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The identity dilemmas of Early Career Teachers from under-represented groups in the UK

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ABSTRACT

Uncontested narratives of normality in primary teacher training are located and demonstrated in heteronormativity, whiteness, able-bodiedness and femininity. Early-Career Teachers who know and feel they lie outside of these are positioned uneasily as they try to locate spaces to express their identities and enable self-agency. This article explores how beginning teachers from under-represented groups come to understand themselves and others during the process of becoming a primary teacher. Through qualitative analysis of video stories of 12 novice primary teachers, we identified salient themes including dilemmas around identity invisibility/hypervisibility and lack of agency to (re)construct their identities. Our findings have implications for teacher educators and school leaders to provide new teachers opportunities to explore their identity dilemmas alongside their peers in safe spaces. Developing provision that builds beginning teachers' peer networks alongside their understanding of self may not only offer an outlet for self-agency but impact on teacher retention from those located in under-represented groups.

Introduction

Early-Career Teachers (ECTs) in England must follow stringent curriculum and professional requirements, such as the Core Content Framework, to achieve the Teachers' Standards (Department for Education, 2019). This reflects the increased emphasis on what Davies (2003, p. 91) terms 'management, surveillance and control' of individuals and professional groups in the cause of accountability to the public. We recognise that beginning teachers simultaneously draw together personal values and experiences alongside pedagogical knowledge and professional understanding to compose a new teacher identity (Izadinia, 2013). This article explores how ECTs from under-represented (UR) groups come to understand themselves and others during the process of becoming a primary teacher.

Our research emerged from support groups for Primary Postgraduate and Undergraduate student teachers who identified as UR. These groups aimed to recognise the humanity and individuality of teachers and how this influences identity. They also provided space for learning, expression of self-ideals, validity, and purpose (Carter

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Andrews et al., 2019). These 'identity-safe spaces' position students' identitities as assets, rather than barriers (Jaquith & Stosic, 2019). The four groups of under-representation identified for this research are:

- Men in primary teaching
- Lesbian, Gay, non-Binary, Transgender (LGBT+)
- Disabled (physical and 'hidden' such as dyslexia and mental/emotional health)
- Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME)

We argue that treating primary teachers as a homogenous group obscures individual difference, dismisses the importance of self and relational understanding and fails to challenge embedded assumptions surrounding the social norms of being a primary teacher, despite national rhetoric of diversity and widening participation in UK universities (Kimura, 2014). This paper analyses ECTs' self-identity accounts to consider what individual identity dilemmas they experience. These considerations have implications for school leaders and teacher educators.

Literature review

Identity and agency

Research demonstrates several key issues in regards to the need to diversify the teaching profession and subsequent focus on the experiences of UR groups in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) covering areas such as admissions policy and practice for UR groups (Childs et al., 2016; Kimura, 2014); the lack of diversification of the teaching workforce (Keane & Heinz, 2016; Powney et al., 2003), and the bias of ITE curricula towards majority-cultural thinking (Bhopal & Rhamie, 2014; Hick et al., 2011).

Some of the difficulties faced by ECTs are unique which counters the one-size-fits-all approach of ITE such as that evident in the Core Content Framework (Department for Education, 2019). This raises barriers and narrowed discourses that can limit primary teachers' identity production and performances. (Childs et al., 2016). Those from UR groups may struggle to enact personal agency and resist 'common-sense' notions of the ideal primary teacher (Martino, 2008). This is reflected in research that recounts conflict between private and professional lives (Bhopal, 2015; Gray, 2013); problems on school placement (Basit et al., 2006; Tolber & Eichelberger, 2016); ITE and diversity (Keane et al., 2018; Kimura, 2014; Lee & Carpenter, 2015); and the stress of performativity (Ball, 2021). However, while research provides an overview of structural constraints, there is very little that looks specifically at the identities of ECTs from UR groups.

Tensions and paradoxes

Teacher education research acknowledges that identity is shaped by life experiences and formed through narratives of being a teacher (Izadinia, 2013; Woodcock, 2013). Research from South Africa and Australia, respectively, argue that ECTs who identify as being outside of normative social expectations can find themselves positioned as 'other' (McGrath et al., 2020; Moosa & Bhana, 2017) and experience inequalities, exacerbated

by a lack of declared teachers in UR groups. Black and Asian ECTs can be confused about their racial and cultural identity within teaching (Callender, 2020; Lander & Zaheerali, 2016); and male primary teachers may adopt an exaggerated, gendered identity (McGrath et al., 2020; Moosa & Bhana, 2017), reinforcing assumptions about what it means to be a male primary teacher and reifying hegemonic masculinity (Cousins, 2020). Such responses can create conflict between professional and personal identities, leading to feeling excluded, vulnerable, and rejected (Cruickshank et al., 2020; Francis, 2010).

Multiple contradictions impact on negotiation and formation of LGBT+ teachers' identities causing many to suffer in silence, hide their identity and become fearful of disclosure (Henderson, 2017). Tensions surround being seen as sexual deviants and perverts and feeling pressurised to adopt exaggerated gender mannerisms to appear as open, gay and proud (Gray, 2013). This contrasts to taking a 'closet' approach to determine when to conceal or expose their sexuality (Brockenbrough, 2012).

Disabled ECTs expressed tensions in terms of disclosure, requesting reasonable adjustments for medical needs and recognition of some physical limitations. Tal Anon and Shapira-Lishchinsky (2019) classify these tensions, for teachers with disabilities, as 'ethical dilemmas'. These include 'coming out' about their disability; worrying about classroom management; exercising, or not, the legal right to reasonable adjustments; and managing the tension between professional work and medical needs. Their research advocates allowing teachers with disabilities to express their ethical dilemmas without fear of comprising their career progression.

Limitations within ITE

Education as a culturally reproductive tool to solidify the power of the majority is a significant challenge when considering the position of under-representation in teaching. Primary teaching in the UK has been colonised by middle-class, white, young, heterosexual females that disallows images of a diverse profession (Buckworth, 2017). BAME teachers and male teachers represent about 14% in Primary while only 0.5% of teachers are registered as disabled (Department for Education, 2020). There are no governmental statistics for LGBT+ teachers but Lee (2020) states there are around 50,000 in the UK. In addressing these stark discrepancies, Buckworth (2017) calls for an increase in critical and equitable consciousness building in ITE to counteract 'symbolic violence' for those outside of the majority norms. Prioritising discussion and reflection around equity and diversity is limited within ITE and ECTs may feel they do not have the capacity or time to engage with social issues and identity in the face of curriculum demands (Maylor, 2016). Buckworth (2017) eschews the neoliberal marketisation, narrow policies, and global competitiveness, conceived in targets and accountability that erode personal beliefs and values. In ITE she warns, de-humanizing and bureaucratizing standards can destroy relationships between ECTs and school mentors, leading to over-judgmental assessments and breakdown of relationships. This is supported by Lee and Carpenter (2015) who call for wider discussions to occur at policy, university, and school level.

Limitations to expression and progression are evident in UR groups. LGBT+ ECTs constantly deliberate whether, and how to, 'come out' in school, navigating away from being subjects or victims, towards being agents. But they face conflicting and problematic landscapes, veering between a growing societal climate of diversity and

greater self-expression, against homophobic cultures existing in primary schools (Lee & Carpenter, 2015). Brockenbrough (2012) and Neary (2013) highlight that agency is also achieved by them controlling the process between silence and disclosure, although ITE programmes offer little or no authentic LGBT+ input, thus limiting knowledge growth for student teachers. Dvir's (2015) findings suggest that disabled student teachers go through three stages of identity development, transitioning from exclusion and failure to professional efficacy and empowerment as a teacher. Tal Anon and Shapira-Lishchinsky (2019) and Benchetrit and Katz (2019) highlight the importance of providing people with disabilities a voice, suggesting that ITE should encourage how disability contributes to pedagogical knowledge and practice. For male student teachers, Chapman (2021) and Palmer et al. (2020) argue for building confidence around gender, addressing misconceptions and providing a focus on reflective practice in terms of experiences to positively impact on identities.

Addressing deficits in ITE towards gender, sexuality, race or disability involves challenging stereotypes to release UR identities from fixed, two-dimensional images and raising the visibility of a diversity of teachers.

Methodology

This paper draws on both Figured Worlds and Critical Race Theory (CRT) to produce a unique theoretical framework. Drawing on two methodologies presents tensions and possible symmetry emerging from acknowledgement of individual identity and self-representation. These methodologies have the capacity to represent how primary teacher identity involves plurality, challenging the white, middle-class, female mindset. Both methodologies conceive how external factors, social and cultural contexts, can damage and limit individual voice and agency, restricting opportunities to develop positive self-knowledge (Holland et al., 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2016).

Holland et al.'s (1998) theory of Figured Worlds bring focus to identity and agency and, notably, the positioning of individuals within local contexts. It supports the analysis of primary teachers' responses to discursive positioning and what opportunities for professional and personal agency are available for them. Identities are 'grounded' within specific 'frames of social life' (Holland et al., 1998, p. 7) or 'Figured Worlds' and are reformed over time. Holland et al. assert that in these worlds 'big structures', such as race and gender, need to be considered alongside the local, or daily practice, to make sense of self. Critical Race Theory privileges the voice and position of those marginalised and discriminated against because of their race and ethnicity. It premises that racism is endemic due to hidden and subversive majoritarian norms and specifically in education it resists and troubles structures that subordinate BAME students, seeing them as deficient 'others' and promotes more equitable stances (Parker & Roberts, 2011; Solórzano & Yosso, 2016). CRT places high value on the alternative or counter stories of BAME peoples and sees them as levers to challenge and change the status-quo. Through these theoretical lenses the following research questions will be explored:

- How far do Early Career Primary teachers from UR groups feel they can enact their identities, values and principles both at university and in school?

- To what extent do ECTs from UR groups talk about the possibilities for agency in their accounts of entering the profession?
- What role do 'identity-safe spaces' at university and in schools play in developing their identity and positionality in their practice?

Methods and participants

Participants' video stories provided personal and meaningful data avoiding the difficulties of in-person interviewing during theCOVID pandemic. Video stories eliminates technical problems with connection and bandwidth that might occur in a synchronous online interview (Hewson, 2017) and provide security and privacy to follow their narrative path and reflect as they proceed (Pereira & Morales, 2016). They become active agents in control of what and how much they divulge, which is important for discussion of sensitive topics such as identity and discrimination (Hewson, 2017; Whiting et al., 2016). Whiting et al. (2016) further suggest that videos provide potential for participants to enact and re-form their identities.

Twelve ECT participants were involved in the research, either student teachers on campus-based, undergraduate, or postgraduate courses, or qualified teachers in their first two years of classroom teaching. They were all current or former students of one ITE institution in the North of England. Three participants (two male and one disabled student teacher) were final-year undergraduates whilst the others (one male, four BAME, three LGBT + and one disabled student teacher) were PGCE Primary students. All the black and Asian participants were female, while two of the LGBT+ participants were male, and one identified as non-binary. All were between mid-20s and late-30s in age. Some self-selected whilst others were recruited using e-mail. We recognise that it is not possible to generalize from this type of sample to the general population; however, a purposive sample (Patton, 2015) can provide information about complex social phenomena and its significance.

Participants made two or three video stories of between three and five minutes each. They were transcribed and their responses were analysed. This involved identifying points and ideas from individuals that significantly related to the three research questions. Ideas were then grouped, from recurring consistencies, into salient themes. The consistencies in individual stories were cross-referenced with others from any other identified UR group so that the themes were developed across groups. This reduced the possibility of homogenizing and perpetuating stereotypes and gave a better chance of representing realities. Emerging themes were lack of visibility as an ECT from an UR group and feelings of isolation in school; lack of agency to (re)construct their identities during their teacher training, and the importance and impact of having identity-safe spaces to explore their identity dilemmas with others who had similar experiences. Initial themes were identified from participants in each group before triangulating across the groups to identify themes prevalent within their experiences.

A Figured Worlds approach enabled us to explore the complexities of the participants' words to make sense of themselves and their environments while CRT enabled a stronger focus on representing realities, often unheard or mis-heard. Through listening and analysis of their responses we entered a dialogue with them that enabled a move towards representing their different positionings with more integrity. By using Figured Worlds and CRT we gain understanding of individual teacher identity formation and how collective

representation of unheard and mis-heard experiences can shape the notions of plurality in primary teaching.

Ethics

As tutors to some of the participants, we balanced between our professional and researcher roles (BERA [British Educational Research Association], 2018). We guarded these boundaries by volunteer participation, signed consent, right to withdraw, safeguarding individuals' and institutions' anonymities. Conversely, as tutors we benefited from existing relationships with participants which can be a crucial part trust building (Barbour & Schostak, 2011). It also meant we had a good understanding of the context of the research to ensure a more plausible interpretation of responses (Gillespie & Cornish, 2014). Participants agreed to the temporary storage of their videos on the university's video channel in the researchers' private, password-controlled areas, to ensure confidentiality. The researchers' university provided formal ethical clearance.

Findings

In our findings we acknowledge distinctions between participants and respect the UR groups to which they most identify, by using their preferred descriptions for gender, sexuality race and (dis)ability. The findings are organised into three sections that respond to the research questions.

Being invisible

The participants were aware of a lack of visibility and role models from UR groups within the teacher workforce. This made them feel alone and exposed. However, there were contrasts between how they felt able to enact their identities, values, and principles at university and in schools. The LGBT+ participants had not encountered openly gay primary teachers and, for some, their experience prior to teacher training was negative. Marcel felt the weight of discrimination, from negative discourses surrounding HIV, AIDS and Section 28. This initially discouraged his interest in primary teaching, wondering if he would be accepted as he, 'did not feel strong enough to fight and was too embarrassed and ashamed'. David too was anxious about joining the PGCE course and how he would be perceived as a gay man and a teacher.

For some participants, choosing to become a primary teacher seemed to stem from the difficult times they experienced in their own schooling, such as Kim, a disabled student teacher, 'often being called weird and stupid by teachers'. However, she, like other participants, positioned herself as a role model to break down barriers and empower others: '[I] want to give pupils the chances and opportunities that I never had. It makes a difference to me, to know that I am representing this group'. Kim, who was still in training, was reluctant to disclose her disability to anyone at school. She explains that currently:

> It doesn't affect the way I teach. It doesn't affect the way I am. I'm positive, happy and bubbly. I am very good at criticism. I don't mind if people say to me about making mistakes.

She notes that she was concerned that her disability might impact on her teaching ability but, 'luckily it didn't happen'. While her school experiences may have negated the need for Kim to disclose her disability, it does contrast with her earlier point where she self-authors as openly representing disabled teachers and being a role model. In contrast Jenny revealed that disclosing her disability changed her visibility and the way she was viewed by her university lecturers: 'I became 'not Jenny', but the person who was disabled'. Ironically, she found that any discussion about identifying as a disabled teacher at university were 'shut down' immediately. This limited her conceptions of teaching: 'When you imagine a teacher, you imagine them as a straight, white, middle-class, able-bodied woman'.

Nick, an LGBT+ participant who identified as non-binary, was also aware of the limitations at university including assumptions about the male and female binary positions and the lack of opportunity to express personal pronouns. He felt a greater sense of equality and criticality was needed to make gay teachers visible and would enable teacher training, 'to try and move forward best practice in teaching' from a non-binary perspective. Nick surmised that greater criticality at university might have helped prepare him for school placement at a Roman Catholic school where, although he thought colleagues guessed at his sexuality, he felt, 'a lot of anxiety'. Marcel too, was open about his sexuality at university, where he felt safe and supported, but struggled to do so in school, admitting he kept his identity 'off limits':

> The braver part of me wanted to say 'is it ok to be out', to reference the fact that I have a male partner . . . I ducked the issue . . . I felt a sense of regret that you can't talk about things like that without it feeling quite loaded.

The male participants describe feeling uncomfortable and isolated as a man in schools, especially in staffrooms. Alfie describes being, 'excluded from conversations' and feeling that he, 'upset the status quo'. This made him withdraw, recalling, 'there were days that I felt so isolated by the whole ordeal and stressed that I dreaded going in and being alone for the day'. David explains how his identity as a male primary teacher feels tokenistic, used as 'an advertising tool: We've got males across the school!' This is also reflected in his experiences with parents: 'They say, "I'm so glad there is a male teacher" but it just doesn't mean I'm any better'. Henry felt pigeonholed as expecting to like sport but he also described problems of relationship-building and gender identity:

> The kids, especially the young boys, when you first go in, they're desperate to talk to you about video games. It's great to have these conversations because they're fun, but then when it comes to trying to teach them and put that fun friendly stuff aside, it's difficult.

He tells how by initially adhering to these gendered performances as the fun guy, he then struggled to position himself as, 'an established teacher'. Billy adds to Henry's point when he notes that, 'there are very few role models for the type of male teacher that I would want to be'.

Gail, a Black ECT, felt both invisible in a white school, believing her cultural identity was subsumed into the white, majority culture, but also hyper-visible as the only Black teacher. Aliza, a Pakistani-Muslim who wears a hijab, also felt the invisible-hyper-visible tension, and described how she 'over compensated' in the way she acted, to be acceptable. She

did however try to voice her opinions in staff meetings to put across alternative perspectives. She explained, 'people automatically put me in a box because of my culture . . . they would tiptoe around me'. Invisibility was also demonstrated through black and Asian participants being subject to explicit acts of racism, including microaggressions. Gail faced a lot of questions from children and parents in her school.

> The way that the parents would view me made me take it a bit more personally because [they're] an adult; [they] should have dealt with a Black person in [their] life at some point . . . [When] a grandma came to pick up a child, the look she gave me was like 'why are you here?' That makes you feel isolated.

Maryam, a Pakistani Muslim, also endured suspicion from children and hostility from parents:

> I experienced a lot of racism and abuse and a lot of comments from the parents, saying they didn't want their children in my class. A lot of children had never seen a hijab, they used to ask me 'Why are you wearing that? It looks weird'.

Farah, a Bangladeshi Muslim, concurred, stating that when she began wearing a hijab she had to 'think twice' about anything she did, although this visibility also achieved positive outcomes:

> I had students who looked like me and they saw me in my hijab. I was the same ethnicity and they felt like they could be really friendly with me.

Limited agency

Black and Asian ECT participants identified several explicit and unsettling reasons why they were limited in their agency as beginning teachers. The first was that the under-representation of Black student teachers, university tutors and teachers affected their outlook and confidence. Aliza identified this imbalance as leading her to feel compromised so that in, 'trying too hard to be English', she became confused about her culture within her teaching identity. The second reason was shown in Farah, who recognised that Black and Asian ECTs need more support because they feel 'degraded' and less confident. She felt strongly that she belonged in the profession and that it needed people like her to educate and help Black and Asian children to have a sense of belonging. Gail, who consciously made it her role to teach about race and diversity to the children and adults in her school, thought it helped to educate everyone and increase her sense of agency and place within the school and profession. Maryam, a Pakistani-Muslim, supported this, saying: 'When I received racist comments [in school] I thought it was my job to teach them. Every day I would talk to those children. I built some trust'.

A third reason limiting agency was that these participants felt their cultural or religious experiences were often ignored or at best included as part of something like Black History Month, which they deemed to be tokenistic. Farah joined in assemblies 'out of respect' but felt conflicted. When she raised this with her teacher she was rebuffed: ' . . . instead of accepting me for my beliefs and letting me do what I feel is comfortable for me. I was made to do what they did, even though I don't necessarily believe in it'.

Limited agency was shown in Liam's response as a disabled ECT who struggles with reading and administrative organisation, by self-authoring as someone who is instead, 'creative and spontaneous'. He notes that 'owning his identity' as a 'dyslexic person' is really an important step in developing a positive mindset around disability and inclusive practice in his teaching, creating a classroom ethos where it is okay to make mistakes. This reflects disabled student teacher Kim's understanding of self: 'I was put in a box, but it doesn't mean anything because it doesn't necessarily define who you are'. She now self-identifies differently:

> There are no limitations to what you can be or what you can do. Life is an on-going assessment, and it is important to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct yourself as a person.

The male participants' accounts demonstrated limited personal agency through descriptions of being increasingly aware of their behaviour and identity performances as explained by Alfie:

> It was almost like I was trying to be more dominant. This is something that I had realized going into school and something that I've always actively tried to avoid.

> I'm always careful to remain very neutral, professional, and respectful.

Alfie shows a consciousness in terms of his behaviour fitting into the 'feminised' environment. He avoids stereotypical ways of behaving as a male, whilst trying to disrupt the 'perception that male teachers cannot offer the empathy needed to teach primary, that we can't do the job as good as females'. However, other male participants felt conflicted. Henry explained: 'I need to modulate to make sure I'm not presenting a version of myself that's going to make people uncomfortable'. Alfie expressed the need to consciously check behaviour to fit into the environment and Billy felt expected to 'take part in laddish banter … talking about things like football and engineering and stuff like that'. Billy clarifies that this is not 'what he wants to be known for' as he wants to be seen as 'professional' in school.

Being a 'good' teacher was voiced by David who believed that being gay had become a 'commodity and fetishization' in schools, so that he could be labelled as the 'gay teacher'. 'People adopt different behaviours [and] speech patterns around me … change their mannerisms'. He added, 'I tend to minimize myself, shrink those mannerisms, those stereotypes'. He described this as a disconnection that was 'uncomfortable' and signified the difficulty of coming 'out' in teaching. Marcel too, had misgivings and disliked being seen through 'a different paradigm … These are uncharted waters for me'.

Identity-safe spaces

Participants valued the UR groups as time provided during their training to explore their identities. These were discrete sessions for students who identified as LGBT+, disabled, men (in Primary) and Black and Asian. Kim, a disabled participant, described the 'relief' she felt 'meeting similar like-minded people who you can share your experiences and thoughts with' within these designated 'identity-safe spaces'. She explained how they enabled her to understand that 'it is not just me that struggles with these things':

> I almost gave up but didn't because of the support from the UR group. It was exciting as your voice could be heard. There are other people in the same circumstances as you.

Jenny, another disabled ECT, did not have a support group at her university, but described their importance as:

> enough support … enough training and enough discussion and a breakdown of what a teacher looks like and what it means to be a teacher.

Alfie tells of setting up his own male-only support group to share his experiences with others on the course. He felt that, 'it was a shame we had to do that in the first place, but it gave some comfort'. He expresses how important identity-safe spaces are to male primary teachers:

> We shared a lot of similar experiences about being unable to engage with certain conversations or feeling disconnected from the staff. The fact that male teachers are feeling this way across a number of different schools is very unsettling … It's still very unspoken.

Billy described being able to share in the groups as, 'normalising, talking about and recognising the additional pressure of being a male teacher'. As an LGBT+ ECT, Nick described the sessions as 'impressive' and felt the opportunity to meet other queer people on the course and the openness were important. He said they also afforded the opportunity of allyship and extended awareness with other student teachers. David added that the support groups gave a high level of encouragement and insight and provided safety to grow because they discussed gay sexuality in the school context in a holistic way.

These UR support groups also contained flaws. Nick felt they did not properly address issues or 'help build an important foundation'. He described them as 'two brief moments' and was frustrated that while there was talk of extending them, he never saw those tutors again. He also felt the focus was on deficit and seeing gay people as not being real or whole teachers. He was also disappointed that these sessions were optional and separated issues of identity rather than understanding the intersections and the effects of discrimination for teachers and children. As an Asian Muslim ECT Maryam also thought the support sessions lacked deeper content such as advice and discussion about how to be Black and Asian on placement. She suffered overt racism during one placement and talked of peers who suffered similarly and either left the course or struggled to make progress, citing their fear of approaching mentors in case it detrimentally affected their position on the course.

> When you're teaching children, where some of the parents can be quite rude, you want to feel safe and know that there are people there to support you.

At the end of that placement, she said she received a lot more respect but maintains that support groups at university are necessary to remove the fear of students speaking to somebody and to feel comfortable that there is someone to guide and listen. Aliza would have liked some input by Black or Muslim classroom teachers both in the support groups and as part of the course, to provide their perspectives and talk about specific issues, such as observing Muslim festivals, as a teacher. She believes this would provide some in-depth support because when talking to a white tutor or mentor she will, 'hold back, because they don't understand'. Farah wanted guidance in the support groups to know how to discuss her position as the only non-white teacher in her school. This would have enabled her not to feel so alone, understand her identity more and help her to, 'make good connections and relationships'.

Discussion

The findings reveal that being part of teacher education that challenges stereotypes, promotes anti-discriminatory thinking and practice, and provides role models is desired by ECTs (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). Disclosure of identity or the way they are perceived is, for some, a significant fear because they feel judged and positioned as outsiders with little status or power (Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021). LGBT+ participants were perhaps the most invisible and all chose not to disclose in school. These 'contradictory spaces' silenced them, and they were aware that their personal life was disassociated from their professional lives (Gray, 2013). This was further exacerbated by being in a church school that engendered 'deep silences' surrounding homosexuality (Neary, 2013). These desexualized primary classrooms raised barriers against 'coming out' (Henderson, 2017). Resisting gender assumptions and being authentically gay and a teacher was significant for the LGBT+ participants, identified by Llewellyn and Reynolds (2021) as the powerful tension between heteronormativity in schools and the increasing expectation of sexual authenticity in society. These place emotional demands on LGBT+ ECTs to show they are still good teachers.

   The lack of opportunities for these ECTs to explore their identity dilemmas highlights a lack of agency they had in terms of repositioning and reconstructing their identities. They describe frustrations and concerns of being labelled and judged against negative stereotypes while simultaneously struggling to enact agency. ECTs who identify as disabled only gained specific, targeted support when they articulated their needs as a disabled person; however, this empowered some to refigure themselves as a student teacher positively placing their abilities and disabilities within a broader social and personal context. This reflects Keane et al.'s (2018) findings that disabled ECTs with negative experiences of their own schooling are driven to provide children they teach with a better experience than they had whilst demonstrating enhanced empathy towards these children. Buckworth's (2017) research suggests that disabled student teachers tend to focus on meeting the requirements for teaching and many do not disclose until they believe they have proved themselves in the classroom.

   Societal and school expectations affected the male participants who reflect Cousins' (2020) findings that gendered discourses continue to uphold the 'glass escalator' phenomenon. Their responses of coping on the scale between engaging in expected 'laddish' ways of being a teacher and voicing their actual views showed contradictions between them and demonstrates the complexities of self-identification. All the male participants note how being underrepresented in the workforce and the lack of role models, particularly with very young children, create difficulties in their self-understandings and reduce their sense of agency. A lack of agency was recognised by the Black and Asian ECTs who never saw a teacher like them, leaving them feeling isolated. Callender (2018) notes how Black and Asian student teachers lie in a rift between knowing they should receive equal treatment but instead feel marginalised and insecure. They are also aware of societal racial hierarchies which reduce their confidence and ability to teach (Bhopal & Rhamie, 2014). They experience a range of subordinations from overt actions such as parents casting looks of aggression at the school gate to ignorance about their religious and cultural needs. This led to confusion, inability to express their feelings, and reduced their agency (Basit et al., 2006).

Although we cannot re-create or figure the conditions of our lives, Holland et al. (1998) maintain that there are possibilities to rearrange cultural resources that evoke social positioning. Dominant discourses that exist within the figured world can constrain and position but also provide the tools to liberate individuals from these discursive positions to author the self differently. However, the ECTs in our study found difficultly in reimagining themselves as agentic beings. The remarks of the male participants reflect the gender discourses that operate within the environment that define possibilities for action, directing them into socially and culturally recognised 'masculine' roles such as the 'PE expert' or the 'joker', reflecting Hedlin et al.'s (2019) point that many reluctantly take up the position as the 'fun guy' due to gendered expectations. They expressed feelings of frustration and disappointment at these restrictions and struggled to reference any recognition they had in relation to their teaching. Instead, they were under pressure to conform to assumed ways of being and behaving as men and had little agency to rethink who they were.

The support groups run by the university, as identity-safe spaces, encouraged open discussions and encouragement for honesty within a supportive network. Within them the participants could state who they were and discuss ways of being themselves within university and school. Critical Race Theory purports that increasing self-knowledge and working with and gaining support from others is necessary for Black and Asian student teachers. (Solórzano & Yosso, 2016). The counter narrative voice, a key tenet of CRT, recognises that Black and Asian experiences challenge the majority narrative, and are necessary to redress inequalities. The Black and Asian counter narratives in this research spoke about the way the support groups informed their understandings. Some felt exposed in their white schools and believed the support groups had the capacity to but did not always provide enough knowledge and guidance about this. Bhopal and Rhamie (2014) have outlined how ECTs' understanding of race is complex and multifaceted and that greater training is needed to assist trainee teachers in their understanding of diversity and racism in the classroom. Support and training that promotes Black and Asian teachers as insiders and assets are necessary to address inequalities and failings in teacher education (Bhopal, 2015).

Developing provision that supports student teachers' self-identification and expression within their teaching is difficult within a tightly controlled ITE system, where targets and outcomes override and refute personal beliefs and values as an ECT (Buckworth, 2017; Maylor, 2016). Student teacher professional identity, as conceived by Izadinia (2013), identifies a need for social communities in the learning process to enable construction and reproduction of self. Time is needed for reflection, examination of ambivalences and tensions surrounding identity.

Conclusion and implications

This research explored how ECTs face their identity dilemmas as members of UR groups, and through their voices there is greater focus on demographics that are overlooked both in research and within the teaching profession. While the four identified groups formed a nexus, intersections across the groups were acknowledged and individual voices valued and represented. This enabled the researchers to challenge homogeneity at a more critical and engaged level.

Our unique theoretical lens enabled us to identify layers of meaning in the concept of ECT identity dilemma. Through application of both CRT and Figured Worlds, we could privilege thoughts and examples considered as unimportant and not relevant to becoming a teacher. The research gave a platform for a conjoining of identity formed by colour of skin, physical and mental disabilities, gender, and sexuality to their enactments as ECTs. Seeing the participants both within the four identified groups and as agentic individuals created the notion that teachers are not generalised or amorphous beings but embody personal and individual traits that require listening to and provision of support so that ECTs from UR groups play a full part in the teaching profession.

Future research may focus on mentors' or university tutors' experiences in supporting students from UR groups and their understanding of their own training needs. As many participants described difficulties during their placements, the challenge is to include specific content within teacher education programmes that covers areas such as race, diversity, and equality to increase understanding among the student population, but to extend this to school mentors and staff. It is essential that both ITE tutors and school mentors have specific training around supporting student teachers from UR groups to develop an openness and gain a greater understanding of the specific needs of these students. It may be desirable to extend the identity-safe spaces to school mentors, creating supportive networks of teachers from UR groups who are already teaching in schools

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