Project Esperanza

A Best Practice Manual for Addressing Racial Disparities in Scotland's Child Protection System

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background and Context

Project Esperanza

Promoting Acceptance, Challenging Inequalities, Igniting Change, Bringing Hope to Individuals and Supporting Community Health.

Project Esperanza: Advancing Race and Faith-Sensitive Support in Scotland

Project Esperanza is a well-established organisation providing practical, emotional, and integration support to families, with a primary focus on those of African heritage, while also serving a diverse Minority Ethnic community. Recognised as a pioneer in race and faith-sensitive, culturally authentic, and specialised support services in North Edinburgh, the organisation has developed a strong reputation for addressing the needs of migrant communities and underrepresented groups.

With a team possessing extensive knowledge and experience, Project Esperanza is uniquely positioned to respond to the complex and evolving challenges faced by migrant families. The organisation takes a human rights and anti-racist approach, ensuring that statutory services are held accountable in their efforts to serve these communities more effectively. By centering community health and well-being, it has successfully implemented innovative and community-driven initiatives that support individuals in overcoming barriers to employment, settlement, and social inclusion in Scotland.

Project Esperanza has been instrumental in co-designing and leading pilot projects that address systemic challenges and develop tailored strategies for meaningful change. These initiatives include:

- The Volunteer Development Programme, offering community members opportunities to gain skills and engage in meaningful work.
- The Student Internship Programme, providing practical experience for students pursuing careers in community work and advocacy.
- Learning Initiatives, designed to equip individuals and professionals with knowledge on racial equity, cultural integration, and systemic change.
- Community Development Programme, promoting well-being and connection among culturally diverse migrants including refugees and people seeking asylum.
- Family Support Service, providing essential casework and advocacy on issues such as housing, food poverty, education and child protection.

In addition to direct support for individuals and families, Project Esperanza plays a key role in equipping workforce professionals and system leaders with the

knowledge and skills necessary to address racialised identities and structural inequalities. As a specialist provider of Cultural Competence Awareness and Anti-Racism Education, the organisation delivers training, resources, and support to professionals working with Black and Minority Ethnic families, including those involved in the education and safeguarding of Black and Minority Ethnic children and young people.

Through its expertise in cultural competency training, Project Esperanza works in collaboration with sectors such as social work, healthcare, education, and public services, ensuring that service providers develop inclusive, informed, and culturally responsive practices.

Strengthening Community Cohesion and Social Inclusion

Project Esperanza has been recognised for its contributions to community cohesion in North Edinburgh, offering integration and support services that promote the social, emotional, and economic well-being of migrant families. Key areas of support include:

Employability Services

- Assistance with job searches, CV writing, and interview preparation
- Income maximisation and financial support
- Access to further education opportunities
- Business mentoring and enterprise development
- English Language Support

SistaCircle Women's Group

- Addressing social isolation through cooking sessions, therapeutic gardening, and creative workshops
- Providing social outings and group activities for women and children
- Supporting newly arrived migrants, individuals experiencing migration trauma, and those managing chronic health conditions

By fostering empowerment, social integration, and systemic change, Project Esperanza continues to serve as a key advocate for racial and social justice in Scotland. Through its commitment to community well-being, education, and anti-racist initiatives, the organisation remains at the forefront of addressing inequalities and driving transformative change.

Context

"Sometimes, some of the ways of working with Black and multi ethnic care experienced children and families are not consistent with keeping The Promise and the effects of the push and pull between my staff and the social workers has me worrying about the well-being of my staff".
Victoria Nyanga-Ndiaye

Scotland's child protection system and social work sector face significant racial disparities that disproportionately affect Black and Minority Ethnic children and families. Research highlights systemic biases in child protection assessments, over-surveillance of Black families, and a lack of cultural competence within social work practice (Bernard & Gupta A 2008). These issues contribute to higher rates of Black children being placed into care, often without adequate consideration of kinship networks or cultural identity needs (Sebba et al., 2020).

A critical factor exacerbating these disparities is the underrepresentation of Black social workers in Scotland. The social work workforce remains overwhelmingly white, young, and inexperienced in engaging with racially diverse communities (Scottish Government, 2023b). This deficit limits the sector's ability to provide culturally appropriate interventions, erodes trust between Black families and social services, and perpetuates racial inequalities in safeguarding decisions (Agbaje et al, 2024). Black social workers face barriers to recruitment, retention, and career progression, often encountering workplace discrimination, microaggressions, and exclusion from leadership roles (Akel, 2021).

Further compounding these challenges is the adultification bias that affects Black children in schools and the child protection system. Black children, particularly girls, are often perceived as more mature and resilient than their white peers, leading to diminished safeguarding responses and harsher disciplinary measures (Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2020). Schools and public institutions have been criticised for their failure to acknowledge institutional racism, exclusion of Black-led expertise, and reluctance to co-produce equitable policies with affected communities (Eddo-Lodge, 2017).

Additionally, the needs of unaccompanied migrant children arriving in the UK are often overlooked, with many experiencing inadequate care provision, cultural isolation, and vulnerability to exploitation (Ögtem-Young, Ö., 2024).

Despite these challenges, Black-led organisations, advocacy groups, and grassroots initiatives continue to push for anti-racist reforms in social work, education, and child protection. Key recommendations include:

- Targeted recruitment of Black social workers, with financial and professional development support.
- Mandatory anti-racism training for social work professionals and educators.
- Greater representation of Black professionals in decision-making roles.
- Stronger accountability measures for racial disparities in child protection.
- Investment in culturally competent support services for Black and migrant families (The Promise Scotland, 2022).

Addressing these issues requires institutional commitment, policy reform, and sustained collaboration with Black-led organisations. Without structural change, Scotland's child protection system will continue to fail Black children and families, reinforcing historical injustices and perpetuating cycles of systemic harm.

'Who feels it knows it'

Bob Marley

Aim and Objectives of the Work

Vision: To ensure that the identity, faith and cultural heritage of every care-experienced child from a Black and multi ethnic background is not minimised but always considered and respected.

Aim: To examine the challenges faced by Black and Minority Ethnic children in Scotland's child protection system and propose evidence-based recommendations for improvement.

Objectives:

- To identify institutional and interpersonal racism in child protection
- To analyse policies and frameworks governing safeguarding
- To evaluate the impact of cultural mismatches in foster care placements
- To assess the role of social work in addressing racial disparities

Critical Questions:

- What are the key racial disparities in Scotland's child protection system?
- How does institutional and interpersonal racism impact safeguarding?
- What role does policy play in either reinforcing or addressing inequalities?
- How can Scotland's social work and foster care systems be improved for Black and Minority Ethnic children?

Significance of the Work

This work contributes to the growing body of work addressing racial disparities in child protection, social policy, and anti-racist reforms in Scotland. While significant progress has been made in developing child-centred approaches to safeguarding,

there remains a critical gap in the consideration of race, culture, and ethnicity in existing frameworks. The experiences of Black and multi-ethnic children in care and child protection processes require urgent attention to ensure that policies and practices do not perpetuate systemic inequalities but actively work to eliminate them.

Addressing Racial Disparities in Child Welfare

A review of social work practice since the Victoria Climbié Inquiry (2003) highlights the continuing challenges faced by Black and multi-ethnic children in the care system. While Scotland has undertaken significant reforms through initiatives such as The Promise Plan 24-30, these efforts have yet to fully address the structural barriers faced by racialised children and families. The complexity of safeguarding cases involving Black and multi-ethnic children demands specialised knowledge and skills, which are often lacking within social work, education, and health services.

Black and multi-ethnic children are frequently subject to cultural erasure within child protection processes, with limited recognition of their heritage, identity, and lived experiences. The absence of culturally competent practice in safeguarding decisions risks further marginalisation and harm, underscoring the need for a structured, anti-racist approach to child welfare.

Cultural Competence and Its Role in Improving Safeguarding Practices

This work emphasises the importance of using a cultural lens in child protection assessments to prevent the misinterpretation of cultural practices as safeguarding concerns. It also highlights the necessity of building cultural competence within the workforce, ensuring that practitioners are equipped to engage meaningfully with Black and multi-ethnic families. The long-term placement of Black and multi-ethnic children in care settings where their cultural identity is ignored or minimised can have profound consequences for their development and well-being. Therefore, integrating cultural safety into social work assessments and foster care placement strategies is essential.

While efforts have been made to improve cultural awareness in child protection, engagement with social workers has shown that many professionals still lack confidence in addressing racial disparities. Initial resistance to acknowledging cultural illiteracy in assessments and support systems has gradually given way to a recognition of the need for reform. However, this shift remains inconsistent and dependent on individual willingness, rather than being embedded within institutional practice and policy frameworks.

The Necessity of Multi-Sector Collaboration in Child Protection

For safeguarding measures to be effective and equitable, responsibility must extend beyond social work. The welfare of Black and multi-ethnic children cannot be addressed in isolation but requires multi-sector engagement, including:

- Education professionals who play a vital role in identifying safeguarding concerns within school environments.
- Healthcare providers who must be equipped to recognise racial disparities in child health and development.
- Immigration specialists, to ensure that child protection policies account for the specific challenges faced by migrant and asylum-seeking families.
- Law enforcement agencies, to prevent the criminalisation of Black children through systemic bias and adultification.

- Senior policymakers who must commit to embedding anti-racist principles within child welfare frameworks and legislative reforms.

Without coordinated action across these sectors, existing disparities in child protection, safeguarding assessments, and access to services will persist, reinforcing structural inequalities rather than addressing them.

Moving Beyond Policy Commitments to Meaningful Change

This work provides a framework for embedding racial equity in child welfare systems, ensuring that Black and multi-ethnic children receive the same level of protection, care, and advocacy as their white counterparts. While policies such as The Promise Plan 24-30 aim to create a child-centred approach to safeguarding, their success depends on meaningful and measurable action in addressing racial disparities.

The significance of this work lies in its commitment to ensuring that cultural identity, racial justice, and anti-racist principles are integrated into every aspect of child welfare. The question remains: *Is the progress made sufficient?* If not, who must be involved in driving change forward? Addressing these challenges requires more than theoretical commitment—it demands practical, policy-driven interventions that actively work to dismantle systemic discrimination in child protection services.

Addressing the Gaps in Safeguarding for Black and Multi-Ethnic Children in Schools

A critical aspect of child protection and social policy reform is ensuring that all children, regardless of race, ethnicity, or background, are afforded equal rights to safety, dignity, and protection from harm. However, findings from self-esteem surveys, bullying questionnaires, and case studies indicate that Black and multi-ethnic children face systemic neglect when experiencing bullying and discrimination in school settings. This raises urgent concerns about how child protection frameworks, including GIRFEC, are applied in practice and whether the fundamental rights of Black children are being upheld.

Rethinking the Definition of Childhood and Protection in Social Work

The process of safeguarding children requires critical reflection on how childhood is defined and whose childhoods are prioritised. The reality observed through this research is that not all children are treated as children, particularly when racial bias, adultification, and systemic inequalities shape perceptions of vulnerability.

Practitioners working in social work, education, and child protection must recognise and address their prejudices to ensure that Black and multi-ethnic children are safeguarded on equal terms with their white peers. The Best Practice Manual and accompanying toolkit provide strategies for professionals to implement culturally competent safeguarding approaches while acknowledging and addressing systemic challenges.

A crucial yet often overlooked aspect of child welfare is the psychological and emotional well-being of Black and multi-ethnic children who experience care, safeguarding interventions, and systemic neglect. While The Promise Scotland outlines ambitious goals for all care-experienced children, there is a conspicuous absence of specific commitments to the experiences of Black and multi-ethnic children.

This silence in representation raises critical concerns:

- How does The Promise Scotland define wellbeing for Black and multi-ethnic children in care?
- What tailored interventions exist to address the additional layers of racial trauma, cultural erasure, and systemic exclusion they face?
- How does the framework for 'wellbeing' accommodate the unique experiences of multi-ethnic families navigating child protection and social work systems?
- The Psychological Toll on Black and Multi-Ethnic Families and Practitioners

The well-being of children cannot be separated from the well-being of families, caregivers, and the professionals advocating for them. Working within oppressive structures and witnessing repeated systemic failures has had a significant impact on the emotional and mental health of Black communities, including those engaged in social work, advocacy, and community support.

For many involved in direct work with Black and multi-ethnic families, the experience has unpacked a need for a therapeutic outlet for post-traumatic stress, a way of processing the frustrations and exhaustion of repeatedly witnessing systemic injustices. Every safeguarding failure, every act of neglect, and every cultural oversight adds another layer of emotional burden to the individuals striving for change within these structures.

The Absence of Black Voices in Child Protection Reforms

Despite ongoing policy discussions on child welfare, Black and multi-ethnic experiences remain marginalised, both in statistical representation and in narrative visibility. The lack of racialised perspectives at the 2024 Stories of Change Conference was a stark reminder that Black voices are consistently excluded from conversations meant to centre the experiences of care-experienced children.

- Disparities in the child protection system can be seen in the disproportionate number of Black and ethnic minority children in safeguarding interventions, yet their experiences are rarely elevated in public discourse (Barn, 1997).
- Black children are overrepresented in the child protection and care system, with studies indicating that they are more likely to enter care, less likely to be placed in culturally appropriate foster care, and more vulnerable to being moved between placements multiple times (Bernard, 2021)
- The Victoria Climbié case in 2000 was a pivotal moment in UK child protection, yet two decades later, similar racial biases and systemic failures persist in Scotland's care system.

This lack of representation is not simply an oversight—it reflects a systemic reluctance to engage with the uncomfortable realities of race, discrimination, and exclusion in child welfare.

Failures in Data Collection: Masking the Reality of Black Child Protection Cases

One of the most concerning issues in the current state of child protection reform is the lack of accurate, transparent, and up-to-date data on Black and multi-ethnic children within the system.

- As of July 31, 2011, there were 2,571 children on Child Protection Registers in Scotland, with 27 children (1%) identified as Black, Black Scottish, or Black British, compared to 2,131 children (85%) recorded as White.
- These statistics are over a decade old, raising serious concerns about the lack of commitment to tracking racial disparities in safeguarding interventions.
- There is no readily available recent data on the number of African families involved in child protection services in Edinburgh or across Scotland.

Why does this gap in data persist?

The absence of consistent ethnic monitoring and reporting raises concerns that the systemic failures affecting Black and multi-ethnic families are being deliberately masked. Without ethnic-specific data, it becomes difficult to hold institutions accountable for racial disparities in child protection decisions, care placements, and safeguarding interventions.

The One-Sided Narrative of The Promise

At events such as The Stories of Change Conference, narratives of successful care experiences and policy achievements were showcased. However, there was:

- No representation of Black and multi-ethnic care-experienced individuals who are still facing significant barriers and challenges within the system.
- No critical reflection on how Black children in care navigate issues of identity, racism, and cultural disconnection.
- No honest discussion on the experiences of Black families applying to be foster carers and the challenges they face within a predominantly white-led system.
- No examination of placement instability and the number of times Black children move through the system, despite evidence showing that they experience multiple placement changes at a higher rate than their white counterparts.

Without an honest, unfiltered assessment of the ongoing issues in child protection, the system risks perpetuating a false narrative of progress while continuing to fail Black and multi-ethnic children and families.

Rethinking Child Protection Through an Anti-Racist, Trauma-Informed Lens

The issues outlined above highlight a fundamental contradiction within Scotland's child protection policies:

- How can Scotland claim to prioritise the well-being of all children when Black and multi-ethnic children are persistently overlooked?
- How can schools and safeguarding agencies be trusted to protect children when they fail to address the systemic racism that contributes to exclusion, neglect, and harm?
- How can The Promise Scotland truly fulfil its commitments if it does not actively engage with racial disparities in care experiences?

A genuinely transformative approach to child protection and social policy reform must:

1. Commit to collecting and publishing disaggregated data on race and ethnicity in child protection cases.
2. Acknowledge the role of systemic racism in child welfare assessments, care placements, and safeguarding interventions.
3. Ensure that Black and multi-ethnic voices are represented in all child protection discussions, events, and policy frameworks.
4. Develop targeted support for Black foster carers and kinship networks, ensuring that culturally appropriate placements are prioritised for Black children in care.
5. Create long-term tracking mechanisms for Black and multi-ethnic children in care, monitoring placement stability, access to cultural resources, and overall well-being.
6. Establish clear protocols for addressing racist bullying and safeguarding failures in schools, ensuring that Black children are not criminalised or left unsupported.

Moving Beyond Performative Reform

Scotland has a limited window of time to fulfil the commitments of The Promise by 2030. However, four years into the agenda, Black and multi-ethnic care experiences remain largely invisible in discussions of child protection reform. Without a deliberate effort to centre these voices, The Promise risks becoming a performative exercise rather than a genuine movement towards justice, equity, and meaningful change.

The central question remains:

What does The Promise Scotland truly want for all care-experienced children? And if racial disparities persist, whose well-being is actually being prioritised?

Until these questions are answered through **tangible action, policy reform, and racial accountability,** the system will continue to fail Black and multi-ethnic children—silently, systemically, and indefinitely.

Chapter 2: Key Issues Arising in Casework

Introduction

Scotland has experienced a steady rise in migration due to an increase in refugees, people seeking asylum, economic migrants and international students bringing their families, among other groups (National Records of Scotland, 2025). Consequently, social work professionals are encountering a growing number of Minority Ethnic families, leading to more complex cases requiring culturally competent and racially aware interventions. Research suggests that the increasing diversity within child protection cases necessitates an informed and responsive workforce capable of addressing the unique needs of Black and Minority Ethnic children and their families (Bernard and Harris,2016).

Concerns from Black and Minority Ethnic Families in Scotland's Care System

Over the years, community organisations such as Project Esperanza have documented recurring concerns from Black and Minority Ethnic families about child protection procedures and foster care placements. A key issue raised is the placement of Black and brown children into white foster homes, which risks cultural displacement and psychological distress (Sebba et al, 2020). In a focus group involving African mothers, a discussion was anchored around the case of a Black boy who had been in care since the age of four and tragically died by suicide at 15 years old in Glasgow. The lack of publicly available information regarding the circumstances of his welfare, mental health, and overall well-being raises serious concerns about the transparency and accountability of the care system.

Furthermore, mistrust in the care system has been exacerbated by concerns around the financial incentives attached to fostering Black children, with families questioning whether their children's placements are motivated by profit rather than their best interests (Gupta & Featherstone, 2021). Despite the Independent Care Review aiming to address systemic failures, families continue to report a lack of compassion and understanding from child protection services, propelling grassroots organisations to advocate for trust-building initiatives, workforce education, and policy reforms (The Promise Scotland, 2022).

Structural Racism and Discriminatory Practices in Child Protection

Through community engagement and direct advocacy, Project Esperanza has observed a culture of systemic oppression, gaslighting, and inadequate support for Black and Minority Ethnic children within the child protection system. This raises critical questions about whether social workers are acting in the best interests of Black children or whether racial bias and Eurocentric assumptions about parenting are influencing decisions (Barn, 2021). Research highlights that social work practices in the UK often fail to account for the cultural realities of non-white families, leading to interventions that disempower rather than support (Bernard & Gupta, 2008).

One of the key concerns is the imposition of Eurocentric ideals of family structures and parenting styles, which neglect the diversity of child-rearing practices across

cultures. Project Esperanza has repeatedly advocated for social workers to adopt a curious and open-minded approach when working with Black and Minority Ethnic families, rather than assuming deficiency or risk based on unfamiliar parenting norms.

Furthermore, while Scotland has committed to Keeping The Promise—ensuring that siblings in care remain together—concerns remain about the failure to uphold restorative practices when it comes to separating siblings. Small organisations advocating for trauma reduction and family reunification often face resistance from social workers and statutory services, reinforcing a power imbalance that disadvantages Black and Minority Ethnic families (The Promise Scotland, 2023).

The Disempowerment of Black and Minority Ethnic Parents

Observations from casework indicate that social workers often exercise their power and authority in ways that disempower Black and Minority Ethnic parents. This results in marginalisation, exclusion from decision-making, and restricted access to essential support services (Gilligan, Manful, & Marston, 2021). Parental fear of social services is a significant issue, as parents are often placed in a position where they must parent under scrutiny, leading to heightened stress, anxiety, and reluctance to engage with professionals (Gupta, 2017).

Additionally, gaps in immigration knowledge among social workers present significant challenges for families navigating the system. Misinformation or ignorance around immigration status and entitlements can lead to serious repercussions, including delays in accessing essential support, wrongful referrals, and increased precarity for children and families (Dewa Legal Services).

Lack of Trust, Transparency, and Cultural Responsiveness

A key theme that emerges in Project Esperanza's casework is the widespread lack of trust between Black families and social services, resulting from non-transparent decision-making and cultural insensitivity. Factors that contribute to this breakdown in trust include:

- Refusal to acknowledge kinship care options within Black and Minority Ethnic communities.
- Exclusion of parents from decision-making processes reinforcing power imbalances.
- Stereotypical assumptions about Black parenting practices leading to biased interventions.

Failure to provide culturally responsive support or acknowledge intersectional challenges faced by Black children in care

Additionally, tensions arise around the interpretation of a child's voice versus their best interests. For example, social workers must carefully assess whether a child's preference to remain in care is motivated by material advantages rather than a genuine need for state intervention. Many Black children in care come from homes where financial resources are limited, meaning that their reluctance to return home may be influenced by the sudden access to material goods such as expensive trainers, clothes, and entertainment options. This raises concerns about how social

workers balance a child's voice with their long-term wellbeing, particularly when there is a lack of culturally competent interventions that support family reunification (Project Esperanza).

Barriers to the Inclusion of Black-Led Organisations in Child Protection Advocacy

Project Esperanza has also encountered institutional resistance when advocating for Black and Minority Ethnic families. Black-led organisations that carry the burden of migrant advocacy are often overlooked, dismissed, or excluded from decision-making spaces. Senior management in social work services have, at times, refused to engage in dialogue with Project Esperanza, citing child protection policies as absolute and non-negotiable. This dismissal of culturally informed advocacy reflects a broader systemic reluctance to incorporate community-led expertise into child protection services.

This resistance extends beyond social work and into education and healthcare settings, where Black-led organisations struggle to disseminate information about safeguarding, cultural competency, and anti-racist practice. Schools and GP practices, for example, have been observed removing or refusing to display information leaflets from organisations such as Project Esperanza, while Scottish organisations continue to receive priority visibility. This raises concerns about gatekeeping, systemic bias, and the exclusion of racialised communities from shaping policy and practice (Craig, 2011).

Adultification of Black Children in Scottish Schools: A Critical Concern

The adultification of Black children is a pervasive and harmful issue that influences how Black pupils are treated within educational settings. This phenomenon occurs when Black children are perceived as more mature, resilient, or self-sufficient than their white peers, leading to differential treatment in safeguarding, discipline, and emotional support (Davis, 2022). In Scottish schools, this bias manifests in the minimisation of Black children's trauma, the overlooking of their vulnerabilities, and inappropriate responses to their distress (Bernard, 2021).

Systemic Failures in Safeguarding Black Children

Despite Scotland's commitments to equality, tolerance, and respect, institutional racism and staff biases within Scottish schools and Police Scotland remain deeply embedded. The case studies documented in racial justice toolkits highlight numerous examples of Black children facing neglect, discrimination, and inadequate safeguarding in school environments. This is not a hypothetical issue but a real and ongoing failure in policy, practice, and accountability (Gillborn, 2008).

One of the key failings lies in the inadequate policies and procedures designed to protect Black children from racism, bullying, and violence. Black children, especially Black girls, often experience physical and verbal abuse, yet their complaints are frequently dismissed, downplayed, or mishandled by educators and administrators (Joseph-Salisbury, 2020). In many cases, parents and community leaders advocating for Black children have sought clarity from Edinburgh City Council regarding the local authority's stance on violence against Black pupils, only to receive unsatisfactory responses or complete inaction (Project Esperanza).

The Role of Schools in Perpetuating Racial Bias

A concerning aspect of adultification is the misplaced trust in teachers and headteachers, who, despite being responsible for safeguarding all pupils, lack the cultural competence required to adequately protect Black children. Studies have shown that implicit biases among teachers result in Black children being perceived as less innocent, more disruptive, and requiring less emotional support (Demie, 2022) These biases lead to disparities in disciplinary measures, lower levels of pastoral care, and increased levels of exclusion among Black pupils (Agbaje & Akinyemi, 2024).

Furthermore, schools often fail to intervene appropriately when Black children are bullied or racially harassed, instead placing the burden on the child to "handle the situation." This lack of proactive safeguarding can create a school environment that is actively harmful to Black pupils, rather than the safe space it is intended to be (Jernigan & Daniel, 2011).

The Importance of Intentional Engagement and Anti-Racist Safeguarding

Ensuring that Black children are truly seen, heard, and protected requires a deliberate and systemic shift in how schools, teachers, and policymakers engage with Black communities. Black children must be valued, listened to, and believed in matters relating to safeguarding, racial harassment, and their emotional well-being. Schools must take a zero-tolerance approach to racial bullying and discrimination, ensuring that clear policies are enforced and that staff are trained to recognise and challenge racial bias in education (Arday, 2021).

This need for systemic change aligns directly with the principles of Keeping The Promise, which centres on Voice, Family, Care, Scaffolding, and People. Without intentional and culturally competent safeguarding measures, the system will continue to fail Black children by neglecting their specific vulnerabilities and seeing their race before seeing their humanity (The Promise Scotland, 2022).

Challenges in Co-Creation with the Workforce: Barriers to Meaningful Collaboration

Co-creating equitable safeguarding practices for Black and Minority Ethnic children in Scotland requires intentional engagement, transparency, and institutional commitment. However, meaningful collaboration with key stakeholders—including Police Scotland, the Education Department, and other statutory agencies—has been hindered by systemic resistance, exclusion, and dismissive attitudes toward Black-led expertise. This failure to genuinely engage with anti-racism work not only undermines efforts to improve child protection outcomes but also reinforces the structural inequalities that necessitate this work in the first place (Emejulu & Bassel, 2018).

Institutional Resistance and Silencing of Black Voices

Despite calls for greater racial equity and cultural competence in public services, there remains a persistent reluctance to acknowledge racism and oppressive practices within social work, education, and law enforcement (Gillborn, 2008). Black-led organisations, such as Project Esperanza, have faced systematic

exclusion in efforts to engage statutory services in The Fostering Equality Sessions - an initiative designed to improve racial literacy and safeguarding for Black and Minority Ethnic children.

Several institutions, rather than engaging in constructive dialogue and transformation, either refused to participate or engaged in ways that were superficial, dismissive, or performative. Some agencies outright stated disinterest in collaboration, while others chose to conduct similar work elsewhere, effectively sidelining Black-led initiatives. Additionally, in some professional spaces, efforts to discuss institutional racism and structural barriers were met with censorship, defensiveness, and tone-policing, where Black professionals and advocates were urged to avoid bringing "negativity" into shared learning environments (Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2020).

This response reflects a deep-seated discomfort in addressing racial inequities within Scotland's child protection system. Research shows that when discussions of race, privilege, and systemic oppression arise, institutions often respond with minimisation, deflection, and avoidance, thereby failing to acknowledge the lived experiences of Black children, families, and professionals (Arday, 2021). Such reactions reinforce existing power imbalances, placing the burden on marginalised communities to remain silent, while preserving the status quo of white-dominated leadership and decision-making (Eddo-Lodge, 2017).

The Problem of Tokenistic Engagement and Exclusion from Decision-Making

A critical challenge encountered during the co-production process was the lack of meaningful engagement from the workforce, particularly from decision-makers in health, education, social work, and local authorities. Efforts to gather feedback through online surveys were obstructed, with responses being minimal or actively rejected. This signals a wider reluctance within the workforce to engage with racial justice issues, particularly when these discussions challenge existing power structures and expose failures in safeguarding Black children (Reid, W. 2021).

Further, while some professionals acknowledged failures in addressing racial disparities, they simultaneously refused to take accountability or contribute to meaningful change. Instead, institutional responses often focused on self-congratulatory narratives, highlighting successes in other areas of their work rather than confronting ongoing racial inequalities within their services (Ahmed, 2012). This pattern of acknowledging racial inequity while simultaneously resisting efforts to dismantle it reflects what critical race scholars describe as performative allyship and institutional inaction (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Power Imbalances in Multi-Agency Collaboration

For co-production to be truly effective, Black-led organisations must not only be included in discussions but must also be centred as key knowledge-holders and decision-makers. However, the existing power dynamics within Scotland's public sector create an environment where Black professionals and community leaders are

marginalised, dismissed, or expected to conform to white-dominated standards of engagement (Akel, 2021).

The continued failure to acknowledge racial inequities—whether through policy omissions, lack of engagement, or defensive reactions—perpetuates a system where Black children remain vulnerable, unsupported, and disproportionately harmed by institutional neglect (Bernard & Harris, 2019). Scotland's commitment to "Getting it Right for Every Child" (GIRFEC) cannot be fulfilled unless safeguarding frameworks actively centre the needs, experiences, and voices of Black and Minority Ethnic children (Scottish Government, 2023a).

Furthermore, as social work professionals and policymakers acknowledge the need for greater racial equity in safeguarding, they must also recognise that co-production with Black-led organisations cannot exist in a vacuum of performative inclusion. True collaboration requires:

- Intentional engagement from key decision-makers, particularly directors of services, senior management, and local authority leads.
- A willingness to be held accountable for systemic failures and to actively participate in transformative change, rather than focusing solely on institutional successes.
- Recognition of Black expertise as critical to improving child protection practices, rather than treating Black professionals as peripheral contributors to white-dominated decision-making.

Community Trauma and Collective Grief in Scotland's Child Protection System

The removal of Black children into Scotland's child protection system is a deeply traumatic experience that extends beyond the affected families to entire communities. This trauma is both individual and collective, shaped by historical injustices, systemic racism, and state over-surveillance of Black families. The forced separation of Black children from their families echoes colonial-era practices of family fragmentation, racial control, and state intervention in Black lives, leading to generational distrust of child protection services (Bernard & Harris, 2019).

Research indicates that Black and Minority Ethnic communities rely heavily on informal kinship networks to provide care and support for children (Gupta & Featherstone, 2021). However, the child protection system frequently disregards these cultural caregiving practices, leading to unnecessary family separations and long-term psychological harm (Sebba et al., 2020). For many African communities in Scotland, these removals resurface painful historical memories of forced separations, from the transatlantic slave trade to colonial child removal policies, deepening the sense of collective grief and systemic oppression.

Assessments in Social Work - Implications for Black and Minority Ethnic Communities

Historical and Systemic Racism in Child Protection

Black families in Scotland, like those across the UK, face institutional racism in social services, which contributes to heightened surveillance and disproportionate child removals. Research has demonstrated that racial biases in risk assessments and cultural misunderstandings result in Black children being overrepresented in care (Nuffield Foundation, 2018). While there is limited Scottish-specific data, UK-wide studies reveal that Black children are more likely to be taken into care than white children, even when families face comparable challenges (Edney, Alrouh & Abouelenin, 2023).

One of the critical lessons for social work in Scotland's implementation of Keeping The Promise is that there cannot be a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to safeguarding Black and Minority Ethnic children. Current assessments, planning, and decision-making processes within child protection services (CPS) are often rigid and culturally insensitive, failing to factor in race, ethnic identity, and cultural context when determining interventions. There is a pressing need for continuous scrutiny of how cultural considerations are integrated into case assessments, reports, and intervention plans. Without this, Black children and their families face further systemic discrimination and trauma.

Moreover, social work must acknowledge the broader structural inequalities that shape families' experiences, including poverty, housing insecurity, and employment discrimination, which disproportionately impact Black communities (Gupta, 2017).

Mistrust in the System and Barriers to Support

The removal of Black children from their families has created deep mistrust between Black communities and social services. As a result, Black families may avoid seeking support from social workers, fearing that their engagement with services could lead to unnecessary intervention or family separation (Agbaje et al, 2024). This dynamic makes it more difficult to address genuine child welfare concerns in a way that is supportive rather than punitive.

Loss of Identity and Cultural Disconnection

The placement of Black children in care frequently results in cultural disconnection. Many Black children are placed with white foster families or in institutions where their cultural identity is not prioritised (Sebba et al., 2020). This can lead to:

- Loss of language, cultural traditions, and community ties.
- Identity struggles and internalised racism, as children grow up in environments where their racial and cultural backgrounds are not affirmed or understood.
- Mental health challenges, including depression and anxiety, due to feelings of isolation and lack of belonging.

Studies have found that Black children in care often face increased levels of discrimination, social exclusion, and academic underachievement, further

exacerbating the negative long-term outcomes of their care experience (Gilligan, Manful & Marston, 2021).

Healing and Resistance: The Role of Community Advocacy

Despite these systemic challenges, Black communities in Scotland continue to resist structural oppression and seek collective healing. Grassroots organisations such as Project Esperanza, along with advocacy groups and community leaders, play a crucial role in:

- Providing culturally competent family support services to prevent unnecessary child removals.
- Demanding anti-racist reforms in social work to ensure that Black families receive fair and just treatment.
- Holding child protection services accountable for addressing systemic racial disparities in care decisions.
- Challenging the lack of Black representation in social work and advocating for increased recruitment and retention of Black professionals in child welfare.

Children's Rights and Unaccompanied Migrant Children

Many children arriving in the UK without a parent or carer do not have their rights adequately met (Ögtem-Young, Ö., 2024). These children have often experienced significant trauma and adversity, both in their home countries and during their migration journeys. Many have:

- Travelled alone, facing risks of exploitation, trafficking, and abuse.
- Endured extreme danger, including forced labour, sexual slavery, and domestic servitude.
- Arrived in the UK without trusted adults increasing their vulnerability.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) guarantees that all children must have a safe and loving home, yet many unaccompanied migrant children lack culturally competent care placements, leading to further trauma and isolation (UNCRC, 1989).

Addressing the Deficit of Black Social Workers in Scotland

The recruitment and retention of social workers in Scotland has long been recognised as a significant challenge, particularly regarding workforce diversity and representation. Through Project Esperanza's training sessions and direct engagement with social workers, it has been observed that Scotland's social work workforce is predominantly young, white, and lacking experience in engaging with Black and Minority Ethnic communities. The absence of Black professionals within the sector not only limits cultural competence but also contributes to racial disparities in child protection decisions, social work interventions, and outcomes for Black and Minority Ethnic families (Bernard & Harris, 2019).

The underrepresentation of Black social workers raises concerns about institutional biases, systemic barriers to entry, and the exclusion of Black professionals from leadership roles within the field (Gupta & Featherstone, 2021). This deficit undermines efforts to develop an anti-racist social work practice and leaves many Black children and families without access to culturally appropriate services (Akel, 2021). To create a more inclusive and equitable system, there is an urgent need to address racial inequalities in recruitment, retention, and career progression for Black professionals within Scotland's social work sector.

The Current State of Social Work Representation in Scotland

Research consistently highlights that Black and minority ethnic professionals are severely underrepresented in the UK's social work sector, particularly in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2023b). While the population of Black and Minority Ethnic communities in Scotland has steadily increased due to migration and demographic shifts, this has not been reflected within the social work workforce, which remains overwhelmingly white and Eurocentric in its approaches (Arday, 2021).

The lack of Black representation in social work has far-reaching implications, including:

- Limited cultural competence in child protection assessments leading to biased interventions and disproportionate removals of Black children (Sebba et al., 2020).
- Inadequate support for Black and Minority Ethnic families, as practitioners often lack an understanding of racial trauma, cultural norms, and community-based support structures (Project Esperanza).
- Barriers to trust between Black communities and social services, reinforcing historical mistrust due to a lack of culturally competent professionals (Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2020).

Barriers to Recruitment and Retention of Black Social Workers

Several systemic barriers prevent Black professionals from entering and advancing in social work careers, including:

- **Lack of Representation in Social Work Education and Training**
  - The absence of Black lecturers and trainers in social work education limits Black students' engagement and creates a disconnect between curriculum content and real-world racialised experiences (Akel, 2021).
  - Social work degrees often fail to include race-conscious approaches in their core curriculum, leaving students underprepared to engage with Black and Minority Ethnic families effectively.
- **Institutional Racism and Discrimination in the Workplace**
  - Black social workers frequently report experiences of workplace discrimination, microaggressions, and exclusion from leadership opportunities (Agbaje, O.S. and Akinyemi, O.O. 2024)

    - Racial bias in promotion and career progression limits opportunities for Black professionals to advance into decision-making roles, reinforcing white dominance in social work leadership (Gupta, 2017).
- **Lack of Targeted Recruitment Initiatives for Black Social Workers**
    - Scotland lacks active recruitment strategies to attract Black professionals into social work, despite increasing racial diversity in the general population.
    - Black students and graduates often do not see themselves reflected in the sector, which discourages them from pursuing long-term careers in social work.
- **Retention Challenges and Career Progression**
    - Many Black social workers leave the profession due to workplace hostility, lack of career support, and exclusion from leadership structures (Barn, 2021).
    - Without structured mentorship and leadership development programmes, Black professionals struggle to navigate career progression within the social work sector (Bernard, 2021)

Conclusion:

The experiences documented by Project Esperanza, along with emerging academic research, highlight the urgent need for systemic change in Scotland's child protection system. The persistence of structural racism, cultural illiteracy, and institutional bias suggests that current policies and practices do not adequately protect or serve Black and Minority Ethnic children. A shift towards anti-racist, culturally competent, and intersectional aware practice is required to rebuild trust, improve outcomes, and safeguard the well-being of children and families (Bernard, 2021).

The adultification of Black children in schools must be urgently addressed through policy reform, anti-racist education training for teachers, and a fundamental reassessment of safeguarding procedures. Without these measures, Black children will continue to experience systemic neglect, inadequate protection, and unjust disciplinary treatment. Schools must move away from racially biased assumptions and instead implement equitable and trauma-informed approaches that centre the best interests of all children, regardless of race.

The exclusion, dismissal, and minimisation of Black-led expertise within Scotland's child protection sector reflects a broader pattern of institutional resistance to anti-racist change. Co-production cannot succeed if engagement is superficial, performative, or driven by white superiority and power imbalances. It is imperative that leaders within social work, education, and health services actively dismantle barriers to meaningful collaboration, ensuring that Black-led organisations are not just consulted but are valued, respected, and integrated into the decision-making process.

If Scotland is to truly address inequalities in safeguarding Black and Minority Ethnic children, its institutions must shift from acknowledging racial inequities to actively confronting and dismantling them.

The failures of Scotland's child protection system to adequately safeguard Black and Minority Ethnic children must be urgently addressed. The over-surveillance, disproportionate removal, and cultural erasure of Black children in care perpetuate longstanding racial injustices. Scotland's commitment to Keeping The Promise must be grounded in anti-racist, culturally competent social work practice, including:

- A commitment to reducing racial disparities in child removal cases.
- Recognition of cultural caregiving practices and kinship networks in Black communities.
- Increased investment in culturally competent foster care placements.
- Stronger safeguards for unaccompanied migrant children, ensuring their rights are fully upheld.
- Greater representation of Black professionals in social work and decision-making roles.

Addressing the deficit of Black social workers in Scotland is critical to ensuring that child protection and social work services are truly inclusive, anti-racist, and culturally competent. Without meaningful reform in recruitment, training, and workplace policies, the social work sector will continue to fail Black and Minority Ethnic families by reinforcing structural inequalities and racial biases in care decisions. Scotland's commitment to anti-racist practice and Keeping The Promise must include concrete strategies to recruit, retain, and promote Black professionals in the social work profession. Only then can the sector deliver equitable and effective services that reflect the diversity of the communities it serves.

By addressing these challenges, Scotland can move toward a more equitable, just, and effective child protection system that truly meets the needs of all children, regardless of race or background.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

Project Esperanza utilised various methodologies to evaluate existing challenges, enhance professional awareness, to inform strategies for anti-racist practice within the social work, education, and child protection sectors. This approach used both quantitative and qualitative methods, incorporating training-based engagement, expert-led discussions, surveys, focus group discussions and participant reflections to examine biases within Scottish child protection practices. Anti-racist methodologies, prioritising the voices and lived experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic families affected by Scotland's child protection system. Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidential and inclusive sessions.

Training Sessions and Participant Engagement

To facilitate direct knowledge exchange and professional reflection, Project Esperanza hosted a series of training sessions, inviting professionals and senior decision-makers from across Scotland's care system, local authorities, and social work services.

The training was delivered over seven sessions in 2024, with over 160 participants attending from the youth work, social work, and education sectors. These sessions provided a structured, interactive learning environment where participants could critically assess their own biases, cultural competency, and institutional roles in safeguarding Black and Minority Ethnic children.

These professionals explored key topics such as:

- Cultural competency and anti-racist practice in child protection.
- Unconscious bias and its impact on social work decision-making.
- Challenges faced by Black, Asian, and other minority ethnic migrant families.
- Good practice for working with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and NRPF families

The training focused on four key themes, which were identified as critical areas where racial bias, systemic failures, and discriminatory policies disproportionately impact Black and migrant families within Scotland's child protection system:

1. **Tackling Bias in Scottish Child Protection Practices: An Overview**
    - Examining racial disparities in child removals.
    - Identifying structural barriers that impact Black and Minority Ethnic families.
    - Discussing institutional racism and implicit bias in social work decision-making.

2. **Working with Children with Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) Status**
    - Understanding the intersection of child protection and asylum policies.
    - Assessing cultural competency gaps in social work interventions.
    - Evaluating the mental health and safeguarding challenges faced by asylum-seeking children.
3. **Supporting Families with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)**
    - Investigating how NRPF policies create barriers to child protection.
    - Exploring the economic precarity and heightened vulnerabilities of migrant families.
    - Addressing the lack of financial and legal support available to NRPF families.
4. **Safeguarding in Cultures of Systemic Bias**
    - This session was particularly designed in response to the race riots across the UK in the summer of 2024, during which the murder of three girls was used to justify racism, Islamophobia, and violence across the UK and Northern Ireland.
    - Examining the impact of racialised violence on safeguarding policies.
    - Exploring institutional responses to racially motivated crimes and their impact on Black and Muslim communities.
    - Addressing the responsibility of professionals in dismantling systemic bias and ensuring equity in child protection.

Data was collected through pre- and post-training questionnaires, focus groups, and case study reflections to assess changes in understanding and explore professional experiences of bias and racial disparities in child protection. Thematic analysis revealed patterns in attitudes, systemic barriers, and urgent reform needs.

Assessing Bullying Experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic Children in North Edinburgh Schools

Project Esperanza conducted a bullying survey in schools across North Edinburgh to evaluate the extent, nature, and impact of bullying on Black and Minority Ethnic children. This component aimed to provide empirical data on racial discrimination, school safety, and the effectiveness of safeguarding mechanisms in educational settings.

Survey Design and Objectives

- Assess the prevalence of racial bullying and discrimination experienced by Black and Minority Ethnic pupils.

- Examine the response of schools and staff when incidents were reported.
- Identify gaps in anti-racism policies and safeguarding procedures within school environments.
- Gather insights on how racial bias and exclusion affect the well-being, educational outcomes, and sense of belonging among Black and Minority Ethnic pupils.

Target Population and Sampling Method

The study focused on Black and Minority Ethnic pupils in North Edinburgh's primary and secondary schools. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, with parental consent required for those under 16. Data was collected through an online survey, printed questionnaires in classrooms, and qualitative interviews and focus groups to capture lived experiences.

The survey questions included:

- Types of bullying experienced (verbal abuse, physical aggression, cyberbullying, exclusion, racial slurs, stereotyping, etc.).
- Perpetrators of bullying (peers, teachers, school staff, etc.).
- School responses and intervention measures.
- Emotional and psychological impact of bullying.
- Student perceptions of school inclusivity and cultural safety.

Quantitative data were analysed to identify bullying prevalence, trends, and disparities, while qualitative responses revealed patterns in personal experiences, school responses, and perceived institutional bias. Ethical measures included collecting no identifiable data, ensuring informed consent, and providing support resources for students who found the discussions distressing.

Critical analysis of The Promise Plan 24-30 and GIRFEC

Project Esperanza conducted an in-depth analysis of The Promise Plan 24-30, focusing on its implementation of Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) and its effectiveness in addressing the specific needs of Black and multi-ethnic children and families in Scotland. While GIRFEC seeks to promote children's rights, well-being, and a coordinated approach to safeguarding, findings reveal significant gaps in racial and cultural inclusivity, systemic bias, and the consideration of structural inequalities affecting Black and minority ethnic communities.

Project Esperanza critically analysed The Promise Plan 24-30 and GIRFEC to assess its commitments to racial equity, cultural competence, and safeguarding Black and Minority Ethnic children in Scotland's care system.

Analysis involved:

- Identifying key policy commitments related to child protection, care, and racial equity.

- Assessing the extent to which the plan addresses racial disparities in Scotland's child protection system.
- Providing written feedback structured under key thematic headings, incorporating relevant excerpts from Plan 24-30.

The review involved document analysis of Plan 24–30 and GIRFEC, internal consultations with Project Esperanza staff, comparisons with past advocacy efforts, and the submission of structured written feedback under key themes to inform policy recommendations.

The analysis was structured around the following key themes:

Inclusion and Representation of Black and Minority Ethnic Children in The Promise Plan

The analysis reviewed how The Promise Plan 24–30 addresses racial disparities in child protection, specifically whether it acknowledges the cultural identity, racial trauma, and lived experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic children in care.

Commitments to Anti-Racism and Cultural Competency in Care

It examined whether the plan explicitly tackles institutional racism within Scotland's care system and assessed commitments to cultural competence through training, workforce development, and leadership initiatives.

Engagement with Black-Led Organisations and Communities

The review assessed if the plan supports meaningful co-production with Black-led organisations like Project Esperanza and whether the expertise of Black communities is valued or overlooked in the policy framework.

Structural Barriers and Systemic Change

This section evaluated whether the plan includes concrete strategies to address systemic inequalities, such as disproportionate removals of Black children, the neglect of culturally rooted kinship care practices, and the lack of Black foster carers and racially responsive placements.

Implementation and Accountability

The analysis explored how progress would be measured regarding racial equity and identified gaps in the accountability mechanisms designed to protect racially minoritised children.

The Self-Esteem Survey

As part of Project Esperanza's commitment to understanding the well-being and identity development of Black and Minority Ethnic children in Scotland, a self-esteem survey was conducted to assess the impact of racial bias, cultural representation, and school environments on self-perception and confidence levels.

Survey Objectives:

The survey focused on Black and Minority Ethnic children and young people in primary and secondary schools, particularly in North Edinburgh, with an estimated sample size of around 80 participants. Recruitment was carried out through schools partnered with Project Esperanza, community and youth organisations, and online platforms for children aged 13 and above, with parental consent required for those under 16. The survey was distributed through online platforms, paper-based questionnaires in schools and community centres, and facilitated discussions and focus groups. It combined quantitative and qualitative questions exploring self-perception, experiences of racial discrimination, cultural representation in education, interactions with teachers and peers, and access to role models and community support, focusing on how these factors influence racial identity and self-esteem.

Case Study Collection and Analysis

As part of Project Esperanza's research, case studies were gathered to provide real-world insights into the experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic children and families within Scotland's child protection system, education sector, and wider social services. These case studies aimed to highlight systemic barriers, racial disparities, and the lived experiences of those impacted by policy and practice shortcomings. Case Studies, legal insights, and historical context are particularly valuable

The methodology incorporated case studies, legal frameworks, and historical analysis, which were highly valued by participants as tools for understanding systemic inequalities.

The historical framing of anti-racism issues provided a critical lens for understanding the roots of racial disparities in Scotland's child protection system. The legal training, delivered by DEWA Legal Services, was deemed highly informative, particularly in understanding No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) policies and the rights of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC).

Case studies were collected from Black and Minority Ethnic children in care or at risk of removal, parents and caregivers involved with social work services, and young people who experienced bullying, discrimination, or exclusion. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, confidential written testimonies, focus group discussions on child protection and education, and observational insights from Project Esperanza's direct engagement with families and professionals. Case studies were identified as particularly impactful, helping participants apply theoretical knowledge to real-world scenarios.

Objectives of Case Study Collection:

- Illustrate the personal impact of racial bias in child protection and education.
- Provide qualitative evidence to complement survey and training session findings.
- Identify common themes in challenges faced by Black and Minority Ethnic children and families.

- Highlight best practices and solutions that have successfully supported Black and Minority Ethnic communities.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

Introduction

The findings of this study are informed by the four key methodologies employed by Project Esperanza, each of which provided unique insights into the systemic barriers faced by Black and multi-ethnic children, families, and professionals in Scotland's child protection and education systems.

Training-Based Engagement (Fostering Equality – This methodology revealed critical gaps in racial literacy and cultural competency within the workforce, highlighting how unconscious bias and systemic racism shape safeguarding decisions and support services.

Bullying Survey in Schools – This survey captured the prevalence and impact of racial bullying on Black and multi-ethnic children in North Edinburgh, demonstrating how discrimination, exclusion, and inadequate school responses contribute to diminished well-being and educational outcomes.

Analysis of The Promise Plan 24-30 – A review of Scotland's national child protection strategy helped assess whether policy commitments adequately address racial disparities, exposing gaps in implementation, accountability, and cultural responsiveness.

Self-Esteem Survey of Black and Multi-Ethnic Children – This research evidenced the psychological effects of systemic bias and racism, particularly regarding identity formation, confidence levels, and feelings of inclusion within school and care environments.

Case Study Collection and Analysis: These provided real-world insights into the experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic children and families within Scotland's child protection system, education sector, and wider social services.

These methodological approaches, supported by case study analysis, form the basis of the findings outlined in this section. The results highlight structural inequalities, institutional bias, and the urgent need for anti-racist reforms in social work, education, and child protection policies.

Fostering Equality – Addressing Bias in Scottish Child Protection Practices

"Our approach for the facilitated sessions was friendly and non-judgmental; we wanted our sessions to be a positive experience for everyone participating and we encouraged everyone to speak up without holding back, but also without centering themselves. We did not intentionally want to upset any of the workforce that attended by having them think they are not important or that they were the problem and should feel guilty just for being White; therefore, everyone who participated was

protected and insulated from any form of discomfort. The respect we want for the children and families that are the centre of this work is the same respect we have aimed to give back to everyone who participated"

Project Esperanza Fostering Equalities Team

The findings from the Fostering Equality training sessions highlight critical gaps in cultural competence, organisational procedures, and personal accountability within Scotland's child protection and social work sectors. Participants, including professionals from youth work, social work, and education, expressed a strong need for structured cultural competence training, institutional reform, and sustained anti-racist engagement.

"We were begging them to work us, we wanted to do anything that they told us to, but they turned everything down" **Parents A**

Cultural Safety Training is Lacking but Essential

A significant gap in cultural competence training was evident across the workforce, with many participants acknowledging that they had little to no formal training in working with minority ethnic and migrant communities.

"I feel like I have personal pressure when I come here, but I think that it is important to be here" **Participant W, Fostering Equalities Training.**

Several participants stated that there was very little emphasis on cultural fluency in their practice. The lack of training was attributed to a failure to recognise cultural competence as core work rather than an 'appendix' to existing frameworks.

Many attendees appreciated the cultural competence guidelines introduced during the sessions, noting that this was their first exposure to structured tools for integrating anti-racism into their professional roles.

Gaps in cultural understanding were particularly evident in fostering and adoption systems, where Black and multi-ethnic children often do not receive culturally appropriate care.

Stronger partnerships with anti-racism advocates were identified as best practice for embedding cultural competence across schools, social work, and care services.

These findings underscore the urgent need to incorporate cultural competency frameworks into social work education, policy, and frontline practice to ensure that Black and multi-ethnic families receive equitable and informed support.

Organisational Procedures Are Not Well Equipped to Deal with Racism

Institutional policies and procedures were identified as inadequate in addressing racism, particularly in education and child protection settings.

Participants highlighted that racial incidents in schools are often misclassified under vague terms such as ‘bickering’, leading to insufficient intervention and follow-up.

Many professionals lacked confidence in discussing race-related challenges with managers, emphasising that organisational culture must facilitate open, structured conversations about racism.

There was a strong call for greater involvement of third-sector organisations in family planning and decision-making processes, ensuring that culturally competent perspectives are included in care and safeguarding strategies.

These findings suggest that institutional inertia and reluctance to engage with racial issues contribute to ongoing disparities in how racism is reported, addressed, and prevented within Scotland’s child protection and education systems.

Anti-Racism Requires a Personal Commitment to Learning and Unlearning

Participants acknowledged that engaging with anti-racism and cultural competence work requires an ongoing personal commitment to learning, reflection, and action. Many attendees admitted to previously lacking awareness of systemic racism and its effects on Black and multi-ethnic communities and valued the training as an opportunity for critical self-reflection. While some participants felt overwhelmed or disheartened by the case studies, they stressed the importance of shifting focus towards actionable change rather than disengaging from the work. Some expressed that it would have been easier to avoid attending or leave the session, highlighting the emotional and intellectual challenge of confronting systemic racism, a reality made more difficult by the failure to make such training a mandatory requirement for social work professionals.

The findings from the Fostering Equality training sessions highlight significant gaps in cultural competence, racial awareness, and institutional readiness to address racism in Scotland’s child protection and education systems. Without urgent reforms in training, policy, and practice, Black and multi-ethnic children and families will continue to experience disproportionate harm within these structures. The feedback gathered from participants underscores the necessity of integrating anti-racism into professional development,

strengthening organisational accountability, and fostering a collaborative, long-term commitment to equity in child protection services.

Self-esteem surveys and bullying questionnaires

A critical aspect of child protection and social policy reform is ensuring that all children, regardless of race, ethnicity, or background, are afforded equal rights to safety, dignity, and protection from harm. However, findings from self-esteem surveys, bullying questionnaires, and case studies indicate that Black and multi-ethnic children face systemic neglect when experiencing bullying and discrimination in school settings. This raises urgent concerns about how child protection frameworks, including GIRFEC, are applied in practice and whether the fundamental rights of Black children are being upheld.

The process of safeguarding children requires critical reflection on how childhood is defined and whose childhoods are prioritised. The reality observed through this research is that not all children are treated as children, particularly when racial bias, adultification, and systemic inequalities shape perceptions of vulnerability.

Practitioners working in social work, education, and child protection must recognise and address their prejudices to ensure that Black and multi-ethnic children are safeguarded on equal terms with their white peers. The Best Practice Manual and accompanying toolkit provide strategies for professionals to implement culturally competent safeguarding approaches while acknowledging and addressing systemic challenges.

Findings from the Self-Esteem Survey: The Impact of Racism on Child Wellbeing

The self-esteem survey conducted with Black and multi-ethnic children revealed deep-seated psychological and emotional consequences of racial discrimination and exclusion in school environments. Key findings include:

- Children who had experienced racist bullying reported significantly lower self-esteem, heightened anxiety, and withdrawal from social activities.
- Victims of racist bullying frequently felt unsupported by teachers and school authorities, with many reporting that incidents were dismissed or minimised.
- A strong correlation between racial bullying and academic disengagement was identified, as children who had been bullied reported struggling with concentration, attendance, and participation in class.

These findings align with research on the effects of racial trauma on children's mental health (Bécares et al., 2015; Kelly et al., 2013), which suggests that systemic exclusion and a lack of emotional support contribute to lasting psychological harm. The failure to recognise and respond appropriately to racist bullying not only undermines the child's well-being but also contradicts the principles of safeguarding and child protection outlined in GIRFEC.

Findings from the Bullying Questionnaire: Systemic Failures in Addressing Racist Bullying in Schools

The bullying questionnaire gathered insights from parents, teachers, and children regarding the effectiveness of school responses to racist bullying. The findings revealed significant inconsistencies and gaps in intervention strategies:

- Black and multi-ethnic children reported feeling “invisible” in schools, where teachers and administrators failed to acknowledge or address racist incidents effectively.
- There were no standardised or transparent procedures for recording and addressing racist bullying, raising concerns about accountability and institutional neglect.
- Parents expressed frustration over the lack of rehabilitative consequences for perpetrators, often observing that bullies remained in school while their children were left with emotional trauma and disrupted education.
- Concerns were raised about police involvement in schools, with reports indicating bias in how incidents were handled when Black and multi-ethnic children were involved.

There is a Need for a Community of Practice to Address Anti-Racism and Cultural Safety

Participants expressed that anti-racist initiatives must remain dynamic, reflective, and collaborative rather than becoming static or procedural checklists. There was consensus that a community of practice should be established, allowing professionals to share experiences, refine best practices, and sustain engagement beyond one-off training sessions. The need for ongoing support and mentorship in navigating anti-racist practice was identified as crucial for embedding cultural competence across institutions.

These findings emphasise that anti-racism in social work and child protection must be a sustained effort, supported by structured networks of professionals, advocates, and community leaders.

Findings from the Analysis of The GIRFEC Framework

Project Esperanza conducted an in-depth analysis focusing on the implementation of Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) and its effectiveness in addressing the specific needs of Black and multi-ethnic children and families in Scotland. While GIRFEC seeks to promote children’s rights, well-being, and a coordinated approach to safeguarding, our findings reveal significant gaps in racial and cultural inclusivity, systemic bias, and the consideration of structural inequalities affecting Black and minority ethnic communities.

This analysis critically examined the Named Person approach, the single model of wellbeing, and safeguarding definitions through the lens of racial equity. The findings highlight the need for a more culturally competent and intersectional approach to ensure GIRFEC truly meets the needs of all children, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds.

Gaps in GIRFEC's Definition of Safety for Black and Multi-Ethnic Children

The GIRFEC framework defines safety primarily in terms of protection from immediate harm. However, for Black and ethnic minority children, safety is more complex, shaped by racial discrimination, social inequality, and systemic exclusion.

Black and minority ethnic children face racism in schools, communities, and care settings, affecting their mental and emotional well-being in ways that GIRFEC fails to address.

CRER (Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights) reported 1,198 racially motivated bullying cases in Scottish schools in 2020/21, up from 409 in 2016/17, yet GIRFEC does not explicitly integrate racialised experiences into its safeguarding definition.

Racism is a direct threat to safety, violating children's rights under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

Key Finding: GIRFEC must adopt a broader, human rights-based approach to safety, ensuring that racism, discrimination, and social inequalities are explicitly acknowledged as safeguarding concerns.

The Named Person Approach: Lack of Representation and Cultural Competency

The GIRFEC framework assigns a "Named Person" to oversee a child's well-being. However, our analysis found that these roles are overwhelmingly occupied by white professionals, with limited cultural competency training.

6% of 'Looked After Children' in Scotland were non-white between 2022-2023, yet there is no commitment within The Promise Plan 24-30 to increasing the representation of Black and ethnic minority professionals in Named Person roles.

Foster and kinship carers from minority backgrounds remain significantly underrepresented, despite ongoing recruitment efforts (Scottish Government Children's Social Work Statistics, 2023; Brighter Futures, 2022).

Lack of cultural representation in Named Person roles can lead to misinterpretations of cultural practices, bias in safeguarding assessments, and inadequate emotional support for racialised children.

Key Finding: GIRFEC must prioritise recruiting, training, and promoting Black and minority ethnic professionals in Named Person roles to better reflect the lived experiences of the children they serve.

The Model of Wellbeing: A One-Size-Fits-All Approach Fails Black and Multi-Ethnic Children

The SHANARRI framework (Safe, Healthy, Achieving, Nurtured, Active, Respected, Responsible, Included) is used to assess child well-being within GIRFEC.



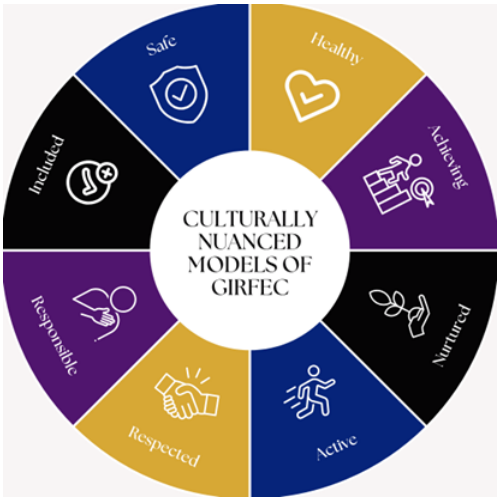
However, this universal approach does not account for the structural inequalities disproportionately affecting Black and multi-ethnic children.

48% of children from BME families in Scotland were living in relative poverty in 2021 (Scottish Anti-Poverty Review, 2022), yet SHANARRI does not fully consider how poverty, racism, and exclusion impact child development.

A wellbeing model that applies the same metrics to all children risks erasing the specific challenges faced by Black and ethnic minority families, such as racial trauma and migration-related hardships.

Mental health disparities are evident—although 6% of children in Scotland are from BAME backgrounds, they make up 10% of CAMHS caseloads, highlighting the need for culturally competent mental health support.

Key Finding: The SHANARRI model must integrate intersectional and anti-racist principles, recognising those structural inequalities shape children's lived experiences and well-being.



Systemic Bias in Education: Achieving and Inclusion Barriers for Black Pupils:

GIRFEC promotes educational attainment and inclusion, but our analysis found that systemic biases hinder Black and multi-ethnic children's progress.

While attainment levels for African, Black, and Caribbean pupils have improved, disparities remain. Between 2011/12 and 2020/21, the percentage of these pupils achieving one or more passes at SCQF Level 6 or above rose by 20.6 percentage points to 83.7%, yet the gap between white and Black students receiving First-class degrees has worsened, now standing at 9.5%.

Universities UK attributes this disparity to systemic issues, including a lack of representation, with only 19% of academic staff identifying as BAME, and just 2.5% as Black.

Key Finding: GIRFEC must implement systemic evaluations of bias within schools and further education institutions to ensure Black and ethnic minority pupils receive equal opportunities to achieve their potential.

The Impact of Adultification on Black Children in Care and Criminal Justice

A critical issue overlooked by GIRFEC is adultification bias, where Black children are perceived as more mature, "streetwise," and less in need of safeguarding.

Black boys involved in gangs are often assumed to be able to fend for themselves, even when missing from home or care, leading to failures in safeguarding against sexual exploitation, youth violence, and criminal exploitation (Bernard & Harris, 2019).

Between 2022-2023, Black children were four times more likely to be strip-searched in Scotland, reinforcing institutional biases in criminal justice and social work interventions.

Key Finding: GIRFEC must explicitly recognise adultification bias as a safeguarding issue, ensuring that Black children receive an equitable level of protection and support as their white peers.

Exclusion from Physical Activities: Barriers to Health and Wellbeing

GIRFEC promotes physical activity as a key well-being factor, but Black and ethnic minority children face barriers to participation.

Only 45% of children aged 5 to 16 are active for at least 60 minutes a day, but participation rates are even lower among Black and ethnic minority children (Sport England, 2023).

Factors such as racial discrimination, lack of culturally inclusive sports environments, and socioeconomic constraints hinder access to physical activities.

Key Finding: GIRFEC must implement targeted strategies to ensure Black and ethnic minority children have equal access to physical activities by addressing economic, cultural, and social barriers.

Project Esperanza's analysis of GIRFEC highlights significant structural gaps that prevent the framework from effectively supporting Black and multi-ethnic children. While GIRFEC's guiding principles aim to promote child well-being, the failure to integrate an anti-racist, culturally competent, and intersectional approach leaves Black and ethnic minority children at a systemic disadvantage.

Analysis of The Promise Plan 24-30

Project Esperanza conducted a detailed review of The Promise Plan 24-30, with particular whether it effectively addresses racial equity, cultural identity, and the lived experiences of Black and multi-ethnic children in Scotland's child protection system. While The Promise Plan outlines an ambitious vision for systemic change, our analysis found significant gaps in its engagement with Black-led organisations, the representation of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) care-experienced children, and the inclusion of cultural rights and identity-based safeguarding practices.

The Need to Engage Black-Led Organisations in Keeping The Promise

"The best educators on the Black Experience are Black people. If we are saying we have experienced racism, believe us, if we are saying we have not been treated with dignity, believe us. Black people must be listened to, must not be dismissed, must not be gaslighted and their issues must not be minimised. The diversity of Black Thought in Scotland is a resource that is often overlooked. The wealth of knowledge in our communities must not be underestimated."

Victoria Nyanga-Ndiaye, CEO, Project Esperanza

The Promise Plan commits to “whole system change” through collaboration between sectors and agencies (Page 5) and states that “understanding the nuances of different children’s lives is only possible through listening to those with lived experience” (Page 19). However, our analysis found that:

- Black-led organisations remain excluded from key decision-making processes, despite their expertise in working with BME families experiencing or at risk of entering the care system.
- Grassroots organisations provide vital cultural and emotional support to BME families, yet there is no formalised mechanism to integrate their knowledge into The Promise’s implementation plans.
- Social work and child protection policies are still designed and implemented predominantly by white professionals, which risks perpetuating unconscious biases and structural racism in safeguarding assessments.

Key Finding: For the Promise Plan to achieve true system-wide change, it must formally recognise and engage Black-led organisations as equal stakeholders in shaping child protection reforms.

Amplifying the Voices of Black and Multi-Ethnic Care-Experienced Children

The Promise Plan does not explicitly acknowledge the experiences of Black and multi-ethnic children in the care system, despite Scotland’s increasingly diverse population. The analysis found:

There is an urgent need to address the unique challenges faced by BIPOC care-experienced children, including racial discrimination, cultural identity loss, and a lack of representation in foster placements.

The Promise Plan does not outline specific actions to uphold the cultural rights and needs of racialised children, despite international frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) mandating the right to identity, culture, and belonging.

Black and multi-ethnic children in care often lack culturally competent foster placements, which can lead to further isolation, racial trauma, and a disconnect from their heritage.

Key Finding: Without explicit commitments to racial equity, The Promise risks failing Black and multi-ethnic children, reinforcing a system where their cultural and safeguarding needs remain overlooked.

The Need for Concrete Outcomes from The Promise Work

The Promise Plan states that it aims to make Scotland the best place for children to grow up, but it lacks clear accountability measures for tracking racial disparities in child protection outcomes. Our analysis raises several critical questions:

How will the success of The Promise be measured? Will racial equity in care placements, safeguarding interventions, and social work decision-making be actively monitored?

How will we know if more families feel comfortable engaging with child protection services? Will Black and multi-ethnic families be included in decision-making about their children's futures?

What tangible reforms are being implemented to challenge Eurocentric models of parenting and childhood? The GIRFEC framework applies a universal model of wellbeing (SHANARRI) that may not adequately reflect the experiences of racialised children growing up in Scotland.

Key Finding: The Promise must set out clear, measurable indicators to track racial disparities in child welfare and ensure that BME children and families are genuinely included in shaping system reforms.

Keeping The Promise to Heritage, Culture, and Community

The Promise Plan acknowledges the importance of identity and community, stating:

"I am nurtured and supported to explore and develop my identity, and people who support me think about what my identity could mean for the help I might need at different times in my life" (Page 2).

However, our review found that this commitment lacks specific mechanisms to protect the cultural rights of Black and multi-ethnic children. Key concerns include:

How will children removed from their families be cared for by those who understand their cultural background?

Beyond kinship care, what measures will be introduced to ensure that BME children remain connected to their community, heritage, and traditions?

How will social workers and foster carers receive the necessary training in cultural competence and anti-racist practice?

Key Finding: The Promise Plan must explicitly commit to ensuring that Black and multi-ethnic children in care are placed in culturally appropriate environments where they can maintain strong connections to their heritage, language, and identity.

Engaging Black Families and Creating Black Kinship Care Networks

"Our children want to see us, but they keep writing on the record that our children do not want to see us. They want to use their laws to break our family. I have lost hope and I am giving up" **Parent S.**

The Promise Plan recognises the need for better support for families experiencing poverty and those for whom English is not a first language. However, it does not explicitly outline how Black and multi-ethnic families will be supported to navigate the child protection system, particularly in cases involving immigration-related barriers or cultural misunderstandings.

Many BME families struggle to access information on fostering, kinship care, and parental rights due to language barriers and a lack of culturally tailored outreach.

Scotland's rising numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) require urgent safeguarding measures that involve Black-led organisations and migrant advocacy groups.

BME community organisations must be given the necessary access and influence to help shape policy responses to child protection concerns affecting asylum-seeking and migrant children.

Key Finding: The Promise must actively work with Black-led organisations to strengthen kinship care networks, provide accessible information to BME families, and ensure that UASC receive culturally competent safeguarding interventions.

While The Promise Plan 24-30 sets out broad principles for child protection reform, our analysis found that it fails to sufficiently address the specific experiences of Black and multi-ethnic children and families in Scotland. Without explicit commitments to racial equity, cultural competence, and the engagement of Black-led organisations, The Promise risks reinforcing the very inequalities it seeks to dismantle.

"At Project Esperanza, we have been listening to the voices of families from Black and Multi Ethnic Communities about their experiences, concerns and frustrations with racism in schools and health and social care services; as well as about how complaints are handled. We are amplifying those voices through the work that we do to challenge racist systems and work practices, as well as to challenge the gatekeeping that happens within systems, which ultimately harm Black and Brown communities. We do this in order to shape a truly welcoming, fairer and safer Scotland that is culturally literate and migrant friendly".

Victoria Nyanga-Ndiaye, CEO, Project Esperanza

Case Studies – Lived Experiences of Black and Multi-Ethnic Families in Scotland

The case studies gathered by Project Esperanza provide a first-hand account of the systemic failures experienced by Black and multi-ethnic children and families in Scotland's child protection, education, and law enforcement systems. These real-world examples highlight how institutional racism, lack of cultural competence, and policy shortcomings directly impact vulnerable children and families.

Through the collection and analysis of qualitative case studies, this methodology aimed to:

- Illustrate the tangible consequences of bias and systemic discrimination.
- Highlight institutional responses to racism and safeguarding concerns.
- Provide an evidence base to support policy recommendations and reforms.

The case studies reflect three major areas of concern: racist bullying in schools, failures in safeguarding refugee families, and the criminalisation of Black youth instead of protection from exploitation. These findings demonstrate urgent gaps in

Scotland's safeguarding frameworks and reinforce the need for anti-racist, trauma-informed, and child-centred interventions.

Case Study 1: Racist Bullying in Schools – 'Racist Attack on 9-Year-Old Girl'

Summary of case study: Amahle, a 9-year-old Black girl from West Africa, was physically assaulted and racially abused by two white classmates at her school in Edinburgh. School staff were absent during the attack, and despite clear evidence of violence, no disciplinary action was taken against the perpetrators. Instead, the school prioritised the attackers' trauma over Amahle's well-being, refusing to acknowledge the racial nature of the assault.

Full case study: Amahle, a 9-year-old Black girl from West Africa, was attacked by two white male classmates at her school in Edinburgh. The boys physically assaulted her while making racist remarks, and there were no staff present during the incident. Witnesses reported that Amahle was left bruised, distressed, and without immediate assistance.

Response from School & Police

Amahle's mother, Zanele, anticipated disciplinary action and support for her daughter, but was instead informed that the boys would not face punishment due to their war-related trauma. The police, instead of addressing the assault, focused on Zanele's emotional response, advising her to "calm down." The police report omitted the racist and violent nature of the attack entirely. Despite the severity of Amahle's injuries, she was only provided with an ice pack before her parents sought further medical attention, where significant head injuries were confirmed.

Institutional Failures & Impact

The school refused to discipline the boys and neglected to offer Amahle counselling, instead pressuring her to 'be understanding.' This lack of support made Amahle feel unsafe, marginalised, and unsupported. Her mental health deteriorated, leading to anxiety, diminished trust in institutions, and a decline in academic performance.

Key Findings:

Failure to Recognise Racist Violence – The school's response minimised the attack, framing it as a non-racial issue, despite clear evidence of racial abuse.

Neglect of the Victim's Trauma – Amahle was not offered counselling, safeguarding support, or emotional care, leading to deteriorating mental health and trust in institutions.

Police Bias and Dismissal – The police failed to document the racist nature of the incident, instead focusing on Amahle's mother's reaction rather than holding the attackers accountable.

Long-Term Consequences – The institutional failure to intervene left Amahle psychologically distressed, academically disengaged, and marginalised within the school system.

This case highlights widespread issues in school safeguarding procedures, where racist bullying is often downplayed or ignored. Schools and police must adopt explicit anti-racist safeguarding frameworks to protect Black and multi-ethnic children from violence and discrimination.

Case Study 2: Safeguarding Failures for Refugee Families – Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and Systemic Neglect

Summary of case study: Family C, a Somali refugee family resettled in Scotland, had endured significant trauma, including the forced genital mutilation of their daughters in a refugee camp. Upon arrival in Scotland, their trauma was repeatedly compounded by failures in information-sharing and coordination among support agencies.

Full case study: Family C arrived in the UK as refugees under a UNHCR resettlement scheme—Mum, Dad, and their four children. Originally from Somalia, they endured five years in a Kenyan refugee camp before resettling in Scotland. Initially placed in a remote Highland locality, they were later relocated to Edinburgh.

Their daughters, aged 9 and 11, were forcibly subjected to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in the camp—an act carried out against the family's wishes. Their mother had also been a victim of FGM. This practice constitutes a severe human rights violation, prohibited under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, Article 5), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, Article 19 & 24), and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, Article 2 & 5).

Upon arriving in Scotland, the family was repeatedly required to recount their trauma to different authorities due to poor information-sharing between agencies. This failure retraumatised them and eroded their trust in support services, violating their right to dignity and protection, as outlined in the 1951 Refugee Convention. Family C's experience highlights systemic failures in safeguarding and support for refugee families. Their case underscores the urgent need for better coordination, trauma-informed care, and a human rights-based approach to resettlement. A centralised system where refugees can access support and where professionals can securely store and share essential information is crucial in preventing repeated re-traumatisation. Such a system would ensure that vulnerable individuals receive consistent, compassionate care while upholding their dignity and rights.

Key Findings:

Re-Traumatisation Through Repeated Disclosure – The family was required to recount their trauma multiple times due to poor communication among agencies, violating their right to dignity and psychological safety (UNHCR, 1951 Refugee Convention).

Lack of Culturally Competent Trauma-Informed Care – The absence of structured, culturally responsive support services resulted in the family's continued distress and loss of trust in Scottish institutions.

Failure to Uphold Human Rights Protections – The UK has clear international obligations to protect survivors of FGM and forced displacement, yet the systemic gaps in coordination left Family C vulnerable and unsupported.

This case demonstrates the urgent need for a centralised, trauma-informed approach to refugee resettlement, ensuring that families are not forced to relive their trauma unnecessarily and receive comprehensive, coordinated support from a single access point.

Case Study 3: Criminalisation Instead of Protection – Police Failures in Safeguarding Black Youth

Summary of case study: Family D, a Nigerian mother and her 15-year-old son, moved to the UK seeking better opportunities. While his mother worked long hours, the teenager became vulnerable to criminal exploitation. When coerced into holding drugs by older gang members, he immediately called the police seeking help. Instead of recognising him as a victim of exploitation, officers arrested and charged him for drug possession, failing to activate any safeguarding interventions.

Full case study: Case Study 3 - Police Protection

Family D, a mother and her 15-year-old son, moved from Nigeria to the UK ten years ago. While his mother worked long hours, the boy fell in with an older group involved in drug dealing. One day, they coerced him into holding drugs before a sale.

Frightened, he called the police, admitting regret and seeking help. Instead of protecting him, officers ignored his concerns and arrested him for possession. Social services failed to intervene, leaving him without safeguarding support or recognition as a victim of exploitation.

This case highlights a failure by both police and social work to protect children from criminal exploitation, violating the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, Article 19 & 40). The UK's Modern Slavery Act 2015 recognises "county lines" drug exploitation, yet frontline services continue to criminalise rather than safeguard vulnerable youth. Police should have identified him as a victim, and social services should have provided immediate protection and support. A trauma-informed, child-centered approach is urgently needed to prevent further injustices.

Key Findings:

Failure to Identify Child Exploitation – Despite UK legal frameworks, including the Modern Slavery Act 2015, recognising county lines drug exploitation as a form of child abuse, the boy was treated as a criminal rather than a victim.

Lack of Social Work Intervention – Social services did not provide support, leaving the family isolated and without safeguarding protections.

Violation of International Child Rights Standards – The police and social work response failed to uphold the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, Articles 19 & 40), which mandates protection from exploitation and a child-centred justice approach.

This case exposes the racial disparities in Scotland's child protection system, where Black children are disproportionately criminalised rather than safeguarded. A trauma-informed, child-centred policing approach is essential to prevent further injustices against vulnerable youth.

The Case for Urgent Systemic Change

The case studies collected by Project Esperanza offer a stark illustration of institutional failures within Scotland's child protection, education, and criminal justice systems. These real-life examples validate the broader concerns raised in our other research methodologies and underscore the urgent need for systemic reform.

Key takeaways from the case studies include*:*

Education Sector Failures – Schools fail to safeguard Black children from racist bullying and frequently dismiss the severity of racial discrimination.

Gaps in Trauma-Informed Support – Families seeking safety in Scotland experience re-traumatisation through fragmented service provision, exposing the need for centralised, culturally competent interventions.

Criminalisation Instead of Protection – Black children and young people facing exploitation and vulnerability are disproportionately targeted by law enforcement rather than safeguarded by social work services.

These cases reinforce the necessity of embedding anti-racist, trauma-informed, and culturally competent practices across Scotland's public services. Without urgent intervention, Black and multi-ethnic children will continue to experience disproportionate harm, marginalisation, and systemic neglect.

Discussion

Findings from Fostering Equality Training: The Need for Anti-Racist Cultural Competency Training

The Fostering Equality training sessions revealed significant gaps in the cultural competence of professionals within Scotland's child protection and social work systems. Participants identified:

Limited access to anti-racism training and cultural fluency resources leads to racially biased safeguarding interventions.

Social workers and educators lack confidence in addressing racism, which results in misclassification of racial abuse and systemic failures to protect Black children from harm.

Institutional resistance to change, where discussions on racial inequality were minimised or dismissed as “not relevant” to child protection.

These findings expose a critical flaw in The Promise Plan 24-30—while the plan aims to reform safeguarding policies, it does not explicitly commit to integrating anti-racist and cultural competency training for social workers, educators, and care professionals.

Implications

Without structured anti-racist training, safeguarding professionals will continue to operate within a framework that does not recognise or address racial bias in child protection assessments.

A failure to integrate cultural safety training leads to racial disparities in risk assessments, with Black families more likely to be investigated and children more likely to be removed from their homes.

The Promise Plan must include mandatory cultural competence and anti-racism training for all social work, education, and child protection professionals to ensure that decision-making is equitable and free from racial bias.

Findings from the Bullying and Self-Esteem Surveys: The Psychological Impact of Racism in Schools

The bullying survey and self-esteem survey conducted by Project Esperanza provided first-hand insights into the experiences of Black and multi-ethnic children in Scottish schools. The findings highlight:

Black and multi-ethnic children face disproportionately high levels of racial bullying, with CRER reporting 1,198 racially motivated bullying incidents in Scottish schools in 2020/21, up from 409 in 2016/17.

Racism in schools contributes to long-term psychological harm, with Black pupils reporting lower self-esteem, disengagement from education, and a loss of trust in authority figures.

Educational attainment gaps persist, despite improvements, with Black students still underrepresented in top-degree classifications and facing systemic barriers in further education.

Implications

The Promise Plan does not explicitly acknowledge the racialised experiences of children in education, failing to provide clear strategies to combat racial bullying, racial trauma, and disparities in school discipline policies.

GIRFEC’s wellbeing model (SHANARRI) does not account for the impact of racism on child development, reinforcing the need for an intersectional, anti-racist approach to education and safeguarding.

Schools must introduce comprehensive anti-racist safeguarding policies, ensuring that racially motivated bullying is recorded, addressed, and prevented through systemic change.

Findings from Analysis of The Promise Plan 24-30: Gaps in Racial Equity and Cultural Identity Protection

The Promise Plan 24-30, while progressive in many areas, lacks clear commitments to racial equity, cultural identity preservation, and the protection of Black and multi-ethnic children. Key concerns identified in our analysis include:

The exclusion of Black-led organisations from decision-making, despite The Promise's assertion that "whole system change demands collective endeavour" (Page 5).

A failure to explicitly reference Black and multi-ethnic care-experienced children means that their unique needs remain invisible in policy and practice.

No mechanisms to track racial disparities in care placements, safeguarding, or child protection outcomes, making it difficult to hold institutions accountable for racial equity commitments.

Implications

Black and multi-ethnic children risk losing connections to their cultural heritage in care settings, as The Promise does not outline concrete steps to ensure culturally appropriate foster and kinship care placements.

The lack of racial equity tracking in The Promise Plan means that systemic disparities may go unchallenged, reinforcing racial bias in child protection interventions.

GIRFEC must integrate anti-racist, culturally responsive wellbeing assessments to account for the distinct challenges faced by Black and multi-ethnic children, particularly in child protection cases.

Findings from Case Studies: The Lived Experiences of Black and Multi-Ethnic Families in Scotland

The case studies collected by Project Esperanza provided direct evidence of institutional failures, illustrating how systemic racism, cultural misunderstandings, and poor safeguarding practices harm Black and multi-ethnic children.

Case Study 1: Racist Bullying in Schools – A 9-year-old Black girl was physically attacked by white classmates, yet the school failed to classify the incident as a racial attack, and the police focused on the mother's emotional response rather than the child's safety.

Case Study 2: FGM and Refugee Safeguarding Failures – A Somali refugee family was repeatedly retraumatised by being forced to recount their experiences of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) due to poor information-sharing among agencies.

Case Study 3: Criminalisation of Black Youth – A 15-year-old Black boy who sought police protection after being coerced into gang activity was instead arrested for drug

possession, highlighting the racialised treatment of Black children within Scotland's justice system.

Implications

The Promise Plan must explicitly acknowledge the role of racism in child protection, policing, and social work practices, ensuring that racial trauma is recognised and addressed in safeguarding assessments.

Black and multi-ethnic children remain disproportionately vulnerable to criminalisation and exclusion, requiring urgent policy interventions to prevent adultification bias and systemic discrimination.

A trauma-informed, anti-racist safeguarding approach must be embedded in social work and education, ensuring that Black and multi-ethnic families receive fair, just, and culturally competent support.

The findings from all methodologies demonstrate that The Promise Plan 24-30 and the GIRFEC framework currently fail to fully meet the needs of Black and multi-ethnic children. Without urgent reforms, racial disparities in child protection, education, and safeguarding will persist, reinforcing structural inequalities rather than eliminating them.

To ensure Scotland's care system meets its commitment to every child, The Promise must:

Mandate anti-racist and cultural competence training for all professionals in child protection, education, and social work.

Actively engage Black-led organisations in policy development and decision-making.

Develop measurable racial equity outcomes to track disparities and promote accountability.

Ensure culturally competent foster and kinship placements for Black and multi-ethnic children.

Recognise and mitigate racial bias in safeguarding practices, ensuring that Black and multi-ethnic children receive equal protection, support, and access to opportunities.

Without these changes, The Promise will remain an incomplete commitment, failing to truly "Get It Right for Every Child."

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Recommendations for Safeguarding Black and Minority Ethnic Children and Young People

1. **Addressing Institutional and Interpersonal Racism**
    - Implement targeted interventions in health, education, and social work to address racism in safeguarding.
    - Establish accountability mechanisms for anti-racism interventions with leadership buy-in.
2. **Policy and Legislative Reform**
    - Conduct a detailed policy review to reduce inequalities in safeguarding Black and Minority Ethnic children.
    - Rewrite legislation and frameworks to reflect the cultural aspects of these communities.
3. **Co-Production and Community Involvement**
    - Engage Black and Minority Ethnic children, young people, and families in developing interventions.
    - Ensure all stakeholders, including policymakers and service providers, participate in co-produced initiatives.

Recommendations for Scotland's Child Protection System

1. **Culturally Matched Foster Care Placements**
    - Prioritise cultural matching for Black children in foster placements.
    - Recruit and train more Black foster carers.
    - Make cultural competency training mandatory for white foster carers.
2. **Improving Training for Social Workers and Foster Carers**
    - Implement mandatory anti-racism and cultural competency training.

- Endorse Project Esperanza's training programs to ensure workforce readiness.

3. **Mental Health and Well-Being Support**
    - Fund specialist mental health services that address racial trauma.
    - Provide access to culturally competent therapists and well-being programs.
    - Endorse and help distribute The Cultural Connections Kit to prevent cultural disconnect and help Black children maintain cultural ties.
4. **Strengthening Community Engagement**
    - Work with Project Esperanza to establish mentorship programs connecting Black children in care with Black role models.
    - Support faith and cultural organisations to maintain children's connections with their heritage.
    - Provide funding for Project Esperanza and other Black-led organisations to deliver advocacy and support services.

Recommendations for Social Work addressing the Deficit of Black Social Workers

1. **Recruitment and Retention of Black Social Workers**
    - Actively promote social work careers to Black communities.
    - Offer scholarships and paid placements to increase access**.**
2. **Embedding Anti-Racism in Social Work Education**
    - Require race and cultural competency training in social work curricula.
    - Increase Black representation among social work educators and trainers.
3. **Supporting Career Progression for Black Social Workers**
    - Develop mentorship programs for Black social workers.
    - Ensure anti-racist workplace policies and leadership pathways.
4. **Ensuring Accountability and Transparency**
    - Collect and publish diversity data on recruitment and retention.
    - Require racial equity action plans in social work organisations.

Recommendations for Loosening Barriers to Kinship and Foster Care

1. **Reforming Foster Care Eligibility Criteria**
    - Relax immigration-related restrictions for potential Black carers.
    - Adjust financial and housing requirements to be more inclusive.
2. **Addressing Systemic Racism in Assessments**
    - Require anti-racism training for social workers conducting assessments.
    - Increase the recruitment of Black social workers to ensure cultural sensitivity.
3. **Improving Recruitment and Awareness**
    - Launch targeted recruitment campaigns within Black communities.
    - Partner with Project Esperanza and other Black Led organisations to encourage kinship and foster care participation.
4. **Providing Better Support for Black Foster Carers**
    - Establish peer networks and mentorship programs.
    - Ensure financial and practical support tailored to Black families.

To ensure Scotland's child protection policies truly "Get It Right for Every Child," urgent reforms must include:

- Diversifying Named Person roles – Recruiting Black and ethnic minority professionals to improve cultural representation.
- Reforming SHANARRI assessments – Integrating structural inequalities and racial trauma into wellbeing evaluations.
- Addressing systemic racism in education and safeguarding – Implementing anti-racist training and policies in schools, child protection services, and the criminal justice system.
- Acknowledging and mitigating adultification bias – Ensuring Black children receive equal safeguarding protections.

Without these reforms, GIRFEC risks perpetuating racial inequalities rather than eradicating them.

To ensure that The Promise delivers meaningful change for all children in Scotland, the following actions are critical:

- Integrate Project Esperanza and other Black-led organisations into The Promise's decision-making structures, ensuring that their expertise informs child protection reforms.

- Develop clear, measurable racial equity outcomes to track disparities in care placements, safeguarding interventions, and social work decision-making.
- Commit to culturally competent foster care placements, ensuring that Black and multi-ethnic children grow up in environments where their heritage is respected.
- Ensure The Promise reflects the realities of racialised children's lives, explicitly addressing issues of racism, discrimination, and cultural identity loss in care.
- Strengthen kinship care networks for Black families, ensuring they have access to legal guidance, financial support, and culturally relevant safeguarding practices.

Without these targeted interventions, The Promise Plan will fail to uphold its commitment to every child, leaving Black and multi-ethnic children at continued risk of exclusion, neglect, and cultural erasure within Scotland's child protection system.

Call to Action

To The Promise Scotland

- Explicitly address racial inequalities in child protection.
- Commit to culturally competent advocacy services.

To Social Work Scotland

- End culturally mismatched placements without proper safeguards.
- Prioritise anti-racist policies in foster care and social work.

To The Scottish Government

- Fund Black-led charities and specialist mental health services for Black care-experienced youth.
- Remove systemic barriers preventing Black families from becoming carers.

To Black-Led Organisations

- Partner with social work services to provide best practice training and advocacy.
- Hold the system accountable for ensuring racial equity in child protection.

To Black Children in Scotland

Demand that agencies and workers:

1. See me and protect me without bias.
2. Hear my voice, believe my experience.

Chapter 6: Tools to Aid Good Practice

Fostering Equality Tool Kit

A Toolkit for Addressing Bias in Child Protection Practices developed in partnership with The Promise Partnership Fund.

What is this Toolkit & What Does It Aim to Do?

Informed by the background research, this toolkit is shaped by these experiences, offering insights and practical guidance to help professionals keep The Promise for all. A Toolkit for Addressing Bias in Child Protection Practices

The toolkit supports Scotland's child protection workforce in engaging more effectively with Black and minority ethnic (BME) families within or on the edges of the care system.

It aims to promote an inclusive, culturally fluent, and rights-respecting approach to child protection practices. At its core, the toolkit challenges the notion of viewing child protection through a singular, white Scottish lens. It emphasises the importance of recognising cultural diversity and understanding how culture, heritage, and lived experiences shape parenting within BME communities.

Grounded in human rights, the toolkit upholds Article 30 of the UNCRC, which protects the cultural rights of minority children, and Article 2 of the ECHR, which ensures non-discrimination. Key legislation such as the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, the UNCRC Incorporation (Scotland) Act 2024, the Equality Act 2010, and the Human Rights Act 1998 further reinforce these rights.

This toolkit is designed to complement the research document findings and recommendations. It provides clear guidance for all practitioners - not just senior managers - on working with cultural fluency. By implementing the practices outlined in this toolkit, organisations or individuals can adopt a more equitable, human rights-focused approach to child protection in Scotland.

The Project Esperanza Scottish Black Care Experience Charter for Racialised Communities

Project Esperanza has developed a care experience charter for racialised communities and takes a Rights and Reparatory justice approach which is consistent with Scotland’s Child Protection and Human Rights legal and policy frameworks. It is consistent with the Promise Scotland Plan 24-30 and National Progress Framework and respects the United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent.

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