

Brownsword, Sarah (2019) Preparing primary trainee teachers to teach children from Black, Asian and other minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds or groups: participation, experiences and perceptions of trainee teachers. *Teacher Education Advancement Network Journal*, 11 (2). pp. 39-44.

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Preparing primary trainee teachers to teach children from Black, Asian and other minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds or groups: participation, experiences and perceptions of trainee teachers

Teacher Education Advancement
Network Journal
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University of Cumbria
Vol 11(2) pages 39-49

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Abstract

This research was conducted in response to the exit survey of a cohort of Primary PGCE trainee teachers at a UK University in a predominantly White area who indicated low confidence in teaching children from Black, Asian and other minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds at the end of their course. The research aimed to find out why trainee teachers felt unconfident in teaching children from BAME groups or backgrounds. Using qualitative methods, findings were analysed using a Critical Race Theory framework. Many of the trainee teachers who participated in this research demonstrated a lack of understanding of their own White privilege and a deficit discourse when discussing children from BAME backgrounds. The study explores how ITE, which is often short and already crammed with content, could embed quality training in race and diversity throughout courses in a way that will both challenge individual perceptions and encourage trainee teachers to examine structural barriers within schools.

Key Words

Race; racism; diversity; Critical Race Theory; BAME; Whiteness; teacher education; student teachers; Primary education; PGCE.

Background

This research was conducted in response to the exit survey of a cohort of Primary PGCE trainee teachers at a UK University who indicated low confidence in teaching children from Black, Asian and other minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds at the end of their course in 2017. In response to the question “How good was your training (not your induction) in preparing you to teach pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds?”, only 60% of the 85 trainee teachers who responded to the question rated their training in this area as Good or Very Good, meaning this was the lowest rated area of the course. The trainee teachers invited to take part in this research were a group of 140 Primary PGCE trainees at the same university, the majority of whom were from White British backgrounds, in an area of the UK with a lower than average number of people from BAME backgrounds (3.5% compared to 14.6% nationally). The research was carried out during the academic year 2017/18 by a member of the teaching team on the course.

Context

It is well documented that unconscious bias has an influence on the way that teachers treat and talk about their pupils, particularly when it comes to race (Gilliam et al, 2016). Many White teachers hold negative views about children from BAME backgrounds and have limited knowledge of cultural diversity (Bhopal and Rhamie, 2014). In most schools, colleges and universities, Whiteness is normalised and legitimised as superior (Lynch, Swartz and Isaacs, 2017). Ohito (2016) states that the supremacy of Whiteness has “an unyielding grip on teacher education” (p455) and there is a resistance to acknowledging and facing this. It is claimed that this is not a passive lack of knowledge but rather

Citation

Brownsword, S. (2019) ‘Preparing primary teachers to teach children from black, Asian and other minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds or groups: participation, experiences and perceptions of trainee teachers’ *TEAN journal*, 11(2), pp. 39-49.

an active protection of self-perceptions and self-identity by White people (Ohito, 2016). Much of the work that has looked at attitudes and perceptions of race in pre-service or trainee teachers has found that there is an unwillingness to engage in self-reflection when it comes to race and that this could lead to hidden assumptions and judgements being taken into their classrooms after qualifying (Case and Hemmings, 2005). It is therefore suggested that White teachers need to develop an awareness of the issues of race, privilege and power to enable them to successfully teach children from BAME backgrounds.

Some of the key ideas I will refer to throughout this research are White Privilege, White Fragility, Tools of Whiteness, Colourblind racism, Cultural Deficit Theory and Whiteness as Property. White Privilege describes the benefits that White people experience in society that non-white people do not which, according to McIntosh (1989), White people are taught not to see. Inequalities in society are often portrayed as being caused by individual acts of racism which disadvantage people from BAME backgrounds, rather than as a result of the advantages which come with White Privilege. Because White people are taught not see their own privilege, it is often difficult to discuss. When confronted about their privilege, White people sometimes demonstrate what DiAngelo (2011) calls White Fragility. White Fragility describes the discomfort and defensiveness experienced by White people when asked to discuss issues of racial inequality (DiAngelo, 2011). White fragility can be displayed outwardly through anger, fear or guilt, or through silence and refusal to participate.

In addition to avoiding race discussions or becoming defensive, White trainee teachers have been observed to actively protect their own privilege through methods that Picower (2009) calls 'Tools of Whiteness'. These can be emotional, ideological or performative, and are ways that White trainee teachers actively resist thinking beyond their own experiences. An example of an ideological Tool of Whiteness is claiming not to see or notice a person's colour or race, or stating that race is no longer an issue in today's society. This is often known as Colourblind racism. White people who do this, appear moral or noble while at the same time dismissing the need for anti-racist interventions (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). According to Bonilla-Silva (2015), examples of Colourblind racism use a particular linguistic style which avoids direct racist language while expressing racist views. Another belief which is very common among teachers according to DiAngelo (2012), is that oppression is a result of specific cultural characteristics in the oppressed group, rather than a result of structural barriers. This is known as Cultural Deficit Theory (DiAngelo, 2012). The concept of Whiteness as Property refers not to property as a physical object, but as a right (Harris, 1993 in Dixson and Rousseau, 2005). In terms of education, this refers to the idea that access to quality education has historically been the privilege of White people and that any 'others' should be grateful that they have been granted access.

Aims of research

The research aimed to find out why trainee teachers felt unconfident in teaching children from BAME groups or backgrounds. In understanding why trainees might find this difficult it was hoped that elements of the course could be developed in order to provide better support on this PGCE specifically and in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in general. The research was guided by the following questions:

What are trainee teachers' perceptions, experiences and attitudes towards the themes of race and ethnicity?

What can the language that trainee teachers use to talk about children from BAME backgrounds or groups tell us?

What particular challenges do trainee teachers face in teaching children from BAME backgrounds or groups within schools in predominantly White areas?

Methods and Research Design

All 140 trainee teachers on the 2017/18 cohort of a Primary PGCE were invited to answer an anonymous online questionnaire which consisted of 13 questions, and to take part in a focus group interview which took place at the end of a teaching day and lasted for one hour. The questionnaire was predominantly open text questions such as 'What challenges do you think children from BAME backgrounds or groups face in school?' which allowed participants to write as much or as little as they wished. The focus group interview was chosen as a way of capturing not only individual voices but also their collective experiences (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012). The questions were open and allowed participants to take the conversation in whichever direction they wished. While all 140 trainee teachers were invited to take part in the focus group, there were only three volunteers. The focus group interview was audio recorded and transcribed.

When analysing the data from the questionnaire and interview, I used a constructivist Grounded Theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), coding the data line by line and then grouping the codes into categories. A Grounded Theory approach is most appropriate when the explanation for a problem is missing (Flick, 2018), and in this case the exit survey data was clearly showing a problem with trainee teachers' confidence in teaching children from BAME backgrounds despite this being included as part of the course they were taking. Once the categories emerged, they were analysed using a Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework. CRT is a lens through which racial inequality in society can be deconstructed and challenged (Rollock and Gillborn, 2011). Beginning as part of Law Studies, CRT was introduced into the field of education by Ladson-Billings and Tate in 1995. Five themes which are central to CRT are:

1. The centrality of racism – racism is a normal and entrenched in the order of our society. It exists, irrespective of intent.
2. White supremacy – white people must be committed to critically interrogating their own racial privilege and unmasking the invisibility of racism.
3. Voices of people of colour – through story telling.
4. Interest convergence – racism reinforces white supremacy, therefore White people have little incentive to eradicate it.
5. Intersectionality – various systems of subordination come together at the same time e.g. gender, ethnicity, class.

(Rollock and Gillborn, 2011).

These five themes were used to group the emerging categories.

This research was carried out with the ethical approval of the University and within the BERA (2011) ethical guidelines.

Findings and Discussion

20 trainee teachers volunteered to answer the online questionnaire. 85% of them were between 21 and 30 and 80% were female. 90% of the participants self-identified as White and 10% self-identified as mixed race. This reflected the demographics of the wider cohort which was 79% female, and 82% were between 21 and 30. Between them, on their first school placement, these trainee teachers were teaching a total of 542 primary aged children. Of those, just over 10% (58) came from BAME backgrounds, however, these were concentrated in a small number of schools rather than being spread across the group. 70% of participants had two or fewer children from BAME backgrounds in their placement class, and 25% had zero.

BROWNSWORD: PREPARING PRIMARY TRAINEE TEACHERS TO TEACH CHILDREN FROM BLACK, ASIAN AND OTHER MINORITY ETHNIC (BAME) BACKGROUNDS OR GROUPS: PARTICIPATION, EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF TRAINEE TEACHERS

Three trainee teachers took part in the focus group interview - a man in his 30s and two women in their 40s.

Although the response rate was low, this number of participants allowed me to gather rich and focused data. This was particularly useful in the focus group interview where the participants were able to talk in depth about their own experiences and much of the data emerged through the interactions between participants who explored and elaborated on their ideas together in a way that would not have been possible with more participants.

Discussing race and ethnicity

From the questionnaire, participants identified racial prejudice and language barriers as the main challenges that they thought children from BAME backgrounds may face in primary schools. All of the participants indicated that they thought it was important for teachers to discuss race in school, however many of them thought this was only appropriate in certain circumstances – for example, if it was relevant to the curriculum or if it was done in a positive way:

Thinking about race is definitely something teachers need to consider. If talking about race is a valid teaching point, e.g. slavery, then it is also necessary, but not in day to day schooling.

I do but with great care. The children need to be taught to be sensitive.

This last comment came from a young, white female trainee who had previous experience in multi-cultural inner-city schools but who was training to teach in a class with no children from BAME backgrounds. Her prior experience of working with children from BAME backgrounds did not seem to have had a positive impact on her understanding of issues of race in education. She indicated a reluctance to talk about it throughout her answers and was particularly critical of a workshop led by a professional dancer where trainees explored themes of slavery through dance:

It is important to consider the sensitivities of race and to teach these topics with care and consideration. Also, many children will have their own stories to tell and it is for them to tell or discuss and not me. I was a little alarmed when the dance tutor...felt it was appropriate to explore slavery with pink ribbons and a mainly white class. I think topics which are so serious should be handled much more carefully.

This seems to be an example of a trainee teacher displaying elements of White Fragility. She says that she wants to talk about race and that it is important to do so, yet at the same time she wishes to avoid it when it makes her feel uncomfortable.

Reflecting on their own ethnicities

Participants were asked to indicate to what extent they thought understanding their own ethnicity was relevant to teaching children from BAME backgrounds. Half of the group thought that it was not relevant at all; all of these were White. Participants talked about not having an ethnicity and Whiteness being 'normal':

My own ethnicity is the 'norm' for the area. I feel like understanding my own does not provide relevance to children from BAME backgrounds.

It is usual for the dominant group in society to be seen as the norm (Tatum, 2017) or the neutral standard (Kirk and Okazawa-Rey, 2012), and for White people to not recognise or acknowledge the advantages of being members of the dominant group.

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Of the participants who did indicate that they thought their own ethnicity was relevant, many also showed evidence of Colourblind racism and a belief in a meritocracy. Only a small number of the White participants showed any understanding of their own White privilege:

We should understand others' ethnicities, however it shouldn't affect our teaching practice as we should treat all children as equal.

There is an important distinction between discriminating between children and discriminating against them. Discriminating between children is something that teachers do all the time in order to meet the various needs of the children in their class (Gaine, 1995). In order to avoid appearing racist, teachers will attempt to treat all children as 'equal', but in doing so are enabling the continuation of structural racism within schools. Not noticing a child's race or colour is also a denial of White privilege (Gaine, 1995).

Confidence in teaching children from BAME backgrounds

At the end of the academic year 2017/18, 65% of this cohort of trainees indicated confidence in teaching children from BAME backgrounds, a small increase from the 60% in 2016/17. In contrast, almost all (95%) participants who answered the questionnaire indicated that they felt prepared to teach children from BAME backgrounds. This suggests that the trainee teachers who chose to take part in this research were those who already felt confident in this area and that those who chose not to participate lacked confidence.

Castro (2010) found that students born within the previous two and a half decades were much more likely to have positive attitudes about cultural and racial diversity than previous generations, however DiAngelo (2012) suggests that White people who see themselves as open-minded about race can actually be the most challenging group to talk to and engage in meaningful discussions with. This could suggest that the participants of this research, despite being more willing to talk about issues of race and having positive attitudes, would be less open to self-reflection and having their views challenged.

English as an Additional Language and gratitude

Throughout the focus group interview, participants wanted to talk about language and the children in their classes who were learning English as an Additional Language (EAL). Despite this not being part of the initial questionnaire or the questions I asked during the interview, repeatedly, the conversation veered back to children with EAL. This may have been trainees demonstrating resistance to talking directly about race. In discussing language, they were participating in the research by talking about children who were not White British and therefore included as BAME, but at the same time avoiding directly discussing race or ethnicity. Discussing children with EAL appeared to be an easy option; improving their English is a tangible issue with potential solutions and does not require any kind of self-reflection. Participants demonstrated a deficit discourse in discussing children with EAL. During a discussion on what Initial Teacher Education could do differently to support trainees teaching children with EAL, I suggested all trainees could spend some time in schools with high numbers of children with EAL at the beginning of their training; one trainee suggested this would actually put people off becoming teachers:

... that could scare off a lot of people and drop out in the first few weeks and say you know what I can't do this. This teaching's not for me if it's going to be like this.

The idea of gratitude and the parents of children with EAL being grateful for the education they are receiving were raised several times. This demonstrates the concept of Whiteness as Property (Harris, 1993 in Dixon and Rousseau, 2005). It also shows that teachers have hierarchical relationships with some children and families (Picower, 2009). The trainees seem to be positioning themselves as 'good'

people for wanting to work with these children, and their families should be grateful that they are doing so. Two of the participants interpret parents not challenging bad practice in the school as an example of their gratitude, although there may be many reasons why parents, particularly those not proficient in English, may not feel able to challenge their child's teacher:

I feel like they didn't necessarily know how to question the teacher to see what kind of support was happening because they were just so proud that their children were in school.

... lots of EAL parents were so grateful that their children were getting an education full stop, that even if they saw really big flaws like you were saying about their child just being taken out just to get them out the way, they never raised it as an issue because they were just grateful they were in school, at a school.

Cultural Deficit

Amos (2011) found that many white trainee teachers blamed minoritised students for their lack of success, and this was reflected in some of the participants' comments about children from BAME backgrounds and their families:

One of them, she separated herself from the class which was really noticeable at carpet time. There were no specified places for them to sit but she would always sit in the far left corner, as far back as she could possible get almost as if she was trying to disappear into the background, and unless you noticed she was there and kind of hoiked her forward a bit, she would keep creeping further and further back so that she didn't have to join in with the input.

The same trainee went on to talk about a girl she described as "Indian" in the same class whose 'culture' is blamed for her not joining in at school:

Half the time she seemed to be on another planet ... she didn't want to join in so whether that's because of her culture where girls aren't encouraged to get the education that boys are but she never seemed to want to join in. She'd be like this the whole time and you'd ask her a question and she'd kind of look at you completely blankly... everybody treated all of the children equally but you just kind of tore your hair out over this particular child because whatever you said never seemed to go in.

Both of these children, in a class in an Early Years setting, were being blamed for not joining in with the rest of the class. The participant claims that all the children are treated equally, protecting her White innocence (Srivastava, 2005) by claiming to be Colourblind, and does not see that the children sit within a system in which White children have an advantage. Further in the discussion, the same participant talks about the school's governing body, who are all White British:

For such a diverse school, the governors were all white British and they couldn't get anybody else from any of the other languages, colours, anything else, nobody else would join the governors so it was run by white British people.

Again, this participant seems to be suggesting that the blame lies with the minoritised individuals and not the system and is an example of Cultural Deficit Theory (DiAngelo, 2012).

Not challenging Racism

I'm happily in a place where race doesn't take any precedence in my perception of people, and I don't think we're far off our culture being completely tolerant. But indeed we do need to make that final push and wipe out prejudice, because it does still happen unfortunately and discussions need to be had. I've witnessed casual racism more than once in my School A placement so I know it still happens.

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This is an interesting and contradictory questionnaire response from a young white male who claims to be Colourblind in a post-racial society and yet has witnessed “casual racism” more than once during a short school placement. Rather than passively resisting the idea of White privilege, he appears to be actively protecting it using Tools of Whiteness (Picower, 2009). By making ideological statements such as ‘race doesn’t take precedence in my perception of people’ and ‘our culture is tolerant’, he is protecting his White Privilege and denying the existence of structural racism. If racism no longer exists then there is no need for him to take action on either an individual or structural level within school. Although he goes on to admit that racism does still happen (frequently, this trainee teacher had only been on placement for a few weeks yet witnessed racism more than once) he has absolved himself of any responsibility.

During the focus interview, participants talked about how difficult they found discussing issues of race and described examples of teachers in schools ignoring racism:

I imagine some teachers would hear some quite borderline things and think, I should address this but I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear it because it’s easier not to...

I think because the boundaries are ever changing, teaching staff are just scared to say anything at all. So they don’t, it’s like head in the sand.

Gillborn (2015) describes a shift in policy within education to a position that views almost any reference to race and race equality as racist. This suggests that not only are teachers uncomfortable discussing race in general but also tackling racism directly. Rather than schools becoming better at tackling racism, Lander (2015) suggests there has been a recent resurgence of racism in schools, which could be linked to the erasure of terms related to race, ethnicity and cultural diversity from the Teachers’ Standards (DfE, 2012). The current Teachers’ Standards (DfE, 2012) have a greater emphasis on not undermining British values than on teaching about race issues or tackling racism (Maylor, 2015). This means that in both schools and ITE, teachers are unprepared in how to address racism and or how to talk about issues of race, leading to it being ignored in schools.

Training, Knowledge and Experience

Training and knowledge appeared frequently in both the questionnaire and the focus group interview as things that would help the participants feel more confident in teaching children from BAME backgrounds. The participants believed that the best way to prepare them for teaching in multi-cultural settings would be to give them more training and supply them with ‘knowledge’. They wanted knowledge about what to say when tackling racism and having tricky conversations about race:

It’s just having that right language under your belt isn’t it and just being comfortable in that moment. Having that recall, it’s like practising a lot, almost like having a script. Like, what’s the script for that?

It should be treated in the same way as the behaviour policy, but if it gets to be a racial thing, what’s the script?

Maybe that could be a resource we could be signposted to.

They also wanted specific information about different cultures, nationalities and religions, particularly the ones they may be teaching. There was a presumption from most participants in both the focus group and the questionnaire responses that children from BAME backgrounds would be ‘foreign’:

Language courses/booklets. More background information on the children to teach other classmates about where their new classmate comes from.

It is not possible to just tell teachers how to teach children from BAME backgrounds in a way that can be put in a booklet, or a script or set of resources. Trainee teachers need to be able to see the complexity of the issue and understand the social, historical and political dimensions (DiAngelo and Sensoy, 2010). In the homogeneous, that is to say not particularly diverse, world of teacher education, where the majority of trainees and those training them are White (85% of UK Post graduate trainee teachers in 2016-17 were White British, (DfE, 2017)), it is very difficult to teach about specific BAME groups without it leading to further 'othering' of already marginalised groups. It may be more useful to encourage trainee teachers to look at themselves and how they have been socialised to see these groups (DiAngelo and Sensoy, 2010). This is particularly important in predominantly White areas where many people may have no authentic relationships with people from BAME backgrounds and are unprepared to think about race critically (DiAngelo, 2012).

Some participants also wanted more experience of teaching children from BAME backgrounds. This poses a problem in a predominantly White area as it is not possible to create diversity where it does not exist. White people often believe that anti-racist education is only necessary for those who are working in diverse environments (DiAngelo, 2012), and this was evident in some of the responses from trainee teachers who did not see their lack of experience or knowledge as an issue because they were not planning to teach in a diverse area:

For someone who may want to focus their career in another part of the Country or World, it would be beneficial to have more information on this topic.

Conclusion and recommendations

A very small number of trainee teachers volunteered to participate in this research. This in itself is a problem in conducting research in a predominantly White area with trainee teachers who do not see issues of race as a priority. Many of the trainee teachers from the local area are more likely to perceive children from BAME backgrounds as a problem or ignore them out of fear of being seen to be racist because of their lack of experience (Lander, 2011). The trainee teachers who did participate, claimed to feel confident about teaching children from BAME backgrounds but the majority of them demonstrated a lack of understanding of their own White privilege, displayed evidence of White Fragility and used Tools of Whiteness to protect themselves. Evans-Winters & Hoff (2011) claim that White Privilege is demonstrated through 'silence' (resisting meaningful dialogue) and the 'power of the pen' (through student evaluations) on Teacher Education courses and it may be that the reluctance of most of the cohort to engage with this research is itself White Privilege manifesting as resistance. Kulz (2017) describes how much of ITE considers racism as a 'tidily resolved history' (p175) rather than a problem that needs to be tackled now. The removal of language related to race and ethnicity from the Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2012) and the focus on ensuring teachers do not undermine British values has led to issues of race and racism not being prioritised in ITE (Maylor, 2015). Recommendations on how to reprioritise issues of race in ITE have mostly been idealist (focused on personal changes) rather than realist (focused on structural changes) (Bennett et al, 2017; Lynch, Swartz and Isaacs, 2017). It is important to challenge individual perceptions through identity development and self-reflection, however it is also important to go beyond that and encourage trainee teachers to see themselves as social activists who can influence structural change within the schools in which they will teach.

One of the problems of a one year teacher training course such as the Primary PGCE is the intensive nature of the course and the struggle to fit in the curriculum and content. Most courses only include one or two sessions on issues of diversity and these are often conducted as discrete 'add-on' sessions (Bhopal and Rhamie, 2014) rather than as part of curriculum sessions or an integrated part of professional teacher studies. In such a short amount of time, it is not possible to facilitate a depth of understanding or enable trainee teachers to understand how to represent diversity in the curriculum (Lander, 2015). Because of this lack of time, institutions often take a multi-cultural rather than anti-

racist approach. Multicultural education has been criticised for perpetuating stereotypes and emphasising the ‘tolerance’ aspect where parts of certain cultures are tolerated on certain days to demonstrate good practice (Patel, 1994). This can be both patronising and superficial (Cole, 2017) as race, faith and culture are not just for and about people from BAME backgrounds; multiculturalism is a lived experience that is “dynamic, interactional and constantly evolving” (Mirza and Meetoo, 2012, p43). Multicultural education asks people to learn about the experiences of minoritised groups yet seldom asks them to consider what it is like to be part of a dominant group (DiAngelo, 2012); it is this change of approach that may be what is needed in ITE. Many teacher educators themselves are not confident or proficient enough to know how to do this effectively, and they also need to be educated. This could take place by race being integrated into course meetings on a regular basis, or having a dedicated annual session run by someone who is experienced in this area (Mirza and Meetoo, 2012). The quality of the education of trainee teachers in issues of race should not come down to the individual confidence or experience of teacher educators within different institutions or the location of the provider and Bhopal and Rhamie (2014) suggest that training in issues of race should be compulsory, not only in ITE, but also for teachers as part of their ongoing CPD.

An Anti-Racist approach is one which would be more concerned with tackling structural inequalities. Lynch, Swartz and Issacs (2017) identified three core components of effective anti-racist education – Visibilising, Recognising and Strategising. In ITE, this would mean providers, schools and students working together to identify the issues, recognise where they are complicit in perpetuating them, and find strategies to tackle them.

Mirza and Meetoo (2012) suggest that issues of diversity need to be raised in ITE early on, before trainees go into school; many trainee teachers have never explored their own racialised identities (Mueller and O’Connor, 2007), and that this could happen through in-depth tutorials; through continuous embedded discussion across subjects and by trainees writing assignments on multiculturalism and diversity. Arday (2015) also suggests that issues of race could be addressed through assessment.

Our recommendations for teacher education do not need to be either idealist or realist, it is possible for them to be both. It is possible that structural change will come from those trainee teachers who are confident in discussing issues of race because they have worked on reflecting on their own Whiteness and can move beyond their own White Fragility and allow themselves to see the structural racism in which they are complicit. If we can embed identity reflection along with meaningful discussion of race throughout all aspects of teacher education (including assessment), and ensure that these discussions are led by teacher educators who are themselves confident regardless of location, this may lead to higher rates of confidence by trainees in the exit surveys, and, more importantly, to more teachers who are willing and able to challenge racism, talk openly about issues of race, and be better teachers to children from BAME backgrounds in schools. ‘I believe that it entails a simultaneous two-way movement, that by changing ourselves (by changing myself), we/I can change the world.’ Keating (2002).

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BROWNSWORD: PREPARING PRIMARY TRAINEE TEACHERS TO TEACH CHILDREN FROM BLACK, ASIAN AND OTHER MINORITY ETHNIC (BAME) BACKGROUNDS OR GROUPS: PARTICIPATION, EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF TRAINEE TEACHERS

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