



RACE EQUITY
EDUCATION GROUP

A COMMUNITY-LED EXPLORATION OF RACE EQUITY IN EDUCATION

7 JULY 2025



Thank you

This report, and indeed the entire journey of the Race Equity in Education Group (REEG), would not have been possible without the profound support, collaboration, and courage of several key organisations and individuals. We extend our deepest gratitude to:



The Ubele Initiative | Our heartfelt thanks go to The Ubele Initiative for their pivotal role in inviting us into the Black Systemic Safety Fund process. Their consistent support and guidance throughout have been invaluable. As a truly trusted Black-led organisation, Ubele consistently demonstrates powerful leadership, empowering communities not just in words but through tangible action. We are deeply grateful for the safe and challenging space they provided, for their insightful critique, and for their boldness in designing a process that actively challenged the status quo. Furthermore, we commend their exemplary modelling of a relationship with the funder that gracefully and with unwavering integrity turned the tables on traditional power dynamics, fostering a truly equitable collaboration.

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Impact
on Urban
Health

Impact on Urban Health | We express immense gratitude to Impact on Urban Health, whose significant financial commitment to this process transcended the typical "talking shop" approach. By genuinely putting their money where their mouth is, they provided the essential resources that allowed meaningful, impactful projects to emerge from the Safety Lab process. Their active involvement, including putting together the final event for the report launch and having team members consistently engaged throughout the project's duration, was deeply appreciated. This level of funder involvement was refreshing and highly beneficial.

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Acknowledgements

Young People



At the heart of this project are the **young people** who participated with courage, insight and creativity. From the outset, our mission was to centre their voices authentically and recognise them as experts of their own experiences. Through role play, poetry, mood boarding and discussion, they engaged with complex and often painful themes with honesty, curiosity and depth.

Acknowledgements

Young People



They asked difficult questions, challenged assumptions and offered perspectives that demanded reflection. Their creative expressions of racism in schools opened our community roundtable event, setting the tone for the conversations that followed. Their contributions moved us as a project team and as an audience and reminded us why this work matters.

Our commitment to them is clear. We will carry their voices forward, and hold systems and structures to account, so that their experiences lead to genuine, lasting change.

Acknowledgements

Community Partners

This project was enriched by the leadership, creativity and care of several local Black-led organisations, each commissioned to deliver workshops that explored the theme of racism in education through creative practice.

Using methods such as poetry, role play and moodboarding, these partners created safe, affirming spaces where young people could reflect, express and share their experiences honestly.

Both the process and the outputs were a testament to how deeply these organisations understand the communities they serve. Their work created the emotional and cultural foundation for the rest of the project.

Before the community roundtable, all of the partner organisations came together to share their creative contributions. That moment felt powerful, a collective expression of resistance, hope and clarity that set the tone for everything that followed.

We are deeply grateful for their leadership, their integrity and their commitment to justice.

Acknowledgements

Community Partners



Credit: Ahmed Kamara

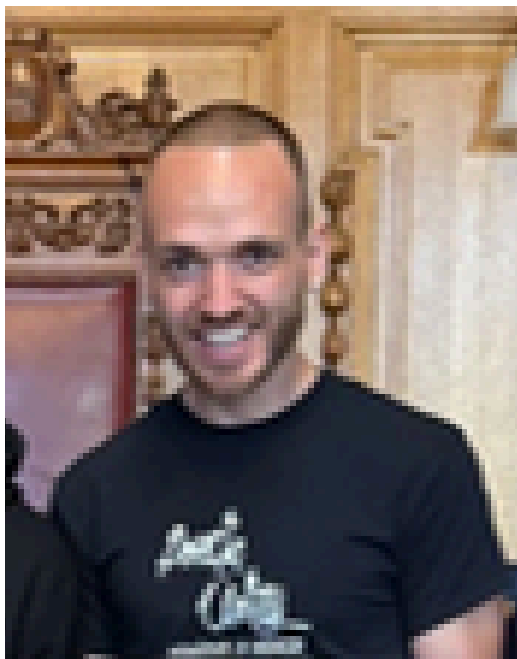


Milk Honey Bees

Facilitated by Ebinehita Iyere and team

Milk Honey Bees is a creative and expressive safe space that supports Black girls to flourish and take up space unapologetically. Through mood-boarding and guided workshops, they enabled participants to visualise and express their experiences in a nurturing and affirming environment.

www.milkhoneybees.com



Poetic Unity

Facilitated by Ryan Matthews-Robinson and Courtney Brown

Poetic Unity is a Brixton-based charity that uses poetry to support young people's mental health, confidence and communication. Their workshop used spoken word to open up brave dialogue, enabling students to speak powerfully on their lived experiences of school and identity.

www.poeticunity.org.uk

Acknowledgements

Community Partners



Preacher the Storyteller
Facilitated by
Emmanuel Peters

Preacher the Storyteller delivers storytelling-based workshops that promote emotional intelligence, identity and empowerment. Their role play sessions created space for young people to explore racial dynamics in schools through dialogue, movement and reflection.

www.preacherthestoryteller.com



Gifted Classes
Facilitated by Aaron Deacon
and Ashleigh Sobowale

Gifted Classes is a youth-focused creative organisation that uses performing arts and drama to build confidence, self-awareness and leadership. Their role play sessions supported students in exploring difficult topics in dynamic, safe and empowering ways.

www.giftedclasses.co.uk

Acknowledgements

Community Partners



Theatre Peckham

**Facilitated by Suzann McLean
and the TP team**

Theatre Peckham is an award-winning cultural venue and Black-led youth arts organisation committed to creative empowerment and equity. In addition to delivering a powerful drama-based workshop, they hosted both the pre-roundtable and roundtable events, holding space with care, professionalism and vision. Their contribution underpinned the project's success.

www.theatrepeckham.co.uk



**Afro-Caribbean Education
Network (ACEN)**

**Facilitated by
Aisha Sanusi**

ACEN works to close the racial disparities in education through policy influence, partnerships and direct engagement with schools. Their sessions introduced racial literacy through primary and secondary school assemblies, equipping students with language, historical context and space to reflect.

www.acen.org.uk

Acknowledgements

Community Partners

We extend our sincere thanks to the schools that welcomed us into their communities and hosted workshops and assemblies as part of this project: St George's Church of England Primary School (Southwark), Oliver Goldsmith Primary School (Southwark), Trinity Academy (Lambeth) and The Norwood School (Lambeth).

We are especially grateful to **Jasaan Machaliwa**, Deputy Headteacher at Oliver Goldsmith Primary School, and **Celica Douglas**, Deputy Headteacher at The Norwood School, for their belief in this work and their active advocacy within their schools. Their leadership created the space for this project to take place. Without their commitment and support, this work would not have been possible.

We would also like to acknowledge the contributions of several individuals who played vital roles in shaping the roundtable event.

Cedric Whilby (Southwark Cultural Health Wellbeing & Partnership, SCHWeP) and **Tony Cealy** (81 Acts of Exuberant Defiance) skilfully facilitated group discussions, bringing deep expertise in community dialogue, cultural wellbeing and participatory practice. Their presence ensured that conversations were thoughtful, grounded and inclusive.



Acknowledgements

Panelists, Host, Keynote



We are also grateful to the individuals who sat on the panel at the roundtable event. Their honesty, expertise and lived experience added depth and urgency to the conversation, helping to elevate the voices of young people and challenge the audience to think critically about equity in education.

We are also grateful to **Professor Nate Holder**, who hosted the roundtable and helped weave together the different threads of the event with care and insight. His ability to hold space and guide the flow of the day was invaluable.



Finally, we thank **Nadine Bernard**, local headteacher and founder of Aspiring Heads, who delivered a powerful and heartfelt keynote speech. Her words resonated deeply and reminded all present of the human cost of inaction and the urgency of doing better.

Foreword



Jade Ecobichon-Gray

It is my privilege to introduce this report as Learning Partner, bringing both a reflective and critical lens to the Race Equity in Education Group's journey. From our very first conversations, I was struck by the core project team's commitment to centre the voice of the community, positioning students, parents, and educators as lived-experience experts whose insights, ideas, and aspirations must be heard. In my practice as a Social Wellness and EDI Consultant, I have witnessed well-intentioned initiatives falter when they become performative exercises, lacking in genuine systemic change; here, we consciously steered away from charters and towards community-led co-production, a pivot that has driven every step of our process.

We extend our deepest gratitude to every young person, parent, educator, and community partner whose courage and insight are honoured in these pages. Special thanks to The Ubele Initiative and Impact on Urban Health for backing this work not merely with words but with significant support, ensuring our ideas could move from discussion to impact. Our thanks also go to Marcus Jones for crafting the short film that so beautifully captured the journey. We are also beyond appreciative of the educators in Southwark and Lambeth who opened their classrooms to our creative workshops, and to the community organisations; Poetic Unity, Milk Honey Bees, Preacher the Storyteller, Gifted Classes, Theatre Peckham, and the Afro-Caribbean Education Network, whose artistry, facilitation, and leadership made this collaborative process possible.

Foreword



Across assemblies, creative sessions, interviews, surveys, and our culminating Roundtable, our work shows that meaningful equity requires both bold structural reforms and deep cultural transformation. Structural changes set the frame, with new policies, roles, resources, and accountability bodies, while whole-school engagement in ongoing learning, reflection, and shared decision-making brings those reforms to life. When students, teachers, support staff, parents, and leaders alike are invited to examine assumptions, share power, and co-design solutions, the result is not merely better policy but a living culture of inclusion across the entire education ecosystem. Young people spoke with both frustration and aspiration, sharing their experiences of inequitable learning environments and their hopes for change. Educators, in turn, described the challenge of balancing policy demands with the work of nurturing every child. Parents spoke with urgency, calling for resources, protected time, and a steadfast commitment to embed anti-racist practice at every level for their children and for those who come after them.

As the Learning Partner I facilitated a half-day session in the early stages of the project that reframed our purpose and methodology. Rather than default to a predetermined framework, we held space for honest critique which included questioning what terms like ‘equity’, ‘anti-racist’, and ‘culture’ in schools truly means, and whether charters that lack accountability and sustainable action do anything other than amplify systemic distrust. That workshop not only generated the four guiding questions that shaped our Roundtable, but it also centered a commitment to active listening, and a collective readiness to embrace complexity and discomfort as sources of insight.

Foreword



This project's mixed-methods approach, grounded in Participatory Action Research (PAR), was chosen to subvert traditional power dynamics and centre lived expertise. Workshops with young people didn't merely gather data; they created counterspaces where students could speak candidly about their experiences, and begin to reimagine what safety, equity and affirmation look like in schools. Reflexive thematic analysis allowed us to surface four convergent themes; systemic distrust, emotional safety, creative empowerment, and critical hope, that form the backbone of this report. In the pages that follow, you will find:

- A detailed account of our PAR-informed methodology and ethical commitments.
- A thematic analysis of student, parent, and educator experiences, illustrating both the psychological cost of systemic racism and the transformative power of community-led spaces.
- The prototype for a Community-Led Advisory Group, designed to shift accountability downward and embed "relational repair" into school governance.
- Actionable recommendations for funding models, whole-school anti-racist practice, and sustainable co-production.

My hope is that this report becomes a meaningful catalyst for change. One that urges educators, leaders, and policymakers to partner with, rather than prescribe to, Black children and families. May it inspire you to listen with intent, to resource community agency, and to build the infrastructures that will enable every child to thrive through compassion, care, and community.

Jade Ecobichon-Gray

Founder, Mindset Matters UK; REEG Learning Partner

Executive Summary

More than fifty years after Bernard Coard exposed institutional racism in British schools, Black children are still navigating an education system that harms more than it helps. This report shares the findings of the Race Equity in Education Group (REEG), a community-led research project that centres the lived experiences of Black students, parents, and educators across Southwark and Lambeth.

Our aim was not just to document the problem but to co-design new solutions, led by those most affected



OUR APPROACH

We used a participatory action research model, engaging:

- 292 young people through creative workshops and school assemblies
- 6 community organisations with deep local roots
- Parents, teachers, and youth through interviews, surveys, and a multi-stakeholder roundtable
- A core team of lived experience and academic practitioners

What began as a plan to create an anti-racist charter evolved, based on community feedback, into something more radical and necessary: **a prototype for a Community-Led Advisory Group, designed to hold schools accountable and redistribute power.**

KEY INSIGHTS

Performative Equity Fuels Distrust

Black students and families do not trust schools to act on their commitments. Anti-racist posters and charters are seen as surface-level, with no impact on daily school life or policy.

Racism Comes at a Cost

Students described emotional exhaustion, misrecognition, and feeling "caged" or "policed" in school. This damages mental health, belonging, and attainment.

Counter-Spaces Create Possibility

In contrast, community-led workshops were named as safe, affirming, and empowering. Young people found voice, solidarity, and hope conditions schools should replicate.

The Call: Listen, Act, Share Power

Participants were clear: schools must stop acting alone. Solutions must be shaped with - not for - the communities they serve.



OUR RESPONSE

A NEW MODEL

We co-designed a prototype for a Community-Led Advisory Group, a structure that embeds student, parent, and community voice into school governance. It creates:

- Ongoing accountability
- A platform for lived experience
- A shift from symbolic change to cultural transformation

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS



1 Establish and Fund the Group

Pilot the advisory group with sustainable funding.

2 Invest in Cultural Transformation

Move beyond one-off trainings and standalone charters. Embed an anti-racist lens across all policies, curricula, and performance reviews, and build ongoing structures for reflection, dialogue, and shared decision-making.

3 Let Community Lead

Include community in design, compensate them fairly, honour their expertise, and commit to a sustained partnership.

**This is more than a report.
It is a blueprint for action and an
invitation to funders, schools, and
systems to show up differently.**

Background & Project Purpose

The Race Equity in Education Group (REEG) was created by three community-rooted leaders: **Joel Dunn** (Paradigm Project), **Dr Suzann McLean MBE** (Theatre Peckham), and **Katrina Thomas** (UDA). Each organisation operates in different spaces, but they share a common mission.

REEG was formed to respond. Not by adding more policies, but by centring lived experience & co-designing new ways to embed accountability into the education system.

To *disrupt* the systemic inequities that affect Black children in education

Across Southwark and Lambeth, these leaders witnessed the same issues repeating. Families were losing trust in schools. Black students were experiencing racism with little support. Well-meaning policies were not translating into meaningful change.

WHY THIS WORK MATTERS

This project sits within the wider context of the **Black Systemic Safety Fund**, led by **The Ubele Initiative** and funded by **Impact on Urban Health**. The fund was created to support Black-led organisations in driving long-term, cultural transformation. Education emerged as one of the most urgent areas of concern.

OUR AIMS

- To document the real experiences of Black students, parents and educators
- To understand why race equity work in schools often feels hollow or short-lived
- To design a community-led model that can support lasting, cultural transformation

HOW OUR FOCUS EVOLVED

We began with the idea of creating an anti-racist charter. But early findings and steering from the Learning Partner revealed that communities were fatigued by performative approaches that rarely lead to change. **We listened, reflected and adapted.**

What followed was the co-creation of a new prototype. One that moves beyond statements and into action. One that gives power to those most affected.

Meet The Team

The REEG brings together a **cross-sector team of community leaders**, educators and researchers each deeply embedded in Southwark and Lambeth. With lived experience, academic expertise and a **shared commitment to justice**, the team combined creative methods, policy insight and grassroots networks to centre the voices of those most affected by racism in education and co-design practical solutions for change.



DR SUZANN MCLEAN
MBE Lead Consultant



KATRINA THOMAS
Lead Consultant



JOEL DUNN
Lead Consultant



JADE ECOBICHON-GRAY
Learning Partner



REMIEL MITCHELL
Project Manager & Strategic Lead





JOEL DUNN

Founder - Paradigm Project



As the primary author of this report and evaluator of this project, my perspective is deeply informed by a career committed to systemic change, advocating for upstream solutions and preventative strategies. I hold a strong belief that meaningful transformation must commence long before crises emerge. My personal journey, which includes navigating the criminal justice system and serving time in prison, alongside frontline work addressing youth violence, has instilled a profound sense of responsibility to drive change. These lived experiences have powerfully reinforced my conviction that early intervention is absolutely crucial to disrupting cycles of disadvantage.

As the founder and CEO of a grassroots charity, I bring a unique blend of lived experience, practical insight, and academic rigour to this work. My ongoing pursuit of a PhD at the University of Cambridge, where I am researching how to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline, positions me as a "pracademic." This allows for a direct integration of theory and practice, aiming to foster lasting impact in education and criminal justice.



DR SUZANN MCLEAN MBE

CEO/Artistic Director, Theatre Peckham | Founder, Young and Talented



As the CEO/Artistic Director of Theatre Peckham and founder of Young and Talented, my approach to leadership in the arts is shaped by both lived experience and a sustained commitment to systemic change. My journey as an actor, director, and cultural practitioner has been driven by a determination to challenge exclusion and widen access within the creative industries.

Having worked extensively across theatre, film, and TV, I've seen how access to the arts is too often shaped by postcode, privilege, and visibility. Conversely, I have also witnessed the transformative power of the arts, as a space where inclusion is the norm, and everyone regardless of background, see themselves reflected and valued.

At Theatre Peckham, I have worked to build an organisation that actively creates pathways for young people to lead and shape their own narratives.

This commitment has been recognised through several honours, including an MBE for Services to the Arts and Young People, and an honorary doctorate from the University of the Arts London.



KATRINA THOMAS

Founder and Director – UDA



As a PE specialist with a background in dance, gymnastics and fencing, I've spent over a decade working directly with children and young people across schools, community organisations and outreach settings. My work has always focused on improving wellbeing, building self-belief and creating inclusive spaces for young people to thrive through movement, mindset coaching and holistic education.

My commitment to equity was shaped not only by my professional practice, but by my lived experience as a Black mother navigating the UK education system. When my son began experiencing behavioural exclusions as early as nursery, including being suspended at age five and placed in a pupil referral unit by Year 4, I found myself in a constant fight for his right to education. His journey was marked by missed diagnoses, exclusionary policies, safeguarding concerns and a system that often criminalised him instead of offering support. As he moved through school, college and specialist services, I had to become his advocate, educating myself on legal and SEN procedures just to stop him from being left behind.

That experience, painful and enduring, showed me how many other Black children and families were caught in similar cycles. I couldn't accept what the system offered, so I chose to build something different. That decision became the foundation of my mission and the reason I founded UDA.



LEARNING PARTNER | JADE ECOBICHON-GRAY

Founder and Director, Mindset Matters



Jade Ecobichon-Gray is a Social Wellness and EDI Consultant, Cultural Humility Educator, and PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge, where she is researching “EDI as Transformative Education.” Drawing on a background in health psychology and over a decade of experience across social care, wellness, and diversity initiatives, she blends rigorous, evidence-based insights with creative facilitation to drive systemic change. Throughout her career, Jade has led multi-stakeholder projects in the public sector, charities, and corporate settings, guiding organisations beyond one-off trainings toward deeply embedded cultural transformation. Her strategic approach elevates lived expertise, fosters shared ownership, and builds lasting capacity for reflection, growth, and accountability.

Her recruitment to the Race Equity in Education Group was pivotal; she possessed specialist skills and critical EDI expertise that were not represented within the core team. This unique lens was instrumental in shaping and directing the project, without which its development would have been significantly hampered, if not impossible.



PROJECT MANAGER & STRATEGIC LEAD | REMIEL MITCHELL

Founder and Director, Optimise Workforce



Remiel Mitchell is a highly experienced Leadership & Development Consultant, specialising in Project Management. He provides consultancy with a distinct project and programme focus for internal teams within organisations, alongside delivering CPD-accredited project management training to professionals and academics who may have limited prior knowledge or experience in the field. His work aims to empower individuals and teams to enhance their skills, foster efficiency, and build confidence in project execution.

Remiel's recruitment to the Race Equity in Education Group was absolutely essential to manage the many moving components of the project. With his expertise in managing complex initiatives, he provided invaluable oversight across the multiple moving parts and diverse priorities inherent in the project. His strategic acumen ensured joined-up working, thorough planning, and the precise execution necessary to translate the group's vision into tangible progress. Remiel's unique ability to structure and guide the collaborative process was instrumental in maintaining momentum and ensuring the project's coherence.

The Case for Change: Research Insights

The findings of this project reflect not only lived experience, but decades of research into racial inequity in UK education. The themes raised by students, parents and educators are echoed consistently in the literature, from curriculum design to school exclusions, from staff diversity to the limitations of institutional responses.

Systemic Racism in UK Education

The marginalisation of Black children in UK schools is not new. As far back as 1971, Bernard Coard exposed how systemic bias in education positioned West Indian children as "educationally sub-normal" (Coard, 1971/2021). Over fifty years later, many of the same patterns persist (Bhopal, 2018; Black Equity Organisation, 2024).

Contemporary research shows that racial disparities remain embedded across key areas:

CURRICULUM

The national curriculum centres Eurocentric narratives, failing to reflect the histories or contributions of Black communities. This lack of representation contributes to a sense of alienation and constitutes a form of epistemic violence (Housee, 2020; Arday & Mirza, 2018; Rollock, 2022).

DISCIPLINE

Black Caribbean students are disproportionately excluded. Black Caribbean girls, for example, are excluded at twice the rate of their white peers (Agenda Alliance, 2023; Demie, 2021). These exclusions contribute to what scholars describe as the "school-to-prison pipeline" (Ali, 2023).

The Case for Change: Research Insights

ATTAINMENT

Black African students tend to outperform national averages, while Black Caribbean students often fall behind, a gap that points not to inherent ability, but to institutional failures (Universities UK, 2019; Codioli McMaster, 2021).

LEADERSHIP AND REPRESENTATION

While Black people make up over 4% of the UK working population, they represent just 1% of school headteachers (Black Equity Organisation, 2024). A lack of cultural understanding and role models exacerbates marginalisation.

The Problem with Performative Responses

Many schools have responded to these challenges with race equity charters or inclusion statements. Yet research consistently questions the impact of these top-down frameworks, noting that they are often performative, compliance-driven and disconnected from real change (Pathak, 2021; Liyanage, 2022).

Critical Race Theory offers one explanation. Bell's (1980) theory of "interest convergence" suggests that change for marginalised groups is only supported when it aligns with the interests of those in power. This helps explain why race equity work often stalls when it threatens institutional comfort (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023).

As Ahmed (2012) and others argue, anti-racism efforts are often reduced to branding exercises or 'tick-box' initiatives, with minimal structural impact (Memon & Jivraj, 2022; Dar & Ibrahim, 2019).

The Case for Change: Research Insights



Why Community-Led Work Matters

In contrast to institutional responses, Black-led community initiatives including Black Supplementary Schools and cultural counter-spaces have consistently provided affirming environments for Black children (Andrews, 2013; Ricketts, 2018).

These spaces offer:

- Culturally relevant pedagogy
- High expectations without deficit narratives
- A sense of safety, belonging and identity

However, they remain underfunded, under-recognised and at risk of co-option by systems that depoliticise their intent (Durham University, 2020; Do It Now Now, 2020).

This project builds on that tradition. It shows that when young people are trusted as experts in their own lives and when their communities are positioned as leaders, not observers new possibilities emerge.

What We Learned: Reflections on Systems, Power and Possibility



1. Intent is Not Enough Without Infrastructure

One of the clearest lessons from this project is the gap between intention and action. Educators expressed a desire to do better, but lacked time, training and institutional support. Parents shared frustration that schools say the right things, but do not follow through.

This echoes Ahmed's (2012) critique of institutional "non-performativity" where saying you are committed to equity becomes a substitute for enacting it. It also aligns with Memon and Jivraj (2022), who argue that without deep structural change, equity work risks becoming symbolic.

"If you want to do this work, it comes out of your personal time." — Teacher interviewee

**“ You’ll see posters for
Black History Month.
But that’s not the same
as being culturally
responsive. ”**

Parent

What We Learned: Reflections on Systems, Power and Possibility



2. Young People Are Not Passive They Are Paying Attention

Students were not simply recipients of school policy. They read between the lines. They felt the disconnect between schools' public statements and daily experiences. They noticed who listened, who didn't, and who performed care without follow-up.

This reflects a growing body of research that positions young people as agents, not subjects. Scholars such as James et al. (2024) highlight the need for youth-centred approaches that value children's interpretive insight, not just their data.

In our project, creative mediums became a vehicle for this insight. Students did not just describe harm they challenged it, reframed it and imagined alternatives.

“ Just because
I am young
doesn't mean
my voice
doesn't matter ”
Student poem

What We Learned: Reflections on Systems, Power and Possibility



3. Structural Reform *and* Cultural Transformation

Much of the harm described in this project cannot be explained by individual prejudice alone. It is structural, from rigid behaviour policies to Eurocentric curricula and the racialised logic of school exclusions. These patterns persist because they are built into the very design of our education systems.

Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) shows us that racism in schools is not an anomaly but a feature maintained through policies, routines, and assumptions that appear neutral.

This means that our solutions cannot be limited to one-off workshops or diversity events. They must transform the system itself, revising how schools are designed, reshaping who holds power, and reimagining accountability. Equally important is fostering a school-wide culture of continuous learning, shared decision-making, and reflective practice so that structural changes take root and equity becomes a living reality.

“

**Well meaning
policies can still
perpetuate
harm**

Roundtable participant

”

What We Learned: Reflections on Systems, Power and Possibility



4. Community Belonging is a Protective Factor

In contrast to experiences of silencing or surveillance in schools, community-led spaces created safety, belonging and voice. This was evident in both the creative workshops and the roundtable. Participants described feeling seen, validated and empowered.

This reflects research into the protective role of counter-spaces, environments created by and for marginalised groups that foster resilience and resistance (Case & Hunter, 2012; Ricketts, 2018). In the context of schools, these spaces do more than repair harm. They offer a vision of what education could be.

Yet these spaces remain undervalued and underfunded. Without sustained investment, they cannot carry the weight of what schools fail to provide.

“ Being able to
express myself
helped me feel confident
to speak up ”
Workshop participant

What this Means



The problem is not a lack of understanding. It is a lack of will, structure and accountability. Schools need help moving beyond rhetoric. Funders need to commit to long-term, relational, non-extractive partnerships. And system leaders must start listening in ways that lead to redistribution of power.

This project has shown what is possible when we start from lived experience and stay open to what emerges. The Community-Led Advisory Group is not just a model. It is a mechanism for shifting who gets to define problems and propose solutions.

As Bell (1980) reminds us, real progress only happens when the interests of those who are marginalised are centred, not just accommodated. The challenge now is to turn insight into infrastructure.

Conclusion: From Insight to Action



This project has made visible what many communities have long known, that equity cannot be delivered through statements, pledges or occasional interventions. It must be built into the culture, structures and relationships that shape the school ecosystem.

We heard clearly that students are ready to lead, that parents have insight schools cannot afford to ignore, and that educators need the time, tools and support to move from intention to impact.

But none of this will happen by accident. Shifting power takes planning. Accountability requires new infrastructure. And transformation depends on more than good will it demands courage, collaboration and sustained investment. The insights gathered through this work are not the end of the process. They are the foundation for something new.

In the next section, we outline three strategic recommendations for system-level change, followed by a prototype for a Community-Led Advisory Group that offers a practical, scalable model for redistributing power in education.

This is not a moment to reflect

It is a
moment
to act

Methodology

This project used a participatory action research (PAR) approach, designed to centre community voice and challenge traditional power dynamics in research and education.

We worked alongside young people, parents, educators and community organisations throughout the process. Rather than extract data, we created space for lived experience to shape the questions, the direction and the outcomes.



WHO WE ENGAGED

- **292 young people** took part in workshops and assemblies led by local community groups
- **6 community organisations** delivered creative, safe spaces for young people to speak openly
- **3 parents and 3 teachers** were interviewed in-depth to explore their perspectives
- **A multi-stakeholder roundtable** brought together students, educators, community leaders and council representatives
- **Feedback and reflection** continued after the roundtable to support ongoing learning and accountability

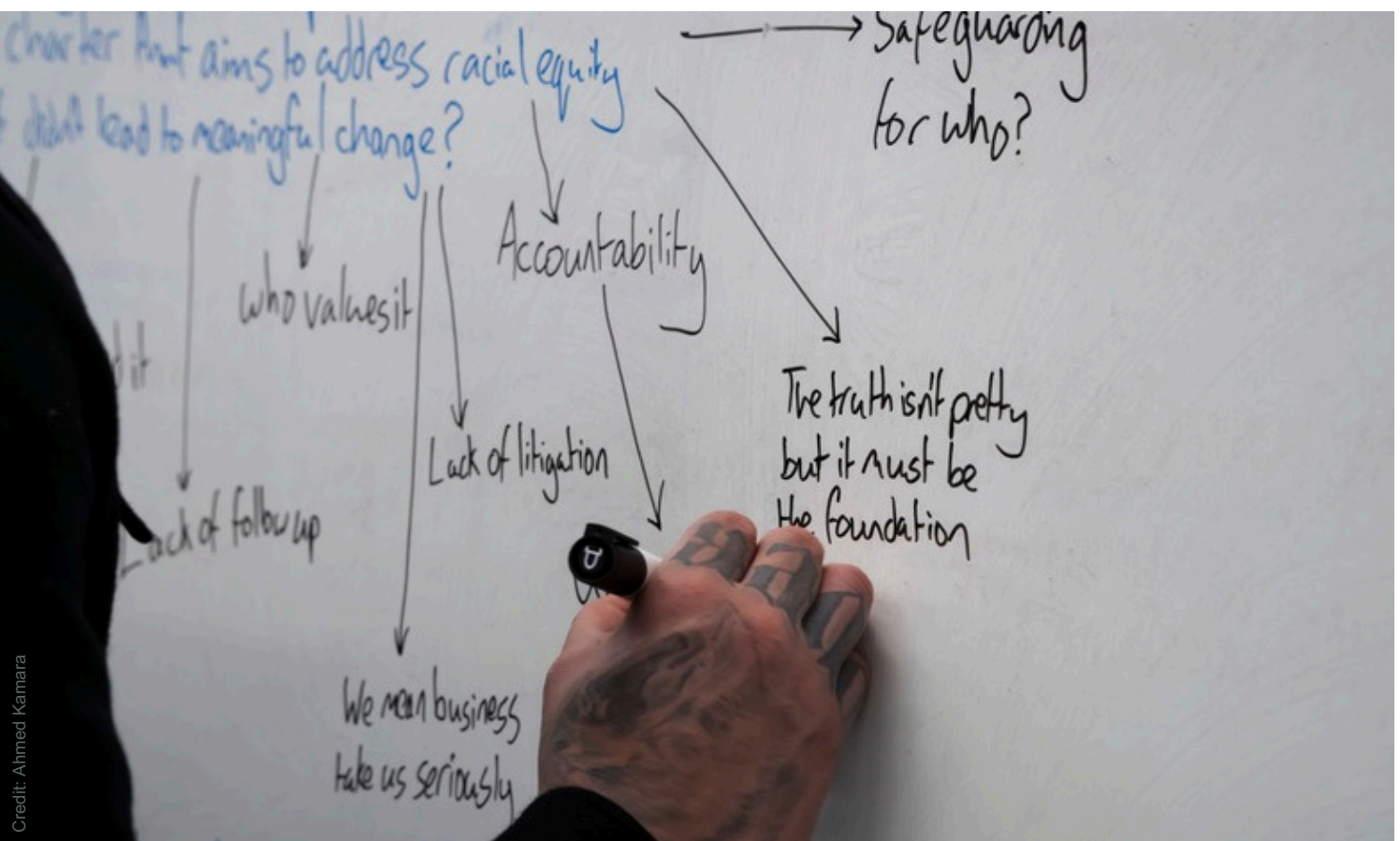
HOW WE COLLECTED DATA

- Creative workshops using poetry, art, storytelling and role play
- Surveys with Year 10 students to gather insights of race inequity in school
- Semi-structured interviews with parents and teachers
- Roundtable discussions and a follow-up focus group to test and refine ideas

OUR COMMITMENT

We ensured informed consent, protected participant anonymity, and created non-extractive spaces rooted in cultural humility, emotional safety, and respect. The process remained responsive, allowing the final prototype to emerge organically based on what was heard.

Key Findings



Our research surfaced four interconnected themes that cut across all data sources, from student poems and parent interviews to educator reflections and roundtable dialogue. Together, they reveal a clear mandate for change.

1. Performative Equity and Systemic Distrust

Students and families shared deep scepticism toward schools' anti-racist commitments. Charters and posters are widely seen as symbolic gestures with little impact on day-to-day experiences. This has created a culture of distrust where students turn to friends over teachers, and many no longer believe the system will protect them.

“They say come and talk to me, but they’re too busy when you do”

Student

2. The Emotional Cost of Racism in School

Young people described feeling policed, misjudged and emotionally drained. Poems spoke of being "caged" or "trained like an animal." Parents echoed this, noting how their children's confidence and wellbeing are eroded by a system that fails to see them clearly.

“ If I speak,
I'm seen as
difficult. It's a
no-win situation ”
Parent

3. The Power of Community-Led Spaces

In contrast to school environments, workshops run by local organisations were described as safe, validating and transformative. Students expressed pride, belonging and hope. These spaces helped them move from silence to voice and from critique to confidence.

“ Just because I
am young doesn't
mean my voice
doesn't matter ”
Workshop participant

4. The Call for Accountability and Structural Change

Across all groups, the message was clear: enough talking. There is urgent demand for schools to move from statements to systems. Participants want ongoing structures where families and communities help shape school culture, policies and responses not just comment on them.

“ List five
urgent things
and get two done
in six months ”
Roundtable participant

What is understood by the term 'culture' in schools? How is it adopted and embedded?

1. Culture is not fully understood
2. It is hard based, its continuity beyond in time
3. Can feel toxic
4. It is something you pick up, the feel, the nothing when you walk into a space. It is a sensation
5. Paradoxically, culture is their ethos. For Oxford it is the feel of the school. Something with children. It is about where they see their
6. Subtle and experience, culture (where you were raised for example)
7. Teachers are generally well-meaning but don't always seek the advice or input of parents
8. Culture is not what you say it is, it is what you live
9. To embed you have to 'top into' the culture and strengthen or shoring up what exists & it is against equity
10. It is not something you can 'parachute' into a place
11. It is dependent on the community you serve
12. It is contingent on learning to embed
13. Move to cultural 'values'
14. Does the school fit the cultural needs of the child?
15. Senior leadership of the school sets the culture
16. It becomes less top down the older you get
17. There is a 'vibe' within the whole school, but then there is a 'vibe' within a particular school year
18. Student within affects school
19. The voice of a young person is powerful and empowered by equipping people with tools and by galvanising community support
20. There is power in numbers
21. Parents do not understand how powerful their voice is
22. Parents who are getting outcomes are the ones who understand the policy
23. When parents join together it affects change
24. Advocacy is key to transformation

Evidence Snapshots

The data collected through this project was rich, diverse and deeply human. Below are key insights from young people, parents, teachers and community leaders that illustrate both the scale of the challenge and the seeds of possibility.

What we heard...

*“I’m not included
Not today”*

Poem excerpt

*“The system won’t really change
for Black girls... so the best we can do
is speak up more often”*

Workshop participant



292

Students engaged in
creative workshops
and assemblies



38



Students completed a
detailed survey on race
inequity in school

13

Students contributed
original poetry

Students consistently
trusted **peers** over
staff for support

Only **4** students said they
would turn to a teacher if
they experienced racism

95

%

Felt more
confident talking
about race
inequity after
creative
workshops



PARENT VOICES What we heard:

3 Black mothers participated in interviews

Parents felt unheard or labelled as “difficult” when advocating for their children

Cultural disconnects and under-representation shaped a lack of trust

“I’ve had to defend her more times than I can count ... she’s just confident”

“The school says the right things, but I don’t see it translating”

EDUCATOR VOICES What we heard:

3 White British secondary teachers participated in interviews.

Teachers want to do more, but lack time, training and system-level support

1 educator roundtable explored barriers to equity work

Some feel equity work is an “add-on” rather than a core priority





“If you want to do this work,
it comes out of your
personal time”

“There is appetite,
but not enough
structure

SURVEY SNAPSHOT

(Year 10 Assembly Group)
**41 students responded to a
post-assembly survey**

23 had witnessed racism at school
10 had personally experienced it
Only **12** felt confident reporting it
27 would speak to a friend first,
only **3** to pastoral staff

WHAT THIS TELLS US

- Schools are not yet safe or trusted spaces for many Black students
- Parents are navigating systems that resist their voice
- Educators want to do better, but need help from leadership
- Community spaces unlock safety, voice and hope

Recommendations

The findings of this project highlight a need for bold, cultural transformation. Communities are calling not for more statements of intent, but for concrete, community-led action.

We make three core recommendations

1 Establish and Fund the Community-Led Advisory Group

Schools need a new accountability structure that includes students, parents and local community leaders. This group should have a formal role in shaping school culture, reviewing policies, and holding leaders accountable for anti-racist practice.

What this means

- Schools and funders commit to piloting the group in local settings
- Governance structures adapt to give community voice real influence
- Participation is properly resourced and sustained over time

2 Invest in Long-Term, Non-Extractive Funding Models

Community-led work cannot thrive on short-term project grants. Equity work must be resourced in ways that value time, lived experience and care. Funding must support both delivery and infrastructure.

What this means:

- Multi-year, flexible funding that covers staff time, planning and capacity-building
- Fair pay for community contributors
- Investment in relationships, not just outputs



Credit: Ahmed Kamara

3 Embed Anti-Racism Across the Whole School

Equity cannot be a bolt-on. Schools must treat anti-racism as central to safeguarding, leadership and learning. This means reviewing internal systems and practices, not just training staff.

What this means:

- Anti-racism and cultural humility training for all staff
- A decolonised curriculum across subjects
- Ongoing review of behaviour, exclusions and pastoral systems through an equity lens



Prototype: Community Advisory Group



1. BACKGROUND & RATIONALE

Over the past decade, schools across England have issued pledges, created charters and undertaken training to address racial disparities, yet Black pupils remain disproportionately excluded, under-represented in advanced courses and report lower wellbeing at school. Conventional responses, including external audits, one-off workshops, diversity statements, often fail because:

- **Insufficient community voice:** Policies are drafted without deep engagement of those most affected, leading to solutions that miss lived realities.
- **Weak accountability:** Without transparent, ongoing scrutiny, schools can lapse back into status-quo practices once initial attention fades.
- **Capacity gaps:** Educators may lack the tools to interpret data critically through an anti-racist lens, and communities often lack formal channels to influence decision-making.

WATCH
THE
TRAILER
HERE



This prototype addresses these shortcomings by embedding a sustained, structured partnership between schools and a community-led advisory body, combining grassroots legitimacy with practical levers for policy and cultural change.

2. THEORY OF CHANGE

The CAG model rests on three core premises:

>> **Collective agency:** When students, parents and community advocates share responsibility for evidence gathering and recommendation design, they generate proposals with higher legitimacy and practical relevance.

>> **Public accountability:** Regular, publicly shared progress reports create reputational incentives for schools to adopt and sustain reforms.

>> **Capacity transfer:** Through co-learning workshops and joint working groups, schools develop internal expertise in anti-racist research methods and reflective practice, reducing long-term reliance on external consultants.

Flow of impact:

1. Data & voice: Surveys, focus groups and policy reviews uncover lived experiences and systemic blind spots.
2. Co-designed recommendations: Multi-stakeholder teams translate insights into clear,
3. actionable policy and practice changes.
4. Adoption & iteration: Schools commit via MOUs to trial recommendations; CAG monitors implementation and feeds back in termly updates.
5. Outcomes: Measurable reductions in exclusion gaps, improvements in attainment and enhanced sense of belonging among Black pupils

This iterative loop, grounded in community agency and public reporting, builds trust and fosters continuous improvement, while the annual borough-wide forum amplifies successes and shares learning across institutions.

3. PILOT SCOPE & SELECTION

- Geographic focus: London Boroughs of Lambeth & Southwark - selected for pronounced racial disparities (e.g., Black–White exclusion gap > 2× national average), a strong civic infrastructure and a cohort of 36 secondary schools amenable to partnership.
- Pilot cohort: 10 state secondary schools (≈ 30 % of borough total), representing a mix of community, foundation and academy governance models.
- Timeline:
 - Foundation (2025/26): Partner convening, MOU sign-up, baseline metrics
 - Pilot (2026/27): Two evidence cycles, initial recommendations, termly updates
 - Evaluation (2027/28): Independent impact assessment, sustainability planning

Selection criteria will balance school readiness (leadership buy-in, existing equity commitments) with diversity of contexts (size, governance, intake profile), ensuring learnings are applicable across varied settings.

4. MEMBERSHIP & GOVERNANCE

ASPECT	DESCRIPTION
VOTING MEMBERSHIP	12 volunteers: 3 students (14–16), 3 parents, 3 educators, 3 community advocates
ADVISORY & ADMIN SUPPORT	Equity & Safeguarding Lead and part-time; REEP specialists delivering anti-racism training, policy guidance and upskilling; Admin Coordinator
CO-CHAIRS	One youth and one adult, elected annually for one-year terms (staggered)
DECISION PROCESS	Monthly full-group meetings + working sub-groups; consensus where possible, otherwise simple majority including at least one youth and one parent; minutes and votes shared via MOUs
SCHOOL MOU	Each pilot school commits to host CAG activities, share data, respond in good faith to recommendations and meet regularly with CAG representatives
STEERING LIAISON	Co-chairs present updates to local authority education teams and, by agreement, to GLA or DfE forums, ensuring community findings inform broader policy while preserving CAG autonomy

5. CORE ACTIVITIES & OUTPUTS

Community Race Equity Audit (Surveys & Hearings)

What: Design and disseminate a 15-question survey (online and paper) to students, parents and educators in the 10 pilot schools, gathering quantitative measures (e.g. representation in the curriculum, incidence of racial bullying, evidence of cultural humility) alongside qualitative feedback (personal experiences and suggestions).

Hearings: Host 4–6 focus groups or “community hearings” (storytelling, poetry or artwork-led) where participants speak directly about their experiences.

Analysis & Output: CAG members - trained in social research techniques by the REEP team - carry out data analysis, producing a Community Race Equity Report (school-level and borough-wide).

School Policy Review

What: Light touch audit of key documents from each pilot school - behaviour/exclusion protocols, safeguarding/Prevent policies, and diversity/equality statements etc.

Method: Small CAG teams apply a race-equity checklist (drawing on DfE guidance and best-practice examples) to identify gaps, discriminatory wording or missing policies.

Developing Recommendations & Action Plans

What: In cross-stakeholder working groups (students, parents, educators, advocates), translate audit and review findings into 5–8 evidence-based recommendations per school and a separate set of borough-wide policy asks (e.g. changes to Ofsted criteria).

Engagement & Advocacy Activities

Regular Liaison Meetings: The Equity & Safeguarding Lead(s) meet mid-year with each pilot school’s senior leadership to discuss interim findings and co-design quick wins.

Community Outreach Events: Host 2–3 open forums or drop-in sessions per borough, keeping the wider community involved and preventing the CAG from becoming “closed.”

Monthly “Pulse” Updates: Issue a creative mini-zine or newsletter each quarter, summarising that quarters’ theme (e.g. exclusions, curriculum), spotlighting successes and sharing data snippets to maintain momentum year-round.

Partnership Building: Connect with existing local initiatives (e.g. Lambeth’s Raising the Game programme, Southwark Schools Forum) and other advisory groups for peer learning and to avoid duplication.

5. CORE ACTIVITIES & OUTPUTS

Annual REEP Race Equity in Education Conference

What: A public, year-end conference co-hosted by the CAG and REEP team. CAG members present audit findings, policy recommendations and zine highlights; pilot schools formally respond with live “pledges” (captured on a digital pledge wall).

Attendees: CAG members, headteachers, governors, teachers, students, parents, local authority and GLA officials, funders and wider community. Features panel discussions, student performances and a gallery of zine artwork.

6. RECRUITMENT, INDUCTION & CAPACITY BUILDING

Recruitment:

- Multi-channel outreach.
- Application process: brief narrative statement and interview.
- Stipends (£2,000 p.a. per member; +£500 joint-chair top-up) removed financial barriers and signalled value of participation.

Induction sprint:

- Three training days covering: Cultural Humility & Anti-Racism, introduction to Research Methods and Teamworking and Group Dynamics

Ongoing REEP Project Team Support:

- After the sprint, members receive monthly reflection sessions and ad-hoc topical workshops (e.g. policy reviewing, public speaking) led by REEP staff and partner experts. Skills coaching and mentorship continue throughout the pilot cycle.

This dual emphasis on recruitment equity and skills transfer ensures that CAG members can function effectively from month 1, and that schools benefit from an embedded pool of anti-racist expertise over time.

7. MEASUREMENT & EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

A robust mixed-method evaluation underpins the three-year pilot

LEVEL	INDICATORS	DATA SOURCES
PROCESS	- Number of CAG participants onboarded and retained - Number of meetings held (full CAG and sub-groups) - Recommendations issued and formally recorded in school MOUs	CAG membership logs; meeting minutes; signed MOUs
SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES	Revisions made to school policy language (e.g. behaviour protocols) - Number of bespoke training or upskilling workshops delivered to CAG and school staff - CAG member satisfaction and confidence (Likert-scale survey)	Document review of updated policies; REEP training attendance records; post-training surveys
INTERMEDIATE OUTCOMES	- Change in exclusion rates for Black pupils (absolute and gap to White peers) - Adoption of heritage-inclusive curriculum elements across pilot schools - Uptake of CAG-endorsed practice changes (e.g. restorative language in behaviour policies)	School MIS exclusion data; curriculum audit reports; follow-up policy scans
LONG-TERM IMPACT	- GCSE pass-rate change for Black pupils in English and Maths - Improvement in pupil sense of belonging (validated belonging scale survey) - Increase in parental trust and engagement (bespoke parent survey index)	DfE/School performance tables; termly pupil wellbeing surveys; annual parent engagement surveys

8. PARTNERSHIPS & ROLES

Pilot schools

Host CAG activities, share data, co-design workshops under MOUs.

Local authorities:

Facilitate safeguarding liaison, support recruitment via school-improvement teams and co-sponsor conferences.

Community organisations:

Nominate/recommend CAG members; host focus groups in community venues and help with outreach.

9. CONCLUSION

The Community Advisory Group model presented here offers a new paradigm for driving race equity in education - one that places the community at the heart of accountability and solution-building. By drawing on the insights of the Race Equity in Education Project, we have crafted a prototype that is innovative yet grounded in best practice. It leverages the knowledge and passion of students, parents, and local leaders, in partnership with educators, to tackle the deep-rooted disparities that policies and charters alone have failed to resolve.

By the end of the three-year pilot, we expect to see tangible improvements in our pilot schools - fairer disciplinary practices, a more inclusive curriculum, greater trust between families and schools, and students who feel seen and supported. Equally, we anticipate intangible yet profound changes: a shift in culture where community partnership is normalised, and a legacy of empowered parents and students who can continue to advocate for equity.

In the words of one REEP participant, *“True change will not come from another charter - it requires embedding culture, community, and accountability into the very fabric of education.”* The Community Advisory Group is our vehicle to do exactly that.

Reflections & Learning

This project was as much about process as it was about outcomes. Along the way, the team encountered tensions, breakthroughs and moments of deep learning that shaped not only the work, but how we work.

Community Voice Needs Time and Trust

The most powerful insights came when we slowed down, listened fully and allowed ideas to emerge rather than be imposed. Co-production works best when space is made for vulnerability, honesty and collective reflection.

“We needed to talk about how we work before we worked” — Project team member

Emotional Labour Must Be Acknowledged

Every person involved in this project brought parts of themselves to the table; as professionals, parents, survivors and advocates. Holding space for this emotional depth, especially around issues of racism and exclusion, was vital and sometimes difficult. The process was human, not clinical.

Internal Equity Matters Too

Even within a project focused on equity, we had to navigate internal questions of visibility, power and voice. Who gets credited? Who is heard? We learned to bring the same scrutiny we applied to schools into our own ways of working.

Without Sustainable Funding, Change Stalls

Despite clear evidence of impact, the next phase of this work remains unfunded. This raises a bigger question for the sector. **How do we make sure community-led innovation is not just spotlighted, but sustained?**

“Equity cannot be project-based. It has to be built into the system”

These reflections are not the end of the process. They are what make the work real. They remind us that change is not just technical it is relational, reflective and ongoing.

Special Acknowledgement



A special acknowledgement goes to **Marcus Jones** for his outstanding contribution in creating the short film that so powerfully documented the journey of this project. Beyond his exceptional professional skills as a collaborative Director and innovative Creative Producer, we are particularly grateful for his remarkable ability to truly understand and embed himself within the subject matter. His talent for crafting compelling, culturally significant narratives, as evidenced by his work featured on platforms like Netflix and the BBC, brought an unparalleled depth and resonance to our story. His commitment ensured that the project's essence was captured with sensitivity and impact.



*Note: This publication is a condensed version of a wider body of work. The process and approach were grounded in a comprehensive literature review conducted by **Joel Dunn** (Project Lead) and **Jade Ecobichon-Gray** (Learning Partner). If you would like to access the full report or discuss the academic foundations of this work in more detail, or to watch the documentary film, please contact: joel@paradigmproject.co.uk.*



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Appendix 1 - Learning Partner Report

INTRODUCTION

From January to May 2025, I served as the Learning Partner for the Race Equity in Education Project. A community-driven initiative funded by the Ubele Initiative and led by Joel Dunn, Suzann Mclean, and Katrina Thomas. In this role, I stood slightly apart from the core project team, observing, questioning, and reflecting on our process and impact. This report provides a professional and reflective account of the project journey, focusing on three key events: an initial Kick-Off Workshop, a community Roundtable Event with Panel Discussion, and a Post-Roundtable Debrief and Learning Workshop. These events, which took place between February and March 2025, allowed both the project team and the community to engage in honest dialogue about race equity in education. The insights gained have directly shaped the proposed onwards actions.

The Race Equity in Education Project aims to address systemic racism within schools by identifying and developing effective anti-racism strategies centered on the voices and experiences of Black children and their communities. Alongside the events detailed in this report, the project has included other activities such as school assemblies and creative workshops with students. These wider activities are acknowledged here but not evaluated, as they are covered in a separate evaluation report. Instead, this Learning Partner report focuses on the collaborative learning moments and reflections that have informed the project teams approach and highlighted the transformative potential of genuine community engagement.

KICK-OFF WORKSHOP (7 FEBRUARY 2025)

Our journey began with a Kick-Off Workshop on Friday, 7 February 2025. This half-day workshop was designed not only to plan the way forward, but also to engage in open reflection, consolidate shared purpose, and consider strategic direction. As the Learning Partner, I facilitated the session to hold space for honest conversations and critical thinking.

We began the workshop by reflecting on three central questions: What have we already achieved? Are there any tasks outstanding that should have been completed at this point? And do we feel like we are on track? These opening reflections provided a vital grounding for the team. Despite the challenges and intensity of the early stages, there was a strong sense of momentum. Milestones such as securing funding, recruiting partners, managing finances, engaging young people, and delivering initial assemblies were all celebrated. One team member noted that “we’re still here, and no one has dropped out”, a comment that, while light-hearted, captured the team’s collective commitment to seeing the work through despite the unpredictability.

We then turned our attention to surfacing key learning moments and surprises. Positive community engagement had been a standout highlight, especially the willingness of young people and wider stakeholders to be involved. However, team members also named areas of discomfort particularly around communication, pace, and navigating assumptions about expectations. Many were surprised by how much had been achieved in a short space of time, while also acknowledging that more structure and clarity were needed moving forward.

An important part of the Kick-Off was situating the work in context. An examination of existing local initiatives addressing racial inequity in schools highlighted Southwark’s “We Stand Together” programme, a borough-wide effort encouraging schools to adopt comprehensive anti-racist policies and share best practices. It also highlighted “Raising the Game” an initiative in Lambeth, which focuses on improving outcomes for Black Caribbean pupils by setting ambitious targets and integrating Black students’ and parents’ perspectives into school policy and curriculum.

KICK-OFF WORKSHOP (7 FEBRUARY 2025)

Discussing these initiatives helped the team explore the positionality of the project, and ensure that any work undertaken sought to align, complement and enhance existing provisions and projects. However, it also underscored a recurring challenge: many well-intentioned programmes and charters in education remain performative rather than transformative. Too often, schools sign up to pledges or run one-off training sessions, yet little changes in day-to-day practice or in the lived experiences of Black pupils. This sobering realisation prompted us to reflect critically on the overarching aims of the project and led to a discussion as to whether the creation of another framework or charter was the most impactful, or necessary outcome for the community.

From there, we shifted into deeper reflective practice, focusing on identity. I facilitated an activity in which participants were invited to write down the aspects of their identity that most influenced their perspective in this project, such as race, gender, neurodiversity, class, profession, parenthood etc. These identities were then shared and discussed, highlighting how our positionalities both empower and constrain us in this work. Several participants spoke about how their lived experiences gave them courage to challenge inequities, while others reflected on how certain dynamics left them feeling less confident to speak up. This discussion underscored a shared learning: that equity work is deeply relational, and that understanding ourselves and each other is foundational to how we build trust, navigate tension, and work collectively.

As the Learning Partner, what I observed during this part of the session was a willingness among the team to begin grappling with difference, even if that process was still tentative. While some participants voiced discomfort with challenging others, the identity reflection activity opened space for acknowledging that we each hold different stakes and positionalities in this work. It is not uncommon for teams to prioritise harmony over honesty, but this session surfaced early signs that the team was willing to hold complexity, even when it felt uncomfortable. That kind of reflective tension, if nurtured carefully, can become a strength, allowing team dynamics to be examined rather than avoided.

After these personal reflections, we began to focus on strategy. The team collectively questioned whether the creation of a new framework or charter was in fact the right goal, given the documented failures of similar initiatives to effect meaningful change. Together, the team co-developed four draft questions, which were refined in the week after the workshop, for the upcoming Roundtable Event:

- **“Charters happen but nothing changes, why?”** – examining why past anti-racism charters or pledges in education often fail to lead to meaningful change.
- **“What needs to be measured to authentically enhance the safety and wellbeing of Black children in education?”** – exploring which indicators can show whether Black students truly feel safe, supported, and able to thrive.
- **“What is understood by the term ‘culture’ in schools? How is it adopted and embedded?”** – probing how school culture is defined and lived, and how a genuinely inclusive, anti-racist culture can take root.
- **“Are all staff competent and confident in creating anti-racist cultures?”** – confronting the issue of educator preparedness: what it takes for school staff to actively foster an anti-racist environment.

These questions embodied the team’s shift toward critical hope: a willingness to interrogate the failures of past initiatives, while holding onto the belief that change is possible through deep listening, shared ownership, and community engagement. From my perspective, this was a pivotal turning point. Rather than placing trust in pre-determined outputs, the team reoriented toward a process that centred inquiry, dialogue, and co-creation with the community.

The workshop concluded with a series of practical commitments. Team members agreed on responsibilities for the Roundtable, including developing briefing materials, finalising the attendee list, and drafting group agreements to support respectful dialogue. There was consensus that, although the project had not moved at the anticipated pace, what had emerged instead was a thoughtful and relational approach, one that prioritised dialogue over deliverables, and reflection over rush.

Ultimately, this Kick-Off Workshop created more than a plan; it generated alignment, honesty, and readiness. It allowed the team to pause, not just to assess where they were, but to reaffirm why they were doing this work, and who it was for. Despite the pressures of implementation, the group showed a willingness to do things differently: to lead with care, centre community voice, and embrace complexity rather than rush toward certainty.

ROUNDTABLE EVENT AND PANEL DISCUSSION (20 FEBRUARY 2025)

The Roundtable Event held at Theatre Peckham on Thursday 20 February 2025 was the central community engagement moment of the Race Equity in Education Project. Designed to bring together a diverse spectrum of stakeholders, students and parents, educators, senior leaders, local officials, and grassroots organisation. It marked a deliberate shift from project planning to public dialogue. More than just a consultation, the event created space for collective truth-telling, mutual listening, and the surfacing of deeply felt insights on race equity in schools.

Panel Discussions

The event included a powerful panel discussion that established a critical and emotionally resonant tone. Each panelist brought not only professional expertise but also lived experience, and their testimonies provided a layered, intergenerational view of how race equity is, and is not, understood and enacted in education.

Aisha Sanusi, Managing Director, The African Caribbean Education Network set the tone early, naming schools as “*largely unsafe spaces*” for Black children. Her framing of race equity as both a structural issue and a personal mission illuminated a recurring theme: that systemic change must begin with truth about the scale of harm. She detailed the widespread institutional ignorance about racism, observing that even when data exists, “*they don’t really care.*” Aisha cited the Yale eye-tracking study on teacher surveillance, connecting implicit bias with disciplinary patterns in the UK, such as Black Caribbean students being three times more likely to be excluded for the same infractions. Her contribution underscored the need for both cultural humility and structural accountability.

“For Black students, education largely is an unsafe space... race equity is at the heart of everything I do and believe—not just for students now, but as you continue to move on in your lives and the impact that it has on the Black community more widely.”

Jasann, a deputy headteacher, brought a practitioner’s lens to the discussion, focusing on the need for inclusive physical and pedagogical environments. She reflected on the importance of representation not just in curriculum content but in how schools look and feel. Her remarks addressed the hidden curriculum of schools, the values, assumptions, and cultural signals embedded in displays, texts, and teaching materials.

She emphasised that inclusivity should not be event-based but embedded throughout school life: *“It has to be purposeful.”* Her insights on staff development were particularly salient; she called for continuous, reflective professional learning, not one-off training, as a way to move from performativity to genuine transformation.

“As adults, we have to accept that we have biases. We’ve grown up in different places, different circumstances. We don’t know what it’s like to be in the shoes of those children.”

Lydia, speaking as both a parent and teacher, offered powerful testimony on bias and misrecognition. She shared a personal story about her son being academically underestimated due to a teacher’s unchallenged assumptions; an example of how implicit bias, if left unchecked, results in material consequences for Black pupils. Her message to other parents was clear: *“Never assume the school is doing the right thing for your child.”* She articulated how vigilance becomes a survival mechanism for Black families, pointing out that emotional and cognitive labour in navigating schools often falls unequally on parents from marginalised communities. Her reflections resonated strongly with attendees, many of whom shared similar frustrations with institutional defensiveness and lack of accountability.

“Never assume that the school is doing the right thing for your child. You have to advocate for your children... Schools are fallible, they’re run by human beings that have biases.”

Alex, a student panelist, brought the conversation back to lived student realities. His incisive reflections on fairness, belonging, and representation underscored the emotional toll of being a Black learner in schools that profess equity but fail to enact it. He challenged educators directly, calling out the discrepancy between open-door policies and the reality of being turned away when students seek support: “They say ‘come and talk to me’ but then they’re too busy when you do.” Alex’s reflections illustrated how institutional promises without follow-through breed mistrust and disconnection, affecting not only education but mental health and future aspirations.

“Certain teachers make sort of an environment where you would feel... uncomfortable... that affects your whole day... not only your education but like mental health as well.”

Ebinehita Iyere, founder of Milk Honey Bees, deepened the conversation by centring intersectionality. She described how the stereotype of the “angry Black woman” takes root in childhood and how school systems often fail to cultivate the emotional literacy Black girls need to challenge and reframe this narrative. Her focus on “*emotional education*” as a strategy for empowerment, asking young women not just what they experience but what they need, was a critical intervention. She also critiqued educators who appropriate Black culture outside school but punish its expression within school walls, urging schools to become sites of affirmation rather than control.

“The angry Black woman stereotype... it starts in school. The invisibility starts in school. The erasure starts in school.”

David Bromfield, a senior education advisor and inspector, concluded the panel by calling for evidence-based accountability. He echoed the need for structural reforms, highlighting recruitment practices, policy changes, and community-informed leadership development. His personal reflection, that after six decades of involvement in education, “it isn’t different”, was a sober reminder of the endurance of racial inequities. Yet his call to action “*if not me, who? If not now, when?*” was a galvanising note to transition the event into the breakout sessions.

“Just over six decades ago I was born around the corner, and I wanted things to be better and different for the people growing up. I had a vision that by the time I reached this age, it would be different—and it isn’t.”

Roundtable Breakout Discussions:

Following the panel, attendees participated in small group discussions structured around five guiding questions. These breakout sessions generated a wide array of reflections, demands, and proposals, captured both through facilitator notes and walkaround feedback. The richness of the data reflected the power of collective analysis when community members are treated as experts in their own experiences.

1. Charters Happen, But Nothing Changes – Why?

Participants expressed widespread disillusionment with performative race equity initiatives. Many had seen charters and frameworks introduced with enthusiasm, only to fade without implementation or accountability. Questions such as *“Who designed it?”* and *“Who values it?”* revealed distrust in top-down approaches. The group noted that without clear goals, resourcing, and enforcement, charters become “tick-box” exercises. Fear, hierarchical structures, and the risk of reputational damage were cited as barriers to honest engagement. The refrain *“PEOPLE POWER! PARENT POWER!”* emerged as a rallying cry, demanding co-created accountability structures grounded in community voice.

2. What Needs to Be Measured to Enhance the Safety and Wellbeing of Black Children in Education?

This group rejected traditional metrics such as attainment and attendance as insufficient for capturing Black pupils’ holistic wellbeing. Participants advocated for the inclusion of qualitative measures, student experiences, sense of belonging, frequency of racial incidents, and relationships with staff. They called for surveys, storytelling, and participatory evaluations to be used alongside data analytics. The insight *“Only us can improve our condition”* captured the need for community-led solutions rooted in real experiences, not institutional assumptions.

3. What is Understood by the Term ‘Culture’ in Schools? How is it Adopted and Embedded?

“Culture, participants argued, is “what you live, not what you say.” It is reflected in daily practices, interpersonal relationships, and the school’s responsiveness to its community. There was frustration with “event culture” where diversity is recognised through one-off activities but not sustained through structures or ethos. The discussion highlighted that school culture varies year to year, class to class, and is shaped not only by leadership but also by students. Parents emphasised their power to shape culture too, provided they are informed and engaged. The group stressed that meaningful culture work involves recognising and affirming the strengths that families and communities bring.

4. Are All Staff Competent and Confident in Creating Anti-Racist Cultures?

The consensus in this group was clear: current teacher training is not enough. Participants called for cultural humility to be treated as a professional standard, not an optional extra. The phrase “Teachers are learners too!” captured the need for ongoing development that challenges power and encourages reflection. Some advocated for staff vetting and mandatory anti-racist training for all educators, while others called for student participation in hiring processes. The group demanded a shift from isolated CPD sessions to a whole-school transformation strategy where anti-racism is embedded in daily practice and governance.

5. Youth Roundtable: What Does a Good Education Mean to You?

Young participants shared honest, sometimes painful reflections on feeling alienated, misunderstood, and unseen. Their insights revealed how school environments often fail to reflect their identities or respond to their needs. They called for relatable teachers, culturally affirming curricula, and safe spaces for expression. Crucially, they wanted adults to *“listen to hear, not to speak.”* They advocated for schools to work with grassroots organisations, provide real-world learning opportunities, and involve students in shaping the education they receive. Their vision of good education was one of empowerment, relevance, and care, not simply control and surveillance.

By the end of the day, the atmosphere in the theatre was one of sober clarity mixed with collective energy. While there was frustration with the status quo, there was also hope, rooted in the fact that so many participants had shared honestly, listened deeply, and begun to co-imagine new ways forward.

As Learning Partner, it was clear to me that this event was not a one-off. It had seeded a community of practice committed to challenging the performative and building the transformative.

The challenge moving forward was how to hold onto this energy and translate these insights into institutional change. The panel and roundtables exposed the disconnect between policy and practice, rhetoric and reality. But it also offered a blueprint for action grounded in cultural humility, community accountability, and student voice.

POST-ROUNDTABLE DEBRIEF AND LEARNING WORKSHOP (20 MARCH 2025)

The Post-Roundtable Debrief and Learning Workshop, held on 20 March 2025, marked a significant moment of pause, consolidation, and strategic reflection for the Race Equity in Education Project team. Convened one month after the successful Roundtable Event at Theatre Peckham, this internal workshop served multiple purposes: to reflect on personal and professional growth, to critically evaluate the project's learnings and limitations, and to chart possible directions for sustainable impact amidst challenging external conditions.

Personal and Professional Learning

The session opened with an invitation for personal and professional reflections; what the project had meant to team members, and how it had shaped them. What followed were deeply moving testimonies that underscored the emotional labour, lived experience, and insight carried by the project team.

Team members reflected on how the Roundtable had unexpectedly opened up personal histories. One member shared how hearing young people's voices had rekindled memories of his own experiences as a young Black student, experiences of voicelessness and marginalisation, and had even shifted how he parented his own child. Another described how the event had illuminated the enduring pain of knowing "we're still in the same place," yet also offered a sense of purpose by using Theatre Peckham not just as a venue, but as a civic space for truth-telling and healing.

Professionally, the project stretched individuals beyond their usual roles. It pushed some from frontline youth work into strategic thinking and governance, while for others it reinforced the power of relational trust and collaborative co-production. Across the board, there was a shared appreciation for the integrity of centring community voices, an approach that, though time-intensive, had proven essential to authentic engagement.

Critical Reflections on the Project Journey

In the second phase of the workshop, the group engaged in critical reflection on the design, delivery, and dynamics of the project. There was frank acknowledgement that while the Roundtable event had been a powerful success, it had not emerged without stress, miscommunications, and moments of friction.

A significant learning was the need for clearer articulation of how the team works together, not just what it aims to do. The project brought together different organisations with distinct cultures, expectations, and communication styles. Without an explicit early conversation about shared working practices, assumptions sometimes went unchecked, leading to avoidable stress during high-pressure moments. As one member observed, *“We needed to talk about how we work before we worked.”*

There was also open discussion about issues of visibility and recognition. It was noted that while the collaborative effort was clear internally, external perceptions had sometimes skewed towards individuals or organisations, with some contributions going unacknowledged. These dynamics, where men received public praise more readily than women, or where back-end work was less visible, prompted a needed conversation about gender, representation, and power in EDI projects. The group committed to greater intentionality around visibility, credit, and shared narrative in future collaborations.

Final Reflections and Looking Ahead

As the project stands at a crossroads, one thing is clear: this was never just a project. It was a call to reimagine how schools listen, how leaders lead, and how communities are invited not just to speak, but to shape.



