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Citation

Pearce, Sarah. 2018. 'It was the small things': Using the concept of racial microaggressions as a tool for talking to new teachers about racism. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 79, pp. 83-92. ISSN 0742-051X [Article]

Persistent URL

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‘It was the small things’: using the concept of racial microaggressions as a tool for talking to new teachers about racism

Abstract

This article discusses the concept of racial microaggressions as tool for supporting teachers to understand and challenge racism in schools. Addressing racism has become less of a priority in initial teacher training, and in schools, yet many subtle acts of racism continue to occur. The article adapts Kohli and Solorzano’s (2012) model for identifying microaggressions, understanding their effects and exploring possible responses to them, drawing on interviews with three new teachers to illustrate each stage. Incorporated into their training, this model may empower new teachers to challenge the subtle acts of racism they have either experienced or witnessed, but have hitherto been unable to name.

Word count: 6775

Introduction

In recent years, the time spent on race and other aspects of social equality on Initial Teacher Education courses in England has shrunk dramatically, as more students are gaining their teaching qualification largely or entirely in schools, and shortened university courses increasingly focus on subject knowledge rather than social policy (Hick et al 2011). This can be seen as part of a wider colourblind approach to education, which is also evident in Australia (Srinivasan and Cruz, 2015), Canada (Fleras, 2014) and the USA (Picower and Mayorga, 2015).

I am a white woman, whose work in multi-ethnic primary schools, research on critical whiteness, and many years as a teacher educator have all enabled me to begin to understand processes of racialization- and how I am daily implicated in them. But the work of supporting students to deepen their understanding of racism has become harder in an increasingly deracialised context. Each year I have similar conversations with beginning teachers, who resist using the term racism when they talk about schools. Both white and minority ethnic teachers struggle with this, but, importantly, they do so in different ways. The term may be unhelpful in enabling many white students to

understand systemic inequalities, when for them racism is often defined as solely or mainly a conscious individual act (e.g. Yancy, 2014). But is also often unhelpful to those students who have experienced racism because, while they often have a greater awareness of its continued prevalence, and its complex nature, the subtle encounters that take place on a daily basis in highly regulated spaces like schools and universities appear to them to be too insubstantial to be labelled racism. Kohli (2009) and Brown (2014) both argue that minority ethnic student teachers are more likely to have experienced racism, but this does not always mean they are equipped to deal with it in their professional lives. There is a significant body of research on white teachers' attitudes to race, and a growing body of work on minority ethnic teachers' attitudes. This article seeks to contribute to the less well researched area of how to work effectively with *both* groups at the same time. There is a need to give both white and minority ethnic teachers the conceptual tools they need to identify and thereby challenge the small but devastating acts that they continue to encounter or witness, but currently feel unable to name. The article explores the possibility that teaching the concept of racial microaggressions may both support the development of the complex understanding of racism that is needed and empower teachers to address it.

Defining Racial Microaggressions

Chester Pierce, an African American psychiatrist, is credited with coining the term 'microaggressions' in the 1970s. He considered that they were 'the chief vehicle for proracist behaviours' and described them as 'subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are 'put downs' of blacks by offenders.' (Pierce et al, 1978, 66). More recently, Kohli and Solarzano (2012, 447) have defined them as 'subtle verbal and non-verbal insults/assaults directed toward People of Color, often carried out automatically or unconsciously'. They draw attention to the importance of the cumulative nature of the pain caused: one incident means little, but the same insult experienced repeatedly over time takes its toll.

Examples of racial microaggressions may be repeatedly mispronouncing or reassigning someone's name; asking someone where they are *really* from; assuming a black teacher must be the teaching assistant; having all questions directed at a more junior, white, colleague, though it has been made clear who is in charge. Each of these incidents was experienced by one of my students this year.

Pierce, working in the USA in the 1960s and 70s, focused his attention on African Americans, and argued that in order to protect themselves against the effects of repeated insults, they should be taught to recognise them as microaggressions and take 'appropriate action'. (Pierce, 1974, 280). Paying attention to the importance of developing a vocabulary with which to talk about those aspects of structural inequality that had hitherto gone unnamed was taken up as an aspect of the work of Critical Race Theory by Crenshaw (1996) and the term is widely used among Critical Race scholars.

It is not that an understanding of the subtle and ever-changing nature of racism is new. Philomena Essed used the term 'everyday racism' (Essed, 1991, 2002) to describe these often nebulous interactions, which take their psychological toll on victims. She provides a clear framework for analysing such encounters, based on three strands:

The *marginalisation* of those identified as racially or ethnically different; the *problematization* of other cultures and identities; and symbolic or physical *repression* of (potential) resistance through humiliation or violence.' (Essed, 2002, 207 italics in original)

Essed also shares with Critical Race scholars a belief in the importance of hearing and validating the experiences of victims of racism. But two things make the term microaggressions potentially more powerful than the term everyday racism. First, the importance of vocabulary: the term appears to convey more vividly the 'death by a thousand cuts' nature of this form of racism. Second, it is already gaining currency in popular discourse and the media beyond its origins in the USA. Energetic blogs exist inviting people to post stories of microaggressions, and the term is becoming more common in newspapers (e.g. Mangan, 2013) and professional reports (e.g. Haque and Elliott, 2017)

One issue that many student teachers struggle with is the relationship between individual racism and institutional racism (Lander, 2011; Yancy, 2014). Here again I suggest that Essed's theorization is the clearest. She argues that there is no such thing as individual racism, since 'racism is by definition the expression or activation of group power... specific practices are by definition racist only when they activate existing structural racial inequality in the system.' (Essed, 1991, 39).

The term racial microaggression may be a way to enable students to understand how an individual instance of racism, however subtle, activates existing structural inequality.

Black and Minority Ethnic Students' Perceptions of Racism

Pierce (1970) advocated that in challenging microaggressions, the first step is to identify the incident and the next is to 'take appropriate action'. Kohli and Solorzano (2012) also advocate a close consideration of the *responses* to the incidents, but suggest an additional element, analysing the *effects* of microaggressions. Perez Huber and Kohli (2014) define responses as the strategies adopted to deal with microaggressions, and effects as their psychological and physiological impact. In organising the review of the literature on black and minority ethnic students' perceptions of racism I adopt this three part framework.

Identifying Microaggressions

Many studies of the experiences of minority ethnic students have uncovered instances of overt and covert racism during their initial teacher education, both in the UK (e.g. Roberts et al 2002, Hoodless, 2004; Basit et al 2006), and the USA (Gomez, et al 2008; Brown, 2014; Kohli, 2014). Bhopal (2015) notes few instances of overt racism in her recent study, but found many students feeling obliged to focus on their self-presentation, to ward off negative stereotypes. Examples of the subtle, sometimes ambiguous, interactions students reported in these studies include being offered less support and being 'put down' by mentors (Jones et al 1997), having their language competency questioned, and being offered unfavourable placements (Basit et al 2006). Being othered by fellow students (Gomez et al 2008), and being expected to be experts on multiculturalism (Hoodless 2004) are also frequently cited. Hobson et al's (2009) study of trainee teachers in the UK found teachers from minority ethnic groups less likely to report positive relationships with teacher mentors than their white peers, and less likely to report enjoying their work, and that these issues persisted into their early careers.

Effects of Microaggressions

Jones et al (1997, 139) quote one student teacher saying, 'there's not a day when I don't come across things that I know it's because I'm black. It's every day. It's every single day.' The weariness suggested by this choice of words suggests that it may be that they were experiencing 'racial battle fatigue' (Smith, 2004), a sense that one is tired of constantly having to deal with racist attitudes. Other studies highlight the fear some felt of being exposed to racism in the future, based on their experiences in the past (Hoodless 2004). Several studies reported some student teachers feeling uncomfortable or unwelcome on school placements, to a much greater extent than their white peers. (Jones et al 1997; Hoodless, 2004; Basit et al 2007; Gomez et al 2008).

In a wider study, Sue et al (2008, 336) found those who had experienced racial microaggressions reporting feelings of 'anger, frustration, doubt, guilt or sadness' for weeks months or even years. Ahmed (2012, 155-6) suggests another possible effect of these ambiguous encounters: 'I am never sure when x happens, whether x is about racism... Racism creates paranoia; that's what racism does.' Each of these effects may be considered forms of internalised racism, which Perez Huber, Johnson and Kohli, (2006) argue has a number of negative psychological effects, including damaging self-esteem and academic performance, and distorting attitudes to family and community.

Responses to Microaggressions

Some students appeared to accept a role in teaching others about their backgrounds (Cole and Stuart, 2005), acting as positive role models (Bhopal, 2015), or confounding stereotypes (Roberts 2007). Wilkins and Lal (2011) found some teachers feeling that they had to be more resilient than their white counterparts. But a more common response to a negative racial climate was to withdraw from it in some way. Basit et al (2007) report that though none of the students who withdrew from their training stated that racism was the cause, they suggest that a negative atmosphere was a factor. Kohli (2016) defines this phenomenon as 'teacher push out', highlighting the role of a hostile climate in teachers' decisions to leave. Hoodless (2004) found some teachers had taken the decision not to risk working in all white areas. For others, the 'push out' was subtler: Basit et al (2007) and Pearce (2012) both reported students avoiding other teachers in the school during breaks.

The commonest response among new teachers to all but the most overt forms of racism appears to be to denial of its existence. A frequent finding is that while the students readily identified negative or unequal treatment, they were reluctant to describe this mistreatment as racism (e.g. Bhopal, 2015; Basit et al, 2007; Wilkins and Lal, 2011). Jones, et al (1997) suggest that this is sometimes a strategic approach, quoting one participant stating that calling it a ‘personality clash’ was the only way in which she could hope that the racism she encountered might be addressed. Ahmed (2012, 162) offers a way to understand this reticence as a self-protection:

‘People of color often make strategic decisions *not* to use the language of racism. If you already pose a problem, or appear ‘out of place’ in the institutions of whiteness, there can be good reasons not to exercise what is heard as a threatening or aggressive vocabulary.’

In a large study of subtle racist incidents in all walks of life, Camara and Orbe (2010) found a range of responses, including all of those identified above, but the commonest, was an immediate and assertive response to the perpetrator. Call-Cummings and Martinez’s (2017, 568) study offers an insight into why this response was not taken up by student teachers in the studies discussed above. It focuses on a group of high school students’ reactions to the microaggressions they experienced, and notes their inclination to find ways to ‘navigate’ a way through their unfair treatment, to blame themselves, or to give it another name, rather than seeking to challenge their teachers. It may be that the powerlessness experienced by new and trainee teachers in school similarly affects how assertive they are able to be. Nevertheless, it is important to note that both withdrawal and denial of microaggressions support the continued existence of racialized structures and systems., and ways to support teachers to challenge them are therefore urgently needed.

Methods

The data presented below are drawn from a larger longitudinal study exploring what factors support or hinder teachers in seeking to address ethnic diversity and race equality in their classrooms. Nine final year student teachers were initially recruited through their involvement in a module led by the author. Seven of the participants were white British women, one had a Somali heritage and one an African-Caribbean

background. They were interviewed twice that year, and annually thereafter. Individual semi-structured interviews were held in the author's office and lasted around 60 minutes. The interviews were influenced by narrative methods (e.g. Connelly and Clandinin 2000), each participant being encouraged to 'pick up the story' of their engagement with race issues where they left off the previous year. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed by the author verbatim. The project followed ethical guidelines set out by the British Educational Research Association (2011) and the authors' institution.

As I immersed myself in the interview data, it was obvious that subtle (and less subtle) acts of racism formed a significant part of the two minority ethnic teachers' experiences, but were far less prominent in the white teachers' accounts, though issues of race and difference were the explicit focus of each interview. In seeking to explore this further, and drawing on Kohli and Solorzano's (2012) definition, I identified all instances of microaggressions mentioned in the interviews. Alongside the two minority ethnic teachers in the group, Farida and Natalie, one white teacher, Susan, also reported having witnessed two subtle acts of racism.

While the data from the study as a whole was initially analysed thematically, the analysis for this paper drew on a life history approach, identifying critical incidents in each participant's story to create a narrative account. This approach conveys the women's subjective understanding of their experiences, and the cumulative effect of those experiences more clearly. As with all narrative methods, it also makes it possible to illuminate the link between the personal and the social (Erben, 1998). Each of the incidents described by the women is structured using Kohli and Solorzano's (2012) three part framework: identifying the incident, analysing its effect on the person who experienced it, and their response to it.

Before moving to the accounts of the three participants, it should be noted that other members of the group showed awareness of overt forms of racism: several identified and some challenged the name calling and stereotyping they witnessed in school (Pearce, 2014). But they did not report any more nebulous incidents, and Susan's account mentions only two. This may be because they did not notice them, or because

they did not recognize them as racism. The imbalance between the accounts of the minority ethnic and white teachers underlines the need for the work this article seeks to contribute to, in naming these incidents as racism, in order to empower teachers to identify and thereby challenge them as they do more overt aggressive acts.

Applying the Framework

Farida

Farida described herself as ‘Muslim first, British second, Somali third’. She was in her twenties, and had grown up in a mainly Bangladeshi neighbourhood in inner London. She wore a hijab, a scarf covering her head, hair and neck. In each of her three placements during her training she reported that she had been made to feel ‘other’ by the mainly white teaching staff, though she was comfortable in the classroom with the children, and with the more ethnically mixed team of teaching assistants.

At interview during her first year in teaching she described her first meeting with one of the governors of the school, an older white man. He asked her if she was an asylum seeker, probed whether children had left her class as a result of her taking over as their teacher, and asked why a Muslim teacher wanted to teach in a Church of England school. Her response to the third question was, ‘I’m not a Muslim teacher.’ She called him,

The plantation owner, a man of his time. I feel he reflects society- you have people up there in control who do have these views and these perceptions.

There’s nothing you can do: you need them. You have to play the game.

The questions asked by the Governor can be identified as microaggressions in that they problematise her Muslim identity (Essed, 1991), first linking it, groundlessly, to another identity which is negatively perceived, then assuming she would be unpopular among families at the school, and finally suggesting her faith is problematic there. In terms of the effect this encounter had on Farida, she is clearly aware that racism was in play. She calls him ‘the plantation owner’, a lightly veiled reference to his racism, but also to the power difference between the two of them. There is a sense of anger and injustice, but

also of powerlessness here. Turning to her response, like other new teachers, her focus is on navigating a way through these injustices, rather than challenging them: 'you have to play the game'. However, Farida's reaction to the Governor's final question suggests she did feel that a more assertive response was possible, like those in Camara and Orbe's (2010) study. Her reply to his question about why a Muslim teacher would want to work at a Church of England school, was: 'I am not a Muslim teacher'. She rejects his emphasis on her Muslim identity. She sees herself as a teacher who is a Muslim: her religious faith is an aspect but not the whole of her identity. Nevertheless, it must be noted that Farida did not report the Governor's remarks to the school or the local authority.

At the school most of the pupils came from African or African-Caribbean backgrounds, and most of the teachers were white. In reply to my question about her relationships with her colleagues, she said:

I was getting a bit paranoid, because I was thinking, you know what, ever since I left sixth form, ever since I got into education, every school that I've been to, there's been that division. And I remember trying to make you understand that it wasn't something you could pinpoint. It was a feeling, it was something you could feel...I just do not feel totally relaxed, and I feel that it's an effort...I was beginning to think, 'is this me?' Is this me just being paranoid, thinking that something's there when it's not really. And I was thinking is it *my* lack of experiences, is it *my* lack of being around white people?

Farida's reply offers several insights into how subtle microaggressions can be, and their cumulative effects. She describes the 'division' between white and minority ethnic people as having been a recurring feature of her life in education, but that it is one that is impossible to identify unambiguously. She describes interactions with her white colleagues as an effort, an example of what Smith (2004) has called battle fatigue. Like Ahmed (2012) and some of the participants in Sue et al's (2008) study, she doubts herself, wondering if she is just paranoid, a form of internalized racism. She blames herself, asking if the problem is her narrow range of experience, though she has been educated among multi-ethnic groups of peers and in white dominated institutions all her life.

The following year she described the way in which the staff team had split into factions over the course of the year:

It was, 'this is what our people do, we like to go to the pub every Friday night and get drunk and dance on tables. But, ok, you're a Muslim, you don't go to pubs. It doesn't matter, we'll go anyway'. That kind of thing... 'OK, we've got to put a display up and I'll help you in your class and you can help me in my class', but I was never involved in that... And it's kind of unspoken.

Here Farida describes microaggressions which relate to being marginalised rather than problematised (Essed, 1991). Her colleagues do not make an effort to include her in their social activities, and the routine support that colleagues can normally expect is not offered to her. Experiences of being isolated (Basit et al, 2007) and not receiving the same support as other colleagues (Jones, 1997) are similar to those mentioned by student teachers in previous research. At interview I asked whether she thought racism played a part in these difficulties:

Farida: It's very hard to say, you can't say they were being racist. What was racist about their acts? You know?

author: But do you feel...?

Farida: I *do* feel, I do feel alienated, I was being isolated because I was different, because I was the Other. You know, I don't feel it was because I was black, but I was the Other. I don't have that shared...

author: Cultural rather than racial..?

Farida: Yeah. You know? It's, it was the small things...it's difficult to say. I wouldn't call it racist, but it wasn't accidental.

Once again, Farida refuses to use the term racism, but is clear that the negative treatment she received was because she was seen as other. She articulates the effect of this treatment as a feeling of alienation and isolation. Her response to the situation was to leave: she resigned from the school after two years.

The following year, I asked her again whether she regarded what she had experienced the previous year as racism:

Whenever you ask me this question...for you to say racial, or cultural elements. For me I just think of like the extreme. Right? I would say, yeah, they never warmed to me, for whatever reason.

Farida still appears to define racism only as overt aggressive acts, and like many other new teachers from minority backgrounds, refuses to label these interactions as racist (Basit et al, 2007; Wilkins and Lal, 2011). Her words, 'they never warmed to me' again suggest that she feels partly responsible, much like the student in Jones' (1997) study who talked about 'a personality clash'.

Natalie

Natalie was a Londoner in her twenties, with an African- Caribbean heritage. She was the only black member of staff on her first placement in school, which was in a mainly white community. She felt that the school was initially not very welcoming:

The head was quite rude, and she didn't approach, she just asked me who I was, and I told her who I was and I said, 'who are you?' Because she didn't have any sort of, you know, treat me as you want to be treated [laughs]...[The class teacher] grew to like me. I remember when I first walked in her room, she looked me up and down and said 'presentable' [laughs].

The experience of being received coldly on placements is common among student teachers. Natalie's response to at least one of these microaggressions is assertive, responding in kind to the head teacher's brusque question. Probing the effect of these interactions, I asked her whether she felt subtle incidents like this had an element of racism:

No, I don't really think there was- but I don't know. I can never call the race card...because I think it's dangerous to call the race card unless you're absolutely positive that it *is* and a lot of the time it's subtle anyway, so you'd have to be really paying attention all the time to see, and, you know, watching interactions with other people, you know, and just make sure it really wasn't just a personality thing, that they just did not like you, because that is possible.

Here Natalie refers to a common strategy of those who wish to deny racism, which is to accuse those who challenge them of ‘playing the race card’, a term which means accusing someone of racism as a means to gain an advantage. This strategy is an example of Essed’s (1991) third strand of everyday racism, the repression of resistance. Drawing on Essed’s ideas, Ahmed (2012, 153) suggests that ‘to talk about racism is thus to be heard as making rather than exposing the problem’. Natalie appears to be aware of this danger. She points to the subtle nature of many racist interactions, and notes the hard work that is involved in identifying racism, work that may result in battle fatigue (Smith, 2004). Like Farida, she would rather take responsibility for the negative interactions, accepting that people might not like her, than suggest racism is in play. Thus the effect is to take on a burden which is not of her own making, and to try to be tougher than her white colleagues (Wilkins and Lall, 2011).

She described herself as ‘uncomfortable’ on her second school placement the following year, where she was once again the only minority ethnic member of staff. Her final school experience was once again in a school in which all of the staff and the large majority of the children, were white. She found her white male class teacher extremely obstructive toward her throughout the practice, to the point where she made a formal complaint to the university. One incident she recounted concerned an interaction between the teacher and a boy at the school:

He made a comment to another boy. He was a black boy, but he was African descent, Nigerian. Every time he saw him he kept saying ‘wha gwan¹.’ And that was getting on my nerves. Why would you say that only to that child? ...it’s a Jamaican way of saying hello. But just because you’re saying it to a black person doesn’t mean that that person knows what it means, because he’s actually of African descent. That’s not how they speak []

He kept saying it to this boy who was in another class. And then the boy got bright and said it to me. And I said, ‘who are you talking to?’ And he’s like,

¹ The phrase ‘wha gwan’ has since become more accepted as a general greeting among young people in South London, but it was not so at the time of the interview, at least in Natalie’s opinion.

‘yeah, Miss...’ and I said, ‘No. Don’t talk to me like... I thought, I can’t hear any other child saying that. So I’m going to say, ‘don’t say it. Why should you be expected to behave differently, and then when you do and you fulfil their stereotypes of you’.

Natalie witnesses her class teacher accomplish two microaggressive acts with his use of this phrase, and Natalie is painfully aware of both. This is an example of Kohli and Solorzano’s (2012) idea of ‘layered insults’. First, in using a Jamaican phrase to a boy with a Nigerian heritage he appears to perceive the many different black ethnicities as a homogeneous group, a type of microaggression noted in Sue et al’s (2008) study. Second, in adopting street language with only this boy, he is drawing on the stereotype of the street-wise, anti-school black boy, an identity which the boy shows signs of accepting. Solorzano and Kohli (2012) suggest that the most significant effect on children who experience microaggressions is the internalisation of racism. Natalie’s response to the boy was assertive, but she did not address it with her mentor at all, perhaps because of the negative relationship they already had, based on his, possibly racist, attitude to Natalie herself.

Natalie described how she manages working in mainly white institutions, offering an insight into both the cumulative effect of the microaggressions she experienced, and her response to them:

See, I don’t know if I neutralise myself around people. By that I mean I don’t make any reference to the music I’m into, to the food I eat, that would be any different to what they’re into. I just don’t talk about it...If you don’t understand what I’m saying, it’s really pointless in me going down certain roads with you. I’d rather keep it superficial, and talk about Big Brother, than bother trying to get on a deep level with you.

Natalie here appears to be referring to an idea of what Ahmed (2012, 157) calls ‘institutional passing’. Ahmed draws on the historical practice of light skinned black people passing as white in a racially stratified society, in order to gain access to the privileges of the dominant group. But here, she is referring not to passing as white, but as the kind of minority person who will not cause trouble. Natalie's words, and in particular the word 'bother' suggests that she finds it too much effort to try to reach a shared understanding with some white colleagues, another reference to what Smith

(2004) termed 'battle fatigue'. Her response is a different kind of withdrawal: she does not reveal her true self at work.

White students' perceptions of racism

The literature on white student teachers' understanding of racism is voluminous and as Durden et al (2014) point out, tends to dominate discussions of addressing racism in ITE. A recurrent finding is the large numbers of white students who still come to their initial teacher education with little understanding of racism as a structural and institutional issue (e.g. Yancy, 2014; Solomon et al 2005). For many, racism can be reduced to 'an individual person who suffers from a false set of beliefs [which] allows structural or institutional forms of racism to recede from view' (Ahmed, 2012, 150). Yet several studies also identify a continuum of attitudes from the defensive, through ambivalence, to race cognisance (e.g. Aveling, 2002; Pearce, 2005, 2012; Lander 2011). Bhopal and Rhamie (2014) note that many white student teachers in their study were aware of the prevalence and subtlety of racism, but did not act because they were unsure about what their role might be. Similarly, Gillborn (1996) found that the reason the white students and teachers in his study did not speak up on racism was that they felt it was not their place to do so, and that they should cede that role to the victims of racism. Levine-Rasky (2000, 284) notes that white teachers' silence in the face of racism is one of the mechanisms through which white norms retain their dominance, and that in remaining silent, they are - often unwittingly - enacting 'racist scripts.'

Susan

Susan was a white British teacher in her forties, who had retrained after a successful career in a very different field. In her second interview she reflected on her final teaching practice in school with a mainly African Caribbean intake and a staff roughly split between white and African Caribbean teachers:

I didn't feel that there was any real deep underlying racism, I think there might have been flippant comments. But then those flippant comments can be really dangerous, that's the thing...I don't know, I mean, who knows, after a while I

might feel able to kind of challenge it, but I certainly didn't feel I could at this stage.

What Susan calls 'flippant comments' appears to be a form of racial microaggressions. Like Farida and Natalie, she is reluctant to label such behavior racism. Yet she is clear that, while they are insubstantial in themselves, they suggest the existence of a systemic problem. Susan recognises the importance of challenging such comments but says she does not feel able to do so at this early point in her career. Her status as a trainee teacher means that any assertive response she makes is personally and professionally risky for her. She reflects that this might change when she gains more power, but does not appear confident about this.

After qualifying the following year, Susan took a permanent post at the same school. At interview at the end of that year, she described the school as very traditional, with a strong focus on discipline, close monitoring of teachers, and little opportunity to draw on children's lives outside school. After describing her year's work with the class, Susan alluded to the fact that the issue of race and ethnic difference was notably absent in her account:

When I was thinking about what I was going to say to you, I really couldn't think. Did I even notice anything? Or even, did it cross my mind?

Susan knows that the focus of the project is teachers addressing ethnic diversity and race equality in their classrooms, and she is familiar with my technique of asking for anecdotes or memorable exchanges with pupils or colleagues. At this stage of the interview she is not able to think of anything that has happened that relates to race. Her comment may offer a useful insight into how removed white teachers are from issues of race, even in this school where the majority of the pupils are black, and the staff is made up of black and white teachers. Dickar (20) noted that the experienced white teachers in her study made fewer direct references to how race impacted on their classrooms, in comparison with their black colleagues. This was partly because the black students were more comfortable raising race issues with black teachers than white teachers. It is also likely that the ethos of Susan's school is such that open discussion of difference is not encouraged.

The picture is further complicated by a story she told later in the interview, about a comment which may be described as a microaggression:

Susan: One of the teachers said to me, 'some of the teachers are not very clever, in this school.'

author: And is there a racial issue in there?

Susan: Yeah, possibly. There might be...I would say that it's the white teachers who think that some of the black teachers are not very clever...But I don't know. I've only been there a year. I've really been 'head down, tunnel vision'. So it's very hard to say.

Susan quotes one particular comment, but appears to suggest that this is an ongoing issue, that a racialised hierarchy exists in the school. Thus, although she begins the interview by suggesting she has not noticed anything, she then suggests that racism is major problem in the staffroom. As with her reflections the previous year, Susan appears to respond by absolving herself of responsibility: she suggests that a year is not long enough to understand the situation, and that she has been concentrating on her work alone. Again, as a newly qualified teacher, she is relatively powerless, but her racial location also affords her privileged status, which she is reluctant to put at risk. Boutte & Jackson, (2014) note, in the context of Higher Education, that even those white colleagues who accept that racism is a problem are often reluctant to stand up against it if it means jeopardizing an untenured post.

It may also be that, like the white student teachers in Bhopal's study (2015) and the more experienced teachers in Gillborn's research (1996), Susan feels that her whiteness in some way disqualifies her from taking action. Or that the levels of mistrust between black and white staff at the school were so high that she felt any intervention would make her vulnerable. Dickar (2008, 125) suggest that in such contexts some white teachers prefer to disengage because, 'they doubt their knowledge of the unwritten rules for navigating complex racial terrain'.

While Susan's own positionality is a key factor here, it is important to also consider the policy context in which she is placed. Susan's reluctance to address race may have been made more likely, more comfortable, in the current colourblind policy climate in which institutional procedures with which to address racism in schools have been

systematically removed. For example, the past few years have seen the erasure of references to ethnicity and race in the Standards for Qualified Teacher status (Department for Education, 2011); the removal of the requirement that schools report racist incidents to their local authority for monitoring (Talwar, 2012); the removal of race equality from the list of areas Ofsted, the powerful English school inspection body, scrutinises. Similar legislation has been passed in several states in the USA, where considerations of race in applications and outreach work, for example, are no longer permitted in schools and universities (e.g. Pollock, 2004).

Discussing race in multi-ethnic classrooms

One of the main aims of this article is to offer a model for discussing racism in initial teacher education classes, through a close analysis of specific racial microaggressions. I have argued that there is a need to find ways of talking about race and racism during teacher training which support both white and minority ethnic students to resist and challenge racism. The issue for me, and many other teacher educators, is how to address the needs of both of these groups of students in the same classroom, when there is clearly a gulf between of experience and perception between them.

Leonardo and Porter (2010) identify two problems with discussing race in multiethnic classrooms. First, that the level of discussion is often set at the level of the least racially literate- often white students. Second, classroom discussions on race almost always present minority ethnic students with an impossible choice between making themselves vulnerable by talking honestly about their experiences, or repressing their own perspective in order to preserve the psychic safety of their white peers. Fishman and McCarthy (2005) also reported that cross-racial sharing of life experiences in their college classroom failed to enable white students to move beyond their understanding of racism as solely an interpersonal matter, and offered little to minority students.

Exploring individual students' experiences of microaggressions may offer partial solutions to both of these problems. It may enable the conversation to begin at a higher level, one that – as a minimum- already accepts the widespread continued existence of racism in schools. It also enables the tutor to demonstrate the significance of the cumulative nature of the microaggressions, and the ways in which each incident is

symptomatic of a wider issue. Thus, it can be made clear that each incident is more than a merely an isolated individual misunderstanding or conflict; it is more accurately seen as what Essed (1991, 39) termed, 'the activation of group power'

Second, beginning with former students' authentic testimony validates minority students' standpoints, and places them on the agenda for discussion, without forcing them to make themselves vulnerable with their own life experiences.

Boutte and Jackson () point out two areas that anti-racist white people need to develop, which this approach may also support. First, they note that because much racism is so covert, white people need to get better at noticing the coded and strategic way in which it is expressed. Close analysis of a series of microaggressions could support this awareness. For example, Natalie's story about the teacher who used the phrase 'wha' gwan' shows vividly how subtle and complex racism can be, activating a stereotype and homogenizing at the same time. The school governor's questions to Farida show how seemingly neutral, formal situations can be sites of marginalization and alienation.

Second Boutte and Jackson note that while many of their white faculty colleagues had gained awareness of racism, they still struggled to translate this awareness into action. I recognize this stance in many of my students. Again, discussing instances of microaggressions can offer a way to rehearse what appropriate action might look like. Having analysed the incidents in terms of their meaning, and effects, tutors could ask, 'what would you do if this happened to you?' 'What would you do if you witnessed this?'

Conclusion

There is evidence that most Initial Teacher Education programmes in England do not prepare teachers to address racism in schools (Lander, 2011). Pressure to focus on English and maths, less time spent on taught courses and under confident and unrepresentative staff have all played their part in this (Hick et al, 2011). Yet the need, in the current political context, is greater than ever. As Kapoor (2013) argues, the

structures of racism remain in place, but in the current deracialised climate we are in danger of losing the tools with which to identify and challenge them.

Exploring racism through the narratives of others also raises awareness among white students of the different ways in which racism can manifest itself. In particular it may shift some white students' understanding of racism as at least as much an institutional issue as an individual one. This in turn may enable them to respond more assertively to the nebulous incidents that are more likely to occur in well-ordered environments like schools and universities. Empowering teachers in this way may be an effective way to protect themselves, their colleagues and their pupils from the psychological and emotional damage caused by this invidious and too easily ignored form of racism.

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