Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0139

Tue 07 Dec 2021

12:50 - 13:10

Working Towards Anti-Racist Practice by Understanding the Experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic Students

Louise Taylor Bunce[1]

[1]*Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, United Kingdom*

Research Domain: Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract: British university students from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds are less likely to be awarded a 'good' degree classification than white students. To examine this gap, the current study conducted focus groups with 17 BME students studying health and social care related subjects to understand their experiences of learning and teaching. This was theoretically informed by self-determination theory, which proposes that achieving one's full potential for learning, alongside experience of wellbeing, is supported by environments that help individuals to meet their needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Thematic analysis revealed that BME students encountered many obstacles that inhibited their experience of fulfilment of these three needs, which often undermined their initial desire to achieve their full potential. The findings are discussed in light of how universities can support BME students to achieve their full potential, and in doing so, address the degree awarding gap.

Paper: There is a consistent, persistent, and inequitable gap of approximately 23% in the number of first class / upper second degrees awarded to Black students compared to white students. If the rate of current progress continues, then a gap in good degree outcomes for Black students will continue to exist for another 66 years (Loke, 2020). According to Singh (2011), universities have now accepted that institutional racism, in the form of structural inequalities that arise from teaching, learning, and assessment strategies, are largely responsible for some of the negative experiences of BME students and the associated awarding gap, requiring change through partnerships between students and institutions (Broecke and Nicholls 2007; Richardson 2015). Many studies have attempted to understand these students' experiences, however, this research is largely descriptive.

We conducted research using focus groups to understand the experiences of BME students, using a theoretical approach informed by Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This theory is supported by decades of educational research that supports the premise that achievement motivation thrives in environments that support students' needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Competence is the need to feel capable and confident to carry out necessary behaviours to reach a goal, autonomy is the need for behaviour to be self-directed and integrated with one's

own sense of self, and relatedness is the need to feel connected to and supported by others, and to have a sense of belonging. The aim of this research was to identify the extent to which BME students experienced fulfilment of their three psychological needs during their experiences of learning and teaching in higher education

In total, 17 full-time students from two degree programmes in health and social care related subjects took part in one of three focus groups. All participants were women, reflecting the fact that women formed the majority of students on the programmes. Their mean age was 32.13 years (SD = 9.78, range = 18–50 years) (two participants preferred not to answer). The participants described themselves as Black African (12), Asian (3), or White and Black Caribbean (2).

Thematic analysis revealed that the higher education environment largely did not support fulfilment of needs among these students. Most students who took part spoke extensively and in depth about how these needs had generally not been fulfilled, which subsequently had a negative impact on their motivation to achieve their full potential and general wellbeing. In terms of *relatedness*, many students reported feeling excluded, frustrated, and distressed during their degree courses, and linked this directly to their BME status: "I have an African accent. […] I didn't have anyone to turn to. […] I was isolated, it was like no one wanted to be with me." They also experienced a lack of *competence*, feeling disappointed with their grades and feeling that they had not achieved their full potential: "[Now] I just want to pass, I just want to get it scraped through and go, but, sitting here and reflecting, the truth about it is, if we were given the opportunity to be at our best, most of us would have excelled." In relation to *autonomy,* students spoke at length about how they felt they could not be themselves. They felt pressurised to behave in ways that complied with non-BME norms on campus and in placements: "I feel like an imposter. […] [With lecturers] I put on an act … my accent changes, my voice changes, and I'll pretend that I am a clever person. […] If I, you know, put on my real accent and if I talked like where I come from, I probably wouldn't be that well liked there. […] I feel a bit fake."

On a surface level, these findings reflect the experiences of many BME students that have previously been reported in previous research. However, the application of SDT in the current study provided richer insight into their experiences of learning and teaching, and have implications for more concrete ways to support their experiences. Based on these findings, this research influenced a number of changes to our program and development of anti-racist teaching practices (see www.brookes.ac.uk/SIIP). This talk will, therefore, discuss the findings from the research, and provide examples for educators to help them develop confidence to make changes to support Black students' experiences and ultimately improve the degree-awarding gap.

References: Broecke, S. & Nicholls, T. 2007. *Ethnicity and Degree Attainment (Research Report RW92).* London: Department for Education and Skills. Accessed from www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RW92.pdf

Deci, E. L. & Ryan, R. M., 2000. "The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior." *Psychological Inquiry 11*(4): 227–268.

Loke, G. 2020. "Time's up for the awarding gap". WONKHE. https://wonkhe.com/blogs/times-up-for-the-awarding-gap/

Richardson, J. T. E. 2015. "The under-attainment of ethnic minority students in UK higher education: what we know and what we don't know." *Journal of Further and Higher Education 39*: 278–291.

Singh, G., 2011. *Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Students' Participation in Higher Education: Improving Retention and Success.* Accessed from https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/black-and-minority-ethnic-bme-students-participation-higher-education-improving