



Understanding and Improving Practice Outcomes for Minority Ethnic Social Work Students

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List of abbreviations

BAME- Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic

NQSW- Newly Qualified Social Worker

SPSW- Department of Social Policy and Social Work

SUPA Group- Service User and Carer Participation Advisory Group

PE- Practice Educator

UL- University Liaison

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A note on Terminology

The authors are aware of debate and controversy about the use of language when describing and discussing race and ethnicity. When this project began, the preferred terminology of University of York (which funded this research) was Black, Asian & Minority Ethnic (BAME). It is important to note that the working title of this project and therefore recruitment and project information material replicated this

terminology in order to maintain consistency with the preferred language across the institution. Throughout the research, the project team have discussed and reflected on our use of terminology, particularly as we move to a phase of producing publicly available outputs. After careful consideration we have opted to use the term 'Minority Ethnic' within the report to refer to students who identify as Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic. We do this to acknowledge that the term 'BAME' is problematic due to its reduction of heterogeneous communities, groups and individuals to an acronym. We have chosen to use the term 'minority ethnic' here in line with guidance from Advance HE (2020), while recognising that the term may similarly homogenise diverse groups of students and with no suggestion that a diverse range of distinct ethnic identities can ever fully encapsulated by the use of such an umbrella term. This term is preferred to 'ethnic minority' as 'minority ethnic' highlights that everyone has an ethnicity and the issues under discussion are particular to those whose ethnicity has minority status in the particular context being considered. Our use of the term here is not used without an understanding of critiques of the term and a willingness to engage with conversations about alternative language. We have retained the use of the term 'BAME' or 'BME' only where it has been used by previous research and statistical reports or in direct quotes from participants.

Introduction/Background

Recent analysis of the Higher Education Statistics Agency data has identified that 34% of students enrolled onto social work programmes identify as BAME, compared to a 27% average across all Higher Education (Skills for Care, 2019). The proportion of BAME social work students has increased over time, from 25% in 2011/12 (ibid, 2019). This picture is similar at the University of York, with between 15-20% of our students identifying as BAME on qualifying social work programmes over recent years.

Research from across the UK suggests that social work students from Minority Ethnic backgrounds face similar challenges to Minority Ethnic students on other programmes. Specifically, research points to poorer continuation rates and attainment outcomes for Minority Ethnic social work students; they also take longer to complete their courses than their peers (Fairtlough et. al, 2013; Hillen and Levy, 2015; Tedam, 2014). At the University of York, data shows the University as a whole has an attainment gap of 17% between BAME and White students (compared to 13% nationally), and a small but growing continuation gap (2% average for BAME students and 8% average for Black students 2012-2016). The Department of Social Policy and Social Work (SPSW) has an attainment gap of 11% between BAME and White students.

This project sought to address this issue by contributing to our understanding of the particular challenges faced by Minority Ethnic students during their social work placements. Students spend 170 days split between two practice placements over the course of the programme, where their work is assessed by a trained and qualified social work 'Practice Educator' (PE). Students must pass their placements in order to continue on and complete the programme, but the placement experience, including support and outcomes, can differ quite extensively. Williams and Rutter (2013) observe that placements can be 'difficult to predict and control' (p.6). We chose to focus on the placement element of the social work programme because if a student struggles or fails to pass a placement, it has a significant impact not only on continuation rates but also attainment. Placements are core to the social work programme and any difficulties typically impact on a student's ability to complete academic work within appropriate timescales and to a high standard. In addition, a student's experience of placements affects their perceptions of the programme and the profession as a whole.

It was anticipated that the research would lead to some clear recommendations to be implemented within the University and placement organisations in order to improve the experience of Minority Ethnic social work students and address the attainment gap. Recommendations are included at the end of the report.

Methodology

The research was designed to have a qualitative and quantitative strand. The quantitative strand intended to analyse student data to establish if there were inequalities in outcomes for social work students in SPSW based on ethnicity. A number of potential indicators were considered including overall degree outcomes and prevalence of placement breakdowns or placement issues which required formal intervention from the university. After liaising with the Head of Department and colleagues in the Business Intelligence Unit, it became clear that access to data would be problematic. Individual departments do not have access to diversity and equality data and it would not be possible to match data on student/ placement outcomes to students' identified race or ethnicity. Given the barriers to accessing meaningful quantitative data within current regulations, the project team decided to concentrate solely on the qualitative strand of the research whilst exploring ways of accessing the relevant data for any future research.

The qualitative strand of the research involved conducting focus groups and individual interviews with a range of stakeholders involved in the placement process including:

- Practice Educators (PEs), who are responsible for supervising students on placement and assessing their placement performance.
- University Liaisons (ULs), academic staff from the teaching team who act as the link between the student, the placement and the University, particularly when difficulties are experienced on placement.
- Minority Ethnic Newly-Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs) who are employed within the region.
- Minority Ethnic social work students currently enrolled at the University who have some experience of being on placement.

The initial proposal was that focus groups would be undertaken with each of these groups of stakeholders. Two focus groups, involving a total of 10 PEs, took place, as well as one focus group for ULs made up of 2 members of University teaching staff and a representative from the Service User and Carer Participation Advisory (SUPA) group with experience of sitting on the Independent Placement Panel (which audits placement organisations and any failed placements). One focus group was arranged for Minority Ethnic social work students, however there was a low take-up and the decision was made to offer students individual interviews, which proved more popular. Whilst for anonymity purposes we have not provided

the identified ethnicities of our student participants we can report that students came from a range of different racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds.

The Covid-19 pandemic significantly impacted upon the fieldwork process, with other planned focus groups being cancelled due to government guidance around social distancing. Instead, a further eight PEs, four Minority Ethnic social work students and one Minority Ethnic NQSW took part in telephone interviews about their experiences. In return for taking part in the research, students received a £20 shopping voucher and PEs and NQSWs received a copy of a textbook on anti-oppressive practice. The research received ethical approval from the Departmental Ethics committee and all focus groups and interviews were audiorecorded and later transcribed. Qualitative data was analysed using a framework approach (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994). Table 1 provides an overview of participants and the interviews they took part in.

The project team did not include any Minority Ethnic researchers and were acutely aware of the potential impact of such a lack of representation. In recognition of this concern an 'Advisory Group' was created to provide guidance and support for the research. The advisory group included two Minority Ethnic social work practitioners from the university's partner organisations and a 'Workforce Development Lead' from a partner organisation. The advisory group met with the project team at key points through the project to discuss the methodology of the project, the initial findings and analysis and the recommendation made in the final report.

Table 1: Overview of research participants

PE Focus Groups	Number of Groups	Total Number of Participants
PE Focus Groups	4	10
PE individual Interviews		8
UL/ IPP members	1	3
Current Social Work students		4
NQSW		1

Findings

Diversity

The demography of the local area means that students often attend placements where the workforce and service user population have limited racial diversity. The university campus and the staffing of the department also reflect this minimal diversity. The Minority Ethnic students in this study reported that the whiteness of these spaces is very visible and can lead to feelings of discomfort, 'standing out' and concerns about being able to fit in and be understood. Some PE's were sensitive to the challenges this posed for students:

And if you are someone who feels different in an all-White team, I think that must be incredibly difficult (PE16)

For many PEs the lack of diversity means they have little experience of supervising Minority Ethnic students, and beyond that, limited experience of working with people from diverse ethnic backgrounds (in terms of colleagues or service users). This was recognised by some PEs as requiring additional effort and thought:

Because [city] is such a...such a White place, it's like...trying to heighten my awareness, as much as anything else (PE13).

However, the majority of PEs expressed that they had little (or no) training around race and ethnicity, particularly in relation to supporting students. Any training they had undertaken was a long time ago and had not been recently updated. Some PE and ULs showed more awareness than others around how a lack of race and diversity training might impact on students. However, all PEs felt that training was important in supporting Minority Ethnic students on placement and would welcome further learning and development opportunities on the topic.

Students were aware of the limited diversity of the local area and were wary of how this might impact on their placement experiences.

because obviously [town] is mainly...White majority, I thought like, am I gonna be like...not welcome. I wonder what people's attitudes are going to be like ... How are they gonna act towards me? And how everyone in the office was going to act towards me. (Student A)

Students were entering their placement with past experiences of racism. Some of the students we interviewed had already experienced racism whilst working in the social care sector and one student described feeling segregated and singled out by university staff on the programme. This combination of demographic homogeneity, minimal experience and training for PEs, compounded by the past experiences of students illustrates the challenging context in which Minority Ethnic students undertake their placements.

Experiencing and responding to racial discrimination

PEs/ ULs felt that it was almost inevitable that Minority Ethnic students would experience racism on placement, although the risk was framed primarily in terms of the potential for service users to use racist language or to discriminate against students. This was expressed in terms of previous racism encountered by students PEs had supported, and PEs own knowledge and experience of racism within the service user groups they worked with:

We know there is racism out within the community and...it's fair to say the student will encounter it, erm, because you encounter it as a White social worker, going to people's homes, they will say things that you then will have to challenge. So, it's almost inevitable it is going to come up... (PE1)

White, White supremacy is more of a concern for us (PE7)

Indeed, three out of four of the students we spoke to had experienced racism from service users during their placements, ranging from overt racist statements to more subtle experiences of being treated differently:

They will doubt you...when the PE chips in exactly what you have said to them... but now they believe more the PE, well... maybe it's because of my skin colour, or...you know, you just...try to think why was it like that? (Student D)

Whilst all PEs/ ULs who took part in the project were keen to protect and defend Minority Ethnic students from racism they could also be uncertain and conflicted about how to deal with incidents of racism and, sometimes, how to recognise racism. Discussions on the topic centred around the need to 'check-in' and support students who had experienced racism from service users. A small number tentatively suggested they might 'gently challenge' racist attitudes. Some PEs occasionally minimised the racism experienced by students, framing it within service user characteristics such as age and '*comments that were not PC*'. A common theme in discussion of service user racism was the tensions that exist in social work, where there is often a duty to provide services regardless of an individual's views, and where effective social work relies on careful relationship-building, especially where service users do not welcome social work involvement. The complexities involved with engaging individuals played a part in PE uncertainty. However, a small number of PEs were unequivocal about the need to challenge racism

Actually, it has to be challenged. You can't be silent about it (PE1)

Some PEs reflected on how they could have better supported students who experienced racism, particularly by being proactive from the beginning of the placement and discussing with the student about how racism would be dealt with, rather than placing the onus on the student to report issues as they arose:

...it would have been good if I could have been the person who instigated that conversation, you know what I mean, I feel like she wanted to...she was sussing out how safe it was....To raise an issue if she had one, because she has had a previous issue in a workplace. So, um...and kind of on reflection, I think that shouldn't really be her responsibility, we should be doing that for people. (PE12)

However, for a large majority of the PEs their capacity to respond to student experiences of racism was closely related to the organisational context. PEs felt hampered by the lack of clear policies and procedures on responding to racism from service users and felt this was potentially an issue for the whole profession, rather than just students. Some PEs made comparisons between the 'zero tolerance' policy

operating within other organisations (such as the NHS) and the lack of similar policies in statutory social work institutions. PEs expressed a need for clear organisational guidance and responses. Where PEs had experienced effective responses to incidents, they had relied on strong institutional guidance and proactive support from managers.

The lack of a clear response to racist incidents was something noted by students. One student had experienced racism from a service user which went unchallenged by a team member who was present:

I think the thing is, people don't know how to respond to it. I spoke to the people around me.....but it was pretty much, everybody had a shared outrage about... the things that had been said, but nobody really said, "What do we do next?" (Student B)

Students were also wary of reporting the racism they experienced to their placement organisations. Previous negative experiences coupled with the limited diversity within some placement teams and amongst university staff created anxieties around raising issues and seeking support.

Why would you make yourself vulnerable to a lot of White people because...as I said, they are often the ones who inflict the, you know, the preconceived ideas and the racist remarks and thoughts, like, it's hard.

(Student C)

There are evidently barriers for students to seek and receive a response to their experiences of racism from service users. From a student perspective, clear reporting routes that are comfortable for students to use are important. Responses should centre on challenging unacceptable behaviours wherever possible, rather than only offering emotional support and sympathy. From a PE perspective it is also clear that understanding how best to protect students and respond to racism is a matter for a whole organisation and requires clear guidance and appropriate assistance from managers and senior staff, which recognises the potential complexity of responding to racism in social work practice.

Approaches to race and racism within organisations.

Two distinct approaches to race and racism were evident from interviews with PE's and UL's. The first was a 'colour-blind' approach in which all students were 'treated the same'. An alternative approach recognised difference and attempted to understand how a students' race might impact on their placement experience. Often, the 'colour-blind' approach was rooted in a desire to treat all students equally as well as uncertainty and anxiety about issues of race and ethnicity. Occasionally, PE's/UL's simply did not see race as an issue that would impact placement.

we don't want to...be seen to make a song and dance of it, or point it out or, you know treat people any different (UL1)

I would have thought for anyone, factors that would support somebody to have a good placement, um, or, or not, wouldn't be related directly to the ethnicity (PE14).

A minority of PE's (generally those who had more experience of working in diverse teams and with Minority Ethnic students) disagreed with a 'colour-blind' approach and felt that talking openly about differences and the impact of race on a student's placement experience was a vital part of supporting students.

I think in the past we have pretended that it isn't an issue and we are colour-blind, and actually what we know is that that isn't helpful, we actually need to talk about difference (PE17)

From the student perspective, the colour-blind approach was potentially damaging.

and just trying to sit there and hear people say things like, "I don't see colour", was to me a really damaging thing, because I was like, how can you be a social worker and say that you don't see colour, when you are going to work with people from different backgrounds? (NQSW1)

We have, sort of...different experiences and we experience different things compared to, like, White British (Student A)

Where PE's/UL's did feel race was an important factor on the placement, they framed their responses in terms of 'exploring identity'. This primarily involved supporting students to reflect on their identities and its impact on their practice. However, very few PEs or ULs suggested that an exploration of their own identity would be relevant to their support of Minority Ethnic students. For some PE's/ ULs there appeared to be an underlying assumption that being a Minority Ethnic student is something that must be analysed as an essential part of understanding self, values, and experience - but that their 'whiteness' in its neutrality does not require the same analysis and attention. Where PE's did discuss reflecting on their own racial identity and explicitly considered the specific strengths of students from Minority Ethnic backgrounds, they were generally from a Minority Ethnic background themselves, or they had worked more extensively with Minority Ethnic students or communities in the past.

A number of PE's had developed supervision techniques for openly discussing similarities, differences and power dynamics with their students. Some of these PE's used specific models and tools to support this work and had found openly exploring their own identities along with students and explicitly acknowledging power differentials was crucial to supporting Minority Ethnic students.

Whilst all the students noted some positive placement experiences and mostly felt welcomed by colleagues, some did also report negative experiences. One student felt they had failed their placement because of discrimination based on their race. Other students had experienced a lack of basic cross-cultural knowledge and understanding, greater scrutiny of their work and stereotyped assumptions about them based on their culture, race or religion. One PE acknowledged she did have concerns about subtle forms of discrimination students could experience whilst on placement.

There was one student from a BME background and there was a lot more...I kind of felt, a lot more questions that were being asked about their capability....That came from colleagues when it came to...doing work, and it was an interesting thing about, where is that coming from" (PE11).

Students also perceived these subtler, more insidious impacts of working in organisations that were not diverse, discussing their perception that there was a requirement to conform and limited space to speak up and be heard as a student in a relatively weak position of power.

but I feel like I couldn't have that voice there. I just had to conform to everything. I felt like I couldn't even make my own professional opinions because...I had to do it their way, that's what they wanna hear and that's what they wanna see (Student C)

Two of the students interviewed had opportunities to work in both racially diverse and non-diverse environments and were able to contrast these experiences, identifying that diverse workplaces were more comfortable as there was a shared understanding of being a cultural or ethnic minority.

I had not had much exposure to diversity...everywhere that I had worked was predominantly White, where I was the only minority. But at [Agency]...all of the workers were, like, Black. You didn't need to explain things explicitly...we had these common values, even though we were from...two different backgrounds, two different parts of the world. (Student B)

Placement organisations and the university could do more to recognise the impact that a majority White work environment can have on Minority Ethnic students and develop approaches for PE's which recognise the potential for indirect institutional forms of racism and explicitly acknowledge additional challenges that might be faced by Minority Ethnic students. Exploring identity can be an important part of this response, but is likely to be most effective where the reflection and exploration is not focused on the race/identity of the student alone but on the racial and power differentials within the relationship, team or organisation.

Culture

Whilst students spoke directly about 'race' and 'ethnicity' during their interviews, PEs and university staff frequently referred to 'culture' and 'identity' instead. Indeed, student participants noted that professionals on placement and at the university sometimes appeared to avoid discussing race explicitly.

Within the PE/UL focus groups, a variety of negative placement outcomes and experiences for Minority Ethnic students were attributed to 'cultural differences'. Participants identified a variety of problematic behaviours, attitudes and traits which they considered to be primarily 'cultural'. For instance, one focus group participant attributed the poor time-keeping of some students to their 'cultural' background. Another participant attributed the 'passivity' of a student to her religious background and upbringing. Generally, some PEs appeared to take a 'deficit' approach to Minority Ethnic students, focused primarily on issues and challenges as opposed to a 'strengths' based approach which would consider the cultural background of a Minority Ethnic student as a positive attribute. This may partly be a consequence of the framing of the research project and focus group questions, which asked PE's to consider barriers to

progression; leading participants to consider challenges and issues rather than strengths. However, some PEs did discuss using specific strengths based approaches which they found were effective.

Alongside a 'deficit' approach to cultural difference, a small number of PEs stated they felt it was important that Minority Ethnic students accept the PEs judgement if placements issues were deemed to be 'cultural'. One PE stated that if a student resisted their interpretation of the issue as 'cultural' then they would not be able to move forward and succeed on the placement. For a small minority of PEs/ULs, it appeared they regarded their own view of a potential 'cultural' issue to be privileged over the students' interpretation. This was particularly surprising given the majority of PEs had self-reported very limited experience of working with people from other cultures and limited relevant or recent training.

A lack of cultural knowledge and understanding in some organisations or teams did not go unnoticed by students. Students reported that misunderstandings and presumptions about their 'culture' were frequent (from PEs and the wider workforce they interacted with on their placement). Generally, such misunderstandings were not malicious and students were able to educate and inform their placement colleagues through open conversations. However, students did express surprise at the lack of cultural and racial awareness they encountered within some placement organisations.

and [Social Worker] thought that being Asian and being Muslim and being Sikh and Hindu and all of these were all the same thing?" / "a temple and a Mosque were exactly the same thing. And I had to sort of break it down and say, actually it's not...but this is like um, primary school level teaching (Student B)

A lack of cross- cultural knowledge could lead to some students taking on a 'cultural expert' role within their teams which created a certain amount of ambivalence. Whilst for some students this was a largely positive experience which allowed them to share aspects of their culture with genuinely interested colleagues, it could also be uncomfortable and place an additional strain on students to educate others. PE's had also noted this tendency for students to become 'cultural experts' and had sought to address this within their teams.

I think the team...wanted...her to kind of be the expert, in terms of, you know, BME identity, and I perhaps was a bit complicit in that. So, I think there was...and I think she, you know, she didn't feel comfortable, she didn't want that role, um, so we did some awkward conversations" (PE12).

There appeared to be many complex dynamics around the idea of 'culture' within Minority Ethnic students' placements. Most strikingly, students noted a lack of cultural awareness (not always but often), whilst PEs/ULs did not necessarily recognise or discuss these limitations within their organisations or own practice. The term 'culture' is a slippery one and it was not always clear exactly what PEs/ ULs were referring to when they discussed this, although they did sometimes conflate ethnicity/ race and culture. From a student perspective, the framing around 'culture' emerged from professionals, and was not their own preferred lens through which to understand their identity or their experiences as a Minority Ethnic student. It is important for education and social work professionals to have a clarity of understanding about the concepts, such as culture, that they use in their work with students. Similarly, professionals (including PEs and university staff) might take a more critically reflective approach to their own cultural knowledge and seek to develop their learning around race, culture and ethnicity.

Communication

A number of PEs and ULs intimated that some Minority Ethnic students struggled with 'communication'. There were a range of interrelated issues around abiding by 'cultural' norms of interaction (hand shaking, eye contact) or making conversation and asking probing questions. PEs and ULs appeared to be ascribing to a limited and narrow understanding of what effective communication in social work looks like. PEs supported students to develop 'communication skills' by encouraging (or requiring) them to adapt their communication style to one that was deemed more appropriate. Suggested ways of supporting students revolved around reinforcing traditional understandings of 'good communication'. PEs in one focus group were keen on the idea of Minority Ethnic students watching videos of Carl Rogers to better understand how they should communicate, with no reflection on what it might mean to ask a young Black woman to emulate the communication style of an older, White man.

Occasionally, issues around communication were centred on interactions within teams and organisations rather than with service users specifically. PEs reflected on experiences where Minority Ethnic students had been considered 'disengaged', lacked confidence or struggled to build relationships within organisations. Interviews with some students revealed that they may appear disengaged (both on placement and on campus) due to feelings of 'standing out', being isolated or worries about how they are perceived as a person of colour in majority White spaces.

It was hard like, yeah. Because all eyes were on me 24/7. I couldn't even pick up the phone. I noticed that, when I was picking up... I was completely changing the way that I spoke, yeah... That's not really me. I noticed that, as well...I know you should speak professionally to an extent, but I felt like I was completely changing my accent, the tone, everything. (Student C)

Some students discussed a feeling that they were required to be friendly and that any lack of overt friendliness such as smiling was interpreted as a communication difficulty and an issue of competence.

Students were especially aware of a need to present themselves in particular ways to avoid being labelled as problematic or, as one student put it, 'an angry Black woman'. Some students discussed how they changed the way they presented themselves in order to appear more acceptable to the organisation. Specific examples included changing their accents, changing their names (to something more easily pronounced) and generally adopting a quieter and more submissive approach. They were sometimes at pains to make their White colleagues more comfortable with them. One student interpreted her reluctance to adopt a more pliant and unchallenging stance as a reason for failing her placement. One PE raised concerns that issues over Minority Ethnic students' competence were sometimes raised when the basis of the problem was not practice competence but the student's lack of social engagement with team members.

The topic of communication skills was raised by both PEs and students, although again, very different perspectives emerged. Students were wary about (and sometimes resistant to) the need to adapt their communication style beyond the usual requirements of communicating in a professional manner. Such adaptations had the potential to stretch across the boundaries of professional requirements and into a critique or denial of a student's racial identity. From the PEs' perspective, they were concerned that 'cultural' differences in styles of communication hindered students' progress on placement- although some PEs did suggest that service users themselves were more open to a variety of communication styles than PEs and colleagues could be. Some aspects of the communication skills expected of social workers are not easy to pin down, relying on a mixture of specific techniques and the 'use of self' to make genuine, human connections. Given this it is inevitable that some issues raised around communication skills by PEs/ ULs were not defined clearly (framed around engagement, friendliness or rapport-building) whilst others were very specific and therefore easier to address in a positive way. One positive example would be the language learning needs of students for whom English is a second language, for which PEs often had developed useful strategies and adjustments (for instance PEs discussed avoiding using jargon and colloquial language).

This is a complex issue, but it is important that everyone involved in the education of students recognises and values different styles of communication (with service users and within teams) whilst being mindful that strong communication skills are a requirement of practice. Decoupling potential learning needs around communication skills from a students' race or culture may be an important principle. Similarly, PEs & ULs should ensure that where issues are raised about a student's communication - that the issue can be clearly articulated in terms of practice requirements.

Preparedness for placement and support for PEs

Some PEs were concerned that their role was undervalued within the profession and that they did not always have the full support they needed from organisations, particularly during difficult or challenging placements. A feeling emerged from PE interviews and focus groups that students (generally) could be better prepared for their placement experience by the university. PEs/ ULs raised some specific challenges around supporting international students or students who did not speak English as a first language. Whilst the experiences of Minority Ethnic students and international students intersect, there are some experiences and issues which can be particular to international students. These primarily centre around written and verbal language skills and the level of preparation in these skills that such students have before starting their placement

PEs who had experience of supporting international students felt that it was particularly challenging. Social work requires a high level of written and verbal communication and an ability to learn and use complex legal and technical terminology, especially in settings where there are crossovers with health and medicine. PEs questioned whether international students were adequately prepared by their university learning for the challenges of written and verbal communication in the placement setting. PEs regularly found themselves providing intensive support around writing reports and case notes, which limited the available time to focus on other key social work skills and knowledge.

Um, but also it would have been good to have some, kind of, teaching support, around...working with people where English is not their first language. (PE12)

From the interviews and focus groups it is clear that the PE role is a challenging, as well as rewarding one and that there are a number of levels on which PEs felt they too could be better prepared. Organisational support (from placement organisations and the university) is not always as robust as it could be - particularly around dealing with complex challenges like racism and supporting international students. Whilst individual ULs can offer university support during the placement - a wider range of support tools could be envisaged to help PEs and students prepare for placements and to help support them through challenges.

Conclusions

The issues identified in this report are systemic and not purely about the practice of individual PEs, ULs or organisations. They speak to wider challenges for Minority Ethnic students in Higher Education, in the Social Work profession and in society generally. The context of students studying in a series of overlapping majority White spaces is important. Whilst it is not within the scope of the recommendations of this report to alter such demographic homogeneity - the crucial factor is for everyone involved in the education of our social work students to recognise this context and the impact it has on our Minority Ethnic students.

One example of the systemic nature of the issues raised in this report is the 'issue' of Communication Skills. The social Work profession has potentially taken a narrow, traditional (and arguably racialised) approach to defining good communication. This is perpetuated through the education student social workers receive throughout their training in both the university and in practice. Addressing the immediate issues that this poses for students on placement is important, but disrupting that cycle is also crucial - and requires deep reflection from everyone involved in the education and training of social workers within our department (and beyond).

It is clear that Minority Ethnic students are experiencing direct and indirect forms of racism whilst on their practice placements, often from service users; but also potentially from within our organisations and institutions. Many PEs may not be adequately prepared or supported to take appropriate action when incidents arise. A unified approach between the university and placement organisations is required and should include clear statements, policies and procedures to support PEs and university staff to take action and ensure students feel safe during their placement experience. Beyond addressing direct forms of racism and discrimination that occur on placements, we need to recognise that there are crucial differences in the way that students and PEs/ULs perceive race (and racism). Whilst students talk openly about race and their experiences of racism, PEs/ULs did not always recognise the impact of race on students' experiences or preferred to talk euphemistically about 'culture' and 'identity'. This 'colour-blind approach' could be damaging to the student experience and an approach which recognises race and the impact of being a Minority Ethnic student in overlapping White spaces should be promoted. Similarly, the development of more strengths based approaches to students is important to encourage a move away from perceptions that Minority Ethnic students may pose additional challenges which are rooted in their culture.

These findings speak to the need for high quality training and support for PEs and university staff specifically around race and identity, which many participants suggested they would be open to. Given the complexity of some of the issues and a plethora of contested and unclear terminologies around race, culture and identity, it may also be beneficial for the department (SPSW) to explain clearly its position on race and racism and take an explicitly anti-racist stance. This could provide students with a clearer understanding of the department's commitment to improving the experiences of Minority Ethnic students and provide a platform for the university to discuss with partner organisations our stance on Minority Ethnic students and their placement experiences.

Supporting practice learning is challenging and complex work, and for those who take on the main responsibility for this task (PEs) their efforts are not always fully valued or recognised. The primary recommendations moving forward therefore aim at organisational change and collaborative partnerships for development between different institutions - rather than focusing primarily on the practice of individuals. However, it is important for all PEs and university staff involved in supporting practice learning to reflect on their own practice values, beliefs and prejudices as well as supporting organisational changes. Spaces to discuss and reflect together as a community of social work educators could be critical to this process. The project received an extremely positive response from local PEs with a large number taking part in focus groups and interviews. Universally, the PEs/ ULs who engaged in the project were open to exploring their own practice further and would welcome any additional support or training that could be offered. The willingness of local practitioners and placement organisations to engage with and support this research has provided an opportunity for positive collaboration, reflection and action.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Department of Social Work & Social Policy

Policies and procedures

- Placement audits and reviews, conducted by the Independent Placement Panel (IPP), should ensure that audited placement providers summarise how they respond to discrimination against students who have protected characteristics from within or outside the organisation, including from those who use the service.
- The Department will provide guidance and best practice exemplars to placement providers who request support in strengthening their response to discrimination.
- The 'Placement Learning Agreement' (PLA) process should be adapted/ used to inform students of the support and action they can expect if they experience discrimination due to protected characteristics during their placement.
- The IPP will ensure that when they are considering placement issues, they will examine whether protected characteristics have been a factor and will endeavour to convene a diverse panel.
- The Department will take steps to ensure that the students are aware of the function of the IPP to independently evaluate issues of discrimination on placement.

- The SPSW Equality & Diversity Committee to consider how to use departmental student representative positions to strengthen support and representation for Minority Ethnic students within the department.
- Diversity training to be provided for staff and open to PEs and partner organisations - to include anti-racism, valuing difference and linking strengths based approaches to diversity.

Teaching & learning

- The SPSW Equality & Diversity Committee should consider the impact of limited staff ethnic diversity on students and ways in which this can be alleviated.
- The Social Work teaching team to consider how best to use external speakers and practitioners on our programmes to address the lack of diversity within the teaching team, until more permanent change is possible.
- The Social Work teaching team to review their approach to practice approaches (e.g. communication skills) across the breadth of the programme as well as any specifically related modules.

Supporting practice education

- Establish an ongoing collaborative 'book club' for local practitioners and academic staff around issues of race and diversity. This recognises the limitations of one-off training for deepening understanding of complex issues and encourages a dialogic and reflective approach to improving our practice together.
- Provide specific training and resources for PEs around anti-racist and strengths based approaches to practice education.

Supporting research

- SPSW Equality & Diversity Committee to consider how researchers might access quantitative data about student attainment and outcomes within the confines of GDPR regulations.
- Continue to support ongoing research and dissemination on the experiences of Minority Ethnic students.

Recommendations for placement providers

- Develop specific guidance outlining expected response to incidents of racism and discrimination experienced by students on placement.
- Design effective and accessible policies on race, diversity and tackling discrimination, and ensure that these are available to students from induction.
- Provide opportunities for 'Continuing Professional Development' (CPD) on race and anti-racism for all staff and students on placement.

Recommendations for Practice Educators and university staff supporting students

- Proactively engage with opportunities to develop learning and understanding of race, culture and diversity.
- Explore and understand how race impacts on students' placement experiences, understanding the potential issues with a 'colour-blind' approach to race.
- Explore your own race and identity in preparation for supporting students and with students throughout placement.
- Adopt an explicitly strengths based approach to supporting students on placement.

References

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