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Facilitating change in higher education: a reflective journey towards decolonization and creating belonging

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a personal and reflective account of a social work lecturer critically considering the learning experiences of racialized minority students in higher education (HE) in a UK university. It considers how pedagogy should be examined critically and suggests that knowledge from other cultures should be embedded in the learning. Several themes are explored, including sense of belonging, decolonization of the curriculum, the use of empathy in education, and allyship.

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Introduction

This article is a reflective account of my teaching and learning in higher education (HE) at a university in the UK and explores anti-oppressive and anti-racist practice in social work education. The article considers the work I have undertaken to develop my own teaching in order to facilitate learning around exclusion and inclusivity of people and perspectives from different cultures. While the focus was initially on the inclusion of people from racialized minority groups and the benefits of this, I began to recognize the benefits to all learners from more inclusive approaches. Although this article reflects my own experiences as a social worker and social work academic in the UK, the issues highlighted are relevant for other disciplines and for academics in other places where similar issues arise.

This article first sets out some of the UK context and how people from racialized minority groups experience exclusion. The areas most relevant to my practice professionally and within HE have been selected. I then explore my own experiences of joining academia from mental health social work practice and identifying barriers and gaps in the curriculum which I then set out to change. This links to empathy and creating a sense of belonging. There is discussion of changes leading to more inclusive and diverse pedagogical approaches through the decolonization of the curriculum. The piece is reflective and considers feedback from others. It concludes by exploring how some of the approaches could be beneficial in other settings and includes suggestions for how to decolonize and increase a sense of belonging, for learners and more widely.

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My own positionality

I identify as mixed race, my mother is from England, although her father's family were from Ireland. My father was born in Delhi and is a Punjabi Sikh; he does not practice the religion. I grew up in a small, fairly affluent area of North West England where there were almost no other people who had parents of noticeably mixed racial groups. This context has undoubtedly shaped my own identity as I was aware of being visibly different to my friends and having different cultural references and norms to them which ranged from not wearing shoes in the house, to some clothing choices (I was the only child I knew who had worn a salwar kameez) and also foods we ate (as baffling as it was to me, none of my friends had ever eaten jaleebi before I introduced them to it, if you have not yet tried this delicious sweet, I urge you to do so). Although I almost never experienced overt racism, I was aware that I was different in some ways to my peers and felt more visible particularly when my brown-skinned family members visited.

Growing up I do not think I consciously acknowledged how my mixed racial identity shaped me or how it made me feel different at times. Even now, it is not a topic I often reflect upon outside of my professional practice and yet there are many ways being mixed race has affected me, including my interests and professional decision making, as will be explored. I have always been interested in travel and different cultures. During my undergraduate degree (Combined Studies), which I started in my teenage years, I chose modules that enabled me to learn about topics such as world religions and social anthropology. Now, many years later, I have been able to consider how ethnicity, identity, and racism have impacted my professional practice within social work and HE. I am more able to reflect upon my heritage, to identify and recognize the impacts in different areas of my life, such as my interest areas. More broadly I have become increasingly conscious of the importance of cultural experiences and the importance of creating spaces where this can be recognized. Khan (2023) has written about similar concepts in counseling practice, recognizing ways individual identities and worldviews interact when people come together and how they shape practice and relationships. Within my work as an educator, I have tried to create pedagogy that is more inclusive and open to different ways of understanding and knowing, which undoubtedly reflects my own identity and worldview.

The transparency included about my background demonstrates how subjectivity matters. D'Cruz and Jones (2004) argue that 'positioning' (which they define as the relationship between an individual's story and the wider context) is important in research contexts as it shapes decisions about what is studied, how information is understood and also acknowledges the emotions involved. An example of positionality and the importance of lived experiences can be seen throughout the publication, by Boakye (2022), *I heard what you said*. The book explores the author's experiences of racism within the British education system on his journey from student to teacher and anti-racist educator. He offers unique and powerful perspectives on the subjects he explores which would not have been possible had he not positioned himself within the research. While not seeking to compare myself to Boakye, I believe that my own background is important to highlight for transparency; it means that this article and the actions it describes are of personal importance, but beyond this, they can be a starting point for driving changes in professional spaces and beyond for the benefit of others.

Context—naming what hurts

The title of this section is taken from the writings of bell hooks (2013), it is the title of a chapter in which she considers how white privilege is passively endorsed in America by people from racialized minority groups. She argues that white supremacist systems have been adopted and colluded with despite attempts of black power movements to change them. hooks argues that an increase in economic power for some black people has meant issues of white privilege and racism are increasingly seen as personal and private matters and not political issues (hooks, 2013). The points raised here aim to highlight some of the unjust structures, systems, and barriers in the UK and how these matters cannot be confined simply to personal and private realms. Instead, the act of privileging certain positions, peoples, and knowledge and the exclusion of others harms all groups and individuals, whereas inclusivity has benefits for all (Arday et al., 2021). This position mirrors the arguments made in relation to economic inequalities, developed by Wilkinson and Pickett (2010), economic inequality harms everyone, those who have economic power not just those who do not.

It is important to recognize that not all individuals from racialized minority groups have the same experiences or identify as having experienced racism. As Robinson (2012) articulates, it is important not to make assumptions about people from different racialized minority groups (she uses the term ‘black’) and recognize that heterogeneity exists across and within groups. However, it is also important that structural barriers are named. Robinson (2012) argues that people across racialized minority groups have commonalities which means their experiences differ when compared with white groups, namely, experiences of racism and discrimination, histories of colonialism and the impact of legislation to prevent racialized minority groups from entering or staying in the UK (Robinson, 2012). As this article focuses upon my own practice and teaching, I will briefly consider some context in relation to both mental health practice and HE in the UK.

Ethnicity and mental health in the UK

Within mental health practice there has been growing concern that people from racialized minority groups are more likely to be subject to involuntary admissions compared with people from white groups; black people (African, Caribbean, or any other black background, NHS grouping) are most likely to experience coercion under mental health legislation compared to those from other groups (NHS Digital [NHS], 2025). It was partly the concerns about the disproportionate use of legislation that led the UK Government (at the time) to review the legislation (Wessley, 2018), leading to the amended Mental Health Act (UK Government [UK], 2025). The recommendations which followed the review included reducing restraint, providing people with more say in their care and also making changes to reduce implicit bias in professional decision making. These recommendations made clear that, at times, the most basic elements of care are not in place across the system, particularly when people from racialized minority groups are concerned.

These recommendations link to findings of wider research, reported by Craig et al. (2025), that people from black communities often mistrust mental health care

systems, face biases and stereotypes and these create barriers when accessing support. A number of academics across different disciplines including psychiatry and psychology have been critical of how knowledge predominantly created by white males has been applied uncritically to people from different ethnic backgrounds, for example, the book *Even the Rat Was White*, first published in 1976 by Guthrie, draws attention to the exclusion of knowledge from racialized minority groups in the field of psychology (Robinson, 2012); Fernando, a British psychiatrist of Sri Lankan heritage, claims psychiatry has had a powerful role in the exercise of power over black men, who are more likely to be portrayed as dangerous through the label of schizophrenia (Fernando, 2004).

Ethnicity and HE in the UK

The experiences of students in HE from racialized minority groups are worse than those of people from white groups, not to ignore the achievements and successes of some at the individual level. There is an academic attainment gap, with more white British students receiving a First or 2:1 compared to students from racialized minority groups. Figures given by Advanced HE [HE] (2020) show that in 2015/16, 78.8% of white graduates received a first or 2:1 classification, but only 63.2% of students from racialized minority groups received the same grades. While the awarding gap has reduced since those figures were collected, white students continue to be more likely to receive higher grades than students from other ethnic groups (Universities UK [UK], 2022).

Degree classification is just one area where differences occur, another is financial circumstances. For many students, university education in the UK is extremely costly. For students who started their course in 2022/23, it is estimated they will have an average debt of £45,600 when they complete their course (Bolton, 2024); however, for some students the financial cost of HE is more likely to impact them during their studies compared with other students. A report by MillionPlus (2022) identifies black students as one of two groups most at-risk of financial hardship. The report explores additional factors that increase the chance of financial hardship, namely, students who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, those from areas with lower rates of participation in HE and students who live-at-home. Students from some racialized minority groups are also more likely to be overrepresented in these 'at risk' categories. Francis-Devine (2020) reports average incomes in the UK are lowest in Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups, while the highest are those of White and Indian ethnic groups. Students from Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds are more likely to come from families where household income is lower than students whose backgrounds are white or Indian. Additionally, The Sutton Trust (2018) reports that students from British Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups are six times more likely than white students to be living at home during HE. Students from these groups are again, more likely to experience financial hardship. The impact of this is multifaceted; students experiencing financial hardship are more likely to have to engage in employment alongside their studies, with students' performance declining with more hours spent in paid work (MillionPlus, 2022). Additionally, people with less secure financial circumstances are more likely to experience symptoms of mental distress such as anxiety and reduced energy and confidence compared to those with increased financial

security (Clark & Wenham, 2022). Educators as well as others in HE should consider how financial hardship impacts some learners more than others, as this may lead to different teaching decisions and greater signposting to support services.

An area that has received some focus in recent times is that of belonging and its importance for learners. An article by Morgan (2024) for Advanced HE outlines how a sense of belonging is vital and impacts both student retention and the wellbeing of learners in HE. At both the macro and micro levels there are barriers which some students from racialized minority groups may experience which can lead to them feeling othered. An article by McNeill et al. (2022) considers the university space and its role and contribution to colonialism. The authors highlight recent name changing that has occurred in recognition that it is no longer seen as acceptable that buildings, institutes, and so on are named after those complicit in slavery or other racist practices. McNeill et al. (2022) give examples of how buildings themselves might exclude learners from racialized minority groups, using an example from Australia; the University of Sydney temporarily transformed its Great Hall to identify the building materials used and their origins. The marble flooring had been removed from the land of indigenous communities, brought to Sydney by settlers and colonialists, and laid as flooring. These examples highlight how university spaces are not necessarily ones that facilitate senses of belonging and the ways in which racism and colonialism are both seen and felt. There are also experiences at the interpersonal level that some students from racialized minority groups report that keep them excluded instead of fostering a sense of belonging. This is starkly highlighted by Osbourne et al. (2023) through qualitative research with black students at universities in the UK. Students reported that daily racism was part of life when entering HE. Students described how others used offensive language or racist ‘jokes.’ Some participants said that due to stereotyping (examples given were black people being aggressive or too sensitive) they felt unable to challenge or felt they had to respond in certain ways such as modifying their appearance, hairstyles, or behavior in order to avoid the gaze of white students.

While this discussion has focused upon ethnicity, it is important to highlight how a sense of belonging is also related to other aspects of student identity which intersect with ethnicity. To return to hooks, she argued that social class among black people was ‘often overlooked’ (hooks, 1996, p. 163). She argued that class differences have always existed, but as the number of blacks leaving their communities and entering traditionally white, elite spaces, the focus on class politics has diminished. Those who entered these spaces sought to break ties with those in lower classes to maintain their positions (hooks, 1996). Within HE in the UK both class and ethnicity impact students’ choice of university; those from working-class backgrounds and those from racialized minority groups are more likely to attend post-1992 universities; middle-class and white students are more likely to attend pre-1992 universities which are more exclusive (Croxford & Raffe, 2014). Reay (2018) argues that for students from racialized minorities who do go to more elite universities, they can experience various challenges: stereotypes and prejudices from others and a struggle to survive, which are compounded by social class. What is less clear is whether hooks (1996) analysis applies, do students from racialized minority groups support one another and foster a sense of belonging, or are there tensions with those from middle-class groups attempting to sever ties with their lower-class, yet ethnically similar, peers.

Arday et al. (2021) summarize the position by concluding that within HE (particularly within the Western world) power and privilege are clear. They argue that people from racialized minority groups are sidelined, while the norms of the white majority dominate. In terms of creating a sense of belonging, there are changes needed, at both macro and micro levels, so that students from racialized minority groups feel valued.

Social work and HE

Social work as a profession recognizes the importance of using knowledge from a range of sources and from groups and individuals who may be marginalized or underrepresented. This is explicitly recognized within its global definition:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline . . . Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014)

There are many ways in which students across HE courses might experience oppression, exclusion, or hardship, as documented above, but for learners studying social work in the UK there are a number of specific areas to consider, both within the HE setting and in practice, as learners undertake mandatory practice placements as part of the course. Firstly, in relation to the university experience, there have been concerns about the curriculum itself. Social work has been criticized for promoting the knowledge and values of white middle-class professionals at the exclusion of others (Robinson, 2012). Research published recently by Morton et al. (2023) highlights experiences of both lecturers and students at two English universities in relation to the ways race works on social work courses. Findings included how teaching that focused on cultural practices of racialized minority groups tended to highlight aspects that were problematic or harmful, such as female genital mutilation or physical punishment of children. Additionally, some lecturers discussed racial identities in ways that contributed to the othering of students from racialized minority groups, for example, case studies which concerned families who were Asian or Muslim would explicitly give this information, which differed from case studies concerning white British families, where ethnicity was not stated but implied. This made some learners from racialized minority groups feel othered and different to their white peers.

Within practice learning, several studies have highlighted difficulties that social work students from racialized minority groups can encounter in the UK. In research undertaken by Fairtlough et al. (2014) students from racialized minority groups reported experiencing barriers during their placement learning. Difficulty for some occurred when the placement setting was predominantly staffed by and supported people from mostly white backgrounds. In these settings students from racialized minority groups reported more isolation, racism and anxiety which impacted negatively on their ability to learn. Other findings included some black students being compared to one another or being mistaken with a peer, some felt they were stereotyped by staff within the setting. Similar findings were reported by Morton et al. (2023) in their research, some students from racialized minority groups were perceived by lecturers and students to be treated differently to white students. Abuse

from service users was described as ‘everyday’ and ‘normalised’ (Morton et al., 2023, p. 562). In terms of progression and passing social work placements, Finch and Tedam (2024) consider how some student characteristics put them at increased likelihood of failing social work placements compared with other peers, this includes being black, male or having a disability. There is a growing body of research which shows how social work students from racialized minority groups are more likely to encounter barriers to their learning and journey into practice than other students. The next section will examine some of the ways I used this contextual knowledge to shape my teaching practices and decisions to create a more inclusive pedagogy for the benefit of all learners, across groups.

Changing teaching practices on a UK social work course

Using contextual knowledge as rationale for change

Given my professional background in social work, my pedagogical practices have incorporated this identity into my role as a lecturer. A key component in social work practice is the need to empathize with others. In the UK this is recognized both by Social Work England (2019) and the British Association for Social Workers (BASW, 2026) in their respective standards and frameworks. Brown (2024) explores the importance of empathy within HE broadly and also within social work courses. She considers empathy as having different components which include emotionally, as it involves a connection at this level with another person; cognitively, as it requires a person to consider and interpret what might be going on; behaviorally, as people need to use skills to demonstrate empathy or to take action. This multifaceted way of considering empathy is helpful as it arguably highlights how, in different situations, some or all of these empathetic responses might be required.

Within my practice as a lecturer, I have considered the actions (grounded in behavioral empathy) I could take to develop the curriculum. When I started in the role, my colleagues shared materials with me and encouraged me to develop teaching in line with module learning outcomes. The first stage of my teaching journey was to critically consider the content of the modules and question whether changes would improve teaching. An example of this was in a module that asks students to use psychological approaches to develop awareness of life course development. I recognized that the approaches were based on theories that had originated from white psychologists in Europe and America and did not reflect knowledge or contributions from people of racialized minority groups. I considered this absence problematic for several reasons. Firstly, on practice placements and once qualified, social workers will work with people from different racialized groups, if they are not taught a range of psychological approaches, then they are likely to assess people against white normative standards and be ill-equipped to understand diversity that might exist between ethnic groups. Considering the research by Morton et al. (2023), there is also a danger that if pedagogy omits the perspectives of other cultural groups, students are more likely to view them as invalid or unimportant. Worryingly, there is a danger that some racialized minority students start to question and feel anxious about the disparity between what is taught and the perspectives of their families and communities which shaped their own personal

development. Linking to the importance of belonging, considered above, I concluded that changes were needed.

As educators, it is important to recognize the impact of emotion and the role it has on people's learning experiences. I have related this to the hypothesis of 'affective filters,' proposed by Krashen (Gonzalez, 2020). Krashen considers how negative filters, such as anxiety or fear, block learning as they negatively impact cognition. Although this theory originally related to the learning of language, it has been applied more broadly by Gonzalez (2020) to learning environments in general. People from racialized minority groups are found to be more likely than other groups to experience imposter syndrome (Ahmed et al., 2020) which is characterized by feelings of not belonging and self-doubt. Imposter syndrome could be classed as an affective filter which is more likely to create blocks to learning for those experiencing it. Part of the academic's role is to minimize affective filters which inhibit learning, in this context by increasing feelings of belonging in pedagogic practice. In my practice I wanted to develop a more inclusive curriculum so students could develop feelings of belonging.

Taking action and implementing change

Regarding the actions I took to support the inclusion of knowledge from other cultures, I will draw upon the work of Boyer (1990) whose views of 'scholarship' arguably expand the definition to include the work undertaken by many academics, not just those involved in formal, primary research (Boyd, 2013). Boyer considered scholarship firstly as 'discovery,' characterized by focused and disciplined inquiry (Boyer, 1990, p. 17). Initially I had little awareness of specific psychological perspectives that had originated from outside of Europe or the US; therefore, the first step I took was to develop my own knowledge base by reading and attending training. Following on from my research, I then sought to make this relevant to my teaching and to the discipline of social work.

There are several changes I made to the sessions with learners. One of the approaches was to introduce articles and research from black scholars, mostly psychologists which focused on approaches that had explicitly been developed by people from racialized minority groups (examples include Clark and Clark (1940) doll study to show self-concept, Cross (1971) black identity development; and Poston (1990) biracial identity development) which enabled learners to consider how these models could be used alongside or instead of other models to help them understand identity development. I also co-delivered sessions with colleagues from different backgrounds, one of whom was able to deliver a Qigong session, a technique used in traditional Chinese medicine to promote health and balance. The aim of the session was to demonstrate how Western approaches to health are one among many and how different approaches might benefit people.

These activities link to what Boyer considers to be 'integration' which he describes as 'giving meaning to isolated facts' (Boyer, 1990, p. 18). It is important that learners are encouraged to consider how their learning about new topics is relevant to their own subject discipline, therefore I encouraged learners to draw upon social work practice documents, such as the Professional Capabilities Framework (BASW, 2026) and how they might use the information in their social work practice. An example is how well-being could be better promoted in some situations by drawing upon culturally relevant

information when working with someone from a racialized minority group, or by applying a different perspective on identity formation, which might lead to a different intervention. This is particularly important within social work education and practice where a fundamental skill is the ability to critically reflect on practice (BASW, 2026; Croisdale-Appleby, 2014).

I have found there can be overlap between what Boyer (1990) terms ‘application’ (how knowledge is applied to solve problems) and ‘integration.’ As social work is an inherently practice-based discipline (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014), it is difficult to separate out these stages. Assessment in social work involves learners being able to apply theories into practice using case studies and through their work with people during practice placements. To support learners in their assessment, I created teaching sessions that introduced a variety of case scenarios for them to explore both as a whole group and in smaller group discussions so that they could obtain and give feedback to one another and receive feedback from myself, in preparation for their formative assessment at the end of the module. During one session I introduced the Black identity model (Cross, 1971), which considers different stages that Black people experience throughout their lives. The first stage is pre-encounter, characterized by people being unaware of race or its importance; the second stage is encounter, when an event or experience leads the person to recognize and feel the impacts of racism; the third is immersion/ emersion, where the person seeks a new identity, immersing themselves in Black culture, rejecting their former self; the fourth is internalization, where the person is able to reconcile their earlier identity and their new Black identity; the final stage is internalization/ commitment, where the person seeks social justice for other Black people. After explaining the model, I then posed the following to students:

Example in practice

- You are a social work student on placement and a manager of a support agency contacts you to discuss a young person, Michael, who they have been supporting for 6 months.
- Michael is 17 and identifies as Black. His parents were originally from Uganda.
- The agency are supporting Michael with education and employment support as he is not currently doing anything meaningful with his time.
- In the past few weeks Michael has started to request he is supported by Black workers.
- Using Cross’s Black identity development theory:
 - 1. what may have occurred?
 - 2. what stage might Michael be in?
 - 3. how could you support the agency to consider this situation?

This session and the activity above enabled students to have discussions about the ideas and how they could use them to understand a situation differently. This supported students in seeing the practical application of theory to practice and the advantages of using this model compared to some others.

To conclude Boyer's model, the final stage is that of the scholarship of teaching, and this is where I believe there is a clear difference between my views on teaching and those he proposes, he states, 'teaching begins with what the teacher knows' (Boyer, 1990, p. 23). I do not think this is necessarily helpful in supporting inclusive pedagogy and a sense of belonging across student groups. Instead, my approach has been to start the sessions by asking learners to reflect on their own experiences and preexisting knowledge, acknowledging differences within the group and supporting learners to reflect on the benefits this brings. For example, in one session I used the statement, 'I do not see colour' and asked them to consider if they have heard it, if so, how it made them feel and also the reasons some people might say it. This approach helped learners to think about different views, not to claim it is wrong but to help them consider how the statement might make some people feel. The approach reflects my own value base, intrinsically linked to the professional values of social work, that people are not, as Freire (1996) argues, empty vessels, instead they bring with them an array of experiences. Therefore, pedagogical practices should be designed to encourage students to articulate their thoughts and feelings. This approach requires a move away from learning being conceived as a transfer of information from teacher to student and, instead, recognizing the subjective nature of learning which is shaped by context and culture (Hager & Hodgkinson, 2009).

Reflecting on feedback

There are two sources of feedback which I have considered in relation to my teaching practice: my own reflections and those of the students. Firstly, I recognized that I had some anxieties around introducing subjects of racism in the classroom and using knowledge from people from racialized minority groups. I worried that discussions might develop that I might struggle to control or respond to depending on what was shared. I also worried that, for students from racialized minority groups, the subjects might feel emotive, or that they were being singled out in some way. Khan (2023) claims that racism is a topic which many educators and trainers are hesitant to discuss due to fear and not having the resources or knowledge themselves. I overcame my fears by recognizing the importance of the topic and concluded that the dangers of omission were worse than my own personal hesitancy. If students were not given some tools to support them to work with people more confidently from racialized minority groups, that would be worse than not drawing upon them. As a social worker, there is a need to adhere to professional standards explicitly set out in ethical standards which identify the importance of knowledge from differing cultures (in the UK by BASW, 2026), this gave me confidence in my pedagogical decisions.

The second source of feedback was that which I gained from students following the introduction of these topics in sessions. I was mindful that some students might find the learning emotive, as I had when conducting research in the 'discovery' stage (Boyer, 1990), when hearing about experiences of racism. In the sessions I explained this and asked for people to be aware of one another's feelings and to expect to feel some discomfort as topics might reflect personal experiences. Additionally, I was mindful not to expect the students to educate one another, although they may (or may not) wish to share personal experiences, the responsibility for the session was one that fell to me as the lecturer. This is

important to consider given the research findings of Osbourne et al. (2023) which identified that some students felt the responsibility to educate peers about racism fell on their shoulders, which is unfair. To avoid this I ensured I brought materials for use in the sessions and took responsibility for managing the interactions, while at the same time, creating space for people to share experiences should they wish to do so.

There has been a lot of informal feedback from students during the sessions, but I have highlighted some specific examples from students which have stayed with me and which confirm the importance of this work. The first was during a lecture where I introduced the Clarks' doll experiment regarding self-concept, when a learner from a black background became tearful. They shared with the group that their child had recently started school and had begun to make negative comments about their appearance, especially their hair. The student thanked me for the session as while they had found it difficult, it resonated with them and helped them to link their own child's experience to the research.

In another session, a white student also became tearful following a video that was played where young black males spoke about their experiences of racism. She shared with the group that she had worked in healthcare prior to starting the course, and, while there were often complaints around staff being racist to service users, as well as staff experiencing racism from both service users and their colleagues, they said that it was not spoken about. The student felt that finally space had been created to discuss what they had witnessed. The same video was shared with a different group, and following this a white student shared that her brother-in-law (who is black) was pulled over by police when he was taking her (white) children to school and questioned about his relationship to them. She spoke about the impacts upon them all as a family resulting from this. The sharing of experiences has been helpful for learners (across ethnicities) to come together and discuss experiences that have caused them pain and enabled them to support one another. Instead of seeing racism as something that only affects individuals from racialized minority groups, the sessions have led to a sense of collective consciousness.

A final piece of feedback I wish to raise was during a different session. A black Nigerian student asked if I knew how badly widows were treated in Africa and made a comment about how much better things were elsewhere. While I thanked the student for their point, I challenged their generalizations about widows in Africa and asked them to consider the varieties of experiences people would have in any area. I encouraged the group to consider the many countries, tribes, religions, urban and rural environments within continents. I acknowledged that the student may have knowledge about abuse some widows experienced but that not all people were treated badly in one continent and well in others, drawing upon some examples of abuse against older people in the UK. This feedback connected to points made by Freire (1996), who explained that people who experience oppression may not be conscious of it; he writes that we must encourage reflection and action as ways of raising consciousness which can lead to transformation. I also considered how this may have felt to the learner; they may have only been taught about positive things in the West, as a quote in research by Fairtlough et al. highlights:

Coming from a country that has been colonised by the west, some of the ideologies that you have been brought up with [...] that you cherish and then you come to this country and you realise that everything that you cherish is what oppresses you. (Fairtlough et al., 2014, p. 611)

Within the sessions I am mindful that learning might have a significant emotional component and that there needs to be time, space, and a supportive environment created so that students feel they can seek support should they want to.

Wider change

Allyship

Although I have focused on the impact and feedback from students from racialized minority groups, it is important that the learning and sessions are not dismissed by students from majority groups as unimportant to them. There is a danger that antiracist practice and activities are an additional burden unfairly placed onto those most at risk of experiencing it; people from racialized minority groups should not be expected to 'fix' racism, it should be a duty for everyone (Reid, 2020). The concept of allyship is one that has relevance here, and it is a concept I have introduced within my teaching. Cumming-Potvin (2024) explores the use of the term 'ally' which was used to describe ways in which heterosexual students advocated for and supported students who identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual within HE. However, she explores the term's wider application; it describes how different groups can come together to achieve shared goals and outcomes.

In my teaching I have introduced students to the model of Allyship proposed by Coghill (NHS England [NHS], 2020), a senior leader and nurse within the NHS in the UK. The model, the '7A's of authentic allyship,' is one that can help students from different ethnic groups to consider actions they can take to promote anti-racist practice. The model considers seven elements to allyship, one of which is to 'acknowledge,' which Coghill (NHS, 2020) explains as the importance of openly acknowledging problems of racism and exclusion. All social workers in the UK have a duty to be alert to oppression and challenge it, not just students from racialized minority groups (BASW, 2021). The model supports inclusive practice by helping learners to identify what they can do to support one another. As noted above, some students may encounter racism within their practice placements, even if they are not the person experiencing it, the model identifies that allyship requires others to acknowledge what may have occurred and take action to address it. This helps to create a sense of solidarity and accountability among learners; it is not only the responsibility of racialized minority students to act, there is an expectation that peers should act as allies. This approach aims to prepare students for what they might experience and may enable them to feel more able to cope with racism if it occurs (Wright et al., 2020).

Implications for social work education and beyond

The purpose of this article has been to discuss how pedagogy can be improved so that learners from all ethnic groups feel a sense of inclusivity and belonging. This has involved consideration of challenges which are more common for some learners, issues that most, if not all, students are likely to encounter and finally how practice can change.

I will now explore the implications for social work educators; however, having worked alongside colleagues from different disciplines, including nursing, veterinary science and food safety, they too have shared how knowledge from the global north continues to dominate their respective fields. Therefore, these suggestions may be relevant across other courses, not just for social work.

Students have multifaceted identities, while they are unique individuals, there are certain characteristics which increase the likelihood of particular challenges occurring. It is important that educators educate themselves so they can offer relevant support. For instance, students who are from Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups are more likely to experience financial hardship, which is related to lower household incomes and their being more likely to live at home. Students who experience financial hardship are more likely to engage in paid work alongside their studies and are at greater risk of mental health difficulties. If educators are aware of these factors, they can anticipate them and offer more proactive and relevant support. This relates to educators being empathetic toward their students, which (as set out above) has different components, emotional and cognitive recognition of difficulties as well as behavioral aspects, where actions are taken. In this example that could mean educators helping students to access financial support, employment specialists, or mental wellbeing advisors.

Several authors have drawn attention to the way knowledge from white, middle-class academics dominates social work teaching in the UK (Morton et al., 2023; Robinson, 2012). Often knowledge from other cultures is not included, or when it is, it is treated as problematic rather than valuable. It can also be presented in ways that contribute to othering. This creates difficulties for students from racialized minority groups who can feel excluded, but another issue is that students from different racial groups need to be able to work with service users who are from diverse cultural backgrounds. If they do not have knowledge of multicultural perspectives, it is more likely they will assess people and groups against white normative standards. This is particularly problematic within social work as professionals have ethical duties to challenge oppressive practices (BASW, 2021).

Within education, the role of emotion is recognized as being a factor that can help or hinder learning (Gonzalez, 2020). It is important that educators recognize how some topics might evoke powerful emotions for students. This has been important for me to consider openly with students so that they are prepared and are aware of support they can access. For instance, when I initially started to discuss racism in the sessions, I was concerned about the impacts there might be on racialized minority students, I had given the same consideration to the impact they could have on white students. I recognize that this was naïve but maybe relates to how racism is often perceived as a topic that impacts racialized minorities and not white groups (Eddo-Lodge, 2020). It is important that individuals within the sessions (no matter their ethnicity) are supported to recognize the impacts of racism within society and their own lives. The spaces created in the sessions have seemed to bring students together by focusing on resources and case studies, but interestingly, some students have then gone on to share personal experiences. This indicates they have felt safe enough to do so.

I will now draw upon the 7 A's of allyship by Coghill (NHS, 2020) to set out some considerations I have had through my journey which might be of use to other social work educators and those from other disciplines.

1. Appetite for change	Drawing upon knowledge from other cultures takes time, it is often outside the comfort zone of academics, it takes time. Students need time to think about why this is important and relevant for them. Educators must have the motivation (appetite) for this work.
2. Ask	Educators must question and reflect upon what is being taught and if perspectives from racialised minority groups are included within the teaching. If different cultural approaches are included, are they all seen as equally valid and valuable. Are learners supported to see the relevance and value of different perspectives. How might the buildings or location link to colonisation? Ai is also be relevant to consider, how might its use cause disproportionately impacts some places more than others (UN News [UN], 2026).
3. Accept	Racism exists and impacts racialised minority students and white students in different ways. For example, some students are more likely to encounter racism within placement settings, so how can we support them? Racism affects white students within these settings, so how are they supported to recognise it, speak about it and challenge it?
4. Acknowledge	All students have unique lives and overlapping identities, acknowledging the ways that power, racism and dominant forms of knowledge are important steps in challenging them, but acknowledging these topics are uncomfortable and can cause pain is important.
5. Apologise	As a lecturer, social worker and UK citizen it is important that I apologise for racism. I work within systems where individuals from racialised minorities experience worse outcomes, I acknowledge my part within those systems and apologise for it.
6. Assume	Certain student characteristics make it more likely that particular challenges will arise. However, it is important not to stereotype or make assumptions.
7. Action	Taking steps to change practice is important for anyone aiming to decolonise their practice. The actions I have taken have been part of a lifelong journey. It began with discover, curiosity about different cultures and then integration, using knowledge within my teaching and implementing changes. I use feedback from learners and my own reflections to consider how to do this, creating environments that simultaneously challenge and support learners.

The process I have described has been a positive one, that has widened my understanding and enabled me to learn about new ideas. It has been joyful, and I hope that others in HE who wish to decolonize pedagogy also experience similar positive feelings in relation to this essential work.

‘Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle’ Martin Luther King.

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