Anna Freud
National Centre for
Children and Families

Anti-racism and mental health in schools: a briefing

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The Anna Freud Centre has been pioneering better mental health care for 70 years. We combine research and innovation, clinical practice, and training and dissemination to improve the quality, accessibility, and effectiveness of mental health provision for children and young people in the United Kingdom.

'As a former teacher, parent and author who passionately advocates for race equality, I am delighted to have collaborated with the Anna Freud Centre on this range of anti-racism and mental health resources for school staff. These resources will support and empower teachers and school leaders to understand, talk about, and address race and racism within the school environment. This, in turn, will support the mental health and wellbeing of our next generation, who are currently students - enabling them to thrive and reach their full potential.'

\-   **Hon. Stuart Lawrence** – Campaigner, Speaker, Author, Former teacher

Introduction

Racism has a detrimental impact on the lives of Black and racially minoritised young people, and when experienced, it affects their mental health and potential to thrive. Experiencing racism can have significant mental health consequences.

An overwhelming proportion of young Black people in the UK report to have witnessed racist language at school.[i] For any children and young people who are on the receiving end of racism, directly supporting them needs to be a priority. The same applies to school staff who have experienced racism in what is a predominantly white profession. In England, 85.7% of teachers are from a White British background.[ii]

School leaders and staff have a critical role to play in creating an anti-racist culture as part of their whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing. These resources are designed to help by providing school staff with a clearer understanding of how racism can impact mental health; by building their confidence to support the mental health of their Black and racially minoritised students; and by ensuring staff have practical tools and examples to hand to guide them through the process.

Anti-racism and mental health in schools is a suite of podcasts and downloadable resources , including staff training and policy templates. Alongside these materials, a free e-learning for school staff will complement the offer in April 2022, covering topics such as student voice, representation, and racial trauma. All of these outputs sit within the Anna Freud Centre's 5 Steps to mental health and wellbeing framework, as set out below, demonstrating that this work is integral to any whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing.

The DfE's recent guidance, *Political impartiality in schools*[iii] emphasises the important role that schools have in teaching their pupils that prejudice and other forms of discrimination are wrong and prohibited by law; and that racism should be challenged in schools. It also helps schools to understand what schools need to consider when teaching about political issues, using external agencies and in extra-curricular activities. None of our resources present a 'politically partisan' viewpoint, but they help to give ideas about diversifying curriculum, which can be achieved with commitment.

Collaborating with a range of experts

This project is a collaboration between experts in anti-racism, including the Hon. Stuart Lawrence (campaigner and speaker, former teacher) and BLAM UK (Black Learning Achievement and Mental Health) and the Anna Freud Centre. This has ensured that their wealth of knowledge, lived experience, and expertise have been weaved through all aspects of the project.

Young people's voices have informed the development of these resources from the outset, via the findings from our young people's survey and focus groups with our Young Champions and other youth groups, including Lynk Up Crew.

We have also closely worked with the Anna Freud Centre's Anti-Racism Working Group (ARWG) and Education Panel of senior leaders across the UK and have involved parent and carer representatives.

> *Teaching can be quite a stressful job. Teaching the subject of English, as a woman from a minority background, can pose a further set of unique challenges. However, these challenges are useful reminders as to why doing anti-racism work in schools is so important. Taking the time out to evaluate your current practices and policies is a necessary first step in reflecting on whether or not your curriculum is truly accessible, challenging and affirming for all students. The Anna Freud Centre's resources provide some clear guidance and best practice for schools and practitioners who want to build anti-racist school policy and curriculum.*
>
> -   **Wonu Adedoyin-Salau**, an Assistant Headteacher and Curriculum Leader of English – St Bonaventure's School

[i] YMCA (2020) *Young and Black: the young Black experience of institutional racism in the UK*. https://www.ymca.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ymca-young-and-black.pdf
[ii] UCL Institute of Education, UCL. *Making progress? Employment and retention of BAME teachers in England,* 2020. https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10117331/1/IOE_Report_BAME_Teachers.pdf
[iii] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/political-impartiality-in-schools

1)   Context: the impact of racism on mental health

There is evidence showing the extent to which racism currently impacts on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing, some of which is highlighted below:

- Research identified as part of our Emerging evidence: coronavirus and children and young people's mental health series suggests that the pandemic has had a disproportionate mental health impact on children and young people of colour. This may be related to a range of factors, including discrimination, institutional racism and health and economic inequalities, which make it harder to access support.[iv]

- In 2019, the YMCA found that young Black people[v] experiencing racial discrimination are likely to experience low self-esteem, and high levels of anxiety and depression.[vi] It reported that 95% of young Black people in the UK have heard or witnessed racist language at school.[vii]

- Mind commissioned a survey which found that 55% of young people from Black and British backgrounds experienced racism at school and 57% of young people from Mixed ethnic backgrounds experienced racism at school.[viii] The same survey found that 70% of young people who had experienced racism in school said this had affected their mental health.

- A literature review published in 2018 found that exposure to discrimination predicted worse mental health (for example, anxiety and depression symptoms) in 76% of the types of discrimination examined.[ix]

- The results of a 2019 mental health and wellbeing survey of 5,146 young people by Healthwatch Sutton found that young people from

racially minoritised groups report more of the following issues: discrimination (10%); peer pressure in school or college (10%); eating problems (19%); and exam pressure (57%).[x]

- A study published in 2019 that examined ethnic differences in referral routes to youth mental health services found that, compared to White British young people, Black young people and Mixed-race young people were more than twice as likely to be referred through social care or youth justice than through primary care.[xi]

2)   Meeting the challenge

Listening to young people

In autumn 2021, we conducted a survey of nearly 800 students and young people in the UK aged 13-20, from a wide range of racial backgrounds to learn more about their perspectives on racism and its impact on mental health.

The survey findings, both quantitative and qualitative, have strongly informed the development of the project, guiding the content and focus of the resources.

The key findings of the survey were:

- Survey respondents were asked whether they have ever discussed racism with staff in their school/college. Most young people (64%) answered 'Yes', but 36% had not.

- Students selected a number of issues which they felt were problems in their school/college, including: unconscious bias (59% of respondents), understanding the impact of racism on mental health

[iv] Jeffery, M., Lereya, T., Edbrooke-Childs, J., Deighton, J., Tait, N. & Cortina, M. A. (2021). *Emerging evidence (Issue 8): coronavirus and children and young people's mental health. Evidence Based Practice Unit.* https://www.annafreud.org/media/13988/emerging-evidence-issue-8.pdf

[v] The YMCA report defines Black people as those who identify with one or more of the following demographics: Black African, Black British, Black Caribbean, Mixed White and Black African and Mixed White and Black Caribbean.

[vi] Ibid.

[vii] Ibid.

[viii] Mind (2021). *Not making the grade: why our approach to mental health at secondary school is failing young people.* https://www.mind.org.uk/media/8852/not-making-the-grade.pdf.

[ix] Priest, N., Paradies, Y., Trenerry, B., Truong, M., Karlsen, S., Kelly, Y. (2013). *A systematic review of studies examining the relationship between reported racism and health and wellbeing for children and young people.* https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nihgov/23312306/

[x] Healthwatch Sutton (2019). *Young people's mental health and wellbeing survey report: January 2019.* https://moderngov.sutton.gov.uk/documents/s66648/7Bf%20FINAL%20Healthwatch%20Sutton%20Young%20Peoples%20Mental%20Health%20Wellbeing%20Survey%20Report%20January%202019.pdf.

[xi] Edbrooke-Childs, J. & Patalay, P. (2019). *Ethnic differences in referral routes to youth mental health services.* Journal of the American Academy and Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. 58(3), 368–375. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2018.07.906

(56% of respondents), and racist language (47% of respondents).

- When asked about their thoughts on the relationship between racism and mental health, most young people (88%) answered that racism affects mental health 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot'. Only 2% answered 'not at all'.

- Only 26% of respondents said that their teachers/tutors understand the negative impact of racism on mental health 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot', while 35% said they understand it 'a little' or 'not at all'. When asked what staff could do to show their commitment to being an anti-racist setting, the answers were wide ranging. The most common theme was the need for firmer sanctions for using racist language or behaviour in school.

- Also mentioned was the need for schools to show they care about the issue and to 'call out' racism when it happens. Students also had positive ideas for strategies which schools could adopt, including support to individual students, zero tolerance policies, and awareness-raising activities. Many raised the importance of education about racism and its effect on people.

> *I think that things could greatly improve if there was a safe space for minorities to voice their opinions, and if teachers could structure the way they respond to racism around the feedback received .*
>
> – **Student**

3)   A whole-school approach to anti-racism

Our 5 Steps to mental health and wellbeing framework aims to equip school leaders and staff to create a culture in their setting that supports emotional wellbeing and resilience.

Written by teachers and school leaders with guidance from mental health experts, this evidence-based framework helps schools and colleges to create their own whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing.

Anti-racism needs to be considered as part of this whole-school approach to mental health to ensure that the wellbeing of every child and young person is prioritised. The suite of resources that we have created sit within the 5 Steps: **Leading Change, Working Together, Understanding Need, Promoting Wellbeing** and **Supporting Staff**.

Step 1: Leading Change

Governors and senior leaders in schools must define the culture and ethos in their setting. Leading Change is about senior school leaders ensuring that there are strong foundations for a whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing.

What young people told us:

- *[When asked what staff could do to show their commitment to being an anti-racist setting] 'Making race and diversity issues part of the curriculum ... helping to provide safe places where people can talk and get advice ... more books about ethnic minority people and cultures and by ethnically diverse authors should be made available and be promoted.'*
- *'Schools shouldn't worry about "looking" anti-racist. They should BE anti-racist.'*
- *'[Schools should] have more open discussions about it [racism] and amplify minority voices.'*

Key tips for staff from the resources:

- Review your school policies to ensure that they are equitable and do not inadvertently discriminate against certain minoritised groups.

- Set up a working group looking at diversifying the curriculum and ensuring it is representative of your student population (see case study from St Bonaventure's School in our resource on representation).

- Work in partnership – reach out to other schools in your area who are actively working to improve in this area.

- Clearly communicate your plans to staff and to parents and carers, and students too where appropriate.

Step 2: Working Together

This step relates to working in partnership across the whole school community, bringing together staff, students, parents and carers, and reaching out to organisations and stakeholders that can support you.

What young people told us:

- *'I think that things could greatly improve if there was a safe space for minorities to voice their opinions, and if teachers could structure the way they respond to racism around the feedback received.'*
- *'Listen. Listen to ethnic minorities … Bring in parents, if they're willing to speak on their issues, in front of the other parents. Allow "workshops" of some sort where the students can interact with each other in a real, safe and educational environment.'*
- *'Celebrate and show appreciation for our happy occasions and celebrations, e.g Eid for Muslims.'*

Key tips for staff from the resources:

- Involve students, parents and carers, teachers, support staff, school

leaders and governors in any anti-racism work.

- Consider how your setting can put on cultural exchange activities in a sensitive and appropriate way, so that you can bring the school and wider community together.

- Encourage student voice. Gather responses from students in a variety of ways to understand what they see as the current issues in your school, how they want to be supported, and what they think their school can do to become anti-racist.

- Working together should be a continuous process, with open dialogue and feedback loops.

Step 3: Understanding Need

Understanding Need is about assessing and meeting the mental health needs of students, identifying those who may be at risk, and developing and implementing interventions for these students.

What young people told us:

- *'The lack of understanding of what is considered racist. As, if it's not blatant racism, many people don't consider it racist. It will be played off as a misunderstanding when clearly that's not what it was.'*
- *'Make the teachers carry out some form of training about racism and unconscious biases … Also have lessons on racism/colourism with the students, so they all understand what is considered racist.'*
- *'My school only handles blatant racism, not backhanded comments or social media.'*

Key tips for staff from the resources:

- If you do any survey with students, be clear about the reasons you are doing it and how it will be used.

- Some staff may find discussing these issues challenging. Provide support where you can and emphasise that this work is not intended

to make staff feel guilty.

- Seek to better understand the scope and impact of microaggressions that can occur in day-to-day life.

- If you hear what you consider to be a microaggression from a student, it's important to:
  - challenge the behaviour or attitude, rather than the student themselves (because they may not have done it on purpose)
  - emphasise that the impact of what was said is more important than the intent behind it
  - ask students to rephrase or rethink their comments
  - whenever possible, challenge stereotypes in the moment and with accurate information

Step 4: Promoting Wellbeing

The fourth step, Promoting Wellbeing, looks at integrating mental health and wellbeing across the whole school curriculum.

What young people told us:

- *'More classes and lessons about black history that isn't just slavery, and on black history month.'*
- *'Stop reading books that use racist language e.g Of Mice and Men and allowing students to read it [aloud].'*
- *'Let students know that they can speak to a teacher in a completely non-judgemental/unbiased manner when they feel uncomfortable about something that has been said or happened.'*

Key tips for staff from the resources:

- Be conscious that just because students haven't reported racist incidents, it doesn't mean they aren't happening at your school.

- Ask staff to challenge discriminatory attitudes and behaviours – no more 'it's just banter'.

- Set up an anti-racism curriculum working group. This can help to ensure the work is being done across the school and not just in your individual lessons.

- There are actions that teachers can take to prevent or lessen the traumatic impact of some curriculum topics at an individual classroom level, like creating a class contract or guidelines, notifying students and parents and carers in advance, and holding debrief sessions post-lesson.

Step 5: Supporting Staff

Supporting the wellbeing of school staff is the foundation of any whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing.

What young people told us:

- *'people aren't confident to talk about it'*
- *'Learning about racism should be a part of the teacher training etc.'*
- *'I believe people are afraid to recognise their "white privilege" and understand that they may never experience the racism that is everywhere.'*

Key tips for staff from the resources:

- Senior leadership should look closely at staff demographics and discuss ways to improve diverse hiring practices.

- Conduct an anonymous staff wellbeing survey which could help to find out about the needs of racially minoritised staff in the school.

- Ensure that calendar events like Black History Month, or celebrating different religious or cultural days, are the responsibility of a group of staff and not just one person.

Conclusion

For those children and young people who are on the receiving end of racism or discrimination, directly supporting their wellbeing is a priority. The mental health of students is everyone in the school community's responsibility, and school leaders, including the new Senior Mental Health Leads, have a key role in leading this work.

More widely, young people have told us they want to see racism tackled openly, not just when racist incidents occur. They want to feel that the voices and experiences of every student are valued and listened to and used to influence whole-school change.

Talking about racism can feel challenging, and these conversations can often be difficult. It requires leadership, collaboration, commitment and a determination to listen – in particular, to the views and insights of those who have experienced racism first-hand.

Committing to building an anti-racist school culture will contribute to better wellbeing and mental health for racially minoritised students and staff, and will contribute to a stronger, more supportive whole-school community. It is a continuous process of learning and development, and should be a crucial part of any whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing.

March 2022

Note on language

With input from our Anti-Racism Working Group, we have discussed how to carefully and consciously use language in addressing issues relating to race and ethnicity.

We use the term racially minoritised to recognise that being considered a 'minority' based on one's 'race' is shaped by processes of power and is dependent on context.

However, we acknowledge that any umbrella term can be flattening. Where possible we have used the terms individuals identify with, or we have used more specific categories to describe groups where these are provided in source literature such as reports and research papers. The term 'global majority' is gaining some prominence as an alternative to umbrella terms like 'minoritised ethnic groups'.

Our anti-racism resources include verbatim quotes from school students who took part in a survey. The quotes reflect the language used by respondents, which sometimes differs from the terminology we use. Similarly, when referencing research by other organisations, the terms used at the point of data collection may be used rather than our preferred terminology.

We recognise the importance of inclusive language. If you have any feedback on our use of language that would help us refine our approach, please get in touch at schoolsinmind@annafreud.org.

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