**I: = Interviewer (Interviewer in bold)**

R: = Respondent [name]

**I: So, [name of interviewee], can I just ask you, you’ve mentioned that you work in** [area in England] **but can you tell me a little bit about yourself, how long have you been a teacher for, the subjects you teach and so on.**

R: So I trained as a teacher in 2014 in a university in [area in England]. I can name the training institute. It’s part of the [university] remit but it’s in [area in England]. So it was [university] that I originally trained. I entered teaching quite late. I had already done a degree when I was [age] and I finished that when I was [age]. I had two years around the financial crash where things were not really happening very much and I decided that teaching may be a safer bet because I think they were, at that time, really actively driven to recruit teachers. So I went down the PGCE route. I opted to go to this particular university because I knew that they were quite a diverse university, quite challenging, quite critical in their thinking. So I wanted to go to a university that I thought would challenge me. So that’s what my journey was into teaching. My original degree was in fine art and critical theory. I didn’t want to be a PGCE secondary teacher. I went into primary school teaching primarily just because I’d been used to working with children of that age group anyway. I felt more comfortable.

I also felt that I was an all-rounder anyway at school, I could do quite a lot of the stuff. I knew my maths and I was interested in science. Way before I actually did my art degree I was meant to go to [university] to read history so I had lots of different things that I was interested in. I thought primary school would be a really good channel for me. So I got into the general primary school PGCE. That obviously lasted for a year. The training was interesting because obviously you only actually have ten teaching weeks at the university. The rest of it you’re on placement. That’s a journey in itself. It’s tough. The PGCE route is tough. I think at the moment they are beginning to phase that type of route out. It’s more about school led training. So a lot of my colleagues are school led now. I wasn’t able to access school led training because I hadn’t worked as a TA or anything like that before. So the PGCE was the best for me. I enjoyed it. It was tough but I really enjoyed it. I thought the university offered a really good space to think and reflect about critical teaching practices and they were beginning to incorporate that kind of analysis that you need when you go into spaces as to what is happening with the structures and the systems and so forth.

So I really enjoyed my teaching practice there. The schools I was placed in weren’t so great. I feel that I didn’t, at that time, make too much of a fuss about it. In one respect I was fairly new into the teaching structure when I was training and I didn’t make a fuss about it. I thought, “Okay, they’ve put me in a school which is an hour and a half away from my home,” and the teacher that I was placed with was someone who had only just finished their NQT so very inexperienced. That was the teacher who they placed me with. The children were beautiful. They were lovely. I was able to pass fine. But obviously I did feel that being placed with such an inexperienced teacher for my first teaching placement, I didn’t really know what to make of that really. I didn’t really kick up a fuss about it. I just accepted it. I don’t know whether that was maybe related to the fact that I was just happy to have got on to a PGCE, maybe it was because I was black. I mean the school I was in was mostly Bangladeshi children. It was 95% Bangladeshi and a couple of percent maybe white immigrant. So it was diverse.

I didn’t really experience anything too much but one thing I do remember which really did put me off that school was midway through my placement one of the assistant heads at one of the Christmas parties mentioned something like, “Well it’s quite a known fact that black people can’t swim.” I thought to myself, “This is the assistant head of a school where 95% are of an ethnic minority with a view like this.” There was something within that that I thought, “Wow, this is the structure of the school.” Anyway, that was the first placement. The second placement was in a bit more of a diverse school but again, I was placed with another teacher who was quite inexperienced. So that was my journey into it. I mean the PGCE is another thing in itself I think. I did manage to pass it. A lot of people didn’t pass it. A lot of black students didn’t pass it. I think my former lecturer has written research on that because that was quite true. A lot of people did not pass it. Proportionally, the black students didn’t. They felt a little bit targeted. So I did feel quite proud that I passed my PGCE I have to say.

I did find, when I was looking for a school to work in in my NQT year, I really wanted to choose a school that was really diverse in terms of teaching, management, staff and teaching auxiliary staff. I wanted a really mixed school. I did find that for my first NQT year. I only stayed there for one year though.

**I: Was it in [area in England]?**

R: It was in [area in England] as well. So this school was in [area in England]. It was quite close to my home. I chose a school very close to my home after the horror of travelling an hour and a half on public transport. I just thought, “The closer the better.” It was a medium large school. It had a lot of children who had recently arrived from Syria at the time. They had a real focus on teaching training and development. At the time when I went into that school, I was one of seven I think of NQTs, or six perhaps, so there was a lot of us who were new. Two of them were women of colour which was great so they were really embracing diversity. They were actively saying, “We want our teachers to be reflective of our students.” The deputy head was, I think, Indian. The head teacher, I think she was from Eastern Europe so it was very mixed. Actually I did enjoy my time at that school. But the reasons as to why I left was I felt that one of the assistant heads who had been there for a very long time had a very abrasive manner. I was also paired with a teacher who was known to be a bully. I’ve had a really tough year with that woman. I had nowhere I could put my complaints.

I had a lot of people saying, “We understand. She’s very difficult to work with. We understand what you’re feeling. We understand, we understand,” but nothing would be done. They wouldn’t reprimand her. She wouldn’t be disciplined. Nothing would be done. It was almost like they were scared of this woman. She’d been there for twenty years or so, had gotten good results, had this really amazing work ethic but her interpersonal skills were abysmal. For someone who is just starting off in the teaching profession, your NQT year you need your mentor. I didn’t have a mentor. There were three of us. I had got one class, another lady had got another class who she did a job share with. The lady who was bullying everyone had her class. By the first term, my head of year, my mentor had left so I was left without a mentor. So I was pretty much, for all of my teaching career I felt I had to just do a lot of things by myself. I feel that I’m quite resourceful. I was a bit older. A lot of teachers start their profession when they’re 22/21. I was [age] by this time. I’d seen the world. I’d travelled a lot.

I had gone to a really privileged school. I’d gone through all the school systems. I’d gone to a very mixed state primary school in central [area in England]. I’d then gone to a girls private school in [borough]. I’d then gone to a mixed co-ed college in [area in England]. So I have a lot of, I don’t know how to explain… I think I’m quite resourceful.

**I: Almost the capital to draw on?**

R: Yes, exactly. I guess an educational capital because of obviously just the richness of my experience but also just my friend network. I’m used to being around all different types of people. Obviously for six years of my life I’d gone to one of the best schools in [area in England] so I guess I can present myself quite well, which I think definitely did have some kind of kudos with certain educators and certain styles. I perhaps maybe wasn’t seen as your typical black teacher perhaps because of the way I spoke. Maybe some of the knowledge that I would have had from doing a fine art degree, which isn’t really that typical also of a choice for a black woman. So yes, I think I had to navigate my way using my capital and, to some extent, it did work for me to get me through but in terms of feeling supported, it didn’t work because there was no one actively really supporting me. I felt that that was all the way through from my PGCE. I felt that I was just having to jump through hoops rather than being very welcomed and very wanted, being very supported.

**I: How was it with kids in that school and other teachers, besides your unfortunate mentor?**

R: So in the NQT year the children were amazing. In fact, all of the children were just amazing. They really, really liked me as a teacher. I got so many presents. I was really well liked. There was one parent I think that was a bit questioning perhaps of my skill set, just would ask a few extra questions that I felt perhaps she may not have asked those questions to someone else who was white, was perhaps a little bit cross with the way I’d spoken to her child one time. I did find there was just only one parent. For the most part, a lot of the parents were absolutely wonderful and I think it was because of the area that I was in. It was very, very diverse. I don’t think we had one white British kid in the school.

**I: Was it also a disadvantaged school or quite affluent?**

R: It had just turned into an academy when I arrived. It had been in special measures. I wouldn’t say necessarily disadvantaged in terms of socioeconomic class. It was actually quite mixed where it was. You had a really, really big refugee population who would have been very socially and economically underprivileged but then you also had a couple of children in that school who lived in some of the biggest houses in [area in England] so it was quite mixed. I would say probably only about 25% of them would be middle class so about 75% perhaps… how many did I have on pupil premium? I think I had six out of 30 on pupil premium. That’s quite a lot actually. I mean it was an experience. I didn’t feel supported I think would be the thing. I think that after that first year I just wanted to leave. I felt that the other teachers, apart from the woman who was bullying, were okay. One of them I still contact. The lady that replaced the woman who left was also really friendly towards me. She was actually my neighbour so we had a lovely connection.

But I was really cut off from… I was in the Year 2 age so I was in the key stage one. Key stage two were quite separate. They went to the pub every Friday. I didn’t ever get really invited to the pub. I never felt like pushing myself into the pub either. I did yoga instead as a way of stress relief. So I never made a lot of bonds. Actually one of my feedback meetings, when you have your observation, was, “You should try to go to the pub a bit more and get involved a bit more.” I thought, “Yes, okay. I’m dealing with a bully on one side who really is quite antagonistic to me and quite rude to me in my face. I’m also in my first year without a mentor. I’ve got no one who I can learn lesson plans off.” The lady who was bullying, how she used to do it was she would never share her plans. She would never tell me how to mark or do all these things that you learn when you enter into a school system. She kept herself under wraps. She was very competitive as well. She would come into my room sometimes and look at my children’s books to see things. It was really, really quite insidious.

They never did anything about it. She wasn’t white as well. She was a woman of colour. But she had come from Uganda I think or Kenya maybe and she was an Indian Kenyan. I do feel that there probably had been some prejudices there just regarding that because I know that there’s a hierarchy that if you are Indian and African your status is higher than, for example, a black African. I think there was something there. The assistant head was also equally very bullyish. She wouldn’t share plans either. She would come in and if you were teaching it the wrong way, the way that she hadn’t envisaged, she would stop your lesson and say, “This is not the way I want it,” and literally admonish you in front of the children, not pull you to one side and say, “Hey, I kind of like what you did but perhaps you can do this better.” It would be, “This is not it,” slam, bang. These were the two women that I had to go to every week if I had an issue so I just didn’t have an issue. I just had to get on with it and try not to have an issue with anything. That was for a whole year doing that by myself. My support network at home was quite fragmented. I didn’t have a partner. I’d split up with a guy halfway through that year. I was living with my grandmother at the time who was really ill. I just literally had no life. I went to school.

I faced the onslaught and came back home again. That was my life for the whole year. I didn’t see any friends. I didn’t have any time. I was constantly tired. So it got to the stage where it was about May 31st and that’s when I handed in my notice, so quite late. I just thought, “Maybe, maybe.” They were saying to me, “Look, we understand that you’re having a really hard time but you’ve done so well,” because I passed obviously. Most people would have given up by this time. They were like, “We’ll move you into Year 3 and you can work with this teacher and it will be perfect for you.” I just felt like, “You know what? This is just not what I want to do. I’m sorry. It’s a bit too little too late. I’ve lost a year of my life. I’ve basically grinned and bared it for the whole year just because obviously I wanted to pass my NQT.” There was no support. This slight token of it’s going to be much better next year, I didn’t want to take the risk. I really didn’t want to take the risk so I just handed in my notice and I left.

**I: The people who started with you, those six NQTs, did they stay or did they go as well?**

R: Who left? The ones in the key stage one. The one who had the assistant head who was shouting, they both left, yes. There was about, I think, four teachers in the end that left, three of us of colour and one was actually white and British as well. She’d had a really bad time because I think this lady maybe assumed that she was very privileged and she didn’t like it. So she really made a beeline for anyone in key stage one. That was her department. That was her domain. She didn’t like anything we did.

**I: Well I wonder if that’s why they had so many vacancies when they hired you guys because the previous cohort of teachers also had to experience that kind of treatment.**

R: Yes. I think it was that and a mixture between going from a state school to an academy as well. The standards obviously for Ofsted had changed. Actually my whole year, we were expecting Ofsted. So the levels of assessment were really high. Your book checks, everything was very, very high. The standard was incredibly high. I mean they would take your plan in on the Monday and if this wasn’t put in, you had to get it sent back and re-add it. They basically looked at your plans every single six weeks I think. So you really had quite a high pressure load as well because of this impending Ofsted. But aside from that, some of the training was good. I think the children were amazing. I do think that part of the thing… I mean I look back at that school a little bit and think, “What a shame that that woman and the bully and that assistant head ruined it for me because actually I’ve now worked in quite a few schools as a supply teacher and as a permanent member of staff. That, as a mix, was beautiful. I’ve never seen such a diverse and kind almost egalitarian mix in terms of the teaching staff.

**I: That’s what many people say, especially with respect to middle and senior management so what you described was quite unusual.**

R: I think I couldn’t appreciate it because obviously I was just thinking of the trauma I had gone through just to pass my NQT because I think your NQT you’re also assessed every half term as opposed to every term. If you have a bad assessment, if you’ve got a bad observation, it’s very worrying because obviously that’s your pass and your fail. You’re either struck on or you’re struck off. You’re either a teacher or you’re not. So you’re constantly worried. I think one time they got the dates wrong and they burst in on a class and I was completely unaware and that was quite upsetting actually and I didn’t have a good obs that day because I was relying on a plan that someone had given me only five minutes before that lesson was due to begin so I had no prep time. They were understanding a bit about it but I think again it just highlighted how unsupported I was.

**I: Where did you go next? Did you do supply for a while or did you find a permanent place?**

R: I went for supply, yes. I joined an agency in 2000 so I would have graduated my NQT 2016. I did PGCE 2014 to 2015, that job 2015 to 2016. I joined an agency. So I joined a supply agency and I worked as little as I actually could to be honest. I really had had quite a traumatic time at that school and my PGCE to a certain extent but I used it for just a little bit of money here and there. I started going on extra courses to improve my professional skills, one of which was art therapy. I felt that I wanted to improve my skill set because I knew that that also was extra capital again if I did go back into a school space. I was in no hurry to give another year of my life to something which I felt had taken quite a lot from me. So the supply agency were good. I ended up having a few regular gigs for six weeks at a time. He offered me quite a few more long term contracts but I always said no. I ended up making a few relationships with some quite nice schools who I still, obviously now, it wouldn’t happen but I would still be able to contact and say, “Hey, how are you doing?” type of thing.

So the schools were all in [area in England] because at the time I was living in [area in England]. I used to work in [borough]. Some of these places were slightly more privileged but the schools that I actually worked the best was the ones which had quite a high proportion of children who were SEN and a high proportion of children who were pupil premium. So those were the inner city schools. The ones which were further out, like [borough] and [borough], those kind of areas, not so great experiences. I had one teacher when I came in who had never seen me before, looked at me and said, “Oh, you’re from the agency. That’s funny because they usually have to send someone quite good.” That was his first comment on seeing me. So I couldn’t work what that was out but obviously that’s just based incredibly on assumption of what I look like, being a female and being black. I was booked for that school quite a few times afterwards but one time I did go in and the booking, something had happened and I was only booked for some sort of sports. I was replacing the sports coach and no one had told me. I’d come in professional shoes.

So I said to the school office, I said, “Look, I did not get the memo that I would be covering your sports coach. I’m not wearing any of the correct outfit. This is not safe. You’re meant to be promoting health and safety. I can’t teach people P.E. wearing shoes like this.” She got very rude. She was like, “Well you should have known.” She made me feel very stupid. I just thought, “Well if I had known I was teaching P.E. all day I wouldn’t be wearing this so I obviously didn’t know.” From then I just said to the supply teacher, “Look, I don’t want to work in this school again.” The children also were quite stuck up and I could feel that they would ask me extra questions almost in a little way to trip me up. Because I have quite a rag-bag of knowledge, I think they weren’t expecting that. They would ask me really strange things like what’s the capital of some really random place and I would say it. They would be, “Oh really?” You would see them actually go on their little iPads or something, I think they had iPad time, checking it out and things. It almost felt that I had to prove myself to the children.

The children had reflected the attitudes of the teacher. That teacher making that judgement on me obviously was something that had filtered down to the children by osmosis. “Usually they send someone good,” always resonated in my head as what that meant, at 8:30 in the morning when you’ve never seen them before. I then moved to [area in England]. So I then did work as a permanent teacher. I’d worked in a few primary schools in [area in England] testing the water with supply. I couldn’t use the same supply agency I had in [area in England]. I was sent to really insensitive schools as a supply teacher, really insensitive schools. I was sent to one school outside of [area in England] where the children came and looked at the hallway while I was waiting to sign and show my documents. They were like, “There’s a brown woman.” These are six year old kids. Those were the kids I was also meant to teach for that whole day. I had to sit with them and have almost circle time about what it meant to be brown. I said, “Look, I prefer you to call me black actually because I’m from African Caribbean heritage.”

I had to actually have that talk with these six and seven year olds but again, the agency, I almost felt that they set me up for that fail. They probably would have known that this school is not that diverse so why send a black teacher into a school fifteen miles outside of [area in England] that has one black child anyway in the school. When I said something to the teachers, I said, “They’re a bit tricky,” she goes, “They’re a bit of a cheeky bunch.” I just thought, “Yes, okay.” There’s a couple of other schools that I was sent to that I was literally just turned away because they were like, “We weren’t expecting you,” and, “Have you got your DBS?” I would say something like, “It’s in the car. I’ll go and get it,” because sometimes you didn’t have to, they’d email it through. “We’ve got no record of you here. We haven’t got a record of you,” so I was like, “Well this is the booking reference. This is the email. Could you call them?” I went all the way back home, then I’d get a phone call to say, “Actually they do need you. Can you go back?” I said, “Well no actually, I’d rather not.” So after all of that I got really jaded with [area in England] and I thought, “I’m going to find a school.”

I found this school in [area in England] which is quite diverse, the most diverse part of [area in England]. They actually had actively said they are looking for ethnic minority teachers or men who are very underrepresented in their federation. So I thought, “Great, let’s send your application in.” I got the interview. I did quite well in the interview. I couldn’t really gauge what the school was really like. I knew that the teaching staff were mostly white. The senior leadership was white but the children were pretty mixed and actually, probably about 70% mixed or black ethnicity, fairly disadvantaged. I would say again out of 30, something like six or seven pupil premium. They basically didn’t give me the job on that initial interview. They said to me basically they were having to advertise a job that someone was already doing from another agency, another man. So he was basically applying for his own job. But they liked my interview so much they said, “We really like you. We want you as part of our school so we’re going to find a job for you. We’re going to find you something.” So I was like, “Wow, this is quite exciting to be finally recognised.”

So they gave me a teaching job in Year 2 because the Year 2 teacher had moved into senior leadership. So I took over her class. For the most part it was okay apart from two weeks into my teaching there they got an Ofsted. A parent had whistle-blown and said that they didn’t deal with something very well and Ofsted came. They failed their Ofsted badly. It became a real mess. I think they gave me an observation and again, it was a situation where they had a shared maths lesson planning with another few schools. It was called this White Rose, which is a scheme of work which they shared with three other schools or two other schools in their federation. Every teacher had two weeks of planning and that was all they had to do for the whole term. It wasn’t our week for planning. We were waiting for this White Rose. So the White Rose plans came I think the day before or even on the day of my observation. So I had no time to prepare. It was fine. The lesson was actually fine. What they had failed me was on a child who couldn’t sit still. He had emotional and behavioural issues.

That’s what they said was made my lesson inadequate because this one child couldn’t sit still, nothing to do with my teaching, nothing to do with the outcomes, it was just on this one child. I felt that that was 1) very harsh because actually this one child, I had watched the old teacher teach, who had moved up to assistant head and he had had a fit and pretty much almost thrown a chair with her. So I felt that that was quite unfair. I felt also that I wasn’t given any support with this child in terms of what are we going to do to make this child or to help this child, I don’t want to say make this child, help this child who was obviously suffering from some sort of extreme trauma. It’s very difficult because I was very new as well into this school. His issues had been something which had been documented over time. So for him, having a new teacher, that’s what happens. So yes, it was not a very nice school. When they failed me for that, I thought, “Okay.” Then what they said was they have a new load of vacancies and that everyone has to re-apply for their job. So my partner teacher in Year 2, she had been working in Year 2 for a year so we’re talking about this is now June, she’d already been working there for nine months and she was made to re-apply for her job.

She wasn’t automatically given it for the permanent contract. She had a fixed term. They wanted everyone to do the same. I thought, “Why? This is ridiculous. You’ve given someone a fixed term contract, it’s just a case of extended it or making it permanent. Why do we have to go through another interview? For what?” It also, I think, gave out the wrong message because obviously they’re advertising outside of school too but those people who were applying for it outside of school have pretty much no chance of getting it. It was fixed. It was like when I applied for the job, they already knew they were going to give it to this guy. It didn’t matter how good my interview was. I think the ethics of it were just not right. But that was a school where every single member of the SLT and teaching staff are white. They had one TA that was black. The children were openly rude to the teachers. They had no respect for them. That was one of the big failings of Ofsted. One teacher on Ofsted had gone off sick with stress.

Quite a few teachers had gone off sick with stress. It felt to me they weren’t really dealing with the emotional and behavioural issues that were going on which I felt were the children not feeling that they were functioning in that space properly. They didn’t have a function in society because nothing was reflected, they weren’t reflected in the teaching staff. They weren’t really reflected in the curriculum as such. They could see that myself, the way that people were treated. I wasn’t treated particularly that well. So I felt like that was probably the children having a reaction towards that. [area in England] is a funny place because actually that’s probably the most overtly racist places I’ve seen and schools I’ve experienced. It’s the most overt in terms of it’s actually quite blatant. I’ve never been referred to as brown in the corridor. I’ve never really had that kind of smile but actually not nice. I can’t even explain it. There are not really words. It’s like an energetic feeling that someone doesn’t particularly like you and it’s based on some type of assumption of stereotype.

The fact that the children, they almost ignore their colour I think. They wanted to ignore the fact that perhaps these boys or these girls have got problems because they’re not seeing themselves represented. That was across the board in lots of institutions in [area in England] actually, lots. It was a lot of schools in [area in England] that I experienced that, where I’d see a lot of black children struggling and there was no one to reach out to them with language I think that they would respond to.

**I: Can I ask you, in your own experience, I’m interjecting really but I want to know when you were in primary school and secondary school, I know you were in [area in England] but did you feel represented in terms of the teachers who were around you?**

R: My primary school, the class was even in terms of this but the actual teaching staff, all the dinner ladies were black or of colour. We had one black teacher in Year 3. When my little brother went up, a lot of parents took their children out because they believed that she wasn’t capable as a teacher. They were really upset that this black teacher was going to be in Year 3. So when they finished Year 2, there was about seven or eight people that took their children out of that school and put them in other schools. I think that was a real protest on her colour, poor thing, actually when I think about it. She had a tough time. So no, I mean that was the only black teacher we had. Actually I remember because of the energy around her teaching style or whatever, we, as children, were quite cruel to her because I think that was transposed to us, that was given to us that she wasn’t a capable teacher, she was awful.

So us, as children, I remember one time making that teacher cry. I feel like we never did that with any other teacher. My Year 6 teacher was really lovely and she really supported me. She really liked me as a child. I feel like that will make and break because my Year 5 teacher wasn’t very nice. She was really instrumental in me going to quite a good school. She wrote me lovely reports. She would basically offer to tutor me. She didn’t. But she offered to do lots of things for me. I went to an all girls white school. Again, I can only remember there were two Asian teachers, one black teacher and that was it. There was a lot of snide little remarks from some teachers. I mean I had a bit of a traumatic time when I was at school. I had real horrible issues at home with my family. So my primary school, I went to a private school. They’re very different in terms of their safeguarding. I mean obviously they have safeguarding but they don’t have this vested interest with local authorities as such. Independent schools, a lot of things just happen behind closed doors and they hide things. Bulimia was rife for example, drug taking and stuff like that. They weren’t reported to the police.

They were just washed under the carpet. So I got away with not really going to school toward the end of my GCSEs. I would turn up late every single day. You’re meant to start at 8:50am or whatever, or 8:30am and I think I’d turn up at 10 o’clock every day or 9:30am every day and no one ever questioned why. No one ever called my mum. I was seven stone and 5’7. I was very thin. I didn’t eat. Nothing happened. I went to see a counsellor once because they had a school counsellor and I said something about my family. A teacher then mentioned something to me in a corridor with other people in reference to something I had said confidentially to the counsellor. I just never went to the counsellor and never said anything. So I blocked out, I just went through the motions of school. I ended up actually meeting a group of girls who were delinquents in school. I say delinquents, it was a private school. You couldn’t be that bad. But we would go out and smoke. We would actively and openly be quite rude to the teachers.

We would go to parties all night on the weekend and turn up to school in our party clothes on a Monday. We did drugs openly in school as well. We were just, really as much as we could, pushing the boundaries. We hated it. They basically kicked us out. They said, “Look, we know that you’re going to college so please don’t come back.” They didn’t tell our parents. They didn’t report. Obviously that’s an issue. If you think about that in a normal state school, any school, I think they probably would have called Social Services or something. So I felt quite neglected again by that school I have to say. I really just went through it. But I did pass my GCSEs quite well because of the way that I was taught. Then when I went to college, it was a little bit democratic, a bit more laissez faire because it was a college. I just dropped out. I didn’t really engage in the A Level system. I turned up. I was 50% attendance I think. Again, no phone calls to home. No one knowing or wondering where I was. No letters saying if you don’t turn up, we’re going to… nothing like that happened. I managed to scrape my pass through my A Levels primarily based on the education I’d had at my private school.

I didn’t have to study as hard. It was alright. I definitely felt that lack of connection with the school through teaching and through obviously my peers as well. I was one of only four black children in my whole year group in my secondary school. There were only ten maybe black girls in a school of 700 so there was no connection whatsoever with anyone.

**I: That was in [area in England] and then you went to university in [area in England] as well?**

R: Yes, I stayed in… it was slightly outside of [area in England]. I went to [university]. So I did my art degree there but art degrees are very diverse in some respects in the sense of you have a lot of international students who are studying art degrees in [area in England]. So you do have that slightly rich middle class British girl might be typical but you also have a lot of Chinese and a lot of Korean and Iranian and also the artistic nature of the school is all about individuality and finding your space and finding yourself so you don’t want to conform with anything either. It’s okay to be different in a way, yes.

**I: That’s interesting. It’s interesting sometimes to find out what your prior experience with diversity is like and why you seem to value diversity a lot in the schools you taught yourself. So what happened after [area in England]?**

R: So [area in England] was for two years. I didn’t stay in that school that I was in that Year 2. I left [area in England] to move back down to [area in England]. I am now in the school that I’m currently in. I was in [area in England] for two years. I’d floated around and now I’m in the current school that I’m in now in [area in England]. I moved back to [area in England] just because I found the diversity, the racism, for me it was too much because I didn’t have my support network which I guess in some respects are people that look like me, having the same experiences as me. I think my family, as much as I had issues with them when I was younger, that’s all be repaired. My mum has a profession. My sister in law has a profession. I have other friends of colour who are in professions. I didn’t have that in [area in England]. I had a few friends who were white who were in professions but it was difficult to explain my experiences to someone who perhaps did not quite resonate with it. Also they were born and bred in [area in England] so a lot of it they couldn’t really see whereas I’d seen [area in England]. [Area in England] has diversity.

I just thought, “I’m not going to make it in [area in England]. I’m not going to end up anywhere that I want to be. I’m not going to be given a chance. The pressures are just going to be too much. I’ve got nowhere when I come home to say, “Hey, I had a really crap day. This happened.”” I just thought, “I need to be supported really, emotionally, outside of the school system.”

**I: Can I ask you, I mean I know that you’re planning to leave. Are you planning to leave the teaching?**

R: Yes.

**I: I just want to bring you back to the retention. What do you think would be the most important retention factor for you?**

R: I feel that they need to actively recruit middle management and senior management of colour in schools. They have to be seen to actively promote that as well. The school I currently work in is 97% black African and Caribbean so we’re talking 97%. There are very few children who are white looking, maybe a bit less than 97% but it’s a high percentage of black African. It’s right in the middle of [area in England]. It’s very, very disadvantaged. There are six members of senior leadership for a two form entry school so that’s a huge amount of top heaviness. Every single one of them is white. Only two of them of the senior leadership I think are over the age of 45. They’re all quite young. The SENCO is I think 31 and only just recently appointed. The other two assistant heads are in their very early 30s. The deputy head has worked her way up and been there for a while. It’s the same with the head teacher. But what’s very interesting to see is that in the whole of [area in England], in a school that’s over 90% black and African, there is not one assistant head that is of any other colour.

I mean it doesn’t have to be black. It could be Asian, it could be Chinese, it could be any other colour. They’re all white and British. That, for me, speaks volumes. That, for me, is colonialism completely explained because all of the bottom, all of the teaching assistants are all black. There is something wrong for me in that message. To retain me in that school, I think they would have to say, “You’ve done quite a few courses and you have been teaching for quite a while. We really see a lot of potential in you. We would like to develop these leadership skills. We have a vision for that.” The council that I’m working in is [borough] so you can see what [borough] is as a diverse population. That should not be seen at a school. I’m sorry. For me, that’s a no no. How that’s happened is colonialism and people wanting senior managers to be reflections of themselves as opposed to seeing what would benefit the children, what would make those children feel that they can aspire to something? What would make them feel valued?

We don’t teach for example also a very decolonised curriculum because the people who are at the top, they probably don’t have that vested interest in promoting a decolonised curriculum. The governors also are pretty much all white.

**I: Do you think it would be the same for white British teachers, the same factors for retention?**

R: I’ve spoken to a friend of mine at the school who at one point wanted to leave. She had a really tough time with some of the kids in the school emotionally. They were very dysregulated and she didn’t have any help. She said, “No, actually I quite like it here.” I don’t know whether it’s because she feels the standards are lower or whether she’s been told that, “If you keep working we will promote you.” But she’s all of a sudden changed her tune from absolutely hating it and crying her eyes out every day to, “I quite like it here.” Another white teacher has just announced that she’s leaving. The reason why she’s leaving is she feels that the children are not emotionally stable. A lot of the children are coming in with lots of issues and they’re not being dealt with properly. They’re being ignored. There’s no money all the time so all of the services have been cut. They cut music therapy and then they had to bring it back because children are not being helped emotionally. So she’s left because she said, “I don’t want to be stuck with these children knowing that I’m not going to get any help.” Another black teacher is leaving so that’s two that have left. There’s no one left.

**I: I’m just thinking about US research where there was lots of effort putting minority teachers into minority dominant schools. Of course they do leave disadvantaged schools as here but often they don’t necessarily cite children when they leave. So the tagline is they are not leaving disadvantaged children, they are leaving because of management. They are leaving because of other issues. That’s interesting what you said resonated with that research.**

R: It definitely is a thing. I think the other thing that’s also very upsetting is the labelling and the casual racism that’s happening in schools. I mean my teacher, the head teacher I’m with, she will talk about children in quite a derogatory way in front of other children, believing that they don’t understand. So she will say things like, “I just don’t understand what their mother does with them,” and that will be in a room full of children talking about the behaviour of two boys that are in my class. Now I don’t think if she was in a white middle class school she would be doing that. That’s upsetting. How do I pull that up if she’s the head teacher? How do I prove that she said that? It’s very, very tricky. I feel that that, for me, if she’s happy to say that so loudly and so disrespectfully, what else has she been saying really. This is your head teacher. I feel that if I wanted to approach her and say, “I would like to teach Egyptians from a decolonised perspective, a more African centred approach,” I don’t feel that that would come down very well. I feel that she would have to refer back to [name of council] and it would be pushed away.

I haven’t even bothered to even try to be honest with you. I feel that I’m just spoken to in such a derogatory way, in a really patronising way. I remembered in one of our Christmas parties we were doing a quiz and one of the assistant heads said, “How come you know that?” She said it in such an emphasis on the word you I thought to myself, “This is somebody who is leading a cohort of 90% black kids and the assumptions of their intelligence and all these things, all these biases that are coming in,” I think this school needs to have some cultural competence. The hypocrisy that is going on in this school is too much. I think just the colonialism for me is repeated and replayed. I think from going from a very mixed, mixed diverse school to a school which is 90% black and then you’ve got this triangular system is not for me. It just isn’t for me. I think the systems at work are too powerful for me to even think that I would want to be in an environment anymore because it’s very subtle. It’s not something I can always put my finger on. It’s not something which is easily tackled because if the people at the top are all of one colour then who do you go to?

That’s the issue. I feel that yesterday I joined a decolonising the educational system, it was a webinar about what measures the NEU are taking to decolonise the curriculum. That would help but I think the problem is is that training, teacher training needs to be more critical. Teachers and leaders need to have equality, diversity and cultural competency training every single year. They need to be made aware of unconscious biases. They need to have a space where they talk with all of the teaching staff including for example some of the auxiliary staff and being more egalitarian I think. This is the problem. If the schools do not want to see that, the senior leader, the head teacher doesn’t want to approach her own unconscious bias then there is no chance for a teacher like me to get any higher than where I am. I may as well find a school that is open and more willing to accept that.

**I: I know that I took too much of your time.**

R: No, it’s okay.

**I: I’m really enjoying the conversation.**

R: No, it’s fine. Just because obviously this year has been really incredible with Corona, what I have been doing is I’ve been a lot more active in my own learning. So I am going to just take another year out. I’m lucky enough to have a partner that I am able to do that now. I’m just going to review my choices. I’m possibly going to retrain and do something else as well like art therapy or something which I feel is going to be more on the helping side of those children that I feel have been labelled unfairly, who have teachers who are talking about what are their parents doing and saying things like that. I would rather be working to help the more disadvantaged children, the more difficult behavioural children because that’s what I notice in certain schools, there is a big fear at the moment. So possibly I’ll read this leadership thing but I feel like now my role is I would like to work within schools on that level, on a more therapeutic level, not an educational psychologist but perhaps maybe in therapy or maybe even going into working with special educational needs or behavioural problems so working in a school as a behavioural specialist because I feel that there’s a big problem with expulsion at the minute.

I’m really wondering why so many black children are excluded. I can see why they are because they are being judged by people that don’t really know them, don’t really want to know them and are not able to represent their experiences through the workforce, through the curriculum. That’s been my decision in the last couple of months.

**I: Understandable and given that all the services are cut, I mean alternative provisions are also something that we are looking at in our centre so I do know the statistics.**

R: Yes. I think it’s something which I’ve just seen now in [area in England] and in [area in England]. The children who are marginalised are these black boys. The women, it’s generally women, do not know how to handle them but just assume certain things and do not touch at all on the fact that they may be feeling really intense feelings about their racial placing within the system, their social and economic standing within the system. All of these factors, they’re just ignored. I feel that that is something which is down to cultural competency and also teachers. I think a lot of the leadership maybe are too scared to approach these issues because they haven’t had the right training or they just make assumptions and they write them off quite early on. So one or two of the boys in my class, they’re very young and they’ve already been slightly written off a bit by the head teacher. That makes me quite sad because it’s going to affect their schooling the whole way through and there is not much I can do about that.

**I: Well [name of interviewee], thank you so much. I know that I took so much of your time but…**

R: No, that’s okay. There was a lot of stuff to say.

**I: Exactly and that’s what happens, we go on and on and it’s just such interesting conversations. I know it’s a lot to ask for under lockdown and you’re probably teaching online.**

R: I mean it’s absolutely fine. I mean I’ve wanted to do this because I really wanted something to happen. The lockdown has given me a bit more space to do my reading, to do more research and to do more thinking around what is happening because obviously some of the changes are not going to just be through the school system, it’s outside. It’s the government pressure. It’s the change in the curriculum. It’s the making teachers have the diversity training every year. We have Prevent training every year. We have safeguarding every year. There needs to be some type of diversity training and I think that is my real strong recommendation. It needs to be led by proper professionals, possibly linked with NHS or whatever because it’s cultural competency in all institutions and it needs to be very much embedded in the institution if you’re going to change for example some of the curriculum and you’re going to challenge some of these behaviours. It needs to be there. I think yesterday they talked about critical race theory.

That may be a bit much for some people to access if they’ve been teaching for twenty years but diversity training every September before they start school to talk about unconscious bias I think is something that needs to be done. I think they probably do need to have some type of almost an Ofsted to go into schools to see how they are addressing equality issues, not just down to Ofsted. It may need to be someone separate, like a separate body coming in, monitoring, what are you doing to address equality and diversity issues and looking at how things are taught, looking at the management team, looking at progress, everything. Until that really happens, I don’t have any confidence in the school system. I don’t want to work for a school system that isn’t doing that so that’s my big thing.

**I: No, I understand. I think you put it very clearly and all the recommendations are all great. Thank you so much, [name of interviewee]. I’ll be in touch about the workshop, if you are able to join. It might be that it will have to happen online.**

R: That’s okay. Alright, thank you very much.

**I: Thank you, [name of interviewee]. Bye-bye.**

R: Bye.

**[End of Recording]**