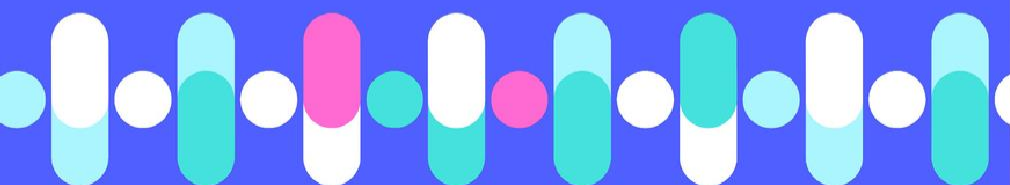# NAVIGATING WHITE SPACES

July 2022

A study of the placement experiences of Black and Global majority students in Nursing and Social Work Practice Placements.

LBU LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF HEALTH

Contents

1. **The Research Team**

Lorraine Agu is of mixed African/ English background, a registered social worker and the Head of Subject at Leeds Beckett University. She has extensive experience in social work education and works strategically with practice partners in the management and delivery of social work education. Lorraine's research interests include race, ethnicity and adoption and issues of inequality within higher education. Petra Amadin is a British national from an African background, a registered social worker within Adult Social Care, Leeds City Council and a Practice Educator. She is an active anti-racist practitioner and has informally supported/mentored social work students who had experienced racism.

Erika Laredo is a White woman of South African heritage. She is a Reader in Youth & Community Work at Leeds Beckett University. Erika is an experienced community qualitative researcher with interests in marginalised communities. Erika has a particular interest in social relationships and critical theory within community work practice. Her current projects include an examination of social prescribing services for young people and exploring how effective youth workers are in supporting young peoples' mental health and well-being.

Fiona Meth is a White, South African registered Nurse and Nurse Lecturer at University of Leeds. She is an experienced Nurse Lecturer with an extensive background in strategic Partnership working to manage clinical placements. Her research interests include health inequalities and underserved communities. Fiona set up the Black and Minority Ethnic student rep Nursing group at Leeds Beckett University.

Mariya Tenebe is a doctoral researcher at Leeds Beckett University, Mariya is of African descent, and undertook the data collection. She has a particular interest in the lived experiences of pressured events and its impact on individuals' well-being. Furthermore, she volunteers as a wellbeing practitioner at Afrikindness, a non-governmental organisation that promotes kindness and addresses mental health issues caused by racial discrimination among children and young adults from black and majority ethnic backgrounds in the UK.

Shirleecia Ward is a Black Caribbean British, is a Lecturer at Leeds Beckett University. She teaches on a range of courses in the School of Health and is an independent end point assessor for the Social Work degree apprenticeship. As a member of the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion committee, she is committed to championing and upholding the rights of those who experience structural oppression. Shirleecia has a keen research interest in the lived experiences of Global Majority children and families and the lived experiences of Children Looked After.

Catherine Waskett is a White British registered nurse and health visitor. She has extensive experience of nurse education and is currently an associate lecturer at The Open University. Catherine's research interests are around improving migrant and minority ethnic communities' access to and experience of healthcare services. She has also been involved in projects focussing on the access to higher education for people who are refugee and asylum seekers and is passionate about widening participation in higher education for marginalised groups.

Mark Williams is a British African Caribbean man. He is a qualified Social Worker and Senior Lecturer at Leeds Beckett University. Mark has extensive experience in social work education and practice placement support, which has led to a development of practice knowledge that considers the concerns in the experience of Black and Global Majority communities in social work education and practice. His research interests have centred on the racialised experiences of BGM in students in health and social care professional academic courses and practice settings. Mark is particularly concerned with the impact of perpetuated racial trauma experienced by BGMs in these settings through micro-aggressions and direct racism.

2. **Executive Summary:**

The research highlights that experiences of racism are pervasive, but students build resilience by learning to negotiate White spaces. This highlights the need to create safe spaces within the curriculum to support open discussions where students feel heard. The project provides an endorsement for a greater level of decolonising work within the curriculum itself, alongside broader conversations with students, academic staff, and practice educators about the importance of developing racial literacy within practice education. The research highlighted the following issues:

- incidences of racism, and at times subtle microaggressions
- intersectionality of racial and gendered experiences
- lack of validation and minimisation of participant feelings and experiences
- the importance of placement preparation
- a need for training for academics and practice educators
- the need to develop a decolonised curriculum

3. Introduction and Background

This research, funded by Leeds Beckett University's Centre for Learning and Teaching, explored the practice placement experiences of Black and Global Majority (BGM) students within Nursing and Social Work professional education and training. Research and anecdotal evidence concerning the experiences of BGM students in nursing and social work highlights experiences of racism, higher levels of failure and reassessment, and the deleterious impact on health and well-being (Jeffery, 2005; Cane and Tedam, 2022). Our motivation to undertake this project grew out of our many years of academic and professional practice and our work with BGM students. As a group of multi-racial research practitioners and academics, it was important to understand our own positionality and personal and professional experiences of racism and the impact of our racialised identities during the research process. We understand the emotional labour involved in hearing the testimonies of BGM students and that these experiences may mirror or contrast with our own racialised experiences.

Before providing a summary of the key findings, we will begin with a note on the contested nature of racialised language and terminology. When we applied for funding in 2019, the acronym B.A.M.E. (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) was widely accepted as an appropriate term for those experiencing racism by virtue of their racialised identities. Without rehearsing the debates about the language, we like many others (Campbell-Stevens, 2020; Abraham, 2022) acknowledge that B.A.M.E is no longer acceptable and is not used by those whom it is intended to describe. Whilst recognising that there is other terminology in use, such as People of Colour, or racialised minorities, we have adopted the term Black and Global Majority as advocated by Campbell-Stevens (2020), which currently best reflects the experiences of those who are racialised as Other.

We also acknowledge the differences in practice education terminology in both nursing and social work and within this research we have adopted the generic term of practice educator.

This report provides an overview of the key findings from our research. Our primary objective is to improve both the experiences and the outcomes of BGM students in practice placements. Consistent with methodologies that are aligned with Critical Race Theory (Hylton, 2012) we began from the premise that although race as a biological concept is not real, processes of racialisation continue to influence and shape the lived reality of people within Britain. In addition professionalism in nursing and social work reflects Whiteness as a set of practices (Jeffrey, 2008). Whiteness does not refer to White people but to a set of cultural practices, and norms that are invisible and unquestioned (Frankenberg,1993). The research adopted a qualitative methodology of interviews and focus groups to give voice to BGM students within professional training settings to better understand their experiences, challenge inequalities and promote social justice.

After our initial reading of the data we drew upon thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) to fully explore and understand participants' experiences. From the rich data gathered, we identified the following five themes as the most important. Within each theme there are inevitably sub-themes and despite presenting these as discrete, there are clear interconnections.

4. **Methods**

We used qualitative methods including focus groups and semi-structured interviews to better understand students' experiences on placement. These were facilitated by a Black African doctoral student. Thematic Analysis was used to understand the participants' lived experiences and to centre the student voice, while applying a systematic analytical approach.

A total of 16 participants were interviewed: 1 male and 16 females;
- 9 Nursing students
- 2 Nursing Professionals
- 3 Social Work Professionals
- 2 Social Work Students
- 2 Nursing Focus Groups
- 1 Social Work Focus Group
- 1 Professional Focus Group, and 2 Individual Interviews

5. The Findings

Theme 1: Navigating White Spaces

a. Professionalism as Whiteness

A major theme throughout this research was participants' feeling that professional education represented White norms of training and professional practice, which they were required to navigate. Participants reported feelings about being outnumbered by White people in a culture that reflects the ideas of 'White professionalism'. Given this context, nursing and social work is perceived as a neutral space, but for BGM participants the space was evidently racialised, and one in which students were frequently confronted by questions of race such as;

> *How many Black people or People of Colour are there going to be? What's the dynamic between the White staff and the Black staff or people of other ethnicities like what's the dynamic between them? … every single time, I'm always quite wary and slightly nervous about the reaction that I could get just because I am Black, and I have walked in the room (**NS8**).*

Another student added

> *I felt left out as far as I'm concerned, but maybe if there was at least one Black nurse (**NS2**).*

Participants discussed the additional barriers and increased emotional labour, which they likened to learning a performative dance enabling them to fit in. One of the participants commented that she is

> *…so used to navigating white spaces that whenever I go onto these placements I'm going in as a different person. I am not going in as I am but as a different persona and that is very exhausting (**NS8**).*

b. Code Switching

Some participants found it hard to present their authentic self, choosing to adopt different personas in order to fit in, a practice often described as code switching.

> *It's been mentally and physically draining, one because I feel like I am doing a lot more than my White counterparts and I feel like I have to put on an extra persona to make the White people feel at ease with me. Like you have to be extra nice, I am already a nice person, but I also have to be extra extra nice just so that I don't get a certain treatment and it's exhausting. It's so exhausting* **(NS8).**

Another participant commented.

> *.. I wasn't being aggressive. I was just being me and saying my opinion and reflecting back on it and looking now from what I know from my studies, it's people's perception of what they want me to be as opposed to what I actually am …* **(SWS1).**

c. Surviving not thriving

In addition to code switching, other navigational strategies were identified, some of which negatively impacted students' experiences.

Sometimes this could be befriending a sympathetic colleague, being silent or becoming invisible. The problems with these strategies are that they are individual and contingent, and ultimately unreliable, leaving participants anxious and unsure much of the time.

> *It's full of anxiety because you want to be sure you have someone who will cover you. Do we need to talk about it, or do you have another question where we will have to talk about our experiences* **(NS7).**

Sometimes these survival strategies are open to misinterpretation and may influence an educator's assessment by which a student may be deemed not to be a team player.

Support systems at university and during placements are crucial to sustaining and promoting positive experiences for BGM students. In their responses, participants discussed how they minimised negative experiences at university and on placement by talking about shared experiences.

> *We only talk about it between ourselves and lament over it, sometimes we just laugh over it, depending on the sensitivity of the issue. Once we finish a lecture, we usually just call ourselves and say did you see what happened today? and then we discuss it. I think that really helps, being able to talk about it freely with people that can easily relate* **(NS5).**

Theme 2 – Not seen or heard

a. Lack of belonging

Participants reported experiences of everyday racism and microaggressions both at placement and in university, these can often lead to feelings of isolation, exclusion and a lack of belonging.

> … *we get cold treatment from our WhatsApp group …I noticed the girls ignore messages on the group once they know you are black but if it's a white person that replies or asks a question, they are so quick to respond* **(NS2).**

These feelings of not being part of the group or belonging has a negative impact on peer and professional relationships and may also be reflected in some of the social activities that can often exclude.

> *…if you don't smoke, don't drink, automatically, you don't fit into the team. If it's not racism against mature black workers, then what is it?* **(SWP1).**

In isolation these experiences can appear to be minor, but it is the cumulative effect of these regular occurrences that contribute to these feelings of isolation.

b. Racist treatment

Participants discussed instances of direct racism as illustrated by the following comment…

I think they will always choose the white students first before you. I had already been given my mentor when I started my first placement, but when I got there I saw the name had been changed. I wasn't given a reason for them to change mentors and my new mentor was not going to be available for a long time. You know, and the white student that got there after I did got the mentor that was originally assigned to me **(NS2).**

Another student said…

If you walk into the ward and you have a strong African accent, you are done. If your accent isn't that strong then you come up in their estimation a little bit ***(NS9).***

In addition to this participants reported feelings of being overly scrutinised and questioned about their professional competence when assessed against White norms and values. Research has shown that this can result in BGM students and staff being over represented in disciplinary procedures (Samuel, 2022).

*…people just see you and judge you. They make very annoying statements like I don't even think she understands English. I don't even think she can comprehend what has been said to her. I don't even think she knows what she's doing…**(NS3).***

Ideas such as this underpinned by pre-judgment and stereotypes result in BGM students having to work harder to disprove these initial assessments.

I then have to show some level of confidence that I can do this. I am experienced in whatever I am doing. They feel like oh she's coming across as being rude or she's coming across as being aggressive or she's coming across like she knows everything **(NP1).**

This may continue beyond qualification as illustrated here…

As a qualified social worker, I went to a nursing home for the first time, to conduct an assessment. Due to my colour there was not even a hello, when I said good morning, the lady said just sign there, you know your way around here, so just go up **(SWP1).**

Although it was not articulated in this study, other research has highlighted experiences of racism from patients and users of services (WWfCSC, 2022).

Theme 3 - Being Colour-blind

The denial of racism is often associated with 'a colour-blind' approach. This approach is characterised by both negating, dismissing, explaining away and minimising participants' experiences.

I said it in the nicest way, but she was in denial and became defensive…
Almost like she was trying to be nice about it but at the end of the day; when I left feeling worse about even opening my mouth because she was like in straight up denial. They don't get it. The only person who will get it is another black person and I don't have any black people to go to **(NS9).**

Participants felt that attempts at raising concerns on placement, and at highlighting things as being specifically related to race, were attributed to practical or logistical issues. As such students were given advice to go back and try to sort things out, which discouraged them from coming forward again for support, as suggested by **NS9** *"...so I said to myself, never again, am I going to open my mouth again".*

Fellow students were also complicit in the denial of racism. Participants were upset that their White colleagues would non-verbally communicate their discomfort during discussions about race, or indeed their outright negation of the concerns voiced by their BGM peers. This included behaviours such as eye rolling, shifting about in their chairs, and being unable to sustain eye contact. Others reported aggression and antagonistic behaviours, all of which closed down any future discussions of race.

There was one lecture that was on race, racism etc. But the discussion in the class was really tense and some of the students tend to talk…I believe you can have a debate with somebody and listen to each other and you talk about your different perspectives. But the moment people start being aggressive over conversations, I lose interest in conversing with them **(NS1).**

Denial is the demonstration of White privilege, White fragility, and 'owning' of White spaces. Participants discussed how in many cases tutors and peers did not see racism or how unjust a situation was…

"Because they will always want to prove they are right, so there is really no point discussing this concern with them." **(NS2).**

The process of investigating claims of racism sent a message of disbelief, which exasperated the participants.

"I realise when I complain of anything, they will start ringing you and disturbing you, asking you to explain more, expand more". **(NS5)**

Denials of racism fail to validate BGM student experiences and exacerbate their feelings of mistrust and insecurity within the support and assessment of their practice experience.

Theme 4: Impact of Racism

Under this theme participants discussed the emotional impact of such denial.

a. Being let down

Having been encouraged by course providers to raise concerns, participants felt let down by the lack of responses, and of not being taken seriously, which creates further harm.

> *So for me, I just feel like it's no point to raise an issue where you know it's just going to hurt and then you are not going to have the answer it's just going to be a scar, just close it … (NS7).*

Another participant added

> *I think at this point we're pretty exhausted with having the same conversations… over and over again… (NS8).*

Other students reported being fearful of getting into trouble and jeopardising the outcome of their practice assessment.

b. Feeling Unsafe

Some students indicated that they would only ask for support when absolutely necessary. The risks associated with complaining left them vulnerable…

> *Yeah for sure, my ethnicity did affect my assessment. I think it can be even worse when you have created problems if you have reported it before (NS7).*

> *Yeah, I have not really thought about discussing it, just because I feel like I just don't have confidence in the fact that there will be something done (NS8).*

The following participant highlighted the difference in raising concerns about the course and taking part in this research.

> *Yeah I can participate in conversations like this because there is strict confidentiality and anonymisation. I know that nobody's name would be mentioned but all these other services provided by the university… I don't trust them. As I said earlier nobody wants to be picked up from the rest of the*

people even after having this conversation today and something happened tomorrow. I'm still telling you that I will not talk. I will not talk because I don't want to be picked on (NS5).

However, one participant acknowledged the benefits of raising concerns.

But yeah, it's difficult to speak up, but speaking up, I know has changed a lot of things in a short while. (NP2).

c. Emotional Labour and Exhaustion

Participants reported examples of exhaustion, depression, and being made to feel their failure was their own, and these feelings lead to a sense of hopelessness.

You can't confront it because if you confront it, it looks like, have you lost your mind? But no I don't. So it happens because it's clear, as plain as black and white that's happened over there, but they look at you like, are you mad? And it's so frustrating. because if you want to engage in it, you will literally get depressed (NS9).

Participants overwhelmingly reported uncertainty about their professional futures, but more immediately about their ability to pass the placement, which clearly affects their performance on placement. The labour exerted in managing their placement impacts on their wider academic performance and this is then reflected in the degree awarding gap.

d. Lack of learning opportunities

Alongside the emotional hurt, participants reported feeling overlooked and being ignored whilst on placement, which they acknowledged as a barrier to their learning.

The first day ... my mentor, her attitude was very unwelcoming. The way she responded was like I am a burden and she let out a deep sigh. I told my colleague that I am not having it, I would go and look for someone else to learn from (NS1).

Another participant added…

For me it was their mannerism because I am not part of them … **(NS2).**

This student felt that she did not receive sufficient direction

… I came last in her priorities. I was not happy with it because I needed to learn as well… But I am just there floating around and when you eventually get a nurse to mentor you that day, she has no time for you **(NS3).**

Theme 5: Curriculum and Placement Preparation

Since the Black Lives Matter campaign there has been a growing momentum to decolonise the curriculum and re-examine the racialised experiences of BGM students. To better understand their experiences, participants were asked to comment broadly on the teaching of race within the course content, and on other race-related experiences.

a. A colonised curriculum and a lack of racial literacy

Most participants expressed concerns that the curricula did not adequately include issues of race and anti-racist practice. This was particularly acute for nursing students who suggested that some lecturers did not have adequate knowledge about different presentations of illness or disease.

…you know you're going to see pink [laughs]. Right, but I'm Black, right? I'm going to come across other darker-skinned people …. some lecturers do say oh by the way, when you come across someone of darker skinned you might expect so and so? But a lot of them don't even think about it **(NSP8).**

Participants were concerned about the implications of the lack of diversity in the teaching and the impact on practice. Even where examples of race were acknowledged it was felt these were tokenistic.

> *There needs to be a bit more conversation about the different care that's delivered in different cultural and personal care needs it's just more conversation and understanding is needed (SWP1).*

Nursing participants were critical about how race and ethnicity were addressed in course content and were concerned that BGM communities, particularly those from African countries, were portrayed negatively.

> *When they want to talk about.. infectious diseases or HIV that they will bring a picture of somebody who is African. ...It's not just Africans that have HIV or those sexually transmitted diseases (NS7).*

Such examples are racial microaggressions that contribute to the continued pathologisation of African communities, which was challenged by some students.

NS2 commented,

> I *always try to challenge it when it is just an assumption, and they don't have hard facts or evidence to back it up. I believe that some of the statements are just negative stereotypes and cannot be generalised without adequate statistics.*

Though it was considered that most tutors *'played it safe'*, participants explained how they corrected tutors that relied on resources that may reinforce racist stereotypes or contain inaccurate information. This carries additional responsibilities for BGM students.

b. White Fragility

Where race is addressed, some participants considered that lecturers were not always confident to do so, and this discomfort reflects a lack of racial literacy in discussing racial issues.

> *… when it comes to race issues, you can feel the anxiety… about answering the question to the point that they almost want to get it over and done with quickly and then they want to move on to the next thing and it doesn't help me because your discomfort becomes my discomfort (NS9)*

One participant expressed their disappointment about the lack of challenge in a session when a White student asked about using the "N-word". They added

That lecturer was a Black woman, why did she not correct that person? It's never ok to use the N-word. This is a social work course …. I would even understand this kind of mindset if I was in a business course but definitely not social work…. it is really not about freedom of speech! **(SWP1).**

This may have reflected a lack of confidence in challenging racism within the classroom, but there is the additional issue of being a Black tutor in a White space.

c. Preparation for Placement

The overwhelming majority of participants felt that issues of race were not discussed as part of the preparation for placement. One participant noted that they undertake role plays on the course;

… and we do have challenging conversations. But it's nothing to prepare you if someone says something about your race, how do you handle that? I didn't know how to challenge that professionally; I was quite anxious as well…. From the university point of view, there was no preparation **(SWP3).**

Some participants expressed concern about experiencing racism on placement and felt that they could have been better prepared for working in a predominantly White community.

When I got the email to say where I was going to be placed because it comes up with X …which is a very white working-class area, and they call it the zoo. So, my initial thought was 'Oh no' this is going to be horrendous. But it couldn't be further from the truth. That's for me to reflect on... is not always to take things at face value, but I think University could have had that conversation **(SWS1).**

A former student suggested that being more explicit at the start of the placement might have enabled them to seek support from their practice educator.

There was no form of induction for the race side of anything. My practice educator said to me… you can come to me whenever but there was no way I could have thought about speaking to her regarding that. She was supportive and all, but I wouldn't have thought about asking her how to deal with such issues (SWP3).

Social work students in particular, highlighted the need for better preparation for placements. However, this theme is threaded throughout the research.

Theme 6: Promoting anti-racism

Participants discussed positive interventions which can be described as examples of anti-racist practice and here they explained the importance of an explicit, anti-racist stance.

During the interview… I definitely asked my interviewer…. What should I do if I experience racism both on placement and at university? …He made me aware that the University doesn't stand for that, and I can always report it to my tutor, or my course leader or anybody else who can help with the issue. So, he definitely made me feel comfortable about reporting it (SWP3).

Promoting an anti-racist culture in the workplace plays an important role in developing confidence in students that racism will be taken seriously. Additionally, participants reported having more positive experiences when paired with a BGM assessor or academic tutor. It was clear from the responses that having a BGM assessor played an important role in making the placement experience

I just had a placement where it was so beautiful because the sister was Black and there were more Black people or people of colour on that Ward, that I was totally relaxed. I got taught so well, I didn't have to fight for any experience. I didn't have to watch what I said. It was the best seven weeks I have ever ha (NS9)

Another commented

Well, I am very happy that my second placement, at least I have seen a lot of Black and minority ethnic nurses. I was really looking out for Black nurses, like

where are the nurses who have gotten jobs already. I thought I will see a few on my first placement, but it was so disappointing! (NS2).

My team is brilliant. They are very anti-racist. So, I mean it's mainly white women do know that work there, but they will challenge things and it's refreshing to see so we could go to a family that are from a trailer and you can clearly see that there are overcrowded in a one-bedroom flat, and they will openly speak about how this Black African family is placed in a place that isn't suitable because the Council feel like they can put them there, and they will challenge it and it's really nice. That you can be so open with people that you inherently think are going to be against you and they're not there. They are absolutely wonderful. It is refreshing, yeah (SWP1).

Concluding comments

The research has provided evidence of racist practices and unconscious biases, which impacted the personal and professional experiences of the BGM students on Nursing and Social Work placements. These illustrate how BGM students can experience multiple and additional challenges that are directly related to their racialised identities. The BGM student experience of professional training is definitely one of Navigating White Spaces.

7. Recommendations

Several recommendations have been developed in response to the findings. These changes are important to improve the practice learning experiences of Black and Global Majority students.

i. One Size does not fit all: There needs to be an overt recognition that there is no one-size fits all approach to addressing the inequalities of Global Majority Students. Organisations must examine how their culture reinforces Whiteness.

ii. Anti-racist/racial literacy training: Academics and practice educators/assessors should all undertake training that focuses on the impact of racism, including institutional, cultural and aversive racisms. This training should include the impact of racial trauma and historical experiences of education.

iii. Develop an anti-racist curriculum: The taught and practical content should address structural impacts of racism and start from the premise that racism still exists. Academic resources must not pathologise those with lived experience of services or promote a disproportionately negative view of global majority cultures.

iv. Supportive reporting structures for students, including independent support for students: Students should be made aware of the support they can access whilst on placement. These processes should be included in module handbooks, and in the placement agreements.

v. Collaboration between placement providers and HEIs: university and placement staff need to work together to review the assessment processes and support provided for students.

vi. Academic/ Link tutors need to take greater responsibility in ensuring that BGM students receive a fair assessment. This will include how issues of race and racism will be addressed within the placement.

vii.   Embedding anti-racist teaching into the practice educator/assessor training: Practice educators should be able to demonstrate anti-racist practice prior to overseeing student placements. Each assessor should be able to identify and understand the impact of their racialised identity on the practice placement process, including when both the student and practice educator are of the same ethnicity.

viii.   Mentorship and Alliance: The students should be provided with mentoring opportunities that specifically address the structural barriers that they may face and programmes of allyship should be identified by the organisations. The burden of this should not fall to the Black and Global majority staff. In addition, the curriculum must develop a programme of allyship for White students and help them to support their BGM peers.

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