Beyond bindis, bhajis, bangles and bhangra: Promoting multiculturalism in primary schools in predominantly white British places

Para além de *bindis*, *bhajis*, *bangles* e *bhangra*: Promover o multiculturalismo nas escolas primárias em locais britânicos predominantemente brancos

Au-delà des *bindis*, *bhajis*, *bangles* et *bhangra*: Promouvoir le multiculturalisme dans les écoles primaires dans des localités britanniques à prédominance blanche

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Abstract

Twenty-first-century education as a powerful means of knowledge will possibly be shaped by the emphasis it places on having classrooms that are race-conscious and multicultural. The present article is based on a doctoral study that explores an under-researched area: experiences and understanding of multiculturalism in mainstream primary schools situated in the predominantly White places of Southwest England. The study was underpinned by a sociocultural theoretical framework; data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the adult participants, students' classroom activities, and documentary analysis of school displays. The article focuses on the data generated from the students' classroom activities. Findings show differences in knowledge level and access to multicultural education among participants that significantly influenced their perceptions of multiculturalism. The study findings illuminated two key ideas. The first key idea is the powerful role of multicultural education in teaching and learning for not only raising cultural awareness among students across communities but also becoming a mouthpiece of empowerment for students from ethnic minority communities by promoting an equitable school atmosphere of recognition and acceptance for them. Secondly, findings illuminate racialised power positioning that created (un)democratic conditions perpetuating broader societal structural (im)balances within the particular local sociocultural context.

Keywords: multicultural education, student-teacher power dynamics, predominantly White schools, mainstream primary education, culturally responsive lessons

Resumo

A educação do século XXI, enquanto poderoso meio de conhecimento, será possivelmente moldada pela ênfase que coloca na existência de salas de aula com consciência racial e multiculturais. O presente artigo baseia-se num estudo de doutoramento que explora uma área pouco investigada: experiências e compreensão do multiculturalismo em escolas primárias regulares situadas em locais predominantemente brancos do sudoeste de Inglaterra. O estudo foi sustentado por um quadro teórico sociocultural; os dados foram recolhidos através de entrevistas semi-estruturadas com os/as participantes adultos, atividades dos/as alunos/as na sala de aula e análise documental de exposições escolares. O artigo

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centra-se nos dados gerados pelas atividades dos/as alunos/as na sala de aula. Os resultados mostram diferenças no nível de conhecimentos e no acesso à educação multicultural entre os/as participantes que influenciaram significativamente as suas perceções do multiculturalismo. Os resultados do estudo revelaram duas ideias-chave. A primeira é o papel poderoso da educação multicultural no ensino e na aprendizagem, não só para aumentar a consciencialização cultural dos/as alunos/as em todas as comunidades, mas também para se tornar porta-voz da capacitação dos/as alunos/as das comunidades de minorias étnicas, promovendo um ambiente escolar equitativo de reconhecimento e aceitação para eles/as. Em segundo lugar, as conclusões iluminam o posicionamento racializado do poder que criou condições (não)democráticas que perpetuam (des)equilíbrios estruturais societais mais amplos no contexto sociocultural local específico.

Palavras-chave: educação multicultural, dinâmicas de poder aluno/a-professor/a, escolas predominantemente brancas, ensino primário regular, aulas culturalmente reativas

Résumé

L'éducation du XXIe siècle, en tant que puissant moyen de connaissance, sera peut-être façonnée par l'importance qu'elle accorde à des salles de classe conscientes de la race et multiculturelles. Le présent article est basé sur une étude doctorale qui explore un domaine insuffisamment étudié: les expériences et la compréhension du multiculturalisme dans les écoles primaires ordinaires situées dans les localités à prédominance blanche du sud-ouest de l'Angleterre. L'étude s'appuie sur un cadre théorique socioculturel ; les données ont été collectées par le biais d'entretiens semi-structurés avec les participants adultes, les activités des élèves en classe et l'analyse documentaire des affichages de l'école. L'article se concentre sur les données générées par les activités des élèves en classe. Les résultats montrent que les différences de niveau de connaissance et d'accès à l'éducation multiculturelle entre les participants ont influencé de manière significative leurs perceptions du multiculturalisme. Les résultats de l'étude ont mis en lumière deux idées clés. La première idée clé est le rôle puissant de l'éducation multiculturelle dans l'enseignement et l'apprentissage, non seulement pour sensibiliser les élèves à la culture des différentes communautés, mais aussi pour devenir le porte-parole de l'autonomisation des élèves issus de minorités ethniques en promouvant une atmosphère scolaire équitable de reconnaissance et d'acceptation à leur égard. Deuxièmement, les résultats mettent en lumière le positionnement du pouvoir racialisé qui a créé des conditions (non) démocratiques perpétuant des (des)équilibres structurels sociétaux plus larges dans le contexte socioculturel local particulier.

Mots-clés: éducation multiculturelle, dynamique de pouvoir entre élèves et enseignants, écoles majoritairement blanches, enseignement primaire classique, leçons adaptées à la culture

Introduction[1]

The April 1974 revolution was a turning point in Portuguese history with significant changes in all domains of Portuguese life – social, political, economic, demographic, and territorial (Fishman, 2019; Manuel, 2010). It marked the end of the four decades of a fascist dictatorial regime and the emergence of parliamentary democracy, free media, political parties, communes for residential neighbourhoods, parents' associations, housing, and school committees (Rezola, 2022; Stoer, 1983). Civil society institutions representing the general public saw a massive expansion and came to occupy a superior position vis-à-vis the state (Brederode-Santos, 2004; Manuel, 2010; Stoer, 1983). The three "Ds": "To democratise – To decolonise – To develop" became the key words in the Program of the Armed Forces, which overthrew the regime in April 1974. However, in education, "to democratise" was the central objective (Alarcão, 2013; Brederode-

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[1] Data, ideas, texts, findings, and discussions included from doctoral thesis: Bagchi, Suparna (2024). *The experiences and understanding of multiculturalism in mainstream primary schools in Southwest England* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. University of Plymouth, England, United Kingdom.

Santos, 2004). April revolution boosted far-reaching democratisation processes in education, both in terms of school management, challenging the old established hierarchical and authoritarian control structure and in terms of what counted as the actual meaning of education, implying a redefinition in the changing 'Portuguese realities' (Stoer, 1983). The similarity between the April Revolution in Portugal and my research project is that both share a common context: the need for cultural and educational mobilisation and transformation. This argument can be linked to the purpose of education in the twenty-first century.

Twenty-first-century education as a powerful means of knowledge will possibly be shaped by the emphasis it places on the theoretical, instructional, and curricular need to have classrooms that promote positive multicultural knowledge (Banks, 1993). Following the brutal killing of George Floyd in 2020 and the Black Lives Matter movement, talks concerning cultural diversity and race equality have resurfaced in British schools. These talks have become particularly relevant in areas of historically low ethnic diversity that have lately experienced a rise in ethnic minority populations. Research studies on the inclusion of ethnic minority communities, whom I call Global Majority Community (GMC), are mostly undertaken in places where their population is high. I argue that similar studies are equally important in less ethnically diverse places where there are very few studies exclusively devoted to this issue and where the GMC people tend to live in a somewhat "invisible state" (Bhopal, 2014, p. 498). In these specific geographical contexts, institutions play a big role because "[i]n such white spaces, whiteness and white Western practices are the norm, and those which do not comply with these are seen as outsiders and others" (Bhopal, 2018, p. 25).

Various ideas drawn from the literature that resonated with the research are briefly explored below to contextualise the discussion in the present article.

Literature Review

What is multicultural education?

Inclusive education was first launched formally at the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994), under which educational settings adopt various measures to respond to the diverse needs of their students. This entails not only the admission of pupils from across different capabilities and backgrounds but also a school-wide approach to restructuring the education setting in such a way that it caters to the said changes (Ainscow, 2016; Nilsen, 2010). Inclusive education presupposes that all children have the right to education (Ainscow, 2020; Florian, 2019; Schuelka, 2018). This argument can be strongly linked to one of the chief objectives of the April Revolution in Portugal, which was to provide education to all in a democratic spirit. I envisage multicultural education as an effective way to promote inclusive education (Bagchi, 2024). Banks (1993), who is a pioneering scholar of multiculturalism, holds that although there is a tendency to oversimplify multicultural education, it is a rather complicated concept. He advances five dimensions of multicultural education: content integration, knowledge creation, prejudice reduction, an empowering social structure and school culture, and equity pedagogy. Multicultural education

encourages curriculum reforms linked to complex issues concerning race as they may evoke ancient feelings and reactions reflecting racial bias (Banks, 1993). I consider multicultural education to involve two essential elements: equity and cultural awareness. It performs a dual function: first, it facilitates the inclusion of the students from the marginalised and minoritised communities or the GMC, and second, it prepares all students for the multicultural society that Britain is, thereby promoting their resilience through recognition and acceptance of the GMC (Bagchi, 2024). With a preliminary allegiance to racial equality, multicultural education may be a powerful approach to educational practices promoting a Curriculum that respectfully includes GMC students by linking to their lived experiences and identities. Additionally, multicultural education may facilitate holistic multicultural learning for students across all communities, whether the dominant majority community (DMC), mixed heritage community, or GMC.

Multiculturalism in Britain: a brief history

There was a huge influx of African, Caribbean, and Asian immigrants in Britain in the 20th century to assist in the rebuilding of the nation following the Second World War. However, the education system struggled to adapt to this huge immigrant student population from the GMC. It considered that the main obstacle of these students was their linguistic difficulty, which could be tackled by teaching them English, and this started a silent process of assimilation of these students in schools, whereby not only their native language but also their distinctive lifestyles became suppressed (Alladina & Edwards, 1991; Troyna & Edwards, 1993). This flawed approach illuminated the power structures in which a superior position was enjoyed by the DMC in all arenas of everyday existence as a norm reflecting Whiteness that signified a "complex, hegemonic, and dynamic set of mainstream socioeconomic processes, and ways of thinking, feeling, believing and acting (cultural scripts) that function to obscure the power, privilege, and practices of the dominant social elite" (Lea & Sims, 2008, pp. 1–2). This arrangement had a significant marginalising impact on the GMC students as they experienced discrimination based on prejudice, ignorance, and racist stereotyping in daily life, whether intentional or unintentional (Tomlinson, 2019). Racist stereotypes are generalised assumptions connected to diverse identities of people based on historical and societal reflections. They can be dangerous for GMC students because they are hardly true and are reflected through a practice of prejudice and ignorance towards them, having a detrimental impact on their school experiences and achievements (Sleeter et al., 2014; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). The Swann Report (1985) stressed the urgent need for all schools, irrespective of their geographical location, to prepare all students for life through a common educational experience. Although in 1988, the Education Reform Act introduced the National Curriculum, affirming the British way of facilitating integration, the distinctive culture and values of the GMC students continued to be neglected (Tomlinson, 2012; Troyna & Edwards, 1993).

Multiculturalism has faced staunch criticism over the decades. Scholars maintain that multiculturalism is nothing more than a cheerful celebration of diverse cultures and festivals; it is apolitical and non-radical (Bonnett & Carrington, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1994). It supports societal segregation through resource

allocation to particular groups (A. Mason, 2018), leading to ghettoisation. Multiculturalism is also criticised for ignoring the need to address the serious issues of racism and inequalities in society (Gillborn, 2013). With the turn of the century and various terror attacks taking place, leading political heads like German Chancellor Angela Merkel and British Prime Minister David Cameron denounced multiculturalism as a failure. The basic concern revolved around how multiculturalism enabled particular communities to live separate lives, thereby failing to integrate them into mainstream society (Johansson, 2024).

However, I find multiculturalism through the incorporation of multicultural education apt to promote awareness of educational inequity in primary schools. In today's world, where increasing immigration of people from GMC to Western countries is a reality, multiculturalism is necessary as it facilitates their political recognition and integration in these countries (Meer, 2010). Modood (2007) argues that multiculturalism is not limited to tolerance and state neutrality as it actively endorses cultural differences, strictly denounces hostility and disapproval, and supports a re-framed public arena where the GMC feels a sense of belonging through inclusion. I argue that multicultural education can be promoted as an empowering force equipping all students across communities with the necessary skills to participate and engage in society more aptly (Luhmann, 2012), thereby helping them to become resilient with a relevant understanding of the multicultural, multiracial society that Britain, in specific and the world, at large is.

Primary National Curriculum in England and teacher's role

A curriculum puts forth a range of subjects and standards to ensure students' academic performance and achievement (GOV.UK, 2024). How a Curriculum is constructed, contextualised, and presented may project the values and traditions of a society and its people. An in-depth evaluation of the primary National Curriculum in England (which is for students in the age group of four to eleven) prescribed by the Department for Education (2015) shows that one out of the 201 pages-long documents of the Curriculum is focused directly on aspects regarding multicultural awareness. Two points (4.5 and 4.6) discuss providing additional help for children with English as an Additional Language (EAL), which mainly revolves around the issue of the language barrier. Nevertheless, cultural adjustment is an important requirement of holistic, inclusive education as it is linked to the psychological level of inclusion that implies whether students feel a sense of belonging and recognition with the school community (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). In a country that is becoming more ethnically diverse with an increasing GMC population (Office for National Statistics, 2022), it is possibly necessary to have more guidelines on the inclusion of GMC students, which, in turn, has implications for their academic performance (Gillborn, 2013).

Since teachers are classroom leaders, their perceptions, belief systems, knowledge, and experiences are necessary for the reflection of multiculturalism in teaching and learning. There is a huge body of literature that stresses devoted culturally responsive and anti-racist initial teacher education (ITE) for trainee teachers to facilitate an equitable learning atmosphere for students (Arday & Mirza, 2018; Flintoff et al., 2014; Joseph-Salisbury, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 1994). This is particularly crucial as there is no mention of race or

racism in the 2019 Department for Education's Core Content Framework, which is an enforced curriculum for teacher training in England (Smith, 2021), just like the statutory and guidance policy documents of education and associated inspection frameworks are considerably deracialised (Gillborn et al., 2016). Smith & Lander's (2023) commendable work on a global literature review of anti-racism in ITE particularly calls for an embedded anti-racist strategy in ITE curriculum based on critical and reflective understanding to ensure race equity in education. This may help to challenge discourses related to stereotypical and deficit-based assumptions as factors for educational inequities. Picower (2012a) supports teacher activism in ITE for educational justice and equity to create a just world. This activism encompasses, among other things, creating liberatory spaces within classrooms through the establishment of caring relationships and democratic spaces to promote students' understanding of prevailing inequities and the competence to take necessary action. Picower (2009) supports the introduction of strategies for critical teacher education, such as multicultural education (Banks, 1993) and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994), to challenge the hegemonic structures of Whiteness. I argue that a repositioning of the Curriculum with a multiculturalist discourse is necessary in which teachers as Curriculum framers play a crucial role because they have the intellectual and moral responsibility to look at what, why, and how resources should be selected and incorporated into teaching (Doyle, 1992). Such discourses may address the structural inequalities in education by going beyond tokenistic multicultural reflection through props like bindis (decorative jewellery pieces worn by South and Southeast Asian people), bhajis (fried vegetable fritters in the Indian cuisine), and bhangra (music/dance genre from Punjab, India).

Study context

Plymouth is a Southwestern English city. Although it experienced a two-fold increase in its GMC population to 6% in a decade, this oceanic city is predominantly White in ethnicity, with 94% of its population from the DMC (Office for National Statistics, 2022). This possibly suggests a limited exposure to diverse cultures shaped by particular sociocultural and historical contexts. Although the increase in the GMC population is still less than that of the national figures, it is possibly necessary to include GMC students in this changing demography by imparting multicultural education. In the context of the present study, multicultural attention in mainstream primary education practice and environment may help to foster educational equity through a meaningful recognition of the ignored communities (Race, 2014) who are rendered vulnerable and minoritised, particularly in the present study's specific geographical, historical, and sociocultural contexts. The study had two research questions:

1. How do teachers, students, and parents describe their experiences and understanding of multiculturalism in four mainstream primary schools in England? How might sociocultural factors be considered when interpreting these descriptions?
2. In particular, how are teachers' experiences and understanding of multiculturalism shaped by the primary National Curriculum?

It is not possible to include all the findings generated from the study. Hence, the present article focuses on the findings and discussion of data generated from the students' classroom activities.

Methodology

For the present study, I adopted a qualitative case study design, which was consistent with my epistemological position within an interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivism entails the understanding that individuals make of their own lives and interpretations (J. Mason, 2017). The interpretivist approach enabled me to derive rich data by exploring the participants' perspectives, positions, and feelings in a natural set-up in their social context (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; J. Mason, 2017). Moreover, the study was influenced by my personal background and experiences as a person from the GMC who has been settled in Britain for over two decades. The study was designed as a single-case study of an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences and perceptions focused on a single category of students from key-stage two (7–11-year-olds) across four mainstream primary schools governed by one Academic Trust. The schools are situated in one geographical location where all teachers work with one student population sample and one official Curriculum, guidelines, and accountability criteria. The analysis section focused on the experiences and understanding of multiculturalism of teachers, students, and parents. Additionally, a single case study design allowed me to maintain the confidentiality of the different schools and participants while researching a sensitive topic, and that too in the backdrop of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, Brexit, and the then-ongoing pandemic. Although criticised for its lack of generalisability, a case study design helped me to understand the prevailing trend of multiculturalism in other schools with similar demography and locations (Gerring, 2004; Yin, 2013). I gathered data through virtually conducted semi-structured interviews via Zoom, observation of students' classroom activities, and documentary analysis of the classroom and corridor pictures. My field notes also helped me reflect on my feelings while conducting the semi-virtual research to understand the participants' issues, principles, and beliefs.

After several meetings with a trustee of the Academic Trust and headteachers amidst COVID-19, an opportunistic negotiated sampling was adopted to identify and gather rich data (Palinkas et al., 2015). The participants in each mainstream primary school included one Year Group from key-stage two, the teacher, the head of key-stage two, and the headteacher. Due to the pandemic-induced complexities, although only six parents had participated in the project (two parents each from two schools and one parent each from two other schools), the smaller number of parents did not prevent gathering in-depth data that reflected the views of people across various communities. My ethical documents included information sheets, consent forms, interview question templates, students' activities outline, Data Management Plan, and COVID-19 safety measures. I followed the British Educational Research Association (2024) guidelines throughout the research. I used NVivo, Word, and Excel for data interpretation and analysis. I selected reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) to explore flexibly, reflexively, and subjectively the ways in which themes formed reality in specific ways in the participants' experiences and understanding of multiculturalism (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

RTA enabled me to indulge in subjective self-awareness and critical reflection practice, which constitute important characteristics of qualitative research. It was an iterative and time-consuming data analysis process for me that involved six stages: familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing them, defining and naming them and finally, constructing a report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Theoretical framework

The study was underpinned by a sociocultural theoretical framework that holds individuals' cognitive development as an interpersonal activity inseparable from their social, cultural-historical contexts in which they take place and traverse space and time (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1934/1986). Cognition or thinking is mediated by specific cultural tools or artefacts (e.g., Curriculum resources, language, and narratives) through which individuals influence the environment, resulting in learning or understanding (Plowright, 2011). This contributes to both the preservation and invention of continuous and transformational mutually constructive cultural practices over time and generations (Rogoff, 2003). Teacher-student interactions can involve many ideas reflecting complex interwoven human activity, having a particular discourse in mainstream primary schools and influencing students' experiences and understanding of multiculturalism. The sociocultural concept of figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998) helped me to understand how multiculturalism is socioculturally and historically produced and embodied through identities (e.g., of teachers and students) in schools and influenced by local and wider social structures in the context and time of the research participants and for the researcher. Furthermore, I explored the participants' experiences in school sociocultural institutions situated in the local context – simultaneously incorporating the broader considerations of power and race as social structures in time, space, and place and how those considerations played out in schools through the perceptions of teachers and students (Nasir & Hand, 2006). Along with my positionality, my theoretical framework assisted in framing the research questions and methodology, generating the research aim and objectives, and guiding data generation, interpretation, findings, and analysis.

Students' classroom activities

Adhering to the Childcare Act of 2006, which holds England's local authorities responsible for including children's perspectives as active school members, students' voice was particularly necessary for my research in providing a setting where the experiences of individuals from underrepresented or marginalised groups are valued and acknowledged (Clark & Moss, 2011). Students' voices included not only their worksheets but also their conversations involving those.

In the pandemic circumstances, the students' classroom activities were designed by me and conducted by the teachers after necessary amendments suggested by the teachers. There were three classroom activities in which students participated collectively spread over three separate days on three lessons lasting for one

hour each. On day one, Activity One, the students found similarities and differences between Britain and a country in the Global South (which broadly includes Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Oceania). On day two, Activity Two, the students wrote a letter to their imaginary pen pal in a country of their choice, preferably in Global South, about their culture. On day three, Activity Three, I showed the students various photos of dress, food, and festivals concerning the GMC on which they talked. The activities aimed to understand the students' experiences, views, and feelings of cultures that were different from their own. However, the students' activities were valuable not only in generating data by producing deep insights into students' experiences and perceptions of multiculturalism but also those of the teachers. This is because how the teachers designed and conducted the activities and how they made classroom responses reflected their perceptions of multiculturalism.

Findings

The following broad themes discuss the findings that I generated from the students' classroom activities on the experiences of multiculturalism. The first finding relates to the powerful role of multicultural education, while the other two findings discuss the societal structural power imbalances in the specific context.

    1. Students' experiences of multiculturalism

    2. Teacher-student power relationships

    3. Stereotypes

1. Students' experiences of multiculturalism

For ease of discussion, this theme can be divided into two sub-themes based on the key ideas I generated.

    i. Students' enthusiasm

    ii. Students' understanding of culture: making connections

i. Students' enthusiasm

Enthusiasm is an abstract noun denoting a valorised feeling reflected through a keen interest in an act by the person showing it and/or getting involved in the act by the person showing it. Generally speaking, students across communities participated actively using resources like Chrome books, asked questions, and discussed with their peers. I think this can be possibly attributed to the activity design, which was in a quiz format using many photographs for which the students did not appear bored or disinterested. The photographs included some of my personal photographs, which added a personal touch to the lived experiences of GMC people and their cultures, and this possibly evoked more interest among students. Although the activities often dealt with countries that they had not heard of earlier, students did not seem to struggle with grasping new information about diverse cultures. As one teacher observed:

The children do not have the first layer of knowledge of the countries outside the U.K.

Instead of being shy about answering incorrectly, the students appeared considerably vocal, in general, sharing whatever they knew, however insignificant. They shared about their favourite movie character and memories of making distinct hairstyles when their cousins visited from their country of origin or wearing a dress sewed by their aunt in their country of origin. Food emerged as a strong connection for students across communities to engage quickly with information on a specific country or its people. For instance, in Activity Three, one child shared that his father was a chef and cooked a delicious Indian curry. Again, in Activity One, a DMC student read out from the worksheet the food name, 'Sheekh Kebab,' which was possibly a difficult term to pronounce. Another DMC student held: "I like the Mishti [Bengali dessert]".

Furthermore, the students shared somewhat freely about things that they were unsure about. For instance, they could identify a saucepan that was used in their house for cooking. However, they were surprised to know that saucepans were widely used in several South Asian countries to make warm beverages like tea and coffee. Again, the students shared that they had eaten a particular dish, seen people wearing a particular dress, or celebrated a particular festival, although they could not name the dish, dress, or festival precisely. For example, a DMC student talked about Gulab Jamun, a South Asian dessert, looking at a photo: "I know; I have eaten it at my neighbour's house. It is very sweet."

In another instance, one DMC student talked about Eid:

> My nanny's neighbour, she celebrates this thing, and I don't know what it's called, but they don't eat for like a whole day…. Then, sometimes they invite some of the people.

An important characteristic of the classroom activities was that religion and ethno-cultural festivals seemed to be a common interest among students across communities in all the schools. This reinforced the importance of Religious Education lessons, which is contrary to Cantle's (2018) views that religions have significantly lost their importance today.

Two features were noticeable among the GMC students during the classroom activities. First, the students actively shared about their own cultures and festivals, in general. For instance, the worksheet below is of a student with EAL who had recently moved to England from an Asian country. Despite experiencing issues in conversing in English, she participated in classroom activities on all three days with considerable interest (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

FIGURE 1
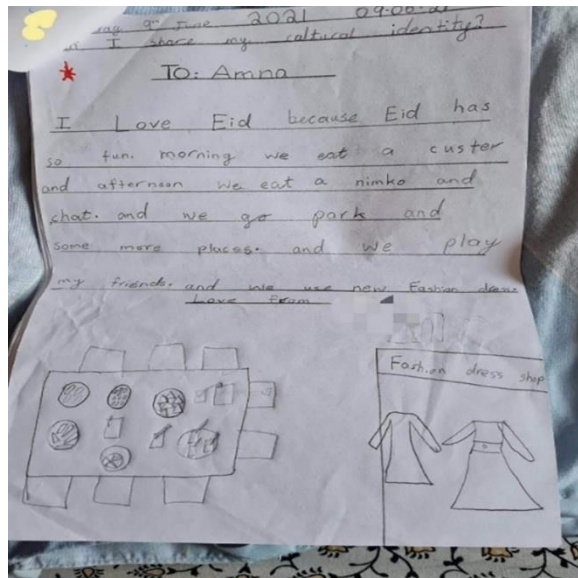
Second, the students selected not only their own country of origin but also other countries during the activities. One GMC student held:

> The reason I didn't choose Ghana is because my family lives there, and I want to learn about a different culture that I, maybe, don't know about and so I chose another country.

The above comment implies an overall interest and eagerness among students for the activity as it allowed them to learn about a multitude of cultures from various countries.

In all the schools, students across communities used adjectives like "fascinating", "fun", and "amazing" to describe their feelings about the activities. One example of a typical response is when one student from the DMC held: "And it was fun to learn about other places and what they do".
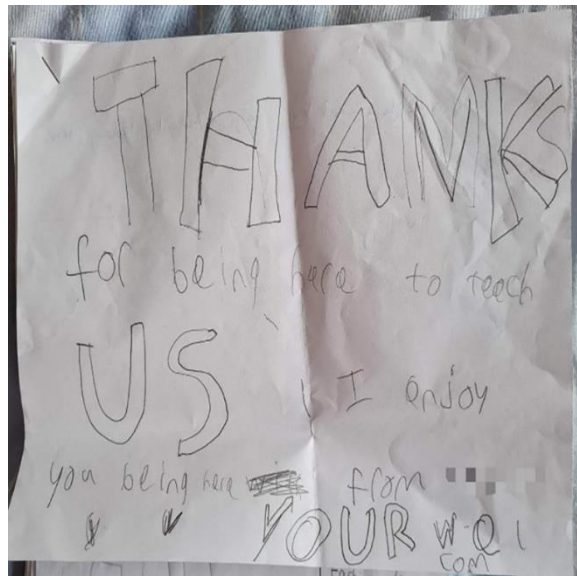
Students experiencing special needs participated in the activities (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2
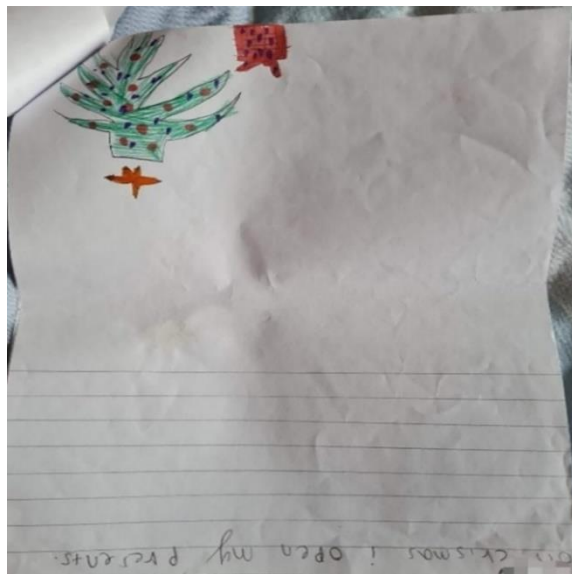
FIGURE 2

One student enjoyed the activities so much that he gifted me a handmade card on the day of Activity 1 (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3

This gesture touched me. While the study was not interventional or action research, I possibly fitted into the students' understanding of seeing an adult in the classroom as a teacher. Finally, the teachers also appeared to be engaged in the study. For instance, one teacher shared that she wore a South Asian dress called a saree once in her previous school when an Indian guest visitor had visited.

ii. Students' understanding of culture: making connections

It might be difficult for the participant student cohort to understand the meaning of culture if their age is taken into consideration. The students did Activity Two based on the teacher's explanation to them about culture by taking simple examples of festivals, dresses, and food that their family considered special. It could also be connected to a toy or game that their family had been doing over the years at a special festival or on a special day. The students made links between the information about culture in the activities to their own culture. In Activity Two, students wrote about a whole range of activities that they enjoyed, including festivals like Christmas, Halloween, fireworks day, and bonfire night. Additionally, they shared about other 'fun' activities like birthdays, street disco, New Year's Eve, snowball fighting, Christmas shopping, unwrapping Christmas gifts, Easter egg hunting, vacationing in exotic locales, playing with friends, playing video games, favourite sports, season and summer activities like biking and swimming (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4
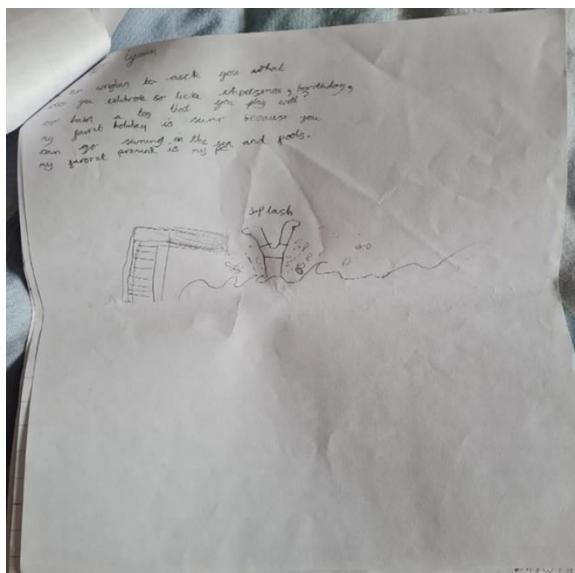
Increasingly, people are considering leisure activities as important to their identity (Antonsich, 2016), which may imply that for today's generation, culture has possibly acquired a new meaning where it is entwined with things that today's generation enjoys. One example may be snowball fighting. It can be noted that the geographical area of my study does not witness much snowfall during winter compared to many other places in Britain. Snowball fights can be relatable to a culture, which, in turn, is connected to Christmas, a religious festival (white Christmas is often considered auspicious among Christians) and, more generally, a cultural festival for people across communities. In this way, the students linked the classroom information about culture to the cultural realities of their homes and families.

The next two themes shed light on the perceptions of multiculturalism by concentrating on how the teachers-in-practice conducted the classroom activities.

2. Teacher-student power relationships

Classroom culture is characterised by conventional expectations of a hierarchical teacher-student power relationship that reflects and moulds their interactions (Macleod et al., 2012; Manke, 1997). It is a rather acceptable norm in classroom practice shaped by motives like disciplinary expectations, educating students, and getting the task done on time and in sequence. Instances suggesting hierarchical teacher-student power relationships were evident, showing the influential role of teachers in monitoring students' responses. The excerpt below is from Activity Three in the context of a photograph of a Bratz doll known for its ethnically diverse physical features that I showed to the students.

> Researcher: It's a "Bratz" [doll]…
> Student: Oh, I know. I just can't remember where I went. But somebody was playing like, I didn't like.
> Researcher: Why didn't you like playing with it?
> Student: I don't know, like it looks weird.
> Researcher: Why does it look weird?

Teacher: What do you like playing with, Kiera? Why, what would you prefer playing with to the doll?
Student: There are no words, but they are just a little bit!
Researcher: So, what type of a doll would you prefer?
Teacher: Do you play with dolls?
Student: Sometimes at friends' houses.
Teacher: At friends' houses. Okay. But you don't play with them all the time?
Student: Not all the time.
Teacher: Yeah, I think it's just not something that Kiera would play with [teacher moves away].

In the above excerpt, the teacher possibly found the discussion irrelevant because the student no longer played with a Bratz doll "all the time" but only "sometimes at friends' houses", albeit finding it "weird". However, since the student raised her hand to express her views on Bratz dolls, silencing her showed a non-egalitarian classroom relationship. The teacher's words, "I think" suggested her efforts to assume the student's views as reflected in this critical incident. This incident demonstrated the teacher-in-practice actively monitoring the student's responses and stopping the conversation instead of engaging in a meaningful discussion on the issue allowing the student to express her opinion, thereby empowering her (Williamson et al., 2005).

Talking about how school agencies in the particular geographical context handled talks concerning multiculturalism brings me to the next theme.

3. Stereotypes

Stereotypes can be understood as presumptions about people and communities relating to social categories like ethnicity, race, culture, and religion. They reflect the prevailing institutional hierarchy, the wider system of Whiteness in practice, and the dominant Eurocentric system (Picower, 2009). Students found funny some information about certain diverse cultures of the GMC. Their views reflected stereotypical perceptions that did not display some cultures in a good light. For instance, in Activity One, a DMC student held: "Chinese eat chicken feet [laughs]."

Again, in the same Activity One, the students shared information like there are tarantulas and scorpions in China (Figure 5), thatched-roofed houses in Uganda (Figure 6), and Ugandans' eating of grasshoppers, all of which are not seen in Britain. Although this might be correct information, these countries might have other information pieces to be known for besides these.

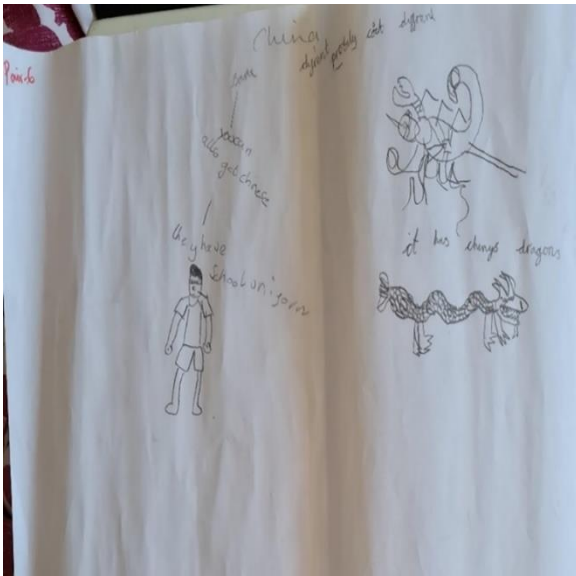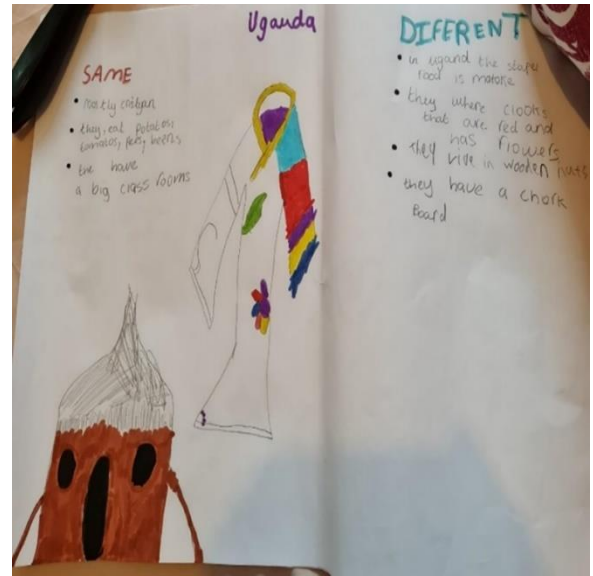FIGURE 5   FIGURE 6

The participant teachers also used terms during the activities that suggested stereotypical notions. For example, a student read from a print-out provided by a teacher about Thai people: "[Thai people] catch crickets and fry them".

While Thai people may eat crickets, the teacher could use other information on food facts in Thailand. As a person from the GMC, I argue that the term "catch" is belittling as it possibly gives images of prehistoric persons catching or hunting animals in the jungle for consumption. These examples of microaggressions (Doharty, 2019) were evident at other times, too. For instance, in one school, the hunting of crocodile tails in Zimbabwe became a funny classroom discussion revolving around 'unusual' Zimbabwean food habits. When a student said that Zimbabweans also consumed cow and lamb, the teacher did not say that these animals were widely consumed across the world. I think that this could have been an apt example of showing the similarities between Britain and Zimbabwe by avoiding the use of "striking" words to attract students' attention that promoted prejudices, however unintentional (Skelton et al., 2002).

Discussion

Students' classroom activities demonstrated students' general interest in culturally responsive classroom activities. Critically analysed, these activities helped to address classroom educational inequities by providing an opportunity for the GMC students to utilise their ethnic capital (Modood, 2004) by expressing their views about cultures of their own and those of others. This is because the presence of an ethnocentric, Eurocentric curriculum (Moncrieffe et al., 2020) does not give much opportunity to the GMC students to see them represented in teaching and learning in daily schooling that they deserve. Thus, the inclusion of these classroom activities may have immediate and long-standing educational benefits across communities with implications for the development of the students' feeling of national and cultural community (Niemi

et al., 2014) and empowering school culture (Banks, 1993). Furthermore, during the activities, students made connections between the information about cultures and their homes, lived experiences, and families while finding out about their peers. The activities denoted students' understanding of festivals with a lessened "religiosity" (Niemi et al., 2014, p. 264) in them despite their continuing importance, thereby emphasizing the fluidity of culture, tradition, and religion. As a person from GMC, I relate to this particular fluid element as I witness that most of our festivals have embraced a cultural aspect, transcending the religious aspect as a chief characteristic. I keep witnessing how, in today's Britain, festivals like Diwali and Navratri are attended by people across communities, showing their multi-aspectual identity. The activities showed efficient avenues for innovative teaching practices linking sociocultural contexts that transcended beyond the local and enmeshed culture and religion. Such innovations may provide a hospitable multicultural school environment (Modood, 2014).

Classroom activities illuminated teachers' role in influencing students' responses, which created imbalances in equitable teacher-student classroom relationships. Adults play a substantial role in students' skill development and knowledge acquisition by offering them necessary information through guided participation (Rogoff, 2003). However, as in the case of the Bratz doll discussed above, the teacher-in-practice possibly tried to avoid a somewhat uneasy situation when the student was expressing their views. Such critical incidents illuminated the importance of students' right to free expression (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990: Articles 12, 13), which is essential for democratic classroom participation. With limited necessary knowledge, the teacher possibly needed to do more to prevent the reproduction of classroom inequities (Picower, 2012b). From a sociocultural perspective, the teacher's perceived reality of the figured world of the classroom resided within dispositions and activities mediated by structural factors like power and privilege, for which the teacher enjoyed a superior classroom position (Holland et al., 1998; Nasir & Hand, 2006). It is necessary to encourage meaningful dialogues on uncomfortable topics (Cantle, 2018), which can help to create reasoning capabilities (Mercer, 2010).

The students' activities illuminated disturbing evidence of stereotypical assumptions about the GMC people. Banks (2012) argues that how teachers project students' cultures can shape students' loyalty to and identity with their peers, different cultures, schools, the wider community, and the country as a whole. Connected to important school values like respect, it is possibly necessary to promote an awareness of differences among students in a positive and enriching way. It is necessary to incorporate educational content that acknowledges the inclusion and representation of people across communities in a respectful way and, thereby, helps to promote a meaningful relationship with knowledge, education, and the well-being of all. This becomes more important in developing cognition and mindsets from an early age for students in mainstream primary education. Socioculturally speaking, stereotypical assumptions in the students' work and teachers' words suggested the maintenance of the racialised structural inequities in the local context within the schools as sociocultural institutions that functioned heavily in favour of the DMC people while minoritising those belonging to the GMC (Parsons, 2009).

These accounts of complex, microlevel interactions between the cognitive, discursive, and interpersonal patterns broadly attributed to different ethnic and racial groups and the sets of norms and conventions that operate in schooling environments begin to reveal the local production of race and culture as they emerge in the context of everyday school activity. (Nasir & Hand, 2006, p. 452)

The teachers' ways of conducting classroom activities and conversations exposed teachers' varying levels of knowledge, experience, and confidence concerning multiculturalism, particularly in a predominately White place. This was evident from the hegemonic dominant stereotypical understanding of culture and ethnicity of a predominately White teaching force, which enabled them to maintain the status quo intact through the practice of Whiteness (Picower, 2009). They were possibly unable to realise their dominating racial identity and higher positionality in the racial hierarchy, which enabled them to project GMC communities, their food habits and homes in particular ways through an active practice of racist stereotyping. Through such practices, they reinforced Whiteness, which may create lasting damage in the lived experiences of the GMC students. Human development takes place through learning within a sociocultural system of relationships that are informed by societal beliefs, practices, behaviour, and inequalities (Nasir & Hand, 2006). In my study, the teachers' identities, behaviour and practices within the figured worlds of classrooms were informed by known social types in relation to others like the GMC students. In the instances of negative racist stereotyping, the known social types rendered a subordinate position to the GMC students, for which their race, culture, and ethnicity could be belittled, however unintentionally or unknowingly. These instances stress racial literacy for teachers to reflect on their racist views and to understand their own complicity in the (re)production of racist stereotyping in classrooms in the study's sociocultural context (Joseph-Salisbury, 2020; Smith & Lander, 2023).

Limitations

The study was conducted in the pandemic-induced restrictions for which more intense and direct interaction between the students and me was not possible. Future studies can be undertaken with the researcher conducting the classroom activities directly or one-to-one or incorporating focus group discussions with students. These techniques may encourage more intense interaction of the researcher with the students enabling the latter to express their experiences and understanding of multiculturalism. This strategy may help to provide a wider picture of issues concerning them.

Conclusion

From an analysis of the students' classroom activities, it can be held that the activities stimulated the students' interest in culturally focused lessons as they expressed their views and feelings. The activities not only allowed students to look beyond their daily school tasks but also to gain information about cultures through a unique opportunity that they possibly seldom get. The activities acted as an effective 'teaser' to boost the self-esteem of the GMC students as they could see themselves in the resources, thereby assisting in

challenging an ethnocentric Curriculum (Moncrieffe et al., 2020; Tomlinson, 2023) where they are side-lined as 'others'. Dismantling the ethnocentric Curriculum is an important requirement that may allow students to have a holistic view of the world through its past and present, which, in turn, may help make them resilient and responsible citizens of tomorrow with the necessary competence to participate in society. The classroom activities suggested differences in the levels of understanding and experiences of multiculturalism in the particular local context where there is limited direct access to knowledge and resources around multicultural awareness. They showed strong influences of teachers-in-practice that significantly shape classroom perceptions, identities, and functioning within school practice by deciding whose voices are included and prioritised and whose not, thereby maintaining a racialised (im)balanced societal power structure, however unintentional. Therefore, it is necessary to address the serious issues around inequities instead of having a superficial incorporation of multicultural elements through bindis, bhajis, and bhangra. It will be interesting to see whether schools may incorporate a multiculturalist discourse through a (re)focus on Curriculum and teaching pedagogy, providing a strong contextual framework whereby respectful inclusion, trustworthy acceptance, and democratically empowering relationships may be promoted among students across communities and between the GMC students and the teachers (Sanahuja et al., 2020).

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