

Reimagining Education in Bristol with Parents of Black Children

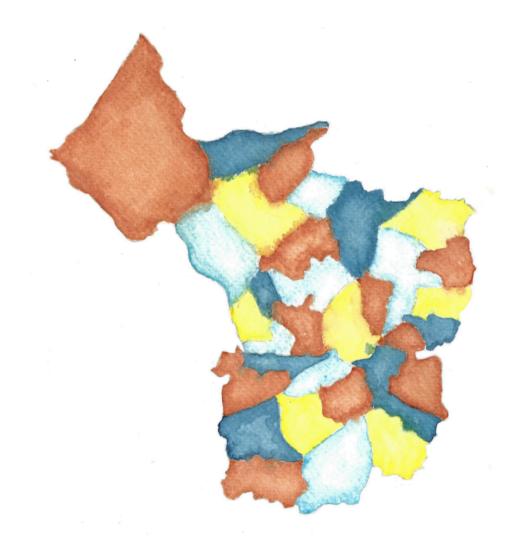
Pathways for Change

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Parents, thank you for sharing stories.



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Introduction

What does justice in education look and feel like for parents of Black children?

This report outlines parents' hopes for the future of education in Bristol and shares stories of current experiences. Racial equality within schools was desired by all parents who took part in this research and the racialised barriers which persist in Bristol's education system were discussed at length by those who contributed to this report. Blackness impacts school experience for both parents and children in this city. This report is intended to document participants' experiences and support testimonial justice - 'being heard' in an authentic sense; whereby one's words are listened to and accepted. Therefore, we have centred the voices of participants throughout this report by sharing their stories and using their own words.

What follows is a call to action from parents to build an education system that:

- acknowledges the pervasiveness of racialisation and supports all children to gain a conscious understanding of the invention of race and how it impacts experience and power relations.
- ensures that geographical location does not determine access to quality education.
- addresses the systematic invisibility and silencing of the parent and negative hypervisibility of the child.
- creates a representative workforce in Bristol schools.
- develops an education system that ensures Black children feel empowered, valued and safe in the schools they attend.

This report is structured by imaginings of alternative educational futures: visions from parents that describe what they need schools to be for their children.

BSWN and Repair-Ed partnership

This research comes out of a collaboration between Black South West Network (BSWN) & Reparative Futures of Education (Repair-Ed). BSWN is an established, Black-led racial justice organisation based in Bristol. Its work has shifted and evolved over the last 15 years to spark positive change for existing and future needs of communities negatively impacted by inequitable systems. BSWN explores how schools meet their Public Sector Equality Duty and is focused upon access to racial justice through education, supporting parents and carers to hold schools to account through knowledge building and self-advocacy. The work seeks to respond to the collective voice of racialised communities for better outcomes, by using the public sector's own strategic and legal framework to lever conversations of public sector accountability. For more information see: https://www.blacksouthwestnetwork.org/

Repair-Ed (Reparative Futures of Education) is a 5-year research project that explores past and present racial and economic inequalities in primary education and how these can be addressed. It involves researching with 10 primary schools and their communities to understand the nature of educational injustices within and between different parts of the city as well as how school communities understand forms of redress and repair for the future. The Repair-Ed project documents personal stories, taken from former students, current educators and community knowledge holders whilst holding space for communities and educators to think together and learn from each other's experience. The aim is to forge a sense of collective responsibility for justice through education in the city. Through community partnerships and participatory research, Repair-Ed hopes to make a lasting contribution to knowledge and action for educational justice in Bristol. For more information see: https://www.repair-ed.uk/

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Engaging with parents of Black children

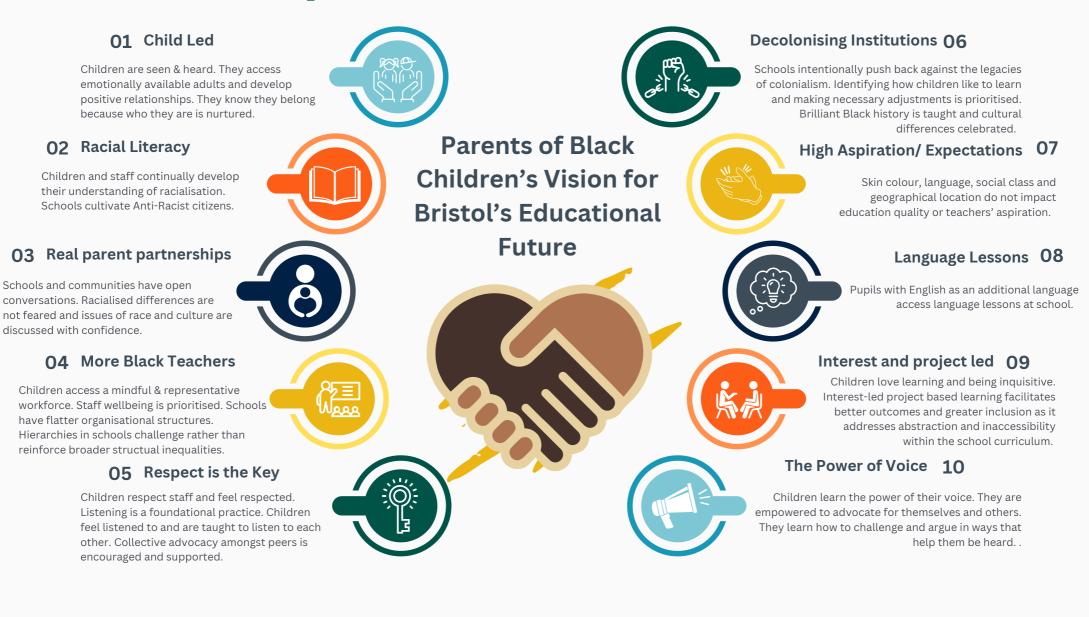
Together, Dr Barbara Brown (Research & Advocacy Lead - Access to Justice) from BSWN and Dr Annabel Wilson (Research Fellow) from Repair-Ed held three workshops with parents of primary school-aged Black children. As there are stark geographical differences in experiences of education and community life across the city, workshops were held in different locations: St. Pauls, Barton Hill and Filwood. The areas chosen are of geographical significance. Central and East Bristol reflect higher numbers of both settled migrant families of African heritage dating back to the 1950s, and more recent migration from wider African countries. South Bristol is reflective of wards which score highly on measures of deprivation, with lower but growing numbers of families racialised as Black or of African heritage.

Parents living in these areas of South, East and Central Bristol were invited to share their reflections on schooling. The workshops were advertised through Eventbrite and flyers were shared with local community organisations and schools. During workshops parents were invited to discuss opportunities and challenges in the current schooling system and re-imagine what a fairer educational experience would look and feel like for Black children in Bristol. Workshops were designed by Repair-Ed researchers and BSWN research and policy staff (Japheth Monzon, Aditya Verna, Margaret Simmons-Bird and Arathi Sriprakash) during two brainstorming sessions. Creating a space for parents to share collective experiences, build connection and support each other as personal stories were shared, was an intentional practice in the design of workshops.

Building upon an existing understanding of race as a barrier to fair education we asked parents to consider how racism and other structural injustices are experienced within the current education system. Parents were asked to define educational injustice. They were then invited to share coping strategies with one another in answer to this question: 'How can/do we survive and resist educational injustice?' Finally, parents considered what the purpose of education was and how Black children would be supported in a fairer education system. Parents were asked, 'What do you need schools to be for your children?'

This report is based upon the testimonies of 9 parents (8 women and 1 man) and over 4.5 hours of recorded conversation.

Imagining a fairer education system in Bristol with parents of Black Children



Schools acknowledge that we live in a racialised world and adequately prepare and support Black children to thrive within this context.

so my son, on Monday somebody had called him the N word

Parent, South Bristol

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She's always been very, very aware of her own difference in colour. Even from nursery. Things were being said at nursery...She has been told, you know, "Brown people aren't allowed at my party." and "Your hair looks like a tarantula".

Parent, East Bristol

Race is significant for children and this significance sparks curiosity. The quotes above demonstrate how 'race' comes up in everyday interactions during the school day. Despite this curiosity, few children are taught about racialisation. A lack of racial literacy amongst pupils and school staff enables racist incidents to occur between peers. Increasing children's racial literacy, creating anti-racist citizens in schools, could prevent children from reproducing or becoming complicit with dominant narratives about race.

Racist instances – moments that make the reality of race explicit - are experienced by children who live in predominantly white areas as well as those who live in areas with high levels of ethnic diversity. However, stories about racist encounters were discussed most pronouncedly by those living in South Bristol [1].

So, for example, my son, I think it was like last year, he came home and said one of the pupils said that his hair looked like poo. So, then it's like for him as a black boy growing up ... in pretty much a predominantly white area, I have to start, like, installing the whole like, "You're ... you, you are going to get this." And just things where our children, we have to raise our children to know that as, just being Black you have to ... it's going to be harder. You have to try harder. And just to be aware of certain things. But he's so young ... so it's not fair to have to be ... having those conversations ... but we do. But then schools don't understand.

Parent, South Bristol

As this parent suggests, teaching Black children to navigate the education system is a difficult yet important burden parents face. Parents want their children to attend schools where staff understand this burden and have the expertise to support them and their children.

^{1} Whilst this did not come up during these workshops, research with educators suggests that colourism is also an issue young children are grappling with. Please see the Understanding Colourism project for more information <u>click</u> <u>here.</u>

I'm a white mum, speaking generally to other white teachers...about an experience that I didn't go through. So, in many ways, I find that tricky...as a white parent of a brown child because it's really hard for me to...know what I'm looking for...understand what she's going through because I, I've got my own unconscious biases. We all have and you know, I'm battling them every day. Questioning myself every day, but I know they're there. So how can I educate myself to be able to help her more in the education system that isn't suited for her?

Parent, East Bristol

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This notion of the education system being a place unsuited to Black children was echoed by other parents. Parents felt the safety of their children (be that physical or mental) was not guaranteed but contingent upon their ability to protect and advocate for them.

It's a fight. But yeah, again, like I said, I just think it's fighting for your children and knowing what's best for them, and putting the input in, isn't it? Yeah. And not taking any nonsense. Don't care what anybody says, you know. It's my child. I know them better. I know what's ... good for them.

Parent, South Bristol

The education system was described by many parents as a place where they needed to fight to ensure that their children were understood and valued within the schools they attend. Some parents compared school to being like a 'lion's den'.

Pathways for Justice, Pathways for Change:

Like parents raising Black and Brown children, teachers need to understand the impact of their conscious and unconscious bias. Such awareness is needed if we are to increase the racial literacy of school staff and pupils and develop anti-racist citizens through schooling.

Quality of education is not decided by where Black 10 children live and go to school.

Geography matters in Bristol. Some of its neighbourhoods are the most deprived areas in England, yet the city also ranks among the highest income per capita in the country. Research that takes account of place in this city highlights how inequality and segregation is geographically located. Applying this to the education landscape, we see that many primary schools in Bristol have either much higher or much lower percentages of FSM-eligible pupils than the city-average – indicating the uneven distribution of socio-economically disadvantaged pupils across schools. Parents reflected on access to quality education in the city and felt that it was difficult to access high quality schooling when you live in an area with high levels of deprivation and Global Majority residents.

Parent 1: The neighbourhood. Like sometimes, the education, the quality of education. Depends on the neighbourhood where you live...And the school is ... the schools that are available in that neighbourhood.... so, you have no choice almost, yeah. You have to choose to bring your kid to a faraway school. Especially the secondary.

Parent 2: They're pushing people ... sometimes the, the kid ... we, we, we're. choosing three schools, and they put the, the child ...They don't give you any of them in another school and you don't have options. They have to come. So that's the real problem now.

Parents, East Bristol

Parents want to send their children to their local school, but they also want the best for their children. Quality relationships with communities are key to ensuring children receive the best education and parents receive the reassurance they need. Parents need to know - and they have a right to know - that their children's futures are in good hands. Barriers to building positive relationships differ between schools, locations and communities. The quotes below demonstrate some of the issues parents in the South of the city face.

I feel like south Bristol needs something like this [workshop] because BME children in some senses they're not really understood.

Parent, South Bristol

I don't actually feel comfortable sending [my child] to any [secondary] school in south Bristol

Parent, South Bristol

Black families struggle in South Bristol. This is not new. It is a lived experience that has shaped generations. Below two participants, whose parents grew up in South Bristol, reflect on the generational legacy of Blackness in the south of the city.

Parent 1: because like young Black children back then, they were unintentionally living up to the stigma that's attached to ... BME boys, girls ... whatever, the aggressiveness through being like, being in like a survival mode.

Parent 3: And that's, that the same for my son. My son looks just like my dad. And he's got my dad's surname and so it's kind of like, right, that's ... yeah, so you're that. And he He's living up to it. Like, yeah, like you know? And the majority of his friends group, friend group are white. And so then it's like ... he's like, he's big for his age anyway. That's a concern apparently for the school that he's so big.

Interviewer: Because he's tall?

Parent 3: And I, and I was like ...

Interviewer: Oh, gosh.

Parent 3: "So what am I do supposed to do then?" Should I, should I stop

Interviewer: Should I stop feeding my child?

Parents, South Bristol

Moments like this, where school staff raise the size of a Black child to a parent in South Bristol, where for generations Black and white people have fought to protect themselves and demonstrate their rights to exist in this place, is ignorant and deeply insensitive. This is a barrier to building positive relationships.

Pathways for Justice, Pathways for Change:

Schools in South Bristol, and schools in all areas, must understand the complexity of the communities they serve. If behaviour is communication, which is a common belief held amongst educators, then understand that subjection to stereotypically racialised misunderstanding in one's everyday life is enraging. It is hard to process, and it is hard to know how to respond.

Developing a framework for emotional wellbeing that recognises the impact of racial harm and the lasting effects of racial trauma would also be helpful. Some schools are good at this. Sharing of good practice around racism management between schools in similar locations would help.

Schools that repeatedly let down the same groups of people need to be held to account more than they currently are.

Black parents can be their authentic selves and do 12 not feel pressure to police their own behaviours in order to be heard by schools.

It is difficult for children to get the most out of their time in school without **real parent partnerships**. When schools and parents work together beautiful things happen. Children learn more and parents worry less. The barriers to this were discussed at length by all Black parents. Parent involvement was considered key if children were to feel and be successful in their education. As one parent described it is the parents' job to protect their children.

I'm not saying the system is right. I just think a lot of parents don't get involved enough...I have seen parents, something has happened to their children in school... instead of going and addressing it and speaking it, they've gone up angry already. Do you know what I'm saying, and then the teacher is, don't want to address things with them and don't want to say things to them, because they know that parent is going to come up and behave in a certain way, you know, which is crazy. You can't be going up to your child's school and being like that. You kno...if you're going to parents evening, and you usually wear hoochy shorts and stuff, if you're going to your parents evening, you wear a skirt and a shirt.

Grandparent, Central Bristol

Parents then must be smart in how they approach schools and speak to staff. Respect is key. However, sometimes it is difficult to stay calm in the face of injustice. The same parent went on to tell us that staying calm is a very hard thing to do even when you believe it is the only way to ensure your child receives fair treatment at school.

The thing is, in my, namely in that relationship, I'm, I'm the fiery one. I'm like, I'll be watching. And then...my patience's run out. [My husband's] not like that, he's very calm. So when everything came up that was sensitive, I'm like, "You need to deal with this, because I'm gonna go up there and rip somebody's head off", because I'm the one that's like that. But he's very calm. He's very collected. And then he's a social worker, so that's the other thing, he'd be like, "No, this is not happening. Because this is, I see this happening to children all the time, and I see this." So he's good at that. So, he was the one who did all that, whereas for me, I was just there ready to, so I never did a lot of the actually navigating them through this, sitting down and talking to them.

Grandparent, Central Bristol

Being mistaken for an angry Black woman is often in the front of Black women's minds when we embark on challenging conversations with authority figures. As this parent shared: I'm so far from, as we all are, this weird stereotype of an angry Black mother. But even just going to speak... about my child, that's enough for people to be primed for, oh, it's the angry Black mother. So yeah, I don't want that as well. I wanna be able to go to school, speak about my child, their experience, without barriers coming up.

Parent, East Bristol

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Parents want to work in partnership with schools, but barriers do come up. People often have reasons for feeling angry. This parent reflects on her personal healing journey, and mastering a greater sense of control over anger, which meant she now attempts to educate people with kindness, in spite of feeling enraged.

Well, yeah, you've been treated bad, and though you might have generations, generations that have been treated bad and then like your kids might be treated bad, but you still have to do, you have to educate people and be kind while you're doing it. And I feel like ... because that's the only way that they'll hear it. But I think at the same time that's really difficult. Because it's ... that's not just a thing of, "All right then, I'm going to be kind." That's like your nervous system because ... you know to be on fight or flight. I just think that it's just necessarily those conversations around, you know, what, what can schools do? It's like what can people do ... when they are on that fight or flight? And like how, how you react to things.

At times parents are operating in fight or flight mode. Trying not to be perceived as angry when feeling emotional and not expressing anger when you feel angry is hard work. Managing how one is seen by others through policing behaviour requires a lot of emotional labour. The parent below shared with us a window into her thought process when engaging with the school. Parent, South Bristol

how to you fight RAUSM W/O VIRENCE WHEN IT'S AU YOU KNEW... AND YOU ARE IN FIGHT/FUGHT FOR CUILDREN?

I think very carefully before I communicate. I'm always kind of considering the other person. But I think, actually, that's probably my history. Having to almost factor in, how do I deliver this in the most kind of palatable way that they won't see me [as an angry Black woman]... even the work that goes into that. Look, I'm so careful in my emails, careful when I speak. Mustn't trigger any ... their, their sort of sensitivities... certain issues that are off that I'm not allowed to speak about. Even though they directly impact on me and my children. Just seems ... it's like a mental sort of ... I don't know, it, it's very weird. Literally feeling like, yeah, being gagged when actually, you know, I ... my background is teaching. I know I can ... everything I'm speak ... saying is reasonable. There's nothing there, but their own projection on to me as something else, just stops the conversation.

Parent, East Bristol

As you can see, this takes a lot of work. Real parent partnerships will not flourish until 14 the mention of race, racism or experiences of racialisation no longer ends conversations.

Below, the group is discussing what educational injustice feels like for them. They focus on what happens when they try to raise issues relating to race and or racism with school staff.

Parent 1: Dismissed. I don't know how to describe it. I guess that would look at just when the subject is brought to these people how they react to it...It's either, "Oh, we're not racist. We don't see colour." It's the defensiveness. Or they just shut down. Dismissive...They just don't want to ...learn, don't want to understand because what they believe is what they believe and that's ... the core. Yeah.

Parent 2: They don't want to hear it.

Parent 3: I think as well, like especially round here because there's so many people like with English as their second language, when they're trying to go to the school, is, it is very much like, "Oh no, you've got that wrong." Like ... "No. Just because I, English ain't their first language doesn't mean to say they've got it wrong.

Parents, South Bristol

Parents attempt to share their concerns with staff, and for the parents we spoke with, they are often not heard, parents stare into confused faces, whilst being reassured that their concerns are not real. This can also be seen in the quote below:

my child's the only Somali. Black and Muslim which is another issue...So, in, in reception they always used to talk about her eyebrows ...So, I had to tell her you're different from her. And then when I talked to the teacher, like, there's some kids commenting on her appearance. The way the ... headteacher talked to me was not really, like she understood where, where I'm coming from, and where my daughter is coming from.

Parent, East Bristol

Pathways for Justice, Pathways for Change:

As one parent says:

I think it would be beneficial just to try and find a way to get those working within the school settings to engage, because I feel like racism is such a touchy subject. Once you bring it up, it's either they get, like the others get defensive because they don't know how to, you know, navigate around it or they just shut down.

Parent, South Bristol

Black children feel empowered, valued and safe in 15 the schools they attend.

This section is led by parents' voice. It outlines what parents believe education needs to be for their children.

within their class it's almost like a family ... like cohesion, connections, relationships, to feel that they belong in that class. And I want them to have that relationship with their teacher, to know their teacher cares about them and, you know, I, I'm under no illusion that you, you just click with different people. We all have different personalities. But a child should always still feel like they are, you know, seen and heard and like, that the person cares about them. It's like really, really important to feel that. Like, especially when their parent isn't there. You want them to feel it's a safe place and there's safe people and the teacher's a safe person and they're gonna be treated fairly.

Parent, East Bristol

Parents want their children to thrive in school. The parent above describes her hopes for her children's educational future.

Real parent partnerships

Parent 2: Because I think as parents, we wouldn't have resistance against school if we felt like everything else was in line.

Parent 1: Yeah.

Parent 2: If we could see that everything was pointing in the direction of good, people wouldn't be resistant to be like, "Well, why is he suspended today?

Parent 3 : Yeah.

Parent 2: Well, if you know that some things was being done and everyone's being treated accordingly and that underlying respect and that underlying of wanting what was best for the child was there, you'd be like, Yeah, you need to be suspended, and you're going to come back better.

Parent 1: Yeah. Yeah. It, it definitely stems from the school environment because maybe if BME children on the whole was, I don't know, like fulfilled with like empowerment and ...

Interviewer: Yeah.

Parent 1: ... confidence and these things were really encouraged in them, then maybe they would feel like, "Oh, I could go to, go to higher education and go and take that degree to become a teacher."

Parent, South Bristol

Parents want to work in partnership with schools. They want to be able to trust and work with them.

Parents want their children to be **empowered** and feel **fulfilled** by the education they receive in school. They want schools to use a positive and strengths-based approach to behaviour management.

High expectations

Parent 1: I think it, it's connected. The language...If, if your kid is ... speaks two languages. They kinda, they kinda expect the kid to be less fluent in English. And they allow it. They're like, oh no, it's normal for her age. And normal for kids from her background. And that annoys me sometimes. I mean, I know she, she will, she speaks different to ... But I still want her ...'cause I mean, I'm expecting her that's she's as fluent as the ... like, her peers.

Interviewer: And you want your teachers to hold the same high expectation.

Parent 2: Exactly, yeah. Correct my child, help her to ... I can see it from, from nursery, it already starts. Like, 'cause that's when they started to learn the language and they can know more words. And you say, like, okay, so-and-so in not really, like, growing her language, like. And they say, "Oh no, it's not ... it's just normal." It's like, because of her background, like".

Parent, South Bristol

Parents have high expectations for their children, and they want to teachers to feel the same.

Representation Matters

Parent 2: We need black people there.

Parent 1: Yeah. This is exactly ...

Parent 2: You can't attend to the, the needs of those living in that community if you're not, if you haven't had certain experiences.

Parent 2: If you was to really think about what school would be like if all the ...

Interviewer: Yeah.

Parent 2: ...teachers was black, if you really like boiled down like the foundations of what we as a people are ...

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah.

Parent 2: ... that is a good thing to be in schools. But what we've got is people in charge who don't have any of the things that we are trying to install in our young people.

Parent 1: 100%.

Parent 2: If you're really thinking about it, these people do not have the same experiences as us.

Parent, South Bristol

Parents want their children to have access to Black teachers. School must become easy places for Black people to work.

Curriculum

So, I think it should be, I think they're more history and more cultural things. The world is too multicultural for everything to just be on one level. It needs to be taught.

Parent, Central Bristol

Anxiety

Parent 3: We talk about authority and that, kind of, discipline, like, we want, we want our kids to listen but then ...at the same time, like, with one of my boys, he was, he's still got the same teacher for the second year but he, he was constantly crying like if I'd forgot to put the iPad in the bag and all that.

Parent 1: Yeah that's happened with me.

Parent 3: ... I had to go to the class and be like, why's he got anxiety?

Parent 2: Why my son's like this.

Parent 3: Why's he got anxiety?

Parent 1: Pressure, pressure.

Parent 3: Like, he's got anxiety because of you. And she was like... "Well you can go and get the, you can go back home and get it." And I said, listen, "I'm going to work"...

Parent 1: Not happening, we forgot.

Parent 3: ... I said, "No one, nobody ain't doing what you're telling me, I'm an adult"... and also however you're talking to them ...

Parent 2: It's not effective, yeah.

Parent 3: ... or treating them is making him feel real bad... so how do you expect me to get all these kids into school ...

Parent 2: When they're all flapping.

Parent 3: ... when all of them's like, aw, I'm staying with you ...

Parent 1: It's a stress.

Parents, South Bristol

Children do not want to come to school when they feel they have let their teachers down. Children want to attend schools that nourish who they are. They need access to emotionally available adults. They need to build positive relationships with each other and with school staff.

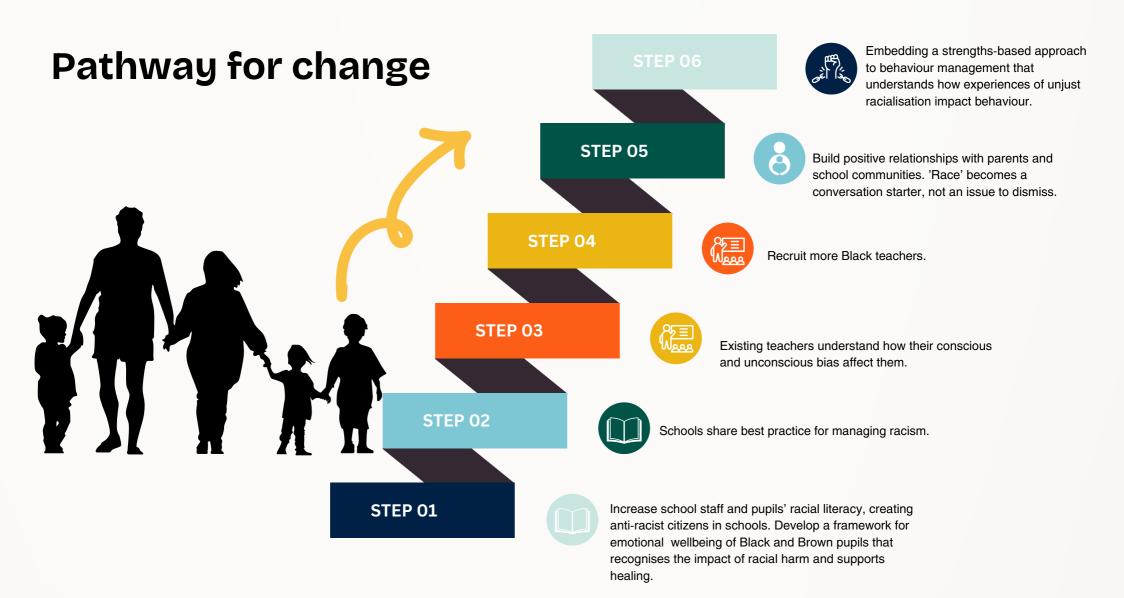
Pathways to Justice, Pathways for Change

Finding a route to change is hard. Misunderstanding an issue and constraints within existing systems are often the greatest barriers to radical change as the parent below powerfully summarises;

I'm always like, we all know what the plan is, but the systemic racism is not going to allow it to happen. Like, we can talk all day, every day but the people who really can change it they're not here... and they don't want to, it doesn't benefit them to change it.

Parent, South Bristol

If Bristol is to create a 'better' education system, then it is going to have to find ways of schooling that are radically different. Below is a conversation starter, a proposal for change to discuss and work with and hopefully, not another offering for change that is ignored.



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