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"I Thought I Had Left That 'Where Are You From?' Stuff Behind": Racialized Participation and Strategic Navigation in Teacher Education

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Abstract

This article investigates how female students with ethnic minority backgrounds experience and navigate the social relations and interactions that emerge in their encounters with Danish classmates in a teacher education program in Denmark. Drawing on Critical Race Theory, the article analyzes qualitative interview data from sixteen students who, despite their diverse cultural and social backgrounds, share common experiences of being othered, singled out, and made visible within the social dynamics of the study environment. The analysis reveals that these students' interactions with Danish peers are shaped by a series of ambivalent experiences. In some contexts, they are met with professional and social recognition; in others, they encounter stereotypical expectations, academic marginalization, and ethnic othering—experiences that mirror broader societal patterns beyond the teacher education setting. To navigate these contradictions, the students develop various strategic, relationally embedded ways of positioning themselves within the everyday life of the program. This process is conceptualized through the notion of racialized situational competence, an analytical tool that captures these navigational practices not merely as reactive coping mechanisms but as expressions of reflective and tactical agency. It highlights how students actively manage participation and recognition within a normatively structured and asymmetrical social space.

Keywords: Racialization, Ethnic Minority Students, Teacher Education, Critical Race Theory, Racialized Situational Competence

Introduction

Teacher education in Denmark, like other welfare-oriented professional programs, has historically been grounded in values such as inclusion, recognition, and social justice. These values serve not only as curricular principles but also as an ethical and normative foundation for the profession itself (Høilund & Juul, 2005). For many young people in marginalized

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positions, particularly those with ethnic minority backgrounds, this professional ethos is an important reason for choosing teacher education (Moldenhawer, 2005).

For these students, the teacher education program represents more than a route to professional qualification and financial stability. It also offers a possibility for social recognition and respect which they describe as often missing in their everyday lives. At the same time, they view teacher education as an opportunity to transform experiences of marginalization into social and ethical engagement, both during their studies and in their future work (El Haj, 2006; Mirza, 2009). In this sense, they aim to challenge exclusionary processes by drawing on lived experience as a source of professional agency. Research further shows that many students with ethnic minority backgrounds enter the field with a strong motivation to contribute to positive change for themselves, their families, and the wider society (Goul Andersen, 2008).

Existing educational research, not only within teacher education but in education more generally, shows that there is not always alignment between institutional ideals of inclusion and justice and how these are actually experienced by students. Even when educational programs emphasize equality and participation, studies describe how ordinary interactions can reproduce quiet forms of social boundary-making and creating invisible lines between majority and minority students (Gilliam, 2009). These experiences are rarely openly hostile, yet they can leave students feeling different or distanced. Over time, such experiences may influence students' sense of belonging, participation, and trust in the educational community (Bennett et al., 2020).

This article examines how female students with ethnic minority backgrounds experience and navigate everyday peer interactions in teacher education. While many describe supportive and friendly relations with their Danish classmates, they also encounter moments when ethnic difference becomes a marker of otherness or quiet exclusion. The article explores how these ambivalent experiences shape students' sense of belonging, participation, and motivation, and how they reflect broader social meanings attached to being ethnically "other" in Danish educational spaces. The central aim is to give voice to these students and to contribute new knowledge about how ideals of inclusion and diversity are lived, negotiated, and sometimes challenged within peer relations.

Data and Method

This article is based on a qualitative study conducted in 2025 involving interviews with sixteen female students from diverse ethnic minority backgrounds enrolled in a Danish teacher education program. The study explores how these students describe their everyday interactions with Danish classmates and how they position themselves socially, academically, and professionally within those encounters.

Participants were recruited through voluntary registration and represent a broad range of cultural, linguistic, and educational experiences. The study focuses on how students experience and navigate processes of belonging, inclusion, and recognition in peer relations. Semi-structured interviews invited participants to reflect on their schooling histories, motivations for choosing teacher education, and experiences with collaboration, classroom participation, and group formation. Particular attention was given to how earlier experiences of racialization and social positioning shape current ways of participating and relating to

Danish peers. The aim was to connect biographical trajectories with present-day forms of navigation and agency in the study environment.

The analysis combined thematic principles (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with a Critical Race Theory (CRT)–informed lens. Rather than identifying neutral or purely descriptive themes, the analytical process focused on how power, race, and ethnicity were expressed and negotiated in participants' narratives. Each transcript was read multiple times with attention to tone, silence, laughter, and hesitation, understood as signals of how racialization is felt and managed in interaction. Coding proceeded iteratively, moving between inductive identification of recurring patterns and theoretically informed interpretation through the concepts of *racialized habitus* (Essed, 1991; Cui, 2023) and *epistemic injustice* (Fricker, 2007).

CRT guided this process by foregrounding how racialization operates as a normalized and relational structure within educational contexts (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Crenshaw et al., 1995) and by treating participants' stories as *counter-narratives* that expose hidden mechanisms of exclusion beneath institutional ideals of equality. Through this analytical process, the concept of *racialized situational competence* emerged to capture the strategic and affective forms of agency that students develop when navigating these uneven terrains. This concept does not describe passive adaptation but rather a situated form of reflexive competence through which students sustain legitimacy, dignity, and professional presence in contexts marked by asymmetrical power relations.

Methodologically, the study draws on a *participant-centered ethnographic orientation* (Fine, 2018), not as prolonged immersion in a single site but as an analytical positioning that takes students' situated voices seriously as knowledge. This approach emphasizes relationality, reflexivity, and attentiveness to how power and difference shape both the production and interpretation of narratives. The aim is not to present a representative picture of teacher education, but to make visible the social and affective dynamics that structure participation and belonging for students positioned at the margins of the educational community.

Student Life, Racialization, and Strategic Navigation

Building on the analytical framework outlined above, this section examines how female students with ethnic minority backgrounds describe their participation in the social and academic life of teacher education. Their narratives reveal that inclusion and exclusion are not fixed states but shifting, fluid experiences that unfold through daily encounters with Danish classmates and within the institutional culture of the program.

The students' stories evoke a dual sense of belonging. On one hand, they speak of warmth, curiosity, and humor shared with peers and teachers. On the other, they recall moments when difference becomes visible through tone, glance, or silence. These small but persistent signals make social hierarchies tangible. What might appear as ordinary interaction often carries quiet asymmetries of attention or a sense of distance. Although the participants enter teacher education with diverse cultural and social histories, many describe a shared awareness of being quietly categorized as "the other."

As Ifza puts it:"I thought I had left that 'where are you from?' stuff behind. But now it's just more neatly packaged. It still happens." Such experiences demonstrate how racialization operates through what Ahmed (2012) calls the ordinary and the everyday. It is not necessarily what is said but what is implied, left unsaid, or sensed in a change of atmosphere. Students

describe how they are continuously interpreted through assumptions about culture, language, or religion. Even when unintentional, these assumptions shape who is heard, who is invited in, and who gradually moves to the margins of group life.

This process also produces an expectation to perform neutrality and to appear adaptable and professional while managing others' curiosity or hesitation. Several students describe how they develop a nearly intuitive alertness to social atmosphere, learning when to speak, when to pause, when laughter feels welcoming and when it becomes sharp.

That such dynamics occur in a program built on ideals of inclusion and social justice reveals a paradox. The very ethos meant to promote equality can obscure the uneven ground beneath it. What emerges is not open exclusion but what might be called polite distance or *inclusive inequality* (Jaffe-Walter, 2019; Horst, 2017), where recognition and marginalization coexist within the same educational space. From a CRT perspective, these moments can be understood as microaggressions—subtle and often unintended gestures, comments, or silences that reproduce racialized hierarchies while appearing harmless (Gressgård, 2014). Over time, they accumulate and settle into the body as an affective awareness of conditional belonging.

It is within this fragile balance between institutional ideals and lived realities, between recognition and quiet exclusion, that the following analysis takes its starting point. The next sections explore how racialization, othering, and belonging are enacted in the students' everyday interactions and how these encounters give rise to the tactical and affective agency conceptualized as racialized situational competence.

Marked from the Start

The students describe their childhood as a period where difference was quietly but persistently present. Already in early schooling, many recall feeling slightly outside what was considered normal. The experience rarely came through direct confrontation but unfolded through small, cumulative gestures such as glances, pauses, or tones of voice.

A recurring theme in the interviews is how students remember their parents' encounters with school authorities. Ifza recalls: "The adults smiled politely, but you could tell they were thinking: well, it's just those kinds of people." Even as a child, she sensed that her parents were not regarded as equals. Their way of speaking or behaving was interpreted as a lack rather than a difference, a form of symbolic devaluation, where cultural distance becomes a sign of lesser worth.

Samira remembers how her lunch, her brown skin, and her name became reasons for teasing. "I began to feel ashamed of my own family and background." The teasing was not always cruel, yet it left traces that lasted. Ordinary differences became signals of exclusion. These stories show how norms of normality are culturally coded, and how children learn to internalize such boundaries long before they can name them.

Several students recall that their academic potential was doubted or overlooked. Ifza, the only student wearing a headscarf in a class of mostly Danish peers, says: "I didn't feel like I was part of what was going on. I was just there." This absence of genuine inclusion—what Essed (1991) calls silent exclusion—carries significant emotional weight.

Others describe stigmatization linked to their schools' reputations. Parisa, who attended a school labelled a "ghetto school" in political discourse (Tireli, 2024), recalls: "We were quickly seen as the ones causing trouble even when we hadn't done anything." Here, stigma operates through association rather than behavior.

At the same time, their stories also include moments of recognition and care. Many remember teachers who treated them as individuals rather than as cultural representatives. Hadel recalls one who "saw me as a learner, not as a representative of a culture." Such moments are described as freeing and motivating.

Cansu explains how she and her friends often sat together at a separate table: "It was our table, but it was also where I didn't have to explain myself all the time." The table became both a refuge and a boundary—a space of safety within an environment that made them feel exposed. These micro-spaces reveal how exclusion and belonging coexist within the same institutions.

This duality is not unique to these individual accounts. Recent Nordic research on Danish schooling shows a similar pattern, where ethnic minority students describe both structural marginalization and small, protective spaces of recognition that they build together with peers and selected adults (Smedegaard Nielsen, Li, & Vertelyté, 2025). The students in that work are not simply passive recipients of exclusion. They actively create forms of safety and solidarity inside institutions that, at the same time, position them as different. The narratives in the present study echo this tension.

Taken together, the students' accounts show how early experiences of difference are carried forward as quiet memories shaping how they listen, speak, and move within new institutions. What they learned in school was not only academic knowledge but also how belonging is distributed. Recognition and exclusion were lessons learned side by side, leaving traces that are still felt in their adult educational lives. These memories become the background against which they later enter teacher education, carrying both awareness and aspiration.

Motivated by Experience, Met with Scepticism

For many female students with ethnic minority backgrounds, the decision to pursue teacher education is deeply personal. It is not merely a career choice but emerges from lived experiences of marginalization, discrimination, and exclusion. Rather than deterring them, such experiences become a moral and emotional source of motivation. They want to create change and become teachers who recognize and support children who might otherwise remain unseen.

As Sara explains: "I remember how I felt completely left out at school. Not because anyone said anything mean, but because I could feel that there was a difference. That's why I want to be the kind of teacher who sees those who are not seen."

This motivation can be understood as both biographical and reflective. It aligns with what hooks (1994) calls *engaged pedagogy*, a commitment grounded in lived experience and ethical responsibility. Their ambition is not only to teach but to transform the conditions that once excluded them. Their own lack of recognition and fairness becomes the foundation for the inclusive pedagogy they wish to practice. This motivation also resonates with Deci and Ryan's (2000) concept of *intrinsic motivation*, where the need to regain agency and dignity becomes an

inner driving force. These students enter teacher education with professional aspirations shaped by a moral horizon.

However, this engagement is often not recognized as legitimate within the academic environment. When students choose to write about discrimination, racism, or exclusion, their work is frequently met with remarks like "It makes sense that you chose that—you've experienced it yourself." Such comments appear sympathetic yet reduce scholarly inquiry to personal narrative.

As Mama explains: "I wanted to write about discrimination in daycare institutions, but suddenly people said it was natural for me to write about it—because I had experienced it myself. It was as if it wasn't seen as professional."

This illustrates a broader pattern where structural questions are personalized and interpreted as identity-driven rather than academically grounded. Minority students report that their voices are welcomed primarily when they speak about racism or culture—topics implicitly linked to their background. When they engage with general pedagogical theory, their input is often overlooked.

Sara reflects: "It's as if my voice is only relevant when it's about racism. When I say something about educational theory, that's not what gets listened to." This selective openness creates what can be described as pseudo-inclusion: a surface-level acceptance that conceals deeper forms of exclusion. Students are included as long as they speak from their minority position, yet excluded from the shared production of academic knowledge.

In these situations, the classroom can resemble a therapeutic space, though not an empowering one. Minority students are implicitly expected to share personal stories of pain and discrimination. These stories are met with polite curiosity from Danish classmates who seem eager to learn about cultural difference. Yet the process rarely leads to genuine collaboration or recognition. The knowledge offered is consumed rather than engaged with—it is valued symbolically but remains disconnected from the academic core of teacher education.

As Cansu recalls: "When we talk about racism in teaching, everyone looks at us, as if we are the experts. But afterwards, it's forgotten. We're not invited into the groups when we have to work together." She adds that she once wanted to write about children's motor skills but was encouraged instead to focus on ethnic integration "because I have experience with that."

These experiences exemplify what Matias and Zembylas (2023) term *racialized subject expertise*, where minority students' authority is confined to identity-related themes. This dynamic reinforces what Gillborn (2008) calls racialized expectations: the assumption that minority students contribute primarily on diversity issues, while their broader academic competence is quietly diminished.

Over time, this produces an uneven distribution of credibility. Students learn to sense which topics open doors and which close them, which statements are welcomed and which fall silent. They begin to assess when to speak and when to hold back—not from lack of confidence, but from awareness that their contributions are judged through who they are. This process results in a subtle but powerful form of epistemic inequality, where belonging depends on navigating what can and cannot be said. As Samira puts it: "It's like I'm only taken seriously

if I talk about my background. But what if I want something else? It feels like I constantly must choose between being personal or being professional, and never both."

The accounts presented here reveal that ethnic discrimination in teacher education rarely takes overt form. It unfolds through ordinary interactions and uneven recognition. The students' motivation to create change and contribute professionally is often met with doubt, selective validation, or reduction to personal biography. Their engagement is welcome only under certain conditions, and their knowledge is often valued symbolically rather than intellectually. This tension between recognition and exclusion is not only emotionally demanding but also shapes how they later participate in collaborative assignments, where trust, equality, and belonging move from conversation into practice

Group Work as a Site of Social Boundaries

In teacher education, group work and problem-oriented project work are central to the pedagogical approach and are often regarded as key examples of collaborative and participatory learning. Yet, for many ethnic minority students, these settings are also where subtle social hierarchies take shape and where difference becomes quietly visible. Group work is not only an academic task but a social practice in which recognition, trust, and equality are continuously negotiated.

Many ethnic minority students describe entering teacher education with enthusiasm and a genuine wish to collaborate across backgrounds. They wanted to be part of a diverse and professional community. As Cansu recalls, "I didn't just want to be in my own bubble." Houda explains that she deliberately sought out Danish classmates to challenge herself and to learn through shared perspectives. Their motivation reflects a desire for inclusion and professional equality rather than separation.

However, several soon realized that participation was not as open as they had imagined. The process of forming groups often exposed unspoken boundaries. When group selection was left to students, many Danish peers had already met outside class, had coffee together, and agreed on partners before the official process began. "It's not that someone says you can't join," Mirembe explains, "but it's as if the groups have already been formed." Those left outside described the experience as uncomfortable and discouraging. Yasmeen says it felt "like being a guest in something you should have been part of." These moments of quiet exclusion did not involve open rejection but unfolded through gestures, tones, and atmospheres that signalled who belonged.

The feeling of being left out was strongest when projects were graded collectively. Several students noticed that Danish peers preferred to work with those they already knew and trusted. "They don't trust us to deliver," Yasmeen remarks, capturing a broader sense that their abilities were questioned. The issue was not competence but perception. Language, accent, and cultural markers became proxies for credibility. Ethnic minority students often felt evaluated not by their actual contribution but by what others assumed about them. Such patterns illustrate what Gillborn (2008) describes as racialized expectations, where social assumptions quietly determine who is considered reliable, capable, or professional. These findings echo recent research in higher education that documents how racialized boundaries are reproduced through everyday collaborative practices. Maene, Van Praag, and Stevens (2024) show that group work, often framed as neutral or progressive pedagogy, can reinforce

subtle hierarchies of trust and competence along racial and ethnic lines. The experiences of the students in this study align closely with these dynamics, revealing how ordinary academic collaboration becomes a site where inclusion and exclusion are simultaneously negotiated.

For women wearing headscarves, this scrutiny was even more apparent. Ifza describes how her headscarf becomes "a topic before I do." It acts as a filter shaping how others see her competence and personality. Several women explain that they eventually began forming groups with other minority students, not to withdraw but to protect themselves. Parisa notes, "It's not because we don't want to be with others. We just don't want to have to explain ourselves all the time." She refers to the fatigue of repeatedly answering questions about where they come from, why they dress as they do, or how their families live. The constant expectation to clarify their difference made collaboration emotionally demanding.

Within these smaller groups, students found a different atmosphere. They describe trust, humour, and focus. Ifza explains that in her current group, she "can be both personal and professional without being made into something symbolic." These groups allowed them to discuss topics such as racism, interculturality, and identity without being treated as representatives or case studies. They were able to work on equal terms and to bring their experiences into the discussion as knowledge rather than testimony. The sense of safety and recognition in these spaces fostered confidence and academic growth.

At the same time, these safe collaborations reveal a paradox. They exist because exclusion exists. As one student puts it, "We didn't choose this separation. It happened to us." The decision to stay among those who understand their experiences is both protective and painful. Group work thus becomes a site where inclusion and marginalization coexist, and where participation requires ongoing emotional and social navigation.

Seen through a Critical Race Theory perspective, these accounts highlight how racialization is reproduced not through conflict but through ordinary academic practices. Everyday arrangements that appear neutral—such as self-selected group work or problem-based learning—can reinforce subtle hierarchies of trust and belonging. As Essed (1991) shows in her analysis of everyday racism, exclusion often operates through routine interactions rather than explicit acts. Similarly, Jaffe-Walter (2019) and Horst (2017) demonstrate how ideals of equality can obscure asymmetries that remain embedded in institutional culture. The experiences of these students point to the need for continuous attention to how participation, credibility, and competence are socially distributed within teacher education.

The experiences from group work also extend into the social life of teacher education. Boundaries are not limited to the classroom but continue in breaks, social events, and everyday gatherings where belonging is negotiated in quieter ways. The following section explores how informal interactions among students create spaces of connection and distance, showing how inclusion is practiced socially and how some remain on the margins even in moments meant for togetherness.

Everyday Bordering and Invisible Lines

Outside the classroom, everyday life in teacher education unfolds through lunches, coffee breaks, and informal gatherings that seem open and friendly on the surface. Yet these spaces also reveal how social boundaries are quietly maintained. Many ethnic minority students describe how they are greeted with kindness but rarely invited further in. Social closeness

appears available to everyone, but access is uneven. As Sara explains, "People are nice, they smile, but it often stops there. You can feel that there's a line."

Students recount that shared social events, such as Friday bars, study trips, or parties, often function as tests of belonging. Participation in these spaces depends not only on interest but also on whether one feels welcome. Several describe how alcohol-centered events create uncertainty about how to participate. Houda recalls: "You can come, but you always stand a bit on the side. You try to join in, but you are not really part of it." These experiences do not reflect individual discomfort but rather how dominant social norms define who fits in and who feels out of place.

For some, the challenge is not exclusion through hostility but through indifference. Mirembe says, "It's not that anyone says you can't come. You just don't get asked." Invitations circulate informally through networks that have already formed. Those who do not drink, or who go home to family responsibilities after class, are often left outside these circles. What appears as neutral social practice thus reproduces cultural hierarchies. Friendship becomes a privilege that mirrors the wider structures of inclusion within the institution.

At the same time, many students describe forming their own spaces of sociability. They meet in the cafeteria, in prayer rooms, or at home, sharing food, stories, and laughter. These gatherings offer a sense of comfort and understanding. Parisa explains, "When we meet outside school, it's easier to be yourself. No one asks you to explain why you don't drink or why your mother calls you ten times a day." In these moments, students experience a sense of freedom and mutual recognition that contrasts with the cautious openness of mixed settings.

Yet, this parallel social world is ambivalent. While it provides safety, it also reinforces a feeling of distance from the mainstream. Several students reflect that they wish for more genuine interaction across backgrounds but feel that the conditions for it are rarely present. As Ifza puts it, "We don't want to stay separate. We just want to feel like we belong without having to fight for it." This longing captures a central tension: the desire for connection within an environment where difference remains silently marked.

From a Critical Race Theory perspective, these experiences illustrate what Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy (2018) call *everyday bordering*: the subtle social practices that reproduce distinctions between insiders and outsiders in ordinary contexts. The students' accounts show how such borders are not fixed but enacted repeatedly in routine situations that shape how they move, speak, and relate to others. What looks like ordinary social life is, in practice, a field where racialization and belonging are continuously negotiated. Recognizing these microprocesses requires attention to the emotional and relational dimensions of participation, not only to formal inclusion within the curriculum but to how community is lived and felt on a daily basis.

When Silence Speaks

A recurring theme in the students' narratives is how repeated social interactions, where ethnic minority students are subtly reminded of their difference or positioned as representatives of "the Other" associated with ideas of backwardness, patriarchy, or religious conservatism, give rise to a reflexive hesitation. Should I say something now? What will happen if I do? This doubt and the fear of being further misread often lead to silence even when students have

much to contribute. In this context, silence is not indifference but a deliberate and protective response shaped by previous experiences of being ignored or misunderstood.

This dynamic also involves Danish classmates, whose silence takes a different form. Mirembe explains, "Sometimes you can feel that people become uncomfortable when you say something. They don't respond; it just goes quiet. If you mention racism or anything political, the whole mood changes. Then you think, next time I won't say anything." This kind of silence functions as a quiet form of social sanctioning. Nothing is openly rejected, yet what is said is quietly set aside. In these moments, the atmosphere itself communicates that certain topics are unwelcome.

Similar patterns have been documented elsewhere. Jenkins (2023) shows how racialized students in U.S. schools become hyper-visible when race is discussed but invisible as equal participants in learning communities. The same tension appears here. The students find that their voices are acknowledged when they speak from minority experience but overlooked in general academic conversation. The shift from being recognized as full individuals to being treated as symbolic figures demands continuous emotional regulation. Ahmed (2012) describes this as affective control, where voices are not silenced directly but disciplined through tone, pause, and gaze. Over time, such dynamics make certain issues feel untouchable in classroom discussions.

Many informants explain that when they raise questions of discrimination or inequality, their contributions are quickly interpreted as personal rather than analytical. This reflects what Fricker (2007) calls epistemic injustice, when credibility is reduced not because of the argument itself but because of who delivers it. Cansu says, "It's not that I don't want to speak. But I'm always thinking about how it will sound. Will they think it's too much? Or that it's just me?" Her reflection captures the emotional labour involved in deciding whether to speak or remain silent.

In this environment, silence becomes less a withdrawal and more a way to protect one's position. Speaking involves social, emotional and professional risks that must constantly be weighed. Learning to navigate these risks requires what can be described as racialized situational competence: the capacity to read the emotional and institutional climate and to act accordingly. Silence thus becomes part of a wider repertoire of communication, a way to stay present without exposing oneself to further marginalization. It reveals how inclusion and exclusion are not only negotiated through speech but also through what is left unsaid.

Racialized Situational Competence

The analysis of the interviews with ethnic minority students in the teacher education program shows that their participation in both professional and social aspects of the study is shaped by constant negotiation within a context where inclusion is rarely unconditional. The students describe how they initially try to participate openly and with enthusiasm, particularly in the early stages of their studies, but soon encounter invisible barriers and complex group dynamics. Repeated experiences of being overlooked, misunderstood or quietly excluded often lead to withdrawal. These moments occur in collaborative projects where trust and recognition are unevenly distributed, in social arenas where norms surrounding alcohol and leisure activities conflict with personal values, and in classroom discussions where certain topics are met with discomfort or silence. Rather than withdrawing completely, the students

develop an affective and tactical capacity to adapt, which I conceptualize as racialized situational competence.

This concept refers to a form of relational and emotional intelligence cultivated in spaces shaped by subtle and persistent racialization. It involves an ability to sense shifts in atmosphere, interpret unwritten norms, and read positional dynamics in both academic and social settings. Through this, the students learn to move tactically toward participation while protecting their dignity and integrity. Drawing on Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), racialization here is not understood as an isolated act of discrimination but as a normalized and relational process embedded within institutional culture.

Racialized situational competence draws inspiration from related ideas such as Du Bois' notion of double consciousness (Larsen & Jensen, 2014), which describes how marginalized individuals see themselves through the perspective of the dominant group, and Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) theory of situated knowledge, which emphasizes how position and experience shape the production of knowledge. What makes racialized situational competence distinct is its grounding in the everyday realities of teacher education. It captures how students' insights, formed through lived experience, are often read not as intellectual contributions but as identity-based expressions.

The concept encompasses several interrelated dimensions:

Affective mindfulness: a heightened sensitivity to the emotional and social climate, allowing students to sense when a topic is received as inappropriate or excessive.

Strategic silence: a conscious decision to withhold speech to avoid being typecast and to maintain professional credibility.

Contextual adaptation: an ability to adjust tone, vocabulary and timing to align with dominant expectations of communication.

Tactical community building: the formation of supportive peer networks with other ethnic minority students, not as acts of isolation but as strategies of resilience and recognition.

Meta-reflexive awareness: a continuous reflection on self-presentation and on how one's contributions are perceived and evaluated by others.

These practices should not be mistaken for insecurity or passivity. They represent highly skilled and necessary strategies for participating in an environment marked by unequal conditions. In this way, they challenge narrow understandings of what engagement, professionalism and academic competence mean in higher education. Building on Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice, racialized situational competence can be understood as both a reaction to and a form of resistance against institutional cultures where knowledge is often judged according to who speaks rather than what is said. Yet this competence must not be romanticized. It develops out of necessity—the need to be constantly attentive, cautious and prepared simply to be acknowledged. It embodies both agency and exhaustion: a power that makes it possible to persist in systems that never fully welcome those who are different. In this sense, racialized situational competence is not only an analytical concept but also a pedagogical provocation that calls for renewed reflection on what equity, recognition and participation require in contemporary teacher education.

Conclusion: Racialized Situational Competence in Response to Structural Inequality

This article has examined how female students from ethnic minority backgrounds experience and navigate life in a teacher education program that formally promotes inclusion but in practice reproduces quiet mechanisms of exclusion. Drawing on qualitative interviews and theoretical perspectives from Critical Race Theory and the concept of racialized habitus, the study explored how everyday practices such as group formation, participation in academic activities, informal socializing and classroom silences shape the conditions for belonging and recognition.

The analysis shows that ethnic minority students' ways of engaging are not guided by simple preferences but emerge as strategic responses to unequal circumstances. Their participation reflects a continuous sensitivity to social cues, emotional risk and unspoken norms. Rather than interpreting these responses as withdrawal or self-segregation, the article introduced the concept of racialized situational competence to capture the affective and tactical intelligence developed in such contexts. This competence enables students to remain present and engaged even when inclusion is uncertain, balancing adaptation with the preservation of personal integrity.

Racialized situational competence urges a rethinking of what participation and professionalism mean in higher education. It draws attention to the emotional and relational work that minority students often perform in order to be heard and acknowledged. At the same time, the concept exposes the structural and cultural conditions that silently shape who is recognized as legitimate and whose contributions are overlooked.

It is essential, however, not to misunderstand this competence as an ideal or a fair expectation. It arises out of necessity rather than privilege—a response to asymmetrical relations rather than a celebrated skill. Yet it makes visible how exclusion operates in quiet and cumulative ways, and how some students cultivate exceptional capacities simply to sustain their presence. As such, the concept functions both analytically and normatively: it challenges educators and institutions to confront the hidden dynamics of inequality and to recognize the knowledge, agency and resilience of those who navigate from the margins.

Teacher education programs must therefore acknowledge that students do not enter the institution as neutral participants but as individuals shaped by social positions, experiences and histories within a racialized society. This applies not only to ethnic minority students but also to majority students whose dispositions are informed by the same symbolic hierarchies. As this study has shown, these structural relations manifest in the everyday life of teacher education—through group work, silences, expectations and informal interactions. Addressing these inequalities cannot be achieved through technical solutions or administrative interventions alone. What is required is a sustained institutional reflection on how racialization is embedded in pedagogical structures and how these structures shape who is able to participate, be heard and develop a professional identity on equal terms with others.

True inclusion therefore demands more than good intentions. It requires an honest engagement with the conditions that make such intentions necessary in the first place.

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