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“I’m Not Sure I Can See Myself in This World”: Experience of Mindfulness Teacher Training among Trainees from Diverse Backgrounds

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Abstract

Objectives There is a growing recognition of the importance of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in mindfulness-based Teacher Training Programs (TTPs), given current imbalances in representation of teachers and trainers, and a recognised need to build awareness of personal and organisational biases. Little is known about how EDI issues may impact the experience of trainees on a TTP. This study aimed to explore underrepresented trainees’ experiences on a TTP, including what hindered or helped them access training or feel included, and their views on how best to foster EDI in TTPs.

Method Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with seven current and graduate mindfulness teacher trainees from underrepresented groups. Their experiences of EDI throughout training were explored. Data was analyzed using inductive thematic analysis.

Results Key findings were that feelings of inclusion were influenced by how represented and acknowledged trainees felt by their trainers and peers; feelings of safety influenced their choices around disclosure; a main access barrier was cost; and more explicit teaching about EDI in TTP curricula is needed. There was a need for wider access to entry trainings such as 8-week mindfulness-based programmes.

Conclusions This study provides valuable insight into how underrepresented teacher trainees experience TTPs and highlights opportunities to better support mindfulness teacher trainees. TTPs need to integrate EDI awareness and understanding into their ethos and curriculum. Further research is needed to inform and develop approaches to further embed EDI in mindfulness-based program teaching and training.

Keywords Mindfulness-based program · teacher training · equality · diversity · inclusion · bias · qualitative

The development of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) paved the way for the practice and research field of Mindfulness-Based Programs (MBPs), with a range of programs tailored to health, education, the workplace and other fields. There is strong evidence to support the positive effects of mindfulness interventions on mental, physical and social wellbeing. These include improvements in stress reduction, empathy and coping skills (de Vibe et al., 2017); reduced depressive relapse (Kuyken et al., 2016); and improvements in cardiovascular health (Nardi et al., 2020).

Mindfulness may also have wider impacts that go beyond personal outcomes; some studies show that mindfulness practice and loving-kindness practice can potentially attenuate implicit and intergroup bias (Burgess et al., 2017; Kang et al., 2014; Oyler et al., 2022). Despite acceptance of MBPs as a mainstream approach to wellbeing, there are concerns about how accessible these programs are to the whole of society (Kenny et al., 2020; Kucinskas, 2018).

Little research has been conducted about Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in the MBP field. A recent survey of mindfulness teachers found that the majority are highly educated, White and female (Burton et al., 2024). Likewise, findings in teacher education research showed that the majority of teachers are White females (Guarino et al., 2006; Redding & Baker, 2019). These findings are relevant as some studies have suggested beneficial effects of same-race teachers and role models on students from minority

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backgrounds (Egalite et al., 2015; Szecsi & Spillman, 2012). Furthermore, there is scarce research about mindfulness that represents people of diverse ethnicity, disability, religion, socio-economic status or sexual orientation (Chin et al., 2019; Iacono, 2019). Indeed, this raises the question of whether the current MBP evidence base is relevant and applicable to the breadth of society (Mindful Staff, 2017).

Acknowledging the lack of diversity in MBP practitioners and participants, efforts have been made to adapt MBPs to a wider breadth of contexts. Work has taken place to articulate the essential and variable elements of an MBP (Crane et al., 2017), and how to adapt MBPs to different groups, contexts and for different intentions, including the importance of tailoring to the cultural context, and including potential participants in the design and development process (Chin et al., 2019; Loucks et al., 2021). There are MBP practitioners who have developed tailored initiatives for under-represented groups, and who are working to expand and educate the mindfulness community towards a more equitable, diverse and inclusive approach to research and practice. This includes initiatives by and with people of colour (PoC), low-income populations, LGBTQI+, and other groups (e.g. Blum, 2014; Rainbow Mind, n.d.).

There is growing interest in mindfulness as a potential methodology for enabling inner change in values, ethics, and world view. These inner changes, in turn, may contribute to behavioural changes needed to enable societal shifts in response to social inequity, EDI issues and the climate crisis (e.g. Bristow et al., 2022; King, 2018). Magee (2016) wrote of the relevance of mindfulness in enabling practitioners to connect with the reality of systemic suffering caused by inequality, exclusion and racism. For example, Mindful Action on Whiteness Training and the DRASIC Mindfulness Based Inclusion Training apply mindfulness and compassion to disrupt racism and systemic Whiteness (The Urban Mindfulness Foundation, 2022). Forbes (2016) proposed an interpersonal approach to mindfulness training, in which intersubjectivity is contemplated with both inside and outside perspectives, providing opportunities to sensitise teacher trainees to biases and the needs of diverse participants, and to support healing from racial stress, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression.

Implementing EDI frameworks in MBP teacher training is increasingly recognised as necessary to widen access, and to foster inclusion and a sense of belonging among trainees from all backgrounds and identities (Kenny et al., 2020; Kucinkas, 2018). Although Kabat-Zinn's early vision when he founded MBSR was inclusive of the breadth of causes and conditions driving human distress, there is a tendency in some MBP teaching to emphasise the location of the habits and patterns that create challenges such as stress and depression within the individual. There is a call now to widen this emphasis by including perspectives

on how the drivers of, for example, stress and depression are multi-faceted and include the systemic social influences that the individual is subject to (Evans, 2018; Roberts & Crane, 2021). This includes a heightened awareness of the reality and prevalence of trauma in individuals in the general population and therefore in the populations who participate in MBPs (Treleaven, 2018). Embedding trauma sensitivity into ways of guiding others in mindfulness and holding group spaces is now seen as basic good practice. Collective-specific initiatives can provide safe spaces that consider and integrate the specific vulnerabilities shared collectively by their members. For example, in the case of PoC groups, practitioners can safely explore and process the shared trauma that stems from a common experience of racial injustice and whiteness, in a context that does not bypass the impact of the historical and systemic roots of their suffering (Gajaweera, 2021). This embraces wider awareness of the systemic and interpersonal trauma in those who have experienced social injustice, prejudice, oppression, or abuse (Magee, 2015; Roberts & Crane, 2021).

Although there is much work in this area still to do, it is now also seen as basic good practice for teacher training organisations to be engaged in ongoing work to embed EDI themes in their organisational processes, teacher trainings and within their pedagogical frameworks. For example, Saltzman (2014), creator of the MBP “A Still Quiet Place”, emphasised the importance of listening to diverse critical viewpoints to foster awareness of cultural and religious sensitivities, and advises careful consideration of how MBPs are introduced into the mainstream. For example, it is critical to be tuned to the use of language, the stories, poetry and metaphors that are woven into MBP teaching, and the framing of resource materials. National MBP organisations have published EDI statements which establishes EDI as an integral part of the culture and values of an MBP (e.g. BAMBA, 2024; Mindfulness Ireland, 2022). So, whilst there is still much work to be done, these initiatives indicate a readiness and an intention to shift towards a more inclusive approach.

Throughout the paper, we use the term and acronym EDI. Broadly, equality refers to ensuring equal access to opportunities and treating people fairly, which includes challenging discrimination and the removal of barriers; diversity refers to valuing and celebrating differences between people; and inclusion refers to how welcome and supported people may feel in a space. It is worth pausing here to examine the term itself. Although EDI is a common term used throughout the UK, it is debated and subject to multiple critiques. For example, there is an inherent power structure hidden within the terminology of EDI—for example, who is “doing the including”, who is “being included” and “from which starting point are we diversifying”? The American Psychological Association (2023) and elsewhere in the US use the term “equity” versus “equality”. Where equality focuses more on

providing the same opportunities or resources to all, equity aims to facilitate all to achieve the same outcome and thus recognises and adjusts for the fact that not all people are starting from the same point. However, given that no commonly used alternative to the term EDI is available at this time (although some groups use the word “belonging”), we use it in this paper, whilst acknowledging it is problematic, that the systemic assumptions we operate within will be shaped by anti-oppression developments, and thus frameworks and terminology will evolve over time.

We now turn from the terminology used to explore EDI developments in the field of higher education, as this area shares broad similarities with TTPs and could inform developments in the MBP field. EDI has become an important area of focus and commitment in higher education with institutional and departmental initiatives such as the Intercultural Knowledge and Competence VALUE Rubrics, with the aim of integrating and fostering intercultural sensitivity in higher education (AAC&U, 2009), and the inculcation of EDI by the American Psychological Association into their undergraduate guidelines (APA, 2016), accreditation standards (Bell et al., 2017), guidelines on people who are transgender and gender nonconforming people (APA, 2015), identity and intersectionality (Clauss-Ehlers et al., 2019), race and ethnicity (APA, 2019) and inclusive language (APA, 2022). In addition, there is growing research about how teacher education programs can both be more inclusive and train teachers to serve a wider population of diverse students (e.g. Bhopal & Rhamie, 2014; Moran, 2007).

While EDI research in neighbouring fields such as higher education can inform MBP approaches (e.g. Callahan et al., 2018; Causey et al., 2000), more research on diversity and inclusion specific to the context of TTPs may help to make TTPs more inclusive of and accessible to underrepresented groups. The aim of this qualitative study was to look at EDI in TTPs, from the perspectives of trainees, specifically to (a) explore the experiences of teacher training for UK-based MBP trainees who identified as belonging to an underrepresented group; (b) explore perceived barriers and supports to accessing training and feelings of inclusion; and (c) explore how the teacher trainee experience could be improved in relation to EDI.

Method

Participants

Seven participants were interviewed, six females and one male. They all met the inclusion criteria which were (a) self-identified as belonging to an underrepresented group (this criterion was deliberately broad as so little research has been conducted on this topic, and thus included all characteristics

covered by the UK Equality Act (2010): gender, ethnic background, LGBTQ+, having a disability, religious affiliation, age; and we also included socioeconomic background), and (b) had participated in a TTP that was a member of The British Association of Mindfulness-Based Approaches (BAMBA). The latter criterion ensured consistency as all BAMBA member programs are required to adhere to good practice guidelines (BAMBA, 2024). Participants at any point in the teacher-training process were included (i.e. completed, part-way through, started and temporarily or permanently stopped before completing). See Table 1 for participant demographic details; and note that pseudonyms are used throughout.

Procedure

The study was advertised on social media and invited potential participants to email the first author. Interested potential participants were then sent a participant information sheet, a consent form and a questionnaire to check if they met the inclusion criteria. Those who met the criteria and gave consent were contacted to schedule an interview via video conferencing. A single interview was conducted with each participant using a semi-structured interview schedule. Interviews lasted between 42 and 78 min.

Measures

A semi-structured interview schedule was created which focused on participants’ experiences of inclusion/exclusion on TTPs. There were additional questions for those who had already taught MBPs themselves, which focused on experiences around EDI issues when teaching. Examples of questions were as follows: What was/is your experience of MBP teacher training? What did you notice when you looked round the room at the other people doing training? What barriers, if any, have you encountered from the beginning to the point you are at? What helped you feel part of the group? What prevented you from feeling part of the group? What, if anything supported feelings of safety? What could have been in place which would have made either access to training, or the training experience itself better? Participants were free to answer questions in their own words or to opt out of questions. As per semi-structured interview protocol, the interviewer was guided by participants’ responses, so some questions were asked in a different order, omitted (if not relevant to the participant) or followed up with further inquiry to deepen understanding or expand on participant’s commentary (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Edwards & Holland, 2013).

Table 1 Participant details

Name	Self-identified as:*	Type of training(s): post-graduate or non-academic pathway	State of completion	Was training externally funded?	Currently teaching MBPs
Andrea	LGBT/lesbian	Post-graduate	Part-way	No	Yes
Brianna	Black British/Afro-Caribbean/woman	Post-graduate Non-academic	Part-way Completed	No Yes	Yes
Corrinne	British Asian	Post-graduate	Completed	No	Yes
Nancy	White British/woman/ practicing Catholic (also mentioned: older student)	Post-graduate	Part-way	No	Starting to
Marco	LGBTQ +/disabled: HIV and cancer	Non-academic	Part-way	No	No
Sara	Low-income (also mentioned: mixed race (half-Indian, half-White) background)	Post-graduate Non-academic	Part-way, temporarily Paused	Yes, student loan govt. loan	Yes
Tessa	Low-income (also mentioned: younger student)	Non-academic	Paused. One course left	Ph.D. funded training	No

*Note that this column denotes how participants expressed their identity in their own words

Data Analyses

Interviews were transcribed and identifying data was anonymised. A methodical approach to thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyze the data as it allowed for flexibility and is an inductive approach. Thematic analysis involves a six-phase method to code and identify themes: (1) data familiarisation, (2) initial code generation, (3) searching for broader themes, (4) review and refinement, (5) theme definition and refinement and (6) final report production (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Edwards & Holland, 2013). In the first phase, the first author repeatedly listened to the interviews, reviewing and correcting the transcription to ensure that words and sounds were transcribed accurately. In Phase 2, initial codes were produced and organised by systematically examining the interview transcripts using Nvivo software as a classification tool and identifying possible patterns/themes across sets. Thirdly, these codes were organised into potential themes and sub-themes (Willig, 2013). Early thematic mind maps and charts were created both by hand and with Nvivo software, and then used to further categorise codes and discover overarching themes and sub-themes. In Phase 4, themes were reviewed and refined into a candidate thematic map. The entire data set was reread and tested against the data set for validity. In Phase 5, themes were further refined and defined and essential underlying or overall “stories” were identified through analysis. Each data item and themes were checked against each other to help the trustworthiness of the analysis, and findings were checked and reviewed by the co-authors. Lastly, the final written analytical account of

the data in relation to the research question was formulated and agreed upon by all authors and six of the participants (Birt et al., 2016).

Approach to Data Analyses

Transparency and reflexive practice are important to heighten awareness of researcher bias (Yardley, 2000). This is particularly important when investigating issues pertaining to personal identity—particularly when that identity has historically been marginalised and the researchers are not a member of that group, as is the case in this research. The authors identify as White, middle-class, middle-aged, cisgendered, females. We worked from the premise that we are learners in this space. The lead researcher, who did the bulk of the data analysis, closely monitored her possible biases, frameworks and attitudes, such as being from the USA, living in Spain and being an MBP teacher in training. Every effort was made to acknowledge how these factors may influence the interview or data interpretation; for example, particular care was taken to not put a positive “spin” on the data, but to adhere to the inductive principle of representing, as closely as possible, the experiences of the participants.

Furthermore, a particular and systematic effort was made to triangulate the data with participants by using a process called synthesised member checking which supports the co-constructed nature of knowledge by providing participants with the opportunity to engage with the interpreted data (Birt et al., 2016). Participants were emailed a copy of the synthesised results section and asked

to feedback on the following three questions: (1) Does this match your experience? (2) Do you want to change anything? (3) Do you want to add anything? Six out of seven participants responded by email and stated they felt accurately reflected in the results, five of these stated they did not want to change or add anything. One participant requested a change to the pseudonym used for them, to reflect their background more accurately. Their involvement at this stage of the analysis served to ensure the voices of the participants were accurately reflected.

Results

Three superordinate themes were identified: (a) inclusion during TTP; (b) access to TTPs; and (c) opportunities to foster EDI in TTPs. These three themes contained six subordinate themes (see Table 2 for themes and Table 3 for terms of reference).

Table 2 Themes

Superordinate theme	Subordinate themes
Inclusion during TTPs	Costs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Program Tuition Costs as a Barrier</i> • <i>Program Add-on Expenses as a Barrier</i> • <i>Barriers to Accessing Teacher Training in Low-income Communities</i>
Access to teacher training programmes	Representation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Disclosure</i> • <i>Acknowledgement</i>
Opportunities to foster EDI	Access to more affordable options Enhanced EDI-specific training more diverse teacher trainers

Superordinate Theme: Inclusion during TTP

All participants stated that they mostly felt comfortable and included during the TTP, and yet there was room for improvement, as there were issues under the surface that negatively impacted their sense of belonging. Participants reported an open and compassionate environment within the mindfulness community. Independently of whether aspects of their identity were visible (e.g. race, gender) or invisible (e.g. sexual preference, religious beliefs), five participants spoke of how teacher trainers and fellow trainees were inclusive and open. Marco said, “You know, there’s such a stress on compassion in the mindfulness, (...) environment, that I would doubt that they would ever be [excluding]”. Andrea reflected, “I think most people who (...) do these sorts of courses tend to be pretty open-minded to different sorts of things”. These expectations were generally met in their direct experience with their peers. Brianna noted, “When I did the training with [program name], it felt quite inclusive and a bit like [other program name], with people from all over the world”. Marco said, “I’ve never had any problems of not feeling supported or feeling safe”. Andrea similarly expressed, “I’ve certainly not felt, ‘Oh, this person is being weird with me,’ once they’ve known [about being a lesbian], I mean”.

When asked about concerns around not fitting in with fellow trainees, both Corrinne and Sara initially named how they were used to being in the racial minority in the room. Corrinne stated, “Because my whole life really has been in White populations (...) I’ve always felt I belong more in a White culture than an Asian culture”. Sara noted, “So, I’m half Indian (...) I’m completely used to being the only non-White face in most environments”.

Participants spoke about how, on the surface of things, they felt included in what they described as an open and supportive learning environment. However, participants acknowledged deeper, subtler, more indirect aspects that did affect their sense of feeling included. These are discussed in

Table 3 Terms of reference

Terms	Refers to:	Clarifying notes
Teacher training program (TTP)	BAMBA-approved TTP (BAMBA, 2024)	Levelled training
Entry-level mindfulness-based program (MBP)	BAMBA-approved MBP, (i.e.: MBSR, MBCT)	This 8-week course is the prerequisite for all teacher training programs and is also what participants are training to teach
Participant	Participant interviewed in this study	
Teacher trainer	TTP instructor	
Trainee	TTP student	
Mindfulness teacher	Entry-level MBP instructor	Someone who is teaching an 8-week course (e.g. MBSR/MBCT)
Student	Entry-level MBP participant	Someone who is on an 8-week course (e.g. MBSR/MBCT)

the following two subordinate themes: *representation*, and *holding conversations*.

Subordinate Theme: Representation

In this theme, representation refers to participants noticing how their demographic characteristics were not always reflected in the teacher trainers and fellow trainees, and the effect this had on their experience. Sara spoke about how MBP teacher training consistently signalled financial expectations she struggled to match, which left her feeling excluded and unacknowledged. “In the mindfulness world, it does feel like it’s presumed that people will just be able to come up with the goods (...) that’s my general sense”. Hearing these assumptions caused discomfort in Sara, “And I do feel a bit awkward and kind of a bit of a cringe”. Sara later found comfort in a classmate with whom she shared similar financial difficulties, “[There was] another girl on the course who really struggled financially (...). And that was really helpful in that I didn’t feel different. (...) it kind of felt okay because my mate, she’s as skint as I am”. Finding or seeing people with similar identities to themselves was also important to other participants. For example, Marco, although entering the study based on his identifying as LGBTQ+ and disabled, often spoke of men being the constant minority on teacher training courses, and described a recent mindfulness event, “And I counted (...) just six of us [men] out of 60”. When asked how this felt, he said, “Maybe just a slight sense of discomfort”. Similarly, Brianna remarked on the lack of racial diversity, and how this made her feel, “Why aren’t there other Black people on that course ... and what the issue is around that?” She spoke of a sense of “relief” when she saw “Another guy on my course who is mixed race”, noting, “I suppose maybe it is a sign that the course in itself is willing to be open to everybody”. Nancy remarked, “Yeah, I felt more included when I realised that other people had ... religious beliefs that were similar to mine”. Marco explained how feelings of safety arose from being among similar others:

I think you derive comfort from the fact that you know you’re relating to somebody who shares your own same baggage or experience, and you know for sure that you can never be discriminated from that person on the basis of your sexuality.

Five participants commented on the lack of diversity among teacher trainers, and how this impacted them, Corinne noted, “All the teachers are White. All of them”. Sara said her mindfulness trainers were “*Very calm and very well-spoken and not like me*”. Perceiving a difference in socioeconomic status in her teachers made her question—at

a fundamental level—whether she could be an MBP teacher herself, “And by the end of the first year, I still didn’t really think that I could see myself in that world”. She concluded, “So, let (...) the trainers of the teachers represent the wider population. Because it just takes that little connection. It’s like, Yes! I could see me there! Yes, I could see *me* there”. Nancy spoke of how having a Christian mindfulness teacher made all the difference in her decision to pursue teacher training, “It was only when I met the most amazing [teacher] (...). It was being with someone who I admire in the mindfulness community who was sharing that experience (...) that makes it easier for us to then [see ourselves there]”.

Having similar others in the group brought a sense of relief, while the lack of similar others caused discomfort. Participants’ words alluded to a deeper impact that identifying with teacher trainers can have on trainee’s belief in their potential as a mindfulness teacher, emphasising the importance of seeing oneself reflected in mentors. This was shared across participants and did not seem to differ according to whether their identity-based characteristics were visible or invisible.

Subordinate Theme: Holding Conversations

The importance of holding conversations in the teaching space around disclosure and acknowledgement was identified as key factors that fostered felt inclusion. Simple verbal cues and recognition of the diversity of trainee experience from the teacher trainer were viewed as enabling more connection and a heightened sense of belonging.

Disclosure

Disclosure refers to deliberately sharing information about one’s own diversity or hearing others share theirs. Disclosure was most relevant to participants whose status was not outwardly visible, such as sexuality, illness, religion, or income level. Five of the seven participants (Andrea, Marco, Corinne, Nancy and Sara) spoke of the importance of feeling comfortable enough to disclose their status, which in turn increased their feelings of comfort or inclusion. Marco discussed his need to disclose:

I know what made me comfortable as well, is ... that I shared with [teacher] the fact that I was gay and the fact that I was HIV. So, had I had to hide that part of me, that would’ve made me feel very uncomfortable.

Disclosure seemed to be particularly complex for people who identified as LGBTQI+. Andrea commented on how being in a heteronormative context can influence or impede one’s choices around how to disclose openly about relationships or experiences that revealed their LGBTQI+ status:

In those inquiry moments, (...) there's a freedom to straight people talking about their lives without any censorship (...) a queer person in that room would have to make some judgments about how they talk about their examples or their experiences. So, (...) I might choose to say partner vs. wife or something like that.

She revealed an added cognitive effort made to monitor and filter communications, which is not needed by heterosexual people when discussing their relationships or sexuality as heteronormative orientation is often assumed.

Both Marco and Andrea spoke of the wish to disclose their LBGQTQI+ status because it meant they could then bring their whole selves to the group. However, navigating this decision entailed a cognitive load of complex thought processes as they assessed the effect their disclosure might have on the group and their place within it. Four participants spoke of how the opportunity to safely disclose enabled authenticity, which was particularly important in a mindfulness class. Andrea stated:

So, if there are people who feel like they need to hide themselves all of the time, what kind of impact that has on their ability to be with themselves and to do all those mindfulness practices, (...) how to be your authentic self when you haven't been able to be your authentic self? That's pretty hard to do and to accept things as they are, right?

Feeling comfortable enough to disclose was deemed essential to participant's growth and wellbeing on the TTP. Choices relating to disclosure were influenced by a range of factors including group size, familiarity with the group, safety, a space that welcomed diversity, connection and familiarity with others and the perceived context (e.g. general population, LBGQTQI+ group). Nancy noticed that she disclosed more in a smaller group, "But you know, your sexuality and your religious faith, I think you do need to be in (...). A smaller, slightly more trusting environment for that sort of stuff to come out". Andrea expressed a variety of factors that influenced her choice to " censor herself" or not, "That could be in the room. It could be the teacher, could be myself. Yeah, all of those things might make a difference".

Acknowledgements

A few participants spoke of how welcome it was when teacher trainers or institutions actively acknowledged some aspects of diversity when teaching (e.g. teaching on how to adapt courses for diverse populations, explicitly welcoming all aspects of personal identity into the space). Even small comments that communicated an attitude of inclusion were appreciated by Brianna:

Teachers (...) saying [something] about how can we make sure everybody is included; (...) just those little comments just to know that, you know, this is something that's there for everyone, really.

While Brianna expressed feeling supported in this way, Sara and Tessa, who both identified as low-income, felt that the costs of the course was not acknowledged in the classroom. Tessa said, "I guess to start with, (...), just some basic acknowledgement that this is a fantastic training route, but it's bloody expensive". Sara echoed:

It would make a difference to me, yeah. Because I hadn't heard that at all. Just very simply acknowledging, (...) "This is going to cost (...). And if you haven't got too much, you're going to struggle (...). We're not just going to assume you can all do this.

For Sara, there was a large gap between what she could afford, and what the trainers seemed to assume their trainees could afford. She recalled her experience of staying in the cheapest accommodation she could find when attending teaching sessions, and called for acknowledgement of low-income trainees:

In terms of being more inclusive, acknowledging that. Being sympathetic to that. Even be able to provide some things to support that, if possible. And there is a thing of, if we're all in the same boat, then it feels all right. And if no one speaks about it, if no one says it, then it's like, it's just me, then (...). I'm just kind of winging it by the seat of my pants.

Sara's words suggested that acknowledgement by trainers may have helped her to feel less isolated and could have facilitated opportunities to connect with similar others.

Superordinate Theme: Access to Teacher Training Programs

This theme explores how participants chose their TTP and what, if any, barriers they encountered that hindered either access to or continuation of training. To contextualise this, to be eligible to start a TTP, one must have first attended an approved entry-level MBP, such as an 8-week MBSR course. Once on the TTP, trainees also must adhere to BAMBA good practice guidelines (2024) which include paying for at least 4 hr of mindfulness supervision a year and attending an annual mindfulness retreat of at least 5 days duration. Finally, to be listed as a BAMBA-approved teacher, trainees must have completed a minimum of a 12-month training, comply with the good practice guidelines and have taught at least two supervised MBPs (BAMBA, 2024).

Subordinate Theme: Costs

Program Tuition Costs as a Barrier

“You’ve got to have a few quid to join this world”. – Sara.

All participants, regardless of their income level, spoke of how MBP training costs were a barrier to access, and most considered it a deciding factor in program choice. For participants on a low income, costs had a much larger impact. Costs such as tuition, travel, accommodation, annual retreats and regular supervision were identified as barriers. Sara and Tessa described how funding support was essential. Teacher training felt “completely unreachable” for Sara until she found a source of funding. “I saw the [post-graduate program] advertised. (...) And, if I do it in three years, it’s funded by the Student Finance England”. At the time of the interview, both Sara and Tessa had completed the first stage of their TTP but had to pause their training due to lack of funding. Tessa felt angry, “It’s 6 years now and I’m still at the beginning of my journey because it’s just too expensive”. It is unknown how many people never start a program due to costs, but these two participants expressed how it was a challenge for them to continue without financial support.

Program Add-on Expenses as a Barrier

Travel and accommodation costs were considered a significant expense, as were costs of meeting BAMBA good practice guidelines (2024), which include attendance on annual retreats and regular mindfulness supervision. “Why are retreats so expensive?” Nancy said as she questioned the £570 difference between a mindfulness retreat and a non-mindfulness-related retreat. Marco echoed, “All these hoops that you need to jump every time, and the retreat is a cost in itself”. Marco’s words hint to a felt nagging demand for more spending. Tessa lamented, “When you just look at the [base] costs, and then if it’s a residential retreat, you have to think about the accommodation and on top of that getting there. (...) It just mounts up and up”. Sara said, “So, hearing particularly about what was required in terms of the retreat for [a module]. That brought a lot of fear”. These expenses were an ongoing source of stress for many, and a barrier to continuing training for those identifying as low-income.

Barriers to Accessing Teacher Training in Low-Income Communities

Some participants speculated on why some communities do not access entry-level 8-week MBPs, so cannot then go on to MBP teacher training. Brianna, a schoolteacher who identified as Afro-Caribbean, noted how a school’s ability to train staff to deliver MBPs to their pupils was unlikely in low-income areas:

If you’re in a community (...) or school that don’t have a lot of money, then you’re just not going to take £800 to spend on somebody to train on that kind of program [TTP]. You’re going to be (...) spending money on students being fed and that type of thing, you know?

Brianna referred here to less affluent areas of London, with pupils largely from “African, Caribbean or Asian background” where she had taught before. She compared this to her current workplace, in “a quite affluent area” where she had her first MBP teacher training funded. She attributed her ability to join teacher training to being “lucky” to have “good mentors around me” and being in a workplace where opportunities presented. She speculated, “If I had been in another part of London, I might have not had that [opportunity]”. For Brianna, “[school] funding will always be an issue” and key to reaching underserved communities. Corrinne, who identified as British-Asian, echoed Brianna’s observations, “If you reach out, say, to the east end of London, (...) predominantly poor (...), then, it’s not just a racial or ethnicity issue. (...)”. Corrinne referred to entry-level MBP courses as a “luxury” that is not accessible to all. Access to these courses is relevant since TTPs have entry criteria of attendance on an MBP course and having a personal mindfulness practice for at least 12 months (BAMBA, 2024). Brianna speculated on two main barriers: “So, I suppose (...) the community, has to know about it. And then there has to be the assistance financially for them to be able to do a course like this”. If people cannot access these entry requirements, then they cannot progress to mindfulness teacher training. Both Corrinne and Brianna suggested that delivering through schools or local organisations might be a way to reach communities in low-income areas and provide affordable access to entry-level courses and/or teacher training. This and other financial support may provide an accessibility bridge for a greater diversity of people.

Superordinate Theme: Opportunities to Foster EDI

Participants were asked for their views on how to improve EDI in TTPs. Three subthemes were identified: enhanced EDI-specific training, a more diverse teaching faculty and access to more affordable options.

Subordinate Theme: Enhanced EDI-specific Training

Two trainees called for more explicit and in-depth training in EDI within the TTP and discussed this at length. Andrea noted only having “One part of one teaching session where we talked about diversity” which made her realise that “It’s not highlighted at all”. She compared this to a discussion on her TTP about making adaptations for physical challenges

such as tinnitus: “We were talking about sounds and silence, and how that could be really quite traumatic and all this kind of stuff. But we haven’t had those conversations around race. (...) [or] around sexual identity”. Andrea pointed out how by not acknowledging difference, something is lost: “We spend all our time trying to flatten everything. And (...) maybe that’s not a really sensible idea”. Corrinne echoed, “Mindfulness, you know, it’s all about being permissive and allowing and adapting (...). And I just wonder (...) that more should be done to accommodate different cultures”. Corrinne saw in-class discussions about EDI as valuable and overlooked opportunities to create safe and inclusive space “where all voices are welcome” and emphasised the importance of providing “space for dialogue to explore”.

In addition to training on EDI, Andrea noted the lack of diverse representation in the research literature on her training, “It does feel like it’s a gap. When you read most of the literature (...) I can’t even really make a clear distinction about who the participants are in all of the research that we’re looking at”. Overall, both called for more dialogue and openness in both teacher training and MBPs. Participants wanted EDI embedded into the TTP, including training of trainers, and course ethos and content.

Subordinate Theme: Need for More Diverse Teacher Trainers

“My main bugbear is the teaching faculty”. –Corrinne.

Most participants expressed that diversity among teacher trainers is “lacking” and how this can reduce the sense of belonging and safety for members of underrepresented groups. This call for representation was identified explicitly or implicitly in five of the seven interviews. Corrinne’s passion was evident, “You know, [teacher trainer name] and others, they say we all need to be more inclusive. And I was like, ‘Well get a more diverse teaching team’”. She acknowledged the potential difficulty of this “Maybe there aren’t people coming through the ranks to be the teachers (...) but it can’t be that difficult to find somebody somewhere with darker skin or a different shade of skin”. Tessa noticed other differences among the teacher trainers, “So in terms of (...) age and stage of life, and money, yeah, they did feel a bit different”. Sara talked about the potential impact of teacher trainers reflecting the breadth of diversity found in society, “But what I would love to see more of is (...). The teachers within the institutions (...) should really represent everything that’s out there. (...) Because the hope is that us as teachers, (...) also represent our participants as well”. Sara’s words pointed to how seeing oneself represented among the teacher trainers opens a door of possibility to a wider range of trainees. She acknowledged the potential for expanding diversity of trainees by having greater diversity in MBP trainers. Corrinne acknowledged that it may take time

for more people from diverse backgrounds to funnel through to become mindfulness teacher trainers, which highlights the need for more entry-level access for underrepresented groups, and a proactive approach to widening access.

Subordinate Theme: Need for Access to More Affordable Options

Participants spoke of welcoming less expensive online options for trainings and retreats, more funding and flexible payment options. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns, TTPs and retreats were forced to shift to online delivery. Three participants reported unexpected financial relief as online offerings became available, as retreat fees decreased, and travel and accommodation expenses disappeared. Marco stressed the opportunity of online options, “The original price, was £450 (...). With the online retreat, it went down to £250, much more accessible for people who have maybe got problems with money”. Sara rejoiced at the lower-cost online options, “I saved a fortune, like, an absolute fortune. (...) It was so much less stressful in terms of financial stuff”. Tessa also spoke of how online options facilitated the “logistical” aspect, easing the demands of schedule constraints due to having a baby. In addition to online options, alternative forms of financial aid were suggested. Nancy supported the idea of “bursaries” and “student financing”. Sara mentioned “waiving fees” for people unable to pay. Tessa suggested implementing a “sliding scale” or “dana”, which refers to paying on a donation basis.

In sum, the shift to online courses and retreats widened access and eased the financial burdens of training. Participants spoke of the relief of the availability of online training events and retreats and expressed feeling less stressed and more included. Many also acknowledged a need for more financial aid and payment options to foster access.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the experiences of MBP teacher trainees from underrepresented communities. This included the barriers and supports they encountered along the way, and their suggestions for what may foster greater accessibility and inclusion. The key findings were that participants spoke of how their felt inclusion was fostered by feeling acknowledged, safe enough to disclose, and their identity being represented among their peers and trainers. Participants felt there was much room for improvement, including EDI training being integrated in the TTP curriculum. They also noted that access to TTPs was limited by lack of upstream access to entry-level courses for those not able to afford them.

All participants spoke about the complexities around feelings of inclusion in spaces that were made up of people who were mostly White, female, and affluent. Experiences also differed according to whether the source of their diversity was visible or invisible. Most felt more included when (a) they felt safe to disclose their status and fully be themselves and/or (b) there were others present like them. Participants mentioned the need for more verbal or visual clues to signal a safe, inclusive space, or simply for their diversity to be acknowledged during the TTP (Magee, 2015). They often talked about feeling relieved, as if a latent concern had been lifted once they connected with someone like themselves. Concrete examples of this included finding fellow trainees with whom to relate; seeing “role models” who shared similar characteristics (Callahan et al., 2018); hearing open discussion and acknowledgement of the full spectrum of their experiences (Magee, 2015); and having a safe environment to freely disclose in a natural and authentic way (Law et al., 2015; Madera, 2010). In essence, participants experienced subtle signals or messages (or lack of) that had the potential to exclude or include, indicating the need for more conscious awareness of opportunities for inclusion.

Due to the safety and relief felt when finding others who shared aspects of their identity, participants emphasised the importance of connecting with group members or leaders who shared similar demographic characteristics to themselves (Egalite et al., 2015; Hardy, 2013). Many called for a more balanced representation of the wider population, noting the “Whiteness” of these programs (Kenny et al., 2020; Redding & Baker, 2019). Wider access to entry level courses led by underrepresented groups is needed to provide safe spaces for learning, connection and growth and help potential trainees move towards teaching mindfulness (Callahan et al., 2018; Gajaweera, 2021). This may require recruiting a more diverse training staff, using inclusive marketing materials, and cultivating collaborative connections with organisations that can serve as conduits to underrepresented populations (Callahan et al., 2018) as well as more proactive approaches to recruiting and retaining people from diverse backgrounds (Redding & Baker, 2019).

These findings highlight the complex intersubjective experience present for people from underrepresented groups during TTPs and underlines the importance of integrating EDI perspectives within and beyond TTPs (Causey et al., 2000; Redding & Baker, 2019). It is important that TTP trainers cultivate awareness of the diverse inherited ethnic, cultural, social and religious imprints that enter the space with each participant (Magee, 2015). This includes building understanding of their personal conditioning in relation to race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation etc., so they have a heightened potential to bring “on radar” the ways in which they may inadvertently commit “micro-aggressions”,

create a lack of safety for some participant groups, or cause harm in other ways (Roberts & Crane, 2021).

The importance of embedding EDI-focused content into the pedagogy is also clear, and there have been recent pedagogical updates which explicitly address diversity and inclusion in the delivery of MBPs (Bartley & Griffith, 2022; Crane et al., 2023; Griffith et al., 2019). While there have been some recent developments, EDI is not yet explicitly embedded into most key pedagogical theories and further work is recommended. Other ways of integrating EDI into the training process include adding EDI-related literature (Chin et al., 2019); addressing the specific vulnerabilities of underrepresented groups in instruction (Roberts & Crane, 2021; Treleaven, 2018); and offering specific EDI content within each TTP to foster inner work, and better prepare trainees to work with diverse populations (Evans, 2018; Magee, 2015).

All participants acknowledged the high cost of training to become an MBP teacher. Those identifying as low-income spoke of how there seemed to be an assumption that they could afford the costs and the time away from work to attend, which made them feel different from others. Two had paused their training because they could not afford to continue. These findings show the fragility of access to training, particularly for people on low incomes. Several participants called for more bursaries and financial aid. This finding is in line with current efforts and initiatives that some training organisations are taking (e.g. Breathworks, n.d.; Mindfulness Association, 2020; The Mindfulness Network, 2020). More research is needed to know the impact this will have on recruitment and retention. Studies on access to Higher Education suggest that bursary students have a higher continuation rate, lower anxiety and greater academic achievement (Harrison, Baxter & Hatt, 2007; West, 2006). It should also be noted that many mindfulness training organisations are not-for-profit organisations and/or operate on slim margins; therefore, creative solutions or outside funding sources may be needed. Providing cost-effective alternatives like online learning may mitigate costs for trainees, whilst upholding quality standards (BAMBA, 2024). The continued use of less-expensive, online training is a promising option to support access to training, but more study is needed to understand any potential losses vs. benefits for an entirely online TTP.

The issue of access to entry level 8-week MBPs spans across the themes of representation and costs. Participants highlighted a lack of diversity among trainees and trainers. This might be partly explained by TTPs being traditionally situated within the fields of education and psychology, often attracting trainees from these fields (Crane, 2017; Kenny et al., 2020). The British Psychology Society, for example, stated that their membership is predominantly White and

female (Bullen & Hacker Hughes, 2016). The Department for Education (2020) showed that, in 2018, almost 90% of all English schoolteachers were White (British or Other) and 75% of all teachers were female. In the USA, White females graduating in Education were vastly more likely to enter the teaching profession after graduation (Redding & Baker, 2019).

There are many factors likely contributing to the lack of diversity among those who access MBPs and TTPs (London Councils, 2017). Inclusion and access will inevitably be linked to wider issues of equity and social justice (Magee, 2016; Petty, 2017). Furthermore, participants suggested that some would be better reached by ambassadors who shared the same demographic characteristics as those populations, recommending local schools and organisations as potential conduits (Chin et al., 2019; Mindful Nation UK, 2015). Participants' stories of how they entered their own training due to mentors or role models like them echoed the value of this (Szecsi & Spillman, 2012). Participants recognised that increasing diversity among MBP teachers and trainers was a process that would take time.

Limitations and Future Research

This was a small study with seven participants, in line with the qualitative method of thematic analysis for exploring individual experiences in-depth (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Participant demographics were broad, and this was a deliberate choice with the inclusion criteria which aimed to gather a wide range of experiences across diverse identities. It was hoped this approach can act as a starting point for future research. This approach provided insight into important common themes that surfaced across demographic characteristics (e.g. factors that influenced a feeling of belonging; costs as a barrier). However, these issues did result in a broad-brush analysis of underrepresentation rather than enabling detailed unpacking of issues specific to particular identity groups. Furthermore, several identified with both the majority and minority in their TTPs (e.g. low-income and White) as well as more than one underrepresentation (e.g. low-income and mixed ethnic background). Questions arise as to how this rich, complex, and multi-layered nature of identity may have affected their experiences. Additionally, this research was conducted within the context of mindfulness TTPs in the UK, which thus may not be generalisable internationally.

The researchers were largely not from underrepresented groups, having identities that include White, middle class and high levels of education. We acknowledge that the dynamics created by members of a largely mainstream group researching the experiences of minority groups may adversely influence the research process (Ford &

Airhihenbuwa, 2010). As detailed in the methods section, steps were taken to by the lead researcher to be as aware as possible of bias, and the results section was member checked by six of the seven participants, who each said it accurately represented their experience.

Research on EDI in TTPs is still under explored. The findings of this research offer ground to support broader understanding of the experiences of underrepresented MBP teacher trainees that train in communities where most people are White, female and affluent. Studies that include a deeper exploration of group-specific experiences of MBP trainees as well as a wider spectrum of underrepresented groups (for example, those who are neurodiverse) and training programs may serve to deepen and amplify these findings. Future research on MBPs would benefit from making efforts to recruit participants from underrepresented groups (Chin et al., 2019). This study only interviewed trainees who did eventually enter a teacher-training program; we do not know the experiences of those who would like to enter a TTP but have not. More research is therefore needed to obtain a clearer picture of barriers to TTP entry.

Research that conducts widescale investigation by and with underrepresented communities is encouraged, such as deeper investigation into how low-income trainees may benefit from bursaries or more affordable options may help inform types and distribution of financial aid. In addition, tracing low-income students from start to finish may provide data that gives insight into the emotional, financial, and practical factors that foster TTP continuation and completion, and contribute to attrition. Lastly, studying the implementation of EDI protocols within TTPs to evaluate their effects on trainers and trainees may help enhance existing protocols with tested approaches and indicate where more development is needed.

Whilst there is willingness and interest in engaging in EDI integration and development within the MBP training field, there is much work to do. Mindfulness involves the cultivation of kindly, open connection, so the reality of EDI issues within the mindfulness field conflicts with the core ethos of the approach. There is thus a profound responsibility to proactively engage with these themes, to ensure justice and equity within the field, and to ideally provide models of EDI good practice to wider society. This work requires the expertise and engagement of colleagues who have not historically been part of the MBP field; and for current trainers, teachers and researchers in the field who identify with societal majority groups, there is a need for humility, deep listening, and courageous inner work. Mindfulness-based programmes have the potential to influence not only individuals, but also wider communities and social structures by making systemic barriers more known and explicit.

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Author Contribution Victoria Fontana: conceptualisation; methodology; investigation; data analysis; writing—original draft preparation; reviewing and editing. Gemma Griffith: supervision; writing—reviewing and editing. Rebecca Crane: writing—reviewing and editing.

Data Availability The original data is not available.

Declarations

Ethical Standards This research was approved by Bangor University ethics committee, and conforms to the standards of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Conflict of Interest VF, RC, and GG deliver mindfulness trainings within a university context.

Ethics Approval This research was approved by Bangor University ethics committee, and conforms to the standards of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Use of Artificial Intelligence Artificial Intelligence was not used.

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