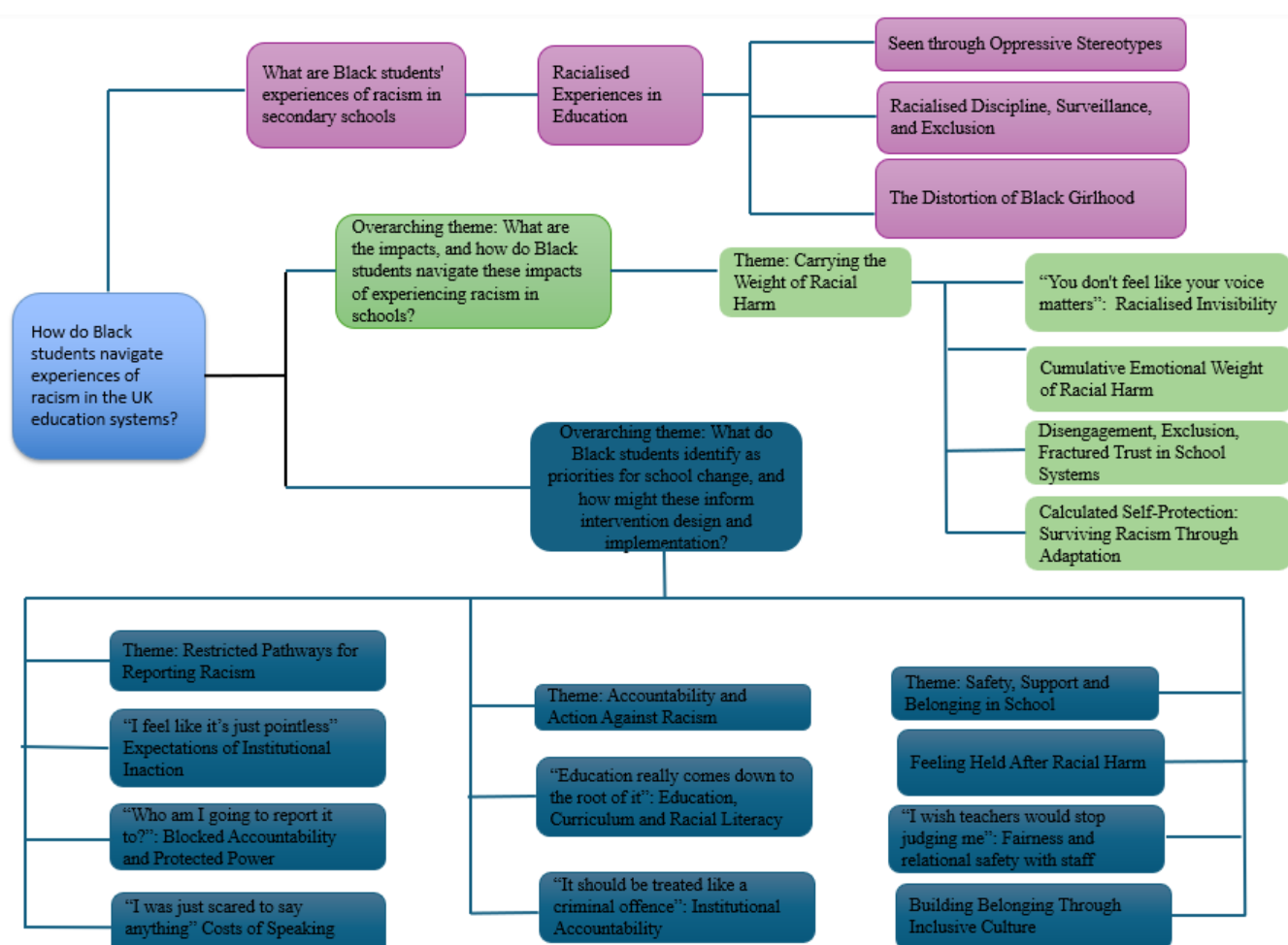
Describing his experience of racism as being “different” – racism doesn’t show up in just one way. Something about microaggression feels different to this young person. Then he goes on to describe Black boys who were simply being loud whilst sitting on a table at lunch time, not only being physically separated from each other but also being removed to a separate room. Racialised physical segregation. Institutional normalisation of grouping.	10:53 mins I guess my experience is sort of different. It's never been a thing for the most part, someone coming up to me and saying the N word or being constantly bullied because I'm black, but it's very much microaggressions and seeing the impact within my community. For example, I remember in year seven, I think it was. Or the year before I came actually to my high school. There was a group of black boys that was sitting on a table. And they had them because they were too loud. They got removed to a separate room. They had their own room at lunch to reduce the noise, which was weird. And then a group of my friends. And when we were eventually in the school, we got, I think, the head teacher came over to us and said something like the black table or something like that, which was really weird. But I think I've also had experiences of the N word being said around me, for example, the really popular book. What was it? Yeah, of mice and men. And then the teacher says the N word, and everyone has that experience. And then teachers don't really do the best to mitigate the situation or handle it in the best way.	The head teacher referring to a table as the Black table – racialised grouping and authority reproducing racial categories
Narrative structure generating early in the interview: experience – impact – proposed solution. Recurring analytic pattern across the dataset.	13:14 mins Yes, it's about comfortability. I think as a child, it's important that you feel comfortable in the areas that you're in, because that enables you to thrive. If you don't feel comfortable, you're not going to be able to access a lesson as well, and things of that sort. So, I think it's been minor things like that where it's made me less comfortable and less outgoing in terms of connecting with the actual material that I'm supposed to be learning, whether it's English or the maths, whatever it is. 13:56 mins It comes down to you, education and really educating everyone on the impact of where the impact of the way we treat each other. And I think it's done in such a 1-dimensional way in today's world, where it's like bullying is wrong, and this is what bullying is, and that's it. I think it really needs to be focused, like here's, like I think PSHE is a big part of schools nowadays, and I think it's important that we have conversations like this, is what race is. This is why the impact. Of this word, actually, is what it is. I think a lot of people don't know what the N word comes from. And I think education really comes down to the root of it all.	“Everybody has that experience” - several participants in this study have mentioned this book, and teachers using this word. • Normalisation of slur use. • Institutional minimisation. • Impact on academic engagement – racism constraining engagement • Comfort as a precondition for learning. • Discomfort as barrier to participation. He is giving insight into how racism is currently handled in school culture, it's often merged under the anti-bullying policy rather than being a standalone policy.

BLACK STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF NAVIGATING RACISM IN UK SCHOOLS

Appendix I: Stage 3 Analysis – Participant's themes

[illegible]

Appendix J: Stage 4 Analysis – Initial Refined Themes



Appendix K: Undergraduate Information Sheet



Independent coders information sheet

Project Title: A Qualitative exploration of Black Students' Experiences of navigating Racism in UK Education systems

Who is the researcher?

My name is Iyunade Onisile, and I am a Trainee Clinical Psychologist at The University of Essex. This research is being conducted as part of my Doctorate in Clinical Psychology. I am being supervised by Esther Ariyo and Danny Taggart. I would like to invite you to take part in the data analysis of this research study. Before you decide whether to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

The purpose of the study

This research aims to conduct a study exploring Black students' relationship to reporting school-based racism to formal reporting channels of information. The study also aims to provide insight to educators and those in positions of power on how to provide positive racial environments in schools whereby students feel safe to report racial experiences. The study will be considered in the context of wider systemic structures that further oppress Black people, and how higher education researchers and policymakers can address the findings.

What will the study entail?

The study will consist of focus group discussions which will take place at the participant's location of recruitment (school, local community centres and local church). The focus group discussions will be audio-recorded, to aid with data analysis at a later stage. The data will be anonymously stored on a computer. The participants will be given a unique participant number.

How will the independent coders be involved?

In the collaborative effort of research co-production, two to three Black undergraduate psychology students will actively participate in the data analysis. The current researcher

proposes three meetings between the researcher and the psychology undergraduate: the first is for introducing the research, and the second and third meetings are for jointly analysing the gathered data. The meetings will take place either virtually on Microsoft Teams or in person at the University of Essex, depending on the independent coder's preferences. The data will be anonymised using pseudonyms before the meeting with the undergraduate coders. The researcher will provide training to the undergraduates on the analysis method, and resources will be sent to help them improve their skills. Undergraduate students involved in the co-production process will be offered ongoing mentorship following their participation. This support will include, but not be limited to, the provision of a reference outlining their contribution to the project and mentorship opportunities to support their career development within the field of psychology.

Concerns and Complaints

If you have any concerns about any aspect of the study or a complaint, please contact the principal investigator of the project, Iyunade Onisile, using the contact details below in the first instance. If you are still concerned, you think your complaint has not been addressed to your satisfaction or you feel that you cannot approach the principal investigator, please contact the departmental Director of Research in the department responsible for this project, Professor Camille Cronin camille.cronin@essex.ac.uk. If you are still not satisfied, please contact the University's Research Governance and Planning Manager, Sarah Manning-Press (e-mail sarahm@essex.ac.uk).

Name of the Researcher/Research Team Members

Iyunade (Lead Researcher/Trainee Clinical Psychologist) io23792@essex.ac.uk

Esther Ariyo (Co-Lead Researcher/University lecturer) esther.ariyo@essex.ac.uk

Danny Taggart (Co-Lead Researcher/Clinical Psychologist/Senior Lecturer)
dtaggart@essex.ac.uk

Lead Researcher

Iyunade Onisile

Doctor of Clinical Psychology, Doctorate Programme

University of Essex

CO4 3SQ

Appendix L: Excerpts from meeting with the undergraduates

Undergraduate 1

Development of Theme 1, Subtheme 1 Through Collaborative Meaning-Making

Main Theme 1

“Education really comes down to the root of it”: Education as a site of harm and change

Subtheme 1

Revised Title: Seen Through Oppressive Stereotypes

Original Title: Pathologised and Threatening Stereotypes

Rationale for Title Change

During the collaborative analytic meetings, one undergraduate reflected that she did not believe the phrase *“threatening stereotypes”* accurately captured the extracts. While the intention behind the label was to reflect how Black students were positioned as dangerous or criminalised within educational spaces, she highlighted that the wording could be misinterpreted.

Specifically, she noted that the phrase might read as though Black students were being “threatening”, rather than conveying that these stereotypes were harmful and oppressive toward them.

Extract from Collaborative Meeting

“Yeah, 'cause reading this was very much people feeling like it was criminalised... If some of the kids said like they had an issue or a past with maybe teachers telling them that they will end up in jail or ‘let me check that you don't have a knife in your bag’... then I would probably say that would have definitely matched to me with the word ‘threatening stereotypes’.”

Here, she distinguishes between explicit criminalisation (e.g., assumptions about weapons or incarceration) and her own experience, suggesting that “threatening stereotypes” would be appropriate in contexts where danger and criminality were overtly projected.

She continued:

“From my perspective... when I was told that my White friend shouldn't hang out with me because... I was gonna influence my friends to drink and do drugs, that was more harmful to me than I would say threatening... I think it's just finding a more sophisticated word for the word harmful. For example, oppressive would be nice.”

Analytic Interpretation

Her reflections illuminated an important semantic and epistemic distinction:

- The term “*threatening stereotypes*” risks centring the construction of Black students as threatening.
- Her lived experience foregrounded the harmful impact of being positioned through deficit assumptions.
- She explicitly proposed “oppressive” as a term that better captured the structural and relational harm embedded in these experiences.

The shift from “*Pathologised and Threatening Stereotypes*” to “*Seen Through Oppressive Stereotypes*” therefore reflects:

- A move away from language that may unintentionally reproduce the stereotype.
- Greater alignment with participants’ meaning-making.
- Clearer emphasis on the oppressive system through which students were viewed, rather than on the content of the stereotype itself.

This revision demonstrates the co-constructed nature of the analysis and the importance of language in avoiding the reproduction of harm within research.

Undergraduate 2

Development of Theme 1, Subtheme 2

The Distortion of Black Girlhood

In discussing the subtheme title, she reflected:

“When you say distortion of girlhood... I thought it sounds morbid, but I think that’s exactly what it is.”

This acknowledgement reinforced the analytic framing that Black girls' childhood experiences are reshaped by racialised adultification and masculinisation.

She further explained:

“Maybe a girl might not be having the best day... if it's a white girl, oh she's just having a bad day. But if it's a black girl... she's got an attitude... she's aggressive.”

Here, she identifies differential emotional interpretation. Black girls are denied a normative emotional range. Anger, sadness, or withdrawal are racialised as aggression rather than contextualised distress.

She added:

“Girls are allowed to be angry... and if they are aggressive, maybe let's get to the root cause.”

This reflects the denial of complexity afforded to Black girls. Emotional expression becomes moralised rather than understood relationally or contextually.

The conversation expanded to the role of media representations:

“It starts in the classroom, but it doesn't finish there... even in school they know that in the media, that's how women are presented.”

She referenced the masculinisation of dark-skinned women, including public discourse surrounding Cynthia Erivo, and explained how social media trends such as “UK beasts” (UKBs) were used to dehumanise Black women online. This term was used by the participants.

“They were labelling black women UKBs... and it was just fuelling racism and hate.”

This illustrates how racialised and gendered stereotypes circulate beyond school and are re-imported into educational spaces. The classroom is therefore not an isolated site, but one that reflects wider cultural narratives.

Appendix M: Excerpts from Reflexive Log

10th Jan 2025: First thesis interview

Taking off my clinical hat and putting on my research hat, whilst still wearing clinical goggles, required careful attention. I had to ensure that my curiosity remained anchored to the research focus. For example, when my first interviewee spoke about not feeling heard by both parents and school, I had to be mindful to stay curious about the school context rather than expanding clinically into family dynamics. She spoke about her parents preparing her for the discrimination she experienced in school by telling her she had to work twice as hard as her peers. This strongly resonated with me. Growing up as a Black child, I received similar messages. Families who have experienced racism often feel they cannot fully protect their children from it, so they prepare them in the only way they feel they can, by emphasising effort and achievement. There is an awareness of the uneven playing field and of being judged more harshly, so the message becomes clear: work twice as hard to be recognised at the same level.

Reaching the stage of conducting my first interview felt like a huge milestone, almost a year after receiving ethical approval. The lack of response from schools, and at times being told that racism “is not a problem here,” had initially made me question whether I had chosen the right research topic. However, listening to this first interview reassured me of the importance of this work. These voices and stories need to be heard.

1st Feb 2025

I completed my second interview today and felt immense pride in this young person and the resilience he demonstrated in the face of adversity. The interview reinforced how important this research is. Experiences of racism described in the literature across countries were echoed here; these are not isolated incidents.

This interview reminded me how imperative it is that I do the best I can to ensure this generation is protected from experiences they should never have to endure. It also made me realise how deeply I care about the younger generation, as this is the second piece of research targeted at this generation that I have conducted in the last two years. This interview also influenced my methodological approach. In subsequent interviews, I found myself asking more explicitly about coping strategies and protective buffers. I became curious about why some young people disengage to the point of exclusion, while others remain within mainstream education. This was not about locating resilience solely within the individual, but about

understanding the relational and structural factors that shape different trajectories. It highlighted the importance of examining how power, access to support, relational scaffolding and social determinants operate within school contexts. Importantly, this conversation made me realise the significance of whose voices may be absent from my research. The young people participating in this study so far are, by definition, those still connected to mainstream education. I started to think about how I could capture the voices of those excluded from mainstream education and which organisations would be best to reach out to.

May 2025: First focus group discussion

My heart broke listening to the stigma and discrimination these young people described. Part of me had hoped, perhaps unrealistically, that they might have been shielded from the racial climate of wider society. But they know. They are aware. They see it. They live it.

Throughout data collection, I have oscillated between feeling purposeful and feeling that I am missing key voices, particularly those excluded from mainstream education or caught within the school-to-prison pipeline. It has been difficult to sit with the reality that my research has not been accessible to them. I find myself wondering what else has been systemically inaccessible in their lives.

I also now wish I had involved Black students in shaping the interview questions and research direction earlier, rather than primarily in analysis. This feels like an important learning about co-production.

September 2025: Pedagogy of the oppressed'

Reading Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire profoundly impacted my thinking. Freire argues that education is never neutral, it either domesticates or liberates. It is inherently political.

My immediate reaction was agreement. I want my research to co-create knowledge with young people about the changes they want to see. However, I also recognise that my thesis itself is a form of education for readers. While I hope it contributes to meaningful implementation within schools, I cannot force change.

This tension leaves me reflecting on the importance of “calling people in” rather than calling people out. My research must invite engagement and reflection, not defensiveness. Change must be co-created with both young people and school staff.

November 2025: Data analysis

During analysis, I had to guard against gravitating towards quotes that aligned with my own assumptions or lived experience. I intentionally practised curiosity across the full dataset.

I felt deeply inspired by participants who described involvement in youth councils and political spaces. Some shared that the interview prompted reflection on integrating their lived experiences into activism. Their intelligence and awareness filled me with awe and sadness. I am saddened that they have had to develop such sophistication to make sense of racism so early in life.

I struggled significantly with the subthemes around reporting racism. The section initially felt fragmented and disorganised. I came to understand this not as an analytic failure, but as reflective of the complexity participants described, reporting racism is layered, emotionally loaded, and institutionally complicated. The “messiness” of early drafts mirrored their experience of navigating systems that feel unsafe.

A participant described growing up in economic disadvantage in one of the most deprived areas in the UK, yet receiving an unconditional offer from a prestigious university. This disrupted the deficit narratives often embedded in discussions of racism. I became increasingly aware of my responsibility to ensure that my analysis does not position these young people solely as victims, nor romanticise resilience in ways that obscure structural harm.

This reflexive awareness directly influenced how I structured subthemes, particularly in collaboration with my supervisors. We worked to ensure that the analysis captured participants as both harmed by systems of power and actively resisting and reshaping these very systems. Attending explicitly to identity and power, both within educational systems and within the research relationship, strengthened the depth and integrity of the analytic process.

Jan 2025: Feedback from supervisors

Receiving feedback that my results section was too descriptive did not surprise me. I have often been asked whether conducting this research as the only Black person in my cohort impacts me negatively. I usually say no, but I recognise this may reflect my avoidance strategy.

To move beyond description, I had to sit more deeply with the data, the pain, the hurt, the weight of participants' stories. Engaging interpretatively required emotional labour. It also required confronting a deeper fear: what if this research changes nothing?

The difficulty was not only sitting with the data, but with the possibility of hopelessness. As a Black researcher, part of me questions whether this work can meaningfully dent a systemic issue spanning generations. Yet I remind myself that progress is cumulative. If those before us had believed change was impossible, we would not be where we are today. Even small shifts matter.

20th Feb 2026: Embedding Anti-racism in School Culture conference

Attending the conference helped me see the issue more from the teachers' perspective. Up until now, my analytic focus has understandably centred on the harm experienced by young people. However, hearing teachers speak openly about their uncertainty made me realise that the gap between anti-racist intention and implementation is experienced on both sides. Students experience silence and inconsistency as harm, while teachers experience complexity and ambiguity as paralysis. This has begun to shape how I am thinking about the discussion section of my thesis, particularly around implementation, not just recommendation.

I really liked the slide with the "interruptions for microaggressions" that teachers could keep on their lanyards. It felt practical. Not abstract theory, but something tangible that could support teachers in the moment. This resonated with what my participants had described; they were not necessarily asking for dramatic reform, but for adults to respond consistently and confidently. The practicality of that tool made me reflect on the difference between knowing racism is wrong and knowing what to say when it happens.

One question that stood out during the conference was: how do you fit all of this in without moving away from statutory GCSE learning? Essentially, how do we "fit" Black history or anti-racism into the curriculum? The response was that this content can sit within KS3 topics such as WWII or the Industrial Revolution by examining multiple perspectives and the differential impact on groups felt important. It challenges the idea that anti-racist education is an "add-on" rather than already embedded within historical narratives. Someone also mentioned the GCSE migration module, which further disrupted the assumption that the curriculum is fixed and unchangeable. This made me reflect on how often structural constraints are perceived as immovable, when sometimes the issue is under-utilisation rather than absence.

The teachers' honesty was particularly striking. Many openly admitted they do not feel equipped. Some said the complexity of racism leads them to avoid it. There is no clear policy, no shared language, no guidance. Some even asked for scripts, exact wording they could use, which speaks to the anxiety and fear of "getting it wrong." Hearing this complicated my earlier

assumptions. It is easy, from a student-centred lens, to interpret silence as indifference. The conference helped me see that silence can also be a product of uncertainty and lack of structural support.

There was strong emphasis on policy clarity: explicitly outlining how staff should respond, using PREVENT proportionately where appropriate, engaging families carefully, and ensuring shared language across staff teams. One point that stayed with me was: normalise uncertainty, but do not normalise silence. Silence communicates that behaviour is acceptable. That distinction felt powerful and directly relevant to my findings, where participants repeatedly described racism being minimised or ignored.

The message that schools cannot control what happens in homes or communities, but can define who they are, “if you send your child to this school, this is who we are”, also resonated. Racism should be treated as seriously as other extremist views, with expectations applying equally to staff and students. A teacher’s suggestion of pairing punishment with reflective anti-racist education, such as writing reflective essays alongside consequences, immediately connected with what my participants had asked for: accountability alongside education, not one without the other.

The distinction between an action plan and an implementation plan felt particularly useful. An implementation plan clearly outlines the problem, the intervention, implementation strategies, implementation outcomes, and final outcomes. It is structured and measurable. This framework aligns closely with what I hope my research can contribute, not simply identifying harm, but informing structured, realistic change.

Overall, the conference reinforced that while racism in schools causes real harm, the gap in response is not always rooted in unwillingness. Sometimes it is paralysis in the absence of clear guidance, shared language and leadership reassurance. This insight will shape my discussion section, ensuring that implications attend not only to what schools should do, but to what they need in order to feel able to do it.

Appendix N: Ethical Approval



25/04/2024

Miss Iyunade Onisile

Health and Social Care

University of Essex

Dear Iyunade,

Ethics Committee Decision

Application: ETH2324-0963

I am pleased to inform you that the research proposal entitled "Qualitative study exploring Black students' relationship to reporting racism in Education settings" has been reviewed on behalf of the Ethics Sub Committee 1, and, based on the information provided, it has been awarded a favourable opinion.

The application was awarded a favourable opinion subject to the following **conditions**:

Extensions and Amendments:

If you propose to introduce an amendment to the research after approval or extend the duration of the study, an amendment should be submitted in ERAMS for further approval in advance of the expiry date listed in the ethics application form. Please note that it is not possible to make any amendments, including extending the duration of the study, once the expiry date has passed.

Covid-19:

Please note that the current Government guidelines in relation to Covid-19 must be adhered to and are subject to change and it is your responsibility to keep yourself informed and bear in mind the possibility of change when planning your research. You will be kept informed if there are any changes in the University guidelines.

Yours sincerely,

Alexandra Kaley

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Wivenhoe Park
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United Kingdom

T 01206 873333

www.essex.ac.uk

 @Uni_of_Essex

 /uniofessex

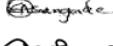
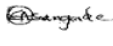
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Appendix O: Risk Assessment



File name:	Qualitative study exploring Black students' relationship to reporting racism in Education settings		
Risk assessment reference:	ETH2324-0963	Version number:	V1

Risk assessment

Description of activity/area being assessed	Focus group discussions exploring Black students' relationship to reporting racism in Education settings The research will involve: - Administrative data analysis - Focus group discussions with Black students		Location Interviews with participants will take place in schools, local community centres and churches in Essex.
Manager responsible	Dr Esther Ariyo Iyunade Onisile	Signature & date	 21/03/2024  21/03/2024
Assessed by (name & role)	Dr Esther Ariyo (PhD lecturer and supervisor)	Signature & assessment date	 21/03/2024

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1

Consequence	Catastrophic	Medium	High	Very High	Very high	Very High
	Major	Low	Medium	High	High	High
	Moderate	Very low	Low	Medium	Medium	High
	Minor	Very low	Low	Low	Medium	Medium
	Insignificant	Very low	Very low	Low	Low	Low
R = LxC		Very unlikely	Unlikely	Fairly likely	Likely	Very likely
Likelihood of hazardous event						

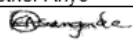
Hazard (H) hazardous event (HE) consequence (C)	Who might be harmed	Current controls	Current risk LxC=R	Additional controls needed to reduce risk	Residual risk LxC=R	Target Date	Date achieved
Study subject welfare. Participants may become emotional when reporting school-based experiences of racism. Deterioration in participant welfare and increased risk to their psychological safety.	Participants	Participants were given a participation information sheet with a full breakdown of what the study requires, preparing them. The researcher is aware of the study's requirements in protecting participants from psychological harm. The researcher will stop the focused groups or individual interviews if required and inform their supervisor immediately. Another adult will be present during the <u>face to face</u> focus groups (teachers, church youth leaders etc.). As schools, community groups and churches will have safeguarding procedures in place for the young people under their provision, these will be utilised as appropriate. Debriefing will be offered after the interview	Moderate X unlikely = Low		Moderate X unlikely = Low	Ongoing throughout the project	-

BLACK STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF NAVIGATING RACISM IN UK SCHOOLS

Hazard (H) hazardous event (HE) consequence (C)	Who might be harmed	Current controls	Current risk LxC=R	Additional controls needed to reduce risk	Residual risk LxC=R	Target Date	Date achieved
Researchers' and independent coders' welfare - The study researcher may encounter emotional fatigue or be triggered by memories of their own experiences of racism.		whether completed or not. Information will be provided on further available support from mental health support services. The researcher will be heavily supported by their supervisors. The researcher will support and signpost the independent coders appropriately when required.					

Add more rows if needed

Periodic Review

Review date:	21/03/2024				
Review by:	Esther Ariyo				
Signed:					

If there are changes, please save assessment as a new version and archive previous version.

Appendix P: Debrief document



Research ethics approval number: ETH2324- 0963

Researchers: Iyunade Onisile

Thank you for taking part in this study. Please do contact one or some of the mental health support services listed below if any further support and advice is required.

- If you require emergency help, please call 999
- If you are ill, you can contact your GP, or visit a Walk-In Centre or pharmacy.
Information and advice about NHS services is available at <https://www.nhs.uk/>. If you need help now, but it's not an emergency, visit <https://111.nhs.uk/> or call 111.
- You can text SHOUT to 85258 <https://giveusashout.org/> free of charge from any UK mobile network and get confidential advice and support straight to your mobile.
- You can call Samaritans if you need to talk or even if you feel you have nothing to say. There is always someone on the end of the line that is there for you.

Appendix Q: Table of Participant Pseudonyms

Interview/Focus group number	Pseudonym
1	Rachel
2	Kingston
3	Sandra
4	Oluwatosin
5	Ayo
6	Jessica
7	Kofi
8	Faith
9	Yemisi
12	Jasmine
13	Maya
13 (Focus group 1)	Naomi
14 (Focus group 1)	Elise
15 (Focus group 1)	Seun
15 (Focus group 1)	Caleb
16 (Focus group 2)	Elijah
17 (Focus group 2)	Theo
18 (Focus group 2)	Jaden
19 (Focus group 2)	Zion
20 (Focus group 2)	Josiah
21 (Focus group 2)	Malachi
22 (Focus group 2)	Kola

BLACK STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF NAVIGATING RACISM IN UK SCHOOLS

23 (Focus group 2)	Noah
24	Isaac
25	Bayo
26	Femi

Appendix R: Data Analysis Reflection Drawing

