

Racial microaggressions in schools: teachers' perspectives and what it means for students

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Introduction

Microaggressions are defined as subtle, daily racial bias against people from a racialised group. From hair and name discrimination to being confused with the only other Black pupil in the class, we know that racial microaggressions and racism in schools can have a harmful impact on the mental health of young people from Black and racialised backgrounds. It can also have negative effects on their academic achievement in school and in further and higher education.

Centre for Mental Health, The Diana Award and UK Youth have created the [Young Changemakers](#) project, which equips young people with the tools to produce social action projects aimed at tackling mental health inequalities in racialised communities.

One of these youth-led social action projects is NotSoMicro, which is proposing mandatory anti-racism and microaggression training for teachers.

We set out to gather insights from school staff about their understanding of racial microaggressions and racism in schools, and their approach towards preventing and addressing it. The survey was aimed at primary and secondary schoolteachers, senior leaders, teachers in sixth form or college, and teaching assistants, to explore how teacher training in relation to racial microaggressions and racism in English schools could be strengthened.

Overall, the research showed several themes: the negative impact of microaggression on teachers and students from racialised communities; a culture where teachers and students did not think that they would be believed when reporting on these issues; and that the depth and breadth of ongoing systemic microaggressions is being under-reported. These themes point to a culture where racial microaggressions are commonplace occurrences, which is having a significant impact on students' and teachers' mental health. The lack of confidence and awareness around how to challenge these instances leads to a call to make such training mandatory.

1. Overview

In partnership with NotSoMicro, Centre for Mental Health designed and carried out a survey aimed at finding out what teachers knew about racial microaggressions, how as individuals and within their school settings they would respond to these instances of racism, and what

training they had received and thought they should receive. In total, the survey received 212 responses, with a broad range in terms of geographic area, ethnicity and teacher type.

Key survey findings:

- Only 40% of school staff felt staff in their school understood the impact(s) of racial microaggressions (and racist incidents more generally) on young people and their mental health and wellbeing
- 67% of school staff said they were either not confident at all, not too confident or only somewhat confident in spotting a racial microaggression
- Only 27% of respondents have ever received anti-racism or microaggression training; over 70% said they had never received training.
- An overwhelming 94% of teachers agreed that microaggression and anti-racism training should form part of mandatory teacher training
- 56% of respondents told us that their school did not have policies/procedures around responding to racial microaggressions or didn't know whether it did.

2. Defining a racial microaggression and dealing with the incident:

A racial microaggression is defined as a 'brief, everyday interactions that send denigrating messages to a person because they belong to a racially minoritised group' (Rollock, 2012). We asked teachers how confident they would feel in 'spotting an incident of a racial microaggression'. Encouragingly, 32% of respondents said that they would feel 'very confident' in spotting such an incident, 55% said they would be 'somewhat confident', 9% said they would be 'not too confident' and 3% that they would be 'not at all confident'.

However, this question included an open text box response which allowed teachers to expand on their thoughts. Here, we can quickly see how much work is still needed in this area but also how keen and willing teachers are to learn. A secondary school teacher of African ethnicity told us that they had identified such an incident (a racial microaggression) but that when they had reported this, they had 'experienced backlash from higher up as they felt that there was no solid evidence and said I couldn't rely on my 'gut feelings''. Further to this, a Pakistani primary school teacher described how they had been told they were 'over [reacting]. Being dismissed. Not being taken seriously'.

Other teachers explained how they were 'judged' for bringing these issues forwards, that there was 'a lack of education surrounding what a microaggression is and it would be passed off as a 'harmless' comment'. One commented that there is a 'lack of leaders or people in positions that are from a diverse group of backgrounds so when confronted with issues such as these, cannot relate or are reluctant to acknowledge it as a problem'. This confirms some of what we already know: that with an overwhelmingly white teaching workforce, these issues are not always given the attention they deserve. According to the Department for Education (DfE), in 2018, nearly [92% of teachers](#) in England's state funded schools were white.

It is important to state that many of the responses from teachers were encouraging in terms of a call to action. A white primary school teacher from the south east pointed to the 'lack of

training and inconsistency in school policies' while others stated that they were 'not knowledgeable enough about what constitutes a racial microaggression or how I should respond/not make it worse', or that 'not being from an ethnic minority myself, I am aware that I might not use the right terminology and would hate to cause offence'. For others it was a question of having had 'no real training or understanding of what to do in this case. I would just report to a member of senior leadership'. Respondents described not being sure 'what the correct language should be for me to respond, how to approach both victim and aggressor', 'Fully understanding the issue as a white British person. Making sure that it is dealt with properly and sensitively', and being 'unsure of sanctions to impose'. Overall, there was a 'fear of getting it wrong/saying the wrong thing' and 'No education in what other perspectives are. As a white person in the work place I would question that I am being sensitive and mindful enough of victims' lived experience'.

Clearly then, teachers from a racialised background not being taken seriously enough when reporting these instances is a serious concern that needs immediate addressing, and demonstrates the importance of making this training mandatory. On the other hand, it is positive to see so many teachers being open about where they feel they need help and their shortcomings.

3. Racial microaggression training – a common practice or sorely missing?

Over 70% of respondents told us that they had never received any 'anti-racist or microaggression training', with only 27% saying that they had. Encouragingly, and as impetus for future action, when asked 'do you believe that racial microaggression training/anti-racism training should form part of mandatory teacher training?', an overwhelming 94% of teachers responded yes. This not only supports the idea that teachers want to learn but that they are willing and ready to make time for this training, despite already rigorous demands on their time. When asked whether this training should be mandatory or not, teachers were given the option to comment more extensively on their thoughts around such training. There were a number of key themes that explained why such a high percentage of teachers thought this training should be mandatory. These included:

- A lack of awareness amongst staff who have seen and heard many incidents of racism but not acted on them
- The hurt/damage caused by racism to people of colour in schools, and the benefit such training could have on their life chances
- A need to stop the systemic microaggressions that take place
- Change can only happen if teachers are confident in tackling these issues, and this only being possible through having training
- Developing better awareness of how to deal with this and help these young people
- Making it mandatory would make it seen as an important part of teacher training rather than an add-on lumped in with behaviour management
- It would let students know that they are supported and believed when they bring these issues to the attention of teachers

- Because it is too common an occurrence to go unaddressed by teachers and it needs to be trained out of the profession
- It would place a higher value on the mental health and wellbeing of students of colour.

The responses were overwhelmingly in support of this training becoming mandatory because the teachers wanted to learn, and saw how it could benefit the students. They also wanted to be more confident and knowledgeable in this area and it was important that this was prioritised. As two teachers told us, 'I completed my PGCE in 2021 and was shocked at the lack of education around this topic' and 'My training was a 1 hour long session and it also covered gender, sexuality and neurodivergence'. The clear pathway to action here is making training around racial microaggressions and anti-racism mandatory. Teachers who have been in the profession anywhere from under 12 months to over 10 years were unanimous in their agreement that this step needs to be taken.

Interestingly, when asked 'Does your school have already existing policies/procedures around responding to racial microaggressions/anti-racism training?' there was a varied response. 42% of respondents said 'yes', 26% said 'no' and 30% said 'don't know'. Within the open comments section there were a few themes that developed:

- This work, where it did exist, often sat within the wider behaviour/anti-bullying/safeguarding framework
- Where anti-racism training, policies and procedures did exist, there was not a microaggression element to this
- There was no sense that a specific racial microaggression or anti-racism policy existed.

4. Understanding the impact of racist incidents on young people and their mental health

When reflecting on the question in section 2 around whether teachers felt confident that they could spot an incident of a racial microaggression (where 87% of respondents answered 'very confident' or 'somewhat confident'), there may have been some selection bias in responding to this question as it was self-prescribing. In comparison, when we asked respondents if they believed 'staff in your school(s) understand the impact(s) of racial microaggressions (and racist incidents more generally) on young people and their mental health and wellbeing' only 40% responded with 'yes'.

In contrast, 45% responded 'no' and 14% responded 'don't know'. The fact that 45% of respondents believed fellow staff members did not understand the impact these racist incidents would be having on the mental health and wellbeing of young people is of grave concern. This could and should be remedied by making training around these topics mandatory, an action teachers overwhelmingly support. It is central to the futures of these young people that teachers understand the deep and long-lasting impacts that racial microaggressions and instances of racism have on their wellbeing and mental health. We cannot expect young people from racialised communities to thrive and achieve their goals if

their teachers don't understand the impact of these issues and how, if not addressed properly, they will continue to affect their mental health.

5. Why here and why now?

A secondary school teacher from the north east, in response to 'Do you believe that racial microaggression training/anti-racism training should form part of mandatory teacher training?' answered: 'This is insane, Woke, cultural Marxist, anti-white/anti-indigenous, divisive, nonsense – but your intent is to cause division'. The young people we have worked with, and young people (such as Child Q and many others) who face racial microaggressions and racism in school every day, deserve so much better. The link between racism and poorer mental health and wellbeing is well evidenced, and those teaching our children must understand the impacts that these incidents have on them. Teachers and educators, as we can see through this survey, are overwhelmingly in favour of receiving training to help prevent future instances of racism, ensuring that these young people can go through school in a positive manner which allows them to thrive and not be burdened by racism. Teachers also want to deepen their understanding of how they can help and make a difference. Future policy in this area should be driven by this fact: teachers are willing and ready to take on this work and make a positive step. However, as the above comment demonstrates all too clearly, this is a journey that some are still all too reticent to embark upon.

6. Recommendations

Overall, there were several recommendations arising from the research that would help to eradicate instances of racial microaggressions and racist incidents in a school setting:

1. Implement mandatory training for all teachers to understand how to identify and deal with racial microaggressions.
2. Make this a mandatory part of any Ofsted inspection - i.e. how schools spot, cope and deal with instances of racial microaggressions and racist incidents against students and teachers.
3. Ensure good mental health support for both students and teachers who are impacted by these ongoing racist incidents.
4. Increase the confidence and awareness of teachers on how to challenge these instances by ensuring that training is ongoing and not a one off.
5. Embed a whole school approach where teachers and students regularly feedback on how they feel their school is dealing with these instances.

These recommendations seek to acknowledge the depth and breadth of systemic racial microaggressions against students and teachers from racialised communities and the negative impact this has on them, and to create a culture where students and teachers are believed when reporting these issues.

7. Summary of collected data

(a) Teacher type:

The highest proportion of respondent was 'teacher' at 31%, followed by 'middle leader (such as a head of year or department)' at 25%, 'headteacher' at 11% and 'teaching assistant' at 8% – with 'other' standing at 22%. Within this, 42% of respondents were based within 'primary schools', 48% within 'secondary schools' and 8% at 'sixth form or college'.

(b) Ethnicity:

The highest proportion of respondents in terms of ethnicity were 'white – English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British' at 59%. This was followed by 8% for 'Asian or Asian British – Indian', 6% for 'Any other White background' and 4% for all of 'Asian or Asian British – Pakistani', 'Caribbean' and 'African'. At 2% of respondents, we had 'Any other Black, Black British, or Caribbean background', 'White and Black Caribbean' and 'White Irish'. Finally, at 1% we had 'Any other Asian Background', 'Mixed or multiple ethnic groups', 'White and Black African' and 'White and Asian'.

(c) Geographic breakdown:

Geographically, 21% of respondents were from London, 16% from the North West, 16% from the South East, 11% from both the West Midlands and the North East, 8% from the East of England, 5% from the South West, 3% from both Yorkshire and the East Midlands, and 2% from Other.

(d) Qualification status:

In terms of when these teachers qualified, there was also a broad range. 61% of teachers said they had qualified 'more than 10 years ago', 15% said 'more than 5 years ago', 8% said 'between 2 years and 5 years ago', and 7% of teachers responded 'between 12 and 24 months ago' or 'within the last 12 months'.