UCET
Universities' Council for the
Education of Teachers

Supporting International trainee and early careers teachers in schools

A collaboration of research informed practice from 8 Initial Teacher Education Providers.

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University of Portsmouth
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Introduction

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Who is the publication for?

- Anyone involved in Initial Teacher Education (ITE): school leaders and Initial Teacher Education providers working with international teachers and international pre-service teachers.

Who are the international teachers referred to in this publication?

- International teachers are defined as teachers who have been educated and/or trained overseas.

What is the publication offering?

- Perspectives on supporting international teachers in school placement and in their first teaching post from eight ITE providers in England and two from international schools in Hong Kong and Taiwan.
- Perspectives from international trainees from ITE provider members of the UCET Special Interest Group in Supporting International Teachers: In their own words.
- Best practice to develop intercultural competences and communication skills to support international teachers joining the English education system and adapting to cultural change.
- A lens to explore the concepts of belonging and a platform for reflection on how belonging may be experienced in our setting.
- Strategies to support international trainee teachers during school placements, drawing on best practice from England and international schools.

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What they bring to our profession

Tanya Riordan, University of Portsmouth
Juliette Claro, St Mary's University Twickenham

International trainee teachers contribute significantly to the UK education system, offering fresh perspectives while also providing stability to a profession facing persistent recruitment and retention difficulties. Their commitment, resilience and adaptability have been well documented. Recent research by the Department for Education (DfE, 2025), for example, identifies international teachers as playing a key role in helping schools address staffing shortages and enriching learning environments through the cultural insight they bring.

The added value of international teachers to the teaching profession: students' identities and pedagogical innovations

- International teachers bring their expertise in the classroom, whether they are linguists, physicists, mathematicians or chemists, international teachers have expertise in their subjects and, in many cases, a wealth of experience teaching in their home country.
- International teachers enhance diversity, enrich cultural understanding and foster broader global perspectives among staff and pupils reflecting British Values in our classrooms. The experiences and perspectives of international teachers spark innovation and support the development of global citizenship within schools (Higton et al, DfE 2025).
- Students' experiences are improved when they are taught by teachers from diverse backgrounds, noting that pupils often feel more understood and represented when their teachers share elements of their cultural or linguistic heritage (Turner, 2025). This perspective aligns with wider academic research demonstrating the positive influence diverse teachers have on inclusion, engagement and cultural understanding within schools (Yip & Ji, 2024).

Creating a global educational network

- International experience enables staff to build global professional networks. Exposure to diverse educational approaches encourages more dynamic and critical pedagogical reflection, often leading to the generation of new ideas through informal conversations and professional learning opportunities (Robinson, 2024).
- Teachers with international backgrounds can positively influence school culture and practice through their broader perspectives (Robinson, 2024).
- International teachers often have experience in international school settings, bringing their knowledge and connections to the school and enriching young people with their knowledge as global educators.

Key Takeaways:

- International students are expert in their field and bring innovative pedagogies to our classrooms.
- Students connect with international teachers through representation and role modelling.
- International teachers are global educators supporting British Values.
- International teachers are resilient and bring stability in retention.

Role models and social justice

Research emphasises the importance of inclusion and equitable outcomes for:

- Students taught by teachers who reflect their backgrounds (Yip, S. Y., & Ji, J. S. 2024);
- Stronger intercultural competence, and more inclusive school climates (Yip, S. Y., & Ji, J. S. 2024);
- Where diverse staff contribute to richer perspectives, innovation, and pedagogies, school organisational and inclusivity culture improvement (Yip, S. Y., & Ji, J. S. 2024).

Staff retention, resilience and stability

International teachers frequently remain in their roles for longer periods, partly due to visa sponsorship structures but also because of their motivation to work within a highly regarded education system.

The DfE (2025) reports improved retention where schools provide appropriate support structures, emphasising that international trainees not only help to fill vacancies but also sustain continuity within school communities. Additional research highlights that international teachers often demonstrate high levels of commitment, driven by career aspirations and the professional opportunities available in England.

Research into the lived experiences of international trainees reveals patterns of hardship and perseverance, underscoring the dedication these teachers bring to their roles (Turner, 2025).

Personal testimonies from ITE providers further highlight the level of sacrifice and determination shown by many international trainees. Some leave young children behind or continue their training despite experiencing significant personal loss.

Despite their varied cultural and geographic origins, international trainee teachers share a clear passion for education, a strong work ethic and a profound desire to positively influence students' lives. Evidence across government reports, academic studies and professional journalism consistently affirms that international teachers enrich the educational landscape, strengthen the workforce and promote greater inclusivity within UK schools (Sharp & Aston, 2024).

Case Studies:

Reflection from Rita - MFL Trainee teacher (Nigeria)
Decolonising the curriculum



A defining moment in my academic journey was attending a workshop on decolonising the MFL curriculum. This session transformed my understanding of language education by exposing how many existing teaching resources still reflect a Eurocentric perspective, often ignoring or misrepresenting the experiences of Black and Indigenous communities. A particular GCSE French text stood out to me; it described a school in Togo as a "wooden hut," later "rescued" by charity workers from Paris. This narrative not only perpetuates outdated stereotypes but also erases the rich cultural and educational heritage of countries like Nigeria. This experience led me to reflect deeply on the kind of language education I wanted to deliver. I realised the importance of creating space for open discussions about race, identity and representation. It also gave me the confidence to advocate for greater inclusion of Francophone African cultures in the classroom cultures that are too often overlooked. These conversations were empowering, and they reaffirmed how important it is for all students to see themselves reflected in the curriculum (Rita, 2025).

Rita then went on to create opportunities for her learners to experience Nigerian culture and reported that: One student remarked that it was the first time she felt African culture was valued in a school setting, rather than reduced to a single story of hardship. Moments like this show the power of inclusive teaching in creating a sense of belonging for every child.

Kamaldeen Oyeniyi Yusuf - Physics Trainee Teacher (Nigeria)
When experts stretch the more able students for A-Level top grades



Kamaldeen's journey from teaching in Nigeria to training as a Physics teacher in England highlights the valuable contributions internationally-educated teachers bring to the profession. With experience teaching large classes of 40–60 students in Nigerian government secondary schools, he developed strong classroom management, clarity of instruction, and adaptability. These are all skills that continue to shape his practice in the UK.

Trained in an academically-rigorous system that prepares students for high stakes examinations such as WAEC and NECO, Kamaldeen has deep subject knowledge across the sciences. His academic background, supported by bachelor's and master's degrees, enables him to bring strong content expertise and high expectations to his learners.

Upon arriving in the UK, Kamaldeen embraced new approaches to pastoral care, behaviour management, and inclusive practice. He valued the emphasis on reflective teaching, formative assessment, and continuous professional development. His willingness to learn and integrate new strategies illustrated how internationally-educated teachers contribute not only knowledge but also professional curiosity and openness.

However, despite completing his PGCE, Kamaldeen was unable to secure a secondary school teaching position due to sponsorship limitations. Instead, he was offered a place at a college, where his skills, subject expertise, and crosscultural experiences are highly valued. This transition has allowed him to continue teaching, contribute to learner progression, and bring his international perspective to Post16 education,allowing Year 13 students to reach their top grades at A-Level Physics.

His story demonstrates how internationally-educated teachers enrich the profession: through subject excellence, global awareness, resilience, and a commitment to inclusive, high-quality teaching.

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Pre-departure support

Juliette Claro, St Mary's University Twickenham

Research consistently shows that the period before arrival is one of the most decisive phases in shaping the integration, confidence and long-term retention of international teachers (Higton et al. 2019).

The common feeling of being thrown into the deep end or the feeling of constant 'figuring it out' has been highlighted in the DfE STEM-MFL teacher programme in 2019 (Higton et al, 2019) and is yet to improve. The knowledge gaps on curriculum, exam specifications, behaviour expectations, safeguarding, and professional norms can be mitigated long before they step into a classroom.

A later DfE study (Higton et al., 2025) reinforces this, arguing that early, structured pre-arrival support significantly reduces culture shock, accelerates professional adjustment, and improves wellbeing and retention.

Pre-arrival support acts as a bridge between the teacher's previous educational system and the expectations of English schools (Claro, 2026). Without it, international teachers may experience cultural dissonance: a mismatch between familiar practices and new norms (Meyer, 2014). This can manifest in uncertainty about behaviour policies, safeguarding procedures, curriculum sequencing, assessment frameworks, or even everyday professional etiquette such as communication styles or punctuality.

Higton et al., (2019) found that many international teachers arrive with strong subject knowledge but limited understanding of the English curriculum architecture, including exam syllabi, progression models, and the emphasis on inclusive pedagogies. Pre-arrival orientation helps trainees contextualise their expertise, reducing the cognitive load once training or induction begins.

Reducing anxiety and supporting psychological safety

The transition to a new country, school system and professional culture can be overwhelming. Pre-arrival support and effective induction processes such as welcome meetings, online briefings or webinars, or early mentor contact signals belonging before the teachers arrive. This early relational connection reduces anxiety, builds trust, and sets the tone for psychology safety.

Acknowledging the teacher's prior professional identity is central to culturally-responsive mentoring and coaching, therefore, where possible, pre-arrival conversations allow mentors, schools leaders, and colleagues to understand the teacher's previous context, teaching culture, and strengths, enabling a more personalised induction.

Schools and ITE providers can strengthen pre-arrival support by offering:

- Clear, jargon-free information about curriculum, behaviour policies, safeguarding, and professional expectations;
- Early mentor/buddy contact, enabling relationship-building and personalised guidance;
- Virtual induction sessions covering routines, school culture, and key systems (e.g., Management Information System (MIS), school timetable, dress code, working hours, curriculum maps...);
- Subject-specific orientation, including exam board specifications, model lesson plans, and curriculum maps;
- Practical settlement guidance, such as housing, banking, access to healthcare, transport, and community support networks;
- Opportunities for questions, acknowledging that they may be hesitant to ask once they arrive.

Pre-arrival support is not a "nice to have" but a critical retention strategy. When international trainees feel prepared, welcomed and understood, they are more likely to thrive, complete their training or induction, and remain in the profession. For schools and ITE providers, investing in pre-arrival support is therefore both an ethical responsibility and a practical solution to workforce stability.

References:

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Example of pre-departure module course

Session no.	Session title	Delivery
1	Understanding the English education system	Online asynchronous
2	Understanding British values	Online asynchronous
3	Building relationships with pupils and managing behaviour	Online asynchronous
4	Understanding personal development and the wider role of the teacher	Online asynchronous
5	Understanding professional behaviours in English schools	Online asynchronous
6	Adaptive teaching and inclusion	Online asynchronous
7	Cross culture communication and cultural differences	Online asynchronous
8	Safeguarding in England	Face-to-face welcome day
9	Getting ready for the course	Face-to-face welcome day
10	Academic writing	Online
	Reflective task	Microsoft Form

Table 1: Pre-course module offered to all international trainee teachers pre-arrival at St Mary's University

Student	Comments
Student from Ghana	'After completing the pre-course module, I need to pay more attention to safeguarding practices as they differ greatly from what I am used to in Ghana… There is a need for me to familiarise myself with safeguarding and behaviour management protocols to integrate into the education system in England.'
Student from Nigeria	'The pre-course has highlighted key aspects of the UK education system, such as its structured key stages, compulsory education age, and specific assessment methods. I will need to adjust to unfamiliar educational terminology and different pedagogical approaches. However, I will look forward to the cultural diversity and advanced resources available in UK schools. To overcome challenges, I will engage in thorough research, seek mentorship from experienced teachers, participate in professional development, and maintain a reflective practice to adapt effectively to my new environment.'
Student from Kenya	'The safeguarding session challenged my thinking by requiring a shift in how I view child protection, professional boundaries and duty of care. The policies place a strong focus on legal responsibilities and being alert to signs of abuse or neglect, which is different from the approaches I'm used to in my home country.'
Student from France	'It requires a complete shift from what I am accustomed to in my home country… Managing behaviour is what I found quite challenging because I've moved to a different setting and environment with different cultures. I need to learn and understand the ways of life of students, and this is something that is not straightforward.'

Table 2: Quotes from the pre-course module reflective task

PART 2 |

Culturally-adaptive and responsive coaching and mentoring

Juliette Claro, St Mary's University
Isabelle Schafer, University of Worcester

A culturally-adaptive and responsive mentoring environment recognises that international trainees arrive with diverse experiences, expectations, and understanding of teaching. Effective mentors do not simply "translate" local practice; they create a space where multiple perspectives can coexist, be explored, and enrich the learning process. This approach strengthens professional relationships, builds confidence, and supports trainees in navigating both the explicit and unspoken norms of a new educational culture.

Start with cultural self-awareness

Cultural responsiveness begins with mentors examining their own assumptions. Every teacher carries implicit beliefs about behaviour, communication, authority, and what "good teaching" looks like. Taking time to reflect on these beliefs helps mentors avoid interpreting difference as deficit.

- Consider how your own schooling shaped your expectations.
- Identify which aspects of the teaching practice are non-negotiable in your setting (e.g., safeguarding) and which are culturally-influenced preferences.
- Be open about these distinctions with trainees so they understand the rationale behind your guidance.

Value prior experience

We are all connected by our lived experiences. As you mentor trainees who attended school and university in Argentina, Canada, France, Ghana, India, Ireland, or New Zealand, your conversations will undoubtedly help you find common ground in your perceptions and experiences of education, while also revealing aspects that differ from what you and your trainees are used to.

- Ask trainees to share what they value about the education systems they are familiar with.
- Show genuine interest in how they have taught: How did they communicate expectations at the start of a lesson? What did they do when learners struggled? How did they monitor learning during lessons?
- Encourage trainees to integrate their valuable prior experiences with the new knowledge and skills they are developing.

Understand culture shock

All education systems are underpinned by cultural values, and social, and political priorities. Trainees can be surprised by norms and ways of being or acting that they are not familiar with.

This is what some trainees have said in the past:

"By law, pupils up to the age of 15 are entitled to a lunch break of at least 1 hour and 30 minutes."
(French trainee)

"Every school starts the day with a morning assembly, which is compulsory for all pupils, and they read the National Anthem together."
(Pakistani trainee)

"Teachers typically move between classrooms while students generally remain in the same classroom for most of the day."
(Nigerian trainee)

"Pupils engage in daily morning exercises and perform eye massage exercises twice a day."
(Chinese trainee)

Build trust through intentional relationship-building

International trainees often face additional layers of vulnerability: language barriers, unfamiliar systems, and the pressure to adapt quickly. A trusting relationship is the foundation of effective mentoring.

- Schedule early conversations that focus on the trainee as a person, not just a practitioner.
- Ask about their previous teaching experiences, cultural norms, and what support they find most helpful.
- Show curiosity rather than judgement when differences arise. This relational groundwork signals that the trainee's identity and background are valued, not obstacles to overcome.



"Every school starts the day with a morning assembly, which is compulsory for all pupils, and they read the National Anthem together."

(Pakistani trainee)

What should I do?

- Reflect on your own reactions to the different cultural behaviours exemplified opposite.
- Explore with trainees that the behaviours they see in English schools are not anecdotal, but underpinned by key principles (e.g. attending assemblies, wearing a uniform, setting up classrooms or equipment before learners arrive, and remaining in school during non-teaching periods).
- If your trainee is struggling to act on advice, create space to compare practices in England with those from their own context.

PART 2 |

Culturally-adaptive and responsive coaching and mentoring

Juliette Claro, St Mary's University
Isabelle Schafer, University of Worcester

Prioritising clear, inclusive communication

Communication styles vary widely across cultures. Some trainees may be used to highly direct feedback; others may interpret directness as criticism (Meyer, 2014).

- Encourage trainees to share when something feels unclear or culturally unfamiliar. By normalising clarification, mentors reduce the risk of misunderstandings and create a safer learning environment.

Many aspects of school culture such as professional norms, staffroom etiquette, lesson pacing and behaviour expectations are rarely taught explicitly to international trainees, who absorb them through osmosis. Supporting them with explicit explanations helps along the way:

- Break down routines and expectations that might otherwise be assumed knowledge.
- Model these expectations and explain the "why" behind them.
- Provide examples of how expectations may differ from those in the trainee's home context. This transparency helps trainees feel oriented rather than overwhelmed.

Using Culturally-Responsive Pedagogical Dialogue

Mentoring should be a two-way exchange. International trainees bring valuable insights into global pedagogies, multilingualism, and diverse learner needs. A mutual appreciation of different education settings helps (Bennett 1993).

- Invite trainees to compare approaches from their previous settings.
- Explore how these ideas might be adapted to the local curriculum and classroom culture.
- Highlight where their perspectives can enrich the school community. This positions the trainee as a contributor, not just a learner.

Adapting the Mentoring Style

A culturally-adaptive approach supports the trainee's background, confidence, and evolving needs Gay (2015).

- Some trainees may benefit from more structured guidance; others may thrive with greater autonomy.
- Consider cultural norms around hierarchy. Trainees from some contexts may hesitate to question or challenge their mentor.
- Create explicit opportunities for dialogue, reflection, and co-planning. Flexibility demonstrates respect for the trainee's individuality and supports their professional growth.

Fostering Psychological Safety

A responsive mentoring environment allows trainees to take risks, make mistakes, and ask questions without fear of judgement.

- Normalise the emotional challenges of teaching in a new country.
- Acknowledge the additional cognitive load of working in a second language.
- Celebrate progress, not just outcomes. Psychological safety encourages deeper learning and helps trainees develop resilience.

Supporting Navigation of the Wider School Culture

International trainees may need guidance beyond the classroom.

- Explain key policies, safeguarding procedures, and reporting structures.
- Introduce them to colleagues who can offer additional perspectives and help them refine their professional identity within the English system (someone of a similar age, gender or ethnicity...).
- Help them understand the rhythms of the school year and the expectations around workload and communication. This holistic support helps trainees integrate more confidently into the professional community.

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Quotes from trainees:

"Sometimes, I feel like I am thrown into the deep end."

"My mentor helped a lot by explaining things to me, it made a lot of sense once he explained the background behind the school policies and protocols."

Key Takeaways:

- Culturally-responsive coaching starts with acknowledging our own biases.
- Relationship, psychological safety and effective communication shape the trainee's experience.
- It is never a 'one-size-fits-all'; mentoring needs to adapt to the style, needs and understandings of the trainee.

Perspectives from Hong Kong

Jessica Glover, MFL Teacher and mentor ESF,
King George V School, Hong Kong

The mentor as a cultural bridge

Hong Kong is a fascinating place to work, especially within the international school community. For many teachers, however, walking into a Hong Kong staffroom for the first time can be a considerable culture shock.

Even if your school follows a Western curriculum, you aren't just working with local Hong Kong staff and 'expat' teachers. You are working with diverse teams from all over the world, with each individual bringing their own cultural communication and professional styles and experiences to their work.

In an international context, part of the role of a mentor is to be a cultural bridge. Beyond professional development, it's about coaching an individual to find their voice within a multicultural community. You are helping them to navigate and value the diverse experiences of their team, ensuring they don't just work in a new culture, but truly thrive within it.

Start with your own cultural compass

Mentoring and coaching across cultures doesn't just require an understanding of your mentee, but also a deep self-awareness. We all carry a cultural compass that guides our biases and beliefs about what good teaching and professional behaviours look like in the workplace. In an environment with consistently high expectations, it is easy to fall back on our own cultural norms without realising it.

Practising self-awareness allows the mentor to support their mentee's growth rather than unintentionally imposing their own cultural biases on the process.

Navigating diverse communication styles

One challenge of working in a Hong Kong international school is understanding that there may be a mix of communication styles amongst colleagues. Drawing on the work of Philippe Rosinski (2003) and Erin Meyer (2014), we often see miscommunications between low-context and high-context cultures:

- **Low-Context:** Many teachers from Western cultures are used to being direct and literal. If there's a problem, they say it.
- **High-Context:** For colleagues from Eastern cultures, communication is often more nuanced. Meaning is often found in what isn't being said, or through subtle hints and body language.

It is important to remember that communication styles are not binary; they exist on a scale (Meyer, 2014). While we can identify cultures as high or low-context cultures, where an individual sits on the scale actually depends on who they are talking to. For example, the UK is generally considered a low-context culture (Meyer, 2014). However, British professional communication is famous for its polite indirectness. A British mentor may say "you might want to look at this" or "have you thought about…?". To some, this sounds like an optional suggestion. In reality, it is often a polite way of saying "this needs to be changed".

In Hong Kong, a solid understanding of communication styles is even more important. Hong Kongers often use a hybrid style due to the city's unique heritage as a former British colony with traditional Asian roots. You might find that colleagues are incredibly direct and efficient when it comes to professional tasks, but switch to a much more indirect, high-context style when it comes to feedback or hierarchy.

Hierarchy, deference, and 'face'

Because of Hong Kong's traditional roots, respect for hierarchy and seniority is deeply ingrained. This contrasts greatly with the collaborative, flat organisational structure that many international schools strive for. Often, mentees are encouraged to be reflective and to question others, but fear appearing disrespectful to senior staff.

As a mentor, you have a responsibility to ensure psychological safety in your sessions with your mentee (Edmondson, 2018). In a city that often demands perfection, psychological safety means creating a space where a mentee feels safe to take risks, ask seemingly minor or 'silly' questions, or admit they are struggling, without fear of professional judgement.

This ties in with the concept of "face" (miànzi) (Xiang, 2024). Protecting professional reputation is vital in Hong Kong. To support a mentee's growth without causing them to 'lose face', corrective coaching should be delivered behind closed doors. This protects their dignity and ensures they maintain their confidence within the wider school community.

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Key takeaways for mentors:

- Lead with self-awareness: Regularly check your own cultural assumptions before giving feedback or advice.
- Understand the scale: Recognise that 'directness' is relative. Help your mentee read between the lines of the specific politeness found in a culturally-diverse staffroom.
- Explicit is kind: In a multicultural team with different rules for communication, being clear and kind in private is the most effective way to support growth.

Conclusion

The best mentoring and coaching in Hong Kong doesn't aim for everyone to act the same. It's about curiosity. When we embrace the different cultural and professional experiences within our diverse teams, we don't just help a mentee survive; we help the whole school community thrive.

PART 2 |

Supporting with Professional Etiquette

Juliette Claro, St Mary's University Twickenham

International trainee teachers bring rich experience, linguistic agility and global perspectives to school communities. At the same time, they are navigating a new professional culture, unfamiliar expectations and subtle norms that long-established staff take for granted. Effective mentoring therefore requires clarity, curiosity and cultural humility (Reheem, 2026). As our educational system promotes Westernised and Anglicised etiquette, sometimes labelled as Whiteness (Lander, 2014 / Cushing, 2022), it may feel uncomfortable for mentors to address issues linked with English etiquette in Professional Behaviours. The aim is not to "correct" the trainee, but to help them decode the professional culture of English schools while preserving their identity and strengths.

Be explicit about professional behaviours

Professional behaviours such as punctuality, attendance, communication and reliability are universal expectations, but the interpretation of these behaviours varies across cultures. In some systems, arriving exactly on time is acceptable; in England, arriving early is seen as a sign of readiness.

Rather than assuming the trainee "should know", mentors can frame expectations clearly and non-judgementally. Meyer (2014) reminds us that our own assumptions are culturally shaped, so clarity prevents misunderstandings. A simple script helps: "In our school, teachers are expected to arrive by X because…" This avoids ambiguity and supports the trainee to succeed.

Demystify English school etiquette

International trainees often report that the "hidden culture" of English schools such as dress codes, staffroom norms, and communication styles, can be as challenging as lesson planning. Teacher attire, for example, varies globally: what is considered professional in one country may appear informal or overly formal in another. Rather than framing this as "right" or "wrong", mentors can explain the rationale: safeguarding, approachability, or modelling professionalism. This aligns with Meyer's (2014) argument that making tacit expectations explicit is essential for equitable practice.

Discuss British Values with sensitivity

British Values can feel abstract or politically loaded for trainees new to the English education system. A supportive approach is to frame them as shared principles: respect, tolerance, democracy and Rule of Law, rather than nationalistic markers.

Encourage dialogue:

"How do these values align with your own teaching context?"

This positions the trainee as a partner in meaning-making rather than as a passive recipient. Self-awareness is useful here: mentors should be aware of how their own cultural lens and biases shape the conversations.

Navigating working hours and workload

Working hours can be a sensitive topic. In some countries, teachers stay on site until late evening; in others, planning is done at home. International trainees may therefore misread expectations. To avoid sounding discriminatory, focus on role clarity, not cultural comparison.

For example:

"Our school day typically involves X hours on site, plus planning time."

"How does this compare with what you're used to?"

This opens dialogue rather than judgement, acknowledging positionality (the trainee and the mentor) and reduces the risk of bias creeping into feedback.

Create psychological safety

Psychological safety is the foundation of effective mentoring (Clutterbuck, 2022). It is defined as a climate where individuals feel safe to ask questions, admit mistakes and express uncertainty without fear of embarrassment.

For international trainees, this is especially important: they may worry about being judged for their use of language, accent, or unfamiliarity with local norms. Mentors can foster psychological safety by using invitational language:

"What support would help you here?"

This helps validate effort, and frames feedback as developmental rather than evaluative.

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Suggestions from mentors:



"I use humour to dedramatise the situation, especially when the trainee's actions impacts on students' behaviour in the lesson."

(MFL mentor)

"I bring my own mistakes in the conversation to show my trainee I made mistakes too, and I still do, but I share how I overcome them, because it is not easy!"

(Physics mentor)

"I use lunch and breaks to address issues first, I try to make it a casual conversation first. If I bring things into an official meeting sometimes it can affect the dynamics. It is always casual first (...) it helps building the relationship with a cup of tea!"

(MFL mentor)

"I ask the trainee to tell me what they think first, and then I build on what they say: Have you noticed anything with the students when you do X?"

(Maths mentor)

Give constructive feedback with dignity

Feedback should be specific, respectful and culturally aware. Avoid generalisations ("In England, we do it this way") and focus on the behaviour, not the person.

Using evidence from practice, offering concrete strategies, and checking for understanding. Mentors should consider how their own cultural assumptions shape what they notice and how they interpret it.

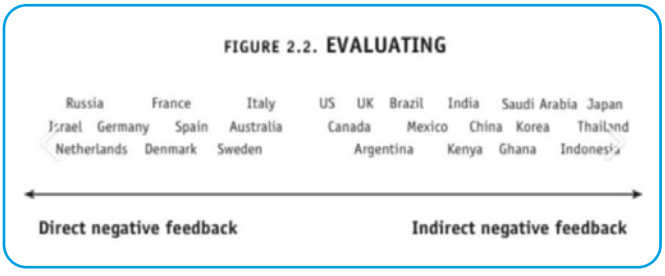
A reflective stance could help:

"I may be seeing this through my own lens" models humility and builds trust.

Understand that some cultures give and receive negative feedback in different ways and that sometimes our communication patterns can confuse, offend or frustrate others.

Self awareness in giving constructive feedback is essential in across-culture dynamic (Meyer, 2014).





PART 2 |

The Wider Role of the Teacher in English schools

Dr Caroline Neuberg,Leeds Trinity University
Juliette Claro, St Mary's Twickenham University

In English schools, the wider role of the teacher goes beyond simply delivering lessons. Teachers are expected to support pupils' academic, personal, social, and emotional development, while also contributing to the wider school community. Whilst these specific supports are each teacher's responsibility at all times, form time – or crew time – is the focal point of the pupils' day. It is the opportunity for a deeper relationship to be established between teachers and pupils. Hence, form teachers (or form tutors) typically develop a much broader understanding of the group of pupils in their care. While pastoral responsibility is shared by all teachers, form teachers see pupils at least once every day and are therefore more likely to notice subtle changes in a pupil's behaviour, attitude, or wellbeing. This regular contact allows them to develop a more holistic view of each pupil.

International teachers often report that this model of pastoral care does not exist in the same way in their home countries. As a result, interview questions relating to pastoral care and the wider responsibilities of teachers in the UK can sometimes leave international candidates unaware of the expectations placed upon them beyond subject teaching.

1. Safeguarding and child protection

Teachers have a legal duty to protect pupils from harm and abuse, identify and report safeguarding concerns, deal with disclosure from pupils in an appropriate way and follow school policies based on the statutory guidance (Keeping Children Safe in Education, 2026).

Providing additional opportunities for discussion and scenario-based learning beyond standard safeguarding training can be particularly beneficial for international teachers, enabling them to contextualise safeguarding expectations and procedures within the English education system:

"In the UK safeguarding system, I am now being trained in places where there is a much stronger emphasis on shared accountability, early intervention, and strict procedural compliance. I have adapted to this approach by familiarising myself with UK safeguarding policies and understanding my duty to report concerns immediately in line with school procedures."

2. Pastoral care and wellbeing

Teachers support pupils by promoting emotional wellbeing and mental health, offering guidance, encouragement, and stability and acting as a trusted adult for students facing challenges. There is no statutory obligation for a dedicated well-being and mental health officer to whom staff can reach out in each school and the presence of those often surprises international trainees.

Creating time and space for dialogue on pastoral care with pastoral managers and leaders will be helpful to support internationals joining the profession:

"In the public school system where I taught back home, pastoral support existed but was less formalized and focused more on academic guidance and discipline, with limited access to specialist services. The UK system places greater importance on structured support, student voice, and preventative wellbeing practices, which I have actively embraced. Where I come from, mental health and well-being are less talked about."





3. Promoting inclusion and equality

The emphasis on inclusion and supporting students with barriers to learning has become a driving force for quality first teaching and developing a sense of belonging in schools in England. This can be a cultural difference that some international teachers may need support to navigate as explained in this testimony:

"Teachers must support pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), promote equality, diversity, and British Values, to ensure no child is disadvantaged or discriminated against by the actions of the teacher. The English approach places a strong emphasis on legal accountability, proactive inclusion, and the explicit promotion of diversity, all of which I now actively embed in my practice. For international trainees and teachers, however, navigating the terminology and acronyms associated with different educational needs can present an initial barrier."

Cultural beliefs and customs, towards different Protected Characteristics may make some internationals feel uncomfortable discussing openly, particularly in professional or educational contexts.

Consideration for open dialogue and culturally-responsive, on-going professional development and mentoring can help internationals navigate cultural differences as explained here:

"I am so grateful for being able to attend the LGBTQ+ conference, this was very new to me, and as a first timer in an LGBT+ conference I felt comfortable and very welcomed. Key themes at the conference included: empathy, anti-bullying, solidarity, and creating school environments where pupils and staff feel safe and valued in the context of rising far right and discriminatory ideologies.

I attended a few workshops among which some were on LGBT+ communities, racism, and the experiences of people of colour, which explored how LGBT+ initiatives and conference learning can be meaningfully implemented in the curriculum. I engaged with the discussion on embedding LGBT+ and disability perspectives into the KS3 curriculum in a meaningful way; I learned a lot and gained insight on active listening and intersectionality."

PART 2 |

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4. Supporting behaviour and positive relationships

In the UK, behaviour management is guided by clear school policies and focuses on modelling respect, consistency across staff, and positive relationships. Building relationships of trust between pupils and teachers is indeed central to effective teaching within the UK education system. As a result, considerable emphasis is placed on knowing pupils well, encouraging positive attitudes to learning, and modelling respect, fairness, and professionalism at all times.

Much of this relational work is governed by unwritten norms and expectations, which can come as a surprise to international trainees. Cultural norms, unwritten rules and etiquette can lead to confusion for non-British teachers:

- Use of uniform;
- Use of Sir/Miss/Mrs and surname;
- Lining up in front of the class or in the playground;
- Behaviour management in the UK is relational whereas in some cultures deference and respect are established through distance or formality with the teacher;
- Restorative practices;
- The concept that behaviour is a form of communication, and it is important to establish the root of the behaviour issues to support children;
- Behaviour management focuses on relationship repair rather than sanction;
- Positive reinforcement and praise for effort that may be an expectation;
- Personalised learning.

"In the public school system where I taught, behaviour support was more authority-based and sanction-focused, with less emphasis on restorative approaches. While expectations of respect and effort were clear, there was less emphasis on restorative practice or individualised behaviour support, and behaviour was often viewed primarily as an issue of compliance rather than relationship-building."

"Back home, the class is silent as the teacher walks in the room, it is very formal, but here I have learnt to know my students by talking to them on canteen duty and joining the sports club. Knowing them outside the Maths lesson helped me to understand why they struggle to concentrate in class. Behaviour improved as my relationship with the students improved. This was very new to me, but I am grateful for my mentor for making me do duties and join the basketball club!"

"Students used to laugh at my accent, but as I observed another young female teacher with a strong accent, I learnt to not let this dominate the behaviour in the class. She helped me to establish my expectations, and build the relationship with the students so that, with a bit of humour, students stopped making fun of me, and embraced other accents as an enriching difference."

Support/Considerations:

- Open dialogue, mentorship and a safe place to discuss and share experiences will be welcomed;
- Professional learning with other colleagues with whom they can professionally identify and find solutions can help build confidence and expectations;
- Live coaching and deliberate practice;
- Discussions with SENCOs and pastoral leaders to explore students' barriers to learning;
- Encouraging them to engage with the student voice;
- Encouraging involvement with extracurricular activities, enrichment, and duties to see the strengths and hidden personalities behind the students outside the classroom.



5. Working with parents and carers

The UK education system places great emphasis on community with consistent, transparent communication and shared responsibility between teachers and parents. As such, teachers are expected to communicate regularly with parents about progress and concerns and contribute to reports, and parents' evenings.

Writing reports, or emails, can be a daunting task, not only because of the content required but also due to the expected formality in the tone and the appropriate level of familiarity. These expectations are often shaped by unwritten yet widely accepted conventions, which can vary significantly depending on the school setting.

This aspect of the role can be particularly challenging for international trainees. Even with substantial teaching experience in their home countries, international teachers may have had limited involvement in written communication with parents.

To minimise the risk of misunderstandings or unintended issues, it is therefore advisable to make expectations explicit and to provide clear guidance on how communication with parents is typically approached within the school context.

"Back home, I never had to call or write to parents, so when I was asked to phone a parent after school, I panicked! Thankfully, one of the teachers in the department was going to do the same, so he invited me to listen and make notes. It was really helpful; I scripted my phone call and with the help of the colleague I felt confident calling home!"

Support/Considerations:

- Deliberate practice and modelling with colleagues;
- Scripting before phoning home;
- Providing models/ templates;
- Explanations of the rationale behind the communication and how this relates to the school policies where applicable.

6. Professional responsibilities and contribution to the wider school community

Teachers are expected to engage in continuous professional development (CPD), to reflect on and improve their practice, and to work effectively with teaching assistants, all while upholding the professional standards set out in The Teacher Standards document (England).

Contribution to the wider school community may include running clubs, trips, or enrichment activities, supporting school events and initiatives, and helping to promote a positive school culture that aligns with the ethos of the school.

In some countries, the role of the teaching assistant does not exist, and expectations around wider professional responsibilities may differ significantly. As a result, international trainees may, initially, find it challenging to navigate these aspects of the role.

Without local knowledge of school systems, routines, and expectations, they may also lack the confidence or initiative to organise trips, clubs, or enrichment activities, despite being highly motivated and capable teachers.

"In France, teachers are paid to do extra clubs or take trips on holidays. Nothing is done for free, so it was strange for me to be asked to run a club in my lunch break at first! But then I realised that it is different here, and I had a lot of fun with the film club".

Supporting internationals to join the wider school community will help with belonging and behaviour management.

Support/Considerations:

- Sharing the list of clubs, trips on offer and inviting them to join or create their own;
- Inviting them on educational visits and trips;
- Inviting them on duty with another member of staff to model how duty works in England;
- Inviting them to school events and initiatives such as student voice, student council forums.

Key Takeaways:

- The wider role of the teacher in English schools is to educate, safeguard, support, inspire, and guide young people, ensuring they are prepared not only for examinations but also for life beyond school. This is not always the same in other cultures and education systems.
- This aspect of the role may not be fully understood or appreciated by international trainees, who may therefore require raised awareness and explicit guidance around these wider professional responsibilities and expectations.

Perspectives from Taiwan

David Mitchell Su, Curriculum Coordinator; QTS Mentor,
Kang Chiao International School Linkou

Taiwan offers rich opportunities for both local and international teachers across national and international school sectors. In my own school, this has created a staff and faculty community that is both diverse and deeply experienced. Our international programme alone includes seventy-nine teachers from countries such as The Gambia, the USA, Canada, the UK, the Philippines, India, South Africa, Hong Kong, and beyond.

This diversity matters as it offers students both windows and mirrors opportunities to see their own identities reflected in those who teach them, while also gaining insight into a range of worldviews (Buchanan & Fox, 2019). This is a key as to why the Department for Education (DfE) in England should seek to resolve their assumptions pertaining to international recruitment , and instead see international students for their uniqueness and potential to add value to the rich tapestry of the British education system.

Acknowledging and challenging the deficit assumption of international hires

The DfE acknowledges the assumption that international teachers often need retraining. Too often, there's a tendency to other these professionals, reducing them to the status of an Early Career Teacher (ECT) (Higton, et al., 2025) regardless of background and experience. This assumption must be challenged, and one way to facilitate dialogue in this area is to draw from the experiences of those in the international school sector who depend heavily on recruitment of overseas hires.

In my setting, we reject this model entirely. We hire teachers and welcome them for what they are: competent, qualified, and experienced professionals. We appreciate and concur with DfE findings that adaptation time is required and proactively factor this into our onboarding process, orientation, and mentoring programme that provides a structured and friendly welcome to our school, the local area, and Taiwan itself.

If the UK is serious about recruiting internationally, it must be careful not to diminish a teacher's status simply because their experience wasn't gained in the UK. It must provide for adaptation and offer a clear programme of support that creates a welcoming environment for any new hire.

Building a multi-layered support structure

Once a teacher is hired, it is important to recognize and appreciate that moving to a new country is a vulnerable time, especially when the local community's language and cultural norms will vastly differ from what the incoming teacher has experienced in their home setting, or even in another international position. This is why it is essential to build and embed a support system, such as those at my school, that prioritises professional agency over hierarchy. To exemplify, here are some of the core features of our support model:

- **Mentor as ally:** Every new teacher is paired with a peer mentor. This provides all new hires, local and international with someone they can turn to who isn't part of the leadership team. This distributes agency and helps new staff feel supported rather than managed.
- **Collaborative landing:** New teachers aren't left to plan in isolation. From the start, they join collaboration groups to review and shape the first part of the semester's curriculum. Their voice and expertise are integrated from day one.
- **Psychological safety in onboarding:** Department Heads and the Professional Development Lead check in at both group and individual levels. We actively encourage new teachers to contribute, and we maintain that support throughout the year through trust-based observations and shared planning.
- **The community tour:** All too often with onboarding, once a teacher is in the country, all settling in matters are usually school-based. We make sure to orientate our new students with the local area so that they know how to navigate the new area in which they live and work, how to take public transport, access medical services, postal services and provide a point of contact in administration who is bi-lingual to assist with matters that require a native command of Mandarin.

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Recognizing the cycle of culture shock

In addition to the support offered above with regards to psychological wellbeing, leaders, mentors, and the community at large need to ensure new teachers or trainee teachers feel that they belong and a key part of this is being aware of the signs of culture shock. At different points in the year, we often see some teachers, not always new, exhibit signs of stress, anxiety, and depression, and such changes are usually the result of the culture shock cycle which presents during the processes of adapting to the local culture in terms of language, societal norms, and even basic daily habits like food (Ahmed & Shahzeb, 2024).

We recognize and are aware of when we pay close attention to moments that matter, especially the lead-up to major holidays in a teacher's home country that aren't celebrated here in Taiwan. These are critical points in the culture shock cycle. By implementing comprehensive support services and cultural education – similar to the recommendations for facilitating academic success in international settings – we help turn a workplace into a community. If signs of culture shock are not understood and countered by fostering a receptivity to diverse cultures, there is a danger of professional isolation and reduced effectiveness, and teacher retention.

Key takeaways for recruiting and retaining international talents:

When a British school looks abroad to recruit teachers, it must respect the decision these professionals have made to join the English system, and to retain them, schools should, as we have:

- **Stop 'othering':** Recognise a global worldview as a pedagogical strength, not a gap.
- **Streamline training:** Focus only on what is essential and trust teachers' existing expertise.
- **Humanize the process:** Build multilayered support that acknowledges the whole person, both the professional and the human being navigating culture shock.



Conclusion

The world is full of great teachers, and to recruit and retain them, we must shift our approach from one of assumptions, to one of welcome and multi-layered support.

STEM for international trainees

Dr Caroline Neuberg, Leeds Trinity University

Science speaks a universal language. The laws that govern physics are the same across continents. While the names of the elements in the periodic table may vary across languages, their chemical compositions remain unchanged. The core laws and processes of biology, such as cell theory, genetics, evolution by natural selection, etc. apply to all living organisms, regardless of where they are studied. However, pedagogical content knowledge, that is, how to teach a specific subject by combining subject knowledge with effective teaching strategies and an awareness of students' learning difficulties, can vary significantly across countries. For example, differences exist in how concepts such as energy stores and energy transfers are taught across different nations.

Science is rich in complex, tier three vocabulary. For international trainee teachers, intonation and pronunciation may differ from the commonly accepted norms of British English. It can therefore be valuable to engage trainees in explicit discussions about how to approach scientific terminology, including exploring word origins and etymology.

International trainees often bring valuable and rich cultural perspectives, and diverse educational experiences. However, they must also develop a secure understanding of the specific curriculum and assessment expectations of this new education system in which they are training. This means not only becoming familiar with the National Science Curriculum and exam specifications, but also learning how particular concepts are typically taught, sequenced, and assessed in England.

As a result, there may be variation in trainee science teachers' awareness of effective science teaching practices used in England. For example, it has been reported that, in some countries, practical work is limited, with a stronger emphasis placed on theoretical knowledge. In contrast, countries such as Singapore increasingly teach science as an integrated subject, where the boundaries between disciplines are less distinct, and using an inquiry-based approach. These approaches allow for stronger connections between scientific concepts and promote a more holistic understanding of science (Teo, 2024).

As a school-based mentor, it may be beneficial to engage in a discussion with the science trainee teacher on how their curriculum was designed and what cross-curricular links were made, for example maths-science or English-science.

Because their own schooling may have followed different curricular structures, content emphases, or pedagogical traditions, international trainees will benefit from explicit opportunities to study the science curriculum in depth, observe how experienced teachers enact it, and practise teaching it themselves. This includes understanding the cultural references, examples, and analogies that are meaningful to pupils in the English context, as well as recognising when their own examples may need adapting.

For instance, the common Physics example of spear fishing to illustrate refraction may be familiar and meaningful to most pupils in coastal regions of Nigeria, where this activity is well known. However, for many pupils in England, who may have little or no experience of such activities, this example could feel abstract or inaccessible. As a result, the intended conceptual connection may be weakened rather than supported. The plum-pudding model of the atom is a chocolate-chip model in some other countries.

Unconscious bias also plays a role in how science education across countries is perceived. Rosling et al. (2018) highlights this in his discussion of generalisation bias. He recounts his shock and realisation in 1972, when, as a fourth-year student placed at a university in Bangladesh, he discovered that his peers there knew more and had studied harder than he had. Rosling reflects on his own assumption of superiority based on where he came from – an example of the belief that "the West is best" and that the rest of the world would never catch up.

Deliberate practice with curriculum materials, guided lesson planning, and scaffolded teaching experience all help international trainees develop curriculum fluency. Over time, this enables them to integrate their global perspectives with a strong grasp of local expectations, ensuring that their teaching is both culturally responsive and aligned with the curriculum pupils are assessed against.

Key Takeaways:

- While scientific knowledge is universal, the way science is taught and assessed is not. International trainees need to be given time to develop their pedagogical techniques and their understanding of exam specifications;
- Explore Walking Talking mocks with exam papers to get internationals a feel for the exam papers and the mark schemes, and ask trainees to mark and moderate assessments early;
- Be mindful of unconscious biases and acknowledge the knowledge that they have;
- Be mindful of the "this is the way we do things here" syndrome. Appreciate there may be alternative approaches tapping into the expertise and experience of international subject specialists.

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From native speakers to curriculum experts

Juliette Claro, St Mary's University Twickenham

International trainee teachers of Modern Foreign Languages arrive with deep linguistic and cultural expertise; some are native speakers or may have lived a long time in the target country. However, the English curriculum and assessment landscape can feel unfamiliar and opaque especially adapting to shorter curriculum time allocation than they may be used to in their home country. Developing a secure understanding of how languages are taught, sequenced and examined in England is not an add-on to their subject knowledge: it is the bridge that allows them to adapt their skills to this context and make their native or expert language accessible, challenging and motivating for English learners.

1. Making sense of the curriculum from KS2 to Post-16

A crucial first step is to help trainees see the big picture of language learning in England. Many pupils will have encountered French, Spanish or German in KS2, then continued (or restarted) in KS3, with only some progressing to GCSE and a smaller number to A level. International trainees need explicit induction into:

- **National Curriculum expectations** at KS2 and KS3: the balance of listening, speaking, reading, writing, phonics, vocabulary and grammar; the emphasis on meaningful communication and cultural understanding.

What languages have Year 7 learnt in your feeding primary schools?

What are the expectations for native speakers in the classroom or those who have had more exposure to the language at KS2?

- **School curriculum models:** Explain how your department interprets and sequences the content, including decisions about single vs. multiple languages, time allocation, methods (Sentence Builders, NCLEP, textbook resources, Schemes of Learning...)
- **Progression over time:** what "typical" progress looks like from Year 7 to Year 11, and how knowledge is revisited, deepened and assessed.

Mentors and tutors can support this by walking trainees through schemes of work, knowledge organisers and assessment grids, narrating the curriculum logic: why particular structures, tenses and topics appear when they do, and how they prepare pupils for later demands.

2. Understanding exam specifications and assessment objectives

Exam specifications (GCSE and A level) are often the hidden driver of curriculum decisions which may be very different from what they are used to. Not every country prepares students from Year 7 to exam-style questions to be taken five years down the line. International trainees need guided time to explore:

- **Assessment objectives (AOs)** for listening, speaking, reading and writing, and how these shape classroom tasks in the KS3 and KS4 curriculum.
- **Paper structure and question types:** for example, role-plays, photo cards, translation, dictation, summary tasks and extended writing.
- **Tiering and demand:** differences between Foundation and Higher at GCSE, and the step up to A-level.
- **Mark schemes and exemplars:** what examiners look for in terms of accuracy, range, complexity and communication.

This is not about turning trainees into exam technicians, but about helping them understand the assessment grammar of the system so they can design teaching that builds the underlying knowledge and skills pupils need. Joint planning sessions where mentors explicitly link lesson activities to AOs and question types can be particularly powerful.



3. Translating native-speaker expertise into teachable curriculum knowledge

Native speakers often "just know" how the language works and need to script how to break it down for novice learners. Supporting them involves:

- Surfacing implicit knowledge: asking trainees to explain why a structure is used, then connecting their explanation to the metalanguage and progression used in the English curriculum.
- Aligning terminology: ensuring they are familiar with the grammatical and phonics' terms pupils will encounter in English classrooms and in exam specifications.
- Focusing on high-frequency, high-utility language: helping them prioritise the vocabulary, structures and phoneme–grapheme correspondences that give pupils maximum communicative power, rather than rare or literary forms.

Suggestions for discussion:

- Comparative tasks such as mapping their own schooling in their country against the English curriculum. This can help them see both the continuities and the shifts in emphasis.
- Explore how they were taught languages at home: this may influence their pedagogical choices for example prioritising grammar and writing over speaking and communication.

4. Adapting pedagogy to English classrooms

To make sense of curriculum and exams, trainees also need to understand the pedagogical norms that sit around them in England.

This includes:

- **Lesson structure and pacing:** short, varied activities; clear learning objectives; explicit modelling; frequent checking for understanding.
- **Inclusion and adaptive pedagogies:** planning for mixed prior attainment, SEND, disadvantaged pupils, multilingual learners and pupils who may be reluctant language learners.
- **Assessment for learning:** using mini-whiteboards, hinge questions, low-stakes quizzes and retrieval practice to monitor and strengthen learning.

Mentors can model how to design sequences that move from input to guided practice to independent use, always with an eye on the curriculum journey and the eventual exam demands.



5. Keeping authenticity and creativity at the centre

As international trainees deepen their understanding of the English curriculum and exam system, it is vital that this does not flatten their creativity or reduce their teaching to exam rehearsal. Their lived experience, authentic resources and nuanced cultural knowledge are precisely what can make the curriculum come alive for pupils.

Encourage them to:

- Choose authentic texts, audio and video that align with curriculum themes and exam topics.
- Use contemporary language and diverse voices that challenge stereotypes and decolonise representations.
- Design tasks that prepare pupils for exam formats while still feeling meaningful, playful and culturally rich.

> "In France, we don't do as much speaking activities, so it is not always easy for me to think about planning for speaking tasks. It does not come naturally, I always plan for more grammar!"

> "In Nigeria, I have more freedom on the curriculum and choice of activities I teach. Here everything is prepared for the students to be ready for GCSE from a very early age. I had to adapt to this and learn the assessment objectives, but my mentor was so helpful and showed me where to find the resources and mark schemes."

Belonging, Race and 'Othering' in Initial Teacher Training

Nicklas Lindstrom, Roehampton University



Belonging is widely understood as a basic human need (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). At its core, it refers to a person's desire to feel accepted, valued and included within a group. For trainee teachers, this matters deeply because training is as much about becoming part of professional communities as it is about learning to teach.

Belonging is also closely linked to ideas of 'home'; places where people experience familiarity, safety and emotional connection (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Importantly, people do not belong to only one group. Trainee teachers, for example, move between several spaces and communities: a university, subject cohorts, professional studies groups, placement schools and departments. Belonging in teacher education is therefore situational and context-dependent. As trainees move between institutions, they must repeatedly negotiate whether they feel associated with that space (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016).

However, simply being present in a space does not mean that someone belongs. Belonging requires reciprocity: individuals may see themselves as part of a group, but they must also be recognised and accepted by others within that group (Kachchhap and Horo, 2021). For trainee teachers, this acceptance often comes through everyday practices – being trusted with responsibility, having access to shared spaces, being invited into professional conversations, and having one's contributions taken seriously.

Belonging plays a powerful role in identity formation. As Miller (2003, p.217) suggests, belonging is 'part of what constitutes our identity. Whether we are explicitly aware of it or not.' This means that feeling included (or excluded) shapes how trainees see themselves as future teachers, how confident they feel in professional spaces, and how motivated they are to persist. Research shows that when people feel distant from belonging, they expend more emotional and psychological effort trying to be accepted (DeWall, Baumeister and Vohs, 2008). For global majority trainee teachers, this additional effort can be particularly significant, as they often enter a profession that is historically and structurally white (Taff and Clifton, 2022).

Why belonging matters in Initial Teacher Training

Teacher training typically involves navigating multiple institutions at once: the university and at least two placement schools. Each setting has its own cultures, expectations and power dynamics (Bjorklund, Warstadt and Daly, 2021). Within universities, trainees often belong to more than one learning community, subject studies groups and professional studies' groups, which can further complicate where and how belonging is formed.

For many trainees, a sense of belonging acts as a form of emotional and professional support, helping them to manage the demands of training and adapt to new environments (Dasgupta, 2011). When belonging is established, trainees report feeling more confident, engaged and able to contribute meaningfully to their schools and courses.

Practical experiences strongly shape this sense of belonging.

Trainees are more likely to feel included when they:

- have access to a physical workspace;
- can seek advice from colleagues;
- feel their ideas and contributions are valued;
- are treated as developing professionals rather than temporary visitors.

(Bjorklund, 2023).

Belonging also affects retention and success. University students who feel they belong are more likely to remain on their courses and to seek support when challenges arise (Allen et al., 2021). Within teacher education, trainees who report a strong sense of belonging are more engaged, more likely to complete their training, and more likely to enter the profession (Kachchhap and Horo, 2021). Beyond qualification, teachers who feel they belong report higher job satisfaction, stronger motivation and lower levels of emotional exhaustion (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2011), and are more likely to remain in teaching long-term (Dewhurst, Ronksley-Pavia and Pendergast, 2020; Balgopal et al., 2022).

Not belonging, race and "othering"

If belonging is experienced by individuals, then its contrary position of not-belonging or 'othering' must also exist. Othering occurs when individuals are treated as different, marginal or outside the normative group, even when they are formally included.

For global majority trainee teachers, experiences of othering may be shaped by racialised expectations, stereotypes or assumptions that mark them as outsiders in predominantly white professional spaces. Such experiences can create psychological strain, reduce confidence and impact performance (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2011). A lack of belonging can make it harder for trainees to build supportive relationships, ask for help, or access informal professional knowledge that is often crucial for success.

Evidence suggests that these dynamics contribute to lower pass rates and earlier exits from the profession for global majority trainees when compared with their white peers (Tereshchenko, Mills and Bradbury, 2020; Maylor, 2022). This has consequences not only for individuals but also for the teaching workforce, limiting its ability to reflect and serve diverse pupil populations.

Initial Teacher Training as a distinctive context

The postgraduate teacher-training year is widely recognised as intense and demanding (Hancock, 2003). When trainees are simultaneously trying to establish a sense of belonging, particularly in spaces where they may already feel marginalised, these pressures are magnified.

Research highlights the additional emotional labour faced by global majority trainees, including anxieties about racism and discrimination during placements (Wilkins and Lall, 2011). These concerns are supported by evidence of racist incidents experienced by trainees in schools (Basit et al., 2007). Such experiences can significantly disrupt belonging and undermine professional confidence at a formative stage in a teacher's career.

Because race, identity and belonging are deeply personal, it is essential that teacher education creates space for trainees to express and make sense of their experiences authentically. Capturing these experiences in ways that honour individual voices and challenge dominant "white space" norms is increasingly urgent (Milner, Harmon and McGee, 2021). By doing so, teacher education programmes can better understand how belonging is experienced, and denied, within initial teacher training, and take informed action to support all trainees more equitably.

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Why awareness matters for mentors of international trainee teachers

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Unconscious and implicit biases shape workplace cultures in ways that are often invisible to those who hold them. In schools, complex, relational environments where professional identity, belonging and performance are deeply intertwined, these biases can profoundly influence the experiences of international trainee teachers. For mentors, recognising and interrogating their own assumptions is the first ethical step in creating psychological safety where international trainees feel valued, understood and able to co-construct their professional identity in their new environment.

Understanding unconscious and implicit bias

Unconscious bias refers to the automatic, unintentional mental shortcuts that influence how we perceive, evaluate and interact with others. Biases are not a sign of individual prejudice but a reflection of the cultural messages, stereotypes and hierarchies we absorb throughout our lives (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013). They operate beneath conscious awareness, shaping expectations about competence, professionalism, communication style and "fit".

In the workplace, these biases manifest in subtle but consequential ways: who is trusted, who is given opportunities, whose mistakes are forgiven, whose expertise is recognised, and whose behaviour is interpreted as "professional" or "challenging". For international trainees, who may speak English as an additional language, and come from different educational cultures, or hold unfamiliar norms of communication, these biases can create barriers that are difficult to name but easy to feel.



How bias affects international trainee teachers

Research on microaggressions shows that individuals from minoritised or culturally "othered" groups often experience subtle forms of exclusion.

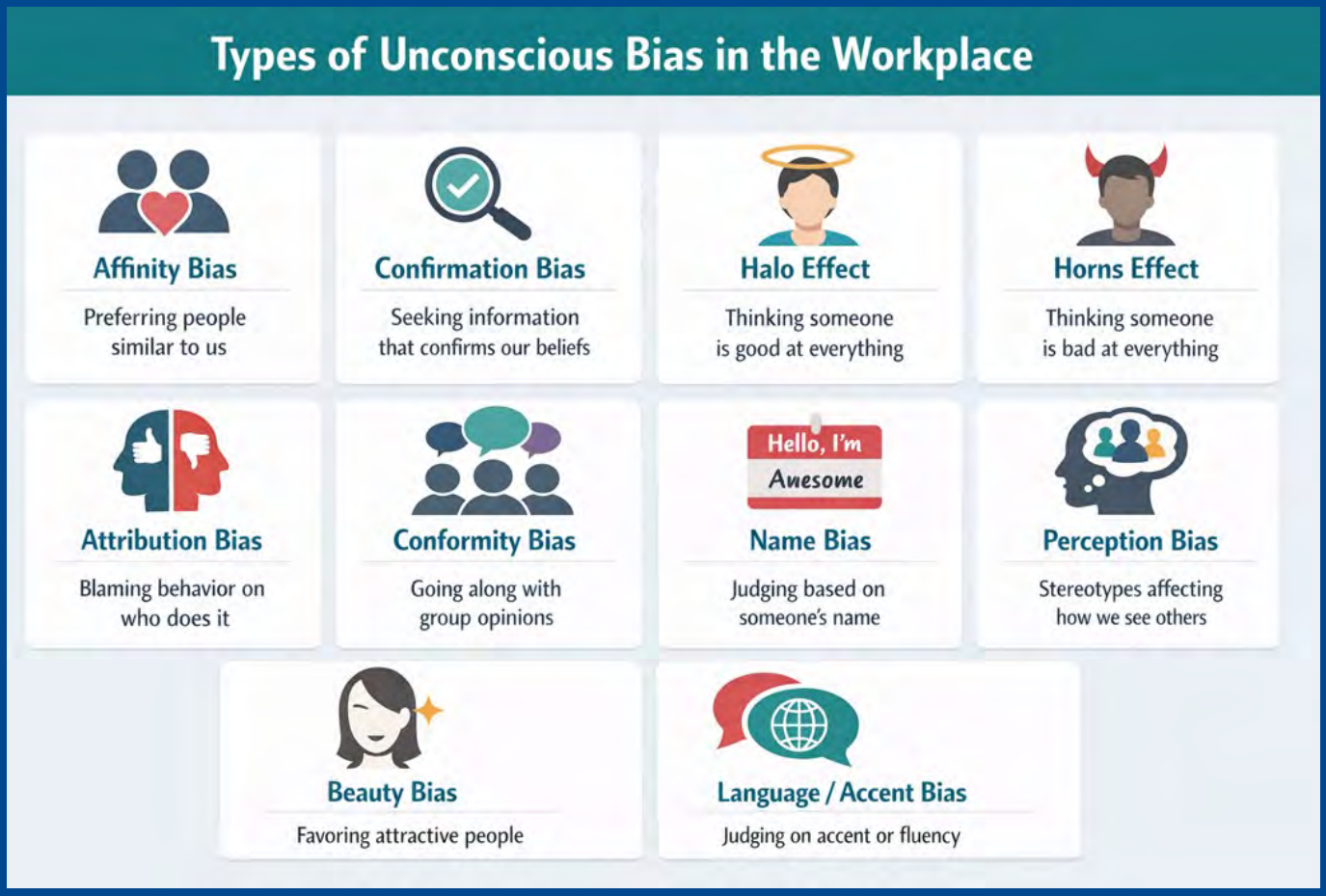
In the context of teacher education (Tereshenko et al. 2024), **this can include:**

- assumptions about linguistic competence;
- questioning of qualifications or prior experience;
- interpreting accents as lack of clarity or authority;
- lower expectations of pedagogical skill;
- over-scrutiny of behaviour or classroom management;
- minimising or overlooking cultural expertise;
- framing difference as deficit rather than asset.

These experiences accumulate, shaping trainees' sense of belonging, confidence and professional identity. For international trainees, who are simultaneously navigating a new education system, immigration processes and cultural norms, the emotional and cognitive load can be significant.

This reflective stance aligns with the principles of intercultural mentoring, which emphasise curiosity, humility and the co-construction of understanding (Passmore et al, 2023).

It also resonates with the ITTECF's focus on professional behaviours, relational practice and inclusive learning environments (DfE, 2024).



Adapted from Banaji & Greenwald (2013) and Ross (2008)

Strategies for reducing bias in mentoring practice

- **Slow down your thinking**
  Bias thrives in speed. Taking time to reflect before giving feedback or making judgements helps mentors separate evidence from assumption.
- **Accept differences**
  International trainees may teach, speak or interact differently, not incorrectly. Mentors can model openness by framing difference as enrichment rather than deviation.
- **Invite reciprocal learning**
  Mentoring becomes more equitable when mentors position themselves as learners too, valuing the trainee's linguistic, cultural and pedagogical knowledge.
- **Create explicit opportunities for dialogue**
  Bias is reduced when mentors ask, rather than assume:
  "How was this done in your previous context?"
  "What feels unfamiliar here?"
  "What support would help you navigate this expectation?"

These conversations build trust and allow trainees to articulate their needs without fear of being judged as 'unprepared.'

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Key Takeaways:

- **We all have biases, but unexamined bias is harmful.** Awareness is the first step in creating mentoring relationships where international trainees feel seen, respected and able to belong.
- **Mentors must interrogate their assumptions.** Structured feedback, reflective practice and intercultural curiosity help ensure that judgements are fair, evidence-based and inclusive. Belonging is built through everyday interactions. When mentors recognise and value the cultural and linguistic expertise international trainees bring, they transform the mentoring relationship into a space where psychological safety allows trainees to grow with confidence without feeling judged.

PART 4 |

Why accents matter

Isabelle Schafer, University of Worcester
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Our accent is unique to us. We combine consonants and vowel sounds differently depending on where we grew up and where we currently live. Bestlemayer (2024) explains that our experiences of interacting with others shape how we sound. This is important because it contributes to a sense of belonging. When we hear someone with an accent similar to our own, we may perceive them as part of our "in-group", but increased interactions with speakers whose accents differ from ours can also make us more likely to evaluate speakers' traits positively. Roessel et al. (2020) describe this process as habituation, which can reduce stereotyping and facilitate meaningful connections. Nevertheless, research shows that accents from nations perceived to have higher economic status tend to be evaluated more positively, and we tend to judge accents according to their perceived distance from our expected norm. In their study, Roessel et al. (2020, p. 40) found that listeners may overstate comprehension difficulties and incorrectly attribute processing challenges to the speaker's fluency, particularly those who do not speak English as their first language.

The cognitive effort required to understand unfamiliar speech may trigger negative reactions, leading listeners to rationalise bias: "It's the speaker, not me."

Listeners' perceptions are not necessarily just acoustic. Kang and Yaw (2024) report on a study in which participants listened to the same lecture delivered by the same individual, but were shown photographs of two fictitious lecturers, one described as Asian and one as Caucasian. Participants reported that the "Asian" lecturer had an accent, whereas they did not report this when viewing the Caucasian lecturer, despite the audio being identical. This finding highlights how listeners' viewpoints shape perception, and Cushing and Clayton (2024, p. 7) argue that "race, class, and language" are interconnected. Accents may be judged on expected norms and standards, which can lead to contributors' views being discredited.

In educational contexts, speakers who perceive their own accents as "standard" may feel entitled to correct a trainee's accent without questioning the implicit or explicit structures that underpin the perceived legitimacy of such correction.

It is therefore important to reflect on ways forward, as communication is a shared responsibility between speakers and listeners.

What if a mentor says...

Potential scenarios:

"The trainee teacher often teaches the pupils the wrong pronunciation."

- The trainee may need to work on their subject knowledge;
- The trainee's pronunciation of words or specific sounds is correct, but too different from the mentor's expected norm;
- The trainee could be encouraged to highlight pronunciation differences to pupils and explain why those differences exist.

"There have been times in lessons when the trainee has not understood what the pupils have said and vice versa, so it has been a journey for everyone."

- Habituation. The trainee can be advised to script their instructions, plan their questions and explanations, or use visual prompts, for example.

"My trainee struggles to understand English."

- The trainee might not understand acronyms, or idiomatic sayings. The trainee may struggle to understand their mentor's accent.

The issue here is that the mentor may be making an erroneous judgement on the trainee's level of proficiency, and perhaps competence. The trainee may ask for clarification, but they might be anxious that this might come across as a lack of proficiency or competence. It is important to reassure trainees.

Communication is a shared responsibility.



Mentors' perceptions:

"My trainee's accent was perceptible. I'm from Essex and I teach in Wolverhampton, so I have an accent too, as far as my pupils are concerned. I used my accent to explain to him the importance of really clear and slow emphasis on key words."

"My trainee's accent created giggles amongst students who said they could not understand her. I reminded the class that we all have accents and that is part of our British Values to respect and embrace the diversity in our community, from our peers to our teachers. I also supported the trainee with scripting and deliberate practice of instructions reminding her of my own struggle as a French native speaker. Humour and storytelling helped a lot to ease her anxieties."

"If they feel worried about their accent when speaking to the class in English, remind the class that they have an accent because they are fluent in a second language: English."



Key Takeaways:

- Reflect on your experience of working with trainees who have a different accent from yours or the learners;
- Help internationally educated trainees view their linguistic diversity as an asset rather than a barrier;
- Focus on strategies to increase the clarity of explanations and instructions rather than accent reduction.

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Being an anti-racist colleague

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These are real quotations and, reported by international trainees and early career teachers in their school placement across the country.

If you were to overhear these comments in our school or community, **how would you deal with these situations?**



Micro-aggression from students:

"Mimicking how they speak"

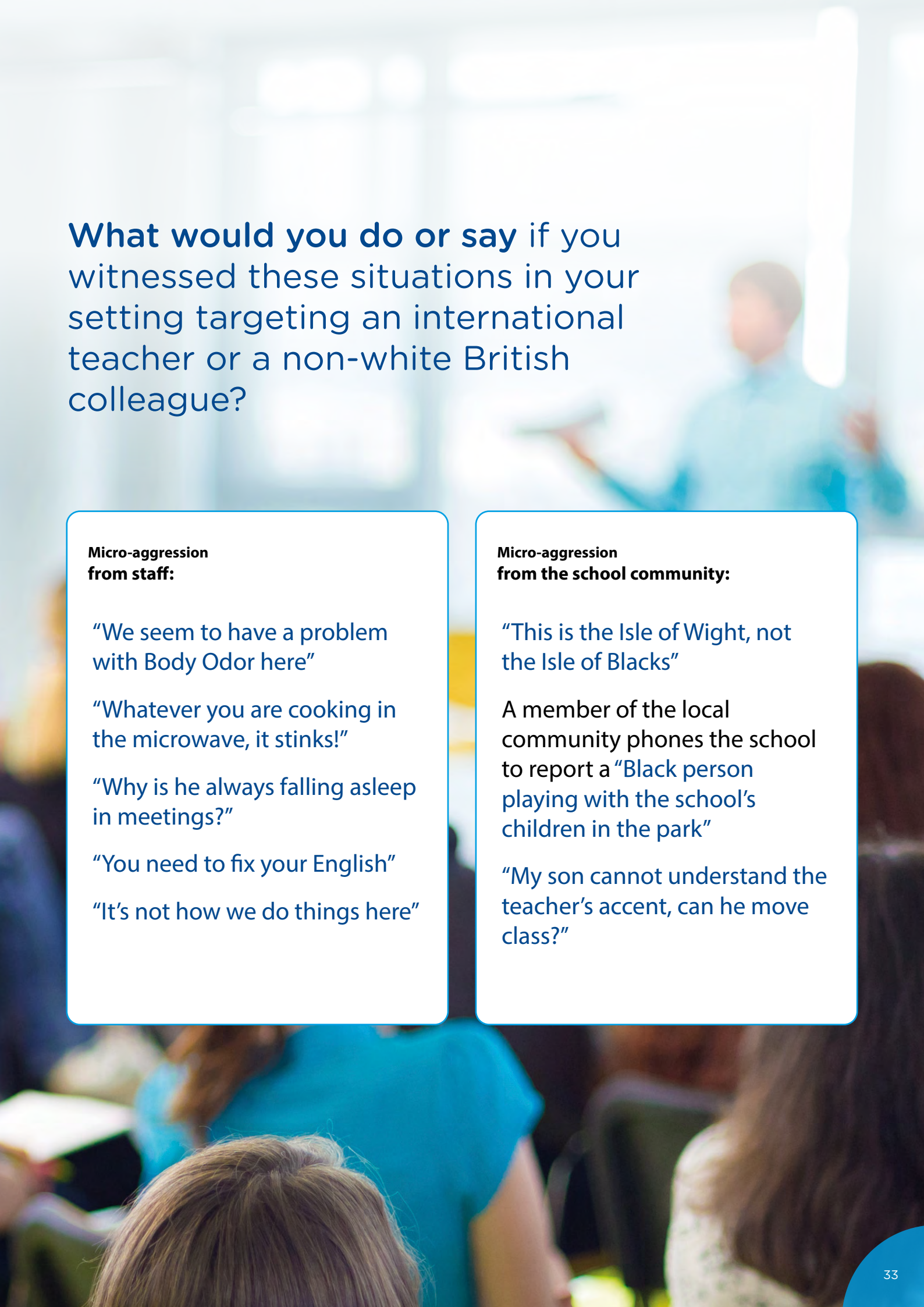
"Sniggering when they talk"

"Where are you from Sir/Miss?"

"Shake those dreads Sir!"

Students reply "never mind" or "whatever" when they don't understand the teacher's accent.

Students making complaints about teacher's accent.



What would you do or say if you witnessed these situations in your setting targeting an international teacher or a non-white British colleague?

Micro-aggression
from staff:

"We seem to have a problem with Body Odor here"

"Whatever you are cooking in the microwave, it stinks!"

"Why is he always falling asleep in meetings?"

"You need to fix your English"

"It's not how we do things here"

Micro-aggression
from the school community:

"This is the Isle of Wight, not the Isle of Blacks"

A member of the local community phones the school to report a "Black person playing with the school's children in the park"

"My son cannot understand the teacher's accent, can he move class?"

How can we help international teachers feel that they belong in our setting?

"We've been having a weekly departmental lunchtime, during which my mentor (the Curriculum Lead) and other colleagues bring various meals and goodies for us to enjoy amidst cool Spanish music and chit-chats, I share my culture and food and they share theirs. We are like a family."

"When I raised concerns during my second placement, the staff truly listened, understood my perspective, and stood firmly by me (..). Their encouragement made me feel supported, and capable of succeeding. Knowing that there were people who genuinely wanted me to thrive strengthened my sense of belonging and confidence within the new education system."

"What really helped me feel that I belonged was how incredibly welcoming my mentor was from the very beginning. The school itself was wonderfully diverse, with colleagues and students from a range of international backgrounds, people I can relate to which made me feel especially comfortable and valued as an African trainee. Seeing such diversity within the school and the department reassured me that I had a place within the school community and the wider education system."

"I had questions that created anxiety for me, coming from a different environment two weeks earlier and now standing before a class of students in England. It was a lot for me.

However, I was blessed to have a good mentor who understood me and allowed me to explore the school policies and curriculum slowly and steadily. She took me along to the pub on Fridays and encouraged me to attend the new science conference at Excel London during the half term.

Another teacher got me the ticket and welcomed me to lunch I met their families and it was a memorable day for me. I found through the conversations that they also had anxieties in the early years of their careers and that I was not alone."



"My mentor also has an accent because he is Scottish, so he told me stories on how students also struggle to understand him, he is funny and he helped me overcome my anxiety with accent. We all have accents and he brings normality and humour to it which made me feel less self-conscious. Accents and dialects make the culture rich and connected, when I struggled with words, I did not feel afraid of asking him to help me."

"My colleagues make me feel truly accepted, valued, and encouraged to grow both personally and professionally. They have created an environment where I feel included as part of the team and supported every step of the way. Whenever I need guidance or advice, they are always willing to help with kindness, patience, and understanding. I deeply appreciate the support they have shown me throughout my teacher training journey, and I am truly grateful to be surrounded by such a caring and inspiring team."

"My tutor has been very helpful. She has checked whether my emails to my mentor and to schools are appropriate, which is especially important because cultural differences can sometimes make communication more challenging."

"My subject mentors shaped my practice through precise, thoughtful feedback that always focused on growth rather than judgement. Over time, I stopped feeling like someone adapting to a new system, and started feeling like a teacher being formed within a community that genuinely believed I belonged there."

"I was invited to participate in birthday celebrations of colleagues in the MFL department. We sat around tables together, took pictures, and was served with various goodies amidst chatting, it made me feel like I was part of the team."

Reflections:

- From these quotes, what are your emerging thoughts?
- How can be refined or further developed in your setting to further improve the sense of belonging of your diverse workforce?
- What else is missing? What else can support mentors in their role?
- What further training can support you?



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