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Racial microaggressions on the initial teacher education programmes: implications for minority ethnic teacher retention

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ABSTRACT

The representation and retention in the teaching profession are lower for people from all minority ethnic groups in England. The most significant ethnic disparities were found to occur in the early career stages (Worth et al., 2022). This article draws on critical race theory to investigate how racism, in the form of racial microaggressions, contributes to these disparities. It shares the findings from a small-scale research project on student teachers' experiences of racial microaggressions while learning to teach and discusses the implications for retention in the profession. It draws on a pilot survey ($N=42$) and interview data from 14 pre-service teachers from a variety of ethnic and subject backgrounds to explore participants' racialised experiences on school placements, as well as university elements of the Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programme in England. The findings suggest that microaggressions were more common on school placements than at universities. There is evidence to suggest that experiences of racial microaggressions may negatively affect minority ethnic student teachers' thoughts on viability in the teaching profession.

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KEYWORDS

Student teachers; racial microaggressions; teacher retention; school placements; race; ethnicity

Background

This research is conducted in the context of ethnic underrepresentation among the teacher workforce in English schools. Minority ethnic teachers make up only about 15% of all teachers in state schools, while minority ethnic pupils represent 36% of the student population, and there is a substantial geographical disproportionality (A. Tereshchenko et al., 2020; D. Wallace & Joseph-Salisbury, 2022). While the demographics of the teacher workforce have evolved over the last decade (Gorard et al., 2023), the overall ethnic diversity gap has actually grown over this time due to the increase of minority ethnic students by a remarkable 75% (Demie & See, 2022).

The headline figures for diversity in the pipeline into teaching look promising, with the overall number of ethnic minority pre-service student teachers (in this case,

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excluding White minority groups) almost doubling between 2011 and 2022 from 12% to 22% (Gov.UK, 2023; Lander, 2014). Yet, Worth et al. (2022) nuanced analysis shows that despite a strong interest in teaching, acceptance rates to postgraduate Initial Teacher Education (ITE) for applicants from all minority ethnic groups are lower. Furthermore, there is a Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) awarding gap between White and minority ethnic student teachers, and the employment outcomes after obtaining QTS are lower for graduates from all ethnic minority groups (Gorard et al., 2023; Worth et al., 2022). Notably, gaps in rates of entry into teaching are generally not explained by characteristics such as age, training route, degree classification, and subject (Worth et al., 2022). It becomes clear that the field faces a retention problem with newly qualified minority ethnic teachers.

Prior research has uncovered instances of covert and overt racism within educational institutions that play a significant role in the retention of student teachers (Basit et al., 2006, 2007; Wilkins & Lall, 2011), as well as in the professional lives and retention of serving minority ethnic teachers in England (Bradbury et al., 2022; Callender, 2018, 2020; D. Wallace, 2020) and other parts of the world (Endo, 2015; R. Kohli, 2018, 2014; Marom, 2019; Santoro, 2015). Despite hailing from different ethnic backgrounds and origins, teachers of colour in postcolonial contexts report strikingly similar experiences of being treated with contempt or mistrust, feeling dismissed or essentialised by colleagues, isolated, misunderstood, pigeonholed, overlooked for promotions, and lacking support from management (Bristol, 2018; Brown, 2019; Callender, 2020; Endo, 2015; Hancock et al., 2020; R. Kohli, 2018; Pearce, 2019). Pre-service teachers from ethnic minority backgrounds are less likely to report positive relationships with mentors and other teachers and less likely to enjoy their work during their ITE programmes, these experiences also persisted when they began working in schools after gaining their teaching qualifications (Poku, 2022).

The subtle and covert expressions of systemic racism in the form of putdowns, throwaway remarks, causal comments, and nonverbal or visual slights—to name just a few experiences—have been conceptualised in critical race scholarship as racial microaggressions (Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015; Solorzano et al., 2000). Drawing on Pierce's (1970) foundational work, Solorzano et al. (2000) defined racial microaggressions as 'subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed towards people of colour, often automatically or unconsciously' (60). To classify the often invisible microaggressive acts, Sue et al. (2007) proposed a framework which consisted of three main categories: (i) microassaults (i.e. explicit verbal or nonverbal derogations with the intention to cause harm through name-calling, avoidant behaviour, or purposeful discriminatory actions that convey rudeness, insensitivity, etc.), (ii) microinsults (i.e. verbal or nonverbal communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity); and (iii) microinvalidations (i.e. comments or behaviours that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings or experiential reality). While perceived as less harmful than old-fashioned overt racism, evidence suggests that the subtle denigrating messages sent to people of colour lead to microaggressive environments that cause victims to feel increased levels of anger, frustration, mistrust, self-censorship, loss of self-esteem and reduced psychological well-being that has shown to negatively impact the physical health of those experiencing the microaggression (Williams et al., 2021). In an

educational context, Frank et al. (2021) found that racialised microaggressive experiences are a statistically significant predictor of Black mathematics teacher turnover surpassing personal variables and organisational factors. Their findings suggest that as the frequency of microaggressions increases the likelihood of teachers considering leaving the profession increases.

The study reported in this article focuses on understanding the pernicious effect of racial microaggressions that can emerge in interactions in schools, university campuses and classrooms on student teachers' thoughts about teaching. It reports on research that consists of a survey exploring the extent of the student teachers' racial and ethnic microaggression experiences on school placements and the university elements of their ITE programme, as well as interviews to understand how the microaggressions manifest in these settings. In addition, we analyse the implications of these negative experiences for minority ethnic student teachers' thoughts on the viability in the teaching profession. Prior to detailing the research design and findings, we highlight the importance of using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a framework to study racial microaggressions.

Applying critical race theory to racial microaggressions

The Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework provides the analytical tool to expose institutionalised racism and other forms of oppression in education. Among its numerous principles, CRT maintains that racism is 'endemic, institutional, and systemic' and is fundamental to how society is structured (Sleeter, 2017, p. 157). The argument put forward by race scholars is that racism operates in more subtle ways, which can make it more difficult to identify, yet it continues to inflict significant harm (Marom, 2019; Prieto et al., 2016). By applying CRT lens to this research, we acknowledge that despite relating to the actions of individuals on the interpersonal (i.e. micro) level, racial microaggressions are expressions of institutionalised racist structures and ideologies in the macro context of White supremacy that justifies the superiority of a dominant group (Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015), promotes pathological preconceptions of ethnic minorities, and signal othering and exclusion (Williams et al., 2021).

This study of student teachers' experiences of microaggressions allows us to identify tangible ways racism permeates everyday interactions in educational settings (Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015). It shows that schools and universities in the UK, similar to the USA (see Banks & Landau, 2019; Harwood et al., 2015; Lewis et al., 2021), are shaped by 'whiteness' as a cultural norm, where subtle and more elusive forms of racism such as microaggressions are referred to as part of the 'hidden operations of power' which can be recognised and named more easily with the tools of CRT (Poku, 2022).

Our data collection and analysis are centred on the lived experiences of minoritised student teachers. In addition to the centrality of experiential knowledge, other tenets of CRT that are applicable include: the intersectionality of race with other forms of subordination such as language, accent, immigration status, and culture; colour-blindness; and whiteness as property (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). Indeed, racial microaggressions can be operationalised as manifestations of these CRT tenets on the interpersonal level.

Following the work of scholars who bridged the gap between CRT and quantitative research, we are mindful of applying statistics in this mixed-methods study focused on

the experiences of minoritised groups to inform design and analyses, avoiding comparing these experiences to the White majoritarian norm, and including voice and insight from interviews to acknowledge that numbers cannot speak for themselves (Gillborn et al., 2018).

Methodology

Our project collected the data during April–July 2022. The existing Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Survey tool, which was developed in the US (Nadal, 2011), was adapted for the ITE context and piloted with three student teachers prior to administration. ¹It was complemented by interviews to illustrate experiences of marginalised groups with their own voice. Each of the authors on our multi-ethnic team had either experience teaching on ITE programmes or conducting research on race, ethnicity and racism using quantitative or mixed methods prior to the start of this project. ²

Participants

Participants were recruited from a wide-ranging sample of student teachers on Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programmes in England. Those ³who self-identified as from a minority ethnic background were invited to participate. In the second half of the programme, potential respondents received an email with information about the online survey and a link to complete it. When students started the survey, they were informed that their responses were anonymous and would not be linked to their institutions. The survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete. Submitted responses were sent to a password-protected server at UCL—the institution that granted the ethical approval to the study.

A total of 42 participants completed the survey. 83% ⁴of the sample self-categorised as women and 13% as men. A majority (68% of respondents) were based in London and the rest were elsewhere in England. The respondents were ethnically diverse, with 29% Asian, 38% Black, 26% mixed/multiple ethnicity, and 7% other ethnicity. The survey included 29% of primary student teachers and 71% of secondary student teachers in a range of subjects: Mathematics 19%, English 12%, Modern Languages 10%, Social Sciences 10%, and others. We also note that a high proportion of participants with a migrant background (43% were non-UK born) may experience additional intersectional inequalities. Given the self-selected nature of the survey, we acknowledge the possibility that individuals who had experienced a racial microaggression decided to participate in the study. The survey was also used to invite respondents to participate in the qualitative interviews, and around half of the interview sample was recruited via a survey.

The interview sample consisted of 14 London based participants (one male and 13 female). PGCE Mathematics students in one of the focus groups were all from a migrant background with the following ethnicities represented: Chinese, Turkish, Albanian, Romanian and Bulgarian. Another focus group included PGCE Social Sciences students who were British born and represented the following ethnicities: Mixed White and Black Caribbean, Indian, Black African. Four student teachers on secondary PGCE programmes were interviewed individually and self-identified as Pakistani, Indian, Black Caribbean and Mixed White and Asian, while an additional Black Caribbean interviewee

was on PGCE in Primary Education. Over half of the interview sample (8 out of 14) was non-UK born.

Instruments

The survey instrument for this study is composed of demographic questionnaire, two microaggression scales, and items to measure student teachers' thoughts about the teaching profession and feelings of belonging to the PGCE programme. The Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (Nadal, 2011) has six subscales following Sue et al.'s (2007) classification, which assess different types of racial microaggressions, including: Assumptions of Inferiority, Second-Class Citizen and Assumptions of Criminality, Microinvalidations, Exoticization/Assumptions of Similarity, Environmental Microaggressions, Workplace and School Microaggressions. For this study, we focused on a smaller subset of the items within each subscale related to microinsults and microinvalidations, suitable for asking student teachers in the context of school placements and university elements of the programme. The 5-point Likert-type format assesses the frequency of various types of microaggressions ranging from 'I did not experience this event' to 'I have experienced this event 10 or more times'. One 4-point Likert-type scale item ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' measuring thoughts of leaving the PGCE programme is included in our analysis in this article: 'I feel like an outsider on the PGCE programme'. Finally, we measured 'thoughts about the teaching profession' using a 4-point Likert-type scale which ranged from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. The items were borrowed from the National Center for Educational Statistics' Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) or formulated based on findings of research with student teachers in England (Basit et al., 2006, 2007).

The interview guide asked about how being a student from a minority ethnic background influenced experiences on the PGCE programme (both on school placements and at the university); specific challenges related to subject or phase; situations in which microaggressions occurred, with probing around areas covered in the survey; thoughts of entering the teaching professions; and thoughts on how to ensure that minority ethnic students' needs are met both on placements and in university provision.

Data analysis

The survey data were analysed using SPSS. We used descriptive statistics because the sample was small and not random. We also explored the distribution of variables using univariate statistics and ran some bivariate analyses to investigate if any of the demographic variables were associated with the reported experiences of microaggressions, and if these experiences were linked to student teachers' thoughts about the teaching profession.

For the bivariate analyses, we summarised the items and created two scales. The first scale which represented an overall self-reported level of Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions on placements consisted of 16 items and the value of Cronbach's Alpha for the scale was $\alpha = 0.948$.⁵ The second scale demonstrated the overall level of self-reported Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions at university on a PGCE programme and consisted of 11 items and the value of Cronbach's Alpha for the scale was $\alpha = 0.832$.⁶

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The analysis used a thematic approach to provide information about processes and interactions that seemed to be associated with pre-service teachers' thoughts about the teaching profession. For this paper, selective coding was used to categorise the data to examine student's encounters with racial microaggressions through the lens of the racial microaggressions framework (Sue et al. 2007). The first author developed an initial codebook of deductive codes, which was validated by two additional paper authors. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, we used pseudonyms for participants.

Findings

The findings of the quantitative and qualitative parts of our study are complementary and discussed in parallel. The identified survey patterns are illustrated and explicated with interview data.

Microaggressions on school placements

Table 1 shows how student teachers responded to 18 statements on the frequency of microaggressive experiences in their school placements. Considering individual statements separately, each of the microaggressions was experienced by over 50% of respondents once or more times. Over half of our sample experienced at least one of the 15 (out of 18) microaggressions once or more times. Three participants in the survey experienced all 18 microaggressions at least once. Only two survey participants did not report any of the 18 microaggressions in their school placements. The more common experiences relate to microinsults, including facing inferiority assumptions, differentiated treatment, marginalisation, as well as experiencing no representation at the senior leadership level. The less common microaggressions around enduring exoticisation, objectification and invalidation of racial experiences fall into the category of microinvalidations (Sue et al. 2007). There was no link between the socio-demographic factors and the microaggressions that happened at school placements, except gender. A one-way ANOVA demonstrated ($F(3, 38) = 4.04, p = .014$) that women ($M = 34.3$ ($SD = 14.6$)) were more likely to report microaggressions than men ($M = 21.4$ ($SD = 9.1$)).

Microinsults

The experiences of respondents suggest that mentors or other teachers may engage in behaviours that are discriminatory. Notably, 60% of student teachers reported experiencing differential treatment from a White colleague at least once. The most often experienced microaggressions relate to being marginalised rather than openly problematised (see also Pearce, 2019). In the survey, around 65% of student teachers reported nonverbal microinsults such as avoiding eye contact or avoiding in social spaces once or more times, while 55% felt 'that a mentor or colleagues were unfriendly or unwelcoming' at least once. Examples of avoidant behaviour in interviews included teachers not trying to include student teachers into social activities and conversations in staff rooms. This problematic dynamic led to feelings of awkwardness, isolation and invisibility. In one of her placements, Cecile (Black Caribbean, PGCE Primary Education) felt like 'I'm not even there', noting how during staff gatherings 'I'd sit all by myself, and no one cared'.

Table 1. Responses to racial and ethnic microaggressions on school placements items.

	I did not experience this event	I experienced this event 1–3 times	I experienced this event 4–6 times	I experienced this event 7–9 times	I have experienced this event 10 or more times
I felt that someone assumed that I would have a lower education because of my race or ethnicity	19 45%	13 31%	5 12%	0	5 12%
I felt that someone assumed that I would not be intelligent because of my race or ethnicity	19 45%	9 21%	9 21%	0	5 12%
I felt that someone assumed that I was not a teacher because of my race or ethnicity	18 43%	11 26%	8 19%	2 5%	3 7%
I felt that someone assumed that I would not be articulate in English because of my race or ethnicity	18 43%	11 26%	6 14%	3 7%	4 10%
I felt that someone avoided me in social spaces because of my race or ethnicity	14 33%	14 33%	9 22%	2 5%	3 7%
I felt that someone avoided eye contact with me because of my race or ethnicity	15 36%	14 33%	9 21%	2 5%	2 5%
I felt that someone spoke down to me because of my race or ethnicity	19 45%	8 19%	7 17%	5 12%	3 7%
I felt that someone dismissed or minimised by contributions because of my race or ethnicity	18 43%	12 29%	5 12%	4 9%	3 7%
I felt that someone assumed my work would be inferior to the work of people of other racial or ethnic groups	20 48%	8 19%	9 21%	3 7%	2 5%
I felt that a mentor or colleagues were unfriendly or unwelcoming towards me because of my race or ethnicity	19 45%	12 29%	3 7%	4 10%	4 10%
I felt that a mentor or other colleagues treated me differently to white teachers	17 40%	7 17%	8 19%	5 12%	5 12%
Someone implied that people of colour do not experience racism anymore	25 60%	7 17%	7 17%	3 7%	0
Someone implied that people of all racial groups experience the same obstacles	21 50%	15 36%	5 12%	1 2%	0
Someone assumed that I speak similar languages to other people of my race or ethnicity	21 50%	6 14%	7 17%	5 12%	3 7%
Someone objectified physical features of my racial or ethnic group	30 71%	5 12%	4 10%	2 5%	1 2%
I heard negative or insulting comments about my race or ethnicity	25 60%	9 21%	5 12%	2 5%	1 2%
I interacted with teachers of my race or ethnicity at my placement schools	12 29%	11 26%	4 10%	4 10%	11 26%
I observed people of my race or ethnicity in senior positions at my placement schools	24 57%	13 31%	1 2%	1 2%	3 7%

*Values may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Another student teacher spoke about feeling ‘a bit awkward sitting alone and just having food’, but at the same time not being ‘that confident’ to ‘join other people’s conversations’ (Shiqi, Chinese, PGCE Mathematics).

Additionally, and perhaps highlighting an ‘acceptability’ of deficit constructions of multilingual teachers (see A. Benson, 2019; A. W. Benson, 2023), several non-UK born interviewees recounted experiences of open ‘othering’, which made them feel like perpetual foreigners (or ‘second-class teachers’ to paraphrase the label ‘second-class citizen’ coined by Sue et al. 2007):

The head of department [. . .] she was calling me Miss Bulgaria. I don’t know why it made me feel very bad but I hated it. (Viktoria, Bulgarian, PGCE Mathematics)

. . . always telling me that my communication skills are too low and that you can’t understand my pronunciations. I was wondering, I didn’t get any kind of similar comments from my first placement. (Nitin, Indian, PGCE Chemistry)

Being spoken down to or looked down on due to linguistic bias institutionalised by English hegemony (Huber 2011) and the requirements set out in the Teachers Standards for teachers to make ‘correct use of standard English’ (Department for Education, 2013) was experienced by other interviewees with migrant backgrounds (as well as by 55% of the survey sample). For example, Yifei (Chinese, PGCE Mathematics) recounted how her lessons were interrupted by the observing teacher who ‘talked about something that I didn’t explain very well or clearly’. Elena (Albanian, PGCE Mathematics) was not allowed to ‘answer any of the students’ questions’ in her maths lessons, with the observer apparently unable to recognise the impact on her self-esteem as a teacher and a mathematician. Elena risked further hostility when she responded to the nativist microaggression by saying (‘I was like, ‘I have a maths degree with a 1st. I got it from a UK university’), she found herself in the situation whereby any bias was swiftly denied by the mentor under the pretext of professional behaviour: ‘She said, “Oh no, I don’t do it on purpose. I just want to support my class”.’

The next set of microaggressions relating to inferiority assumptions were faced by over half of the sample once or more times. These include assumptions that they were not a teacher (57%), that they had a lower level of education (55%) or lower intelligence (55%), that they would not be articulate in English (57%), and that their work would be inferior (52%). This pattern of microinsults was clearly exemplified by a Muslim student teacher Ayesha (Black African, PGSE Social Sciences) in the following excerpts:

They assume you’re either uneducated or that you don’t speak English because of the way you look.

However, because of the invisibility of these unintentional expressions of bias (Sue et al. 2007), interviewees often reported second-guessing themselves when confronted by microaggressive acts, offering other rationale for prejudicial behaviour, such as that their age might be implicated in the inferiority assumptions of being ‘mistaken for a student quite a bit’ (Martha, White and Asian, PGCE Psychology). Yet, drawing on her experiential reality, Jasmine (Black Caribbean, PGCE Psychology) could see a pattern of bias in being taken for a teaching assistant due to, she said, a cultural conditioning that ‘Black people tend to be uneducated’ (see also Warner, 2022):

I suppose maybe they just think I'm young, so I'm inexperienced. [...] I think it's more to do with maybe race, because generally in schools the majority of the diversity comes from the support staff who tend to be Black and the teachers tend to be White.

In the same vein, because of the assumed intellectual inferiority of ethnic minority people, surprised reactions were described when a student teacher was found to be from a highly selective university: 'What? You're at [name of university]? Oh my God, how did you get there? What?' (Aneela, Indian, PGCE Social Sciences).

Microinvalidations

Less frequently reported microaggressions include hearing negative comments about race or ethnicity or statements that nullify the experiential reality of a minoritised student teacher (e.g. remarks to suggest that racism is on the decline or does not exist). Nonetheless, these forms of microaggressions were endured with a varied degree of frequency by 40% of the surveyed students (see Table 2). Relatedly, 50% of the respondents reported experiences of someone implying that people of all racial groups experience the same obstacles. In terms of the manifestations of these microinvalidations in the schools, for instance,

Table 2. Responses to racial and ethnic microaggressions on university elements of the programme items.

	I did not experience this event	I experienced this event 1–3 times	I experienced this event 4–6 times	I experienced this event 7–9 times	I have experienced this event 10 times or more
I felt that someone assumed that I would not be intelligent because of my race or ethnicity	22 52%	12 29%	3 7%	1 2%	4 10%
I felt that someone assumed that I would have lower education because of my race or ethnicity	23 55%	12 28%	2 5%	1 2%	4 10%
I felt that someone assumed that I would not be articulate in English because of my race or ethnicity	23 55%	8 19%	6 14%	1 2%	4 10%
Someone implied that people of colour do not experience racism anymore	25 59%	12 29%	3 7%	2 5%	0
Someone implied that people of all racial groups experience the same obstacles	24 57%	14 33%	2 5%	2 5%	0
I felt that I was ignored in University spaces because of my race or ethnicity	29 69%	9 22%	3 7%	1 2%	0
I felt that someone assumed that my work would be inferior to students of other racial or ethnic groups	26 62%	10 24%	2 5%	3 7%	1 2%
I felt that a tutor treated me differently to White students	31 74%	9 21%	1 2%	1 2%	0
I experienced negative attitudes about race among other students on the PGCE programme	28 67%	9 21%	2 5%	2 5%	1 2%
I experienced negative attitudes about race among tutors on the PGCE programme	38 91%	3 7%	1 2%	0	0
I interacted with tutors of my race or ethnicity on the PGCE programme	21 50%	9 21%	4 10%	2 5%	6 14%

*Values may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

when Leila (Pakistani, PGCE English) witnessed conversations among teachers in the staff room denying the role of White privilege in shaping society (e.g. ‘how they don’t want to teach white privilege because poor white kids don’t have any privilege’), the effect was to negate her life-long experiences as an Asian Muslim woman. Ayesha (Black African, PGCE Social Sciences) also related a staffroom encounter in which her characterisation of racism was corrected by a White teacher, who said, ‘That’s not racism. That’s just negligence. They just don’t know how to do their job. My husband got called a white-haired hippy. That’s racist.’ In all cases, our interviewees engaged in a passive form of coping with microaggressions where the negative impact remained hidden from colleagues.

Environmental microaggressions

Beyond human encounters, environmental microaggressions occur when a minority ethnic student teacher is exposed to a school that minimises their identity through the exclusion of staff from a similar background centred on a lack of representation among school leaders rather than among teachers. Only 43% of survey respondents interacted with a senior leader from their background once or more times, while 71% interacted with teachers of their race or ethnicity. Prior research has highlighted the systemic problem of low levels of progression into leadership as a key retention issue for experienced minority ethnic teachers, whose careers often stall at the middle leadership level (e.g. A. Tereshchenko et al., 2020; D. Wallace, 2020). However, our data reveals that environmental invalidations become evident to the training teachers at the very beginning of their professional journey. For instance, although Leila (Pakistani, PGCE English) said she was going to start her first teaching job in a very supportive school, she did not ‘expect to move past middle management’ without ‘a lot of blood, sweat and tears’, already asking herself ‘if I want to work that hard’. Aneela (Indian, PGCE Social Sciences) wondered if she was ‘going to be a teacher forever’: ‘Do I really just want to be stuck in one place for the rest of my life?, because you don’t see anyone like you in the leadership team’.

Microaggressions on university elements of the PGCE programme

Table 2 shows that the university settings are somewhat different to schools with respect to the frequency of racial microaggressions. Considering individual items separately, each of the 11 microaggressions on the university elements of the programme was never experienced by over half of those who responded to each statement, while that was the case only for several microinvalidation items in school placements (see Table 1). Furthermore, 17% of participants did not experience any of the 11 microaggressive events on university elements of the programme.

Microinsults

Some positive findings include, for example, 74% of student teachers reported never experiencing being ‘treated differently to White students’, and a significant proportion reported never experiencing ‘negative attitudes about race among tutors’ (91%) or ‘other students on the PGCE programme’ (67%). For example, these interviewees contrasted

relationships with tutors and school mentors, especially with regards to recognition of their significant subject knowledge and experience:

Both are White but they get me, and my great subject knowledge. I always answer the questions, and share my knowledge, but they know who I am, so I feel very comfortable with them. (Nitin, Indian, PGCE Sciences)

... university was the safe haven; my second placement school was honestly like hell. [...] If it was up to my placement mentors, 100% they would have failed me. [...] I'll say it again, by the end of this year, I'll have three degrees. (Leila, Pakistani, PGCE English)

Yet, over half of the respondents reported experiencing three out of the 11 interpersonal forms of microaggressions in university settings at least once. As in prior research on the experiences of students of colour on university campuses in the USA (Lewis et al., 2021; Solorzano et al., 2000), these included inferiority assumptions about intellect, English language abilities, quality of work and levels of education, with between 38% to 48% of pre-service student teachers in this study reporting these experiences once or more times (see Table 2).

Environmental microaggressions

Some interviewees on one PGCE programme spoke about how their experiences with minority ethnic representation among university tutors increased their sense of belonging, willingness to access support, and ultimately their retention on the programme. The following was a typical view:

I think I would have dropped out because I was thinking, 'This is so hard.' [...] I don't think I'd be able to do that if someone else who I didn't feel represented me and just was like me would understand or they'd maybe think I'm lying or it's an excuse. (Aneela, Indian, PGCE Social Sciences)

Furthermore, the role of minority ethnic tutors in facilitating anti-racist curriculum content was highlighted: 'if we didn't have any diversity in the leadership of the course, it would be hard because a lot of the sessions we did on race and diversity and inclusion, she [tutor] added them in' (Jasmine, Black Caribbean, PGCE Psychology). Some participants suggested that this type of content is not available universally to student teachers. Yet, 50% of the survey respondents indicated that they never interacted with a tutor of a similar race or ethnicity on their PGCE programme.

Microinvalidations

Although we do not have any examples in interviews of how microinvalidations manifest on the PGCE programmes, a significant proportion of survey respondents reported microinvalidations at universities. These experiences included others denying the existence of racism in society (41%) and hearing endorsements of a colour-blind racial ideology (43%). This reflects the dominant discourse propagated by universities that they uphold liberal tenants of 'objectivity, meritocracy, colourblindness, race neutrality and equal opportunity' (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26). Despite research evidence which shows that 'ethnic minority students remain disadvantaged at every stage of their higher education' (Bhopal, 2024, p. 91).

Overall, the survey provided some evidence linking the feeling of belonging on the PGCE programme to experiences of racial microaggressions. Those student teachers who agreed with the statement ‘I feel like an outsider on the PGCE programme’ (16 out of 42, 38%) also reported a higher frequency of microaggression experiences both on their placements ($M = 37.3$, $SD = 14.4$; $M = 28.9$, $SD = 13.9$; $t(40) = 1.9$, $p = .070$) and at university ($M = 20.9$, $SD = 6.6$; $M = 16.2$, $SD = 6.5$; $t(40) = 2.3$, $p = .026$).

Outlook on teaching

Table 3 shows that over a half of survey participants (57%) wondered ‘whether teaching is the right career for me’, with indicative evidence that those students who ‘strongly agreed’ or ‘somewhat agreed’ with this statement also experienced a higher number of microaggressions ($M = 19.5$, $SD = 7.2$) in university settings compared to those who disagreed with the statement ($M = 15.9$, $SD = 5.8$; $t(40) = 1.8$, $p = .086$). Despite this, we registered a positive outlook on teaching in the near future. An overwhelming majority (45% ‘agreed’ and 50% ‘strongly agreed’) were looking forward to entering the teaching profession. Interview participants such as Ayesha (Black African, PGCE Social Sciences) explained that they had chosen their first job school ‘based on certain requirements’ where ‘there’s people like you’, which made the prospect of teaching ‘more exciting’. Likewise, Yifei (Chinese, PGCE Mathematics) hoped to ‘enjoy my teaching experience from September more’, highlighting the ethnic background of the future line manager in addition to her professional qualifications:

I’m really looking forward to my new role because the head of the maths department is an Italian lady. She is a migrant teacher and she’s got a maths and physics degree.

We interpret this in light of the CRT framework as minority ethnic teachers seeking out counterspaces ‘where a positive collegial racial climate can be established and maintained’ for coping with racial microaggressions (Solorzano et al., 2000, p. 70). The longer-term plans of several participants with migrant background to seek work in

Table 3. Responses to the thoughts on entering the teaching profession items.

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I often think whether teaching is the right career for me	9 21%	9 21%	21 50%	3 7%
I am looking forward to entering the teaching profession	0	2 5%	19 45%	21 50%
I am confident that I will be a positive role model for students	0	0	10 24%	32 76%
I doubt I can make a difference as a teacher	21 50%	12 28%	7 17%	2 5%
I am confident I can establish good relationships with other teachers	0	3 7%	19 45%	20 48%
I am confident I can establish good relationships with senior leaders	2 5%	7 17%	19 45%	14 33%

*Values may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Notes:

- The cognitive interviews did not yield substantive changes to the already adapted survey. Minor changes included taking out a small number of items, as we feared the instrument was too long; and furthermore, interviewees suggested that a small number of items related to overt racism would not be applicable. Other changes also included language: adding the word ‘ethnicity’ to items as used more commonly in the UK.

international or bilingual schools could be viewed as a quest for a culturally supportive community, or for those individuals contemplating private tutoring as withdrawing from racialised spaces. Explaining his reluctance to go into teaching immediately after PGCE, a non-UK born participant Nitin (Indian, PGCE Sciences) said, ‘I need some more time, I need to prioritise my mental health above everything else’.

Furthermore, student teachers explained that they were looking forward to having more autonomy as qualified teachers: ‘not to fit what someone else wants to see from me’ (Ayesha, Black African, PGCE Social Sciences), ‘don’t have to copy someone’s teaching style or talk or act or just be like someone else’ (Aneela, Indian, PGCE Social Sciences). They hoped to be spared racialised feedback on their teaching once they qualified, including, as the following extract exemplifies, on their mannerism, ways of communicating, relating and simply being (see discussion of ‘whiteness’ as normativity in schools in Cheruvu et al., 2015; Cushing, 2023; Marom, 2019; A. Tereshchenko et al., 2022):

Aneela: One of my targets I was given in my first placement was ‘you’re too feminine’. It’s like as a woman to say that to me, what do you mean I’m too feminine? I’m not going to change me to fit what you like seeing because I’m teaching your class. What, do I need to put on a deeper voice or do I need to stand in a certain way? What do you mean?

Ayesha: Or ‘stop moving your hands.’

Nina: In my second placement I was told so many times, ‘You can speak a lot more clearer or posher’, but when I speak to them [students], explain something really quickly, I’m like, ‘Right, basically ...’, and they appreciate it so much more if I just broke it down for them and spoke to them the way that they could relate to [...] That was seen as something to shy away from because they’re not your friends.

As Nina (Mixed White and Black Caribbean, PGCE Social Sciences) indicates, many of our interviewees empathised with minority ethnic students, and similar to minoritised teachers in previous research (Hancock et al., 2020; R. Kohli, 2018) enter the profession with an understanding that they have the power, and a desire, to positively influence the lives of children:

We will try to be a role model and we have a piece of life in this country, we would like to touch their lives to develop their lifestyle. (Hilal, Turkish, PGCE Mathematics)

I am quite positive about making the impact, however small that is, and that outweighing any feelings of having to fit in or not be myself. (Nina, Mixed White and Black Caribbean, PGCE Social Sciences)

Indeed, all survey participants agreed that they would be ‘a good role model for students’, while a clear majority (78%) had no or little doubt that they ‘can make a difference as a teacher’. Yet, those students who reported some doubt about making a difference as a teacher ($M = 22$, $SD = 9$) also mentioned a higher frequency of microaggressions in university settings ($M = 16.9$, $SD = 5.8$; $t(40) = 2.1$, $p = .045$).

Finally, the majority of our participants expected to ‘establish good relationships with other teachers’ (93%) and ‘with senior leaders’ (76%). As outlined above, whether they stay in the profession long-term might depend on how much they have to, in Leila’s (Pakistani, PGCE English) words, ‘suffer’ to progress rather than whether they are accepted: ‘I’m not scared about teaching, it’s more about career progression’. It is

nonetheless of interest that microaggressive experiences while on the PGCE programme seem to influence participants' beliefs about their relationships with senior leaders in schools: those who disagreed that they could establish good relationships with senior leaders ($M = 42.7$, $SD = 17$) also experienced a higher number of microaggressions during their placements compared to those who agreed with the statement ($M = 29.3$, $SD = 12.6$; $t(40) = 2.6$, $p = .012$). There was no such link between the experiences of microaggressions and participants' confidence in establishing good relationships with other teachers in the future.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of racial microaggressions faced by minority ethnic student teachers on ITE PGCE programmes and whether racial microaggressions were related to their thoughts about the teaching profession. For the present article, we analysed survey data and interviews. By bringing two datasets into conversation with one another, we have presented evidence that schools continue to perpetrate unconscious or conscious views of White superiority 'used to keep those on the racial margins in their place' (R. Kohli & Solorzano, 2012, 447). Specifically, our findings indicated that minority ethnic student teachers experienced a higher frequency of racial microaggressions on school placements than on the university elements of the teacher education programmes. They most often faced microaggressions related to being marginalised, avoided or excluded in school spaces that resulted in a feeling of isolation and invisibility. Although we noted how several non-UK-born interviewees reported being openly problematised. One commonality identified across both school and university settings was a high frequency of inferiority-based microaggressive experiences such as assumptions of a lower level of education or lower intelligence, and proficiency in English. Female survey participants reported microaggressions on placements more frequently than males, but there were no other significant relationships between various demographic variables explored in the analysis. We have however found relationships between a higher frequency of racialised microaggressions and doubts about teaching being the right career, as well as student teachers' confidence around making a difference as a teacher. Furthermore, those student teachers who felt more like outsiders on the PGCE programme also reported a higher frequency of microaggressions in schools and at universities.

Although our study produced interesting and relevant findings, there were limitations. We did not have a large enough survey sample size to determine if there are significant ethnic group differences based on racial microaggressions and thoughts about teaching, as well as whether microaggressive experiences or specific types of microaggressions predict a negative outlook on teaching. To build upon this pilot work, we can expand quantitative data collection using a shorter survey instrument to improve the response rate and variation. Although there is an inherent limitation in using self-report surveys, we argue that it is important to study subjective experiences to help us uncover the underlying reasons for why some minority ethnic student teachers have a more negative experience in ITE programmes at different types of institutions.

Finally, we propose actively centring minority ethnic student teacher experience in anti-racist training, decision-making and practice, both in schools and on teacher

preparation programmes. Following this research, the team worked to produce a resource for school mentors and other educators that documents student teacher experiences of racialised microaggressions on school placements (A. Tereshchenko et al., 2023). We argue that it is educators' willingness to increase their ability to identify racial microaggressions and understand the psychological toll on minoritised groups, as well as take actions to change practices, that will have the most impact on reducing experiences of this form of racism in educational institutions, and ultimately supporting minority ethnic teacher retention. Teacher education programmes should incorporate relevant content to help student teachers understand the role of race and racism in education, as well as empower them to engage with (rather than ignore) racialised dynamics within the school system to lessen negative impact. Greater representation of minority ethnic staff on ITE programmes will also support pre-service/student teachers in navigating the racialised contexts of both schools and universities.

Notes

1. The cognitive interviews did not yield substantive changes to the already adapted survey. Minor changes included taking out a small number of items, as we feared the instrument was too long; and furthermore, interviewees suggested that a small number of items related to overt racism would not be applicable. Other changes also included language: adding the word 'ethnicity' to items as used more commonly in the UK.
2. Four out of five authors conducted the interviews. Two of these interviewers had prior relationships with a small proportion of participants from the respective ITE programmes. While this could potentially have discouraged student teachers from sharing university-specific microaggressions, we observed the opposite effect: this familiarity actually facilitated more open reflections on their university experiences with the tutor who was also from a minority ethnic background because of the psychologically safe space which was created by their 'insider' status.
3. Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) training programme is for prospective primary and secondary school teachers. It combines teaching practice, educational research and theory. PGCE students conduct the majority of their study on campus, but also get classroom experience, spending time teaching in at least two schools for a minimum of 24 weeks.
4. Although 90 people gave consent to continue to the survey after reading the information sheet, only 70 filled at least one survey question. Out of these 70 people, only 42 fully completed the survey and provided their consent for the data to be used.
5. Cronbach's alpha coefficient measures the internal consistency, or reliability, of a set of survey items to help determine whether a collection of items measures the same characteristic. Analysts frequently use 0.70 as a benchmark value for Cronbach's alpha. At this level and higher, the items are sufficiently consistent to indicate the measure is reliable (Cortina 1993).
6. The two items related to environmental rather than interpersonal microaggressions did not fit the scale, and after checking with exploratory factor analysis they were removed: 'I interacted with teachers of my race or ethnicity at my placement schools', 'I observed people of my race or ethnicity in senior positions at my placement schools'.

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