Decolonial Praxis: Teacher educators' perspectives on tensions, barriers, and possibilities of anti-racist practice-based Initial Teacher Education in England

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Abstract

The impact of colonisation, cognitive imperialism, and Eurocentric ways of knowing, being and doing have had an effect on education, including teacher education. Colonial epistemologies, 'epistemicide', 'academic dependency' disempowerment and 'intellectual inferiority' are challenged by decolonial and liberatory pedagogies that present opportunities to reconceptualise ontological and epistemic foundations to inform praxis. However, prevailing teacher education policies of standardisation in England raise difficult obstacles against decolonial and anti-racist practices. By acknowledging the existence of institutionalised forms of coloniality, which includes the reproduction of colonial-modernist-western modes of thinking and doing, a re-imagined decolonial reality can be envisioned. We argue that this process can engender humanising, antiracist, and epistemically liberating pedagogies within teacher education, which can encourage the co-existence of a diverse plurality of forms of knowing, being and doing. Through conversational semi-structured interviews with nine teacher educators, enriched by a critical analytic ethnographic study, the findings suggest perceptible evidence of teacher educators' growing curiosity and commitment to exposing ITE's complicity in the reproduction and sustenance of the logics of coloniality of knowledge and relational inequities.

Keywords: Initial Teacher Education; decolonial praxis; antiracist practice; barriers and possibilities

Introduction

This study investigates university teacher educators' perspectives on tensions, barriers, and possibilities of anti-racist practice in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in England and the link between decolonial praxis and antiracist pedagogical approaches. hooks' (1994) idea that 'the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy' (1994:12) presents a daring path of how ITE could develop and strengthen its anti-racist and decolonial praxis. Progress down this path is underway in ITE, but practices remain patchy between the Primary and Secondary phases and are easily set back by Government changes and social mores (Puttick & Murrey, 2020). Within this environment, racially minoritised student teachers are positioned as 'other' and navigate complex and culturally incongruent spaces (Warner, 2022). Within ITE, specific and destabilising factors present barriers to pursuing decolonial initiatives. These are revealed in curricula bound by policy expectations, a focus on standardised and measurable outcomes, and an institutional lack of knowledge and will (DfE, 2022). In these conditions, structural racism and narrowed policies thrive (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020). Widespread calls to decolonise the curriculum have impacted ITE less than the rest of Higher Education. This has prompted ITE educators to believe that we may now have reached a crucial reckoning point in our role of educating the future teaching workforce. We either continue the road of an ever-constricting standardised curriculum or engage with a creatively responsive framework that reflects the social reality of a diversified workforce (Dominguez, 2019).

We draw inspiration from Sanchez (2018) and seek not to offer a guide about what decolonial praxis *should mean or how it should be done to* avoid the reproduction of

coloniality in work with student teachers. Instead, we offer a series of interjections and counter-narratives that trouble neo-colonial discourses that promote racist ideas and practices through action and inaction, which is often prevalent in ITE curricula. The following questions drive our inquiry:

1. How are teacher educators' theoretical orientation and positionality implicated in knowledge production, relationality, and critical consciousness?
2. What are teacher educators' perspectives on challenges to developing decolonial and anti-racist practice-based Initial Teacher Education in England?
3. What are the tensions and possibilities of a decolonial and anti-racist ITE?

Literature Review

The impact of colonisation, cognitive imperialism, and Eurocentric ways of being, knowing and doing have been widely examined and discussed in the literature (Ezechuckwu, 2020). In education, these have had a persistent colonial effect on racially minoritised communities, such as epistemic erasure, 'epistemicide' (de Santos Souza, 2005), 'academic dependency' on Eurocentric forms of knowing (Alatas, 2000) 'disempowerment' and intellectual inferiority (Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, 1986). These have led to hierarchical 'relational knowing and epistemic injustice' (Pohlhaus, 2011) that materialises through a whitewashing of Othered's cultures, histories, and knowledges and communities. This positions Eurocentric academic knowledge and culture 'as the centre of legitimate knowledge, the arbiter of what counts as knowledge and the source of 'civilized' knowledge' (Smith, 1999: 63). The permeation of Eurocentric thinking in learning and teaching is reinforced by a governing curriculum that invalidates and excludes diverse world views and forms of knowledge. Thus, curricula remain anchored to imperial ways of generating and expressing knowledge that is part of a dominating epistemic and ontological world order. These organisational conditions perpetuate academic dependency and mental captivity, manifesting in an 'uncritical and imitative mind' based on Western thought modes (Alatas, 1974). Freire (1967:19) notes that 'all education is political, and teaching is never a neutral act' hence the need for educators to be conscious of their orientation and pretensions of neutrality and universality in knowledge generation and relational encounters. By acknowledging institutional forms of coloniality, a reimagining of what a decolonial reality might look like can be envisioned to enable epistemically just and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Alim & Paris, 2017) within ITE that foreground multivocal ways of knowing. This process engenders humanising and epistemically liberating pedagogies within teacher education, encouraging the coexistence of plurivesal relationalities and worldviews (Carmichael-Murphy & Gabi, 2021). We consider praxis as ongoing self-reflexivity and critical consciousness that repositions subjectivity and accountability as a prerequisite for delinking from entanglements with coloniality (Mignolo, 2009). As argued by Mignolo & Walsh (2018:19), decoloniality is a practice-based, action-oriented ongoing process that is:

> *Understood as a praxis – as a walking, asking, reflecting, analyzing, theorizing, and actioning – in continuous movement, contention, relation, and formation.*

Therefore, decolonial praxis becomes a process of de-linking from the colonial matrices of power that involves working from a position of radical hope and re-imagining possible futures. This entails 'an approach that emphasises the connection between significant personal change and concrete teaching strategies, resources, and practices' (Hayes, Luckett & Misiaszek (2021:898-899).
Such actions move the 'coloniality of knowledge' (Lander 2000), 'coloniality of power' (Quijano, 2010) and the 'coloniality of being' (Maldonado-Torres, 2007) toward the 'unveiling of epistemic silences of Western epistemology' (Mignolo, 2009:4) and seek to dismantle inequitable patterns of knowledge generation and relations.

Reclaiming knowledge and sustainable, transformative change beyond tokenistic gestures is at the heart of decolonising the curriculum (Bouttatia, 2015). Arday et al. (2021) identify universities as deeply colonial in structure and curricula, reproducing and sustaining hegemony. They argue that we are at a 'critical juncture' when Eurocentric, epistemic control, in the form of accepted canons and dominant discourses, needs to be reimagined. Anti-racist and decolonial praxis, working in parallel, can expose and eradicate injustices caused by uncritiqued normalcy embedded in the system. Heleta (2016) extends this further in his conceptualisation of epistemic violence in Higher Education as an instrument that maintains racial hierarchy in learning and subjugation of minoritised students' knowledge. The only way forward, he proposes, is re-thinking and re-constituting curricula with many forms of knowledge and understanding. Efforts to challenge ongoing coloniality in universities are hampered by a Eurocentric academic infrastructure that sustains the colonial condition and mindset. Interrogating persistent forms of coloniality is crucial for opening spaces for reflexive practices that nurture authentic dialogue and praxis as shared action toward epistemic, cognitive, and restorative justice that seeks to realign, rebalance, and address miseducation that is no longer fit for sustainable, equitable and inclusive 21st Century education (Marcus, 2021).

Coloniality in ITE has different turns and contradictions from the rest of HE. As a professional provider, ITE produces teachers that can be deployed to any school that follows the English National Curriculum. The standardising requirements create a baseline for practice which has become the dominant feature. At the same time, diversity and difference across schools and teaching are not embodied in professional attributes (Department for Education, 2018). There is laudable good practice in many ITE institutions that is shared and effective within ITE programmes where student teachers are challenged and equipped to enact anti-racist teaching and where decolonial action values both non-White and Eurocentric ideas are embedded (Davies, 2021). Efforts to dislodge teacher-student power/knowledge hierarchies are evident where co-authoring and collective writing between students and educators aimed at enabling geography student teachers to thrive within the teaching profession (Rushton et al., 2021). But this is intermittent, left to the will of individual teacher educators and subject teams (Cushing & Snell, 2022). Notably, there is a lack of push or acknowledgement from the top and even a subduing of anything seen as radical or upsetting to the status quo (DfE, 2022). While the *Core Content Framework* (Department for Education, 2019) is presented as flexible to allow ITE institutions to include additional and optional elements, this can mean the outcomes for decolonising work are patchy.

Puttick and Murrey (2020) suggest there is a 'deafening silence' on decolonial praxis with little space for creative and thoughtful decolonial approaches to move

authentically from traditional knower-receiver ways of teaching. This reproduces 'canons' of theories that cloak them in a normalised and uncontested aura (Moncrieffe, 2020). This reifies the cultural reproduction of Euro-centric ideologies that keep knowledge and capital within powerful White discourses and demote Black, Brown and Global South epistemologies (Ayling, 2020). These hidden White cultural norms are deeply embedded but serve to sever links between culture and education for racially minoritised student teachers (Martin & Pirbhai-Illich, 2016). In teaching reading, for example, the rules of Phonics are drilled as a separate entity to reading as a creative process. This creates an artificial division between the two where children's agency and reading power are afforded second place.

These barriers have created an impasse in ITE where there seem to be no clear direction, the body of knowledge, or will to change. Student teachers are left to work it out themselves. Black and Asian student teachers in the minority in ITE feel deficient and irrelevant because they are not listened to or represented (Warner, 2022). White student teachers, who desire to move forward in equitable education, are ill-equipped to challenge their Whiteness and privilege and may ironically reproduce harmful colonial practices (Kerr & Andreotti, 2019). The lure of coloniality in ITE is convenient. It is often found in congenial and acceptable guises such as social, moral, and ethical justice agendas. Educators are still locked in reproducing oppressive and colonialist ideas and practices while believing their teaching is inclusive and just (Pashby & Sund, 2020). This means that there are no attempts to dislodge the knowledge of the powerful (Puttick & Murrey, 2020) due to the absence of decolonial equitable knowledge building. Turning towards decolonising in the ITE curriculum recognises student agency and is not afraid to name race in pedagogy, which provokes, contextualises, and draws them practical and embodied understandings (Olsson-Rost, Sinclair & Warner, 2021; Nayeri,& Rushton, 2021). It also enables a crossing of borders from hegemonic and uncontested privilege toward new radical conversations (Kerr & Andreotti (2019) that engenders pluriversality and plurivocality where teaching becomes *with* and *alongside* learners to build a critical, relational, and dialogic space.

The slow and limited progress in addressing hidden oppressions in dominant bureaucratic structures and curricular content leads to racial harassment, stereotyping, and alienation of Black and Asian students (Wong et al., 2020; Arday, Belluigi & Thomas, 2021). Dominguez (2019:50) notes that teacher education is poised at a point of socio-political reckoning because of a lack of response to the worldwide calls for decolonising education. The numbing effect of bureaucratisation and accountability has produced a static, 'epistemic zero point,' which he argues disables attempts to trouble and dislodge Western domination. He emphasises that the training of teachers needs specific and uncompromising intervention to avoid reifying colonial practices. The difficult socio-political position within which ITE is situated reveals pedagogical discomfort and challenging tensions. Policymakers and institutions interrupt Western knowledge in how generations of student teachers are now educated as a matter of urgency and demand ontological shifts to draw in ignored and sidelined theories and pedagogies. Only then is there the possibility of teacher education becoming potent and transformative.

Methodological positioning

This research emanated from an ethical and professional responsibility and a socio-political act to intentionally disrupt injustice and re-dress deficit thinking, disentangle knowledge from colonial ways and misconceptions about racially minoritised communities. Antiracist practice and decolonial praxis allowed us to consider ways of promoting open and embodied human inter-relationality and contribute to our university strategy and priorities to champion racial equity within ITE. As Black, Asian, and minoritised researchers, we are few and often subject to silence and silencing that instantiates our position as outsiders to ITE and erodes our sense of being, yet motivates us to undertake this research. Embracing our heterogeneity as researchers, we engage in deep introspection as a source of strength. Enriched by a critical analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006), we can tell our stories from a 'place of personal-political-pedagogical-philosophical crisis' (Mackinlay, 2019: 203). Our approach is anchored in challenging disembodied practice-based research and undoing forms of coloniality in curricula and relational encounters, moving towards embodying transformative praxis (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). This is underpinned by recognising and examining how teacher education is complicit in disembodied curricula and practices purported by White, Western epistemologies (Ohito, 2019). These serve to separate knowledge from experience. However, embodiment acknowledges and is empowered by understanding how experiences bring fuller dimensions to how we know and understand the world. We are also conscious of how our entanglements with coloniality and other institutional structural factors that govern ITE curriculum delivery may complicate the research process. Thus, as we seek decolonial and dialogical reflexive spaces, the idea of 'body-knowledge-space configuration' informs our research and praxis (Ezechuckwu, 2020) is recognised. This allows us to move from the colonial binary matrix that works at stratifying and segmenting us into perpetual victimhood of oppressor/oppressed or victim/saviour to understanding how racism's subtleties thread through the curricula of ITE can be countered. This enquiry attempts to make visible the link between positionality, relational ethics, and decoloniality.

Methods and procedure

We conducted conversational semi-structured interviews with nine (collaborators) Primary and Secondary teacher educators at the same Higher Education institution who teaches a combination of ITE undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Where the collaborators are subject specialists, this has been indicated in the analysis and discussion. Pseudonyms have been assigned to protect their identities. As a fully engaged encounter, the interviews helped make accessible multiple perspectives and intersections of material context that contributed to the productive formation of meaning. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was recorded. Each collaborator received an information sheet explaining the study's purpose, approach, and dissemination strategies. Informed consent was obtained for face-to-face audio-recorded interviews and video recording and audio for remote interviews via the university's Microsoft Teams. Ethical approval for the study was obtained through institutional processes of Research Ethics.

We were conscious of the impact our discussions and reflections on anti-racist and decolonial praxis might have. This could not be underestimated or glossed over, particularly for the collaborators (and us) as we experience the weight of higher education institutions' ongoing coloniality. Thus, our research had the potential to generate aversive feelings of guilt, embarrassment and discomfort evoked by self-reflection and evaluation. To mitigate risk to the collaborators and us, we engaged in therapeutic debriefing sessions after the interviews. This nurtured meaningful dialogic knowledge generation processes based on a shared struggle to transform ITE and relational modalities of accountability, respect, reciprocity, and responsibility (Wilson, 2008). This helped create a visceral sense of solidarity that challenged the view that researchers 'give voice' to the collaborators. Instead, drawing from hooks (1994:148), we considered 'coming to voice' as not merely about telling our experiences and perspectives but rather, 'it is using that telling strategically to come to voice' so that we can co-generate meaning. Through debriefing sessions, we realised how our ITE experiences were intersubjectively entangled, which helped us all feel less isolated. As part of the research process, an anonymous short baseline survey, approximately 15 minutes to complete, was distributed to the collaborators who responded to the invitational email. The survey aimed to gain some initial insights into the tensions, barriers, and possibilities of antiracist practice experienced by teacher educators and to draw on these in the semi-structured conversational interviews. Secondary sources were also gathered from the collaborators willing to share examples of antiracist-inspired materials they have used as part of their teaching practice that inform their understanding of decolonial thought and its application in the classroom. The materials were used as examples to deepen understanding of how teacher educators' theoretical orientation and positionality may be implicated in knowledge production and critical consciousness. Sharing these materials was voluntary, and the shared resources were anonymised and analysed as secondary evidence of antiracist practice in ITE.

Data collected from the semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic coding to establish key themes and effectively manage the data. There has been a divergence of views regarding the merit of establishing codes before data analysis or whether it is more faithful to the data to be responsive in the analysis (Cohen et al., 2018). In this instance, the research questions acted as a starting point from which codes were formed, modified, and occasionally merged in response to the data. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019) was utilised, which flexibly aligns with analytic autoethnography as it acknowledges the researchers' active role. The interpretative process of making meaning of the varied and nuanced responses from the conversations was considered a highly significant aspect of the data analysis process - hence the emphasis on the reflexive aspect of the thematic analysis. With a post-positivist lens, it has been argued that observations and analysis are inevitably subjective and that to argue anything else is 'epistemically naïve because it ignores the theory-ladenness of observations' (Gläser and Laudel, 2013: 14). As a research team, we, therefore, wanted to acknowledge our positionality as interpreters, to make our roles visible as an integral part of our methodology. We are cognisant of the fact that 'coding is recognised as an inherently subjective process, one that requires a reflexive researcher - who strives

to reflect on their assumptions and how these might shape and delimit their coding' (Braun and Clark, 2020: 39). We carried out the analysis following the six stages of reflexive thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clark (2020: 39): 'familiarisation; coding; generating initial themes; reviewing and developing themes; refining, defining and naming themes; and writing up'. These were not rational sequencing of methodological steps that isolate each step from another but how:

> 'Thinking about data's relationality, movement, entanglements or multidirectional epistemic flows – that is, knowledge from data shaping researchers and research, knowledge from research shaping data, and/or knowledge within the data-researcher relationship shaping the data-researcher relationship, among others – might help us to change the direction of knowledge production' (Koro-Ljungberg, 2015:46)

Excerpts of raw data also added analytic depth and richness to the data. As an imperative for relational ethics and anti-oppressive research, we shared the findings and analysis with the collaborators for them to review and bring any issues/suggestions. They were happy with how we anonymised and presented the data. A few suggestions made were incorporated into the findings and analysis.

Findings and discussion

Positionality and orientation

Positionality and orientation around understanding the term decolonial praxis were described as:

> '*It means being prepared to attempt to uncover unconscious biases, and to engage in processes which broaden the intellectual soundscape, to include as many voices as possible from different ethnic, social and cultural traditions, with the explicit aim of expanding perceptions of who is able/invited/permitted to contribute to knowledge'.*

One of the survey respondents provided this comment and links to the idea that positionality in terms of whiteness is an issue for teacher educators. There is a frustration in wanting to be supportive, as exemplified by Molly, a Primary and Secondary Modern and Foreign Languages teacher:

> '*I can't even begin to understand how those people feel, who have gone through those experiences, and they have, you know, they will have ancestry and things like that. But it's about for me to do decolonising; it's about saying, okay, yeah, you know, let's face it, I can't, I'm never going to be, you know, I'm never going to be anything different than I am. But I can be supportive and play a part to enable the children to understand'.*

Phoebe, a Primary and Secondary PGCE Tutor with academic interests in transformation in the classroom through equality of opportunity, commented:

> *'I think that until we accept white privilege is real and it shapes outcomes and opportunities, how do we move forward. Look at our government, predominantly White men. How can they dismiss white privilege?'*

Fay, a Primary PGCE/BA teacher, mentioned how she struggled with her whiteness and referred to challenges as a white teacher educator when talking about race with students. She and others referred to these tensions since they felt it is also essential whilst this work is challenging. There was also a sense of guilt associated with delivering a Eurocentric curriculum. Phoebe commented,

> 'So, *our ITE curriculum is Eurocentric, White and utterly skewed and biased. And I don't really think very much has changed. And until we've really picked this up, I still believe there is a huge amount of work to do on looking at the colonial damage that has been done and still exists.'*

Fay highlighted her concerns around '*tokenistic'* and *'visual'* gestures that *'whitewash'* the issues on the surface and do not seem to resolve the deeper problems. Nathan, a Primary and Secondary History PGCE teacher, adds: '*for me, decolonial practice is taking an honest good look at our mindset and our own set of values... I think it is a way of mentally challenging our preconceived notions.'* He expands on and explains his view on the politicisation of these issues:

> *'And potentially Marxist groups which to me and in the whole thing politicises, you know, there's a deliberate misinterpretation, I think, by many politicians, more on the right of what deep colonialism is. They see it as an eradication of history rather than an adding-in. And I think they present it entirely for political purposes to play to a certain gallery and say, look at the dangers here. You know they want to get rid of anything positive about British history, which is not true.'*

There appears to be perceptible evidence from these interviews of a growing curiosity and commitment to exposing ITE's complicity in the reproduction and sustenance of the logics of coloniality of knowledge and relational inequities. As such, decolonial delinking from the colonial matrix of power can be envisioned through practice-based ITE where educators engage in epistemic disobedience (Mignolo, 2009) – learning how to teach whilst confronting their positionality and resisting colonial ways of thinking about and doing teacher education. Individual praxis was undoubtedly described as an intentional and continuous agitation to develop decolonial ways of knowing (Lander, 2000) and being (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). This necessitates openness to practice that promotes embodied inter-relationality and epistemological pluralism.

Propulsion points

The testimonies from several collaborators demonstrated the significance of crucial propulsion points that had encouraged the development of their decolonial praxis. Some teacher educators commented on a shift in their thinking due to becoming involved in a higher education setting after practicing as school teachers earlier in

their careers. In most cases, this allowed for the space and access to research and the development of their knowledge and understanding. When asked what decolonial practice means to her, Karen (a Primary and Secondary Art PGCE Tutor) responded *'Before I came to the university, that really wouldn't have meant very much to me at all.* Illustrating how working in Higher Education has provided further opportunities to engage with decolonial praxis. Critical consciousness through the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement prompted several collaborators to confront their positionality. Phoebe explained her positionality around the ignorance she has experienced:

> *'Because what I see is that white people will say, Well, I'm not racist. And so, it wipes away all the problems, all the challenges. It closes the conversation. It stops any further discussion about racism. And I also think that white people are so fearful of saying the wrong thing that they say nothing at all, which is problematic on many levels. Being silent, in a way, can't be neutral, and by being silent, you are also being complicit. You cannot say I don't have anything to say.'*

This emphasises how silence can present challenges for white teacher educators who feel that they are unable to talk about race and racism since it is not their own lived experience. However, they also highlighted how this creates tensions when silence is perceived as complicit. The BLM movement was viewed as having illuminated the need for social change to break barriers in education and highlighted the inequity of tokenistic equal opportunities policies in schools. For collaborators such as Linda, a Primary PGCE teacher, the propulsion points to critical consciousness happened as a personal exposure to different worldviews, engaging in critical dialogue through family and travel, thus highlighting for them '*subtle forms of racism* and misrepresentation of post-colonial subjects in the Western world.

The interviews revealed that academic disciplines are not immune to being colonised and that a 'shift' or 'propulsion point' for several collaborators resulted in a rethinking of cultural world views, insularity of historical narratives (Bhambra, 2014) and exploring shared assumptions about how the world is (Sabaratnam 2017). The BLM movement seemed to have been a motivating force to push for epistemic justice for several collaborators, even though decolonising the curriculum as a concept is not a result of the BLM movement. This highlights positionality and critical consciousness as crucial factors when considering whiteness and the curriculum's Eurocentric nature. Therefore, integrating marginalised scholars who present alternative knowledge challenges intellectual hegemony and academic neo-imperialism that perpetuates academic dependency (Alatas, 2003). This allows teacher educators to diversify the curriculum and demonstrate how ideas can be theorised from diverse positionalities as a strategy that pushes for equity, and inclusion to address 'miseducation' (Snyder, 2015) and the persistent education equity gap for Black, Asian and minoritised students where they, compared to their White counterparts, are unlikely to get a good honours degree.

Subject-specific examples

Collaborators gave various subject-specific examples of their attempts to decolonise the ITE curriculum. When collaborators who teach on Secondary School PGCEs talked about decolonising their practices and curricula, they predominantly framed this process within their subject specialism. There did appear to be a sense of autonomy and ownership over teaching specialist subjects in ITE programmes. Many of the practices and examples discussed by the collaborators were subject-specific, and the collaborator's sense of how and why to decolonise often relied on subject specialism. For example, Rose, a Primary Science teacher educator, noted how *'a lot of scientific events are accredited to people who are white European essentially'*. They recognised that trainee teachers need to reflect on their teaching and bring in *'ethnicities that are non-white'*. History education was identified as an area where challenging discussions around *'why we teach what we teach and how to teach it'* (Amanda, a Secondary Geography PGCE Tutor) and how this is vital in supporting trainee teachers so that they can understand where the curriculum comes from, and the impact of this on children trying to understand the world. Geography education complements that of History, especially in examples of language from the past, which can bring up challenging discussions in higher education contexts. Nathan, a History specialist, adds to the Humanities dialogue:

> *'Because good history will always be balanced and nuanced, we will acknowledge where Britain has* [sic] *done things that are humanitarian nature. But at the same time, history is those shades of grey'*

Amanda, a geography teacher educator, questioned what decolonising the science curriculum might look like? Pointing out that it has *'not been heard in the national picture'* and the debates are not as apparent as in other subjects. Examples given by an Art teacher educator included embedding a broader cultural base that diverges from the standard curriculum. In Primary Science, examples were used to broaden the view away from White, male, Western scientists. These included comments by Fay, for example, *'positive and more accurate stories in terms of the history of different discoveries*', exploiting *'opportunities given to decolonise the curriculum'*. Fay highlighted that

> *'ITE needs to redress the balance in terms of theorists we draw on when teaching primary students about how children learn, as it feels skewed to a Western view of childhood – e.g., Piaget etc., rather than how children learn within their community.'*

In this way, the collaborators provided subject-specific examples, not tokenistic gestures, to fulfil non-existent structural agendas. On the contrary, they highlighted their efforts to represent knowledge through academic freedom. Examples from various subjects situate subjugated knowledge, experiences, and histories to challenge Eurocentric epistemic violence and decenter whiteness (Kinloch et al., 2020). Collaborators demonstrated preparedness to reconnect, re-order and reclaim knowledge that has been historically marginalised, misrepresented or hidden because of colonial and imperial power (Bhambra, 2014, & Grosfoguel, 2013). This exemplified how these educators navigate positions of knowledge in ITE to impact the next generation of educators. This prominence of discipline-specific knowledge and understanding suggests that teacher educators should be 'up-to-date' with their

practice and disciplinary expertise to transfer this to the students they teach. Therefore, the recent emphasis on decolonising subject disciplines (Gandolfi, 2021; Moncrieff, 2020; Nayeri & Rushton, 2022) may influence how teacher educators make sense of their identity as well-informed practitioners. Decolonial praxis appears to be an integral part of their specialist disciplinary expertise, encouraging the development of such praxis among individual teacher educators. However, this also poses questions about the drivers behind Primary teacher educators' efforts to decolonise their praxis, where subject specialism is less prominent.

Responsibility

All collaborators commented on their individual responsibility for developing decolonial praxis. Some mentioned how this is not something they have been told to do but that they have taken the initiative to establish these practices themselves. The driving force was passion and a strong belief in the importance of undertaking this work as part of an educator's responsibility. Karen commented, 'I *want to move from tokenism to embedded'* praxis, and '*I've chosen to make a big thing of it in my teaching*.' Some also emphasised that their practice was influenced by sociocultural theory: Bourdieu, Foucault, and Freire's ideas, alongside Critical Feminism and Black Feminism. They also acknowledged that they still have much to learn about race and racism.

In contrast to the responsibility of the individual, the collaborators felt that race issues are not seen as necessary in ITE due to accountability and standardising measures from the DfE and OFSTED and that these are the key motivators in ITE programmes, as described by Fay:

> *I think it needs to come from the people at the top, and when I say that, I don't just mean the senior people at universities and schools and colleges. I mean, I think the DfE needs to do more, and I think that's a big conflict.*

Fay expands on this by commenting that unless decolonial practice *'...appears in things like inspection frameworks,'* there would be '*no incentive or motivation* to put it higher on the agenda. These concerns reflect those discussed by Dominguez (2019), although some of this work is being undertaken by dedicated individuals despite a lack of encouragement from 'above'. A couple of the collaborators raised issues related to this individual responsibility, suggesting that *'...it falls on people to have a real passion for this work*' and that when the driving force is solely from one individual, a vacuum is created when the individual is no longer there to take responsibility for the work: *'...all that work that I started did not carry on when I left. It was about me.'* There was a shared feeling that decolonial work is everyone's responsibility and something '*everyone is searching for.'*

The idea of individual responsibility for developing decolonial praxis in teaching resonated with the collaborators, who all felt it was up to them because no one else would do it or be interested in it. Their belief that it is an integral part of their selves

and their role engendered an overriding drive. Nathan commented on his first-year experience of working in ITE and suggested a student perspective:

> *'I see a real willingness on the part of students to want to be challenged and sort of go beyond their comfort zones and sort of out the zones from their school education... I see our role is to kind of model not only best practice but also to make students research informed.'*

This seems to work against existing trends in ITE to subdue and neutralise what is purported to be politicised teaching (DfE, 2022). This can take different guises, such as teacher educators deferring to more acceptable approaches such as teaching moral and ethical ideas that sidestep direct issues of race and equality (Pashby & Sund, 2020). Often informed by Black cultural theory, collaborators deepened their understandings of praxis, leading them to eschew tokenism and seek more meaningful teaching that impacted their student teachers' philosophies and practices in the classroom. This often involved educating their students in what Karen called the '*complicated dynamic'* of how language can both dominate, oppress, and liberate those who are minoritised. They were also concerned that the reliance on certain individuals to carry out this work might result in inconsistent exposure to decolonial praxis for student teachers.

Hearing about individual initiatives in developing decolonial praxis has been illuminating. However, it also reveals challenges and tensions. Even without decolonial approaches at the top of the agenda for the institution, the DfE and all staff, some very well-developed thinking and work is taking place among teacher educators, as demonstrated in the interviews. However, this reliance on individuals' initiative and enthusiasm can lead to fatigue and frustration (Doharty et al., 2021), which could be detected in some interviews.

> *'...there are various challenges, I think, priority and timing within the curriculum. I think it's very much how far schools on the ground will go, you know, be willing to embrace this beyond what I would call a superficial tick box exercise. I think also that for many, not just trainees, but many people in practice, even very experienced colleagues in schools for many years, there's a certain discomfort... I sympathise with colleagues who want to do the right thing but feel inhibited.'*

This can create a situation where it becomes a burden, and an unfair workload, for those members of staff who are undertaking this work (Doharty et al., 2021). It also means that praxis is inevitably inconsistent even with the autonomy afforded in teaching subject specialisms, which seemed to come through quite clearly in these interviews. It can also result in regressive steps if a leading individual leaves their role. Because of the nature of this work, these interviews seemed to suggest that it relies on a deepening of the thinking and understanding that underpins racial literacy and anti-racist practices among teacher educators. Nathan adds:

> '*...even when I'm just having regular discussions with people, I still see and am now more conscious of it than I ever used to be where certain slippages come out that are unintentional and reflect deeply seated societal norms.*'

Teacher educators also discussed how to actively implement strategies such as increasing representative authors on reading lists, not as a tokenistic gesture, but to challenge trainee teachers to think about '*their own unconscious bias.'* Collaborators highlighted the importance of confronting racial inequities as anti-racist action and '*at least try to stand alongside if not in the shoes of our Black students or Black colleagues.'* It was felt that having opportunities to have conversations with the '*non-white community is essentially how we do it*.' However, it was stressed that more training is required. There was also an acceptance of individual accountability among all the collaborators who commented on the unpicking of attitudes such as '*no problem here. I'm not racist*' and challenging the '*safe space'* occupied by the '*non-racist*' (Kendi, 2019:9).

Institutional initiatives often become tick box exercises (Ahmed, 2012), which does not encourage the kind of deeper thinking a lot of the findings from this study suggest is required to start the decolonising process. For teacher educators to undertake the 'epistemic innovation' that Dominguez (2019) refers to, further development is required. Considering this need to develop decolonial thinking to underpin practice, it might be questionable how far initiatives 'from the top' can facilitate such thinking and doing. Audrey, a Secondary PGCE teacher specialising in English, seemed conscious of her positionality, coloniality and the inequalities of race. She describes it as 'on her radar' and 'being attuned.' Audrey suggested that effective leadership would require '*leading by example*. This could be achieved by affording space to raise and discuss specific concerns, even if this might lead to discomfort. This would also have to be followed up with resources to back up any positive action that might help to address specific issues. This approach appears less '*top down*' (Fay) and more reliant on active leadership at the middle management level. Arguably, leading by example in this way might, yet again, require reliance on the individual initiative and willingness of the middle manager. Audrey's comments specifically highlight a lack of interest and leadership in ITE and silence from the DfE about anti-racism and decolonisation. She suggests this is palpable and reductive for curricula, not how ITE tutors should operate. Audrey seemed frustrated by the focus of her job, shifting from having conversations around developing understandings with colleagues and students to increasingly administrative activities.

Racial literacy

Specific challenges linked to racial literacy were raised as an obstacle. Several collaborators suggested that a lack of racial literacy can result in struggles to respond to issues raised about race and racism when the required depth of understanding is missing, affecting how issues are presented to students. A survey respondent commented that there is '*...assumption that white people know and understand issues of race and racism which, in my experience, is far from reality*.' Audrey also suggested:

> *'The histories and lack of spaces for critical discussion and the troubles that I sit with quite a lot, both in school and when I look outwards at the*

world and see it in teacher education. There is a lack of racial and linguistic literacy in relation to identity, in tutors, teachers in school, the DfE, across the whole system.'

Collaborators commented on the need for accurate representation and awareness of who they are, the lens they are looking through and making their students aware of this. They were mindful of the need for accurate use of language and issues related to the misuse of language in the past. They also highlighted the importance of communicating these issues to student teachers, using approaches to unpick terminology such as 'decolonial praxis'. Audrey understood this as *'critical thinking and reflection which leads to action'* and how appearing to *'think critically'* and *'taking action'* are distinct. Contextual examples were provided by Audrey around '*complicated dynamics'* in name pronunciation in school registers and training teachers to focus on *'giving respect'* as this is an essential part of identity whilst considering *'linguistic justice'* when marking assignments to counter linguistic violence and address racial inequalities and disparities.

The faculty's Black and Asian student group was mentioned as a central facility that captures *'important work being done'*. This collaborator saw this student group as an opportunity to create a *'sense of belonging, and that it is a provision for student voice, which is essential for retention and well-being'*. It was also felt decolonial praxis is not just about the curriculum but the *'bigger picture'* and that it is *essential for university leadership to drive the agenda getting everyone on board in 'challenging the status quo'*

Tensions

There was a sense among several collaborators that time constraints on an ITE programme pose challenges to developing decolonial praxis, especially if all teacher educators are to engage with this work. Several examples were provided, such as being overburdened by administrative tasks and how ITE programmes are designed, with students in university for '*short bursts of time'* whilst spending most of the time in school placements. Questions were raised regarding how teacher educators might respond to being asked to undertake even more work. As Amanda put it: '*everybody will see that as another thing*' they must do, on top of an already overcrowded workload.

Another tension raised by some of the collaborators was the low priority of developing decolonial praxis. This was referred to both at an institutional and DfE level. Some collaborators stressed that this work is seen as optional and that not all teacher educators are engaged. One collaborator thought that because it is not fully embedded, students do not always appreciate the urgency of these issues. The sentiment that it is something 'additional' rather than embedded can make it challenging to incentivise staff to undertake this work.

The feeling that accountability measures highly influence ITE, and specifically a lack of autonomy, was discussed by several collaborators. The influence of OFSTED inspections and performativity measures was referred to specifically. Phoebe

commented, '…our survival depends *on us jumping through those hoops [accountability measures]*.' Audrey also commented on how the Core Content Framework promotes a view of teaching as an '*instrumentalised profession'* and that the DfE's conception of education is not about thinking and exploring, hence discouraging the work required to develop decolonial praxis.

Arguments suggesting that ITE is being left behind in the decolonising the curriculum initiatives and depressingly remains embedded in colonialist practices and epistemic violence (Heleta, 2016) might appear overly critical, especially considering some of the findings of this study. However, the specific context of ITE is undoubtedly holding back more transformative changes in colonial practices. Acting as engaged and passionate individuals, however, is often met with immediate obstacles in ITE due to a lack of commitment by the government (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020). Moves to challenge the ITE curriculum involve engaging with the epistemologies and methodologies of *what* is taught, *how* and by *who*. This is heightened when what is taught comes in the form of a series of centralised directives from the DfE, such as the Teachers' Standards and National Curriculum and is surfeited by demands for 'political impartiality' (Department for Education, 2022). As Fay concluded, '*there is no incentive or motivation* [to decolonise the ITE curriculum],' thus cementing its low-priority status and further embedding the dark, colonial side of education, where race is relentlessly erased and replaced by a modern world side that offers ethical justice and other nebulous ideas instead (Mignolo, 2011).

Concluding thoughts

Challenges in ITE such as structural and institutional forms of whiteness affect pedagogy, curricula, and policies. It struck us how this research has highlighted decolonial and antiracist practices in ITE are not high on the agenda, are still unseen, and are a niche area. It is evident from the interviews that individual teacher educators are passionate about equity and understand how colonialism has oppressed generations, including student teachers, who are being educated within a narrowed curriculum that reflects White dominance and leads to cognitive imbalance. Collaborators expressed frustration and guilt in arriving at decolonial work late in their careers and tensions of wanting to do the work under constraining conditions driven by performativity and standards. This perpetuates the reduction of education to standardised methods and educators as transmitters of such measures. What intrigued us was the importance placed on autonomy and agency. Several Collaborators described their decolonial praxis as part of the delivery of their subject specialism. First, this highlighted how vital autonomy is in delivering subject-specific aspects of ITE. This is where we have the autonomy to develop our praxis, and it is also where we have the most in-depth understanding and conceptualisation of decolonial praxis and what it looks like in practice. Second, it suggested to us that perhaps this is how we encourage further engagement with decolonial and antiracist praxis in ITE as we 'continue to struggle, reflect and learn from our entanglements with coloniality and the intricate and contradictory nature of how we understand and interpret decoloniality as part of the university structure, and moreover of university teaching and learning' (Menon et al., 2021:949).

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