“We started talking about race and racism after George Floyd”: insights from research into practitioner preparedness for anti-racist social work practice in England

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The events of 2020, notably, the murder of George Floyd and the global COVID-19 pandemic, brought issues of race and racism into sharp focus in social work education, research and practice. In the UK, the Black Lives Matter movement contributed to raising awareness of the existence and effects of racism, and the need for anti-racist practice in all areas of social work; yet, surprisingly, some social workers alleged to have first heard the term ‘anti-racist practice’ after the murder of George Floyd, while others claimed a basic understanding of what it meant in practice. This article reports the findings from a qualitative study with 67 social workers about their preparedness for anti-racist practice with service users at the point of qualification and after their assessed and supported year in employment. A proposal for race intentionality as opposed to race evasiveness is made.

Key words anti-racist practice • assessed and supported year in employment • social work education • George Floyd

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Introduction

Anti-racist practice in social work is not new, yet many programmes in England continue to deliver content disparately, resulting in social work graduates stating that they feel ill-equipped to work with service users in practice. A combination of events propelled the authors to undertake this study in 2021, notably: the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd in the US; the subsequent protests of the Black Lives Matter movement; the COVID-19 pandemic; and the disproportionate impact on Black and minority ethnic people in Britain. Discontent with narratives of racism in higher education grew, implicating many disciplines
and leading to renewed calls to decolonise curricula. In addition, debates about moving away from the use of the umbrella term ‘Black Asian minority ethnic’ (BAME) to ‘global majority’ gathered momentum. While there is little scope within this article to examine these ideas fully, it is important to highlight the authors’ realisation of increased requests for anti-racism training from local authorities and social work employers in this period. While increased training in anti-racism is a welcome development, it is unfortunate that it took these events to bring the lack of training to the fore.

The authors were concerned about the impact of the lack of anti-racism knowledge and skills on interventions with Black and racially minoritised individuals and families, and wanted to learn about this at first hand. The decision to interview newly qualified social workers and those undertaking their assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE) programmes was therefore necessary to understand the extent to which the most recent social work curricula addresses race, racism and anti-racism within their programmes (Cane and Tedam, 2022).

Another concern for the authors is the disproportionate numbers of Black and racially minoritised service users within the various provisions across the sector, who are reported to be over-represented as children looked after, in inpatient mental health services and as victims of stop and search and other policing processes (Laird and Tedam, 2019). Research suggests that racially minoritised social workers are more likely to fail their ASYE (Carter, 2021), disproportionately referred to fitness to practise (Samuel, 2020) and under-represented in social care leadership and management positions in England (Bernard, 2020).

The findings from this study point not only to a lack of preparedness on the part of qualifying and newly qualified social workers, but also to the minimal and inadequate teaching around race, racism and anti-racism on some qualifying and ASYE programmes. We argue that the damaging effects brought about by the limits of education on race for the students, practitioners, service users and wider society is regressive, and perhaps suggests a colour-mute (Pollock, 2004) and race-evasive approach (Chang-Bacon, 2022). Finally, the authors take up the challenge posed by Williams and Bernard (2018), seeking to understand from social workers’ perspectives how their qualifying social work and their ASYE programmes in England prepared them for contemporary anti-racist social work.

Recommendations for improving teaching around anti-racist practice are made, alongside a call for social work educators to enhance their teaching of anti-racism through ‘race intentionality’ which is about explicitly addressing topics of race and racism in teaching (Chang-Bacon, 2022), as this has direct implications for practice with Black service users and their families, and could minimise the over-representation of Black and racially minoritised service users already mentioned. The following discussion will trace the history of anti-racist practice in social work in England and Wales, and also comment on the importance of ensuring that social workers are equipped with the skills, knowledge and tools to work within an anti-racist framework.

**Conceptual framework**

In this article, we argue that Dickar’s (2008) concept of ‘racism evasiveness’ can be used to understand participants’ experiences of anti-racism teaching on some of
their ASYE programmes following the murder of George Floyd. Racism evasiveness, suggests the avoidance of discussions about race and racism, which then undermines efforts to address racism (Dickar, 2008). We argue that a deliberate and intentional approach to teaching anti-racist practice is required in social work qualifying and ASYE programmes.

Background and context

Anti-racist practice

Social work education (both in the classroom and on placements) has been positioned as a potential space to learn about and disrupt racism in society; however, failure to address race and racism in these spaces has the potential to leave social workers unprepared to engage in anti-racist practice and could result in minoritised social workers underprepared to challenge racism directed at them from others (Copeland and Ross, 2021).

In England and Wales, anti-racist practice is said to have begun as a distinct political project following a wider post-war Black struggle against racism during the 1960s and 1970s (Lavalette and Penketh, 2014). Following criticism of this, the focus shifted to a spectrum of social justice requirements under a broader paradigm of ‘anti-oppressive practice’, which many argue has diluted the discourse about race and racism.

Lavalette and Penketh (2014) argue that social work came under attack in the early 1990s for being overly concerned with ‘political correctness’ through anti-racist practice focusing on the ‘isms’ and the ‘ologies’. This is perhaps why Social Work England’s standards do not mention racism specifically, but rather ‘discrimination’, ‘oppression’ and ‘injustice’.

It is important to also view racism as manifesting in many forms. Interpersonal racism relates to individual thoughts, beliefs, attitudes and actions that perpetuate or support racism at conscious, unconscious, active or passive levels. Of structural or systemic racism, Sivanandan (1991: 45) suggests: ‘If, in the final analysis, racism as I see it is tied up with exploitative systems, our struggle is not only against injustice and inequality … our struggle is against the system of power that allows these things to obtain.’

In the current neoliberal context, a neo-assimilationist language of diversity and difference has emerged, largely replacing the discourse of anti-racism (Williams and Bernard, 2018). The ongoing argument is that the nuances of racism are lost when subsumed within an umbrella framework of anti-oppressive or anti-discriminatory practice. Williams and Bernard (2018) challenge scholars to engage in a paradigm shift, re-engage with history and formulate new pathways.

Currently within qualifying social work education in England, a set of prescribed standards by Social Work England and the professional capabilities framework (PCF), alongside the knowledge and skills statements (KSS), determine the content and value base of professional training, and include varying levels of reference to social justice. For example, Social Work England recognises the importance of promoting social justice and challenging discrimination, exploitation and harm, and articulates this through their standards, specifically:
As a social worker, I will:

1.5 Recognise differences across diverse communities and challenge the impact of disadvantage and discrimination on people and their families and communities.

1.6 Promote social justice, helping to confront and resolve issues of inequality and inclusion.

4.8 Reflect on my own values and challenge the impact they have on my practice.

As a social worker, I will not:

5.1 Abuse, neglect, discriminate, exploit or harm anyone, or condone this by others. (Social Work England, 2022)

It is fair to say that all KSS for child and family social workers recognise the importance of anti-racist practice, despite not being explicit. For example, the acknowledgement of relationships and communication in interactions is further strengthened through non-judgemental and anti-oppressive practice. The KSS for social workers working with adults also promotes anti-racist practice through its requirement for person-centred approaches, direct work and effective assessments (Skills for Care, 2015).

Craig (2007) argues that racially minoritised people in Britain are more likely to experience poor health, housing, criminalisation and educational outcomes as a result of structural barriers and racism, as well as the hostility towards immigrants and immigration more generally. The ever-decreasing recognition of race and racism in public policy, social policy education, practice and research is of concern, and requires attention from anti-racism scholars and activists (Craig, 2013). In social work, the obvious place for this work to begin is in the classroom.

The value of anti-racism teaching and learning

Racism is a social problem of gigantic proportions, which many underestimate. For social workers, racism should have no place in the profession, yet it is an entrenched social problem and has also been referred to as a ‘public health crisis’ (Andrews, 2021). Anti-racism in the field of education is a progressive strategy that has a transformative and emancipatory role, and can be used to contribute to a transformation in perspective (Mezirow, 1981). It can also lead to a developed ‘critical consciousness’ through what Freire (1970) refers to as the process of conscientisation.

It could be argued that while equality, diversity and inclusion discourses are prominent and more likely to be delivered on social work programmes, there appears to be less of an appetite to prepare and deliver specific teaching on anti-racist practice (Perez, 2021). The reasons for this perceived hesitance need to be fully explored.

To engage meaningfully with anti-racism in practice, social workers must be given the tools. These tools relate to knowledge and skills that can be taught using various teaching and learning strategies. Cane (2021) recommends disrupting racism in the classroom first, offering students space to learn from each other, reflect and start developing confidence to talk about race and racism.

Beasley et al (2021) remind us that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and ever-increasing anti-Black and anti-Asian racism requires social work programmes to
undertake a critical introspection of its taught and practice curricula. They examine the importance of achieving ‘equity-mindedness’ (Beasley et al., 2021: 2), which they say occurs when a person ‘becomes aware of racial identity, uses disaggregated data to identify inequitable racial and ethnic outcomes, reflects on racial and ethnic consequences of practices, exercises agency to produce racial and ethnic equity, views the classroom as a racialised space and self-monitors interactions with students of colour’. Writing from a Canadian perspective, Jeffery (2005) suggests that incorporating race and anti-racism in social work educational policy has been contentious, leading to resistance by students, educators, social workers and policymakers.

As Fisher et al. (2017: 346) argue quite decisively:

The ability to acknowledge and respond to issues of race and racism is an essential social work skill, now more than ever. Current events cannot be ignored, either in the classroom or in the agency. However, helping social workers learn to navigate issues of social justice and cultural competence is one of the most complex tasks social work educators may attempt, particularly when it comes to the effects of racism and oppression.

It would appear that this quote is timely and resonates with our current reflections in relation to the importance of teaching anti-racist content on social work programmes and the ASYE. Practising social work from an anti-racist perspective can assist practitioners to understand, identify and address the different forms of racism that may be contributing to the over-representation of Black and minority ethnic services users.

### Methods

Using the same methods and methodological approaches reported in Cane and Tedam (2022), we employed a qualitative paradigm through the use of round-table discussions and semi-structured questions. There were ten questions, and the round-table discussions lasted for approximately 60 minutes, with an extra 30 minutes utilised for delivering the 4D2P Framework (Discuss, Discover, Decide, Disrupt, Power, Privilege) (Tedam, 2021) for participants to reflect upon.

### Positionality

Both authors are Black British female social work academics of African heritage, who have come to understand some of the complexities and disadvantages associated with race-evasive approaches in social work education through being external examiners, curriculum reviewers for higher education institutions and involved in delivering anti-racism training to social workers.

### Sampling strategy

Participants were white and minority ethnic social workers, including but not limited to African, Asian, Arab and Caribbean backgrounds, of varying age, gender, social class and sexualities, trained on traditional and fast-track programmes in England and Scotland. All were qualified social workers within their ASYE year, with the majority being within two years of completing the ASYE programme in England.
(two were three to four years post-qualified), except one participant who was in their final placement of an undergraduate social work degree. Intersectionality shaped the responses provided by participants, including what was going on for them emotionally, psychologically and practically (for example, conflict in the workplace and conflicting feelings about organisational approaches to racism in terms of the experiences of service users and employees from racially minoritised backgrounds) (Bernard, 2020).

**Recruitment**

The study was advertised mainly through Twitter, reaching out to local social work partnerships and snowballing. Participants contacted both researchers directly and were provided with information and consent forms, alongside a link to Calendly, allowing them to self-select a convenient date to attend a focus group.

Round-table discussions involved a heterogeneous cohort of three to ten participants. Mixing participants enabled newly qualified social workers from different pre-registration programmes, with varying practice experience across various social work settings, to share their views about anti-racism teaching on pre-registration programmes and experiences (Cane and Tedam, 2022).

**Ethical approval**

The study was approved by the University of Sussex Research Committee in April 2021. Participants were encouraged to use anonymous names to ensure confidentiality protocols. To comply with the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR), the researchers only requested information about the type of programme participants had studied and when they commenced the ASYE programme.

**Data collection**

Data were collected from 67 participants through ten round-table discussions conducted virtually on Zoom videoconferencing, with both researchers present to support, moderate discussions and ensure comfort, the inclusion of all voices and conversational flow. Falter et al (2022) support the use of Zoom as an effective platform enabling researchers to access participants with a wider geographical reach.

Before starting each focus group, a confidentiality statement and commitment to GDPR protocols were declared. Participants were asked to complete a remote consent form and to confirm that this was completed before discussions commenced. Those joining late were required to follow the same process. Participants could withdraw at any time.

One of the limitations in using Zoom for this study was that participants were not always able to access quiet spaces, especially when working from their offices or places of work, and this may have impacted on the content and depth of their participation. Distractions from a few dropping in and out were prevented by using a waiting room facility and automatic mute facility upon entry. It is not always easy to identify natural pauses in order to find an appropriate time to interrupt and contribute. It is possible to miss important voices due to either missing cues or hesitation in making physical prompts or raising a virtual hand for prolonged periods. In addition, there was the challenge of time-zone differences in relation to one of the authors, based abroad; however, this was easily addressed due to her flexibility.
Data analysis

Recordings were transcribed verbatim and installed in a word document for manual coding and analysis. Analysis followed Smith’s thematic analysis adopted for focus-group data (Love et al, 2020). To minimise bias, researchers engaged in critical self-reflective sessions after each focus group, which Merriam (2009) suggests is a useful strategy to examine any researcher biases, assumptions and relationships to the study that might affect their research. These reflections were ongoing throughout the interpretive stages of the analysis.

Participants were assigned a letter alongside the letters FG (focus group) and the number assigned to that group. By way of illustration, for SFG4, S is the participant and FG4 is Focus Group 4. This is used in the findings when their narratives are recounted.

All transcripts were read individually and reread, allowing immersion into the data. Similarities and differences were noted, and emerging patterns were identified, contextualised and clustered further, with the final themes and sub-themes amalgamated.

Findings and implications for social work

The findings from the study have been selected purposely in relation to the title of the article, supporting the view that racism and anti-racism in English social work was given prominence after the murder of George Floyd. The four broad themes are:

- the murder of George Floyd as a catalyst for anti-racism teaching;
- inadequate or absent teaching on anti-racism;
- broader teaching and learning around anti-oppression and anti-discrimination; and
- owning the responsibility for learning about anti-racist practice.

The murder of George Floyd as a catalyst for anti-racism teaching

The discussion under this theme relates directly to the view that the murder of George Floyd resulted in issues of racism and anti-racism gaining prominence. As one participant noted, and as also captured in the title of this article: “We started talking about race and racism after George Floyd, I think six months into the ASYE programme” (SFG4). This revelation points to the reactive processes in relation to anti-racism and brings to the fore the need to embed such teaching and learning routinely at all levels and stages of social work education and practice to align with the concept of race intentionality (Chang-Bacon, 2022).

For KFG7, the murder of George Floyd allowed her to appreciate gaps in her learning and on the social work course. Additionally, there was a strong sense across all groups that due to the low level of teaching provided, anti-racist practice was seen as an ‘add-on’, ‘one-stop thing’ or ‘bolt-on’:

“We did have a little bit of teaching on anti-racist practice, and we had a workshop which they called ‘cultural competence’. But I found that those things were quite distinct. They weren’t threaded through the rest of the
teaching; it was almost a tick-box exercise that we’ve now covered racism, but it didn’t come into the other teaching about law, or reflection, or any other model theories. With the George Floyd situation, everything’s been highlighted over the last couple of years, and it’s been really, really, I’ve sort of come away sort of feeling like that was something that we missed out in a massive way on the course.’ (RFG2)

Anti-racism teaching being experienced as an ‘add-on’ risks further marginalising Black and racially minoritised students, while reproducing a reductionist view of the importance of this area of teaching. This highlights the ways in which universities are racialised spaces (Masocha, 2015). In addition, this clarifies what is viewed as sufficient or insufficient teaching content around anti-racist practice from an ASYE candidate’s perspective.

As opposed to teaching real understanding of race and racism, participants like CHFG2 and others felt that their modules provided “a lot of guidance on how to think if you wanted to answer, say, an essay question, but not a lot of things on how to think about it [racism] systematically”. With that in mind, others expressed frustration that discussions about racism on social work courses, especially after the murder of George Floyd, “feels at the moment a bit of lip service. As long as you write something about it in your essay, then you’ve ticked that box” (DFG5).

Another participant surmised that while the reason behind not addressing anti-racist practice might be linked to the fear of offending on the part of educators, the absence of such content left social workers vulnerable once qualified and into direct practice with service users (Ladhani and Sitter, 2020):

‘I felt quite sad that with the George Floyd situation, at least it prompted a discussion, but in other areas, really serious discussions are not taking place because of fear of maybe offending or saying the wrong thing. If those discussions are not taking place in the classroom, then that leaves us as developing and practising professionals in a really difficult position because how do you address and work with people within those contexts?’ (SHFG4)

For ZFG4, the disappointment that anti-racism content was not prioritised was incongruent with the role of social workers in addressing inequalities in society:

‘George Floyd has obviously brought things to the fore and made us talk about this more. It is so sad and disappointing that, even in social work, that this wasn’t done before. It’s not like it’s just happened. We’re social workers, we’re meant to be addressing inequality in society and promoting best outcomes for people.’ (ZFG4)

The murder of George Floyd highlighted the gaps in racial literacy within some ASYE programmes and acknowledges that as a profession, social work is not immune to the many direct and indirect forms of racism. According to Singh (2019: 638), the omission of such important content is unacceptable given data from his study which suggested that ‘at the end of the educational intervention students were able to evidence a wider repertoire of issues and skills for anti-racist practice which were demonstrative of new learning and professional development’.
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ZFG4 goes on to state that while the discussions appeared to be happening, “we had an hour’s discussion, but then it wasn’t just about race” (ZFG4). This indicates not only that anti-racism content should have been introduced or taught earlier, but also that there should have been a focus on race, and it ought to have been longer than one hour.

ZFG4 bemoaned the shift from ‘race’ to discussions about other forms of oppression within minutes of the discussion:

‘I think we had the training after George Floyd’s death, and we were talking about racism. But within five minutes of talking about racism, somebody comes up and says it’s the same as people that are gay…. All of a sudden, the topic changes from talking about race into something else. I think what all of you guys are saying is there’s something uncomfortable about talking about racism.’ (ZFG4)

This discomfort about talking about racism and the switch to other areas of diversity is an example of race evasion (Chang-Bacon, 2022). Perez (2021: 513) corroborates these sentiments by suggesting that rather than providing anti-racism teaching, diversity courses provide a ‘non-threatening way for social work programs to appear they are committed to diversity without requiring transformative pedagogical changes’.

While there should be no ‘hierarchy of oppressions’ (Lorde, 1983), it is clear from the preceding quotes that some students would have appreciated a focus on race and anti-racist practice during that particular training event. The importance of intersectionality must be emphasised, as it explains the multiple forms of inequality and oppression that people can experience. SH appeared to have taken the situation to her head of service:

‘I had a conversation with our head of service about looking at representation at the senior levels. I said to her that, “Sadly, an incident like George Floyd has come up and everybody is thinking we need to change our ways of working, but you need to tell me as a head of service: what are you doing as an organisation that’s committed to this long-term?” There’s no action plans; it’s just, “We’re doing something.”’ (SHFG4)

Bernard (2020) outlines the lack of representation in senior management in England and highlights the need to dismantle workplace racism, which is preventing racially minoritised practitioners from progressing into positions of leadership.

JFG2 reflects on her experience of supervision while on placement and shares that there was no escaping the topic with her practice educator, who focussed on this for three hours:

‘In the wake of the murder of George Floyd last year, and when the protest movement was at its peak, I remember my practice educator, I was in the middle of my adult’s placement at the time, my supervision that day ran to about three hours, there was an expression of anger which has been building.’ (JFG2)

This very much suggests that where there is individual commitment, discussions around racism and anti-racist practice will persist (Chang-Bacon, 2022). This
practice educator is an example of a practitioner who was angry about the draconian consequences of racism and indeed committed to understanding and championing anti-racist practice, albeit in this example spurred on by the murder of George Floyd.

Participant CFG2 recalls a couple of sessions on anti-racist practice and again highlights the murder of George Floyd as contributing to this: “We had a couple of sessions speaking anti-racist practice in the ASYE. The murder of George Floyd, it’s inescapable. It’s almost like a catalytic point” (CFG2). Finally, MDFG4 acknowledges that while the murder of George Floyd triggered discussion about racism, they felt that the university showed little commitment but that George Floyd’s murder compelled them to appreciate racism and act formally: “I feel like it’s brought it up because they’ve been forced to recognise it, more so than actually wanting to recognise it. I don’t think it’s something that’s not been known about; I think it’s been known about a long, long time” (MDFG4). The suggestion of tokenism explored by Copeland and Ross (2021) highlights the importance of being anti-racism-focused in social work learning spaces.

Inadequate or absent teaching on anti-racism

Under this theme, broadly, participants felt that anti-racist teaching was not a priority on their programmes of study. The majority of participants reported that specific teaching about race, how to deal with racism and anti-racist practice was missing, and a few argued that no reading or learning material on racism was provided:

‘Anti-racism was not addressed: there was no lesson on it; there was no module on it; in fact, I don’t think we were even given any reading on it. The cohort that I was in was white; there was one lady from an ethnic minority and, quite tellingly, she dropped out.’ (LFG6)

The disclosure in the preceding quote is unambiguous, and the further mention of the only minority ethnic female student dropping out of the course is of concern. With little by way of elaboration, we can only surmise that the connect between being the only minority ethnic person and experiencing segregation, lack of support and no teaching on anti-racism may be linked to the decision to drop out. Cane (2021) recommends the importance of disrupting racial division in social work classrooms in order to promote positive learning and teaching environments for minority ethnic students feeling segregated in social work education.

For another participant (LFG5), the programme appeared to avoid “uncomfortable conversations” by exploring the broader context of anti-oppressive practice and not anti-racism specifically. This sentiment was articulated as follows:

‘What I’m really struggling with is that in this whole university and the training and the teaching that they give us, they talk about “anti-oppressive practice”, and it was a big thing in [university], but it was very much under one umbrella. It wasn’t targeted at anything. Actually, why aren’t they having the uncomfortable conversations? It’s the bread and butter of social work. It’s uncomfortable conversations; it’s challenging conversations with people.’ (LFG5)
These ‘uncomfortable conversations’ are necessary and require social work educators to aim at developing critical self-reflection to support students to manage their discomfort (Stephens and Rock-Vanloo, 2022). Again, race evasiveness may be concluded here. As LFG5 adds:

‘There is not a single family that I go out to that I don’t have uncomfortable conversations with. That is what we do. That is what we’re supposed to be able to do well. Why can’t we do that in university? Why can’t we do that in training and have those uncomfortable conversations? Why are we being taught by people who won’t address the elephant in the room?’ (LFG5)

The perception that the programme team at the university was in some way unwilling to address issues of racism could be indicative of a wider concern about the priority given to this area of knowledge. Stephens and Rock-Vanloo (2022: 371) caution that students are likely to replicate any prejudice and biases that are the foundation of their education, hence why ‘critical methods of teaching and learning which challenge and disrupt’ such prejudices are important:

‘I don’t think there was anything specifically around anti-racist practice in a module, but there was, you know, anti-oppression. And a lot of the work that we have done, and a lot of the modules, that was all kind of linked and part of it … it was something around prejudice.’ (JFG1)

Here, it is important to recognise that this participant’s reference to anti-racist practice not being in a ‘module’ may mean that it is not a theme throughout the programme, corroborating race evasiveness (Chang-Bacon, 2022). As TAFG4 also states: “We didn’t have the time to have a lecture specifically on anti-racism as a full lecture. It came up now and again.” That anti-racism came up ‘now and again’ is telling and concerning in the context of social work education. Wane (2003) asserted that many educators perceive anti-racist approaches as risky, potentially volatile and to be avoided, and this is a possible view of some social work educators referred to in the preceding quote. As educators, we run the risk of sending out the wrong message about our own commitment to anti-racist practice.

Those who received teaching said that it was superficial, not specific or detailed, and did not stand out. Others were signposted to material without follow-up learning, and that learning was therefore left to the student to navigate and work out, without further guidance:

‘It’s only a couple of years ago that I finished at university, but there was nothing over the three years of the course that I’d done that really stands out for me as definitively anti-racist. It was touched on at points – there were certain bits; there was reading materials and that – but definitely no specific module, no specific learning really that comes to my mind, and there was definitely no specific assignments around anti-racist materials.’ (KFG7)

Another participant echoed the sentiments just expressed, saying: “I felt like at university, it was touched on very briefly. It wasn’t something that we went into detail about, which I feel like it should have kind of gone into more detail because of the
diverse service users that we work with” (SFG4). Anderson et al (2020) argue that institutional racism exists in the social work curriculum but is rarely acknowledged, resulting in the devaluation of Black lives and experiences through what is taught (or not taught), by who and to whom.

Broader teaching and learning around anti-oppression and anti-discrimination

Within this theme, a number of ideas about the focus of teaching being broad and linked to anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice will be reported. For example, one participant articulated:

‘We had one lecture on race, focused mostly towards anti-discriminatory practice. We kind of mixed race within identity and the use of self for ourselves, rather than working with somebody who is different from us. That was the focus. It was one lecture and one seminar. That was it. We haven’t had intense lectures focusing on it or even essays focusing on what it would be like to work with somebody that is different from you. It’s kind of a one-stop thing like a tick-box, that’s how I felt.’ (FFG7)

This participant clarifies that it was a single lecture and seminar. What is more, they confirm the absence of essays or coursework about anti-racism, as well as any strategies or frameworks for working with people “different from you”. This echoes findings by Williams and Parrott (2014) on the invisibility of race and racial considerations in social work students’ assignments.

For participant LAFG3, it felt as though being the only Black student in their class may have contributed to the lack of commitment to deliver learning on anti-racist practice: “They did emphasise anti-oppressive, anti-discriminatory, but focused on being non-judgemental, but not really touching on a lot about race, because for two years, I was the only black student in my class.” Another participant added:

‘A lot of the language that they told us to be careful about was mental health, so you can’t say this, be mindful of this. I don’t really think we got to be mindful of someone’s race, someone’s religion, someone’s beliefs. They didn’t really emphasise on that. Again, that was quite frustrating. But I feel like it’s because in my university as well, there was a very small number of individuals who were from a BAME background. I feel that’s pushed to the side.’ (SFG5)

Chang-Bacon (2022) argues that the low number of Black and racially minoritised students has been used to justify race evasiveness within the classroom.

Another participant shared that the module on their programme was about values and attitudes: “We did a very brief module on attitudes and values, which was more about anti-oppressive practice, which encompassed everything, not just racism. It’s just a minute part of the course, which doesn’t equip you” (BFG5). This participant acknowledges that their particular training did not equip them to practise in an anti-racist way once qualified. A similar sentiment is shared by another participant: “I did the BA and whilst it was addressed, it didn’t feel like it was addressed in a way that was integrated with the rest of the course. It was very standalone. It felt like it was almost bolted on at some point” (CHFG2).
Participants presented a strong sense that cultural competence, the use of self, anti-discrimination and values were explicitly taught on social work courses. However, anti-racism was merely taught under the umbrella of anti-oppressive practice. Even then, it did not cover the fundamental issues associated with racism, and it was integrated well into their courses:

‘We have a module for social work knowledge and application…. I don’t think we’ve had a specific focus on applying anti-racism. I think we’ve had a lecture on values … social graces and identity, but very little on anti-racist practice.’ (KFG7)

‘We had a module on values…. It was more on the lines of anti-oppressive approach, which is what we hear a lot more about than anti-racist … there were bits on race.’ (EFG7)

For some participants, the emphasis of their course was on the context of social work, that is, developing social work identity and good communication skills:

‘If I’m being honest, in terms of the learning aspects within the actual classroom, I don’t think we did really touch much on anti-racist practice, if I’m being honest. I think the emphasis was just a lot on good communication with people, regardless of their background and whatnot, but actually ensuring that your practice is anti-racist and bearing that in mind, I don’t think there was a solid focus on it.’ (LOFG7)

Owning the responsibility for learning about anti-racist practice

Due to the lack of in-depth teaching on anti-racist practice, students and newly qualified social workers interested in anti-racism taught themselves while undertaking either dissertation projects or independent research, or referred back to previous learning outside of the social work course:

‘I think some of it is self-taught for me, going and doing reading, and talking to my friends who are from different backgrounds, cultures. Just having those discussions with those who are happy to do so.’ (KFG7)

‘I was at [university undertaking] my undergraduate degree, and nothing was ever spoken to us about anti-racist practice. It was all about anti-oppressive practice. It wasn’t until I did my dissertation, which was about Gypsy, Roma and Travellers and working anti-oppressively, that I started to explore what anti-oppressive really meant and where it came.’ (SSFG3)

Another participant engaged in external ‘training’ to enhance their understanding of anti-racist practice: “I personally went on a training course called ‘safeguarding and cultural awareness’. That was really useful because it helped me to understand how culture can impact people’s understanding of safeguarding and how the bar is quite different” (DWFG3). Hick (2005) concluded that research in the area of anti-racist social work is minimal; hence, it is necessary to examine literature outside of social work to gain a deeper understanding.
Most participants on fast-track programmes identified that their courses were less diverse, and even where anti-racism was taught, the lack of diversity prevented participants from reflecting or learning from students of other racial backgrounds. However, only a handful of participants reported that anti-racist practice was a ‘thread’ running through the course, though it was still only under the umbrella of anti-oppressive practice: “I did the [programme] social work fast-track course. I think that anti-racist practice and anti-oppressive practice was a thread that ran through pretty much everything that we did, I would say” (SESFG1). As another participant stated:

‘The issues of colour and race came about to say, “Look at yourself and what will the impact of your presence be out in practice?” The issues like some people wouldn’t work with me because of my skin colour, and this, and this were raised, to say if that happened, what you should do. That preparation was there.’ (JFG2)

**Limitations of the study**

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study into the preparedness of newly qualified social workers and ASYE candidates to practise within an anti-racist framework. The timing of this research (during the COVID-19 pandemic) could have impacted on participants in terms of engagement. We also recognise that the limiting of round-table discussions to 60 minutes may have impacted on the depth and scope of the discussions; however, our decision was based on following through with our duty of care towards participants, who have had to work remotely during the pandemic and with excessive use of computer screens.

In total, our study involved 67 participants; consequently, caution must be applied, as the findings may not be generalisable to the wider population of newly qualified social workers and ASYE candidates. However, participants who took part self-selected, as they felt passionate about anti-racism and had the desire to contribute meaningfully to research around racism and others affected directly or indirectly by the lack of adequate teaching around racism, thus making these narratives valid and powerful (Cane and Tedam, 2022).

Another limitation was around being able to categorically conclude from the data how much anti-racism content would be enough to enable newly qualified social workers to feel confident to work with racially minoritised individuals and families. The data revealed that ‘how’, ‘what’ and ‘when’ anti-racism is taught contributed to practitioners’ sense of preparedness.

**Teaching about racism and anti-racism in social work education**

Hollinrake et al (2022), writing in the context of England, suggest that Black history is poorly taught in schools in England, and so it is possible to conclude that students studying social work in universities in England may have had inadequate formal teaching about Black history. This makes it all the more important to embed teaching about Black history, racism and anti-racism into all sections of the social work curriculum.

Tedam (2021) explored the pedagogical value of anti-racism teaching on social work qualifying programmes and concluded that if not themselves equipped with the
necessary knowledge and expertise to deliver teaching about racism and anti-racism, social work educators should draw on the expertise of community-based organisations, persons with lived experience and external training organisations to ensure that social work students access learning on anti-racism. For deep learning about race, racism and anti-racism to occur within the classroom, it is crucial that students are respectful of each other’s presence and create a conducive learning environment. Cane (2021) examined the racial segregation that can exist within social work classrooms and offers some suggestions about how this might be addressed.

Singh (2019) examined the link between university teaching on race and racism, and the outcomes for students who have engaged with such training on social work programmes. His findings suggest that ‘anti-racist social work education enables students to move from “magical consciousness”, where racism and racial oppression is invisible and thereby left unchallenged and maintained, to more critical and reflexive level of awareness where it is named, challenged and no longer shrouded in a culture of professional denial and silencing’ (Singh, 2019: 631).

**Implications for education and practice**

Social Work England (2020) stated that they ‘will explore and begin to understand the competence of newly qualified social workers’; consequently, this article is timely in that regard and offers a particular focus on competence in the area of anti-racist practice. The findings in relation to preparedness for anti-racist social work practice at the point of qualification or after ASYE were generally surprising and disappointing; however, there were instances of good practice, including the fact that all programmes addressed broad concepts of anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice. Social work qualifying programmes and ASYE candidates must re-examine their commitment to anti-racist practice. By not explicitly teaching about racism and anti-racism (Chang-Bacon, 2022), they could be perceived as reproducing racism because practitioners who are ill-prepared to work using anti-racist principles are more likely to misunderstand the needs of service users through culturally ignorant or insensitive practice. Such practice can contribute to the over-representation of Black and racially minoritised people in the most restrictive sections of services. As a profession, we must avoid what Lorde (1984 [1980]: 117) refers to as ‘historical amnesia’, which could rob us of reflecting on the history and place of anti-racism in social work, and instead make us think that we need to reinvent the wheel.

It has not been the purpose of this article to examine the barriers to social work educators delivering content on anti-racism; however, it is crucial to note some of barriers that could affect the delivery of anti-racist pedagogy within social work classrooms. The first barrier is racism itself, arising from evading discussions about race and racism (Chang-Bacon, 2022). This may be a controversial point to raise; however, it is important to note that unconscious, personal and/or institutional racism can result in social work educators ignoring this content in teaching, or offering basic and ineffective content. It is also not uncommon for some educators to say that the geographical location of their higher education institution is ‘not very diverse’ and ‘largely white’, using this as an excuse to avoid content on racism and anti-racism.

Second, hesitance or resistance to delivering anti-racism content may also be about concerns by educators about where such content ‘fits’ within the social work curriculum. In this regard, reference to the requirements of the PCF, Social Work
England’s standards of practice, the international definition of social work, social work values and other codes of practice must be taken seriously. We wish to note that working to a prescribed list of standards can also result in box-ticking, which participants stressed should be avoided.

As has already been mentioned, social work educators can source expertise outside their own institutions to deliver content on anti-racism if they do not feel equipped to do so themselves. It is acknowledged that anti-racist practice is a learning experience that continues to develop well past the point of qualification, and gauging what constitutes sufficient knowledge is subjective, especially when ASYE candidates have passed the taught and practice-based elements of their qualifying programme. From the data, it is clear that ‘one-off’, ‘bolted-on’ sessions were not considered effective. Consequently, Copeland and Ross (2021) found that a dedicated course on anti-racism is more effective than a model that integrates anti-racism within the course as a whole.

Finally, teaching methods should be compatible with anti-racist practice. To use uncritical case studies, examples and literature will offer student social workers very limited knowledge on the subject and may not result in the acquisition of knowledge and skills for future anti-racist practice.

**Recommendations**

This article makes four key recommendations:

- Anti-racism as a thread throughout the programme at all levels and in all modules is an important strategy. Hollinrake et al (2022) propose that this begins with an audit of individual modules to identify where gaps might be or where anti-racist practice is absent. Such an activity would illuminate the areas requiring review. Stephens and Rock-Vanloo (2022) argue that without honest and critical discussions about race and racism, Black social work students feel helpless in the acknowledgement that they are unwelcome in academic spaces, which continue to be comfortable for and privilege White students. Knowledge from Black and racially minoritised scholars, case examples that reflect our communities and concepts that can be applied globally (for example, *Ubuntu*) could be incorporated into teaching.

- Social work programmes should consider adopting specific theoretical positions, such as critical race theory, to strengthen the commitment of programmes to anti-racist practice. The social work programme at California State University (Dominquez Hills, USA) is an example of this, where they assert that they have ‘an intentional focus on bringing attention to and addressing structural inequities through the lens of Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality’ (California State University, 2022). Masocha (2015) argues that social work educators must locate and foreground the centrality of race and racism in shaping differential outcomes for students and for people who use services. Many participants did not easily identify and name theories and concepts taught at university or on their ASYE programme that helped them to understand race, racism and how to engage in an anti-racist way with service users.

- Social work educators must do better. Heads of schools, faculty, departments, programmes and courses should demonstrate anti-racism in their engagement with students and staff. All staff, including practice educators and onsite supervisors,
must be committed to making the necessary changes to the curriculum and the way it is delivered, both in the classroom and in practice. By not teaching this content (or failing to teach such content adequately), institutions are at risk of perpetuating ‘colonial thought that currently reproduce[s] bias and injustice, regardless of the racial background of the SW [social work] student to become worker’ (Stephens and Rock-Vanloo, 2022). Service user involvement must include people from racially minoritised backgrounds, and their contributions to the curriculum must be fully and equally acknowledged and encouraged. Additionally, researchers should continue to make available the evidence needed to improve anti-racism teaching and practice.

- Finally, we recommend that the recruitment of students to social work courses should entail a racially unbiased process. All programmes should consider carefully strategies and processes that promote a proportionate balance of diverse students on their courses. This will enable positive learning spaces for students from a range of backgrounds. This recommendation should be taken even more seriously by fast-track master’s programmes, which have been found to be less diverse, recruiting more from white, younger and higher socio-economic backgrounds than traditional social work master’s programmes (Dillon and Pritchard, 2022).

A number of participants commented on this in their groups.

Critical to these recommendations is the need for institutional and organisational support by all stakeholders (Ladhani and Sitter, 2020) to ensure that anti-racism knowledge, cognitive and affective processes, values, and skills are assessed in practice situations requiring ASYE candidates to make professional judgements that demonstrate not only an understanding of oppression, marginalisation and racism, but also the ability to challenge microaggressions (Copeland and Ross, 2021).

Conclusion

The profession cannot sit by and wait for another murder of, or injustice towards, a racially minoritised person before it begins to put the wheels of anti-racism teaching and learning in motion in social work learning spaces. While some are embracing and acknowledging the value of this discrete area of knowledge, many are still to move beyond lip service and box-ticking to genuinely commit to the process of understanding, identifying and disrupting racism in all its forms.

In their everyday work, social workers witness and experience individual and systemic racism; consequently, being insufficiently equipped to understand and challenge racism is unfair and regressive. As educators, we have a vision for anti-racism that begins in the classroom through formal teaching and learning on the history of racism, as well as its manifestations, impact and possible ways to challenge and address it, both within the classroom and, importantly, during practice encounters. Even with a professional code of ethics and practice standards that mandate social workers to understand and work using anti-oppressive principles, the findings discussed in this article evidence that there are ongoing difficulties in staying true to these mandates, especially in the area of racism and anti-racism.

Conflict of interest
The authors declare no conflict of interest.
We started talking about race and racism after George Floyd.

References


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“We started talking about race and racism after George Floyd”