The practice educator's gaze and Black international students' shoulders caught in complex and controversial social work placement contexts

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Abstract

This article explores the perspectives, knowledge, and experiences of practice educators (PEs) and academics assessing practice learning experiences of Black international students on placement. Cross-faculty research was conducted at a university in England from April to October 2024, using purposive sampling to recruit PEs and academics involved in the supervision and assessment of Black international students within the Schools of Social Work, Education, and Health Sciences. Using MS Teams, interviews and focus groups were conducted with twenty students and nineteen staff. Solely focussed on Social Work staff data, key findings accentuated the PE-gaze, which confirmed the existence of racism. However, the PE-gaze did not consider the cumulative effects of multi-faceted and intersectional layers of disadvantage impacting students. Rather, the PE-gaze misconstrued such disadvantage as student incompetence and resultant placement failure. These profound, debilitating effects of student challenges were concealed in Pandora's Box, further compounding the numerous webs of complexity impacting PE duties. Race-work was shifted on Black international students' shoulders; however, it should be the PE's duty to challenge racism and ensure equitable and anti-racist placement conditions. The article concludes with recommendations for race to be a protected characteristic fully considered as a reasonable adjustment when supervising students on placement.

BASW
The professional association for social work and social workers
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Introduction

This research focusses on understanding the placement experiences and progression difficulties of Black international social work students enrolled on the Bachelor of Arts (BA) and Master of Arts (MA) degrees at a university in England. In this article, the perspectives of academics and practice educators (PEs)—experienced, qualified social workers trained to assess students' practice learning, were explored and presented to illustrate their knowledge, practice experiences and challenges encountered when supervising Black international students on placement. This area of study has been overlooked in social work discourse and research. It was crucial to better understand the extent of staff knowledge and what was required to ensure greater cultural sensitivity and successful placement outcomes for all Black international students.

This is urgent work because fundamental lacunas are completely overlooked and required redress. Evidently, most PEs are white British (Social Work England 2024); they are thus powerfully positioned to assess Black international students' professional competencies on placements. PEs are trained and required to complete the British Association of Social Workers (BASW)'s Practice Educator Professional Standards (PEPS) accreditation of practice educators (BASW 2022). The assessors are usually experienced and qualified social workers, with some working towards their postgraduate practice education qualification. Many PEs are knowledgeable practitioners, often holding positions of seniority, and well-versed in the profession to supervise students. However, in the placement context of assessing Black international students, I argue that PEs' limited cultural knowledge, racial illiteracy, and potential use of a colour-blind approach, are problematic.

The PE role is complex, distinguished by the requirement for balancing supportive and educative functions that includes an assessment of the student's practice (Gregory et al. 2025). This role is compounded by the risk-averse, blame culture in which PE duties are conducted. Likely, constructing harsh assessment conditions and practices of over-surveillance, misunderstandings, and better-safe-than-sorry judgements. Various studies provide significant evidence of racism in higher education (Tate and Page 2018; Wong et al. 2021) and social work practice (Dytham, Mallett, and Walters 2024; Tedam and Finch 2024). Extant literature further discovered that when it comes to practice learning assessments, it is not a level playing field. Ethnic minoritized students report

racism, experience disproportionately higher failure rate, and taking longer to complete placement (Tedam and Finch 2024). These students are over-represented at fitness to practice panels within universities (Sangha 2022) or withdrawn from the course (Fairlough 2013). In one sense, affirming the harsh, demanding, and complex placement contexts in which Black international students were expected to succeed, whilst simultaneously highlighting the dichotomy between the profession's proclaimed social justice agenda and actual practice contravening inclusion, diversity, and equality principles outlined in Social Work England's 2021 professional standards.

Student placements is integral to the BA and MA social work degree qualifications. In practice placements, students discover how to reflect and integrate theory and practice in a practice-based learning context (McGuire and Lay 2019). With the professionalization of social work, the introduction of the degree qualification mandated 170 placement days, and thirty skills training delivered at university (Finch 2017). Students are expected to undertake two placements of contrasting experiences distinguished as the Level 1 placement as seventy days and Level 2 placement being one hundred days. Within the UK placement context, a competency-based system is used in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, whist in England the Professional Capability Framework provides a national occupancy standards and capability model to assess students on placement (Finch, Hill, and Rollins 2021).

This article begins with a brief historical overview and background literature, followed by the methodology, the discussion and analysis of research findings, and the conclusion.

Background literature

There is very limited research on the perspectives and actual experiences of PEs and academics assessing Black international students on social work placements. Likewise, not much is known about the actual practice learning experiences of Black international social work students in England. On terminology, international students are defined as 'students who have crossed a national or territorial border for the purposes of education and are now enrolled outside their country of origin, carrying student visas for their legal status' (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2010: 264). This article follows the government's directive (Race Disparity Unit 2022) and thus uses the term, 'ethnic minority' when referring to a group of people from different ethnic minority backgrounds. However, where research studies cite the term 'BAME' (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic), 'racially minoritized', or 'global majority', I will use this terminology to accurately report on research studies. My research acknowledges that ethnic minorities are not a homogenous group.

However, it is important to recognize that they are members of a distinct and internationally diverse group of people who share commonalities, rooted in their multiple identities and marginalized positioning within broader socio-economic and structural positions of power, privilege, and inequality.

Moreover, for over twenty years, the number of international students has substantially grown. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2021), in 2019 there were 6.1 million international students recorded to be in tertiary education across the globe—more than double the number of international students in 2007. In 2022, over 1.9 million residence permits were issued for incoming international students to OECD member countries (OECD 2023). Decisions to study abroad are often made based on the presumption that international students would access high-quality tuition and possibly employment opportunities which were conceivably lacking in their own countries (Bhandari et al. 2018). For higher education institutions, international students provide substantial economic benefits and a diversified learning space that expand national and cultural boundaries (Heck and Mu 2015). However, this expansion of international education posed institution-level challenges, including the requirement for universities to continually adopt educational practices that reflect the diverse needs of international students (Macgregor and Folinazzo 2018).

The academic space is highly unequal and profoundly challenging for ethnic minoritized students, especially Black international students. Indeed, the devastating impacts of racialized, unequal student outcomes are painfully felt by many ethnic minoritized students impacted by the dominance of racism in higher education, and the legitimization of Whiteness in the curriculum through pedagogic and assessment practices (Arday 2018), whilst British ethnic minoritized students, who live and study in the UK, may endure similar experiences of racism and discrimination (Brown and Jones 2013). Research highlights how societies, such as the UK (Madriaga and McCraig 2019) and USA (Yao et al. 2018), construct structural conditions that construe international students as deficient and challenging. This is evidenced in research whereby international students were perceived as lacking the required skills, knowledges, and aptitudes for successful study (Xu 2022). Further research on the lived experience of Black international students evidenced that these learners were often silenced, excluded, and under-valued (Lomer, Mittelmeier, and Carmichael-Murphy 2021).

Since the late 2000s, Schools of Social Work in various countries such as the UK, Australia, and USA, have expanded their admissions intake to include international students (Ahn 2017; Brown et al. 2023; Zuchowski et al. 2022). Because student placement education is a crucial opportunity for social work students to develop in-depth knowledge, understanding, and skills of the profession, in England social work courses

are required to develop Fitness to Practice processes outlined in Social Work England (2021) guidance. Stating that universities need to ensure there is a thorough and effective process ensuring the ongoing suitability of the student's conduct, character, and health. Thus, when concerns arise, placement procedures enable a three-way discussion between the student, placement, and lecturer exploring the nature of concern and possible action plan (Finch 2017). Often, despite this intervention, some students have failed the placement and, depending on the university's policies, some were not allowed to continue their study, whilst other universities offer a second opportunity to repeat the failed placement (Finch 2017).

Although placements are often considered as the most significant and memorable aspect of degree study (Tedam and Finch 2024), the practice learning environment often epitomizes a place of difficulty, characterized by progression issues and racist attitudes from colleagues and service users (Bernard and Harris 2019). A growing body of academic literature provided first-hand accounts affirming ethnic minoritized social work students' experiences of racism, marginalization, inequalities, and oppression on placement in England (Fairtlough et al. 2014; Furness 2012; Bernard and Harris 2019; Finch 2017). Internationally too, researchers in Australia reported that Aboriginal and Strait Island social work students disclosed incidents of racially oppressive practices and emotional wounding on placements (Zuchowski et al. 2013; Bennett and Gates 2019). Likewise, in the USA, Johnson et al. (2021) discovered that racially minoritized students encountered covert and overt racism in placement. In the Canadian context, Srikanthan (2019) reported evidence of racially hierarchical categories within placement settings, whilst Razack (2001) found that PE used colour-blind approaches, treating all students the same without an acknowledgement of distinct differences.

Similar racialized outcomes were also apparent in my own cross-faculty research, confirming negative placement outcomes for Black international students on professional degrees courses in the Schools of Social Work, Education, and Health Sciences (Cornish et al. 2025). Evidently, student placements are a contested space and fraught with complications caused by the cumulative effects of intersecting, personal, and structural factors, hence impacting some Black international students more than others. There is a compelling need for a stronger university focus and government mandate examining the progression and academic outcomes of Black international students on professional degree courses.

Research methodology and theoretical framework

Most Black and Asian international students on professional courses face racism on placement (Tedam and Finch 2024). Our own review of

student attainment data highlighted differential placement outcomes for students in the Schools of Social Work (SWK), Education (EDU), and Health Sciences (HSC). To further investigate possible causes, qualitative research was conducted from April to October 2024, whereby purposive sampling was used to recruit participants, enabling the recruitment of students with specific characteristics relevant to the study. The aim was to recruit a cross-section of students enrolled in different courses. The inclusion criteria for student participation specified the following criteria: students who self-identify as Black and international; enrolled on SWK BA, MA, Apprenticeship degrees; students enrolled on Primary PGCE and Secondary PGCE; and students enrolled on pre-registration health sciences programmes.

Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities. The ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any research stage underpinned this study. The recruitment flyer explained that the purpose of the project was to explore students' placement experiences to identify key factors that enable positive placement experiences and issues that negatively impact students' outcomes. Once ethical approval was granted by the university, the student recruitment flyer was posted on Blackboard Student Zone section and individual Blackboard course sites. In addition, relevant cultural and course specific societies were asked by email for support to circulate the recruitment flyer to students. The staff recruitment flyer specified the need for recruitment of PE and academics who had previous experience supervising and assessing Black international students on placement. The flyer was emailed to PE supervising Black international students in SWK, EDU, and HSC on placement. To increase research objectivity, three staff members from the project team interviewed staff participants separate from their School. A graduate intern of ethnic minority background was appointed and interviewed all student participants. Using MS Teams, online interviews focus groups and interviews were conducted with twenty students and nineteen staff (lecturers and placement supervisors from the NHS, County Council, and schools). Initially, MS teams' transcription was used to attain a transcript, and the recording of the session was reviewed to ensure that the transcript was correct.

Focussed on the Social Work staff data, transcripts were used, and manual thematic analysis to find common themes across staff participants' narratives. Each transcript was read and re-read, descriptive and explanatory accounts were highlighted to obtain basic codes. This constructed initial themes, sub-themes and key themes using qualitative coding. For instance, the first theme of Pandora's Box emerged in consideration of the profound impacts of multi-layered structural and individual disadvantages, and a sub-theme identifying the weight of personal sacrifice. Fixed on the recounting the experiences of PEs, two

themes emerged from the data: opening Pandora's box and the web of complexity. Black international students embody multiple marginalized identities in white-structured environments. Intersectionality was appropriately used as framework as it offers profound insight into the complex ways that multiple forms of inequality compound themselves, creating obstructions that are rarely prevalent in mainstream thinking (Crenshaw 2017). Adopting an intersectional lens, each theme is discussed below with relevant quotes from staff participants, followed by a critical discussion and conclusion.

Key findings

An analysis of my empirical data affirmed that Black international social work students were positioned in harsh, unfavourable, unequal academic and placement conditions. This is evidenced in the two emerging themes: opening Pandora's box and the web of complexity.

Opening Pandora's box

Drawing on the narratives of PEs, various student profiles emerged which revealed a deeply complex, structured layer of disadvantage that constrained students' agency and capacity to freely demonstrate competence on placement. Illustrating this, Lauren, an experienced PE recounted:

> She has been the only black person in the in the team. And it's been tough for her. What I noticed working with my student was that she had come from Nigeria and she's an intelligent woman but has a very different experience of education. So, at times she's kind of struggling…. what was expected of her and how she kind of gets to grip with that and the culture of living in city and working in the city and just everything…the money to getting the bus…international students are going to be non-drivers which makes placements really difficult for them…. Her experience of racism was different as well, coming from Nigeria, so she was bringing to supervision some examples of microaggressions…she's just really not experienced before. (Focus group, 3 June 2024)

Revealed in Lauren's narrative, racialized pain was part of the everyday, multi-faceted challenges faced by international, Black international students. Coming from Nigeria, Lauren's student reportedly never experienced racism before, but once on placement, she described microaggressions to her PE. Lauren's account thus confirmed that racism occurs on placement. It also recognized the multi-layered constraints imposed on Black international social work students. For instance, several Black international social work students come from deprived backgrounds and managed to secure scholarship to pay for expensive international tuition fees (£22, 700 per

year). Having made a huge financial investment, the stakes were high, fuelling a compelling need to succeed. Yet even so, they are offered a different type of practice experience; most international students tend to be non-drivers and were therefore restricted to placements that do not offer a full suite of opportunities. Faced with financial constraints, payments for bus fare are challenging. In sum, these financial constraints contribute to what could be described as rationed education, and diminished freedom of placement choice and opportunities. In such a milieu, any prospect for specialist placements that required driving was quickly squashed. PEs are expected to supervise and assess students in placements they might not necessarily have chosen nor had an expressed interest. These cumulative effects are often concealed in Pandora's box.

Moreover, the staff data further highlighted the harsh reality that Black international students experienced racism that was perpetrated by patients/service users and carers. Consequently, Black international social work students are regularly returning to painful and racially hostile placements, which left them vulnerable to ongoing racism during a pivotal assessment context measuring their competence. Yet, the adversarial placement context went unchallenged with staff narratives revealing that the educator's gaze centred on individualized factors such as age and issues with diary-keeping. If a safeguarding lens was used, students would have been protected against incidences of racial harm on placement. However, because this approach is not taken, Black international students were expected to zone-out racial abuse and continue with placement in harsh and racially oppressive circumstances. Unrealistic and unfair expectations of Black international students were consequently buried within Pandora's Box.

Emphasizing the significance of team culture in successful placement outcomes for Black international students, the staff data presented key examples of good practice found in the Working with Asylum Seekers and People from Abroad Teams. They were considered as highly inclusive, skilled, and patient with Black international students and social workers alike. Joanne, an academic, recalled how one of her students from a Black Caribbean background had a placement in the young asylum seekers team, and how the nature of work plus the type of staff and approach taken, collectively created an inclusive and successful placement experience. Joanne stated: *"they just allowed her to flourish"*. In full agreement, Rose, a PE, claimed that the Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Team, ranging from the Managers to the social workers, '*all come from that equality basis. It is their behaviour and their mindset, because of who they're working with …*'. Clearly, the team culture within student placements and pace of work ought to be key considerations; yet placement profiles exemplified by high stress and less supportive colleagues, were overlooked factors in failed placement outcomes and obscured in Pandora's Box.

Some international students were suspected of having additional needs. Reporting on this challenge, Ben, an academic stated:

> …. *there seems to be tension at times as well though in terms of picking up on particular specific learning needs. That's been a challenge that I've had with a student who is in their third year of a MA … and the student isn't willing to get diagnosed. Plus, the assessments can take some time, and by then they are on placement.*

Ben's statement likewise affirmed that MA degree studies took longer for some Black international students to complete their studies. Also, recognizing the added complication that some of the international students were suspected of having additional learning needs. However, due to time constraints and some students' conceivable reluctance of having a diagnostic assessment, in these situations, PEs were supervising students with undiagnosed learning needs without any reasonable adjustments in place. Consequently, the PEs' capacity to provide fair placement support or optimal placement learning environments was jeopardized. Key concerns, such as cultural considerations towards the diagnosis and labelling of learning needs, plus the possibility of students having undiagnosed learning needs, were significant challenges further masked in Pandora's Box. These factors were hardly recognized when examining placement outcomes.

Web of complexity

PE duties are rendered in a placement context whereby Black international students face challenging individualized factors, compounded by wider structural issues that significantly impacted their placement conduct. Evidencing the gravity of intersectional disadvantage, Lauren, a PE, recounted the lived experiences of another female MA student who arrived in the UK, with very little time to adjust to life in a new country and placement context. Described as intelligent and Nigerian, the student arrived with academic competence but there were comparable differences in her learning. The student's previous learning was based on didactic teaching with minimal scope for critical reflection and spontaneous interactions. Additionally, the student was now positioned in a predominantly white, first-world country, resuming her studies in a new city, university, and placement that completely lacked in her racial representation. This new context heightened the student's racial visibility, reinforcing her 'othered' and minoritized status within the practice setting. Faced with high tuition costs (£22,700 per year) and family dependents, the student was on placement three months, attempting to adjust to a new culture, whilst balancing academic studies, and finding work to support herself and her family. To exacerbate matters, the induction courses did not cover essential practical details about post codes, catchment areas, bus services, and names of shops

selling affordable groceries—all necessary to orient international students to a new environment. Lauren further elaborated:

> *As PE, I suspected that the student might also have had additional learning needs but there was not enough time for an assessment of her learning needs. Also, for the first time she discovered a coffee shop, a place she discovered in her final placement supervision, because she is always working. And I think my student felt very isolated largely because she just has no spare time…. I gave her Fridays off just to draw breath and sleep because by the Midway review, she was clearly exhausted. You know, her consciousness was all over the place in terms of trying to learn everything so quickly.* (Focus group, 3 June 2024).

This account provides a powerful explanation of the profound multiple layers of disadvantage that significantly curtailed this student's capacity to freely participate and demonstrate competencies on placement. On face value, all students are expected to swiftly adjust and learn new knowledge that hopefully result in a successful placement outcome. However, the MA student was entangled in a web of financial, academic, and family responsibilities causing social isolation, physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion. Impairing her capacity to quickly process details and adjusting to new situations. To worsen matters, there were additional challenges, evidenced in ineffectual university and placement inductions, minimal cultural sensitivity, limited information on affordable grocery shops, ill-timed placements, undiagnosed learning needs, and the student's literal striving to survive. The student thus lacked the required organizational support and knowledge necessary to better position herself for practice education within the UK working culture. Instead, she was expected to navigate these complex layers of disadvantage in her personal and professional lives. Lauren recognized the demanding impact on her student and offered her a short break to rest, but PE duties are undertaken within a web of wider, complex structures that have fixed timescales requiring the PE to perform assessment duties that meet rigorous professional standards. The PE is also reliant on the social work teams' subjective interpretations of professional conduct. Viewed from all vantage points, the PE duties in the context of Black international student placements are incredibly complex, uncertain, challenging, yet rewarding and empowering work.

The research findings also indicated that PEs reportedly felt that they lacked sufficient cultural knowledge and understanding to fulfil the role. Emphasizing this, the PE, Helen, stated:

> *I've been looking for how to support her best in in the placement and I think one of the things that I think for me it would have been really helpful, I think, to have had some sort of sounding board mentoring… somebody outside the placement at university who would sort of just be*

supportive of practising white practice educators working with black students. (Focus group, 3 June 2024).

From the above narrative, it underscores the reality that having an extensive social work knowledge and professional experience were not enough when supervising Black international students. Ideally, what was required was a knowledgeable person that could provide race-informed advisory and mentoring support for the PE. This is necessary, because PE duties are undertaken within a web of uncertainty and complications.

The web of complexity was further illustrated in the reality that PEs were expected to assess students with differential starting points and foundational knowledge of UK social work. This variance is acknowledged when Lisa, another PE reported:

> …*I came in straight as a level 2 social worker and community work was used in India. What I found is, it was almost like a completely different system. So, somebody from the Caribbean will probably learn about more community-based practise and you know what they've learned ethnographically how they're placed and also, they learn a lot about anthropology within their social work curriculum. So, when they come here, they're not aware of statutory social work, which in itself is a big shock. I feel like by the 30-day 35 day 40 they're finally it's clicking in their head that right this is how it's this is how it works in the UK this is the kind of interventions we do*. (Focus group, 3 June 2024)

Evidently, there is a distinct difference in curriculum knowledge; international students had a stronger curriculum focus on social anthropology and community work which emphasized the role of the social worker within a broader socio-ecological context. This was markedly different from the UK's individualized orientation to social work delivery and its predominant focus on statutory social work services. The curriculum difference and lack of foundational knowledge of social work in England have profound impacts. It was a great shock for most international students, creating significant delay in their capacity to re-orient their cognition and knowledge of social work practice. Nevertheless, Black international students were positioned within a stringent governance system operating along a competency framework with specific timescales and progress reviews. Inevitably, they faced tough challenges whereby time was not on their side and their placement learning curve was steep. Evidence of their systemic disadvantage was revealed in the stark reality that for most international students, it was usually near the midway point, that is, day 35 out of seventy days for the Level 1 placement, and day 50 out of 100 days for the Level 2 placement that most of them only then seemed able to move past the starting point of the practice learning journey. They are thus comparably out of step with the usual pace and expectation that come the midway review, students would work more independently. This systemic disadvantage is often overlooked or misrecognized, incorrectly portraying Black international students

as problematic and incompetent. Resulting in referrals to fitness to practice panels, whereby punitive steps were enforced, irrespective of the students' racialized experiences and systemic disadvantages jeopardizing their capacity to demonstrate professional standards. Consequently, Black international students face enormous stress, dealing with a failed placement, possible repeat placement year, visa implications, and additional financial costs.

Herein lies great complexity for the PE because they are expected to perform assessments based on what they see at face-value, regardless of any disparities in curriculum knowledge or student issues. This is a challenging reality, catapulting PEs into a landscape, whereby their assessment practice has been scrutinized in relation to the disproportionate placement failures of Black international students (Cornish et al. 2025). However, PEs were caught in a double bind because despite the multifaceted layers of disadvantage impacting Black international students, the PE's assessment practices were governed by tight, placement deadlines and compliance with the competency frameworks. Even so, individual factors such as the PE's subjective interpretation of placement conduct, their attitude towards the student and practice learning, the quality of team culture, and prejudicial attitudes shape how PEs navigate any system of governance.

Critical discussion

The key findings illustrated the compelling need for urgent change. In this section of the article, various critical points are recognized for practice implications.

Imperialism and the invisibility of black international student knowledge

British social work education should recognize and value international students' training in a curriculum focussed on social anthropology and community work as a strength. But this difference in curriculum knowledge is often ignored, overlooked, or absent from placement profiles or university modules in the UK. Perhaps, because in the context of Black international students, the notion of difference is problematized as a deficit (Heng 2018). Moreover, I argue that PE judgments are often subjective, rooted in whiteness, racial stereotyping and an unspoken ideology of the 'ideal social worker'- usually typified as white British, often female, English as first language, and accustomed to the local contexts of social work. Noticeably in stark contrast to the emergent, culturally diverse workforce of minoritized 'others' from racially and language diverse communities seeking access to the social work profession.

By implication, potentially contributing to misunderstandings, bias, and disproportionate placement failures.

Additionally, international students were often described as lacking knowledge, with frequent descriptions of their struggles (Lomer and Mittelmeier 2023). However, when recruiting international students, there should be a pedagogical space for an exchange and inclusion of global knowledge to diversify social work practices. The fact that international students, by virtue of their nationality, hold different viewpoints should be an invaluable strength for any social work team, and universities advocating for the decolonization of education. Yet, in actual reality, the dominance of white, Eurocentric knowledge, ideologies, and practices are prioritized and emphasized. This point was reflected in research with international students identifying coloniality and positioning Eurocentric ways of learning as 'superior' (Moosavi 2020). Consequently, constructing a milieu whereby imperialism rendered 'other forms' of knowledge as invisible in British Social Work. The broadened focus on community-based social work hence goes unacknowledged in university and practice education. Black international students were also therefore expected to set aside their existing repertoire of skills and knowledge, for them to learn a more case work, individualized outlook on social work practice issues. Alternatively, a strengths-based approach would have enabled Black international students to expand their knowledge and skills, allowing flexibility in how to approach cases. Especially given their payment of high tuition fees and the significant possibility that they could assist in providing more meaningful services within our emerging multi-cultural society.

Shifting race-work on minoritized shoulders

In this study, PEs' narratives confirmed that racism and microaggressions are lived realities for Black international students on placements. They are regularly returning to painful and racially hostile placements which left them vulnerable to ongoing racism during important placement assessments. Most PEs reportedly felt uncertain about whether they should deal with racism on their students' behalf. Students were either expected to deal with the racism on their own, with PEs offering advice from the sidelines. PEs overlooked the debilitating effects of racial trauma that was stacked on top of stringent placement requirements. In circumstances when the PEs do not actively guard against and challenge racism, PEs potentially risk becoming complicit in reproducing an unjust, racially hostile placement conditions. When racial harm occurs on home visits, service users, and carers need to know that any racial hate crime will be reported to the police as it is a criminal offence to discriminate against someone based on their race, religion or culture. Within the workplace, if any staff member displays any form of racism, strict disciplinary measures need to be enforced.

Demonstrating the organization's firm compliance with the Equality Act 2010 and Social Work's professional values.

However, because students were not safeguarded, Black International students were expected to ignore racial pain and continue placement in harsh, racially oppressive circumstances. Almost always, a lack of racial literacy was a key contributing factor as it constructed a barrier to sensitive understanding of the profound impacts of racism. Especially, how racism often silenced students, causing emotional wounding and a state of paralysis at a pivotal time of assessment in placement. A PE with a robust working knowledge would have critical insight into the student's reluctance to report racism; it may not be due to their fear of reprisal or them wanting to 'keep their head down'. Instead, the student was grappling with an unspoken question as to whether they have a trusted PE who was anti-racist and prepared to advocate on their behalf.

Working six times harder

Black international students regularly faced complex and multi-layered issues that have long-lasting psychological, emotional, academic, and social impacts. Simply put, they must work four times harder ($1 =$ psychologically, $2 =$ emotionally, $3 =$ socially, $4 =$ culturally) to navigate the compounding effects associated with their distinguishing markers of difference. Additionally, the odds were further stacked against them because they faced $5 =$ academic and $6 =$ placement requirements. These were structured within a highly unequal, discriminatory, and predominantly white workplace that heightened the marginalized status of ethnic minoritized students. This is in direct contrast to their white counterparts, who could primarily focus on the placement and academic requirements of the course benefitting from required family and systemic support. My findings demonstrated that Black international students were positioned in marginalized spaces of power and white dominance, which severely reduced their agency and capacity to demonstrate competencies on placement.

Hidden in Pandora's box, the multi-faceted layer of structural disadvantage, race-specific labour and potentially undiagnosed learning needs, is often overlooked and should be acknowledged in PE assessments. Mainly, because these factors debilitate the student's capacity to freely demonstrate competence on placement. Yet, in the current milieu, the spotlight is shone on the individual's attributes, problematizing their performance. Rather, it was an important opportunity for PEs to acknowledge the existence of racialized placement conditions within placement supervision. Since this was not the case, Black international students' placement assessments lacked adequate consideration of their intersectional identities and discriminatory realities. Consequently, this paper advocates that race and cultural-specific reasonable adjustments are enforced too; a practice that already exists for students with

suspected and diagnosed disabilities. In making these reasonable adjustments available, it ensures that sufficient time is allocated for cultural adjustments, language processing, and the acquisition of local knowledge. This means that in practice, the induction plans for Black international students should be student-led and tailored to the individual needs of the student. Also, that practice education is delivered in a strength-based, relational way, mirroring social work's social justice ethos. This work should complement a robust, zero-tolerance organizational mandate, stipulating that all racism should immediately be reported and dealt with by skilled, racially literate social work and police staff. Ultimately, demonstrating similar dedication and concern as in cases when other protected characteristics are breached.

Grappling in the dark

There are trainee PEs who are learning on the job whilst supervising students on placement. Although this strategy could prove advantageous, it could also be disastrous when supervising Black international students because they embody multiple layers of disadvantage. They thus require a knowledgeable educator advising them on how they could arrive at the expected professional standards in a contested and predominantly white workplace. However, this is difficult to achieve if both PE and student are in training. On the one hand, the PE was grappling in the dark trying to fathom how to undertake this new role as an educator, balanced against managing their own learning and workload. Additionally, they have no previous understanding or experience of accurately responding to the culturally diverse needs of Black international students. In this milieu, too many uncertainties outweigh any positives, and could tip the balance into the realm of a negative placement experience and student failure for Black international students.

Limitations of the study

This study focuses on racism, which is likely to provoke painful emotions given the sensitive nature of the topic. To negate concern over research bias and subjectivity, transparency was achieved at making research visible through written narratives that provided critical opportunities for an intensive description and meaning for those involved (Spencer et al. 2014). The research team also ensured greater distance between the participants and research teams, which resulted in the staff participants being interviewed from a researcher from a different School. Given the relatively small number of student and staff participants who participated in this cross-faculty study, generalizability is limited. However, the intended goal is not to generalize but recognize the issue of transferability (Stahl and King 2020) because

similar experiences might be taking place in the experiences of other Black international students on student placements at different universities worldwide.

Conclusion

This article explored the perspectives, knowledge, and practice experiences of PEs and academics to better examine the placement experiences of Black international students on a Social Work course in England. The research findings confirmed racism on student placements and its debilitating impacts on Black international students. Given the deeply painful and sensitive nature of practice learning, I strongly recommend that race as protected characteristic be fully considered as a reasonable adjustment when supervising Black international students on placement. Indeed, Black international social work students were positioned in harsh, unfavourable, and unequal academic and placement conditions. Race-work was shifted on Black international students' shoulders; it should be the PE's duty to challenge racism and ensure equitable and anti-racist placement conditions. Any form of racism should immediately be reported and effectively dealt with, whether it was perpetrated by a staff member or service user. Moreover, PEs carried great responsibilities and were positioned within a web of complexity in a risk averse culture, which complicated student practice assessments and placement outcomes for Black international students. Evidently, a strengths-based approach should be adopted, enabling Black international students to use their acquired community-based knowledge in their social work assessments and interventions. Practice education is a crucial part of the wider social work education system and required dedicated commitment from Social Work England to provide high-quality, culturally appropriate mentoring support, and financial rewards valuing this important work.

Funding

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