Meaning and structure in Black students' ways of experiencing academic achievement

This is the Accepted Version of the final output.

Meaning and structure in Black students' ways of experiencing academic achievement

Mike Mimirinis

University of West London

Elina Wright

Bishop Grosseteste University

Corresponding author: M.Mimirinis@uwl.ac.uk

Meaning and structure in Black students' ways of experiencing academic achievement

Abstract

Historically White universities in Britain have a long history of misrecognising the experiences of Black students and rendering their struggles and aspirations a matter of scrutiny. More recently an intense higher education policy focus has been placed on addressing outcome differentials between various ethnic groups. Little however is known about how minoritised groups of students experience and understand academic achievement. In our phenomenographic study Black students' conceptions of academic achievement vary from broad expectations of gaining good grades to developing as a person and contributing to the society. Seen through a relational lens, the results can be utilised to identify the aspects of university life that warrant further attention to improve Black students' experiences during their studies and achieve equitable outcomes.

Keywords: academic achievement; Black students, phenomenography, equitable outcomes.

Introduction

Inequalities in the educational achievements of minoritized students in higher education (HE) are often attributed to structural inequalities (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Noguera 2017; Richardson, 2008). In the UK, research literature and public records alike point to persistent inequalities before, during, and after university for students of "Black and minority ethnic" (BME) backgrounds. Previous education and socio-economic status can have an impact on students' attainments in HE; a substantial proportion of "BME" students enter HE with lower qualifications, and they are more likely to associate prestigious selective universities with whiteness (Reay et al., 2001). However, when individual characteristics (e.g. age, gender,

parents' education, etc.), institutional characteristics (e.g. proportion of "minority ethnic" students in the institution, size of the institution, etc.) and entry qualifications are controlled for, the attainment gap persists, pointing to the role of students' experiences of the curriculum or teaching and learning processes (Codiroli Mcmaster 2021; Richardson 2015).

Outcome differentials are evident in the progression and achievements of "BME" students, particularly Black students. An analysis of the difference (%) between White and Black students living in the UK who received a "good" undergraduate degree (i.e., first or upper-second class) between 2004 and 2020 reveals that despite policy and institutional narratives and efforts concerning "equal opportunities" and "access", the attainment gap remained large, with a widening of the gap between 2004 and 2010 (the year the Equality Act was introduced) and a moderate narrowing between 2010 and 2020 (Figure 1). While certain factors have been suggested to account for this (e.g., due to COVID-19 emergency regulations leading to greater flexibility), it remains unclear whether it signals a long-term trend (Coridoli Mcmaster 2020).

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

Overall, among students living in the UK who received an undergraduate degree in 2020, 86% of white students received a first- or upper-second-class award, compared with 66.3% of Black students (65.9% for Black African students, 68.6% for Black Caribbean students, and 62.3% for Black Other students) (AdvanceHE, 2021). Data monitoring of employment trajectories also reveals that ten years after graduation, 80.4% of white graduates are in sustained employment, compared with 69.2% of Black African graduates, 77.4% of Black

Caribbean graduates, and 72.8% of graduates of any other Black background (Department of Education, 2022).

In view of these inequalities and drawing on the premise that the term "BME" is conceptually and methodologically unhelpful to promote effective interventions for diverse groups of students, our research aimed to contribute to the understanding of a particular group of students (Black undergraduates living in the UK) and to provide empirical accounts of their understanding of academic achievement. Academic achievement has been associated with a number of factors including schooling, students' personal traits, and the academic environment of tertiary institutions (e.g. departmental policies, staff attitudes and behaviour). For this study, we defined "Black students" as undergraduates who identified with family origins in Black Africa and/or the Caribbean (Gillborn, 2008). Our research question was: what are the qualitative differences in the ways Black students understand academic achievement? Before reporting the results of our study, we will first expand on why "BME" is an unhelpful term and what empirical work has previously been done in the UK context.

The "BME student": a construct of misrecognition

In this paper we argue that the widespread use of the term BME forms a construct of "misrecognition", as the term was proposed by Nancy Fraser. Referring to barriers to participatory parity, which correspond to two distinct species of injustice, Fraser notes the people can be impeded from economic structures that deny them resources they need for full participation but also that "people can also be prevented from interacting on terms of parity by institutionalized hierarchies of cultural value that deny them the requisite standing; in that case they suffer from status inequality or misrecognition" (Fraser, 2007, 20). Fraser's

approach locates the injustice in institutionalized hierarchies of cultural value that prevent some members of society from participating as peers in social interaction. Overcoming misrecognition can be achieved by replacing parity-impeding cultural norms with parity-fostering alternatives (Dahl et al, 2004, 377). Such endeavour entails a different understanding of the politics of recognition: status equality can be established by changing social institutions (Dahl et al, 2004). In British educational discourses, such parity-impeding norms are reflected in, and reinforced by, homogenising categorisations of students' as "BME students". Consequently, minoritised students' achievements are examined through a "BME" lens of subjectification that clusters heterogeneous groups on account of their non-whiteness. The initialism "BME" was first used in the 1970s. At that time, we argue, the employment of the term "ethnic" and the labelling of diverse groups as "minorities" was an act of historical and socio-political convenience. It attempted to erase the complexities of race and racism and to signify a smooth transition from a colonial, unequal past to a post-colonial, meritocratic present. The classifications subsequently used in the UK census comprise a composite of skin colour and national, regional, and continental origins (Fenton, 1996). The term "BME" is not just an arbitrary reduction of complex ethnic, cultural, and religious differences. We argue that labelling a group of students as a "minority", and labelling diverse groups as "ethnic", establishes misrecognition and a power relation between white students and other groups of students. It renders whiteness invisible, unscrutinised – the default – while "other" identities are seen as powerless, their positions, motives, and aspirations scrutinised, and their legitimacy interrogated. Language, including the language used to define groups of people, can produce material results, and it may perpetuate inequalities in and of itself. Referring to the social construction of subordination in US colleges and universities, Harper (2009, 9) deconstructs the term "minority students" by challenging minority status as a natural state of being and emphasising that students are

rendered minorities in institutional environments that sustain an overrepresentation of Whiteness. We therefore propose that, in the backdrop of what Rollock (2009, 518) described as persistent silence about the role of Whiteness and pervasiveness of racism, and parity-impeding cultural norms within HEs, more specific empirical work should be developed that fully and equitably recognises the historical and sociocultural parameters of the identities of those who are members of contemporary academic communities.

The experiences of Black students in British HE

Despite the existence of a substantial body of work on Black students in compulsory education (e.g., Strand, 2012; Demie, 2021), empirical work exclusively focusing on the experiences of Black students in British HE remains scarce (Arday & Jones, 2022). Early empirical accounts appeared in research that employed the term "Black" to include all so-called minority groups (Bird, 1996). This line of enquiry continued with a range of studies that included all minoritised groups in HE, including students of African and/or Caribbean parental heritage. These studies typically offered insights into the experiences of all minoritised students under the categorisation "BME", or more recently "Black, Asian, and minority ethnic" (BAME) – categorisations that reflect the demographic classification of student groups according to the UK Office for National Statistics. In these studies, students of African and/or Caribbean descent formed a subgroup within the wider group of "minority" students. Their experiences pointed to unmet expectations, financial and family difficulties, institutional factors, and feelings of isolation, hostility, and lack of belonging, leading to drop-out (Mirza, 2018). Other studies reported remote teaching staff, Islamophobia, and wider perceptions of exclusion (Osler, 1999) while Tomlinson (1983) highlighted the importance of parental involvement, teachers' positive expectations, and the role of the Church in Black female students' achievements in HE. Gender and its intersections with race

also appeared in Dumangane's (2017) study of Black African Caribbean men in elite institutions, which similarly emphasised the importance of faith as an influence on academic success. Most recent work, reaffirmed themes of (re-)traumatisation, loneliness and isolation (Arday & Jones, 2022), reported experiences that signal (non)belonging for Black students (Osbourne et al., 2021) or feeling on the outside (Arday, 2018) and pointed to the mechanisms of constructing racism as acceptable in higher institutions where Black students aspire to study, participate in academic life and succeed (Osbourne et al., 2023).

In this article, we contest the key parameters of the current attainment discourse regarding Black and other minoritised students. We concur with the critique of "gap talk" – "constant references to minority improvements which give a completely unrealistic spin to tiny yearly fluctuations" (Gillborn et al. 2017, 14). Additionally, we contest the term "BME" as unhelpful for educational research or interventions. In doing so, we shift our focus from "gaps" to a relational understanding of academic achievement. Moreover, we centre on the understandings of Black students themselves, thereby avoiding the problematic labelling of students as "minorities" and the homogenisation of different sets of student experiences.

Theoretical perspective

Our study is conceptualised to address the shortcomings of student deficiency models. We argue that the current policy discourse on "BME attainment gaps" (re)positions students within a deficit mode – albeit in less explicit terms – and remains silent about the power inequalities that exist inside and outside British HE institutions. Talk about gaps in students' achievement has been criticised as a "discursive strategy whereby statistical data are deployed to construct the view that things are improving, and the system is moving in the right direction" (Gillborn, 2008, 65). In contrast to the limitations of gap talk and its

overreliance on data and demographics, we draw on earlier research in HE that explored variation in the ways students experience teaching and learning. This research identified relationships between the quality of what students learn, how they perceive the teaching and learning context, and the characteristics of the students themselves, such as their prior experiences (Trigwell et al., 1999). It is within this line of enquiry that we explore understandings of academic achievement as a prerequisite for enhanced approaches to study and improved academic performance. We argue that such understandings may be crucial against the backdrop of racialised inequalities within historically White institutional environments in Britain.

We have chosen phenomenography informed by variation theory – referred to hereafter simply as "phenomenography" – to explore qualitative differences in Black students' understandings of academic achievement. We utilised the heuristic strength of phenomenography to explore variation within groups of students, and this methodological approach can provide meaningful accounts of Black students' achievements in HE. Phenomenography can be used as a pedagogical tool to transform HE: to move towards socially just opportunities, to learn together in a shared space, to break down the traditional hierarchical roles of teacher and researcher, and to focus on what is to be learnt by all, rather than on who is doing what. Moreover, variation does not only refer to how students understand their objects of learning or academic achievements; it may also refer to their *discernment* of aspects of the structures and norms of university life, including the oppressive structures and norms (e.g., racism, discrimination, stigmatisation, exclusion) that often determine the quality of students' educational experiences.

Methodology

The first author conducted the interviews in a regional access university in England. The focused primarily on teaching, and, with lower entry tariff points serving students from socio-economic backgrounds. Approximately 20% of the students were Black from various English hometowns with some commuting to their campus.

Purposive sampling sought to take account of the wide variation of students' experiences. Students therefore represented first, second and third year of undergraduate study, and were enrolled on a range of courses such as Psychology, Sociology, Law, Health, Art and Design, Education, Engineering and Computing. Students who responded to a call asking for participants were invited to attend an interview. The call invited those who identified with one of the conventional demographic categories widely used by the government and public institutions in England i.e., "Black", "Black British", "Black African", "Black Caribbean"; additionally, the call invited those of "African" and/or "Caribbean" heritage without reference to either "Black" or "British". We deliberately did not include the words "race", "ethnicity", "nationality" in the call for participants. Only participants who had grown up in the UK were eligible, thus excluding international students from the study. The term "mixed race" was not included in the call for participants due to its conceptual complications. However, one student who identified as mixed race and of Caribbean heritage attended an interview.

A cohort of 19 students from various disciplines within the institution participated in semi-structured interviews exploring their experiences of academic achievement. Consent was sought and given by means of a signed and dated informed consent form. Each interview focused on a particular instance or event where the student reported they had achieved something important, using probing questions to reveal the structure and meaning of their conception of academic achievement. Fourteen of the students identified as female, and five

as male. Six students referred to their background as "Black British" (of whom four added an African parental heritage), four as "Black African", three as "Black British Caribbean", and two as "Black British African". One interviewee identified as "mixed Black British and Caribbean", one as "Black Caribbean", one as "African and Black Portuguese", and one as "mixed race of Caribbean heritage". Although students were not asked about their family backgrounds, there were fragments of stories of first, second and third generation immigration to Britain. The study received Ethics approval by the University where the research was conducted.

We were both racialised as White and immigrants to England from continental Europe; the first author was also a teacher and researcher at the university while the second author was external to the university, joining at a later stage for the analysis of the data. The first author was an insider as part of the same academic community yet an outsider, due to privilege and power arising from the different identity positions and racialisation. Age and, in the case of most participants, gender were all being different from those of the students and, therefore exerted influence on how the interviews were conducted. Perhaps participants were less inclined to share their views, although several approached the interview as an opportunity to raise concerns or take ownership of their struggles and achievement. As White researchers we engaged in reflection on our positionality and background in conversation with interview participants, other university students and staff. We reflected on our actions and worked to understand the students' perspectives and what the study meant for our commitment to antiracist work in education.

Phenomenography (Marton & Booth, 1997) provided us with a suitable methodological approach to identify a wide breadth of voices within the group as well as to explore collective meaning in Black students' experiences, beyond deficit-centred discourses. We compiled the transcripts of the 19 interviews into a single document. Each of us then read the compiled

transcripts several times and independently marked "meaningful utterances". Both of us reread the extracts in the pool of meanings to explore similarities and differences *between* and *within* them. We agreed on five categories of description. Finally, our analysis moved from constructing categories of description to identifying the structure of the outcome space, depicting meaning and structure in the experiences of the students, and the dimensions of variation. We documented all the phases of the analysis.

Results

Black students' accounts of academic achievement pointed to the expansion of awareness from

A. gaining good grades and a good degree classification, to

B. successfully engaging with academic tasks through perseverance, to

C. gaining knowledge and understanding of the subject matter, to

D. achieving personal growth and development (for personal benefit and formation, self-awareness, self-confidence, self-fulfilment, self-monitoring, and self-regulation), to

E. contributing to society (for the benefit of others and society at large, during and beyond one's studies).

Each category is inclusive of aspects of the previous categories, but the core meaning in focus is different in each category. The extracts reproduced below are attributed to the anonymised participants (P01, P02, etc.).

Category A: gaining good grades and a good degree classification

In this category, students' understandings focus on gaining the best possible grades at module level, or the best possible degree classification. Academic achievement is about successful

outcomes of external assessment, at varying levels of achievement: passing exams and thus "moving forwards", or "getting good grades" or "getting a degree in general", whether in relation to future plans – "to do whatever you want to do after" university – or in relation to earlier experiences of unsuccessful education. Students' personal aims, in terms of achievements and judgements of success, are limited to gaining the desired grades and qualifications.

> To get good grades. Yes, to get good grades consistently, as well, I'd say. I think if you come out of uni, and you've got mediocre grades, and I know this is probably harsh, but I'm not sure there was a point in coming to uni, because I think by the end you need to prove that you did well enough, that you had enough achievement to do whatever you want to do after. (P01)

Grades represent feedback or proof – external validation from the university of one's effort and the outcomes of one's study, confirming that "you're doing well, you're on the right path'.

Category B: successfully engaging with academic tasks through perseverance
In this category, achieving academically is described as performing well in particular academic tasks through personal perseverance. This category includes but expands on the previous understanding of academic achievement in terms of gaining good grades and a good degree classification. Academic achievement is not only seen to be about fulfilling the external expectations of the university, but is also understood as subjective and relative to one's personal goals, circumstances, social expectations, and support. It is understood to require "time and effort" and "perseverance" in the face of difficulties. The focus has thus

shifted from external validation of one's academic achievement – "what you get on that paper" in the form of a grade or degree classification – to an internal "sense of pride" at completing academic tasks successfully in relation to one's social community. Such sense of pride might be further strengthened by facing adversities as in the following instance where a White, female lecturer fails to understand the importance and relevance of a final year dissertation project about colourism:

> I mentioned her. She is doing colourism, and her lecturer is obviously – she's white. The lecturer wasn't allowing her dissertation to go through ethics for quite a while. My friend was, like, "It's because she doesn't understand it". I never really thought about anything like that, but it was like she…. My friend would sit down and talk to her about what she was doing and how she was going to do it, and it just kept not even getting to ethics, let alone being turned away from ethics. I don't know the ins and outs of it, but her simply saying she doesn't understand it or, almost, kind of, recognise it, that impacted how far her work was getting. It impacted her own view on her own study […] I think she kind of felt like she wasn't being listened to, to be fair. So, I think she did put a complaint through, and then she went back to her supervisor, and they were able to work it out. She did get her study up, and she's now done all her participants. […] So, yes, she did persevere, and she's doing fine. (P01)

Some students explicitly focus on their identity in relation to their achievement: academic achievement is seen to bring self-fulfilment and self-validation as a Black student in relation to White student peers.

I think being part of a minority is against me. As a young Black person, it's almost rare to make it that far […] to be in this position. The fact that I've managed to make it here and the obstacles that were against me statistically haven't succeeded in pulling me back, that in itself is a sign that I've achieved something – I think it is an extraordinary burden. Maybe I'm wrong in saying this, but I think perhaps it's the mentality that we have to accept as Black people, we have to be prepared to shoulder the extraordinary burden.

Academic achievement is understood in terms of perseverance "against the odds", facing the "extra burden of competition and pressure" to better oneself as a representative of a Black community.

Category C: gaining knowledge and understanding of the subject matter

Here academic achievement is understood as learning about a subject matter, not only in the sense of knowledge and skills, but through an in-depth understanding and ability to apply that knowledge – beyond merely gaining good grades and certificates, and beyond the organised effort required to attain educational success. Understanding the specific subject matter about which one is learning has priority over gaining a good grade. The focus is on academic achievement as an outcome of learning and gaining knowledge both during and beyond university studies.

I would say that academic achievement is, firstly, coming out with a good result, ideally a first. If it's a 2:1 that's fine as well. I would say a good result and also having more knowledge in the subject, or whatever it is that you've been doing. It's

all well and good passing, but do you have the knowledge, and have you gained skills that you can then apply in the real world, after uni? (P08)

Academic achievement is seen to require learning about and understanding the subject, having an interest in it, gaining knowledge and skills in relation to it, enjoying and engaging in related academic tasks, and being able to use that knowledge and apply it in the real world beyond university.

Category D: achieving personal growth and development

Here academic achievement is seen in terms of personal formation. Achievement is about self-regulation and monitoring, fulfilment, confidence, self-awareness, and personal development and growth. The focus shifts from learning and knowledge to personal development and growth. This is underpinned by notions of self-validation as stemming from one's having dealt with adversity and managed to persevere. The focus is on self-awareness, an experienced increase in self-confidence due to learning, and development as a person as part of academic achievement over time. This process is discerned as a distinction in the temporal before-after dimension: "along the way", "more than before", "beyond just achieving a high grade".

To me, academic achievement is doing well for myself in terms of each module, performing to the best of my ability. Overall, it means that I've performed to the best of my ability. The best of my ability is not just 'I've tried. If it's bad or if it's good, that doesn't make a difference'. It's important that I've tried, and I've achieved a high mark, and I've learnt something along the way, and I've progressed in a sense. I know more or I'm more confident in something than I was before. For me, that's all part of

academic success. Confident in my ability to do whatever needs to be done. If it's to sit an exam, then confident to sit an exam. (P05)

The student is aware of the importance of achieving a "high mark", but also of learning something "along the way" and ultimately gaining confidence in one's abilities. The focus is on the nature of academic achievement in a "holistic sense" as "a kind of personal intellectual growth".

Category E: contributing to society

In this category, academic achievement is identified in terms of contributions to society for the benefit of others, beyond one's individual personal formation, development, and growth. Academic achievement is focused upon as a tool for social change or "liberation": going beyond one's own benefit for the benefit of others in the community and society, using one's academic education to make a difference, and educating others, both in one's immediate surroundings and in the wider African diaspora.

> I think every person, especially a young person, has that innate desire to contribute to their society or to their community. Especially if you're part of a diaspora, everybody I've spoken to who are from the diaspora has always said "I want to help my mum's country, my dad's country' or where they migrated from". Most of the time it's not a Western country, it's a third-world country. They want to help it develop to the standard that they will live in in the diaspora and are enjoying. That's why education is so important, because for us it's our education that will help us do that. It's important because I can see myself finally reaching a place where I'll be in a position that will help me to help my country. (P19)

Students' accounts point to an expansion of their relational awareness of social responsibility as persons-in-communities and members of society, both during and beyond their university studies. It also demonstrates an awareness of the social, cultural, and historical roots of their communities.

Dimensions of variation

The internal relationships between conceptions are reflected in the hierarchically inclusive outcome space of the categories of description, where the higher categories include the lower ones (Table 1). The expanding awareness of the meaning of academic achievement from category A to category E is marked by four dimensions of variation: the object of academic achievement; strategies for academic achievement; the purpose of academic achievement; and, agency and context in academic achievement. The qualitatively different ways in which Black British students conceptualise academic achievement vary between the categories, as illustrated along these four dimensions.

The object of academic achievement varies from (A) good grades to (B) successful university study in relation to required criteria and personal goals, to (C) learning and understanding the subject matter and applying one's knowledge and skills, to (D) personal growth and development, to (E) contributing to society for the benefit of others. For example, the following extract shows variation in the awareness of the object of academic achievement: a shift from grades and certificates as proof of successful study to the object of learning, a deeper understanding of the subject matter, and the application of knowledge and skills.

> I still think academic achievement is probably what you get on that paper, how you've done. But then, I think it's – I still think it's something like how you feel you've

achieved inside. But the more I look at it, the more I feel like it's just what you've done, like exam results, and stuff like that. But yes. Obviously, when I finish my third year of uni, whether I graduate with a first, a 2:1, a 2:2 or whatever, that's my academic achievement. But I think I'll feel a sense of pride inside, saying "I've graduated with whatever" whilst raising a child single-handedly, but I still had support and help from others. So, that's what I'd sort of summarise as academic achievement. (P11)

Strategies for academic achievement vary from (A) consistent effort, work, and completion of tasks to (B) organised effort, perseverance, and dedication in the face of the obstacles and pressures of being Black, to (C) engaging with knowledge and understanding, discovering underlying reasons, and applying one's knowledge beyond university, to (D) doing well and exposing oneself to new learning situations, to (E) having a sense of purpose and using one's degree for the benefit of others. The extract below shows implicit variation in awareness of the nature of the process of academic achievement and the conditions necessary for achievement. It shows this by contrasting easy versus difficult, formal versus autonomous approaches to study.

Academic achievement means succeeding in your chosen course or your chosen module. For me, by success, I feel like that is a mixture of things. I feel like, in order to be successful, you have to be dedicated. At university, dedication is something that I think everyone struggles with. It's much more relaxed compared to formal education, if that makes sense. It's much more autonomous. I just feel like academic success is the balance that you've managed to dedicate yourself to putting in hours

revising this topic or putting in effort so that, if you don't understand a topic, you don't just leave it. You chase it up and try to get help, you search for solutions. (P05)

The purpose of academic achievement varies from (A) a vague sense of moving forwards or after one's degree to (B) its personal benefits in terms of future employment, to (C) succeeding in academic tasks and applying one's knowledge to everyday life in the real world, to (D) self-fulfilment and having confidence in academic and non-academic contexts, to (E) changing society by liberating others through education. The response from a Law, female student illustrates how the purpose of academic achievement involves not only meeting external expectations or personal goals but also exceeding self-actualisation and self-improvement as an individual, extending to the socially oriented, relational purpose of contributing to society:

> I think my greatest achievement has been being able to place why I'm doing law. Like I said, I'm of African descent. Ghana, where I'm from, FGM [female genital mutilation] happens in parts of Ghana. Even as a young child, when I was made aware that such things happen in Ghana, I've always felt uneasy about it, it didn't feel right to me. Why should girls be put through that? Growing up as somebody who has desire to study law, I want to stop that. I want to help in some way. Finally, being in a place where I'm learning about it, learning about the law that governs it, and what I can do as a lawyer or as an advocate to help, if not stop it and lessen the occurrences of it, is where I feel like I've finally achieved something. I've finally made a step towards where I've always seen myself since I was a little girl. I think that was my achievement, that I'm one step further towards my eventual goal. I think every

person, especially a young person, has that innate desire to contribute to their society or to their community. (P03)

Agency and context in academic achievement varies from (A) the absence of agency in academic achievement as externally determined to (B) the presence of agency in relation to externally determined achievement, to (C) the presence agency in self-determined academic achievement, to (D) active agency in self-determined academic achievement, to (E) complex agency-social structure relationships in self-determined, socially interactive academic achievement. These positions represent an incremental expansion of awareness of agency and a realisation that there is a complex relationship between the (racialised) individual and the context/structure. The quote below illustrates an awareness of one's position not only within the institutional environment but also in society in relation to knowledge and wider learning:

> If I had to absolutely add anything, I'd say just making learning more inclusive. The more inclusive it is for us, the more interested we are, the more engaged we are with the module and therefore the easier it is to study. If I'm learning about things that relate to me as a Black person or people in my society, I'm more engaged in what I'm learning about. I'm more willing and happier to learn, it doesn't feel so difficult to study. That in turn helps me to achieve a better grade. Inclusive study. (P19)

Each dimension of variation has different values (Marton 2015, 47). Table 1 shows the values along the dimension of variation in each category, thereby differentiating between categories. [TABLE 1 HERE]

The students' conceptions and their structural relationships are presented in an outcome space of five categories of description. The categories are structured from A to E in a hierarchy of inclusiveness, where higher categories are inclusive of lower ones. This describes the widening of students' collective awareness in its increasing sophistication and discernment of the complex relationships between the meaning of academic achievement, its aspects, and the related contexts. Each category entails a referential aspect – the meaning content in focus – and a structural aspect – the way in which it is structured. The key content of the conception (referential aspect) in the foreground of awareness shifts from (A) grades and degree classifications to (B) personal effort and perseverance, to (C) the understanding and application of knowledge, to (D) personal growth, to (E) contributing to society. In each case, the characteristics focused on in the lower categories are discerned but not foregrounded, and they recede into the background of awareness.

Discussion

In contrast to dominant policy discourses on achievement, which place Black and other minoritised student populations in a position of deficit, we have focused on Black students' own accounts and the variation in collective meanings within those accounts. We have therefore highlighted the importance of providing empirical accounts of the experiences of historically underserved communities as well as placing a decisive focus on variation in the experiences of students *within* the group. This provides an alternative conceptual and methodological approach that contests the homogenisation of the experiences of students labelled as "minorities", "underachieving", "in need", or "hard to reach" and the misrecognitions arising from such homogenisation. Moreover, our study contributes an understanding of four potential areas for improvement, reported in this article as dimensions

of variation.

The first dimension is the question of what Black students define as the object of academic achievement. A focus on the object of achievement from the students' perspective foregrounds the different ways in which students experience that object. This opens teaching up to the aspects on which students themselves focus, which can in turn help students to expand their awareness of the object of learning. This is an important area of work if universities aspire to address disparities in understanding between students and the formal curriculum. Black students' accounts (e.g., in the Category E, P19 extract above) point to disparities in this regard and express their quest for epistemic inclusivity and ways of learning that will motivate and reward learners of all backgrounds.

The second dimension is students' perceived strategies for academic achievement. Students' accounts reveal a rich picture characterised by organised effort, perseverance, and dedication, leading to a will to engage with new learning situations and gain a sense of purpose for the benefit of oneself and others. It is worthwhile to explore whether such strategies are acknowledged and rewarded in the context of historically White institutions or clash of values and priorities results in lack of acknowledgement and misrecognition.

The third dimension is Black students' understanding of the purpose and benefit of academic achievement, which can reveal aspects of their motivation for learning and engaging with their studies. More importantly, Black students' accounts demonstrate expanding levels of awareness in relation to their own agency and how they relate to their academic context – the fourth dimension of variation in our results. By contrast with recent empirical accounts of minoritised university students' expectations regarding future employment, where they

appear resigned to structural inequalities (Bhopal et al., 2020), our study reveals incrementally expanding levels of awareness, from a lack of agency and the acceptance of externally determined meanings of academic achievement to self-determined, socially interactive academic achievement that attests to a complex awareness of the relationship between agency and social structure, including the student's own individual potential to question, challenge, or change characteristics of the structure. This individual development, and the assumption of agentic positions within the structure, signals a more meaningful trajectory for the lives and aspirations of Black students, and it warrants a different approach to enhance their personal and academic experiences, at university and beyond.

Perhaps not all of these dimensions have been considered on the HE curriculum, but they are all relevant to students' life worlds, as is apparent in our study. This means that the HE curriculum can be revisited in order to make the intended objects of learning relevant for all students, not just for the racialised white majority. In light of the above, our study corroborates the importance of efforts to revisit the curriculum in pursuit of initiatives for epistemic justice and tools for more meaningful student engagement. It is important, however, to acknowledge that while such efforts can offer a pathway for genuine change, they can also be co-opted to reinforce existing epistemic inequities.

In this study we have demonstrated that phenomenography can reveal different implicit structures of collective awareness, along with their underlying ontological and epistemological commitments, which structure the different ways in which university experiences are understood. Our study therefore has theoretical significance thanks to its conceptual development of phenomenography and variation theory, as well as educational significance for the enhancement of teaching and learning in HE in ways that are equitable

and socially just. Teachers must make sense of competing models and theoretical and pedagogical frameworks to design teaching in order to make the object of learning available to all students. This requires reflection on what is valuable for students to learn about the object in relation to what they already do and/or do not understand about it. It involves considering the different frameworks, and their underlying world views with different ontological and epistemological claims, in a manner that does justice to the integrity of each framework as part of social reality. It also involves making decisions about those frameworks' truth and educational value. Moreover, teachers must identify what is necessary for students to learn to help them grow as persons in their communities, as local and global citizens, and in relation to their identities and world views regarding the ontological nature of reality. Furthermore, students' discernment of the object of learning involves the discernment of different values and world views within their discipline. Phenomenography has predominantly engaged with the object of learning and helped to advance the understanding of qualitatively different ways of engaging with teaching and learning. Our study highlights phenomenography's potential to reveal qualitative differences in the ways students experience and understand a range of phenomena that are intertwined with the object of learning but also go beyond it. Such a broadening of the object of research (the phenomenon) can harness phenomenography's full potential as a theory of awareness *and* a theory of learning, with learning being a subset of awareness (Åkerlind, 2018).

Conclusion

Our study offers an account of meaning and structure in Black students' experiences of academic achievement. Historically White institutions in the UK have a long history of pathologising Black students' experiences in higher education and misrecognising their right to participate and succeed in higher education. Addressing how they might gain from

meaningful educational engagements requires commitment and a willingness to reflect critically on current practices and existing power relations. In addition, we argue that variation in Black students' experiences matters, and we have provided an account of such variation in the context of a widened access HE institution in England. Although our study focused exclusively on undergraduates, the issues are likely to affect students at other levels of study. Institutions need to examine institutional barriers to student achievement, develop trust with Black students, and establish the necessary conditions to support their achievement, based on recognition of and reward for their rich sociohistorical heritage, ontological perspectives, and agentic positions.

Data availability statement

Due to ethical restrictions, supporting data is not available.

References

AdvanceHE (2021). *Equality in higher education: student statistical report 2021*, London: AdvanceHE. 28 October.

Arday J. (2018). Understanding Mental Health: What Are the Issues for Black and Ethnic Minority Students at University? *Social Sciences, 7*(10), 196.

Arday, J., & Jones, C. (2022). Same storm, different boats: the impact of COVID-19 on Black students and academic staff in UK and US higher education. *Higher education*, 1-22.

Bhopal, K., Myers, M., & Pitkin, C. (2020). Routes through higher education: BME students and the development of a "specialisation of consciousness". *British Educational Research Journal*, *46*(6), 1321-1337.

Bird, J. (1996). *Black Students and Higher Education: Rhetorics and Realities*. SRHE/Open

  University Press.

Coridoli Mcmaster, N. (2021). Ethnicity awarding gaps in UK higher education in 2019/20.

  AdvanceHE report. 13 October. Available at: https://www.advance-

  he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/ethnicity-awarding-gaps-uk-higher-education-201920.

Dahl, H. M., Stoltz, P., & Willig, R. (2004). Recognition, redistribution and representation in

  capitalist global society: An interview with Nancy Fraser. *Acta Sociologica*, *47*(4),

  374-382.

Department of Education (2022). Destinations and earnings of graduates after higher

  education. 30 August. Available at: https://www.ethnicity-facts-

  figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/after-education/destinations-and-

  earnings-of-graduates-after-higher-education/latest#data-sources

Demie, F. (2021) The experience of Black Caribbean pupils in school exclusion in England,

  Educational Review, *73*(1), 55-70.

Dumangane, C. (2017). The significance of faith for Black men's educational

  aspirations. *British Educational Research Journal*, *43*(5), 875-903.

Gillborn, D. (2008). Coincidence or conspiracy? Whiteness, policy and the persistence of the

  Black/White achievement gap. *Educational Review*, *60*(3), 229-248.

Gillborn, D., Demack, S., Rollock, N., & Warmington, P. (2017). Moving the goalposts:

  Education policy and 25 years of the Black/White achievement gap. *British*

  Educational Research Journal, *43*(5), 848–874.

Fenton, S. (1996). Counting ethnicity: Social groups and official categories. In R. Levitas &

  W. Guy (Eds.), Interpreting official statistics (pp. 143–165). London: Routledge.

Fraser, N. (2007). Re-framing justice in a globalizing world. In T. Lovell (Ed.),

(Mis)recognition, social inequality and social justice: Nancy Fraser and Pierre Bourdieu (pp. 17–35). Abingdon: Routledge.

Harper, S. R. (2012). Race without racism: How higher education researchers minimize racist institutional norms. *The Review of Higher Education*, *36*(1), 9-29.

Hurtado, S. (1992). The campus racial climate: Contexts of conflict. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *63*(5), 539-569.

Marton, F., & Booth, S. A. (1997). *Learning and Awareness*. Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates.

Marton, F. (2015). *Necessary conditions of learning*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Mirza, H. S. (2018). Black bodies "out of place" in academic spaces: Gender, race, faith and culture in post-race times. In: Arday, J., Mirza, H. (eds) Dismantling Race in Higher Education (pp. 175-193). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

Noguera, P.A. (2017). Introduction to "Racial Inequality and Education: Patterns and Prospects for the Future". *The Educational Forum*, *81*(2), 129-135.

Osbourne, L., Barnett, J., & Blackwood, L. (2021). "You never feel so Black as when you're contrasted against a White background": Black students' experiences at a predominantly White institution in the UK. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, *31*(4), 383-395.

Osbourne, L., Barnett, J., & Blackwood, L. (2023). Black students' experiences of "acceptable" racism at a UK university. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, *33*(1), 43-55.

Osler, A. (1999). The Educational Experiences and Career Aspirations of Black and Ethnic Minority Undergraduates. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *2*(1), 39-58.

Reay, D., Davies, J., David, M., & Ball, S. J. (2001). Choices of degree or degrees of

choice? Class, "race" and the higher education choice process. *Sociology*, *35*(4), 855–874.

Richardson, J. T. E. (2008). The attainment of ethnic minority students in UK higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, *33*(1), 33–48.

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 & Higher Education*, *39*(2), 278–291.

Rollock, N. (2012) Unspoken rules of engagement: navigating racial microaggressions in the academic terrain. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 25*(5), 517-532.

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2006). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Singh, G. (2011). *Black and minority ethnic (BME) students' participation in higher education: improving retention and success*. Higher Education Academy. Available at: https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/black-and-minority-ethnic-bme-students-participation-higher-education-improving.

Smith, W. A., Allen, W. R., & Danley, L. L. (2007). "Assume the position... you fit the description" psychosocial experiences and racial battle fatigue among African American male college students. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *51*(4), 551-578.

Strand, S. (2012). The White British-Black Caribbean achievement gap: Tests, tiers and teacher expectations. *British Educational Research Journal*, *38*(1), 75-101.

Tomlinson, S. (1983). Black women in higher education: case studies of university women in Britain. Race, class and education, 66-80.

Trigwell, K., Prosser, M., & Waterhouse, F. (1999). Relations between teachers' approaches to teaching and students' approaches to learning. *Higher Education*, *37*(1), 57-70.

Warmington, P. (2020). Critical race theory in England: impact and opposition. *Identities*,

27(1), 20-37.