Reframing responses to racism in practice learning: Introducing the 6F Trauma Responses Framework for Black and racially minoritised social work students

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Abstract: Black and racially minoritised social work students continue to experience significant challenges during practice learning, including racism, microaggressions, isolation, heightened scrutiny and questions regarding their competence, academic abilities and professional suitability. While existing literature has documented these experiences extensively, less attention has been paid to how students respond psychologically and behaviourally to placement environments perceived as unsafe, unfair or threatening. This paper draws on the trauma responses framework (fight, flight, freeze, flop and fawn) to explore how Black and racially minoritised social work students may be navigating racially hostile, exclusionary or culturally insensitive placement settings. It also introduces a sixth response (Fit in) which is about adapting to dominant professional norms to survive racialised environments. Drawing on published research examining the practice learning experiences of Black and racially minoritised students, this paper argues that behaviours frequently interpreted by practice educators as resistance, disengagement, passivity, lack of confidence or over-compliance may be understood as adaptive survival responses to racialised stress and repeated experiences of marginalisation. Using examples from the literature, the paper examines how each trauma response may manifest during placement. The paper concludes by proposing a culturally responsive and trauma-informed approach to practice education. It argues that practice educators must move beyond individualised interpretations of student behaviour and instead consider the broader structural, relational and racial contexts shaping students' experiences. By recognising trauma responses as potential indicators of psychological safety rather than student (in)capability, practice educators can create more equitable and supportive learning environments that enhance student wellbeing, learning and professional development.

Keywords: Black and racially minoritised students; practice learning; racism; trauma-informed, social work education; supervision; anti-oppressive practice; belonging.

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Introduction

Practice learning remains the signature pedagogy of social work education (Wayne et. al 2010) and represents a critical site for professional identity formation (Wiles, 2017), knowledge application, and assessment of competence (Finch 2017). Yet for many Black and racially minoritised social work students, placement settings can also become sites where racism, exclusion and marginalisation are experienced and negotiated (Bartoli et al, 2008; Tedam, 2014; Tedam & Mano, 2022; Feyerabend & Musselbrook 2025).

Over the past twenty years, research has consistently highlighted the unique challenges faced by Black and racially minoritised students during practice learning in England (Bartoli et al, 2008; Fairtlough et. al, 2013; Tedam, 2015; Tedam & Finch 2024). Similarly, research in Scotland (Hillen & Levy 2015: Feyerabend & Musselbrook, 2025) Australia (Bennett & Gates, 2019); Canada (Razack, 2001; Srikanthan, 2019) and USA (Lilly et. al, 2023; Dozier et. al, 2025) reveal similar patterns. These include experiences of overt and covert racism, microaggressions, differential treatment, cultural misunderstandings, heightened scrutiny, social isolation, lack of representation, the pressure to continually prove competence and fast tracking to failure (Tedam, 2015; Tedam & Mano, 2022, Finch & Tedam, 2024).

A recurring finding across this body of work is the emotional labour involved in navigating placement environments where students may feel simultaneously visible and invisible and often describe their experiences as traumatic and impeding their ability to learn (Zuchowski et. al., 2014) . Visible because of racial difference and invisible because their experiences of racism are often minimised, denied, or misunderstood (Dozier et. al.,2025) While this literature has documented what students experience, less attention has been given to how students respond to these experiences, something this article directly addresses.

This paper is directed towards practice educators because of their central role in supporting, supervising, and assessing students during practice placements. While trauma responses may emerge within the supervisory relationship, they can also arise from interactions with service users, colleagues, or others within the wider placement environment. The purpose of this paper is to support practice educators in recognising behaviours that may reflect trauma responses, exploring their potential origins through reflective supervision, and responding

in ways that are supportive, trauma-informed, and educationally appropriate. By developing an understanding of these responses, practice educators can better create conditions that promote student wellbeing, learning, and success in practice settings.

This article proposes that the trauma responses framework which is commonly understood as fight, flight (Cannon, 1925), freeze (Campbell & Teghtsoonian, 1958), fawn (Walker, 2003) and flop (Heidt et. al 2005) offers a useful lens for understanding student behaviour in placement settings. A sixth response, 'fit in' is introduced into the framework. These responses describe adaptive survival mechanisms which are activated when individuals perceive threat, danger, or lack of safety.

Background literature

Although often associated with physical danger, contemporary trauma scholarship recognises that chronic discrimination, racism, and exclusion can also activate trauma responses (Carter, 2007). The argument advanced here is not that all Black and racially minoritised social work students experience racism on placement nor that they are traumatised. Rather, the key message is that any exposure to repeated racialised stressors within placement environments may trigger adaptive responses which can be misinterpreted by practice educators, onsite supervisors, educators, and others involved in practice learning. This review of literature will examine racism, trauma and racial trauma, psychological safety, and intersectionality.

Racism, belonging, and psychological safety

Racism is a complex and enduring feature of society, embedded within social systems and practices, and expressed through both conscious and unconscious forms of discrimination. Harper (2012: 10) defines racism as 'individual actions (both intentional and unconscious) that engender marginalisation and inflict varying degrees of harm on minoritised persons; structures that determine and cyclically remanufacture racial inequity'. Microaggressions are verbal and non-verbal insults, sometimes subtle, that are directed at people based on range of identity markers.

The existence of racism in the context of social work education and practice can be difficult to accept because the profession prides itself as one that upholds and champions equality, diversity, and anti-oppressive practice. Racism has remained consistent in the profession since the 1980s when Dominelli (1989) argued that:

> Social work purports to be a caring profession aimed at meeting the needs of its clients. But this is not the case for Black people. Whether they enter the social work arena as clients, employees or students, Black people experience negative treatment (p.391).

Since then, the question of 'belonging' which refers to an individual's sense of emotional attachment, acceptance and recognition within a particular social context (Yuval-Davis, 2006) has become recurring theme in research with Black and racially minoritised social work students. Belonging is strongly associated with inclusion, participation, identity and social justice, conditions which allow individuals and communities feel valued and respected (Tedam, 2024). Social work students describe entering placement environments where they are the only Black person within a team or organisation (Masocha, 2015; Gooding & Mehrhotra, 2021; Rafter et. al, 2024). They further reported feeling under constant observation, experiencing representational burden (having to represent the entire race) and fearing that their mistakes may confirm negative stereotypes (Dozier et. al, 2025). Tedam (2015) identified examples of students feeling scrutinised more intensely than their White peers. More recent work by Cornish et. al (2025) demonstrates how students often become reluctant to disclose experiences of racism because of fears that they may be labelled problematic, oversensitive, or unable to cope.

Moving on to explore psychological safety, Kahn (1990) views psychological safety as an individual's perceptions about whether they are comfortable to show and be themselves without fear of negative consequences and that they can only do this when they have trusting and supportive interpersonal relationships with work colleagues. It refers to an individual's perception that they can speak, question, challenge and make mistakes without fear of humiliation or punishment. When psychological safety is absent, individuals often shift from learning mode into survival mode. This distinction is important for practice educators. A student who may appear disengaged, defensive, or excessively compliant may not be demonstrating a lack of learning or practice readiness. Instead, they may be responding to a placement environment

perceived as unsafe. While most trauma literature examines exposure to service-user trauma (Didham et al., 2011; Dal Santo et al., 2024), this article examines how racism itself may produce trauma responses in students during placement learning and offers practice educators strategies for consideration.

Race based trauma (RBT) & Racial Trauma (RT)

Trauma is defined as 'physical and psychological experiences that are distressing, emotionally painful, and stressful and can result from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances such as a natural disaster, physical or sexual abuse, or chronic adversity (e.g., discrimination, racism, oppression, poverty)' Han et al., (2021, p.2). While trauma has traditionally been associated with discrete and often catastrophic events, there is growing recognition that chronic exposure to racism and discrimination can also constitute a traumatic experience. This emerging body of work has challenged conventional understandings of trauma by highlighting the psychological and physiological harms associated with racial oppression, leading scholars to conceptualise racism as a potential source of trauma. Carter (2007) therefore argued that although trauma researchers historically did not focus on racism as a factor in the development of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after exposure to a stressful, they have found that Black and racially minoritised people showed elevated levels of PTSD which could not be sufficiently explained. Race-based trauma (sometimes also called racial trauma) is increasingly understood as a significant threat to wellbeing, with studies linking experiences of racism to a range of adverse physical and mental health outcomes, including hypertension, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress symptoms (Chin et al., 2023). Racial trauma is the result of ongoing exposure to racial stressors such as racism, racist bias, discrimination, violence against Black and racially minoritised people , and racist abuse in the media that creates an environment in which they unsafe simply because the colour of their skin.

While racial trauma provides a useful lens for understanding the emotional, psychological, and physiological impact of racism, it is important to recognise that experiences of trauma are not shaped by race alone. Individuals occupy multiple social locations simultaneously, and these intersecting identities can influence both their exposure to

oppression and the ways in which they respond to it. An intersectional perspective therefore deepens our understanding of racial trauma by drawing attention to how race interacts with other dimensions of identity, such as gender, class, disability, sexuality, religion, and others. The following section explores the relevance of intersectionality to understanding the experiences of Black and racially minoritised social work students in practice learning settings.

Intersectionality, Identity and Trauma Responses

The experiences of Black and racially minoritised social work students on placement cannot be understood through race alone. Intersectionality, originally developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), reminds us that individuals occupy multiple social identities simultaneously and that these identities interact to produce unique experiences of privilege, disadvantage, and oppression. Black and racially minoritised students are not a homogenous group. Their experiences of practice learning are shaped by the intersections with gender, age, disability, migration status, religion, language, socioeconomic background, sexuality, and family responsibilities. For example, a mature student who is also a parent may encounter different challenges to a younger student entering higher education directly from high school. Similarly, a student who speaks English as an additional language and/ or with an accent (Harrison, 2013; Battaglia et al., 2024) may experience over-scrutiny of their communication skills alongside racialised assumptions about competence. Black LGB students in the UK experienced varied levels of homophobia and racism during practice learning (Fairtlough et. al, 2013), while Muslim students have encountered Islamophobia alongside anti-Black racism (Pentaris et al., 2022). Tedam (2015) found that students with disabilities had to navigate ableism and racial discrimination within placement environments.

An intersectional lens is particularly important when considering trauma responses (Ford, 2024). The same placement experience may evoke different responses depending on how students understand their own social position and previous experiences of exclusion. A Black and racially minoritised woman may experience a combination of racism and

gendered expectations that encourages a fawn response characterised by compliance and emotional labour. A male student may feel pressure to avoid behaviours that could be interpreted through stereotypes of aggression and therefore adopt flight or freeze responses. Students with histories of migration, displacement or previous experiences of discrimination may also have heightened sensitivity to environments perceived as unsafe or exclusionary (Dytham, et al., 2024).

Intersectionality is therefore an important framework helps explain why trauma responses are neither predictable nor universal. Fight, flight, freeze, flop, fawn and (fit in) should not be understood as fixed reactions associated with particular groups but as context-dependent responses emerging from the interaction between individual experiences and structural conditions. What might appear as withdrawal, silence, compliance, or resistance may reflect the cumulative impact of multiple and intersecting forms of oppression rather than race alone (Ford 2024).

For practice educators, an intersectional perspective requires curiosity rather than assumption. Understanding students' responses necessitates attention to the complexity of their identities and lived experiences (Tedam, 2012). Such an approach aligns with anti-oppressive and culturally responsive practice by recognising that students bring diverse histories, strengths, and vulnerabilities into the social work classroom and into placement settings (Tedam, 2024). It also challenges educators to move beyond single-axis explanations of student behaviour and to consider how systems of power and privilege operate simultaneously within practice learning environments and often replicated in higher education contexts.

The discussion to follow considers each trauma response individually drawing on examples from the experiences of Black and racially minoritised social work students on placement to illustrate how these responses may manifest within practice learning environments.

The 6 F's

Fight

The fight response occurs when individuals confront a perceived threat. Within practice learning, this may manifest as students questioning racist assumptions, challenging discriminatory comments, or raising concerns about inequitable treatment for themselves or others. For example, a student with disabilities in the Tedam (2015) study was told by her PE that her crutches might be problematic on placement. The student fought back saying:

> *well if for any reason the organisation doesn't want someone that has crutches; I said first of all its discrimination; you know I said and I did say to her I'm not sure if I'm being discriminated here because of my race or because of my disability and I was open with her and I said you know I have to tell you this because I'm not sure right now. I'm walking out of here thinking you know it can't be my disability is it my colour you know. And I said to her I cannot understand why you being a social worker and I'm a student and I'm actually saying to you that if you need to tell someone that they can't have crutches and work in your organisation, you need to give them a reason with that and that should come with a risk assessment from someone that's qualified to do so.*

Such a response could be interpreted positively as assertiveness, but at other times could be viewed negatively as aggression, defensiveness, or a lack of professionalism. If perceived as the latter, then there are possible negative outcomes for the student. The challenge for practice educators is that anti-racist resistance can easily be misread as oppositional behaviour. A student who challenges a colleague's racial stereotype may be demonstrating professional values and ethical courage rather than hostility. However, where organisations are uncomfortable discussing race, the student's response may become the focus of concern rather than the racism itself.

In another study, a student expressed a similar sentiment during focus group discussion, stating that there was no need to apologise for one's accent.

> *We shouldn't apologise for our accents, because that's who we are . . . so the moment you start apologising because you have a different accent, what happens is that you start devaluing your identity as a person . . . I'm erasing who I am (Yeung et. al, 2026, p465).*

A Muslim student in a team with white colleagues explained that, in the first week of the placement, the team manager emailed his practice educator to say he was 'not right for the team' and inadvertently copied him in. His first experience of speaking to the manager was to ask why she thought this, a question she brushed off. Following this, he experienced ridicule from colleagues and hostility from service users but was unsure whether this was about islamophobia, racism or the fact he was a man (Morton et. al, 2023, p.563).

For this student, calling out was the last resort.

> *I dealt with a lot of microaggressions and racism. But I did end up calling out the supervisor . . . it always falls on us to do it and, meanwhile, we have two other White women in the practicum who just sat there silent. (Lerner & Kim, 2024, p.78)*

Flight

The flight response involves avoiding perceived danger. Among Black and racially minoritised students, this may manifest through social withdrawal, reluctance to participate in team discussions, days off placement, avoiding challenging conversations or emotional distancing from colleagues. Research has identified experiences of isolation among Black and racially minoritised students (Tedam, 2011; 2019, Dytham et al., 2024). Students often describe 'keeping their heads down' avoiding conflict and focusing solely on passing placement.

From the perspective of a practice educator, such behaviours may be interpreted as poor engagement, lack of initiative or poor motivation. However, viewed through a trauma-informed lens, withdrawal may represent a rational strategy aimed at reducing exposure to further harm. Students who have previously experienced racism may conclude that speaking up carries significant personal and professional risks.

For one participant in the Dytham, et. al (2024) study, they could relate better to members of a different team and not the one in which they were placed.

> *I just didn't fit in... and I ended up going out with some of the people from the other teams and actually felt really like the part of those teams. I felt like they're more accommodating than my own team, in my own team I just sat there thinking, will I*

say the wrong thing, will I do the wrong thing? Will I? It's kind of, yeah. It just made it really uncomfortable and I just felt, I don't know. It still really upsets me when I think about that place.

In a much earlier study, another student expressed

I brought it up in the team meeting and said this is unacceptable […] It is not my fault I am black … I just want you to stick up for me in that situation … and not just sit there and let me be abused (Fairtlough et. al, 2014, p.617)

Freeze

The freeze response refers to an involuntary trauma response in which Black and racially minoritised social work students become temporarily unable to respond to racist incidents or discriminatory behaviour. Students may for example struggle to articulate knowledge during supervision; become unusually quiet during meetings or around particular people; have difficulty making decisions. Practice educators may interpret these behaviours disengagement, lack of knowledge or confidence yet freeze responses frequently occur among highly capable individuals whose cognitive resources become temporarily overwhelmed by stress. A student who appears unable to answer a question in supervision may not lack understanding. Rather, they may be experiencing the effects of anxiety, hypervigilance, or stereotype threat (Gooding & Mehrotra, 2021).

Trauma-informed supervision creates opportunities to revisit these incidents, validate students' experiences and develop psychologically safe strategies for future practice.

One student describes their supervision thus.

My experience has not been too pleasant. Supervision sometimes feels like a waste of time. There are times when we have nothing to discuss.

Another student explains

Supervision has not offered a platform of safety because I am scared of my supervisor because she never gives me a chance to talk and say my feelings. The feedback is not constructive because she never sees me as an individual since she is always comparing me with other students'. (Ross & Ncube, 2018, p.43)

These examples may be perceived as protective responses to an emotionally unsafe supervision environment where fear has resulted in the suppression of the student voice.

Flop

The flop response is less widely recognised but involves submission when resistance appears futile. In placement settings, this may appear as resignation, emotional shutdown, or passive acceptance of unfair treatment. Students may decide not to report racist incidents because previous concerns have been dismissed. They may stop challenging unfair decisions or withdraw emotionally from learning opportunities.

Tedam and Mano (2022) describe the pressures experienced by Black practitioners and students who feel compelled to endure tricky situations because speaking out may carry professional consequences. The flop response can emerge when students perceive that organisational systems will not protect them. For practice educators, this presents a significant risk. A student who appears cooperative may be disengaging psychologically from the placement.

The following quote demonstrates this:

> *It has already been a difficult week and today is not different. My practice educator spent the time telling me off for my writing, my reflective logs, my case notes- everything. She keeps talking about failing and I don't know why. It's made me very uncomfortable about approaching her for support. Maybe that is what she wants, so that I will not come to her……. I feel down. I do not know if I will have the energy to come to placement tomorrow. She won't care, she won't bother. She will be happier without me here.* (Cited in Tedam & Finch, 2025).

For another student, who faced repeated instances of racism throughout placement, the emotional impact resulted in breakdown and she

> *ended up like just having a bit of a breakdown at the end of the placement because it was just, everything was just too much, and I felt like I couldn't do anything. (Cornish et. al. 2025, p.10)*

Similarly, Fairtlough et. al, (2014, p.616) reported a student as saying

Working in the placement has made me realise: basically, don't tread on people's toes, (being) ethnic minority.

Fawn

Perhaps the most overlooked response is fawning because it involves excessive accommodation, people-pleasing and efforts to avoid conflict by prioritising the needs of others. Many Black and racially minoritised students describe feeling pressure to work harder, achieve more, and avoid giving colleagues any reason to question their competence (Tedam, 2015; Cornish et. al, 2025).
Fawning may manifest as:

- excessive agreement with practice educators or other colleagues in the team
- reluctance to challenge inappropriate comments.
- Over-preparation
- taking on additional work, inability to say no
- striving for perfection.

Such behaviours are often rewarded within placement environments because they generally align with notions of professionalism and commitment. However, they may also conceal significant emotional distress. The student exhibits one or several of the above may not be thriving, they may simply be surviving.

Writing about the placement experiences of students of colour in USA, one participant in Dozier et. al (2025, p.7) study articulated this:

Like, I was dressed nice. I looked nice. You know what I am saying? But I don't know, she didn't accept me as well. …She was nice at first when she was talking to my supervisor, but when I came up there it wasn't the same reaction.

In a UK study, Cornish et.al, (2025, p.8) highlighted that students.

described feeling compelled to modify their behaviour 'just to pass'. One participant explained 'I kept smiling, kept being polite. . . all I could think about was finishing my placement and moving on'. This sentiment was

echoed by a student who recounted: 'You have to keep your head down, put on a fake smile, and just get through it. You're thinking, 'I need to pass this placement, I can't afford to make anyone angry. (*Dozier et. al. (2025, p.10)*

There has been a couple of times [when] I have to kind of like, glue my mouth shut. Because I'm like, 'Oh, no … That's not right.

Another example of a fawn response is captured in this quote from a student.

I widely researched the topics, and I tried to use the correct terminology, but I also apologized all the time about my accent, or if I forgot to say something, or it wasn't really a full sentence. With my team members, sometimes I felt I am not always listened to. (Yeung et. al, 2026, p. 463)

Fit in

I am proposing a sixth response (Fit in) which describes the trauma response where students consciously or unconsciously alter their behaviour, change or shorten their names, appearance, language, accent, opinions, values or cultural identity in order to reduce scrutiny, challenge, discrimination, or exclusion.
Cornish et. al. (2025, p.9) reported that:

One student reflected on how they had to 'shift' their identity to fit into the placement environment: 'You have to mould yourself, be someone else when you're on placement. . . it's hard to be yourself when you know they're watching and judging everything you do' .

In the Gooding & Mehrotra (2021 p.321) study, a student said this of her Black practice educator:

My field supervisor cried a lot, because she felt like she can't bring her whole self to the work. [...] You can't bring, as a person of color you have, in order to fit into the mainstream, you know, you have to kind of fit into the mainstream, White mainstream, in order to be accepted, because you know we're already looked at as different. We're already looked at as deviant or not conformed, poor. You know, there's all this perception and biases against people of color.

Another participant articulated what can be described as a fit in

response.

> *It is also just hard feeling like I can't be my boisterous self, because I have to be my professional self. [...] I have to like quiet myself because I don't want them to think like, 'oh she's just the angry Mexican girl'. And so, that's been really tough, because you don't get to feel like you can be who you are...*

Code-switching and self-silencing are other techniques used by Black and racially minoritised social workers to 'fit in'. Code switching involves adjusting how one speaks by adopting a more formal pitch and tone in professional settings, while self-silencing is when Black people limit self-expression or speech, 'often to avoid conflict, preserve harmony, or maintain relationships' (Cooke et. al. 2025, p.163)

> *Petra (SW) reported that she always felt nervous and needed to correct herself and 'look for the correct words' to communicate. (Yeung et. al. 2026, p.464)*

One student found that fitting in was a useful strategy with service users.

> *Not because you are embarrassed of where you come from, but you are trying to create meaning with your service users. You want them to understand what you're trying to say, and you don't want half the conversation to be based on them saying, 'say that again. What exactly do you mean?' . . . I did adjust how I sound, so that I sound British. In that way, I felt it was easier for them to accept what I was trying to say, and it was easier for them to take me seriously. (Yeung et. al, 2026. P.464)*

This social work student, Jaya used the term fitting in to describe their experience

> *It's not so much that you are not proud of your heritage or where you come from . . . It just happens subconsciously because as we are part of a group, when you are with certain individuals . . . It's an interesting thing what the mind does, but you want to fit in and sometimes you find yourself saying certain words, or phrases because that's what everybody else is saying . . . it's about fitting in. (Yeung et. al.,p.465)*

This 'linguistic racism' or 'ethnic accent bullying' according to Dovchin (2020) can silence speakers and result in them becoming passive or withdrawn.

Implications for practice education (and beyond)

According to Aldana and Vazquez (2020, p.137), 'the attention social work education has given to racism has been sporadic and inconsistent throughout its history'. Rather than reflecting a sustained commitment to anti-racist education, institutional attention has often followed a cyclical pattern, characterised by periods of heightened engagement in response to widely publicised acts of racial violence, followed by a gradual decline in momentum. Examples include the response to the murder of the murder of Stephen Lawrence in the United Kingdom in 1993 and George Floyd in the United States in 2020 both of which prompted renewed scrutiny of structural and institutional racism within social work, education, and wider public institutions. While these events stimulated important conversations, policy developments and curriculum reform, the resulting progress has often been uneven and difficult to sustain, leaving anti-racist practice vulnerable to shifting political priorities and institutional complacency. Consequently, racism continues to be experienced by Black and racially minoritised social work students despite repeated calls for systemic and enduring change.

The trauma responses framework offers practice educators an additional reflective tool using a framework which they may already be aware of. PE's can ask themselves and their students 'what has happened' and 'what might the behaviour communicating?'. It is entirely possible that some of the behaviours and responses are from a previous placement or from previous life experiences and it is important to understand this context. Students may also be exposed to 'external' racialised stress emanating from the growing anti- black and anti-immigrant sentiments gripping the world at this time, which they see and hear in the news and witness on the streets, possibly on their journeys to and from placement or during their interactions with service users.

It is vital that practice educators consider ways in which they might create psychologically safe placement environments where discussions about race, discrimination and belonging are welcomed rather than avoided (Rafter, et. al 2024) and where incidents of racism and other forms of discrimination are challenged and addressed. Practice educators should initiate conversations about identity rather than waiting for students to raise these discussions when problems arise. Understanding trauma responses requires insight into the racial contexts in which they occur therefore practice educators need opportunities to critically reflect

on racism, oppression, whiteness, discrimination, privilege and power within placement settings.

Finally, PEs are encouraged to make anti-racism a 'signature value' by engaging in intentional anti-racist supervision with their students (Tedam & Cane 2026,p.164). For PE's in England, adhering to the BASW (2022) values statement for practice educators is critical.

Sweeney and Taggart (2018) contend that individual practitioners can adopt trauma-informed approaches even within organisations that have not yet embraced trauma-informed principles at a systemic level. Applying this argument to practice learning, PE's are well positioned to embed trauma-informed practices within supervision and placement settings, regardless of the extent to which these approaches are formally integrated across the wider organisation. To create a trauma informed placement environment, practice educators should recognise and maintain safety, trust, support, empower and encourage voice and be culturally responsive. This should not be an onerous task if social work organisations are already trauma informed. Practice learning settings for students are also simultaneously places of employment for others , consequently, the norms, cultures, values, and power dynamics of these organisations can significantly influence students' experiences. For Black and racially minoritised students, placement settings may present additional challenges where experiences of exclusion, microaggressions, stereotyping, or racism intersect with the demands of professional learning. Practice educators therefore have a responsibility not only to facilitate learning and assessment, but also to critically examine the placement environment, challenge oppressive practices, and create conditions in which students feel valued, respected, and able to participate authentically. Such an approach promotes belonging, psychological safety, and professional growth, while reducing the likelihood that students will rely on trauma responses such as fight, flight, freeze, flop, fawn, or attempts to simply 'fit in' as a means of navigating adversity.

Conclusion

For Black and racially minoritised social work students, practice learning can represent both a site of professional growth and a site of racialised stress (Finch and Tedam, 2024). Existing research has documented the challenges students encounter, but less attention has been given to how students respond to these experiences. The trauma responses framework offers a valuable lens through which practice educators can interpret student behaviour. Fight, flight, freeze, flop, fawn & fit in responses may all emerge as adaptive strategies when students perceive placement environments as psychologically unsafe. This framework can be easily applied to all forms of discrimination and oppression and for qualified practitioners from a range of specialisms.

Recognising these responses shifts attention away from deficit-based interpretations of student behaviour and towards the relational, organisational, and structural contexts in which learning occurs. It encourages practice educators to move beyond questions of performance and capability and towards considerations of safety, belonging, and equity. Ultimately, if social work education is committed to anti-oppressive practice, practice learning must become more than a site of assessment. It must become a place where Black and racially minoritised students are able not merely to survive, but to learn, flourish and belong.

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