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# Taking a Cross-Faculty Stand Against Racism and Inequality: What Are Enabling and Inhibiting Factors Influencing the Placement Experiences of Black, Asian, Ethnic Minoritised Students in the Schools of Social Work, Education, and Health Sciences?

Carlene Cornish [1],*, Stephanie T. Jong [2],*, Isabella Albarran [1], Swati Kale [2], Sarah Brownsword [3], Cat Playfair [2], Sophie Vauzour [3], Tina Odu [1], Godfrey Lusigi [2] and Virginia Shikuku [3]

[1] School of Social Work, Lawrence Stenhouse Building, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ, UK; isabella8albarran@gmail.com (I.A.)

[2] School of Health Sciences, Queens Building, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ, UK; s.kale@uea.ac.uk (S.K.); c.playfair@uea.ac.uk (C.P.)

[3] School of Education, Lawrence Stenhouse Building, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ, UK; s.brownsword@uea.ac.uk (S.B.); s.vauzour@uea.ac.uk (S.V.)

* Correspondence: c.cornish@uea.ac.uk (C.C.); s.jong@uea.ac.uk (S.T.J.)

**Abstract:** Many Black, Asian, and ethnic minoritised students on university courses leading to professional qualifications face racism on placement. Our own institutional review at one UK university highlighted differential placement outcomes for students in the Schools of Social Work, Education, and Health Sciences. To investigate, a qualitative study was conducted between April to October 2024, using focus groups and interviews with 20 students and 19 staff (lecturers and placement supervisors from the NHS, County Council, and schools). Researchers used NVivo to support the thematic analysis of the qualitative data. Key findings identified various enabling factors, including the significance of supervisory placement support and the quality of placement environment. However, our data further confirmed several inhibiting factors, including power dynamics, systemic failures, and broken trust, contributing to racialised and oppressive placement conditions. We recommend that the university and placement providers have a dedicated system for reporting race-specific incidents to a dedicated person/team who are trained and accountable for tackling and preventing racists incidents on placements.

**Keywords:** racism; placement; ethnic minorities; students; social work; health sciences; education

## 1. Introduction

The university placement experiences of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME)[1] students in the fields of Social Work, Education, and Health Sciences in the UK have gained increasing attention in recent years. Placements, as integral components of professional education, provide students with practical learning opportunities. However, for BAME students, these experiences are often shaped by additional challenges, including racism, microaggressions, and structural inequalities, which negatively impact their learning and progression.

Extant research highlights that BAME students frequently encounter barriers such as racial discrimination, a lack of support from supervisors, and differential treatment

compared to their White counterparts (Bhopal 2018). These experiences are shown to contribute to feelings of isolation, diminished confidence, and even withdrawal from placements, leading to disparities in educational and career outcomes (Stevenson 2012). Studies by Sue et al. (2007) and Nadal (2018) document how racial microaggressions—subtle and often unconscious discriminatory behaviours—permeate placement settings, exacerbating the emotional and psychological toll on BAME students.

In this article, specific background literature relevant to professional disciplines is considered, followed by a concise description of methodological details. Thereafter, key research findings are presented, along with a critical discussion identifying salient points for consideration. We conclude with some key recommendations to enhance assessments and support for BAME students.

## 2. Background Context

To provide a more detailed review of the literature on enabling and inhibiting factors that influence the placement experiences of BAME students in the UK, this section will be structured by discipline: Social Work, Education, and Health Sciences. Each discipline presents its own unique placement-based challenges and opportunities for BAME students, shaped by institutional practices, systemic inequalities, and cultural dynamics within placements.

### 2.1. Social Work Placements

Social work placements are pivotal for students to integrate theoretical learning with practical experience. For BAME students, however, these placements often present additional challenges due to the structural inequalities within social work settings outlined below:

*Institutional Racism and Bias:* The reality that racism occurs in social work practice is shocking and frankly should not happen in the first place, but it does (Cornish 2023). Dominelli (2008) argues that racism within social work is both institutional and structural, and it is reflected in the placement experiences of BAME students. While social work is a field centered around values of equality and anti-oppressive practice, research shows that placement settings often perpetuate systemic biases, particularly in predominantly White environments. BAME students frequently encounter a lack of cultural sensitivity from supervisors, which hinders their ability to thrive professionally. This is compounded by the fact that social work placements are largely dominated by White professionals, which reinforces feelings of isolation and marginalisation among BAME students.

*Cultural sensitivity and microaggressions:* Research by Bernard et al. (2011) illuminates the persistence of microaggressions in social work placements. BAME students report encountering subtle discriminatory behaviours from supervisors and colleagues, ranging from dismissive attitudes to insensitive comments regarding race or culture. These experiences create a hostile learning environment and have been shown to negatively impact students' self-esteem and professional development. For instance, Bernard's study highlights how BAME students are often perceived as "troublemakers" when raising concerns about racism, further discouraging them from seeking support during placements.

*Lack of representation and mentorship:* A lack of BAME representation within supervisory roles in social work placements has been identified as a key inhibiting factor to student success on placement. Claudia and Harris (2019) stress that the absence of diverse role models contributes to a disconnect between BAME students and their supervisors, often leading to inadequate support and guidance. BAME students frequently report feeling that their supervisors are ill-equipped to understand their cultural backgrounds or the specific challenges they face in the field. On the other hand, studies such as Osborn and Karandikar (2022) show that when BAME students are paired with culturally competent supervisors

or mentors, their placement experiences improve significantly, highlighting the need for greater diversity in the workforce.

*2.2. Education Placements*

In the field of education, placement experiences are integral to teacher training and the development of pedagogical skills. However, BAME students often face significant barriers that inhibit their success in these environments.

*Racial microaggressions and stereotyping:* Gillborn (2020) asserts that the UK's education system is rife with institutional racism, which extends into teacher training placements. BAME students frequently experience racial microaggressions, such as being assigned to schools with predominantly ethnic minority students or being asked to teach topics related to race, reinforcing stereotypes. These practices marginalise BAME students and limit their exposure to diverse teaching experiences. Studies show that such stereotyping can hinder professional growth and negatively impact students' confidence in their teaching abilities (Maylor 2009).

*Support and mentorship gaps:* According to Sharp and Aston (2024), BAME students in teacher training programs often report a lack of adequate support from their placement supervisors. This lack of mentorship, particularly from professionals with shared cultural backgrounds, creates an environment where BAME students feel underrepresented and unsupported. Without culturally competent guidance, students are less likely to discuss issues related to racism or discrimination, which further exacerbates feelings of isolation during their placements.

*Inhibiting role of Whiteness in Education settings:* Whiteness and the dominance of White cultural norms in education placements are critical barriers to inclusion for BAME students. The teaching profession remains largely White-dominated (DfE 2018), and this power dynamic influences how BAME students are treated in school placements (Gillborn 2020). Supervisors and mentors may unconsciously apply higher standards of performance to BAME students (Demie and See 2023), reinforcing racialised expectations and impeding their progression through the training process.

*2.3. Health Sciences Placements*

Placements in health sciences, including nursing and allied health professions, are integral for students to gain practical application of skills, developing professional skills, and gaining insight into the different fields of their future professions. For BAME students, however, these placements often come with distinct challenges related to racial discrimination and bias.

*Racial bias and disparities in feedback:* A recurring theme in the literature is the impact of racial bias for BAME students on health sciences placements. A narrative review found that factors contributing to the formation and maintenance of implicit racial bias include peers, educators, the curriculum, and placements within healthcare settings (Joseph et al. 2021). Linked to assessment and feedback processes, Woolf et al. (2011) found that BAME medical students were often subjected to harsher critiques and disproportionately negative evaluations compared to their White counterparts, despite performing at similar levels. This feedback gap is a significant inhibiting factor as it affects not only students' grades but also their confidence and future career prospects.

*Experiences of racism and discrimination from patients and staff:* Research by Morrison et al. (2023) and Walker et al. (2024) shows that BAME students in healthcare placements frequently encounter racism, not only from staff but also from patients. These students report being assigned fewer desirable tasks and often feel undervalued by their supervisors. Such experiences of discrimination detract from their learning and create a hostile work

environment. Moreover, many students hesitate to report these incidents due to fears of jeopardising their professional relationships or future placements.

*Mentorship and support networks as enablers:* Conversely, studies show that mentorship and strong support networks serve as key enablers for BAME students in healthcare placements. Thomas (2012) emphasises the importance of culturally competent mentors who understand the unique challenges faced by BAME students and can offer guidance and emotional support. Peer networks also provide an essential source of solidarity, helping students navigate the complexities of placement experiences and build resilience against racial discrimination.

Finally, as demonstrated in the literature, research tends to focus on the negative aspects of placements, with limited exploration of strategies that can mitigate these challenges. Much of the literature is discipline-specific, with few comparative studies analysing placement experiences across Social Work, Education, and Health Sciences (Sewell 2020). Additionally, most studies concentrate on individual-level experiences, leaving a gap in the examination of broader institutional and structural dynamics that shape these outcomes (Rollock 2012). The current research seeks to address these gaps by posing the following question: What are the enabling and inhibiting factors that influence the placement experiences of BAME students in the Schools of Social Work (SWK), Education and Lifelong Learning (EDU), and Health Sciences (HSC) at one UK university? It aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges they face and to identify practices and policies that promote more equitable and supportive placement environments.

## 3. Research Methodology

The current study builds on a pilot qualitative study conducted the previous year by the Schools of SWK and EDU. For the current iteration of the study, the School of HSC was also included due to shared concerns about the placement experiences of BAME students. The primary aim of this research was to understand the enabling and inhibiting factors influencing placement experiences of BAME students. Given the research question and aim, a descriptive qualitative approach was appropriate as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the personal, social, and contextual factors that shape those experiences. Qualitative research focuses on understanding individuals' lived experiences, which is essential for exploring the personal and social dynamics of racial disparities and structural inequalities in education (Creswell and Poth 2018; Patton 2015). A qualitative approach allowed us to centre participant voices, ensuring that their experiences were authentically represented and can inform policy and practice changes in clinical education (Smith et al. 2009).

Online interviews and focus groups were selected as the methods of data collection. In using these methods, researchers gained a detailed understanding of the students' lived experiences, and the specific barriers they faced (Creswell and Poth 2018). The research team designed two topic guides to support a semi-structured approach to data collection, one for students, and one for staff. A research intern within the team conducted the data collection with students, and university staff members within the research team conducted the data collection with staff. This approach aimed to foster a conversational exchange between participants and researchers, providing a safe space to discuss potentially sensitive topics.

- The two participant groups included BAME students who studied on a professional course in SWK, EDU, or HSC, and practitioners who support students during placements. We recognised the crucial role of placement providers and teams in shaping students' experiences, and as such, we sought their insights to complement the student data and to better inform recommendations for good practice and areas of improvement. For this article, we solely highlight the voices of student participants to provide depth in exploration, centering the lived experiences of the primary affected group,

BAME students. Eligible students were from a BAME background, and studying within one of the following schools:

- Social Work (SWK): Undergraduate, Postgraduate, and Apprenticeship programs
- Education (EDU): Primary and Secondary PGCE programs
- Health Sciences (HSC): Nursing and Midwifery, and Allied Health Professional (AHP) courses

Recruitment strategies varied by school to reach the most students. We posted recruitment flyers on student bulletins and the university virtual learning environment platform. Team members also emailed students and, in one school, collaborated with Practice Education Leads, role holders who work directly with students and staff in placement environments, to distribute the flyer. The recruitment flyer included a QR code linking to a participant information sheet and consent form. Interested students completed the consent form and provided their contact information. The research intern within the team then contacted interested students to schedule a focus group or individual interviews. Individual interviews were arranged for those who requested them or were unable to attend a focus group. At the end of the focus groups and interviews, students were asked to voluntarily complete a form to collect demographic information. Data collection was conducted over a four-month period from April to October 2024.

## 4. Data Analysis

The focus groups and interviews were recorded on Microsoft Teams, and the automatic transcripts produced by Microsoft software (version 25017.203.3370.1174) were used as a starting point for manual transcription. Transcripts were carefully checked against the recordings several times before moving on to coding and theme generation on NVivo 14. Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was the selected analysis method as it facilitated a deep and nuanced understanding of personal experiences, essential for addressing the research aim and objective. RTA allowed for the identification and exploration of patterns or themes within the data (Byrne 2022; Braun and Clarke 2006), a key aim given the participants' diverse academic backgrounds across different Schools of study. Given the exploratory nature of the study, RTA enabled the researchers to analyse detailed responses from focus groups and interviews, uncovering both explicit and implicit themes related to enabling and inhibiting factors.

The iterative data analysis process involved both the research intern and an experienced researcher, providing different perspectives that enriched the analysis. NVivo 14 software was used to assist with the reflexive thematic analysis by organising the data. The researchers began by coding the same three transcripts—one from each School of study—individually and then met to compare and discuss initial codes, their potential meanings, and their relevance to the original data. This exchange of interpretations reflected varying approaches and experiences. The researchers continued to meet periodically to refine and develop candidate themes that identified both enabling and inhibiting factors. The theme review and definition process were presented to the broader research team in online meetings, where feedback helped further refine the themes generated from the student data.

The research team consisted of seven female researchers, including a research intern who led the student data collection. The team included one academic from the School of Social Work, two from the School of Education, and three from the School of Health Sciences. The researchers represented a range of nationalities: Peruvian, South African, French, Indian, Australasian, and English. The research intern, from a Social Sciences background, had previously been a student at the same university. As an ethnic minority, her background positively influenced her understanding of the student participants' experiences during

the interviews and focus groups. One student participant specifically mentioned that the research intern's non-British-sounding name made them feel "safe" in agreeing to an individual interview. Furthermore, the research intern's recent experience as a student helped her build rapport with the participants, encouraging them to share their personal experiences more openly. This dynamic may not have occurred if the participants had felt they were speaking to an academic, given the potential power imbalance and sensitive matters discussed. Overall, the diversity within the research team, both in terms of academic and ethnic backgrounds, enriched the project, particularly given the focus on how students from ethnic minority backgrounds encounter distinct challenges in placements compared to their White counterparts.

## 5. Key Findings

A total of 20 student participants engaged in the research (four interviews with students, and six focus groups). The discussion of key findings below is restricted to the student data only to highlight their voices. Analysis of data generated key themesm representing three enabling factors and three inhibiting factors relevant to the placement experiences of BAME students. The enabling factors included a focus on the nature and quality of supervisory support promoting student learning; wider support, driving student wellbeing and achievement; and the significance of a positive placement environment. The enabling factors were identified as having a profound impact on effective placement support for BAME students. Inhibiting factors included recognition of power dynamics and the complexity of being an ethnic minoritised student on placement; the lack of cultural inclusivity, evident when students' unique cultural backgrounds are often overlooked and misunderstood; lived experiences of racism, microaggressions, and marginalisation in placement; and concerns over broken trust and systemic failures. Both enabling and inhibiting factors are outlined below, together with their definitions and corresponding sub-themes.

**Enabling factors:**

1.  **Supervisory support promoting student learning:** This is crucial in shaping the placement experiences of BAME students.

    Supervisory support helps BAME students navigate the complexities of their learning and professional development. Having clear expectations of learning goals, including explanations of how students will be supported to achieve expected standards, are crucial. In so doing, students benefit from structured support from the outset and are able to focus on their learning. One participant highlighted how their supervisor ensured that learning was prioritised: *"You're not here as staff, you're here to learn"*. This clarity helped the student navigate the placement with a focus on learning, rather than feeling overwhelmed by operational tasks. Likewise, another student described how their supervisor continuously checked in with them, ensuring they stayed on track despite the busy environment: *"He didn't forget me. . . he made sure we had time to discuss my learning"*. This emphasis on education, even in fast-paced environments, fosters a supportive learning experience where students feel prioritised and guided.

    Constructive, quality feedback is another vital aspect of supervisory support, helping students build confidence and develop professionally. One student shared that receiving detailed feedback, both verbal and written, made a lasting impact: *"She gave me such good feedback. . . it was very detailed and written down, so I could keep it and look back on it"*. This type of feedback not only reinforced what the student had done well but also provided a reference for future improvement, reinforcing their learning. Another participant noted how positive feedback encouraged them to continue improving: *"Hearing someone say I think you're going*

*to make a good social worker gave me the courage to keep going"*. Hence, constructive feedback, when delivered effectively, does indeed boost students' confidence and motivation to fully engage with their placements.

The findings also underscored the significance of shared experiences, whereby practice educators sought common ground and experiences to establish a closer working relationship with students. Supervisors who shared common experiences or understood the unique challenges faced by students were reportedly better able to build rapport and targeted support. One student described how a shared cultural background with their supervisor enhanced their placement experience: *"She recognized the difference in our educational backgrounds and adapted her teaching style"*. Even when the shared experience was not cultural, students appreciated it when supervisors could relate to their journey in other ways. For instance, one student noted the comfort of having a supervisor who had gone through a similar training path: *"They had done the apprenticeship themselves, so they understood what I was going through"*. These shared experiences create a sense of empathy and understanding, making students feel supported and understood on a deeper level.

2. **Wider support driving student wellbeing and achievement:** Collaboration between the university and placement provides support for students before and during placement.

A recurring theme in the experiences of BAME students across various disciplines is the significant role that a supportive network plays in enhancing their placement experiences. Having access to mentors, professional tutors, and a cohesive team can create a more inclusive and reassuring environment. For example, one participant highlighted the value of having multiple layers of support: *"I had an on-site supervisor and a practice educator. . . it worked out really well because I had those two options"*. This multiplicity of contacts provided students with a safety net, ensuring that they had avenues for feedback and guidance, particularly when issues arose. The availability of dedicated mentors who actively engage with students also proved critical. One student reflected on the positive impact of a mentor who *"made sure I was part of the team. . . introduced me to everyone"*. This integration into the team not only enhanced the learning experience but also fostered a sense of belonging, which is often challenging for BAME students in predominantly White settings. Another participant emphasised the importance of being included in decision-making processes, as they were consistently encouraged to *"come stand here, observe, and understand why this has to be done"*. Such involvement fosters both professional development and emotional security. Overall, these accounts underscore that when students feel well-supported and part of a team, they are more likely to thrive during placements, even in challenging or unfamiliar environments. A strong support system acts as a buffer against the isolating effects of racism or microaggressions, allowing students to focus on their learning and professional growth.

In addition to a strong support network, the role of staff *"having students' backs"* is a critical enabling factor that significantly enhances the placement experience for BAME students. Many participants described how staff advocacy and intervention fostered a sense of security and empowerment. For instance, one student shared how their advisor intervened during a midway review by clarifying expectations that were beyond the student's role: *"My advisor stood up and said that's not in her job description. . . That sealed it for me"*. This type of staff involvement ensures that students do not feel overwhelmed by unrealistic expectations and are treated fairly in their professional development. Other students emphasised the emotional support they received from staff, with one participant noting how their advisor *"was always calling to check up on me"* and that this consistent care helped them feel valued and supported: *"I don't know what I would have done or where I would have been without the support I got from my school"*. This level of staff engagement fosters a positive

environment where students feel their wellbeing is prioritised, which, in turn, enhances their learning experience and overall confidence during placement. These examples highlight that when staff actively advocate for and support students, both emotionally and professionally, it strengthens the students' ability to succeed and manage challenges in their placements.

- **Placement environment:** The work setting and the individuals within it play an important role in shaping the overall placement experience.

The placement environment was a significant enabling factor in students' positive placement experiences. A key aspect of a supportive placement environment is being welcomed and treated as part of the team. One student reflected on their experience, noting that from the very first day, *"they don't treat us like trainees; they treat us like professionals from the university here to support"*. Another student emphasised how being introduced to everyone and feeling included set a positive tone for the entire placement: *"I was part of the team... everyone knew who I was"*. This sense of inclusion fosters a learning environment where students feel valued and supported, contributing to their confidence and engagement.

A diverse workforce can also significantly enhance a student's sense of belonging. In one instance, a student expressed that being part of a diverse team in London made them feel comfortable and supported: *"The diversity was... positive compared to my placements in Norfolk"*. Similarly, having a diverse team was linked to a more inclusive culture where students felt less isolated, and the diversity of backgrounds helped to foster mutual understanding: *"It just adds to the atmosphere... I felt I could thrive"*. The representation of diversity within the workforce ensures that BAME students feel seen and understood, enhancing their overall placement experience.

The opportunity to contribute and have one's voice heard was another critical factor. Students valued being able to share their ideas and feedback without fear of judgment. One participant explained, *"You feel valued and can share opinions without feeling like you're imposing"*. Another described how their contributions were actively encouraged, and their cultural experiences were welcomed in the classroom: *"They actually encourage us to bring new things and contribute"*. This open exchange of ideas not only fosters professional growth but also empowers students to bring their full identities into the placement environment.

**Inhibiting factors:**

- **Power dynamics and the complexity of being an ethnic minoritised student on placement:** Power relations between staff and students act as a structural factor that discourages students from speaking up.

Power dynamics within placement settings serve as a significant inhibiting factor for BAME students, influencing their experiences in two primary ways: power imbalances that force students to remain silent and modify their behaviours, and an additional layer of oppression experienced by students of different ethnicities. Many students shared how the hierarchical structure of placements made them feel they could not express concerns or challenge unfair treatment for fear of jeopardising their progress. One student explained how the pressure to comply with supervisors was overwhelming: *"I was scared to say anything because they have power over me... if I speak up, my placement might not go well"*. Another described feeling compelled to modify their behaviour just to pass: *"I kept smiling, kept being polite... all I could think about was finishing my placement and moving on"*. This sentiment was echoed by a student who recounted: *"You have to keep your head down, put on a fake smile, and just get through it. You're thinking, 'I need to pass this placement, I can't afford to make anyone angry'"*. The pressure to remain silent not only affected their ability to address issues but also stifled their learning. One participant regretted not speaking up about a biased

situation: *"I was in denial that someone wouldn't believe me, so I stayed quiet. In the end, it was me who suffered. . . I should have spoken up, but I didn't because I was scared of the power they had over my placement"*. This fear of retribution for voicing concerns was a recurring theme, as many students felt trapped by the power dynamics, unable to address problems without risking their placements.

In addition to the general power imbalances, BAME students often face an added layer of oppression tied to their ethnicity or cultural background. One student shared how they felt out of place in an all-White team*: "As soon as I joined the team, I felt I didn't fit in. . . there were constant microaggressions, and by the end, I had a breakdown"*. Another participant explained the heightened expectations placed on them because of their race: *"I felt like they expected more from me just because I'm Black. . . my White counterparts could get away with things I never could"*. This pressure to conform, or adapt behaviour based on race was a common experience. One student reflected on how they had to "shift" their identity to fit into the placement environment: *"You have to mould yourself, be someone else when you're on placement. . . it's hard to be yourself when you know they're watching and judging everything you do"*. Another student described how this constant scrutiny and pressure created feelings of alienation: *"I felt like I had to work ten times harder to prove myself, and even then, it wasn't enough. I couldn't help but wonder, is it because of my skin colour?"*. These quotes reveal how the intersection of power dynamics and racial bias in placements creates a uniquely challenging environment for BAME students. The fear of speaking up, coupled with the added pressure of racial expectations, severely limits their ability to thrive in these settings, contributing to feelings of isolation and frustration.

- **Lack of cultural inclusivity and lived experiences of racism, microaggressions and marginalisation in placement:** Unconscious bias and differentiated treatment negatively affect students' sense of belonging and opportunities for equitable learning.

The lack of cultural inclusivity and the prevalence of racism, microaggressions, and marginalisation profoundly affect the experiences of BAME students during their placements. These experiences reveal deep systemic issues, leading to emotional and psychological harm, and contribute to a hostile learning environment. One of the key barriers BAME students face in placements is the absence of cultural inclusivity, where their unique backgrounds and needs are often overlooked or misunderstood. This lack of awareness can manifest in both subtle and overt ways. For instance, a student recalled how wearing a jacket indoors due to the cold—a common practice in her home country—was interpreted as disrespectful. She explained, "*They asked me why do you put on your jacket? And I explained. . . they went behind me to speak with my on-site supervisor to say that I wear a coat and that is rude*". Instead of understanding her cultural background and physical discomfort, the supervisors framed her behaviour as a violation of workplace norms, alienating her further.

This lack of inclusivity often translates into a failure to accommodate the specific needs of BAME students, making them feel unwelcome or different. In another case, a student felt her ethnicity was used to single her out. She described how her supervisor's initial warm reception quickly deteriorated, leaving her isolated: *"She had some kind of attitude towards me, and even though she was really competent. . . I was just scared somehow"*. The shift from inclusion to exclusion often goes unaddressed, with students left to navigate these complex emotional landscapes alone. Racism and microaggressions are recurring themes in the placement experiences of BAME students. These incidents, while sometimes subtle, have a cumulative emotional impact. One student recalled how her name, a basic part of her identity, became a source of discomfort: *"They always struggle when they hear my name. . . by the end of the first week or second week they say my name fine, but it's just like in the beginning they make it such a thing"*. The constant mispronunciation of her name by colleagues and

educators was more than just an inconvenience; it was a reminder of her outsider status in a predominantly white environment.

In another instance, a student described a humiliating moment during a team meeting when her educator publicly criticised her attire: "*She just said it across the table like ahh... can't believe what you're wearing, why would you think this is appropriate to wear to placement? I spoke to her and said... you could have taken me to the side and corrected me because that's embarrassing*". The lack of sensitivity in this situation reinforced a sense of being singled out for not conforming to unspoken norms, with the added humiliation of being reprimanded in front of peers. Microaggression also manifests in emotional dismissiveness. One student, after crying due to the overwhelming stress of these subtle aggressions, found her emotions trivialised by her educator, who remarked, "*Oh you don't even look upset anymore, you just look angry*". The educator's response not only invalidated the student's feelings but also perpetuated harmful stereotypes of Black individuals as overly angry or aggressive, adding another layer to the emotional toll.

The emotional impact of these experiences of marginalisation is significant, often leading to anxiety, self-doubt, and emotional breakdowns. One student, who faced repeated microaggressions throughout her placement, described how these incidents accumulated until she could no longer cope: "*I ended up like just having a bit of a breakdown at the end of the placement because it was just, everything was just too much, and I felt like I couldn't do anything right*". This emotional exhaustion not only affects students' mental health but also their ability to focus on and succeed in their placements. The emotional toll is exacerbated when students feel unsupported or ridiculed by their colleagues. One student described how she became a laughingstock among her peers, constantly put on the spot and questioned about her knowledge in a public and humiliating manner. She recalled, "*I was being asked... what's the name of the medication? And everybody's looking at me and if I don't get it, they sort of look at each other and smile... it's not professional*". This kind of treatment not only undermined her confidence but created a hostile and anxiety-inducing environment that hindered her learning.

The burden of navigating these emotionally taxing environments often leads BAME students to question their place within the institution. One student reflected on her struggle to justify remaining in such a setting, questioning, "*But Louisa, why am I in the UK anyway? I come from a very nice country. What am I doing in this country?*". The constant microaggressions and marginalisation can create feelings of isolation, making students feel like outsiders in both their academic and personal lives. The lack of cultural inclusivity, coupled with ongoing experiences of racism, microaggressions, and marginalisation, creates a damaging environment for BAME students during placements. These systemic issues not only obstruct their educational progress but also take a severe emotional toll, leading to anxiety, breakdowns, and a sense of alienation. Without substantial institutional change to foster inclusivity and address these biases, BAME students will continue to face unnecessary barriers to their success and well-being.

1.  **Broken trust and systemic failures:** University and placement systems are not working; they are failing students instead.

The systemic failures and broken trust within the placement process significantly inhibit the success of BAME students. These issues span across several key areas, including the absence of action plans for students at risk of failing, insufficient support, lack of prioritisation for student learning, lack of follow-up on reported issues, and an inability to address raised concerns effectively. One of the recurring concerns is the absence of structured support for students who are close to failing. BAME students often feel neglected, particularly when facing issues related to racism or miscommunication. For instance, one student highlighted that during a placement where the educator displayed racist behaviour,

she was failed without the implementation of an action plan. Normally, students at risk of failing would have an action plan to support their improvement, but in this case, no such intervention was offered, and the student was failed abruptly, causing suspicion and frustration: *"They just failed me straight away. . .I already know that one is a bit suspicious"*. This lack of intervention, especially in racially charged environments, compounds the challenges BAME students face in overcoming placement obstacles.

Another significant issue is the failure of mentors and educators to provide adequate support, which is often exacerbated by the high pressures of clinical environments. Many BAME students reported feeling abandoned or left to manage on their own. One student mentioned how, despite being on the same educational level as a peer, she barely spent any time with her educator, who prioritised another student instead. This unequal treatment was a source of frustration, as she felt *"to the side"* and excluded from meaningful learning opportunities. In other cases, mentors failed to step in when students encountered racism or harassment from patients. One student shared an experience where her hair was grabbed by a patient, and her educator did nothing to intervene. Such inaction sends a message of disregard for both the students' safety and their learning needs. The systemic lack of support leaves BAME students navigate difficult placements without the resources or guidance they need to succeed.

Even when students do raise concerns, the system often fails to respond adequately. One student who reported a racist incident noted that despite her efforts to bring the issue to the Hospital Trust, no follow-up action was taken for over two years, even after repeated attempts of chasing it up. She stated, *"I chased it a year later, and still nothing"*. This prolonged inaction discourages students from reporting future issues, as they lose confidence in the institution's ability to address their concerns. In some cases, students felt that raising issues was futile because there would be no meaningful resolution or accountability from either the university or the placement providers. There is also a clear disconnect between the university and the placement providers. Students observed that the university appears more concerned with maintaining good relationships with placement providers than ensuring the well-being of its students. One student noted, *"The university needs to speak to the educator and the trust and let them know. . . this is unacceptable"*, but instead, it seemed the university was satisfied if the placement partnership was in place, even if it was detrimental to students. Moreover, students felt that lecturers, many of whom are friendly with each other, were reluctant to engage in conflicts or confront difficult issues, creating a culture of avoidance that ultimately disadvantaged the students.

## 6. Critical Discussion

Based on the key findings, it demonstrated three key areas of practice which promoted positive student placement learning experiences. The significance of a supportive student learning environment is emphasised in the student data, especially given the sheer complexity of understanding the different tasks required to fulfill their practice learning requirements. The student participants valued timely, constructive, and clear feedback that provided clear insight into how the learning goals are to be achieved. Most students new to student placements would find the practice learning context daunting. However, based on existing research reporting racism and inequalities in placements regarding BAME students, this learning experience is a lot more challenging and painful (Sharp and Aston 2024). For this reason, effective supervisory placement support should be in place.

Racism on placements causes emotional wounding that significantly hinders the extent to which a student can freely be themselves and demonstrate the required practice standards. Fundamentally, it is significant that placement supervisors have profound insight into the pain and humiliation that racist experiences cause BAME students (Joseph et al.

2021). Thus, truly understanding the reasons for their reluctance to report racism; these explanations are well-articulated in our student data. What is required is an anti-racist supervisor who has a zero-tolerance attitude, challenging racially hostile placement conditions and advocating on behalf of their student. Ultimately ensuring that BAME students are positioned within a practice learning environment that is truly equal, inclusive, respectful, and tolerant. Racism on placement should be eradicated, but it requires placement supervisors with the wider team and management to combat racism.

The placement conditions for BAME students are harsh and unequal. Racist placements are often left unchallenged, which consequently results in a practice whereby many BAME students are expected to successfully pass placements, despite their regular experiences of racial microaggressions and emotional wounding (Cornish 2025). This is an unrealistic expectation and should be tackled by the university and placement to ensure optimal learning conditions of an inclusive, safe placement is made available for BAME students (Cornish 2025). This is urgent work.

Moreover, it is important that the practice supervisor and university staff keep their power in check. Given that it would be the student's first practice learning experience, there is a strong likelihood that they would have no idea about how placement works. They are therefore reliant on their placement supervisors for support (Walker et al. 2024). It also means that placement supervisors should therefore manage the uneasy tension of waiting and helping students to learn the required area of practice. It is understandable that for some students the pace might be slower, especially if they are international students (Cornish 2025). This is often exacerbated by the fact that most placements are predominantly white, which by implication is a constant reminder of the student's racial visibility. It is therefore important that the placement supervisor adjust their pace of working, so that it would mirror the student's capacity to comprehend new information. Forming a rapport, through finding common ground and developing authentic working relationships, held strong benefits. It also narrows the chasm between what the student considered as a new, unknown, and potentially terrifying student practice experience versus a learning space that is constructive, have margin for error, and a commitment to help the student achieve success on placement.

Additionally, the data highlighted the significance of building a wider support network that includes a focus on student wellbeing too (Sharp and Aston 2024). Acknowledging that students experience different life challenges alerts students to the fact that placement supervisors truly see them as a person and not only as students. Our key findings demonstrated this point, highlighting how students felt seen and respected, which, in turn, prompted self-determination to do well on student placement. Crucially, universities and placements must work together much closer, enabling both parties to be fully aware of the academic requirements and the practice learning standards that must be achieved for an overall successful placement outcome. Yes, having university staff attend placement meetings is one step forward but not enough; it is important that regular updates and an exchange of literature or resources are used in both contexts to demonstrate a continuum of student learning. The findings also underscored the importance of the placement environment, especially the need for supportive colleagues in the wider team. Is the placement ready for the student? If not, what is required to ensure that the team is welcoming, supportive, and inclusive? These are key questions that require strong consideration to ensure that the inclusive and teamworking ethos of social work as a profession is displayed on placement too for BAME students.

The lack of structured support, insufficient prioritisation of student learning, and systemic failure to address reported issues create an environment where BAME students felt unsupported and left to fend for themselves. This broken trust between students, the

university, and the placement providers severely hampers practice learning experiences and disproportionately affects BAME students. Evidently, exacerbating their racialised experiences and diminishing prospects for success in placements.

## 7. Conclusions

These project findings confirm the painful racialised and oppressive experiences that jeopardise successful placement outcomes for BAME students. The student data provides wide-ranging inhibiting factors, underscoring the gravity of the situation and constraining influences of broader sociostructural inequalities within professional contexts. Equally significant is the fact that the data illustrate the profound need for the university to seriously tackle the broken trust in a reporting system found to be lacking in rigour, accountability, and cultural sensitivity. We recommend that the university and placement environment have a dedicated system for reporting race-specific incidents to a dedicated person/team who are trained and accountable for tackling and preventing racists incidents on placements. There is a significant amount of work required, but this project is one of several steppingstones tackling race inequality and promoting greater success for all students, including those from ethnic minoritised backgrounds positioned in placements in predominately White settings.

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## Note

[1] We acknowledge that the BAME acronym lacks nuance. Finding the right term is difficult and people have individual preferences when it come to terminology. Whether your personal preference is racialised minority, global majority, ethnic minority, minority ethnic, or person of colour, this research sought to better understand and take action to address racial inequalities and experiences.

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