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Minoritised teachers' experiences of multiple, intersectional racisms in the school system in England: 'carrying the weight of racism'

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ABSTRACT

This paper recounts the experiences of 24 primary and secondary teachers from a number of minoritised groups in the education system in England, using interview data collected for a project exploring the retention of minority teachers. The teachers' experiences of racism are discussed alongside other intersectional aspects of their identities – including gender, class, accent, and the subject they taught – to emphasise the variety of *racisms* experienced by these teachers. The stories of teachers, both early in their careers and with decades of teaching experience, provide powerful evidence of the cumulative effects of racism experienced by teachers and the continued power of race with the education system in England.

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Introduction

Discussions of issues of racial equality in education in majority white countries frequently include the issue of the recruitment and retention of teachers from minority groups (Dandala 2020; Haque and Elliot 2017; Ingersoll, May, and Collins 2019; Price 2016; Santoro 2015; Walsh and Mc Daid 2019). The lack of minoritised teachers within an education system through low recruitment and/or through poor retention is seen as both indicative of education systems which discriminate on the grounds of race, and also as a cause of low attainment by minoritised students, affected by a lack of role models (Joseph-Salisbury 2020). Within this context, where governments prioritise the recruitment of minority teachers (DfE 2018b) and raise concerns about their retention, listening to the experiences of these teachers becomes vital. This is particularly the case in England, where a government report in 2021 declared that institutional racism is a thing of the past (CRED 2021), despite the fact that 85.7% of all teachers in state-funded schools in England were White British (Gov.uk 2021). Analysis of the schools workforce data found that 26% of the schools have no minority ethnic staff of any kind and 46% of the schools have no teachers from minority ethnic groups (Tereshchenko, Mills, and Bradbury 2020).

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This paper presents a detailed discussion of how minoritised teachers experience the education system in England in both primary (age 5–11) and secondary (age 11–18) schools, and as both early career and more experienced teachers. The data arise from lengthy interviews with 24 teachers who identified as belonging to a minority ethnic group, which were conducted as part of a wider project exploring the retention of minority teachers (see Tereshchenko, Mills, and Bradbury 2020). Using an analysis informed by concepts from Critical Race Theory, we discuss how the teachers experience multiple forms of racism which are often related to other aspects of their intersectional identities. The analysis of these intersectional racisms experienced informs not only our understanding of the issue of teacher retention but more widely provides further evidence of the continued institutional racism embedded within the education system in England, contrary to government pronouncements (CRED 2021).

Teachers' experiences of racism

The experiences of minoritised teachers within schools in England have been researched over several decades, with studies focused on different groups of teachers and different stages of their teaching careers (Powney et al. 2003; Basit et al. 2006; Bush, Glover, and Sood 2006; Cunningham and Hargreaves 2007; Haque and Elliot 2017). A 2017 report by the racial equality organisation Runnymede and a teachers' union, based on a survey of 676 teachers from minority groups, found 'widespread inequality of treatment' for these teachers (Haque and Elliot 2017, 7). Nearly a third (31%) of minority teachers reported that they had 'experienced discrimination in the workplace in the last 12 months' and nearly two-thirds of BME teachers (64%) had experienced 'verbal abuse by pupils' (compared to 51% of white teachers). This has repercussions for teachers' wellbeing, and a majority (64%) reported being unsatisfied with their job. While overall proportions of teachers considering leaving the profession are high, they are even higher for minoritised teachers (75% compared to 64% for white teachers).

As Haque and Elliot's report notes, there is great variation in experience in different places and for teachers from different groups and with different experiences. Research suggests that teachers from minoritised groups who were educated abroad, for example, report more negative experiences of career progression (Bush, Glover, and Sood 2006). As in this paper, some literature in this field takes an intersectional approach in examining the experiences of particular groups of teachers. For example, Wallace (2020) research on Black male middle leaders in London schools found that they experienced 'pressures for Black male teachers to serve in racialized roles as community liaisons, role models, and school-wide disciplinarians, particularly for ethno-racial minority students' (p345). Indeed, as in the US literature discussed below, Black teachers in particular have been the focus of research more than other minority groups, although the teaching workforce in England includes teachers from multiple minority groups.¹

This literature and research from England reveals great similarities with the forms of discrimination and Othering reported in studies internationally, including those on Indigenous teachers' experiences of training and teaching in Canada (Oloo and Kiramba 2019); Black male teachers' experiences in Canada (Martino and Rezai-rashti 2010); and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and other minority ethnic teachers in Australia (Santaro 2015; Burgess 2017). There is an extensive literature from the United

States on the racism experienced by teachers of colour: for example, Bristol & Goings report the experiences of Black male teachers in an urban school district, where participants perceived that their colleagues viewed them as ‘either incompetent or overqualified’ (2019 p 61). Pizarro and Kohli report on minoritised teachers’ ‘cumulative and ongoing experience’ of racism, providing counterstories of individual lived experiences within the predominantly white teaching profession within the US school system (Pizarro and Kohli 2018, 967). They apply Smith (2004) concept of ‘racial battle fatigue’, combined with ideas from Critical Race Theory to these experiences of both overt racism and every-day racial microaggressions. This US-based literature, though based in a different cultural context, provides helpful theoretical tools to understand the racialised nature of the experiences of teachers in England, as we discuss further below.

While our focus here is on serving teachers, there is also some insight to be gained from the research on teacher training and education programmes and minoritised teachers (Wilkins and Lall 2011; Bhopal and Rhamie 2014; Bhopal 2015), especially given many of our participants were in the early stages of their careers and referred to their ‘placements’ (periods of teaching experience in school allocated by the university or other training provider). Callender (2018)’s work on Black male early-career teachers, which identified the negative assumptions and stereotypes they faced but also their agentic responses, is similarly relevant here in our analysis of teachers’ experiences at the beginning of their careers.

A key feature of the findings in this field of research internationally is the significance of the ‘hyper visibility’ of minority teachers within the white spaces of schools (Yancy 2014). Teachers from minority groups – such as Black men in this case – are made hyper visible by a “social space [...] constituted as an enveloping White racial integument that holds together White bodies and that installs those White bodies as familiar and ‘familial’, a social skin that calls to those bodies as wanted and as desirable” (Callender 2020, 1084). Brown’s review of US literature on teacher education similarly concludes that:

the dominant, (dis)embodied and normalized culture of Whiteness that pervades contemporary teacher education, challenges the goal of preparing teachers (of color) to teach in a way that is relevant, critical and humanizing, while also socially and individually transformative
(Brown 2014, 327).

The argument of a culture of Whiteness which impedes the training and education of teachers of colour can also be applied to the experiences of serving teachers, we argue here. As stated, in England 85.7% of all teachers are white (Gov.uk 2021), and many schools have no teachers from minority groups at all. Only 16% of schools have a workforce where there is over 20% minority teachers (Tereshchenko, Mills, and Bradbury 2020). This hyper visibility has significance in the selection of teachers for particular roles, such as the behaviour focus mentioned above, but also anything to do with ‘race’; as one Black woman teacher commented in Haque and Elliot’s report, “‘You become the spokesperson for everything BME’ (Haque and Elliot 2017, 37). This normalised culture of Whiteness is an underlying feature of the school system which emerges from our participants” stories.

A notable feature of the literature is that for the most part, research has not attended to the impact of nuanced inequalities that matter in the professional lives of teachers from different minority backgrounds and intersectional positions. While there is a range of

scholarship on Black male teachers (Maylor 2009; Woodson and Pabon 2016; Bryan and Milton Williams 2017; Thomas and Warren 2017; Bristol 2020; Young and Young 2020), and a special issue on male teachers of colour (Woodson and Bristol 2020), there is a lack of research which examines the experiences of women of colour in teaching, and the intersection of racialised identities with other aspects of teachers' subjectivities. This research begins to address this gap by examining the experiences of minoritised teachers in England.

Theoretical frameworks

The methodology of the study and analysis of our data were guided by concepts from Critical Race Theory (Delgado and Stefancic 2000; Solórzano and Yosso 2002), particularly the notion of racism as endemic and 'normal' as applied to schools in England, and the totalising impact of Whiteness. Here we consider how the education system in England is imbued with Whiteness, by which we mean 'a system of beliefs, practices, and assumptions that constantly centre the interests of White people, especially White elites' (Gillborn 2019, 112). The concept of intersectionality is central to the discussion of our data here, as we attempt to emphasise the multiple forms of racism experienced by minoritised teachers as they relate to other aspects of their identities. As a long-established concept, intersectionality has an extensive lineage dating back to Black feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s, though the term was first used by Kimberle Crenshaw in her Crenshaw (1989) essay 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics' and Crenshaw (1991) paper 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color' (Crenshaw 1989, 1991). Crenshaw's argument that women of colour were forgotten in social movements relating to domestic violence, articulated the key point that identity cannot be understood on one axis (race, gender, sexuality for example) but through the intersection of multiple axes of identity. Since then the term has an extensive history as it has travelled into multiple fields and contexts (Carbado et al. 2013). For our analysis, the central premise of intersectionality is key in understanding how minority teachers understand and experience racism in their schools, that it is the entwinement of race and other aspects that produce specific forms of racism.

Critiques of intersectionality, including scholarship described as post- or 'after' intersectionality, have focused in part on the usefulness of the term in a time of mobile, transnational identities (see Cho 2013; Bilge 2013; Chang and Culp 2002). As Rodriguez et al. (2016) explain in their summary, legal scholarship has questioned the static nature of categorisation within intersectionality, while questions have also been asked about the reductionist and totalising nature of the term. However, we would agree with the position of (Mohanty 2013), that the term and approach it underpins remain highly relevant, if we take into account the history and context of intersectional identities. For example, we cannot treat the positioning of a female minority teacher of Indian origin in the UK the same as we might in the US, given the complex history of colonialism, oppression and later migration between India and the UK. We cannot even assume the context will be the same in different areas of the UK, given the differential patterns of migration in different regions. Intersectional analysis, approached with subtlety and an awareness of the

importance of time and space in the formation of identities (Calás, Ou, and Smircich 2013) remains in our view a respectful and appropriate strategy with the rich qualitative data collected here.

A further point of theoretical relevance is identity performance (Carbado and Gulati 2000a, 2000b, 2001), a concept developed in relation to workplace discrimination which has also been applied elsewhere, including in relation to children in schools (Bradbury 2014). Identity performance emphasises the agency of the individual to perform their intersectional identity in a range of ways, and for discrimination to occur on the basis of this choice. Carbado and Gulati's original example in 'The Fifth Black Woman' describes a Black woman in a law firm who is discriminated against, unlike her Black female colleagues, because of the way she dresses, the food she eats, and who she is associated with. She does not subscribe to 'acceptable' notion of Black femininity which offers 'racial comfort' to her white co-workers, instead performing her identity in ways which do not de-emphasise her Blackness. The argument that the law firm does not discriminate because the other four Black women do not experience racism is dismissed on the basis that her *identity performance* is the reason for her discrimination. The teachers in our study similarly describe their actions and comments as placing them outside of acceptable identity performances that offer 'racial comfort' to white colleagues.

A further conceptual tool we use here, related particularly to the issue of retention, is 'racial battle fatigue', a concept developed by Smith (2004) in relation to Black staff in higher education, and defined as "the psychological, emotional, physiological, energy, and time-related cost of fighting against racism" (Smith, 2009, cited Pizarro and Kohli 2018, 969). This has been applied to the experiences of teachers of colour by Pizarro and Kohli (2018):

Be it micro or macro, racism is not confined to a specific moment in time. Those who endure it carry it with them; and those who challenge it expend a great deal of personal energy, often throughout their professional lives. The constant experience with racism and its ongoing toll can foster doubt, produce anxiety, and be exhausting . . .

(Pizarro and Kohli 2018, 969)

The 'battle fatigue' for minoritised teachers is created by the mental and emotional burden of combatting racism, in addition to the work undertaken by White teachers. This accumulative impact of racism and additional racial burden (Tereshchenko, Mills, and Bradbury 2020) has the effect of wearing teachers down, so that – as we see in the research data in later sections – they simply leave the profession.

The research study

This paper reports on the qualitative data collected as part of the *Retention of teachers from minority ethnic groups in disadvantaged schools* project, funded by the British Academy and Leverhulme Trust (Tereshchenko, Mills, and Bradbury 2020).² The study had two objectives: to investigate patterns of minority ethnic teachers' employment across English schools and to explore the reasons behind low rates of minority teacher retention through the perspectives of teachers from different demographics and professional backgrounds. It is this latter objective – fulfilled through qualitative interviews with 24 teachers – which is our focus here, and in particular their experiences of racism.³

In order to focus on the lived experiences of minoritised teachers, we employed a qualitative, narrative, and semi-structured interview approach, influenced by a critical race methodology framework (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). The framework foregrounds race and racialised experiences in all aspects of the research process, while providing insight into how other social identities and forms of subordination intersect to affect the experiences of minority ethnic teachers in mainstream schools. Including participants from a range of ethnic groups, origins, and professional backgrounds, we were able to explore how teachers are intersectionally marginalised in the education system in complex ways.

The sample of teachers was recruited through existing contacts at our own university and other education departments, through social media, through the National Education Union's Black Teachers' Network, and through further snowballing to additional participants. Our criteria were that participants were or had been teaching recently, and they self-defined as from a minority background. The 24 teachers we interviewed comprised of 11 who had been teaching for 5 years or less, and 13 who had been teaching for more than 5 years; nine who had worked in primary schools and 15 in secondary schools (see Table 1). All but two of the interviews were with serving teachers, although some of the interviewees were doing only limited supply teaching at the time.

The majority of the teachers were female (18 women and 6 men). They self-defined as being from the following ethnic groups, set out in Table 2.

Interviews were organised around a loose structure of open-ended questions about participants' experiences when they were younger, their decision to become a teacher, their teacher education, and their working life as a teacher. Crucially, we allowed teachers to make choices about events, ordering, punctuation, values, and emphasis (Kartch 2017). Though the interviews were planned to last an hour, some lasted up to 90 minutes due to the details provided by the teachers. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, with the lead researcher checking transcripts and then developing an initial list of codes that were structured by the interview themes and relevant literature.

All interviews were undertaken by white researchers, an issue we have reflected on throughout the project.⁴ We recognise the limitations of using white researchers to explore issues of race and racism, and the impact this may have had on the data collected.

Table 1. Respondents according to school type and years of teaching.

School type	Years in service	
	5 years or less (<5)	More than 5 years (5+)
Primary (P)	Charlotte	Laila
	Olivia	Alexis
		Rachel
		Kiara
		Noor
		Naomi
		Mark
		Farid
		Gita
		Amal
Secondary (S)	Mia	Michelle
	James	Simon
	Hannah	Fatima
	Jasmine	
	Jade	
	John	
	Kamu	
	Samantha	
Mariam		

Table 2. Interview participants by ethnic group.

Pseudonym	Self-defined ethnic group
Fatima	Mixed Black African and White
Gita	Indian
Samantha	Black African
Laila	Pakistani
Naomi	Black Caribbean
Kamu	Bangladeshi
Rachel	Black African
John	Black British
Jade	Black Caribbean
Alexis	Black African
Michelle	Mixed Black Caribbean and White
Mark	Black African
Simon	Black African
Amal	Iraqi
Mariam	Black African
Charlotte	Black African
Hannah	Black Caribbean
Farid	Asian
Olivia	Black Caribbean
James	Black British
Noor	Pakistani
Mia	Black British
Kiara	Indian
Jasmine	Mixed Panjabi (India) and Iraqi

As scholars committed to social justice, we continue to reflect upon our own privileges, to listen to the voices of those marginalised by institutional racism and to look for ways in which we can challenge racial inequalities (Bergerson 2003; Patton and Haynes 2020; Swan 2017). As a reflection of this concern, we reported our findings back to the participants through a second stage of workshops, as an attempt at co-construction of findings and recommendations. A follow-up project also involved co-constructing a guide for school leaders with members of the Ethnic Diversity Network of a national teachers' union (Tereshchenko et al. 2022).

Through the analysis stage, codes were developed further through analysis across the research team including our research assistant. Data from the second stage of workshops with participants drew our attention to issues which we may have overlooked, and this fed into the analysis process. While the interview data were incredibly rich and detailed accounts of teachers' lived experiences, here we present only the data relating to experiences of racism and intersectional racisms, focusing on the section of the interviews where teachers reflected on their teaching careers.

Findings

Our findings show that racism – in many forms – is alive and well in schools in the UK, in direct contrast to claims that there is no institutional racism (CRED 2021). Here we present the findings from the interviews dividing into three areas: racism, both overt and covert; intersectional racisms relating to gender and class; and further intersections, relating to accent and subject taught. While this distinction is necessary here, we recognise the overlapping and continual nature of the racisms experienced by our participants, which do not fit neatly into categories.

Cumulative experiences of overt and covert racism in schools

Many of our respondents explained how their teaching careers had been affected by what one participant called ‘carrying the weight of racism’ (Noor), in both overt and covert ways. For some of our participants, experiences of racism began with their teacher education courses: Alexis (Black African, primary) described how the minoritised students on her course were always an afterthought, and the arrangement of placements was ‘very last minute’. For Alexis, experiences of racism continued to be a feature of her 10-year career in primary education: during her first year of teaching, when she was given ‘the most difficult class with high behavioural needs’, she felt the school leadership was unsympathetic and even antagonistic. A move to a private school was initially successful, but her contract was not made permanent and the owner of the school was ‘racist towards me’ and ‘towards another Chinese teacher’. In subsequent roles, she experienced racist remarks from other staff and school leaders, and when she complained, was told to ‘toughen up’, ‘because it’s difficult to prove it’. She had decided to move abroad to teach in a British international school, leaving behind friends and family, in order to make a fresh start, explaining ‘If you’ve gone through a year of racism [...] having to put on a fake smile it’s very demoralising and very tiring’. This is a clear example of ‘racial battle fatigue’ (Smith 2004) leading to a teacher leaving the state education system.

Similarly, Olivia (Black Caribbean, primary) was planning on leaving the profession, although she was early in her career. She explained that she had experienced racism in schools in Bristol, a city in the South West of England, while working as a supply teacher for an agency:

I was sent to really insensitive schools as a supply teacher, really insensitive schools. I was sent to one school outside of Bristol where the children came and looked at the hallway while I was waiting to sign and show my documents. They were like, ‘There’s a brown woman.’ These are six-year-old kids. Those were the kids I was also meant to teach for that whole day. I had to sit with them and have almost circle time about what it meant to be brown. I said, ‘Look, I prefer you to call me Black actually because I’m from African Caribbean heritage.’ I had to actually have that talk with these six- and seven-year olds but again, the agency, I almost felt that they set me up for that fail.

(Olivia)

At other schools her suitability to work was questioned and some turned her away, resulting in her moving back to London. She described that she felt ‘I’m not going to be given a chance’ in this area, and how ‘the racism, for me it was too much’. After moving to a school in London with a high number of minoritised students but a white senior leadership team, she had decided to leave teaching.

Our participants emphasised that racism was a major reason for considering leaving teaching, and often more important than the other challenges faced by teachers such as high workload. As Gita (Indian, secondary) commented, ‘the work wasn’t really the issue for me, I could do the work’. Instead, it was the ‘toxicity that was geared towards me’ that led to her moving schools, including microaggressions targeted at her ethnic identity, her nondominant cultural perspective and the South Asian students in schools where she worked.

A further burden for more senior and more social justice-oriented teachers particularly was the effort involved in challenging the status quo. Noor (Pakistani, primary) described how years of attempts to trouble the racial status quo in school leadership took a profound toll on her mental health, wellbeing, and retention.

They're not changing, it's absolutely structural racism if you raise anything. I decided, for me that I was never going to be a leader. I couldn't fight it on my own and I had to make a different path.

(Noor, Pakistani, primary)

The need to 'fight' the system is an additional task faced by minority teachers – an extra weight to carry, as Noor described – which can also position them as antagonistic to the school leadership. This is the 'wrong' identity performance, in that it emphasises the teachers' difference, rather than offering 'racial comfort' (Carbado and Gulati 2001). For example, Michelle (White and Black Caribbean, secondary) attempted to denounce the racism she observed at one of her schools, but this only led to her moving schools. She described the need to repeatedly challenge the senior leadership team (SLT) about racist assumptions as wearing, and commented that it positioned her as difficult and limited her career progression: 'I was raising a problem and therefore I was the problem. All of a sudden my Blackness became who Michelle is'. Like Michelle, who commented she was seen as 'too assertive' and 'too aggressive', several other teachers felt that articulate, outspoken and/or unionised minority teachers, especially those who had reached higher pay scales, were the most 'feared' and subjected to covert racism. Like the 'Fifth Black Woman' in Carbado and Gulati's (2001) analysis, these teachers suffer discrimination not only because they are Black but because they perform Blackness in a way that was deemed unacceptable with a culture of Whiteness. Nonetheless, having to be alert to and navigate racial boundaries in the workplace expends considerable psychological energy even on the part of teachers who avoid confrontation as argued elsewhere (Bristol and Goings 2019).

These teachers' experiences of overt and covert racism – from their initial training and into their careers – often combined with feeling that their ways of being as a teacher (for example, defending students of colour) rendered them unacceptable by white leadership teams, contributed to their 'racial battle fatigue' (Smith 2004).

Intersectional racisms relating to gender and class

As identified in the research literature focused on Black male teachers (Bristol and Goings 2019; Callender 2020; Wallace 2020; Young and Young 2020) gender and 'race' intersect in particular ways for teachers in schools. The Black male participants in our study identified the same issue of being pushed into pastoral and behaviour roles noted by Wallace (2020) in London schools. John explained:

I've noticed that black men as a whole, or ethnic minority men, sorry, as a whole, definitely get pigeon-holed into working with those style of children, even if that's not what they want to do. Obviously I've been in schools for a long time so I know quite a few ethnic minority male teachers. One of them that I'm quite close with a year or two ago, I was really annoyed at the fact that he was consistently getting challenging classes year after year and actually wanted an 'easier' class where he could really focus on the academia of the class. He feels like he wasn't getting the chance to teach in that kind of setting. He's got a new job [. . .] I've seen how it can create a pressure on ethnic minority male teachers.

(John)

This assumption that Black men are better able to deal with behaviour issues, particularly those relating to Black boys, is based on a racialised narrative about role models (Callender 2020), and particularly the stereotype of a strong aggressive Black man who student will fear. This is a form of gendered racism, which fails to recognise the diversity of possibilities for Black men (Woodson and Pabon 2016) and further indication of the hypervisibility of Black men in the white space of teaching (Yancy 2014), which leads to them being ‘pigeon-holed’, in John’s words. Their choices, and careers, are limited by these racist and gendered assumptions.

A further important intersection was with issues of class and social status. This was seen as having an impact on getting a job and being promoted. As our participant Farid, an Asian science teacher, noted, ‘the British [class] culture is still very strong, especially in the education sector’. Farid argued that his working-class background and lack of ‘cultural capital’ had limited his career progression and put him at a disadvantage:

So maybe when they look at the senior leadership team in education, they’re looking for people who speak a certain way. Your English might be great but if you don’t sound a certain way, then they feel like you should not be put in front of people in public, in front of parents.
(Farid)

Farid is held back, in his view, by the way he speaks, which means the school does not want him to engage with parents. He made links between this issue and his background in East London with parents who did not speak English well, though he was also reflective about the relative importance of his racial background and his class background in preventing access to promotion.

However, the experiences of the Black participants who saw themselves as middle-class revealed the relative importance of race over class, as they recounted the foregrounding of their racial status over their social status. Jade, a Black Caribbean secondary teacher said, ‘It didn’t matter if I was middle class if no one knew who I was. I’m a Black woman’. For Alexis, a primary teacher, her middle-class upbringing resulted in raised eyebrows and remarks based on how ‘well spoken’ or ‘well-travelled’ she was, but she still felt (and indeed was told) that she did not fit in.

Overall, we see how class and race intersections work in complex ways for these teachers, but particularly appear to disadvantage Black teachers. As Alexis commented, ‘It’s a different playing field for Black teachers’.

Further intersections, and privileges

Beyond the ‘big three’ intersections of ‘race’, class, and gender, the data revealed examples of intersectional racisms based on further axes of identity, including accent, migration status, and the subject taught. We also found cases where participants who defined as of mixed heritage recognised the privileges associated with their relative Whiteness, but also their movement back into minority status when they raised issues of race.

Like Farid above who thought his working-class accent was limiting his progress, Mark, a Black African primary teacher, commented that his accent marked him out as Other in an additional way because he was seen as a ‘foreigner’ as well as a Black male:

I'm not sure if it's conscious bias or unconscious bias. My accent really throws [people, but] I honestly can't be bothered to change, that's hard work and as a foreigner, I get it three ways. I'm Black, I'm a male, I'm a foreigner, in a primary school, which is like 'this is not going to go down well'. Initially I thought it was my qualifications, maybe I wasn't qualified enough, so I did the Masters. I thought, okay the Masters, maybe that's a leg up, no it's not enough. I thought I'll do the doctorate, well I'm not sure that's going to be enough to be honest, I doubt it.

(Mark, Black African, primary)

Intersectional marginalisation on the grounds of 'race', gender, accent and 'foreign' status prevents this highly experienced teacher from converting his additional cultural and academic capital into a promotion. Mark also shows evidence of 'racial battle fatigue', in that he 'doubts' even doing a doctorate will help him to progress.

A further intersection which was a site of racist assumptions was that between ethnic group and the subject that secondary teachers taught – a factor which we can see as a component of their identity performance (Carbado and Gulati 2001). Long-standing associations between certain groups and particular areas of study played out in teachers' experiences, in that where teachers' choice of subject did not cohere with these stereotypes, they were treated more negatively. For example, Gita, an Indian woman who taught secondary English, felt this combination was unacceptable to her colleagues:

The thing is: I'm walking into a classroom as an English teacher with an Indian identity, you know. That kind of throws up quite a few problems, doesn't it?

(Gita)

Gita implies that the history of colonialism and the issue of language mean that she cannot be seen as an adequate keeper of knowledge about English as a subject; being Indian and a teacher may be intelligible if she is in certain departments, but not English. Thus, it may not be only that she is Indian that results in discrimination, but that she is an Indian *English* teacher. In contrast, Kamu, a science teacher of a Bangladeshi background, felt he was respected and accommodated as the only minority Muslim teacher in his all-white working-class school in Essex. He received a rapid promotion with teaching and learning responsibilities in his first year, suggesting an advantage for teachers whose racialised and religious identity coheres with stereotypes about subject interest. Similarly to Gita, one of the Black African participants (not named to ensure anonymity) noted that they encountered surprised remarks in relation to choosing maths education for their part-time doctoral thesis, such as 'Oh, I thought you did something else really'. For those teachers whose choice of subject – a part of their identity performance – did not cohere with stereotypes, countering such microaggressions and other forms of racism formed an additional burden.

Our participants from 'mixed' backgrounds also drew attention to the complexities of racialised identity for teachers: the two teachers who described themselves as Mixed White and Black both stated that they had different experiences within schools than their darker skinned colleagues, based on the cultural meanings attached to skin colour. This issue of colourism/colorism, discussed mainly in US literature (Monroe 2013; Hunter 2016), affected these teachers' progression: Fatima (Mixed Black African and White, secondary) commented that she thought she was promoted at the beginning of her career, because 'I think, complexion wise, I don't think I was perceived as a threat'.

Michelle, an SLT member in a secondary school, emphasised that her lighter skin colour afforded her opportunities and helped to reduce others' perception of her as threatening. However, Michelle also described a number of setbacks in her pursuit of leadership opportunities, as well as her difficult position of having to navigate and accommodate the white fragility of other school leaders – for example, she explained that she cannot be 'all about Blackness' in her pastoral role. Thus, although these teachers felt they were afforded certain privileges of Whiteness due to their Mixed identities, they also experienced the need to adapt their behaviour to afford white colleagues 'racial comfort' (Carbado and Gulati 2001), for example by not focusing on issues of race exclusively in pastoral work. Again, this point speaks to the issue of needing to engage in constant evaluations of how to behave in ways which allow these minoritised teachers to be accepted within a largely white environment, resulting in a cumulatively erosive effect on teachers as individuals, and on their views of the profession.

Conclusion

We argue here that these teachers' testimonies, across different sectors and levels of experience, and based on a range of racialised identities, demonstrate the continued significance of 'race' within the education system in England. Importantly, the racism examined in policy (Gillborn 2020; Bradbury 2020) is also reflected in everyday practices and attitudes within schools. While we do not use data from all the teachers here, the data presented are representative of the wider sample of 24 teachers.

Schools suffer a problem with the retention of teachers overall (DfE 2018a), but minoritised teachers leave the profession, or consider leaving, because they experience racism, in multiple forms. These may be based on their racialised identity alone – as we saw in the case of Olivia, who experienced racism in a new area of England – or linked to their intersectional identities, relating to class, gender, and accent, for example. Elements of their identity performance can also be a source of racism, such as when teachers' choice of subject affected their experiences of racism in education, or some teachers were positioned as antagonistic for challenging racism. Those teachers who had Mixed identities were afforded some privileges associated with Whiteness, but similarly had to engage in the 'battle' of navigating white spaces. As Gillborn argues, 'Whiteness does not exist merely as an element in the system – it is not some ghost in the machine' (Gillborn 2020, 131); for these teachers, it remains a powerful force in education which excludes them in multiple, complex ways.

As we have discussed elsewhere (Tereshchenko, Mills, and Bradbury 2020), teachers' decisions to leave the profession are related to the racial literacy of the senior leadership team, career progression, and pupil and staff demographics, but at the heart of many of these aspects of our findings lies racism. The continued constitution of teachers that are racialised as belonging to a minority ethnic group as Other, and as less competent, effective, or collaborative is part of a broader system in which Whiteness dominates and racial justice is only ever a minor concern (Gillborn 2018). Recent attempts to deny the presence of institutional racism by the national government in England further enforce this denial of the importance of race in education.

Both in England and internationally, attempts to improve teacher retention and to diversify school leadership need to begin with a fundamental recognition of the experiences of minoritised teachers, particularly the multiple, intersectional racisms to which they are subject, and a commitment to dismantling the prejudices and discrimination embedded within education. Our contribution here is to provide examples of the experiences of intersectional racisms among teachers of colour from a range of groups and sectors, and to emphasise the multiplicity of ways in which minoritised teachers can be marginalised.

Following this research project, the team undertook further co-construction work with the Ethnic Diversity Network of a national school leaders' union (ASCL), to produce a document for headteachers and principals that made clear recommendations based on our data and their expertise as minoritised school leaders (Tereshchenko et al. 2022). These recommendations, which were accompanied by specific themes and suggestions from the Ethnic Diversity Network on how to put them into practice, were:

- (1) Be deliberate and proactive in enabling dialogue around race, diversity, and equity in school
- (2) Be mindful of how teachers are deployed and promoted in your school
- (3) Be willing to recognise and tackle 'whiteness' as a cultural norm in schools

It is proactive work by school leaders, we argue, that will have the most impact on reducing the experiences of racism discussed here.

Notes

1. 15% of the 508,087 teachers in England describe themselves as belonging to a 'minority ethnic group' according to government figures, with the largest group being Asian or Asian British (n = 22,629) (UK Government 2021).
2. Note that the term BAME – meaning Black and Minority Ethnic or Black, Asian, and minority ethnic – is used here in the project title but not in our analysis. We use the term 'minoritised' here to emphasise the culturally and historically contingent nature of being in a minority, and where possible use participants' self-defined identity to avoid the homogenising effects of terms such as BAME. Where necessary, government data which use the BAME definition are referred to.
3. The first objective to map the employment of minoritised teachers was fulfilled through quantitative analysis, as presented in Tereshchenko, Mills, and Bradbury (2020).
4. The core research team was made up of a White European woman, a White Australian man, a White British woman due to institutional issues which are indicative of the level of institutional racism in higher education. Our research assistant was Hispanic.

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