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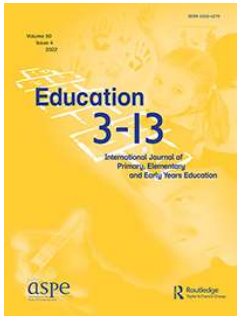
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# We are not ‘Mixed’, we are ‘All’: understanding the educational experiences of mixed ethnicity children to enhance learner agency

Rachel C. Boyle

Head of Interdisciplinary Studies, Carnegie School of Education, Leeds Beckett University, Carnegie Hall, Leeds, United Kingdom

## ABSTRACT

From the moment a child is born, they create a self that it is influenced by their external world, this includes social and political factors. As the sense of self develops one cannot ignore the importance of interpersonal relatedness and social interactions. School experiences are therefore key. This paper addresses the experiences of mixed ethnicity children in primary school in the UK. It presents an initial discussion of how children’s agency is both impacted and enhanced by their racialised position. Categories of race/ethnicity may be broad and abstract, and this creates an opportunity for representations to be characterised by their physical appearance. This then has a direct impact on how children see themselves represented in primary school both through the curriculum and in their teachers themselves. The notion of belonging is central to the discussion of children’s agency and mixed ethnicity children form their sense of self through interactions with both their peers and their teachers. For mixed ethnicity children to be given the best opportunity to develop agency, three elements are needed: culturally aware teachers; a curriculum in which children see themselves represented; and an ethnically diverse teaching body that truly represents British society.

## KEYWORDS

Mixed ethnicity; race; racism; school; identity; belonging

## Introduction

In 2011 the census found that 13% of the population identified as being from a Black or minority ethnic background. The largest ethnic group to contribute to this figure was the Black African Caribbean community (3%), closely followed by the Asian/Asian British: Indian community (2.3%). However, the next group to contribute to the overall 13% was the ‘mixed/ multiple ethnic’ community (2%). Demie and Hau (2017) concluded that by 2070 those who identify as mixed ethnicity will be the largest community next to those who identify as White. Recent school statistics from the DfE (2017) identified that approximately 32% of the school population are children from Black or minority ethnic groups, and the mixed ethnicity population in schools has increased from 168,900 in 2003 to 388,868 in 2017. This shows an increase of 130%. This, it could be suggested, is due to the recent developments in the categories offered by the census and, therefore, the subsequent gathering of information. It could also be attributed to an increasing number of interracial unions as well as an increasing number of people choosing to identify as mixed ethnicity (Joseph-Salisbury 2016).

**CONTACT** Rachel C. Boyle  [r.c.boyle@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:r.c.boyle@leedsbeckett.ac.uk)

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For the purposes of this article, the term 'mixed ethnicity' is used to describe those whose parents do not come from the same ethnic group. In order to situate this research, it seems appropriate to provide some brief author details. Given the focus of this research, my ontological positioning is central as I am a researcher from a mixed ethnicity background – English, Bajan, Irish, and West African. I categorise myself as 'mixed ethnicity' as I acknowledge that my position and identity has been informed by both sides of my family. I have recently replaced 'race' in my ascription, and when describing others for the purpose of this work. The term refers only to physical appearance as 'race' is the concept of dividing people into groups based on various sets of physical characteristics usually resulting from genetic ancestry (Solomos and Back 1996). I believe that the way in which one identifies oneself is far more meaningful than simply by appearance. Ethnic identity is defined by Jones (1997, xiii) as 'that aspect of a person's self-conceptualisation which results from identification with a broader group on the basis of perceived cultural differentiation and/or common descent'. This in itself provides a rich and diverse set of possibilities where the combination of ethnicities is significant. The way in which someone from mixed ethnicity may view themselves, therefore, has the possibility to be significantly unique.

Despite the significant growth of the mixed ethnicity community, relatively little research has been undertaken to develop an understanding of their experiences (Aspinall and Song 2013), and education research is yet to uncover the factors that influence their academic achievement (Williams 2011). Therefore, there is a significant and urgent need for work in this area. Several researchers have argued that teachers need to develop their understanding of the needs of, and issues faced by mixed ethnicity pupils of all ages (Williams 2011; Morley and Street 2014). This paper seeks to begin to contribute to a growing dialogue about the educational experiences of mixed ethnicity children and young people (Demie and Hau 2017; Joseph-Salisbury 2017) and to specifically address the development of agency. Agency, and the capacity to act independently to make one's own choices has a significant impact on educational outcomes, success and achievement (Manyukhina and Wyse 2019). It is central to a learners' identity, autonomy and behaviour (Toohey and Norton 2003). Factors that influence agency include a sense of belonging and the formation of one's identity. Throughout this paper the educational challenges faced by the mixed ethnicity community will be addressed, including ways forward for education. Such dialogue is essential if education is to truly understand the needs of its pupils, develop teachers' understanding and ultimately to begin to further develop agency within our mixed ethnicity community.

### **Sense of self and learner agency**

From the very first moment a child is born, they create a self that it is influenced by social and political factors (Bareka, Panhofer, and Rodriguez Cigaran 2019). Fischman (2009) explains that, when talking about the development of a sense of self, one cannot ignore the importance of interpersonal relatedness and social interactions and school experiences are key. Foucault (1980) stated that anonymous structures, networks of knowledge in social and cultural institutions all embody, as well as produce, the sense of self. Agency, and the capacity to act independently to make one's own choices, is considered central to the sense of self and this is essential for success. Education and the interactions with early schooling, therefore, have a pivotal role to play in the development of learner agency and the related sense of self. Manyukhina and Wyse (2019, 223) define children's agency as 'the capacity to act'. They go on to distinguish three overlapping elements. The first is an individuals' 'belief in their ability to act independently and exercise choices'. However, having a sense of agency will not necessarily result in the exercising of agency. Therefore, Manyukhina and Wyse identify that the second essential element is for children to have tangible opportunities to exercise their agency. However, opportunities will not be fulfilled if children do not feel competent of acting upon them. 'When opportunities are genuinely offered and consciously recognised by learners they become affordances, the third element' (Manyukhina and Wyse 2019, 226). And it is in 'affordances, not just opportunities', that are essential requirements for the exercise of agency.

They conclude that ‘the importance of these three elements means that agency is best defined as a ‘socially situated capacity to act’ (Manyukhina and Wyse 2019, 227). If the position of mixed ethnicity children is considered within the definition of agency, one can immediately begin to identify challenges in their socially situated position.

### **Labels, identity and a sense of self**

The use of an ethnic or racial marker is the outcome of interactions between observers, official bodies and wider society. Aspinall (2020, 2) describes these as the ‘social categorisers’ and those whom the label describes as the ‘group identifiers’. Racialised labels placed upon me over the course of my life, particularly during education, have had an impact on my sense of self. Becker’s (1973) Labelling Theory identifies that the interaction between definition by others (external) and self-definition (internal) is described as a process of internalisation. Jenkins (1996) explores labelling and its consequences. He identifies that the power of the labeller has an impact on the individual’s experience. For example, an individual may define themselves somewhat differently to social categorisers but in lieu of a more accurate definition, may still be prepared to use the externally defined social categorisation. There is then space between their sense of self and the category in which they are placed. This is something I certainly felt for many years in education, and categories were partially meaningless, which resulted in me reflecting on the notion of belonging. This was particularly apparent during my years of schooling in the 1990s. That space that exists then impacts of one’s sense of self. Without a secure foundation of a sense of self, the development of agency is hindered and to regain what is lost during those pivotal school years can take a long time.

The years of childhood (approx. 0–16) are central to the development of a person’s sense of self (Stein 2004) and schooling has a profound impact on the formation of identity. This develops through children’s interaction with their peers and teachers. They begin to draw upon both conscious and subconscious messages received from interactions, language and events. Conversely, those of mixed ethnicity may also not have a single view of their identity that is in ‘mixed’ terms. There is evidence that some people may identify with a single category option. Consequently, even siblings with the same biological parentage may have different understandings or perspectives on their identity (Root 1992). Therefore, developing identity as someone of mixed ethnicity involves the consideration and indeed assimilation of each side of one’s heritage. This may involve internal conflict. If we consider this added layer of complexity for mixed ethnicity children when forming their identities, it becomes clear why there may be challenges in their ‘socially situated position’ and subsequently in their development agency when compared to their White counterparts.

Research has generated debate about how identities, social interactions, psychological well-being and agency are interrelated (Kao 2001; Ogbu 2003). Stone (1962) proposed that identity is a consequence of two processes. ‘Identification of’ involves the social learning of the meanings and expectations associated with the role or group. It highlights what an individual shares with other group members and what makes a member of a group identifiable to oneself and others. Contrastingly, ‘Identification with’, includes the investing of oneself into a role and creating group connections. In Stein’s (2004) work, he discusses Jung’s theories about the ‘psychosocial identity’ and the social dimension of self. He states that the individual is a part of a changing society and is in a constantly modifying state. Drawing upon both Jung and Stein, Bareka, Panhofer, and Rodriguez Cigarán (2019) identify that all these changes result in a self-awareness and the personal identity.

### **Mixed Ethnicity: terminology, understanding and the gaps between**

There are a significant range of standard terms for those of mixed ethnicity, and terminology associated with race or ethnicity can be seen as a form of representation. To use the term ‘biracial’, popular in the USA, indicates two areas of heritage. Similarly, ‘dual heritage’ has limits in focusing on duality and the union of two groups – this is not always the case. Therefore, this terminology can be

problematic and significantly limiting. 'Mixed race' is the salient term as a group identifier, though census practice has dissociated 'mixed' from 'race' in adopting the terms 'mixed/multiple' (Aspinall 2020, 2). Research in both Britain and North America demonstrated that when given the opportunity, a significant number of mixed ethnicity people prefer to identify their mixed origins rather than identification with a single group. Approximately 230,000 individuals avoided the available options in the 1991 Great Britain Census and wrote in a 'mixed' description, while others opted to select several categories by ticking multiple boxes (Aspinall 2003).

'Race' is a socially constructed notion as there is no biological basis for the differences identified by such categorisation (Fryer 1984). However, one could argue that this alone gives it greater saliency. The implications of racial categories are indeed significant and impact every aspect of our lives, from relationships to career progression (Aspinall 2020). Racial categories are used in settings of popular culture, political discourse and 'statistical governmentality' (Foucault 1980). The origin of specific ethnic/racial terms is seen in the process surrounding the census and results in the creation of social categories and group identities. The lived experiences of different communities are both complex and intricate. This added to the role of power and authority in how this terminology comes to be used and provides optimum conditions for the creation of these meanings in everyday dialect. 'These processes are not unidirectional but feed back upon each other, belying the description of terminology for minority and majority ethnic/racial groups as multiple, contested, contentious, dynamic, and slippery', (Aspinall 2020, 2). It is important to note that the use of the term 'minority' serves to place people in a deficit position and the more recently used term 'Global Majority' is gaining significance due to its empowering and positive connotations used as a collective term for people who are Black, Asian or of mixed ethnicity with heritage in the global south. This term is a more positive identifier for those who have previously been labelled as 'ethnic minorities' (Morris 2021). Globally, such groups currently represent approximately eighty percent of the world's population making them the current global majority. With current growth rates, notwithstanding Covid-19 and its emerging variants, the global majority is set to remain so for the foreseeable future (Campbell-Stephens 2020). This positive shift in language is a sign that we are moving closer to the precipice of racial equality. The spaces in which this can be further developed are the key to advancement – education is at the heart of this.

### **Learner agency and education as a space for racial equality?**

Education has long been a key space in the fight for racial equality in Britain. Seen as both a mechanism for social mobility and a means of cultural integration and reproduction, schools (as institutions) and schooling (as a practice) lie at the heart of the pursuit of a successful future for multi-ethnic Britain (Alexander and Arday 2015). However, while there appears to be an acceptance of the principle of equality in education, not all groups are able to approach education in the same way or enjoy comparable experiences. 'Some groups [including] Black students are systematically disadvantaged in the English education system and experience ... academic underachievement' (Peart 2013, 3). Included within this are children of mixed ethnicity. Although, data from the DfE (2017) shows that mixed ethnicity children overall have been achieving above the national average, there are significant variations once these figures are broken down and analysed. Firstly, the data homogenises mixed ethnicity learners and overlooks the impact of heritage on achievement. The statement further belies the fact that some groups of mixed ethnicity children are amongst the lowest achievers in the country. Amongst pupils who identified as mixed White and Black Caribbean, only 48% achieved 5+ A\*-C GCSEs, including English and Maths compared to the national average of 58% (DfE 2017). According to Lewis and Demie (2018) the empirical evidence suggests that whilst mixed ethnicity children are achieving better than national average, the gap is bigger between mixed white and Black Caribbeans and others. Song (2014) suggests that limited teacher awareness and understanding might be due to the lack of information about mixed ethnicity children and young people in school data and suggest that this may be because

they are often categorised as simply Black. Research has highlighted a ‘space’ between the ways in which mixed ethnicity people view themselves and how they are viewed by others, often as ‘either black or mono-racial’ (Dewan 2008, 64). Therefore, if children are categorised as only being Black, their identities become invisible, and while their numbers have grown, it is unsurprising that little is still known about their educational experiences. Consequently, there are significantly limited ways in which their engagement, achievement and indeed agency at school are currently being supported and enriched.

Research has shown that teachers’ perceptions play a transformative role in the experiences of pupils from non-White backgrounds (Dunne et al. 2018; Farrell 2016) and that racism amongst teachers can often be disguised as ‘colourblindness’ (Bhopal and Rhamie 2014; Bonilla-Silva 2002; Lander 2011; Smith and Lander 2012). The colourblind individual claims that race is not a factor when forming an opinion or making a judgement. In the case of teachers, to adopt a colourblind stance is to claim that ‘I only see children, I do not see race’ (Bhopal and Rhamie 2014) and a belief that all children should be treated the same regardless of their race. This attitude denies a child’s position and identity and renders their ethnicity as irrelevant. Previous research (Bonilla-Silva 2002; Lander 2011; Smith and Lander 2012; Bhopal and Rhamie 2014; Dunne et al. 2018) has shown that trainee primary and secondary teachers use colourblindness to ‘cushion their views’ and act as ‘racial shock absorbers’ when discussing issues of racial identity and racism (Bonilla-Silva 2002, 61). Drawing upon the work of Sleeter and Schofield (1986), Castagno (2013) asserts that when examining White teachers’ understandings of race, ethnicity and difference, findings have been largely consistent: White teachers adopt a colourblind stance and ignore institutionalised patterns of racism. Schofield (1986) found that even after focused professional development on multicultural education, White teachers continued to embrace a colourblind perspective thus denying the significance of race, and favour assimilation goals for their students. This viewpoint ‘rests on a colourblind ideology that ignores race and posits that race and racism do not matter in the lives of students and within our educational institutions’ (Castagno 2013, 114). When denying a child’s ethnicity, a teacher dismisses part of their identity and this, in turn, limits their view of the child. To develop learner agency, children must be seen and their identity acknowledged as the foundation for their agency. Teacher awareness and understanding is, therefore, key in the development of agency and the impact of a racialised position must be addressed at the earliest stage.

### **The role of Initial Teacher Education (ITE)**

The teaching profession is a largely White space, and there is a significant underrepresentation of ethnic minorities. In 2019 it was revealed that 85.7% of all teachers identified as White British and 92.7% of headteachers came from White British backgrounds (DfE 2019). This is compared to 0.9% who identified as mixed ethnicity (DfE 2019). Underrepresentation amongst teachers, teachers’ perceptions and a lack of awareness remain a cause for concern (Joseph-Salisbury 2016). Many children suffer discrimination because of their skin colour and are also vulnerable to teachers’ inaccurate perceptions about their home lives (Smith and Lander 2012). Research also concurs that mixed ethnicity pupils are being subjected to low expectations by teachers and that conscious or unconscious stereotypes and assumptions about them can impact negatively on their achievements. Demie and Mclean’s (2015) research concluded that such evidence reinforces serious concerns about the extent to which the education system and schools are meeting the needs of mixed ethnicity children. There is, therefore, a critical need to research the factors that lie behind teachers’ low expectations and the underachievement of mixed ethnicity children and young people.

Time and attention are given to race, ethnicity and equality in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes varies considerably across the UK and issues around racial justice are often conflated with other equality-related concerns under ‘culture and diversity’ titles (Milner and Howard 2013; Sian 2015). Race and ethnicity is not an area that is compulsory or formally taught to student teachers in England (DfE 2013; Sian 2015) and this may leave teachers unsure

how to talk about it; and also perhaps less able to understand their position in dealing with the inequalities that schools, as public institutions, perpetuate (Lander 2014). There are specific Black Studies programmes and dedicated modules on race and equality in social science degrees and race as an aspect of social reality is always a feature of sociology programmes. Therefore, one could argue that Black studies is a subject in its own right with a heritage and tradition. Indeed, the study of race is also a subject as the existence of Critical Race Theory supports. Davies and Crozier (2006) show that 'race' and diversity are often addressed in ITE in relation to students for whom English is an Additional Language (EAL). Significantly, they found that there is little coverage of these issues when students were in predominantly White higher education institutions. 'In England, we continue to struggle to maintain a foothold (at times this feels like a fingernail hold) to introduce new teachers to issues related to "race", ethnicity, and education for the benefit of all children in our schools' (Lander 2014, 2).

Goldberg (2009) explores the idea that there has been a structural shift in racial governance, and terms of race and ethnicity have increasingly evaporated from the educational policy. Indeed, the Macpherson report (1999) appeared to signal a new dawn in tackling racism particularly through education. However, according to Kapoor (2013) since the report was published in 1999, it is possible to identify a trend where the removal of language associated with race is apparent, and indeed the silencing of race was a key element of New Labour's neoliberal agenda post-2001. Discussions of race were replaced by an emphasis on social interaction and adherence to British values. According to Hall (2011) as New Labour's time in power progressed, it became increasingly apparent that they had 'continued where Thatcherism had left off'. There were attempts to promote multiculturalism, but they were couched in a frame of assimilation that increasingly avoided any acknowledgement of racial structures (Kapoor 2013).

Avoidance of the issue of 'race' can be seen in Government legislation, providing clear evidence in support of Kapoor's argument that neoliberal ideology erases race as a social and political reality. The Equality Act (2010) replaced all previous equality legislation, such as the Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000) and the Disability Discrimination Act (2005), and now provides a single source of discrimination law in the UK. An emphasis on generic inequalities and social exclusions replaced specific concern with racism, as demonstrated by the abolition of the Commission for Racial Equality and its replacement by a joint Equalities and Human Rights Commission (Gillborn 2013). A further example of dilution can be seen in the opening paragraph of the Equality Act (2010), where any words relating to race or ethnicity are omitted. There is a cautious vagueness throughout, as illustrated by phrases such as: '... prohibit victimisation in certain circumstances ...' Such language within 'race-neutral' policies arguably serves to deny the existence of racism as a fundamental premise of equality (Bonilla-Silva 2002, 63).

Parallel watered-down language changes may be seen in education policy. In 2010 the Government-driven Ofsted framework removed the requirement to inspect schools for race equality. This was followed in 2012 by the new Teachers' Standards which no longer contained reference to race, racism or ethnicity but referred, instead, to 'cultural diversity' only as part of a 'range of factors which can inhibit pupils' ability to learn' (DfE 2012, 11). When teacher education curricula relegate issues of culture, multiculturalism and diversity into a single course, set aside to fulfil an evidence-based competency checklist, the topics of race and whiteness are rarely explicitly discussed and, when they are, only in a distant and emotionless manner for fear of unraveling deep-seated emotions (Matias 2016). The aim of any ITE programme must be to agitate and educate students to acknowledge social injustices and critically question a neoliberal policy that reinforces White privilege. Initial Teacher Education courses must offer opportunities to confront and explore racism and encourage students to critically examine their positions and the impact this has on their role as teachers. Without this crucial opportunity during their training to realise, confront and examine the impact of such issues on classroom practice, newly qualified teachers will be prevented from acknowledging and dismantling the fact that mixed ethnicity children's opportunities to develop agency will be significantly limited.



## **‘Fundamental British Values’ and the impact on school curricula**

The ‘new’ National Curriculum published in 2014 was seen as an overhaul of the previous document and heralded a return to ‘traditional’ subjects and teaching methods. The new programmes of study sought to overturn decades of more diverse, socially inclusive and multicultural curricula (Alexander and Arday 2015). But what children are taught in schools and what kind of messages the curriculum gives or denies access to affects students’ intellectual development. A profound impact can be felt in their view of themselves, their opportunities to develop agency and their ability to influence their learning and life chances. It is therefore essential to consider the potential impacts of curriculum content on students’ sense and exercise of agency in the classroom, with the ensuing implications for children’s immediate and long-term educational outcomes. An obstacle to raising mixed ethnicity pupils’ achievement at school is the failure of the National Curriculum to adequately reflect the needs of a diverse, multi-ethnic society (Demie and Mclean 2015; Demie 2005). Teachers have little awareness of the needs of mixed ethnicity pupils as Government education reform acts and white papers have failed to explore the specific needs of mixed ethnicity pupils and they are similarly overlooked in the school curriculum and policies. Kapoor (2013) asserts that discussions of race were replaced by an emphasis on social interaction and adherence to British values. It is not just the removal of mention of race and ethnicity from previous policy that is concerning, but the replacement of policy with the only mention of race being something to be frightened of. The only specific references to race or ethnicity within policy are negative and relate to violence, extremism, terrorism and fear. The origin of this shift to fear and the promotion of ‘Britishness’ has had widespread implications on curricula and the messages promoted under the guise of ‘Fundamental British Values’.

### **Ways forward**

The research shows that there are three main areas to be addressed if the UK education system is to better meet the needs of mixed ethnicity learners to improve and develop their agency:

- the recruitment and retention of Black and mixed ethnicity teachers.
- a revision of ITE and statutory requirements of teacher training.
- the use of Fundamental British Values as an opportunity to immerse schools in anti-racism.

Each area requires a systematic review by individual teachers, schools and higher education institutions. Each have a pivotal role in improving the educational experiences and outcomes for this ever growing community. As the evidence suggests, there is an increasing and indeed urgent need to further explore the educational experiences of mixed ethnicity children. Research in this area must address and begin to dismantle the current systems of White privilege and marginalisation. The agency of mixed ethnicity children can only be improved if the UK education system firstly acknowledges that there is a problem. This problem is far reaching and is present in all aspects of the British educational journey.

### **Recruitment and retention of Black and mixed ethnicity teachers**

It is imperative that representation amongst the UK’s teachers is addressed as a priority. Recruitment of more Black and mixed ethnicity teachers is the first but complex step. The Hamilton Commission, recently founded by Formula 1 driver, Lewis Hamilton, found that only 2% of teachers are from Black backgrounds and that 46% of schools in England have no racially diverse teachers at all (Morgan and Scarlet 2021). This finding was also supported by a report produced by UCL Institute of Education (IOE) (Tereshchenko, Mills, and Bradbury 2020). The IOE research team found that Black and Global Majority teachers are concentrated in London schools and tend to work in disadvantaged

schools in and around the city. Many Black and mixed ethnicity pupils across the country do not therefore see themselves represented in their teachers. They miss out on the opportunity to see agency modelled by teachers who look like them, thus rendering an element of inspiration and aspiration missing from their school experiences. Furthermore, all pupils miss out on the diversity of experiences and understanding, and potentially socially just and race-conscious teaching (Joseph-Salisbury, Connelly, and Wangari-Jones 2020).

Developing the recruitment of new teachers from Black and Global Majority groups is important, but this alone will not solve the issue. Retention across the sector remains an issue (Smith 2016). Impeded opportunities for career progression are at the heart of non-White teachers leaving the profession. Those interested in senior promotions feel unfairly passed over for such opportunities, leaving many disillusioned or in pursuit of opportunities outside of the state school sector. The challenges of progression need to be placed on the policy agenda to mitigate the turnover and loss of both early career and experienced teachers from minority ethnic groups (Tereshchenko, Mills, and Bradbury 2020).

The teaching profession as a whole must therefore begin to address the experiences of teachers and identify improvements in the quality of opportunities presented to mixed ethnicity individuals and communities. This begins in schools and local authorities across the country. There are also real opportunities offered in partnerships with universities who provide initial teacher education. Collaboration and joint enterprise could have far a reaching impact on the recruitment and retention of mixed ethnicity teachers and thus the experiences of mixed ethnicity pupils.

### **Revision of ITE and statutory requirements of teacher training**

During training, students should be urged to interrogate particular ways of thinking and deconstruct ideological sets that maintain racial injustices both in and out of the classroom. By engaging with critical thinking, students may begin to interrogate taken for granted ideas, language and practice. In critically reviewing their positionality, pedagogy and use of language, they may seek to deepen or widen understandings, especially when the subject matter creates discomfort (Zembylas 2015). The silences that surround race and ethnicity may represent discomfort, fear or self-protection (Dunne et al. 2018) but can also be seen as spaces for future exploration. This offers ITE an opportunity to begin to deepen students' level of consciousness. When teacher education curricula relegate issues of culture, multiculturalism and diversity into a single course, set aside to fulfil an evidence-based competency checklist, the topics of race and racism are rarely explicitly discussed and, when they are, only in a distant and emotionless manner for fear of unraveling deep-seated emotions (Matias 2016).

Teacher educators must begin with themselves, place their own pedagogy under scrutiny and reflect upon how their thinking, beliefs and pedagogy approaches play a role in (re)producing racism and limiting the opportunity for Black and mixed ethnicity children to develop agency. The development or reconstruction, of a teacher subjectivity that fosters self-reflection on the meaning of values, and wider societal positioning in relation to a collective, is needed in teacher education (Dunne et al. 2018). Reflexivity offers an opportunity to challenge the taken for granted assumptions that are often found in popular discourse and practice. Teacher educators should encourage student-teachers to become aware that knowledge is not standardised or uniformly structured and to view it as fluid, ever changing and linked to experiences (Ladson-Billings 2004). Lanas (2014) refers to Biesta's (2003) use of the Levinasian perspective on education to argue that learning is not about the acquisition of knowledge or truth, but about responding. Responding, and learning about others necessitates learning about ourselves. Student teachers need to learn to be reflexive in their thinking and aware of their gaps in understandings. Then the next step should be to *respond* by seeking further understandings through both learning and experiences. If students can problematise and deconstruct their own attitudes, then they might be in a position

to develop effective race equality practice and subsequently enhance opportunities to develop the agency of their mixed ethnicity learners (Dunne et al. 2018).

## Fundamental British Values – an opportunity to immerse schools in anti-racism

The repetition of the term ‘fundamental British values’ from the Government’s Prevent strategy has weakened Black and Global Majority communities’ sense of belonging in the UK, particularly British Muslim communities (Farrell 2016). Following the ‘Brexit’ vote there have been a reported rise in racist attacks, which have destabilised the already weakened sense of belonging held by non-White communities.

Prior to the vote for the UK to leave the European Union in 2016, the sense of belonging held by Black and Global Majority communities existed in a permanent state of instability. However, it was further destabilised by the UK government’s emphasis on British values and rhetoric in schools and colleges ‘to not undermine’ and ‘actively promote fundamental British values’ (DfE 2014, 3). The murder of George Floyd in 2020 placed racism back into the consciousness of the world. But here in Britain, conversations have reflected the fact that we view it as an American issue – this is not the case. Britain currently sits in the perfect storm for racism to develop (Boyle 2021). The Report of the Commission on Racial and Ethnic Disparities (HMG 2021), popularly referred to as the Sewell Report produced by the Conservative government in 2021, denied the existence of structural racism and referred to the slave trade as ‘the Caribbean experience’. This has served to deny and dismiss the lived experiences of Britain’s Black and mixed ethnicity population. When rhetoric like this exists in popular discourse, children of mixed ethnicity begin to absorb messages and their socially situated capacity to act starts to become disrupted.

To be British is to be diverse (Boyle 2021). Indeed, Britain has had a Black population for centuries. Fryer (1984, 1) points out that, ‘there were Africans in Britain before the English came here’. He goes on to explain this hypothesis by arguing that:

They came here as soldiers in the Roman imperial army that occupied the southern part of our island for three and a half centuries. Among the troops defending Hadrian’s wall in the third century AD was a division of Moors (numerus Maurorum Aurelianorum) named after Marcus Aurelius or a later known official by the same name ... the earliest attested date for this unit’s presence here is 253-8AD. (Fryer 1984, 1)

The Black presence in Britain is long standing and significant (Olusoga 2017; Malik 1996; Ramdin 1987; Solomos and Back 1996) and school curricula must reflect this. Mixed ethnicity children’s heritage and the contribution of non-White communities to British society must be acknowledged and indeed normalised. If mixed ethnicity children are to feel recognised, develop a sense of belonging and subsequently agency, then the diversity of the UK reflected in school curricula is a strong tool. The development of learner agency amongst mixed ethnicity children requires pupils to be ‘seen’, and the contributions of all sides of their heritage acknowledged. Teachers’ attitudes and the content of the curriculum can absolutely achieve this.

## Conclusion

The lived experience of mixed ethnicity communities is intricate and complex, and schooling forms a pivotal part of the journey to developing the sense of self. Therefore, it is a crucial opportunity that can lay the foundations for positive life chances. If Britain is to move on from its colonial past and break the binds of its history of racism and marginalisation of non-White communities, then education must step forward and take the lead. Educators must acknowledge that racism is still present within the education system and that the time to act is now. As the mixed ethnicity community grows, education cannot afford to lose any further time in the fight against racial equality. The development of ITE requirements and recruitment and retention strategies for Black and mixed ethnicity teachers will ensure that all children will benefit from their skills, knowledge and unique lived

experiences. School curricula must normalise the contribution of all aspects of Britain's diverse past and present if mixed ethnicity children's agency is to be enhanced. Learner agency is central to educational success and mixed ethnicity children must experience a sense of belonging within the 'academy' – this task sits firmly with all those involved in education from primary schools, right through to higher education institutions. The mixed ethnicity community brings with it a rich history and in this, there is a strength and an understanding of what society may look like tomorrow. It is to tomorrow education must now turn.

## Note on contributor

Rachel's research focuses on race, racism ethnicity and education. She uses critical race theory as a theoretical framework to examine 'race' inequalities in society, specifically in education. The experiences she had growing up as a child of mixed ethnicity in the 1980s have underpinned Rachel's passion for and commitment to addressing racial inequality in education. She has worked with trainee teachers to examine the impact of race, racism and ethnicity on the educational experiences of children and young people. Rachel encourages her students to develop an understanding of the position of the 'other' and to use their voices to ensure that the teaching profession consistently evolves to meet the needs of the children it serves. More recently, Rachel has worked across the media to provide commentary on societal issues of racism, including the death of George Floyd, the Black Lives Matter movement and racism within the UK.

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