



OfS Uni Connect Programme



# ThinkHigher Report

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## : The Black Experience Project

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# 1 Background



## 1.1 About ThinkHigher

**ThinkHigher** is a local network for Coventry & Warwickshire that aims to reduce the gap in higher education participation between the most and least represented groups. As one of 29 partnerships within Uni Connect, it aims to support effective and impactful local collaboration by higher education providers working together with schools, colleges, employers and other partners. One of its key objectives is to explore new ways of meeting local need and priority in order to meet its overall aims.

## 1.2 About Coventry & Warwickshire Partnership

**ThinkHigher** represents collaboration between partners including the University of Warwick, Coventry University, Warwickshire College Group and North Warwickshire and Hinckley College, as well as the Local Enterprise Partnership and both Coventry and Warwickshire Councils.

## 1.3 Commissioning of Work

The murder of George Floyd in May 2020, which fuelled a global burgeoning of the existing Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, initiated for many schools, colleges and universities in the United Kingdom (UK) a period of action and reflection. Perhaps for the first time, the Education sector recognised the need and value in centring Black lives, who both historically and currently represent one of the most disadvantaged groups in Britain.

As part of its aim to reduce the gap in higher education participation between the most and least represented groups, **ThinkHigher** has commissioned a specific project exploring the needs and experiences of Black children and young people. By centring the voices of Black children across the Coventry & Warwickshire landscape, the project aims to support local understanding of needs, priorities and, most importantly, the actions required to effect meaningful change.

## 1.4 The Report Team

Professor Jason Arday was commissioned by **ThinkHigher** to produce a report based on the experiences of young Black people in Coventry & Warwickshire. Claire Muttock, Data & Operations Manager at **ThinkHigher**, oversaw the project, supported by Jamie Ormes, including the collection of data that informed analysis and report recommendations.

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## 2 Introduction

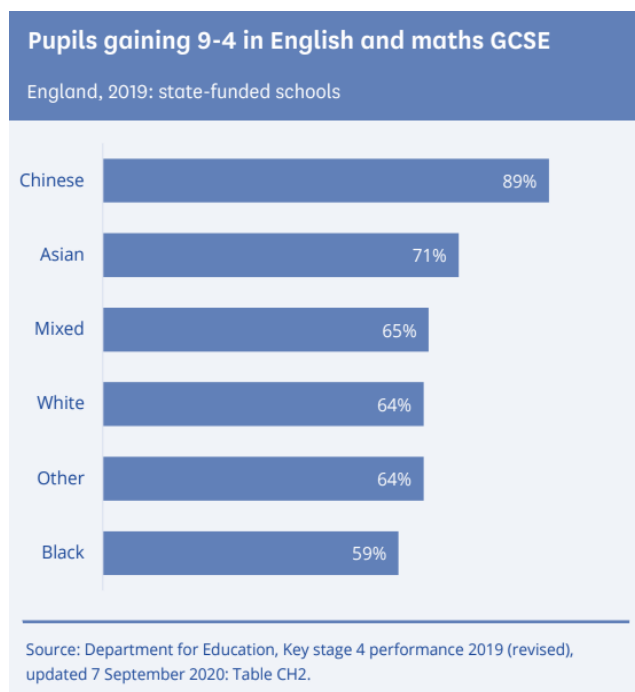
This report contributes to the growing body of policy discourse and literature regarding the educational experiences and trajectories of young Black people within the UK Education system. While schools in England continue to show a steady commitment towards addressing educational disparities, particularly among Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic<sup>1</sup> pupils, there are still a paucity of measures to tackle the overt discrimination that pupils from this diaspora continue to face alongside a dominant Eurocentric curriculum.

### 2.1 Black in Education

Over the last ten years, and particularly in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement since 2020, steps have been taken to illuminate the experiences of Black learners and the racial and structural inequalities that they face within the British Education system.

#### 2.1.1 Outcomes

In 2018/19, across the Black major ethnic group 59% of pupils attained a standard pass in English and maths GCSE (grades 9 to 4, broadly equivalent to the old A\* to C grading). This means Black pupils have the lowest pass rate for GCSE English and maths combined, representing the lowest rate for any major ethnic group (Roberts & Bolton, 2020). This of course impacts on students progressing (or not progressing) into higher, and then further, education.



Further exploration of data indicates that Black Caribbean pupils have significantly lower pass rates compared with Black African pupils, highlighting the importance of disaggregating ethnicity data (e.g. Stephenson, 2019).

Meanwhile, statistics from the Timpson Report on School Exclusions (2019) point to lower attendance, and higher rates of absenteeism and exclusion among Black young people.

However, while focusing on the attainment gap and highlighting negative educational outcomes for Black young people is important, it is essential also to look at education as a wider

enterprise, as well as the experiences of young Black people in schools and colleges (Runnymede Trust, 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to acknowledge that the term “BAME”, despite its widespread use, is problematic for a number of reasons (see Aspinall, 2021). The term can both reproduce unequal power relations and assume that experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people are equivalent. As is the case in this report, in order to understand the unique experiences of Black children it is important these are disaggregated.

### 2.1.2 Experience

Poor education outcomes among young Black people are a product of the systemic and discriminatory terrain which continues to disadvantage the attainment outcomes of Black learners. For example, 95% of young Black people have experienced racism in school, 49% see racism as the greatest barrier to attainment in school and 50% feel teacher perceptions of them inhibit educational success (YMCA, 2020). This of course has the power to impact their trajectories onto employment, training and further education.

Racism is associated with poor mental health in young Black people (e.g. Priest et al., 2013; Trent et al., 2019), and poor mental health is related to lower attainment and attendance in school (Lereya et al., 2019). With this in mind, it becomes easier to see how the current and historic systems that Black children are required to navigate disadvantage them in subtle and persistent ways. It is these recurrent experiences that take a physical and psychological toll on many Black learners, forming the basis of what Fasching-Varner terms “racial battle fatigue” (2014).

### 2.1.3 A note on intersectionality

The UK education system privileges and disadvantages minoritised racial and ethnic minority groups (Arday 2021), which themselves often intersect with other types of inequality (Ogbonna, 2020). UK and international evidence suggest that minoritised pupils face at school several problems as part of their social location, including intergenerational poverty, lack of parental engagement, and negative attitudes around education. These other intersecting and situational components, such as poverty, also impair the academic achievement of students and thus further contribute towards the existing achievement gap. The consideration of these factors is integral to unpacking many of the contexts that facilitate this continuous cycle of disadvantage for Black pupils.

In terms of attainment, for example, 42% of Black Caribbean boys attained 9–4 GCSEs in both English and maths, whilst the figure for Black Caribbean girls was 55% (Robert & Bolton, 2020). Meanwhile, in terms of experience, for example, Black girls are subject to high pressures and expectations, which can themselves lead to mental health difficulties (e.g. Epstein et al., 2017), whilst Black boys are impacted by the “failure” narrative which teachers can reproduce within their classrooms (e.g. Arday & Morton, in press).

#### Recommendation

- It is essential that an intersectional lens be adopted when considering the needs of Black young people.

## 2.2 What works

At school level, there still remains no targeted funding to address racial and ethnic disparities in educational outcomes and separate grants, such as the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant (EMAG), have been incorporated into mainstream grant funding. The locus of responsibility continues to remain with schools and local authorities to mobilise this agenda against a backdrop of ever-decreasing funding and ever-increasing pressure.

Nevertheless there has been an large body of research conducted within the higher education sector that outlines and evaluates the available programmes, initiatives and interventions. Unfortunately, much of research in this area that considers race and ethnicity regards Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people as a whole. This makes understanding the specific needs of young Black people a challenge.

There is evidence for the benefits of support programmes and interventions that focus on improving educational experiences and outcomes for minority ethnic pupils, particularly among Black males who are disproportionately affected by exclusion from school and the school-to-prison ‘pipeline’ (Graham, 2016). Within the evidence base mentoring programmes are frequently cited (Timpson, 2019) and there is well-documented support for their effectiveness in school settings (e.g. Mentoring & Befriending Foundation, 2011). The outcomes associated with mentoring appear to be impacted by certain variables, including parental participation, mentor training, cultural responsiveness of programmes, and mentor characteristics such as gender and race (Sanchez, Hurd & Neblett, 2017). This highlights the importance of consideration of intersectionality, as well as adopting a whole-systems approach that considers the team around the child or young person (i.e. the mentor, the parents, etc.). Involving families in interventions with young Black people is thus key (Sanchez et al., 2017).

Non-formal education (e.g. Youth Work) can also improve educational outcomes (National Youth Agency, 2014) and can provide an extra step before school exclusions, thus disrupting the school to prison pipeline which disproportionately impacts Black students and in particular boys (e.g. Timpson, 2019). Additionally, restorative justice approaches are associated with positive outcomes among Black and Mixed Heritage students (e.g. Brentnall, 2017), and are low intensity and thus accessible to a wide range of Black pupils. Such restorative and pastoral approaches, particularly when accompanied by interventions at school and systems levels (i.e. involving teachers, parents, and educational staff and leaders) can provide a conduit for disrupting conscious biases, and racial stereotypes and ascriptions often associated with Black learners.

### 2.3 What now

Building on current understanding of “what works” in support young Black people in higher education and beyond, this report explores the education experiences of Black pupils within the Coventry & Warwickshire area of the Midlands. Together with the evidence base, these lived experiences inform a range of recommendations around improving educational outcomes and experiences for local Black children and young people. The report, produced in conjunction with **ThinkHigher** and funded by the Office for Students (OfS) Uni Connect Programme, intends to provide a framework by which to promote action and effect change on behalf of the young Black community.

### 3 Methodology

To explore the lived experiences of young Black people in the Coventry & Warwickshire area, eleven (N=11) local secondary school students participated in semi-structured interviews. Aged between 15 and 18 years old, participants identified as male (n=5, 45%) and female (n=6, 55%) and were interviewed via virtual platforms (e.g. Zoom, Microsoft Teams). The interview schedule comprised prompts based on pre-existing data and research in race and education, facilitating an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of participants. Of note, the researchers conducting interviews were White, both of whom had engaged in dialogue about this when speaking with participants.

The report is based on qualitative narrative data which were transcribed and themed. The adoption of a narrative inquiry was selected due to its flexibility as an analytical and accessible research instrumental. Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants, which means the findings may not be generalisable (Cohen, 2012). Nevertheless they provide a valuable insight and contextualisation of the issues and experiences of young Black people navigating higher education.

### 4 Findings and discussion

Five themes were identified through analysis. From the first theme, **Education Curriculum**, a sub-theme emerged around *negative discourse*. From the second theme, **Experiences of racism**, sub-themes emerged around *unfair treatment, microaggressions, negative stereotypes*. From the third theme, **Impacts of racism**, sub-themes emerged around *feelings of exclusion, mental wellbeing struggles, racial gaslighting and confusing, and internalisation*. A fourth theme, **Hair**, a sub-theme emerged around *negative ascriptions and fetishization*. The final theme, **Opportunity for change**, sub-themes emerged around *improving staff competence, taking more responsibility, increasing representation, engaging in dialogue around race and creating spaces of belonging*.

#### Theme 1 (T1): Eurocentric curriculum

The curriculum was a strong theme across several participants, who spoke of the paucity of Black history in current teaching:

You only really get to hear about these things if you do history, but you only get a small amount. Black History Month they did a little assembly, but there wasn't really anything in depth. (1, Black female).

I wish they could know our history, because we know ours. It would be nice if everyone in the UK knows...because sometimes we just feel left out and confused as to why they don't know this (3, Black female).

For some, there was a sense that Black history was not sufficiently taught, and there were missed opportunities for dialogue around race and racism. There is a sense that this knowledge was being neutralised:

It's like we watch a film about it [slavery] and then that's it but really we should talk about it in depth and the thing that happened during it. (1, Black female).



This speaks to an erasure of history that has often been synonymous with discussing Britain's troubled past, perhaps pointing to a lack of knowledge that teachers can exhibit when engaging in a curriculum that sits outside their lived experience, collective or taught history.

### **T1 Subtheme 1: *Negative discourse***

Within the Eurocentric Curriculum, a sub-theme emerged regarding how participants felt that Black History was only discussed in the context of slavery. As well as positioning slavery as Black history, rather than White, it means young Black people learning about themselves at school do so only through a lens of oppression and trauma:

You don't learn about Black history apart from slavery. Teach more Black history, that is definitely a must (6, Black male).

We did take like two lessons on the transatlantic slave trade. But no stuff about culture, no stuff about heritage. I feel like if you're going to talk about African may be acknowledge that there is more to it than just the slave trade (10, Black female).

As well as speaking to the normative centring of Eurocentric history, the absence of an alternative presentation was linked to negative depictions of Black people that in turn limit learning:

You got maybe a few lessons on how people were chained up or put in a ship but they don't really go in depth in culture and how different ethnic backgrounds celebrate stuff...it leads them to have these stereotypes and allows them to have these views which could lead to the negative comments (2, Black male).

You only get portrayed as poor people who are suffering, which is true but there is also a good side to us (2, Black male).

### **T1: Recommendations**

- The teaching of Black history should go beyond slavery and racism, and should include positive racialisation and stories of Black excellence;
- The teaching of Britain's colonial past should be recognised as White history as well as Black history;
- The curriculum should be taught using a range of methods that promote discussion and sharing of experiences rather than exclusively pedagogy
- Decolonising the curriculum should be seen not just in the context of history, but across all subjects.

### **Theme 2 (T2): Experiences of racism**

A theme emerged around experiences of racism, with all participants relating incidents or anecdotes where they and others had been discriminated against on account of race.

These largely fell into three key areas: *unfair treatment from teachers, micro-aggressions* and *negative stereotypes*.

### **T2 Subtheme 1: *Unfair treatment from teachers***

Within experiences of racism, many participants were treated differently by teachers. There was a clear sense that compared to their white friends or peers, they were treated less favourably:

It's so obvious they favour the white students to the people of colour (3, Black female).

For some, this centred on severity of consequence, suggesting bias in the way that teachers approached punishment. This was a finding consistent with wider research into the experiences of young Black people (YMCA, 2020):

One of my friends, she's white, we were playing and the teacher saw and didn't say anything, and I did the same back to her and all of a sudden she was like "you are too loud why are you shouting, get off her, don't touch her". It just felt like my skin was the reason that she did that (1, Black female).

Sometimes I feel like the handle situations differently so they might let other people go with something but I would get further punishment for it...your punishment may be more severe (2, Black male).

There were so many times where my other Black friends used to get kicked out of lessons, put in all these detentions (11, Black male).

It was also linked to inhibiting progression, with the sense that Black people are "held back" despite putting in the same amount of work:

You've put in all the work and all the effort, you completed the same modules as with everyone else but you have been held back and the only difference is your race (2, Black male).

### **T2 Subtheme 2: *Microaggressions***

A second sub-theme emerged around the presence of micro-aggressions. Participants felt that as well as overt racism, an evolved, nuanced form of racism existed that impacted them in more subtle but pernicious ways:

Nowadays it [racism] is more tactical, it's micro racism and it's really hard to see (6, Black male).

Some people think racism is the n-word but small micro-aggressions are effective, like I remember one time this girl was saying she was surprised my parents spoke good English (1, Black female).

With microaggressions, it's almost normalised so it feels worse because they don't realise they are being racist to you...it's not as easy to call someone out (5, Black female).

### T2 Subtheme 3: *Negative stereotyping*

The final sub-theme within experiences of racism was around racial stereotyping and how young Black people are perceived as being troublesome:

There was 6 or 7 Black students in my year and the teachers came up to us and said we needed to separate because we looked like a gang and we looked like we were up to something. But there were groups of white students huddled together and the same wasn't said to them (5, Black female).

This was experienced as difficult to challenge in others, despite the person possessing characteristics that would clearly counter that negative discourse:

I would consider myself really polite. But if someone has this mental image of you, it is hard to shake it (6, Black male).

There was also evidence of colourism<sup>2</sup> at play for one participant, who relayed how the shade of his skin amplified the stereotype. This is consistent with research that colourism can affect educational outcomes, including less preferential treatment by both teachers and peers among Black children with darker skin (Adams et al.; Hunter, 2002, 2016):

I am in a new school and people have been hesitant to come and talk to me, because I wear a lot of tracksuits and they think I already come with a personality that they have that stereotype of a Black person. I'm very dark, so like the stereotype for me especially being Black is not good (6, Black male).

## T2: Recommendations

- Teachers should be provided with more training and development opportunities to support identification and challenge of internal biases;
- Data should be collected around consequences (e.g. detention rates, exclusions) and **disaggregated** ethnicity to monitor and highlight bias in decision-making;
- Colourism should be taught and discussed in school settings, and teachers and educational staff and leaders should challenge these narratives.

### Theme 3 (T3): *Impacts of racism*

There was also a dominant theme around the impact that these experiences of racism had on participants, which led to *feelings of exclusion, mental health struggles, racial gaslighting and confusion, and internalisation*.

#### T3 Subtheme 1: *Feelings of exclusion*

A sub-theme emerged around feelings of exclusion, which for participants left them with unpleasant emotions such as embarrassment and awkwardness:

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<sup>2</sup> Colourism typically privileges those with lighter skin tones (Hunter, 2016), who are seen as closer in proximity to whiteness.

It was just awkward because like people are always looking at you when they talk about it [Black history]...it kind of feels embarrassing (1, Black female).

This appeared to be the case in particular when topics around race were brought up, suggesting that the teacher or professional facilitating these conversations was not sufficiently competent or equipped to do so:

They knew there was an Asian and a Black person in the class but they still went on talking about it [Asian hate and Black Lives Matter]...they didn't realise how much it was affecting us in class (3, Black female).

They added the word ethnicity in it, and then everyone started laughing, and they looked at me (9, Black male).

### **T3 Subtheme 2: *Mental wellbeing struggles***

The second sub-theme stemming from impact of racism was around the impact it had on the mental wellbeing of participants and other Black people they knew.

It just kind of brings you down a little bit...I kind of push it aside (1, Black female).

Some linked distress in particular to the murder of George Floyd and subsequent Black Lives Matter movement. This is consistent with wider research into the experiences of Black students (e.g. Pennant, 2021), who spoke of the re-traumatisation of Black communities:

Watching the George Floyd situation] was very upsetting (2, Black male).

I'm actually feeling the effects of everything that is happening and it's really traumatising and it was really bad for my mental health (3, Black female).

This suggests that, while conversation and dialogue around racism and current events is of key significance it is equally important that it is facilitated by adults (e.g. teachers, learning assistants) in a sensitive manner.

### **T3 Subtheme 3: *Racial gaslighting and confusion***

A third sub-theme emerged around the impact of navigating racism in a world where it is not always recognised, in some cases by the perpetrator and in some cases by the recipient. The net effect was a sense of doubt and confusion:

I didn't know how to react because I was thinking, is this racist, is it not? (1, Black male).

Even my brother has been through stuff where he was so confused...you don't even notice that someone is being racist until you realise later (3, Black female).

It's like people would look at me, but then again it could be me overthinking stuff (7, Black male).

Navigational and resistant capital are forms of capital held by young Black people that equip them to traverse systemically racist institutions such as school, college and university. With greater understanding of how to support their pupils to increase these, teachers could help Black children to be better equipped and more confident in navigating and challenging individual and institutional forms of racism and discrimination.

### **T3 Subtheme 4: *Internalisation***

The final sub-theme that emerged within impacts of racism was around the ways in which participants internalised their experiences. Some felt that they had no choice but to ignore it, because taking an alternative path would further deepen the problem and they would be perceived negatively. This had a psychological cost to doing so, which reinforces the literature around the impact of racism on mental health (e.g. Priest et al., 2013):

You have to turn a blind eye to it. We are told when someone says a racist remark just don't retaliate 'cuz it's going to be worse for you (9, Black male).

Just being quiet and trying not to make them classify you as a stereotype because that could be really damaging. You try not to let anyone see how angry you are, you just keep your head down...I'm scared I'm going to be seen in a certain way. It stresses you out, you feel tired all the time (3, Black female).

There was a sense that the responsibility for dealing with the problem sat with them, with a lack of trust that the adults (e.g. teachers) around them would challenge racism and/or support those experiencing it:

When those acts of racism were going on, it was often up to the students to deal with it themselves, because the teachers wouldn't do anything about it (10, Black female).

I think the support system just isn't there, there was no one you could go to, nowhere you could go and talk. Your support system had to be the people around you. If you didn't have good friends you didn't have anyone to talk to (10, Black female).

This is key, as it highlights the additional burdens that racism can place on young Black shoulders. This is evident not just at an individual level (not saying anything, holding emotions in, trying not to react) but at a collective level (leaning on peers, dealing with issues as a student group), which as well as placing a shared burden on Black pupils also increases the risk of unsanctioned and thus repeated behaviour.

### **T3: Recommendations**

- Staff should be provided more training and development to be able to sensitively facilitate classroom discussions around race and racism;
- Educational staff should develop understanding of how to support their pupils to build navigational and resistance capital (Yosso, 2005);

- Clear mechanisms should be in place for addressing and challenging racism;
- Support systems should be put in place for young Black children experiencing racism, which is clearly communicated and implemented by all staff.

#### Theme 4 (T4): Hair

There was a strong theme around the interplay between racism and hair. This was experienced both through negative ascriptions and fetishizing. This suggests that the choice to wear their hair natural, styled and/or grow it out would be accompanied by unwanted attention, treatment or comments from others.

##### T4 Subtheme 1: *Negative ascriptions*

Participants felt their hair was used as a means of insulting them, dehumanising them, ostracising them and/or stereotyping them:

This one time this girl was saying my hair was straw (1, Black female).

I've had experiences like "your hair looks funny" when that is my natural hair. I can't change that I'm a normal human being like you (6, Black male).

I wanted to grow my hair out and my Dad did tell me that I was going to get looks from people because it is a stereotypical look (7, Black male).

They give me dirty looks all the time whenever I have my afro (11, Black male).

##### T4 Subtheme 2: *Fetishization*

Young Black people found that their non-Black peers would react in fascination at their "different" hair. This appeared to underpin the experience of Black girls in particular, who also felt that this was an invasion of personal space:

When I get a new hair style, like braids for instance, it's like "oh my god your hair looks so nice, how long did it take, can I touch it? It feels weird (1, Black female).

It could be experienced as a pattern of dominance, itself a reinforcement of whiteness, when others touch their hair without consent:

As a Black woman, they like to touch my hair a lot, like without my consent...like not actually having control over my body (4, Black female).

The girl ran up to me and started squishing my hair and was like "oh gosh your hair is so fluffy" and it left a weird taste in my mouth, I was like, am I an exhibition, am I just like there to be looked at? (5, Black female).

Indirectly, these may reinforce decisions of young Black people to subject themselves to Eurocentric beauty standards (i.e. chemical treatments, weaves or wigs) or other methods of erasure (i.e. shaving).

## T4: Recommendations

- Touching a pupil's hair without their permission should be considered unacceptable behaviour, and should be managed as such and reflected in relevant policies;
- When consent is taught within PSHE and other relevant forums, hair should be included as a topic of discussion.

## Theme 5 (T5): Opportunities for change

The final theme that emerged was around opportunities for change. In some cases, participants highlighted a lack of what was needed in order to improve their experiences, and in others, participants made explicit recommendations for what action could be taken.

### T5 Subtheme 1: *Improving staff competence*

A strong sub-theme centred on the need to upskill teachers to manage racism, but also developing their cultural competence when teaching or facilitating learning around areas they are less familiar with.

I feel like teachers could be trained so that if they spot a situation that is similar to like a micro-aggression or something racist then they can like tell the people what they have done wrong and put it right (1, Black female).

I don't think they have a very good understanding of micro-aggressions Leadership positions in schools should get more education on how to deal with racial discrimination (5, Black female).

It was strange, they had an interfaith week where they did food from around the world, but the food was so bad and not at all reflective of the cultures. It was al really culturally insensitive (10, Black female).

### T5 Subtheme 2: *Taking more responsibility*

This sub-theme spoke to the need for teachers to take responsibility for addressing racist behaviour:

I have heard stories of people saying the n-word, it's like why is this not being picked up on, why aren't teachers doing anything about this? (7, Black male).

The ability to tune out experiences of racism can be seen as exercising racial privilege, leaving young Black people who are unable to turn away from their experiences left frustrated. This can explain why some participants engage in the internalising behaviours outlined within the impact of racism.

Instead of closing their eyes, plugging their ears, or turning away from it, just not considering it their responsibility...like my job is to teach, it's not my job to have these uncomfortable conversations with students (10, Black female).

### **T5 Subtheme 3: *Increasing representation***

A key sub-theme was around the importance of representation, with a number of participants highlighting the impact of when there was, and when there wasn't:

The majority of my school life there have been predominantly white teachers. If you don't see people of power around you, you'll think why is there not someone who looks like me, so you have someone to emulate (2, Black male).

I only have white teachers, my sixth form is really not diverse. There are no people of colour on the board (3, Black female).

I feel like I've been supported by teachers...I had some Black male teachers and some female ones (9, Black female).

One participant highlighted the positive impact that having a more diverse workforce had not just on them, but the white pupils in their classroom:

My physics teacher was Asian and we would talk a lot about these kinds of issues. For them [the white boys] they finally got to understand...it was kind of a moment of realisation for them, like oh these issues exist and effect real people (5, Black female).

### **T5 Subtheme 4: *Engaging in dialogue around race***

One of the other ways in which participants spoke about opportunities for change was in the need to better engage in dialogue around race and racism. There was a sense that this included feelings and emotions as well as learning and culture, which are of course often inextricably linked:

They don't really give us the opportunity to talk about how we feel and how we could make a change. They just need to provide us with a platform to talk about our struggles, to talk about our experiences in school (2, Black male).

I feel like it [BLM] was the perfect opportunity to have these sorts of conversations...I feel like it was a bit of a missed opportunity (5, Black female).

One participant highlighted the benefits of sharing their experiences, both on other Black people and fellow students who can learn from these:

There definitely needs to be more lessons on Black issues. Yeah, like social issues and racial experiences, but Black people are allowed to talk about their experiences and share them with fellow students (5, Black female).

### **T5 Subtheme 5: *Creating spaces of belonging***

The final sub-theme centred on the need for spaces of belonging to exist for Black people. For many this was to access spaces in which to experience trust, inclusion and friendship. It appeared that most saw the most obvious way of doing this as having spaces in which young Black people could be in community with each other:



Make us feel together, like a community of people who rely on each other, depending on each other and trust each other (2, Black male).

A programme for Black students so they can meet fellow Black students, so they can feel like they got somewhere to go cuz personally I didn't have many Black friends and I felt somewhat alone (5, Black female).

Have a place for Black students to gather and be themselves, just express themselves, like maybe art of music, embracing their culture and being unapologetic (5, Black female).

I see mixing as good, it's very ostracizing to be the only Black person in a group of white. I was in a group of white girls and I just couldn't assimilate, and no one ever made an effort to explain and I wasn't part of the culture. It would have been nice to know another Black girl (10, Black female).

However, belonging was not just defined by sharing spaces with other Black people. Having a non-judgmental, open space in which to feel heard and understood was recognised as being valuable and comforting:

I want a place where I feel comfortable and so I will be able to voice my opinions without nothing being taken away from me (3, Black female).

#### T5: Recommendations

- See T2 recommendations, plus;
- The need to develop cultural competence, awareness and an ability to challenge racism and engage in dialogue around race should be reflected in relevant policies, strategies and role descriptions;
- Senior leaders should model having courageous conversations with staff and pupils, and encourage and facilitate dedicated spaces for staff to do the same;
- Schools and colleges should ensure they are taking steps to increase the representation of their staff, including senior leadership teams;
- Schools and colleges should conduct reviews, in conjunction with Black pupils, parents and staff, to identify ways in which to foster belonging;
- Schools and colleges should consider making use of partnerships with each other to facilitate shared spaces of belonging, particular where they have lower numbers of Black pupils and staff.

## 5 Conclusions

The key themes that emerged were around having a Eurocentric curriculum, experiences and impact of racism, hair (itself revealing a further form of racism), and opportunities for change. The normality of the omission of Black history when discussing aspects of curriculum, particularly in terms of understanding its importance, remains problematic and can create a disinterest in the curriculum among Black pupils unable to recognise themselves in their curriculum. This becomes an important part of how make sense of the engagement and learning experiences particularly when attempting to discern the impact

upon attainment. As reflected in the recommendations here and in much other literature (e.g. The Black Curriculum Report, 2019), there is an urgent need for review and reform.

The pervasive nature of racism and how it is experienced in the classroom and beyond remains a cause for concern. Black pupils continue to experience racism in a range of insidious ways, which impacts on the way they are treated and perceived by others, the support and opportunities they access, and their mental health. For the latter, this also interplayed with the murder of George Floyd. The BLM movement was seminal moment in the lives of young Black people globally; for the participants in the study, this represented a period of empowerment but was also distressing. It also spoke to the resistance of the movement and at times the performative solidarity by schools and individuals that undermined the serious message behind the BLM endeavour. Young Black people require more support from the systems around them, both to reduce the racism they experience and to support them when (not if) they do.

Finally, the opportunities for change should sit squarely with educational leaders and not on young Black shoulders. The context considered is hugely important with regards to how Black pupils make sense of their place within the classroom space and how these interactions with peers and teachers impact aspects of learning, attainment and belonging. Steps should be taken to demonstrate to young Black people that they are being listened to and understood, and that actions are being taken to improve their educational experiences. It is thanks to the generosity of the participants who shared their experiences that this report is able to make such recommendations.