

**Black educators in (white) settings:
Making racial identity visible in
Early Childhood Education and
Care in England, UK**

**Presented to: Early Childhood
Forum**

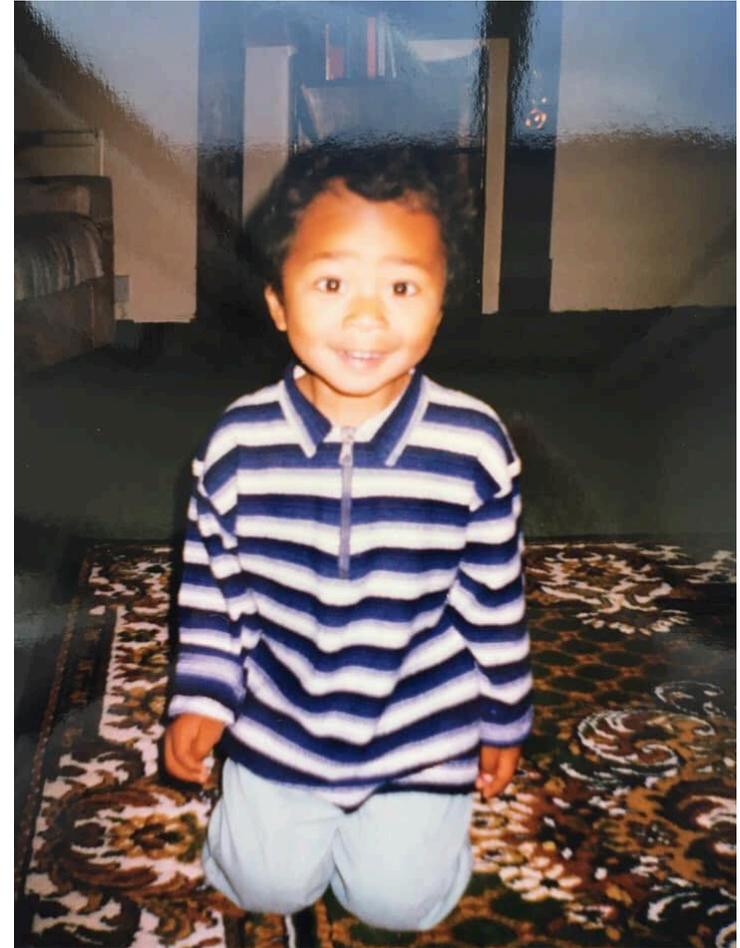
Shaddai Tembo
October 2021



Who am I?

Shaddai (pronounced Shad-eye, but Shad is fine) (He/Him/they).

- **Lecturer** at Perth College UHI and the Open University
- 3rd year **PhD student** at the University of the West of Scotland.
- Former **Early Years Practitioner** and **Family Support Worker**.
- **Trustee** for Early Education and the Fatherhood Institute
- **Co-convener** for SERA EY network.
- (occasional) **Writer** at [CriticalEarlyYears.org](https://www.criticalearlyyears.org).



Focus

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-  What we know (about education)
-  What we **don't** know
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-  My research and findings
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Black educators in (white) settings: Making racial identity visible in Early Childhood Education and Care in England, UK

Shaddai Tembo 

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Abstract

The participation of Black educators in the UK's education system has been a source of much debate in recent years. Research indicates having a teaching force that better represents society is critical because of the character, ubiquity, pervasiveness, duration and importance of teaching as a social activity. However, to date, many of the existing studies have taken place in primary, secondary and higher education contexts. The primary purpose of this paper is to draw upon concepts of identity to make Black educator identity visible in the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) context. Secondly, this paper aims to contribute to recent developments around mobilising Black studies as an academic discipline by seeking to explore how Black ECEC educators construct their identity through their professional practice. This paper draws on Critical Race Theory and narrative analysis methods to illustrate the experiences of Black ECEC educators. While this paper does not generalise to the experience of all Black educators, it does highlight a much under-researched area and advocates the need for counter-narratives to challenge normative unracialised experiences.

Keywords

Black studies, Early Childhood Education and Care, educator identity, race and racism



Positioning race and Blackness

- I interpret race as **unreal** as a scientific category.
- However, **we live as if race has meaning**. We live race in practice experiencing the world in ways that are mediated by racialized social categories and relationships.
- To capture this, a **racial ambivalence standpoint** is useful to complicate race as both **real** as a social tool and **unreal** as a scientific category.
- **Blackness** is founded on what the foundations of race represent, however implies more than just differences of phenotype and is **an active commitment to the liberatory politics that tie into skin colour**.
- Ultimately, it is **a way of knowing** that concentrates on the experiences of Black people in providing perspective on the formation of western society' (Andrews and Palmer, 2016: 19).



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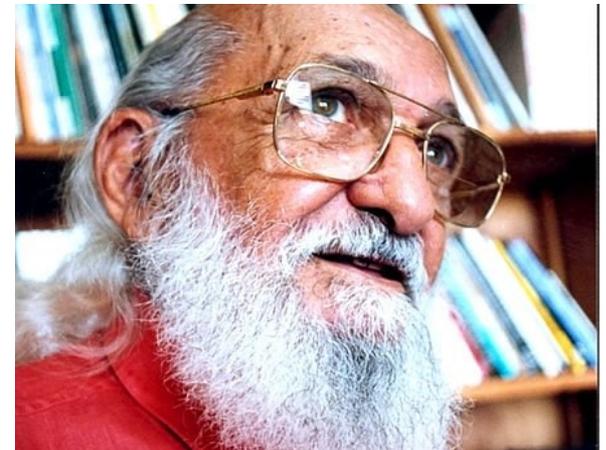
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What we know

*“Education can serve as an important vehicle for the political formation of citizens within a democratic society (Freire, 2005) ... Research consistently indicates **having a teaching force that better represents society is critical** because of the character, ubiquity, pervasiveness, duration and importance of teaching as a social activity”.*

Tembo (2020:71)



*“Positioning **education as a political site** reveals dominant ideological norms and epistemological assumptions about race and identity ... This view disrupts assumptions of neutrality in education, whereby schools are political sites involved in the construction, control and containment of oppressed cultural populations (Darder, 2014)”.*

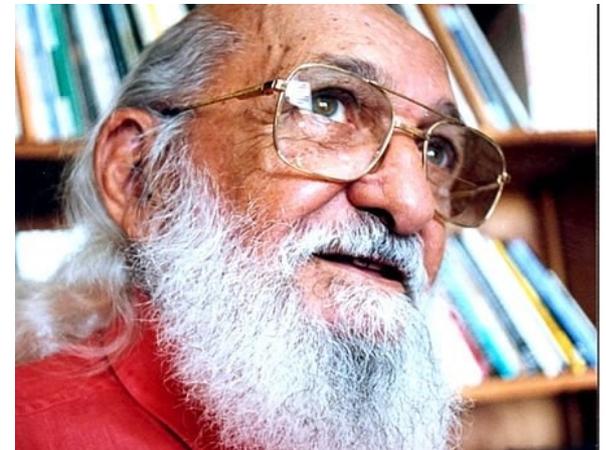
Tembo (2020:73)



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Tembo (2020:73)



What we know

Only 1% of UK university professors are black

By Sean Coughlan
BBC News family and education correspondent

🕒 19 January



B News ▶ Bristol News ▶ Education

We only have 26 black teachers out of 1,346 in Bristol, and that's a problem

Bristol has been found to be the most segregated core city in Britain, and the problem starts in school



What we **don't** know

What about Black educators in the early years?

The Early Years Workforce Strategy (DfE, 2017: 25) makes explicit reference to the 'Gender diversity of the workforce'. However, there is **no reference to racial diversity and the value it *could* bring to enhancing children's experiences.**



What we know

The broader context of **whiteness** matters here.

- A **silencing** of discussion around race and racism.
- 'Professional identity' as a **neutral** category, smoothing over individual differences..
- Feelings of **tokenism** and **isolation** among BME educators.

My argument...

Research in later education has shown that Black teachers, through their identity, do bring specific life experiences and strengths that benefit children ... It is crude to position all Black educators as models of acceptable Blackness ... However, recognising that these educators may inevitably model some kind of Blackness in learning environments, and can play some kind of role in mediating whiteness, may ultimately provide insight in the ways we understand the construction of identity.



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My research

Int: "...and I'm glad you've said yes (to being interviewed for my study)

Well there's not many, not many Black people to ask in this place is there? (laughing)" (Mandy)

- I worked with **Critical Race Theory**, using an epistemological approach towards analysing participants' narratives.
- **Counter-narratives**, in this view, are a means of discursively addressing normative (white) experiences of working in the profession.
- Therefore I drew together counter-narratives with narrative analysis to explore the experiences of Black ECEC practitioners working in the profession.



Findings

I think the Black parents that come in and look around, they do worry because it isn't as diverse as it could be. I think they worry about the interactions with other children because they exclude even by gender so as they get older I have noticed that is more of a thing. From 2/3 to preschool, they begin to see boys playing with boys and vice versa. So, I think that sort of comes in (with race) because some kids can be like that and they obviously don't want it to be seen as a negative I suppose. With gender we always challenge that sort of stuff, so I guess with people of colour that could also be something that happens. (Safi)

As a counternarrative, this highlights the **need to discuss race**.



Findings

I think with the parents I've met at the moment that are Black, they seem happy to see me! It's like they were hiding everybody away and suddenly I pop up, so they're asking what have you been doing and where have you come from? So yeah, I delight in the fact that it looks like there's a **relief on their face**, I can say oh we're not the only ones here or **thank god there is someone I could talk to that looks like me.** (Mandy)

As a counternarrative, this highlights **the value of representation** in community work with parents.



My research

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In conclusion

Moving beyond the notion of race as something that is irrelevant, or inappropriate at this level of education, towards a more critically informed understanding of what kinds of influence that minoritised educators can have, is crucial in addressing experiences of racism in educational spaces. **Black studies remains a relatively new field in academia** and **the paucity of research on the Black educator in ECEC**, combined with the data presented, therefore **justify a need to continue to focus on *the experiences* of those in the ECEC profession.**

Tembo (2020:12)



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'Hang on, she just used that word like it's totally easy': Encountering ordinary racial affects in early childhood education and care

[Shaddai Tembo](#) 

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Abstract

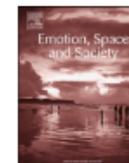
At a time when racism remains prevalent in educational spaces, this paper addresses what *else* we can know about the ways in which race and racism manifest and are experienced in practice. This paper draws on continual mobilisations of affect and new materialist theory to examine the conditions of emergence through which race and racism are experienced within ordinary, yet affective, encounters. I propose that drawing attention to how race surfaces in affective encounters may allow us to develop more critical interventions that challenge racisms in process.

Keywords

[Race and racism](#), [affect](#), [early childhood education and care](#), [assemblages](#), [ontology](#)

Opening

If documented experiences of race and racism among educators remain an under-researched area within the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC), then theorisations on the role of 'affective' experiences are even fewer still. The purpose of this article is to draw upon the theory of affect to think through the ways in which experiences of race are felt and lived in ECEC ([Massumi, 2002](#); [Stewart, 2007](#)). I return to my own existing data from a previous study into the experiences of Black educators at work in predominately white spaces to foreground ordinary, everyday racial affects. I argue that a focus on affect may provide insight into the ways in which bodies become racialised through assemblages and contribute to the existing literature on anti-racist pedagogies.



Bodies out of place: Affective encounters with whiteness

Shaddai Tembo

University of the West of Scotland, United Kingdom

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Affective encounters

ABSTRACT

This essay foregrounds the role of affect in felt experiences of whiteness by illustrating two accounts, one that took place on 25th May 2020 between Amy Cooper and Christian Cooper in Central Park, and an encounter from the authors previous study on Black educators' experiences of working in white spaces. In doing so, this essay is an affective attunement to the ways that felt intensities inform our experience of power relations and ultimately constrain the capacities of bodies to act.

1. Introduction

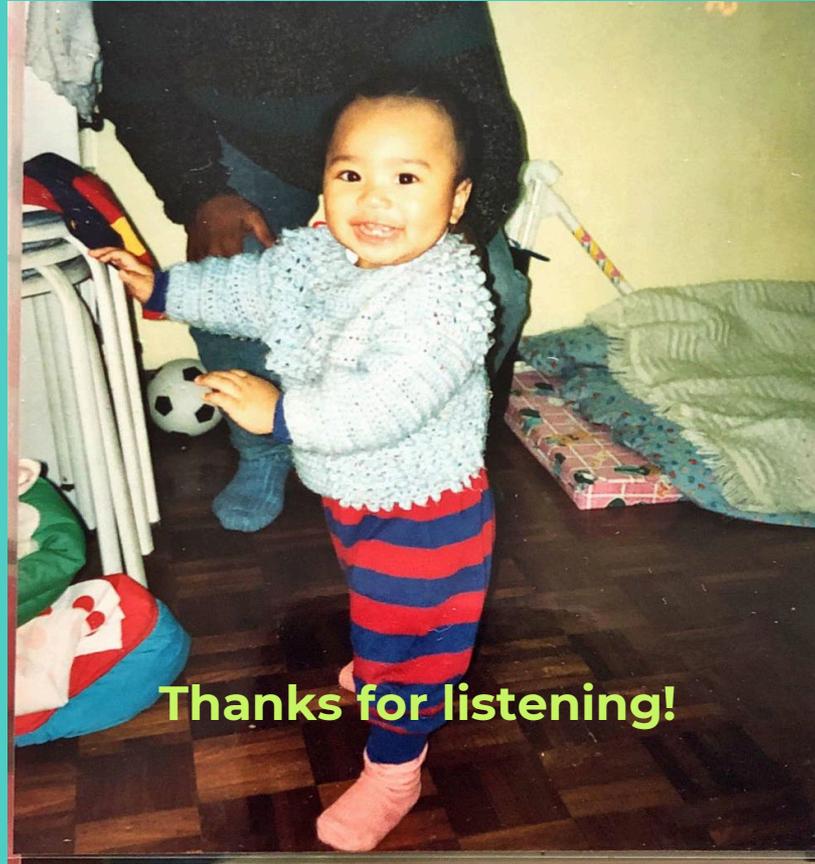
A year on from the resurgent Black Lives Matter movement and global protests around the world against racism, much has been written about what might be done to meaningfully address the routine dehumanisation of Black and minoritised people's lives. Across public and scholarly arenas, increased scrutiny has been paid toward the role of whiteness as a conceptual tool and its application in practice. This partly autoethnographic essay aims to explore how whiteness impresses upon spaces as an *affective formation of power*, partially extending an existing line of scholarship pertaining to the felt experience of whiteness (Ahmed, 2007; Hook, 2005; Leonardo and Zembylas, 2013; Matias, 2016; Saldanha, 2006). Partially, too, extending on the 'turn to affect' within qualitative cultural inquiry in recent years (Gale, 2014; Serra Undurraga, 2019; St. Pierre, 2020).

I begin this essay by introducing affect and detailing how it works, before 'feelingthinking' (Wolfe and Hook, 2019) through two encounters that foreground experiences of whiteness as affective.¹ Feelingthinking provides a heuristic technique to work through my felt experience of these examples and become entangled *in media res*, in the midst of the relations they generate. 'Encounter' is deliberately used to consider the emergence of unplanned events that involve surprise and conflict, as an assemblage of things coming together. Firstly, I turn to the encounter that took place on 25th May 2020 between Amy Cooper and Christian Cooper in Central Park and subsequently went viral on social media. I use this particular encounter not because it is any more or less important than any others that have circulated online during this period, notably the video of George Floyd's state-sanctioned murder a day later,

but because *it has had an affect on me that I have needed to write out of my body*. Sensing the political nature of what is at stake within these encounters is an 'affective attunement' attentive to intensities, a sense that something is happening, a something that forces us to think (Stewart, 2010). In the second example, I return to data from an earlier study on Black early childhood educators' experiences of working in predominantly white spaces. I situate this within the broader affective turn in early childhood scholarship and attend to whiteness as the palpable feeling of being affected, debilitated, and of being put out of place. As a former early childhood educator myself, the encounter I share here resonates with my experiences of these spaces where the felt experience of whiteness can impress upon Black and minoritised people.

The intention for bringing these two seemingly distant encounters into proximity is threefold. Firstly, I intend to draw attention to the everyday, routine assembly of whiteness across overlapping and not entirely distinct geographical contexts. These are entirely situated encounters that locate the mundanity of Black life (such as bird-watching in a park or walking into a room) within particular places. Yet, at the same time, such encounters are necessarily implicated within the broader diasporic concerns regarding Black subjectivities throughout the contemporary West (Andrews, 2018; McKittrick and Woods, 2007). To use a popular cultural refrain, both encounters seem to have the 'same energy', the same debilitating feeling of facing whiteness. Neither can be read as distinct from the colonial histories that continue to saturate our present moments. Whiteness is nothing less than a globally felt process of oppression in the ongoing wake of anti-Blackness (Sharpe, 2016).

My second aim for situating these encounters together is an



Thanks for listening!

