



## Enhancing racial representation in the curriculum: The case of performing arts programmes at a UK higher education institution

Janet Ramdeo & Stewart Nicholls

**To cite this article:** Janet Ramdeo & Stewart Nicholls (30 Jan 2025): Enhancing racial representation in the curriculum: The case of performing arts programmes at a UK higher education institution, *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, DOI: [10.1080/14703297.2025.2459651](https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2025.2459651)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2025.2459651>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



[View supplementary material](#)



Published online: 30 Jan 2025.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

# Enhancing racial representation in the curriculum: The case of performing arts programmes at a UK higher education institution

Janet Ramdeo<sup>a</sup> and Stewart Nicholls<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Surrey Institute of Education, University of Surrey, Guildford, UK; <sup>b</sup>Guildford School of Acting, University of Surrey, Guildford, UK

## ABSTRACT

It is well known that the performing arts industry lacks diversity and that training provision needs to reflect an increasingly racially diverse student body. How to enhance racial representation in performing arts curricula remains an area of conversation. Our university's Inclusive Curriculum Framework, created and piloted in 2022/23, became the required tool to identify necessary changes to curriculum design, delivery and assessment in the School of Acting. Narrative inquiry was utilised to interview fifteen racially minoritised final year undergraduate and postgraduate students to understand curricula omissions through their training experiences. Findings illuminated learning experiences that lacked racial authenticity, perceived disadvantage in casting decisions and experiences of stereotyping and essentialising. However, their experiences could improve with more external diverse creatives contributing to their learning and developing staff's racial awareness. Implementing the framework enabled the School of Acting's staff to identify meaningful actions towards delivering inclusive and anti-racist pedagogies, practices and programmes.

## KEYWORDS

Performing arts; racial representation; decolonising the curriculum; narrative inquiry; student voice; anti-racist pedagogies

## Introduction

The continuing discourse in literature and the media about the lack of diversity and representation in the performing arts workforce is well documented (Hunt, 2023; A. McNamara & Armstrong, 2021; Rumens & Broomfield, 2014; Stein, 2020) with the acknowledgement that the pipeline from training to 'treading the boards' needs to change. Actors, such as Christopher Eccleston opined, 'You need to be white, you need to be male, and you need to be middle class' (Denham, 2015) to have a successful performing arts career. Specifically, the representation of racially minoritised people within the performing arts remains a point of discussion, with implications for attracting diverse groups into an industry which does not fully represent them. This further has implications for drama schools and conservatoires' recruitment practices and curriculum

**CONTACT** Janet Ramdeo  [j.ramdeo@surrey.ac.uk](mailto:j.ramdeo@surrey.ac.uk)  Surrey Institute of Education, University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey GU2 7XU, UK

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

design to challenge this lack of diversity. The supply chain clearly needs to change but with this comes the need for curricula that meets and represents both the needs of performing arts industries and the diverse student bodies universities and conservatoires aim to attract (Daly, 2022).

The killing of George Floyd in 2020 in the US and the subsequent global response saw many universities, drama schools and conservatoires making public statements committing to tackle racial injustices and inequalities within their institutions (Daly, 2022). With this came a reinvigorated look at decolonising curricula, with calls for 'the new generation of actor trainers to acknowledge and challenge the problems in current training lineages' (Stamatiou, 2022, p. 97). However, perceptions of what and how 'Decolonising the Curriculum' looks like remain areas of conversation between students, staff, and educational developers (Winter et al., 2022). Whilst non-Euro-American knowledge in the performing arts exists (as an example, see the work of Ravengai, 2018), it is often overlooked, on the margins of the cannon of knowledge and unseen (Bala, 2017). C. McNamara and Coomber (2012) outlined the experiences of racially minoritised students in a London conservatoire, finding that these students experienced isolation and alienation with their peers, hyper-visibility as racially minoritised students, stereotyping and high levels of attrition due to low attainment. They recommend that course content reflect the lived experiences of their communities to tackle these issues. This requires a decentring of Euro-American knowledge and incorporating what has been marginalised or unseen to broaden the cannon of knowledge and eliminating the concept of a knowledge centre (Arora, 2021). However, there is still substantial work to do across the various performing arts disciplines to meet this recommendation.

Whilst there is much literature on inclusive education, including the effectiveness of frameworks and toolkits that aim to avoid exclusion and discrimination based on disability, gender, ethnicity and culture (Kioupi et al., 2023), less focusses specifically on enhancing racial representation and particularly in the performing arts in the UK. However, ethnic and racial underrepresentation remains an issue in disciplines like music, drama and dance, not helped by Eurocentric curricula, lack of diversity of discipline staff and continued uneven attainment and retention (Sharma et al., 2019). This paper, therefore, looks to examine the effectiveness of implementing our university's new Inclusive Curriculum Framework, through a funded project, to make tangible and sustainable enhancements to the learning experiences of racially minoritised students in four performing arts programmes through curricula change and driven by students' voices.

## Context

The School of Arts under discussion in this article has approximately six-hundred students registered across seventeen taught programmes including Certificate of Higher Education (one-year), BA (Hons) (three-year) and taught postgraduate MA and MFA programmes. Like many UK drama schools, or conservatoires, it has history dating back to the early twentieth century and has evolved over the decades. The School of Arts is accredited by the Council of Dance, Drama and Musical Theatre, regulated by the Office for Students and is a partner school of the Federation of Drama Schools.

Historically, racially minoritised students have been chronically underrepresented in the student population of UK drama schools. This school is no different. In recent years,

the percentage of racially minoritised students has shifted from 11% (2017/18) to 18% (2022/23), although the Musical Theatre undergraduate programme stands out with 25% of the cohort being from racially minoritised backgrounds. While this is a shift in the right direction, there is much progress to make.

The school's racially minoritised students include 'Home' students and 'international' students. We acknowledge that the lived experiences of these two groups will be materially different, in terms of the ways race and racism has affected their childhoods and prior education, for example.

Drama schools enable students to encounter a wide variety of performance forms, texts and genres. The choice of texts for productions and the casting of them are a central feature of Programme Leaders' roles in drama schools. Representation is a key consideration. Staff are responsible for enhancing training and the career trajectory of students when industry-facing, presenting all students at their strongest to support their chances of agent representation and employment upon graduation.

Underrepresentation of racially minoritised staff is a significant issue at many drama schools and again, this school is no different. Students notice and rightly comment on the lack of diversity among the core staff. At the time of writing, the school has fifty-one staff, five of whom are of racially minoritised backgrounds. While recruitment and selection processes have incorporated anti-racism practices of various kinds, the pace of change is governed by the pace of resignations and recruiting to vacant posts in a climate where universities are implementing recruitment freezes, re-structures and redundancies to strive for more financially viable operating models. Diversity amongst hourly paid Associate Lecturers and external creative staff is continually sought for a wide range of teaching, masterclasses, projects and final year productions.

### *Inclusive curriculum framework designed for local needs*

Racially minoritised students within two Postgraduate Taught (PGT) Acting and Musical Theatre programmes of the university's School of Acting had articulated the lack of racial and ethnic representation in the training they received. To address this concern, this project, funded by two small grants, looked to evaluate the effectiveness of implementing the Inclusive Curriculum Framework, an educational development initiative designed after a scoping exercise conducted across the university to ascertain current understanding and practices in inclusive education. The framework was created in response to the university's 2021–2024 strategic vision and to support the requirements of the university's Race Equality Charter action plan. It provided a mechanism for enhancing inclusive education across the institution and aimed to tackle identified awarding gaps. The framework, in part, was designed to enhance racial and ethnic representation across curricula. It was piloted in academic year 2022/23 across four disciplines in three faculties plus Learning Development provision within the Library and Learning Services before the framework's use was encouraged (although not obligatory) through the university's Curriculum Design Review process. It contains generalised statements, in the structure of a checklist and action plan template, aimed to support inclusive and representative module and programme design but what this looks like is discipline-specific. The framework is divided into sections that raise considerations of the role that students' voices play in curriculum design and review, ways to enhance curriculum design practices, delivery

**Table 1.** Relevant framework statements to guide enhancing racial representation.

| Curriculum design area | Framework statements  |
|------------------------|---|
| Students' voices       | Students' voices are being captured in multiple formats to review, modify, and enhance content and delivery.  |
| Design                 | Content materials are representative, reflecting the diversity of the student community in ways which are positive, avoiding deficit model perspectives.                                      |
| Delivery               | The diverse student community are provided with opportunities to learn collaboratively enabling students to recognise the value of working with people from diverse backgrounds.              |
| Assessment             | There are assessment opportunities which allow students to draw on their own background.  |
| Staff development      | Student-facing educators have completed relevant university-offered or external training (e.g. Unconscious Bias either online or face-to-face; 'Moving Towards Decolonising the Curriculum'). |

and assessment, creating an inclusive learning environment (both physical and virtual) and staff development for inclusive practices. As students from the PGT programmes had specifically voiced the lack of racial and ethnic representation, the School of Arts was invited to participate in the project, providing an opportunity to clearly demonstrate the efficacy of the framework to enhance curriculum representation.

Whilst the framework considers 'inclusion' in its widest definition, [Table 1](#) outlines the specific framework statements that centre representation within curricula pertinent to the project.

## Research design and methods

To understand the experiences of racially minoritised performing arts students, their voices and perspectives on performing arts programmes were central to contextualising generic inclusive practice statements embedded within the framework for effective implementation. The project draws on the voices of racially minoritised performing arts students interviewed from four programmes of study to provide the direction for change within their curricula. Although fifteen students were interviewed (nine students from undergraduate programmes and six students from the taught postgraduate programmes), this paper presents the perspectives of six students as exemplifications. We found overlapping themes in the full range of interviews but felt that it was important to take an anti-essentialist approach, described as 'an emancipatory discourse in the challenge of hegemonic representations' (Verkuyten, 2003, p. 371). We recognised that, whilst overlapping themes emerged, experiences were subjective and unique to the individual, countering the concept of essentialising or generalising personal perceptions and lived experiences. Anti-essentialism, therefore, ensured that individuals were heard, which may have been lost if we attempted to include all fifteen voices through focusing on themes rather than personal experiences. Whilst the six students who feature in this paper represent a sample of the whole number of participants, similarities in their stories are shared by several participants. Drawing on Critical Race Theory's (CRT) tenet of centralising voices of colour (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), narrative inquiry methodology that enables participants to share stories of their experiences was utilised to capture racially minoritised students' experiences, perspectives and personal stories of being seen and unseen. Through the lens of CRT, narrative inquiry enables participants to offer counter stories to accepted normative perspective of their lives. Platforming and hearing their

experiences assisted in in-depth understanding of the nature of curricula design and informed the application of the framework's generic statements around enhancing racial and ethnic representation. To answer the research question, 'In what ways do racially minoritised performing arts students in the School of Acting feel seen or unseen in their training?', the fifteen undergraduate and post-graduate final year racially minoritised students were interviewed either individually or through small focus groups, as the chosen methods to capture student voices and their experiential stories. Interviews, which were primarily unstructured to allow students to share their stories without feeling pressured to share details that they may have found uncomfortable, took place between October 2023 and February 2024 in person and online via Microsoft Teams. Due to the limited number of students, all students who identified as racially minoritised within the School of Acting and within their final year of study were invited to voluntarily participate in the study and were provided with an information sheet outlining the nature of the project and consent form to complete. One Programme Leader facilitated two focus group interviews that took place in person, timed around timetable pressures, to ensure that all racially minoritised students on the programme were provided with opportunities to participate, if they chose to. Eight students participated in the focus group interviews. The remaining participants preferred an online interview outside of their study schedule, for convenience. All interviews, whether individual or focus group, were video recorded and transcribed for analysis. The risk of harm to student participants was central to ethical considerations and application for research ethics approval, as research shows that sharing personal stories can be painful as they recall incidents of perceived oppression (Osler, 1997). As such, the risk of harm was explained in depth in the ethical approval submission that was approved by the University Ethics Committee in August 2023. Mitigating practices included providing participants with a break or moving away from topics which the students find uncomfortable to share, creating spaces of psychological safety. Students participating in focus group interviews were asked if they were comfortable to share their experiential stories in front of their peers and were invited to only offer stories that they wished to, as the use of narrative inquiry methodology suggests. The interviews were also conducted by a racially minoritised researcher, as a recognised mechanism of access and in the belief that some level of race matching or symmetry (Egharevba, 2001; Vass, 2017) between the researcher and the researched may encourage research participants to be more open with a researcher who can relate to their world view and lived experiences due to sameness and commonalities and avoid misinterpretation of these experiences.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) was applied deductively to the data through the framework statements that focus on racial and ethnic representation. Taking a deductive approach to data analysis drew out key issues specifically related to racially minoritised students' experiences of their programme curricula. Experiences that illuminated training successes were identified to highlight good practices but moreover, omissions provided a steer of where curriculum enhancement could be made. Taking a deductive analytical approach also aided in maintaining focus on students' experiences of learning through curricula design, as wider experiences of oppression were inevitably expressed through students' stories and perceptions, which cannot be ignored but can be addressed separately to the aims of this project. Whilst the students featured in this

research were overwhelmingly positive about studying at the university's School of Acting, with its outstanding reputation, highly experienced staff and high success rates, hearing perceptions and experiences of their perceived lack of representation in their learning journeys provided opportunities to review and critique curriculum design to be more diverse and inclusive.

## Results

To exemplify students' experiences, the perceptions of six of the fifteen interviewed students are drawn upon specifically to illustrate themes. Pseudonyms are used to maintain the anonymity of the participants. Findings present the learning and training experiences and perceptions of Anthony (Black British undergraduate male student), Amara (international undergraduate female student), Jaden (Black British undergraduate male student), Kai (international post-graduate male student), Alicia (international post-graduate bi-racial female student) and Imani (British undergraduate bi-racial female student).

### *More diversity and authenticity in dance training*

Students noted that they wanted more opportunities to learn authentic dance styles, particularly those which could enable cultural diversity. Given the strong influence that hip-hop dancing has had on commercial dance, the inclusion of this dance class was a welcome addition to the curriculum for diversity and representation. However, Anthony was left disappointed by his experience, stating,

When I saw we had commercial (dance style) on the timetable, I was like, 'excellent!'. But the one session last year wasn't commercial because it was ... it was very whitewashed commercial. It was really disappointing. The biggest thing for me was I knew this style but I could tell that it wasn't authentic commercial to push me to improve. Everyone was watching me for my reaction and I just felt I was being judged throughout the whole class. When it came to auditioning for a role which contained commercial, I did months of auditions for it and got to the end of the process and they said, 'Look, we really like you, love your voice and we love your acting choices. But your dance technique is not strong enough', and that upset me. I ended up doing evening commercial classes, with endless hours in the studio at my own cost.

Amara confirmed a similar experience and that the training experience was more like a box-ticking activity, saying,

To push myself in contemporary dance I had to go to Pineapple (dance studios) to do these classes and it was so expensive but I wanted this opportunity so badly, to push me. There's (sic) so many genres of dance that are culturally diverse that they could incorporate into our training that everyone in the room could take value from, but so far they took one little step and they do this whitewashed commercial. It's like, we've done commercial – check!

Racially minoritised students felt that cultural diversity in their dance training is important to their racial and ethnic identities. They felt that the lack of authenticity was not just placing them at disadvantage in the industry as the landscape changes and develops but was also marginalising and undermining their cultural heritages.

### ***More diversity and authenticity in voice and accent work***

Students talked about wanting voice and accent training related to racially minoritised communities to be more authentic and delivered by culturally diverse tutors and trainers who are from those communities. Jaden commented,

It doesn't help us if we're being trained in a Jamaican accent by, like, someone who doesn't have an authentic Jamaican accent. We know it's not authentic. Accents are so diverse in the Caribbean so it's, like, quite insulting to our communities if trainers don't get it right.

Whilst British students from racially minoritised backgrounds want training from those who hold authentic accents, avoiding undermining their cultural identities, international students whose first language is not English wanted more support to develop their Received Pronunciation (RP), finding that their own accents are prohibitive and making them feel invisible. Kai, who is from South East Asia, provided his perspective, saying,

We did our public productions and all of the main parts, apart from one, went to the English RP (Received Pronunciation) speaking people. I think I would have been a main if it was colourblind casting or accent blind casting. Being an international student with an accent (from home country), I feel that I'm overlooked.

Kai also noted that for international students, more assessment and opportunities to work in their own accents would help them feel valued.

### ***More diverse plays, performances and improved training that avoid miscasting, not casting and perpetuating stereotypes***

Most students articulated their frustrations in the lack of diversity in plays and performances, feeling that more should be done to increase representation and opportunities for racially minoritised students. Alicia held particularly strong opinions about her experiences, saying,

I think in terms of representation, there is a lot more to be done because there was absolutely nothing on my programme, although all the plays we performed, all the plays we handled and looked at were all for white people. And I think even if we come for the Western education, there is a lot of diversity that is to be touched upon and looked at. For example, there is the immigrant experience.

She goes on to provide her perceptions on how the choices of plays and performances disadvantage racially minoritised groups and particularly racially minoritised women. She explains,

It's like, when I see this play (Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?) being put on, it's disappointing when this play is good for white people, and particularly good for white men, you know. It's never for a person of colour in mind. Why don't we do something else? The only people you're putting at a disadvantage are people of colour, especially women, and not taking any responsibility. I felt like (the tutor) was really putting all the women of colour not in a good place with this play and not helping them forward in any particular way. He (the tutor) said he couldn't really place me (for roles). He wouldn't know what I would be OK for, and then I'm like, oh, is it because I'm not white enough? This is really frustrating and upsetting for me.



Further, Alicia reflected on whether casting decisions were based on expected Western or white norms, with decisions not being transparent causing scepticism. Her perceptions about who is included and excluded in casting decisions created a context she found demoralising that damaged her confidence and trust in the casting process. She recalls,

I remember that a white English guy got this main lead that was a romantic lead in a Shakespeare play. And in my opinion, I have never seen Shakespeare done as well as by this Korean guy (student on programme), who sounds quite British as well, and he was like the most typical picture book romantic lead if there ever is one. I don't understand why he wasn't cast as the lead. Unless it's because of his ethnicity. I literally don't see any other reason. And then, of course, the (Black) South African woman was forgotten in the casting. She didn't get cast at all. It's upsetting to see it happen. I think we (racially minoritised students) all felt very clearly who else it could have happened to and who it could have not happened to.

Alicia was not the only student to raise experiences of how racially minoritised students are seen by programme tutors. Amara showed her exasperation at the stereotyping she faced in her singing classes, being from South East Asia, by stating,

So, often I walk into the singing class and I'll sing something from 'Miss Saigon'. It's like I'm only being trained for 'Miss Saigon'. I don't want to always sing 'Miss Saigon'. I want to be more than 'Miss Saigon'.

Students felt that these types of interactions amounted to the absence of some staff members' racial awareness, including a lack of understanding of the triggers and trauma of racial stereotyping for different racialised groups. However, they also found it difficult to express their exhaustion and exasperation to relevant personnel, suggesting that psychologically safe spaces were required to support students and challenge behaviours that served to marginalise, invisibilise and traumatise students.

### *Using more diverse external creatives*

A number of students interviewed were positive about a specific visit from an external creative who performed in the show 'Hamilton'. For racially minoritised students, this became a highlight of their training due to the representation the experience brought. Jaden and Anthony agreed with one another when reflecting on this experience. Jaden recalled,

We had a 'Hamilton' person who came in, teaching us the actual dance because he was in the show. And because of that lesson, we actually felt like we were being seen. And the students who were white students, also really enjoyed it.

The students then went on to query why more external racially diverse creatives were not invited in to contribute to their training. Kai noted,

If the school is internationally acclaimed, why would you only have British teachers? It might be very interesting to have some teachers who have a different background who can teach movement from a different cultural perspective or who can teach Chinese dance or this or that. It could only add to your value and I think make us (racially minoritised students) feel valued too.

It was clear that the students wanted to see a more diverse staffing body, although they also recognised that this was not something that could be remedied quickly. Hence, they were keen to see more ethnically diverse external contributions to their training, from people who can be brought in and who understood the challenges of the industry from a minoritised perspective.

### *Staff being more educated in race equity*

Students felt that staff needed to be more sensitive to key events and issues affecting racially minoritised groups that are being drawn upon for individual performances and assessment. Anthony exemplified this, feeling that a key moment in the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 that he used for an assessment (John Boyega's powerful speech) was considered unimportant by the assessing tutor, as the feedback received was felt to be unhelpful for his development. He questioned his choice of performance, despite the importance of the Boyega speech to communities that reflect who he is, stating,

I chose to do a political speech for an assessment. I picked John Boyega's BLM (Black Lives Matter) speech. That resonated with me and a really important speech for Black communities at that time. Then my feedback was, 'Yeah, good. I can tell that resonated with you'. That's it? OK, in what way? Like, what was that (as feedback)? How can I use this (to improve)? And I felt like I shouldn't have done it and done something less provocative. What a waste of six weeks doing a project where all you're going to say is 'That was good'. I could have told you that it was a good speech.

Whilst the above could be seen as simply poor feedback, Anthony felt that the presentation of a speech that was clearly associated with the Black Live Matter protests in 2020 was the barrier to receiving appropriate feedback as the staff member was perceived to be uncomfortable with engaging with an assessment underpinned by an important racialised event.

Students also raised the issue of essentialising Black students and explained how they experienced being mixed up with their peers. Imani raised concerns about why this is problematic and unacceptable to her, explaining,

The other day, the tutor got me and Andrea (pseudonym for student sat next to her) mixed up and not for the first time. We don't look anything like each other and it's lazy. They wouldn't do that to white girls. They don't do that to white girls. My concern is these tutors are assessing us and if they can't be bothered to recognise who we are, how can we trust their assessments of us?

Students are clearly concerned about inappropriate or inaccurate assessments of their skills and knowledge, either because of perceptions of tutor discomfort related to assessment content being related to racialised events or experiences, or simply by not being recognised and essentialised by their assessing tutors. Like with the miscasting, non-casting and stereotyping above, students felt that some staff members' racial awareness required development to avoid episodes that negatively impact on the students' sense of belonging to the school and the industry. Further, increasing racial awareness would potentially prevent students feeling gaslighted so questioning their choices of performance for assessment activities.

### *Students' voices for curriculum enhancement*

The six voices presented above provided the drivers to focus potential curriculum enhancements, alongside perceptions from other students interviewed but not featured in these findings. Additionally, Nav (British South Asian heritage undergraduate male student) noted the importance of hearing multiple voices to achieve improved representation, stating,

If it's coming just from one person, then it's like, it's a one off (negative racialised experience). Nobody's going to do anything about it. But if there are multiple voices saying the same thing, then somebody has to sit up and listen at some point.

### **Discussion and ways forward**

Concepts that arose in the findings include authenticity of the curriculum, stereotyping of students, staff cultural awareness and student voices being the driver of curriculum change. Much research that explores the nature of authenticity in education focusses on student and staff authentic identities (see Bialystok and Kukar (2018) as an example). However, this article also points to the authenticity of curriculum content to be a true reflection of cultural knowledge and skills which may require a move away from the Euro-American knowledge base that performing arts traditionally relies upon.

To improve the learning experiences associated with racial and ethnic representation outlined in the findings, curriculum gatekeepers need to firstly be more racially aware to recognise the detriment to racially minoritised students that a lack of representation causes and then be prepared to reconstruct their curricula to be more reflective of and responsive to the growing diversity of the student body. When staff are not racially aware and fail to develop their racial literacy, it affects students' performance, engagement and perceptions of their value in their learning spaces (Kioupi et al., 2023). As Arday et al. (2021) notes, '(T)he absence of a curriculum that is reflective of an ever-increasingly diverse and multi-cultural society continues to contradict and compromise the lofty egalitarian ideals often espoused by universities' (2021, p. 299). Further, the examples of stereotyping and essentialising experienced by participants demonstrates the myth of tolerance in higher education (Moosavi, 2022) and instead potentially views racially minoritised students through a deficit lens. Stereotyping and essentialising have the power to stigmatise students, which can be challenged and eradicated through raising staff cultural awareness, highlighting the importance of continued training and staff development. The pedagogical omission of racially minoritised identities and knowledge needs to be interrogated to develop new canons of knowledge that are more representative and inclusive. This is particularly important for students entering a highly competitive industry that does not represent them and where acceptance can be challenging, as noted by actor Ncuti Gatwa who stated, 'There's so much white mediocrity that gets celebrated, and Black people, we have to be absolutely flawless to get half of [that]' (Thomas, 2024).

To tackle the pedagogical omissions that marginalise or make student groups invisible, students' voices become a key driver for change, particularly in fields that are dominated by white Western canons of knowledge. Whilst concern exists about the weight and authority of student voices and how to wrestle the power imbalances and location of

expertise between staff and students, co-construction of the curriculum provides opportunity to inclusively respect both student and staff voices to contribute to new approaches to pedagogical practices and promoting greater equity (Cook-Sather, 2020). In other words, the community aspect of inclusion should enable students to participate fully in the design, delivery and assessment decisions made about the education they receive (Kioupi et al., 2023). Therefore, racially minoritised students provide the situated knowledge of their experiences critical to authentically enhance racial and ethnic representation in their curricula which had been previously omitted. Whilst student voice plays a key role in curriculum development and design (Brooman et al., 2015), we must be mindful of the need for an ethic of care (Reich, 2021), as self-reflective research practices that avoid reproducing inequalities and creating harm, to prevent retraumatising students as they share their experiences of their curriculum.

The School of Arts operates a 'Student Voice' framework typical of UK universities. Feedback and reflection is sought frequently and this informs continuous enhancements. A number of the views shared by the undergraduate students, for example, stem from their first and second years of training, with some of what they voiced in the interviews being shared previously and, in most cases, acted upon to resolve. The project, therefore, illuminated good practice in some areas, as highlighted above. However, to tackle the continued omissions in racial representation in the school's curricula and practices and students' concerns about staff members' racial and cultural awareness, the use of the university's new Inclusive Curriculum Framework identified further areas for development.

The university's Inclusive Curriculum Framework includes an action plan template to ensure that suitable, measurable and affordable actions are built into curriculum design as a mechanism for sustainable change. Drawing on the interview findings and in discussion with key stakeholders at the School of Acting, a workable set of actions were devised to move towards greater racial and ethnic representation, identifying actions that could resolve some issues immediately to longer term changes that the school can look to make. Demonstrating ways forward, Table 2 outlines these actions in relation to the framework statements focusing on representation to be built into the school's Learning and Teaching Strategy and Curriculum Enhancement Review process. Staff discussions recognised that there is still work to be done and to get right. Representation in the curriculum done authentically and meaningfully leads to enhanced student belonging as students feel valued, included and accepted in university, all contributors to student success (Pedler et al., 2022).

Engaging with racially minoritised students' voices beyond the university's standard student feedback mechanisms provided a richer understanding of their experiences in the performing arts programmes. Having a more nuanced understanding of these students' experiences in relation to racial representation in the curricula opened a space for School of Acting staff to critically examine ways to address the lack of diversity in performing arts programmes and training that is recognised in literature and the industry. The use of the framework to identify curricula omissions enabled programme team members to focus their minds on inclusive curriculum design by understanding that asking the right questions and providing psychologically safe spaces for alternative student feedback can lead to meaningful actions for change. Whilst there is still work to do and a deeper

**Table 2.** Identified actions for enhancing racial representation in performing arts curricula.

| Framework statements  | Actions for enhancement of racial representation  |
|---|---|
| Students' voices are being captured in multiple formats to review, modify, and enhance content and delivery.  | To replicate this project methodology periodically across all programmes as part of the university's Curriculum Enhancement Review process.   |
| Content materials are representative, reflecting the diversity of the student community in ways which are positive, avoiding deficit model perspectives.                                      | To incorporate more commercial dance training, reflecting the changing landscape and skillset needed for Musical Theatre, finding the right trainer/s who can teach authentic commercial.<br>To audit roles in plays over the last five years to evaluate casting decisions and possible bias in casting.   |
| The diverse student community are provided with opportunities to learn collaboratively enabling students to recognise the value of working with people from diverse backgrounds.              | To build a bank of diverse creatives as contacts and community of practice who can provide additional support to students (individual or groups of students) or to be invited in to enhance representation and authenticity of training.  |
| There are assessment opportunities which allow students to draw on their own background.  | To provide clarity of opportunity for voice and accent work and assessment, enabling students to safely and confidently draw on their own and other culturally important performance examples.  |
| Student-facing educators have completed relevant university-offered or external training (e.g. Unconscious Bias either online or face-to-face; 'Moving Towards Decolonising the Curriculum'). | To create opportunities for staff to complete or refresh training on (conscious and unconscious) bias and racial awareness to prevent perpetuating stereotypes, miscasting decisions and building racial awareness/literacy. Opportunities include:<br>Race Equity Training (online);<br>Staff Network Allyship training specific to race;<br>Three-day anti-racism and social justice in pedagogy training used previously.<br>To work with Admissions Team to consider needs of international students at point of audition to enrolment.<br>To diversify staffing profile (long-term aim). |

understanding to be gained of both what students' experiences and perceptions stem from and why they may hold these perceptions, this project has provided the school with further direction and detail to work towards inclusive anti-racist pedagogies, practices and programmes. This project also provides a methodology and evidence of an effective mechanism for change that we envisage being shared within the institution to encourage greater use of the framework for formal quality activities and to create more inclusive and representative curricula.

## Acknowledgments

Thank you to Professor Catherine McNamara for useful contextual insights and to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback. Thank you also to the fifteen students who provided their voices that enabled the drive to enhance representative provision.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) Research and Evaluation Small Grant under Grant number 86208992; Fluor Global University Support Programme under Grant number [8503D].

## Notes on contributors

**Janet Ramdeo** has worked in various academic leadership and programme leadership roles in universities in London and Cambridge, predominantly in teacher education both locally and internationally. In recent years, Janet has become more involved in issues of equality, equity, diversity and inclusion, which has become the focus of her research.

**Stewart Nicholls** is an undergraduate Programme Leader with a Director, Choreographer and Musical Stager background for West End, national and international productions. Stewart has lectured in the history, direction and choreography of musical theatre with publications in *The Oxford Handbook of The British Musical* and *Paris and the Musical*.

## ORCID

Janet Ramdeo  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2744-8572>

## References

- Arday, J., Zoe Belluigi, D., & Thomas, D. (2021). Attempting to break the chain: Reimagining inclusive pedagogy and decolonising the curriculum within the academy. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 53(3), 298–313. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1773257>
- Arora, S. (2021). A manifesto to decentre theatre and performance studies. *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 41(1), 12–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682761.2021.1881730>
- Bala, S. (2017). Decolonising theatre and performance studies. *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies*, 20(3), 333–345. <https://doi.org/10.5117/TVGN2017.3.BALA>
- Bialystok, L., & Kukar, P. (2018). Authenticity and empathy in education. *Theory & Research in Education*, 16(1), 23–39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878517746647>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis, APA handbook of research methods in psychology. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, vol. 2: Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological* (Vol. 2, pp. 57–71). <https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004>
- Brooman, S., Darwent, S., & Pimor, A. (2015). The student voice in higher education curriculum design: Is there value in listening? *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 52(6), 663–674. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2014.910128>
- Cook-Sather, A. (2020). Respecting voices: How the co-creation of teaching and learning can support academic staff, underrepresented students, and equitable practices. *Higher Education*, 79(5), 885–901. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00445-w>
- Daly, D. (2022). *Actions speak louder than words. An investigation around the promises and the reality of representation in actor training. Theatre, dance and performance training.* <https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2022.2078873>
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (3rd ed.). University Press.
- Denham, J. (2015, September 7). Christopher Eccleston argues only white, male, middle-class actors get to play Hamlet on the London stage. *The Independent*.
- Egharevba, I. (2001). Researching an-'other' minority ethnic community: Reflections of a black female researcher on the intersections of race, gender and other power positions on the research

- process. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 4(3), 225–241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570010023760>
- Hunt, E. (2023). American Nepo babies have nothing on the British. *Vice*.
- Kioui, V., Nawire, A. W., Musungu, S., Nzuve, F., & Giannopoulos, G. (2023). Policy and practice on inclusive higher education in the UK and Kenya: A theoretical framework and recommendations. *Sustainability*, 15(18), 13540. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su151813540>
- McNamara, A., & Armstrong, E. (2021). *Towards accessible Actor training*. [www.nationaldrama.org.uk/journal/](http://www.nationaldrama.org.uk/journal/)
- McNamara, C., & Coomber, N. (2012). *BME Student experiences at central school of speech and drama*. The Higher Education Academy.
- Moosavi, L. (2022). The myth of academic tolerance: The stigmatisation of East Asian students in Western higher education. *Asian Ethnicity*, 23(3), 484–503. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2021.1882289>
- Osler, A. (1997). *The education and careers of black teachers: Changing identities, changing lives*. Open University Press.
- Pedler, M. L., Willis, R., & Nieuwoudt, J. E. (2022). A sense of belonging at university: Student retention, motivation and enjoyment. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 46(3), 397–408. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1955844>
- Ravengai, S. (2018). Decolonising theatre: Subverting the Western dramaturgical frame in Zimbabwean theatre and performance. *Critical Arts*, 32(2), 15–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2018.1452952>
- Reich, J. A. (2021). Power, positionality, and the ethic of care in qualitative research. *Qualitative Sociology*, 44(4), 575–581. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-021-09500-4>
- Rumens, N., & Broomfield, J. (2014). Gay men in the performing arts: Performing sexualities within ‘gay-friendly’ work contexts. *Organization*, 21(3), 365–382. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508413519766>
- Sharma, S., Catalano, E., Seetzen, H., Julia Minors, H., & Collins-Mayo, S. (2019). Taking Race Live: Exploring experiences of race through interdisciplinary collaboration in higher education. *London Review of Education*, 17(2). <https://doi.org/10.18546/LRE.17.2.07>
- Stamatiou, E. (2022). Pierre Bourdieu and actor training: Towards decolonising and decentering actor training pedagogies. *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 13(1), 96–114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2021.1943509>
- Stein, T. S. (2020). *Racial and ethnic diversity in the performing arts workforce*. Routledge.
- Thomas, C. (2024, April 20). Ncuti Gatwa says while “White mediocrity” gets celebrated, black people must be “flawless” to get half that. *The hollywood Reporter*.
- Vass, G. (2017). Getting inside the insider researcher: Does race-symmetry help or hinder research? *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 40(2), 137–153. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2015.1063045>
- Verkuyten, M. (2003). Discourses about ethnic group (de-)essentialism: Oppressive and progressive aspects. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 42(3), 371–391. <https://doi.org/10.1348/014466603322438215>
- Winter, J., Webb, O., & Turner, R. (2022). Decolonising the curriculum: A survey of current practice in a modern UK university. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 61(1), 181–192. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2022.2121305>