



# Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions on School Placements

A Resource for Mentors

Antonina Tereshchenko  
Balbir Kaur  
Alison Wiggins

## What are racial microaggressions?

Racial microaggressions are subtle forms of racism, often manifested in brief verbal or non-verbal everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of colour, whether intentionally or unintentionally (Sue et al. 2007).

Microaggressions, despite relating to the actions of individuals, are expressions of macro racist structures and ideologies (Pérez Huber & Solorzano 2015).

Racial microaggressions can take different forms in different settings. This brochure highlights the manifestations of racial and ethnic microaggressions on school placements, through the eyes of minority ethnic student teachers.

## Racial microaggressions as a barrier to teacher retention

Racial microaggressions are found to have a negative impact on minority ethnic teacher job satisfaction and thoughts on staying in the profession (Kohli 2018; Frank et al. 2021). The [research project](#) that informed this brochure suggests that the exposure to racial and ethnic microaggressions causes some student teachers to become discomfited by the prospect of entering the profession, due to being treated as trespassers and not belonging.

This resource will help school mentors and other educators, who in most cases differ from a student teacher in race, ethnicity or culture, increase their ability to identify racial microaggressions more broadly, and in themselves, understand the psychological toll of microaggressions on minority ethnic student teachers, as well as take some action to support individuals.

In designing this resource, we drew on Sue et al.'s (2007) microaggression framework.



## Theme: **Second-class citizen**

Situations in which minority ethnic student teachers are treated with less respect, consideration or care than normally expected

### **Microaggression:**

A student teacher of colour mistaken for a support staff member

### **Example experience:**

“...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, so they assume I’m support rather than an actual teacher because obviously there’s a stereotype that Black people aren’t educated.”

### **Message this sends to student teacher:**

Ethnic minority people couldn’t occupy higher status positions.

### **Microaggression:**

Undermining student teachers as professionals by interrupting the lesson or displaying disapproving looks, gestures and tones

### **Example experience:**

“Some of the teachers interrupted in the middle of my lesson and they talked about something that I didn’t explain very well or clearly, didn’t write down the objective or something like that. Actually, it’s better if they talk to me after the lesson.”

### **Message this sends to student teacher:**

Your ethnic and/or linguistic background make you less capable.

### **Microaggression:**

Perceived treatment as a lower status person compared to White teachers

### **Example experience:**

“I didn’t have a table or a chair to sit at, and when I asked her if I could have one, she said, ‘No, but there’s a cupboard that you can sit in’. Am I so lowly that I don’t even get a table and chair that I’m going to sit in a dusty stockroom cupboard?”

### **Message this sends to student teacher:**

Minority ethnic student teachers are less valued.

## Theme: **Invisibility and exclusion**

Nonverbal exclusionary messages leading to feelings of isolation in the workplace

### **Microaggression:**

Ignoring a minority ethnic student teacher in a conversation or in a staff room

### **Example experience:**

“The mentor here [...] understands me a little bit more, she has conversations with me, I’ve learnt about her experience, so we’ve connected a bit more. It’s hard, but it’s not like the first one, the first [placement] was really like I’m not even here.”

### **Message this sends to student teacher:**

You are an outsider.

## Theme: **Denial of individual racism**

Statements made to reject racial or cultural biases in response to scrutiny of problematic behaviour

### **Microaggression:**

Accused hypersensitivity and exaggeration when unfair treatment is highlighted

### **Example experience:**

“The other senior member of staff took her side and when I was trying to say that my feedback sessions are very hard [...] ‘It’s you, your self-esteem should not be reliant on positive comments at work, you’re a type A personality’.”

### **Microaggression:**

A school mentor cites neutral learning priorities to dismiss concerns of biased treatment

### **Example experience:**

“She didn’t let me answer any of the students’ questions. [...] I was like, ‘I have a maths degree with a 1st. I got it from a UK university so I don’t see your point of doing that.’ She said, ‘Oh no, I don’t do it on purpose. I just want to support my class’.”

### **Message this sends to student teacher:**

Your racial/ethnic experience is not important.

## Theme: **Exoticising and pathologising**

Direct or indirect criticism because of real or perceived cultural differences

### **Microaggression:**

The difference of student teachers with migrant background is emphasised

### **Example experience:**

“The head of department, she didn't make it in a bad way, but I wasn't feeling well with it. She was calling me Miss Bulgaria. I don't know why it made me feel very bad but I hated it.”

### **Message this sends to student teacher:**

You are a foreigner/You don't belong.

### **Microaggression:**

A suggestion that behaviour and communication style of minority ethnic people are inferior/abnormal

### **Example experience:**

“I was told so many times, 'You can speak a lot more clearer or posher', but when I speak to [students], I explain something really quickly [...] and they appreciate it so much more. That was seen as something to shy away from.”

### **Message this sends to student teacher:**

Monitor your behaviour and speech to be taken seriously as a teacher.

## Theme: **Colour-blindness or colour-evasiveness**

Involves downplaying, avoiding or invalidating racial or cultural issues and experiences

### **Microaggression:**

Statements that indicate that a person does not want to acknowledge that race plays a role in success

### **Example experience:**

“A group of teachers that were all White and they were talking about how they don't want to teach white privilege because poor White kids don't have any privilege.”

### **Microaggression:**

Imposing a definition of racial reality on a student teacher of colour

### **Example experience:**

“Then when I was telling my mentor about a racist experience [...], the woman that was also in the room was like, 'That's not racism. That's just negligence. My husband got called a white-haired hippie. That's racist.' I was like, 'Okay'.”

### **Message this sends to student teacher:**

Race and culture are not important variables that affect the lives of ethnic minority people.

## Theme: **Ascription of intelligence**

Assigning a degree of intelligence to a student teacher on the basis of their race

### **Microaggression:**

Teachers and/or students react with surprise that a minority ethnic student teacher is from a Russell group university

### **Example experience:**

“when they found out that you went to UCL it was like, 'What? You're at UCL? Oh my God, how did you get there? What? You went to [university] and you're still at UCL?'”

### **Message this sends to student teacher:**

It is unusual for people of your race to succeed.



## Theme: **Environmental invalidation**

Microaggressions which are more apparent on a system level due to limited representation

### **Microaggression:**

A senior leadership team in school is all White, including in ethnically diverse urban schools

### **Example experience:**

“I think it stunts you, the idea of, ‘I’m going to be a teacher forever.’ You’re not going to be able to progress. It’s like, ‘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.”

### **Message this sends to student teacher:**

Only White people can succeed and advance in the teaching profession.

### **Microaggression:**

Non-diverse curriculum that student teachers of colour often have to teach

### **Example experience:**

“I would say obviously it’s quite difficult not being able to teach texts that are anything but White authors, the majority is White authors, so that in itself can be quite alienating.”

### **Message this sends to student teacher:**

Leave your cultural knowledge outside of mainstream school.

## **Recommendations**

Raise awareness of the scale and implications of racial microaggressions faced by students on PGCE programmes with PGCE tutors and school-based mentors/lead professional mentors (e.g. through training).

Encourage schools to develop processes that detail how to report, record and deal with racist incidents. These processes should be communicated to the student teacher at the beginning of the placement.

Ensure that all mentors and partnership management members have anti-racism and anti-discrimination development training embedded as part of their role as professional mentors.

Embed anti-racist practice and pedagogy in the PGCE curriculum at the subject and programme level to develop the racial literacy of student teachers.

Add support with dealing with issues of racism to the PGCE student safety and wellbeing agenda.

Develop course and placement evaluation tools to give students the opportunity to share their experiences of racism (even if these were not reported) and use this information in monitoring, assessment and planning.

## **Sources and resources**

Frank, T. J., Powell, M. G., View, J. L., Lee, C., Bradley, J. A., & Williams, A. (2021). Exploring racialized factors to understand why Black mathematics teachers consider leaving the profession. *Educational Researcher*, 50(6), 381–391.

Kohli, R. (2018). Behind school doors: The impact of hostile racial climates on urban teachers of color. *Urban Education*, 53(3), 307–333.

Pérez Huber, L., & Solorzano, D. G. (2015). Racial microaggressions as a tool for critical race research. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 18(3), 297–320.

Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. M. B., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist*, 62(4), 271–286.

Smith, H. J., Lander, V., & Garratt, M. (2022). *Anti-racism Framework for Initial Teacher Education/Training*. Newcastle University. Available at: <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/social-science/research/anti-racism-framework>.

Universities UK (2020). *Tackling racial harassment in higher education*. London: UUK. <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/tackling-racial-harassment-higher>.

## **Acknowledgements**

**Project funder:** Centre for Teachers and Teaching Research (UCL)

**Project team:** Claire Pillinger and Dr Olga Cara (UCL)

**Reviewers:** Professor Vini Lander (Leeds Beckett University), Professor Heather Smith (Newcastle University), Dr Geeta Ludhra (Brunel University), Professor Caroline Daly (UCL).