An evaluation of the experiences of the hidden curriculum of Black and minority ethnic undergraduate health and social care students at a London university.

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Black and minority ethnic (BME) students are less likely to achieve a first or upper-class second degree than White students. This evaluation investigated the experiences of BME Health and Social Care students at a London university of the hidden curriculum, thematically analysed through a critical race lens. Four overarching themes were identified, (1) super-visible ethnicity, (2) the negative depiction of BME lived experiences, (3) self-depreciation and self-confidence and (4) separation. Recommendations at an institution-level are made in the areas of staff diversity, language support, student registration experiences and canteen costs. Recommendations at a course-level are made in the areas of co-creation of the curriculum, student belonging, academic and literacy skill development. The recommendations are underpinned by a critical pedagogy, including culturally sensitive teaching strategies and the development of meaningful staff-student partnerships. The recommendations made may be applicable to other Higher Education Institutions with a diverse student cohort where the attainment gap is prevalent.

Introduction

This paper presents an evaluation of the experiences of the hidden curriculum of Black and minority ethnic (BME) undergraduate Health and Social Care (H&SC) students studying at a London University. This introductory section provides a background and rationale, the aim, scope and the context within which this evaluation took place.

The degree attainment gap

The degree attainment gap between White British and BME undergraduate students in UK universities is well known (Equality Challenge Unit [ECU], 2015). Sixty-four percent of the students from the London University in which this study took place are from a BME group (London Metropolitan University [London Met], 2019b) with a reported 25% gap in those achieving a first or upper second-class degree compared to White British students (81% vs 56%); the H&SC degree reports a 35% attainment gap (67% vs 32%) (London Met, 2018).

Across Higher Education this attainment gap remains statistically significant even when controlling for prior attainment, subject, age, gender, disability, deprivation, type of institution, mode of study and term-time accommodation (Broecke and Nicholls, 2007). The ECU (2016) recognise racial inequalities as a concern in the sector with racism woven into everyday society, influencing everyday situations, processes and behaviours. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) need to harness the talents of students from all ethnic backgrounds (ECU, 2016) and not adopt a student deficit model (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2015).

The hidden curriculum

Since the 1960s, education has undergone a conceptual change from being teacher to student-focused (Semper and Blasco, 2018); in the 1970s, arguably as a result of this change, scholars discovered a pervasive hidden curriculum (Vallance, 1974; Overly, 1970; Kohlberg and Mayer, 1972; Apple and King, 1977). The character of this initial discovery of the hidden curriculum revolved around notions of social control, instilling values of socialisation in obedience with and docility to the preservation of traditional class structures (Vallance, 1974). The notion of the hidden curriculum has since expanded from its social control origins to encompass debates around the detachment of *being* from education, the differences between curriculum as designed and curriculum in action and the dilemmas of the widening participation agenda (Kohlberg and Mayer, 1972; Barnett and Coate 2005; Bennett and Brady 2012; Semper and Blasco, 2018).

The hidden curriculum includes learning through relationships, the learning environment, social norms, values, beliefs, practices and routines. The influences of the hidden curriculum are often unintentional but can impact upon student feelings of belonging, their self-image and their interactions with teachers and peers, all playing a part in student outcomes (Miller, 2016; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015).

Our engagement with the term hidden curriculum is centred on the hidden curriculum's treatment within the critical pedagogy tradition, which seeks to understand power relations in educational settings and to connect what happens in the classroom to broader societal contexts (Apple, 1990; Giroux and Purpel, 1972; Giroux and Penna, 1979; Hofmann Nemiroff, 1992; Apple, 2004; Semper and Blasco, 2018). This

approach was enhanced in the 1980s by studies that looked at the factor of race and gender in the hidden curriculum (Brandt, 1986, Tierney, 1982, Willis, 1981).

Critical theorists such as Shor (1992) hold the view that the curriculum is socially and culturally constructed benefiting dominant groups within society. The hidden curriculum is not only influenced by society but has the power to shape society as students move into their professional lives. Through such lenses, the hidden curriculum "can be brought to light as a middle-class, male, and white-dominated phenomenon" (Skelton, 1997 p. 184). In this evaluation, we take an analytical rather than descriptive approach to the hidden curriculum (Hofmann Nemiroff, 1992; Giroux, 1983). Grounding these critical approaches within this study, we examine the student experience of the seemingly neutral H&SC curricula to uncover "the sometimes-exclusionary processes of educational transactions" (Barnett and Coate, 2005. p. 35).

Taking a critical race approach

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has risen to prominence in the field of education over the last 25 years (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). CRT questions the role education institutions play in perpetuating social disparities between dominant and marginalised racial groups (Solorzano and Yosso, 2000). CRT is valuable in the field of education to support HEIs to work towards an inclusive curriculum.

CRT in England, whilst still in its infancy compared to its use in the USA (Warminton, 2020), has gathered pace since a seminal paper from Gillborn in 2005 presenting an analysis of English education policy through a CRT lens. Gillborn stated that "although race inequity may not be a planned and deliberate goal of education policy neither is it accidental" representing a tacit intentionality (Gillborn, 2005, p.

485). Gillborn concludes that it is the unsaid privileges offered to white people by the education system and indeed society that perpetuate racism by disadvantaging those from a BME group.

CRT postulates that racism is an inherent part of society, negatively impacting marginalised groups (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). CRT talks of property rights or ownership (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995); Hiraldo (2010) provides an example of this tenet, highlighting that ownership of curriculum design and evaluation is in the hands of academics, where BME groups are underrepresented (ECU, 2015). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995, p.52) challenge claims of equal-opportunity stating that this equates to "colour-blindness" with beliefs of meritocracy ignoring systematic racial inequities that exist. CRT advocates the use of narratives and counter-narratives, giving recognition of the experiential knowledge of marginalised groups.

Rationale

The University is committed to equity and inclusion "providing a learning community in which the rights and dignity of all individuals are respected…free from discrimination" (London Met, 2019c, p.3) with teaching staff asked to "promote equality and diversity through their teaching programmes and through relationships with students" (London Met, 2019c, p.7).

McDuff, Tatam, Beacock and Ross (2018) emphasise the importance of a critical race perspective when exploring the BME attainment gap to support understanding of the experiences of BME students. The evaluation is framed as the following research question: What are the experiences of the hidden curriculum of BME H&SC students from a critical race perspective? The aim is to support the

deconstruction of normative practices that may oppress BME students, making recommendations for change.

Method

This section covers the methods used in this curriculum evaluation.

Approach and participants

This evaluation was exploratory in nature, developed from a constructivist perspective, understanding that students construct their own knowledge and realities based on their experiences (Elliot, et al., 2000). Two focus groups took place in February 2020, lasting on average 53 minutes, over a lunch period with lunch was provided. A semi-structured format ensured that data was collected concerning the evaluation topic. Participants were recruited by email invitation; 11 students took part.

Table 1. Participant characteristics

Participant	Gender	Age range	Ethnicity	Level of study
1	Female	46 to 50 years	Black - Caribbean	Level 4
2	Female	18 to 21 years	Black - African	Level 5
3	Female	22 to 25 years	Black - Caribbean	Level 5
4	Female	22 to 25 years	Black - African	Level 5
5	Female	26 to 30 years	Black - African	Level 5
6	Male	22 to 25 years	Black - African	Level 6
7	Female	31 to 35 years	Black - Other	Level 5
8	Female	18 to 21 years	Black - African	Level 4
9	Female	22 to 25 years	Black - African	Level 4
10	Female	41 to 45 years	Black - African	Level 6
11	Female	41 to 45 years	Bangladeshi	Level 6

Data management and analysis

Focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data was held securely on password-locked computers. Hard files were transferred to electronic copy (scanned) and then safely disposed of. A formal thematic analysis was conducted (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to look for common themes within the diversity of experiences and perspectives, grounding the themes in the data. The thematic analysis followed six stages: -

1. Transcription of the interviews

2. Familiarisation with the data involving reading and rereading the interview transcripts and qualitative comments

3. Initial coding

4. Theme identification

5. Theme review and development of higher level candidate themes

6. Identification of relationships and patterns, checked against the original data

The resulting themes, patterns and relationships were reviewed and interpreted through a critical race lens informed by CRT, looking to the broader literature to examine student experiences, moving beyond theoretical discussions to make recommendations for practice (Baber, 2017).

Ethical considerations

When interacting with the research participants, we sought to avoid the reproduction of existing hierarchical relations by creating a horizontal interview setting (Steinberg and Down, 2020). This was reflected in the 'dialogue friendly' arrangement of the

classroom furniture, the provision of food and beverages, the listening-orientated interview style and allowing students to attend in groups of friends. Moreover, there was no prior history of a hierarchical relationship between the students and interviewers.

We hold the view expressed by Matusov, Marjanovic-Shane and Gradovsk (2019) that truth can be found in a critical hetero-discursive dialogue of diverse participants and communities with diverse foci; We are a diverse team of authors, of different ages, genders, roles, backgrounds and ethnicities, coming together to conduct and analyse the interviews.

Despite our efforts to mitigate against replicating existing power relations, we acknowledge that the notion of 'power-over' is still likely to have been present in this evaluation in our initiation and termination of the interview, posing questions, and our monopoly of interpreting the meaning (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018).

Crucial to breaking down existing power relations in the research is informing students about the details of research (Phillips, 2013). However, this laid bare an ethical dilemma; it has been suggested that discussion of the attainment gap with students may result in students internalising the issue, thus perpetuating the attainment gap (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2015). Thus, caution was employed when discussing this topic with the students. Also, care was taken to ensure that the presentation of the results of this study did not perpetuate a student deficit model (Universities UK and National Union of Students, 2019). This evaluation received a favourable ethical opinion from the London Met School of Social Professions.

Results

Four overarching themes were identified. It is likely that some of the identified themes are pertinent to the student body as a whole and not isolated to BME students; they are presented here as they were important to the BME students involved in this research. A narrative for each theme is now presented in relation to the extant literature.

Super visible ethnicity

Lecturers of colour were often racialised by participants whereas White was not mentioned when referring to White lecturers; "And we have a black guy, *Name*, one of the lecturers"; "*Name*, being an Asian woman"; "Like *Name* [White Male], who's our module leader". It can be inferred that Whiteness was perceived to be normal whereas BMEs were the exception; a focus group respondent stated "there's not a lot of Black lecturers"; this was met with agreement from others in the focus group.

Seventeen per cent of academic staff in the UK are BME (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2020). Twenty-seven per cent of staff from the University are BME; however, the distinction between academic and non-academic staff is not clear (London Met, 2020a); whilst this is far greater than the UK figure it is not reflective of the H&SC student body of which 86% are BME (I Price 2020, personal communication, 4 May 2020). CRT contends that structures within society have a powerful influence perpetuating subtle racism; the underrepresentation of BME teaching staff can be related to this tenet. From a constructivist perspective the prominence of White staff may contribute to the construction of this social norm. In addition, CRT highlights

property rights, in this case, as identified in the Introduction, ownership of curriculum design and evaluation is in the hands of, predominantly, White academics.

Negative depiction of BME lived experiences

Being from a BME group was problematised, whereas Whiteness either appeared unmentioned, neutral, part of the solution or as a means of comparison. Students believed that nursing and caring roles were the job of BMEs; "in other unis some courses are more attracted to maybe the White group…I think H&SC is predominantly Black people because we tend to do most of the caring, the nursing." This was met with acknowledgement from other focus group members. This emphasises how wider society influences student views and experiences and is evidence of stereotyping and speaks to the CRT tenet that racism is woven into society.

BMEs were depicted as poor and unhealthy within the curriculum; "[the course] focusses more on the social determinant of health and how it effects the Black communities. We are…the ones most affected because most of us are from poor backgrounds"; "when they talk about inequalities, why do you always feel like the bottom of the gradients." Whilst it is important to present health inequalities as part of a H&SC degree, this portrayal of BME groups as deprived may reinforce negative stereotypes (Steele, 1997).

On one-hand students were taught that BME groups were poorer yet University food was seen as unaffordable (although not explicitly linked); "I normally try to bring my meals because I found out that meals in the University are so expensive"; "the uni

could provide sandwiches, free sandwiches for students who…genuinely can't afford, because it's too much."

It may be argued that food provision is outside of the curriculum; however, we content that institutional ethos is relevant as a context dimension of curriculum and high canteen costs bring in to question the institution's understanding of the lived experiences of its students. The critical approach to hidden curriculum points to the existence of structural factors outside the immediate environment of the classroom as important forces in influencing both the day-to-day experiences and the outcomes of the schooling process (Giroux, 1983). This evaluation highlighted the student concerns of the high price of food in the University canteen. Though this concern of the student was physically outside of the immediate environment of the classroom, an emerging body of literature has been built up around such concerns and highlight the negative implications for psychosocial health and academic performance (Broton and Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Bruening, Argo and Payne-Sturges, 2017; Raskind, Haardörfer, and Berg, 2018).

There is a broader context here, where food poverty is one of the challenges BME students face whilst they "strive to survive" university life (Mirza, 2018, p. 3) and gain what is considered a good degree. Constructivism postulates that learners construct meaning through their personal experiences and knowledge; the students involved in this research are depicted in the taught curriculum as poor; the University has the stated aim to support students from quintiles 1 and 2 on the index of multiple deprivation (LondonMet, 2019a), yet the canteen costs are suggested to be expensive for the students they are trying to reach, perpetuating the problem. The importance of the price

of food may be questioned, as students could bring in their own or eat elsewhere, however, this is an example of an institutional decision that is, albeit unintentionally, favouring those that can afford the canteen food.

Self-depreciation and self-confidence

Students problematise and 'responsibilise' themselves to the extent that systemic issues were marginalised. This theme included several sub-themes which are now covered.

Navigating enrolment

Students faced issues navigating the enrolment and registration process experiencing delays in enrolment, challenges with module registrations, confirmation of timetables and accessing the University IT systems; "it wasn't really good at the beginning", with many questioning "why that was happening." One student said "I didn't want to come here anymore because it was too much for me." Ten per cent of UK BME students quit university in their first year, 3% higher than the average (Social Marketing Foundation, 2017). Early enrolment and registration issues may be a determinant of this; this is an area for future research.

Assumed IT skills

A further sub-theme was the assumed IT skills of students, an unstated prerequisite of the H&SC degree and potentially an institution-wide assumption; "some people are still struggling to get on to their email"; "I had a friend in this other university...I had to beg him to maybe use his…access [to search for papers]. I realise that *the University* have access but…I didn't know how to use it. Then maybe they should teach us the basics

from first year." This theme is supported in the wider literature with Curry (2001) identifying that students blame themselves for not possessing the unstated prerequisite academic skills and literacy; BME students find themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide (Sharma and Turner, 2020).

Linguistic barriers to communication

Some students did not want to speak out in class for fear that their accent would be laughed at, or ridiculed in some way, and a belief that they were less able than other students; "if I say [something] maybe they will laugh at me or they will judge me"; "…sometimes you could go…oh they're smarter than me or they articulate themselves better than how I articulate myself." This may come from a desire to mask their identity to avoid negative stereotypes (Morrison, Machaldo and Blackburn, 2019) with disconnection from the situation a protective measure (Steele, 1997).

The language barrier continued from the classroom into the assessment process with some students feeling "picked on" and unfairly treated; "…when they are checking our work, they don't really consider that English is not our first language"; "…even though we get the feedback, grades seem to surprise us and then when we actually talk to the lecturer and show them, define then what we've done and the comments they've gave us, it's not really matching." This feeling is supported by the National Union of Students (NUS) who identified in their 2011 report, Race for Equality, that a significant minority of BME students find it difficult to communicate with teaching staff because of language barriers, particularly students whose first language is not English; this speaks to the CRT tenet of colour-blindness. The NUS (2011) go on to report that this issue can be exacerbated if teaching staff lack understanding of the diverse range of

academic and language skills in the classroom, resulting in a reluctance of some students to seek support for fear of perceived bias in feedback and assessment, thus compounding the problem.

Grades were deemed important for most of the students within the focus groups, above all else, potentially reflecting an impact of neoliberalism on higher education and the importance accorded to a 'good degree' over personal growth and development (Maisuria and Cole, 2017), viewing education as an act to simply gain a [better] job. It could be argued that having high ambition (Law, Finney and Swann, 2012) but not seeing this reflected in grade achievement may impact on student self-confidence and self-esteem, continuing the cycle of self-depreciation.

BME students at HEIs report feeling a lack of power and influence to bring about change. This disempowerment may compound a sense of not belonging and not wanting to speak out, as seen in this evaluation (Hammond, Williams, Walker and Norris, 2019). Power dynamics are at the heart of CRT. If BME students feel disempowered then action is required to redress this as otherwise it will serve to perpetuate the systemic racism that exists and continues to manifest in gaps in degree outcomes, which in turn will continue to perpetuate systemic racism in society.

We are lazy

"Sometimes we need to look inwards and see where the problem is coming from so it's not mainly the University, sometimes it's…the student, we are lazy... So sometimes the problem lies with us, actually, the Blacks"; this perception of laziness demonstrates the internalising of failure rather than implicating systemic failure; it also demonstrates the

impact of stereotyping (Reyna, 2000). This perceived laziness could also be related to a lack of engagement through a disconnectedness with the taught curriculum, maybe from the negative depiction of BME groups within the curriculum content. Another possible explanation, as highlighted in the preceding theme, is that this perceived laziness may actually be misconstrued and could be a defence mechanism, disconnecting from the classroom experience to protect one's self-esteem.

Separation

Some felt that there was a separation between different ethnic groups in the classroom, although this was not a consistent view. The cause of the in-class divide was once again internalised by some:

> "it's not even the Whites. I think it's mostly about us, maybe about me. I could say I relate more with the Blacks, OK, in my class…there's segregation. The Whites sit together, the Blacks sit together. We don't really mix but I would prefer that we mix but then it could be my own issues as well."

Natural-separation by religion or ethnicity is seen in other education institutions (McKeown, Stringer and Cairns, 2015); "the row is just the white and the blacks in this corner, why, this is a university. Shouldn't we stop that." One student reflected on this separation with historical connotations saying "it's supposed to be the "other way around", meaning that Whites should be separating themselves from BME students. This speaks to the subtle racism that exists in today's society supporting the CRT tenet that racism is ordinary, perpetuated by unintentional classroom separation. Some students did not support this view with one student commenting "I'm not sure about the

other courses…in my class I think they're different peoples and we all come together"
suggesting that integration can be achieved with good classroom management.

Discussion

This evaluation set out to understand the experiences of BME students of the hidden curriculum, thematically analysed and considered through a critical race lens informed by CRT. Universities should be fully inclusive with students free from discrimination; however, the sector must acknowledge that the opposite might be true. To address race equality in higher education, academia must acknowledge race as a legitimate object of scrutiny both in scholarship and policy (Arday and Mirza, 2018). Henriques and Abushouk (2018) call for student solidarity and a student movement to decolonise academia from within. CRT emphasises the importance of narratives; this evaluation has given the students included a voice on their experiences in relation to race. The identified themes have been related to the tenets of CRT in the Results section. What follows moves beyond theory, linking the findings to recommendations for practice (Barber, 2017).

Pedagogy

The H&SC degree course specification states that:

> Consistent with a commitment to producing graduates who challenge
> exclusionary and discriminatory practice and who bring about lasting social
> change, critical pedagogy will be the dominant teaching and learning approach
> throughout the course (London Met, 2020b, p.21).

Critical Pedagogy is a teaching approach which aims to empower students to question and challenge the dominant beliefs and practices within society. Marginalised students need to critically analyse environments and processes that promote racial inequalities (Ladson-billings, 1995), with the confidence and skills to do so, a lack of which is highlighted in the results of this evaluation.

Student culture and lived experience should influence both the teaching and the learning environment. Students need to feel that their institution appreciates their culture (Bamford and Pollard, 2019); the *negative depiction of BME lived experiences,* the identified *language barrier* (included within the *self-depreciation and self-confidence* theme) and the feelings of *separation* suggest that improvements could be made in this area. Critical pedagogy should seek to make the curriculum relevant to all student groups and be reflective of students culture, values, customs and beliefs, ensuring cultural integrity (Howard and Terry, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Milner, 2011). Advocates for critical pedagogy assert that social justice is inherent in teaching and learning (Coté, Day and De Peuter, 2007); this pedagogical approach underpins the recommendations made in this section.

Redressing the distribution of power

Students in this study perhaps felt disempowered by the treatment they received, through certain relationships, a sense of *separation*, *language barriers* and the *negative depiction of BME lived experiences* within the curriculum. To empower students, power needs to be distributed appropriately across all parties; power imbalances should be challenged especially where they may reinforce existing racial inequalities (HEA, 2014). The NUS (2012) states:

A corollary of a partnership approach is the genuine, meaningful dispersal of power … shared responsibility for identifying the problem or opportunity for improvement, for devising a solution and importantly for co-delivery of that solution. (NUS 2012, p.8)

The HEA (2014) offer a framework consisting of four overlapping areas to support staff-student partnership development; these are (1) learning, teaching and assessment, (2) research, (3) the scholarship of teaching and learning and (4) curriculum design; all resonate with the findings of this evaluation. It is recommended that meaningful staff-student partnerships are developed outside of the normal feedback routes of the course committee and evaluation surveys. The HEA (2014) offer a useful series of questions to support partnership development covering case, context, the values on which the partnership is based, and the aforementioned four framework areas. Development of such partnerships is necessary to implement the recommendations that follow.

Institutional recommendations

Some themes relate to issues at an institutional level. As such, the following recommendations are made as they are deemed to impact on the hidden curriculum and experiences of BME students at a course level.

Diversity of teaching staff

The University boasts a diverse teaching cohort; however, it still does not represent the student body and this was acknowledged by the students in this evaluation. Greater staff

diversity can improve inclusivity, enhance student support, improve degree attainment and progression into postgraduate study (Oloyede, 2018). Recruitment of a workforce that is representative of the student body should be considered.

Language support

A *language barrier* is identified by the students in this evaluation, impacting on student inclusion, dialogue, and assessment results; the University should take responsibility for this and commit to real and effective language support.

Registration experiences

A reoccurring theme in the discussions with students were their poor registration experiences. Unfortunately, the limited research that is available in this area focuses on the recruitment rather than the enrolment process; however, what is apparent is that in addition to social and emotional support, students require assistance in the brokering of relationships to navigate complex systems (Kirshneer, Saldivar and Tracy, 2011; Teranishi, C. Suárez-Orozco and M. Suárez-Orozco, 2011).

Action should be taken to investigate the specific issues faced by students. It is recommended that a survey of students is completed to understand their views on the enrolment experience and their outcomes at the end of their first year to identify associations between these variables.

Canteen cost

Cost is a barrier to healthy eating in university students (Hilger, Loerbroks and Diehl, 2017) and the unaffordability of the University canteen food was identified as a concern

for students in this evaluation. The negative impact of poor nutrition on children's educational performance is well known (Shaw, Gomes, Polotskaia and Jankowska, 2015) and it is suggested to be true also of university students but further research is required (Burrows, Whatnall, Patterson and Hutchesson, 2017). As a healthy diet is associated with better student outcomes, the University should consider its menu choices and costs.

Course recommendations

Recommendations are now made specifically for the H&SC degree, although many of these recommendations may be applicable to other courses.

Curriculum co-creation

The students saw themselves depicted negatively in the curriculum and this may lead to a disconnectedness with the taught curriculum. Further, as mentioned, students perhaps felt disempowered. Engaging students as partners in curriculum design and pedagogical approaches has been shown to be beneficial to both parties (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014). Shor (1999) advocates the democratising of authority by giving students responsibility for co-development of the curriculum and desocialising students from isolated passive learners.

A meaningful partnership should be created with students to co-develop the course and module curriculum taking into consideration the negative or stereotyped views of BME students that were suggested to be conveyed in the curriculum. This partnership should remain and facilitate the periodic review of the H&SC curriculum at all levels.

Increasing students choice when it comes to assessment may help increase grades; this is something that requires further investigation if implemented. A diverse range of assessments should be provided with students able to choose the approach and formulate their own question to reflect their own strengths, educational and cultural backgrounds (Kingston University, n.d.). The importance students place on grades is highlighted in this evaluation, potentially an impact of neoliberalism on education. The evaluation did not set out to evaluate the influence of neoliberalism on the experiences of BME students nor its influence on systemic racism, both of which are important areas for further investigation.

Creating a sense of belonging

Producing graduates who challenge exclusionary and discriminatory practice may not happen without critical dialogue and critical dialogue cannot be developed if some students are reluctant to speak in class, as was the case for some students in this study. Formal engagement with the curriculum and teaching staff and informal engagement with peers is linked to academic success (Tinto, 1987), autonomous thinking and problem-solving skills (Bamford and Pollard, 2019). The interaction between staff and peers increases in importance when cultural differences exist (Read, Archer and Leathwood, 2003), evidenced by the sense of separation felt by the students in this evaluation. We agree with the view held by Bamford and Pollard (2019) that it is not that teaching staff are not aware of cultural diversity within the classroom, but that little attention is given to the impact that such diverse classrooms can have on student experience.

The discussions did not reveal any explicit or implicit experiences of racism; however, much has been written about the invisibility of racism; subtle and indirect "operating below the level of conscious awareness and continuing to oppress in unseen ways" (Wing Sue, and Spanierman, 2020, p. 12). Thus, teaching staff should be culturally aware and conscious of anti-oppressive practice and receive training in these areas.

Staff should endeavour to install feelings of social and cultural comfort and facilitate communication between students of different cultural heritage (Bamford and Pollard, 2019). The HEA (Thomas, 2012) support student-centred approaches, such as working across different peer groups in small group settings, allowing students to draw on their own experiences. Such opportunities should be embedded in module delivery throughout level 4 and during the foundation degree to allow for early development of student relationships.

Recent unpublished research at the University by Heugh et al. (2020) suggests that enrichment activities helped develop inclusive communities and a small improvement in progression rates, however, students reported a lack of such opportunities. Therefore, it is recommended that a suite of enrichment activities are developed in partnership with students, which compliment student timetables and are mindful of students busy lives.

Developing academic skills and literacy

Much of the self-depreciation and lack of self-confidence exhibited by the research participants may stem from the lack of opportunities to develop their academic

literacies. Positive associations have been observed between academic attainment and students confidence (Adams et al., 2020; Schunk, 2005).

Academic abilities and literacy (including IT skills as highlighted in this evaluation) are the basic skills needed for academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995). It is positive to note inclusion of a specific academic skills and literacy module at each level on the H&SC degree. Inclusion of a similar module in the foundation degree is omitted. It is argued that these skills are necessary early in the degree journey and should therefore be included within the foundation degree also.

Action research

All recommendations offer an opportunity for Action Research, a critical reflection of practice in action (Zubber-Skerrit, 1992). Teaching staff should be encouraged to undertake research and evaluation of their own practices and pedagogical approaches. Studies investigating education and race should take place repeatedly to understand the underlying issues and what works to bring about change (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Using a critical race lens provides a useful approach through which to develop this understanding, as does thematic analysis. We encourage all scholars to ask themselves if their actions are anti-racist, if their actions are redressing power imbalances and having a positive impact on racism.

Limitations

This evaluation is not without its limitations. BME students do not form a homogeneous group, with individuals bringing their own knowledge and experiences. We have taken a constructivist approach to this research, believing that reality is

constructed in the minds of individuals or in the discourses of groups, therefore, it is difficult to make causal inferences. Our approach believes in multiple realities. Despite the diversity of the students experiences, through conducting a thematic analysis we have been able to identify common themes within these individual realities upon which we have based our recommendations. We contend that taking a constructivist approach to this evaluation of the hidden curriculum, grounded in lived experiences, is responsive to the multiplicity of perspectives of students of the H&SC degree. We do, however, acknowledge that a sample of only 11 students is a limitation of this evaluation.

We acknowledge that some may see our methodological use of CRT to support the interpretation of the identified themes as a narrow framework approach. CRT's use in education is rooted in the experiences of African Americans in predominately White educational institutions (Baber, 2017). London's post-1992 universities have a substantial BME student population, indeed, 86% of the student population on the H&SC degree in question are BME (I Price 2020, personal communication, 4 May 2020). Therefore, whilst CRT has informed this evaluation, we believed it was important to let the data collected speak for itself, given the complexity of exploring the experiences of BME students in HEIs. We have endeavoured to relate the identified themes back to the tenets of CRT, an area identified as missing in the wider education literature (Barber, 2017). We have also endeavoured to maintain the CRT traditions of linking findings to practice, offering recommendations for change (Barber, 2017).

Differences by age or ethnic group are not identified in this research. The sample is not representative of the student cohort with many ethnic and age groups not represented and only one male participant. Further, data on social economic status was

not collected limiting analysis of intersectionality. The focus groups took place within a lunch hour creating time pressure with some students arriving late and disrupting the flow of conversation.

A further limitation of this study is that it was hoped that the recommendations would be developed in partnership with the student participants. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 public health crisis at the time, this was not possible. The most significant impact of this limitation is in the prioritisation of the recommendations by students. We decided that it would be improper to decide on the importance of the recommendations in isolation without meaningful student input, emphasising the importance of developing staff-student partnerships as a consequence of this work. However, some recommendations will be more impactful on the attainment gap than others, for example, language support is key and more important than canteen food prices.

Staff engagement is the bedrock of inclusive curriculum development (McDuff, Tatam, Beacock and Ross, 2018). The views of staff are missing from this evaluation. This is an important area for follow up research.

Despite the limitations of this evaluation, we feel that it adds to the wider debate on understanding race and dismantling racism within higher education (Arday and Mirza, 2018). This study touches on belonging, for example through the linguistic barriers to communication, price of canteen food, segregation, discrimination, and the belief that BME's occupy low paid jobs, installing a belief of low market value. Further,

this study highlights the concerns of BME students with being downgraded with tutors not sensitive to their needs.

The themes identified and recommendations made can be related to decolonising the curriculum. Decolonisation requires an institutional-wide commitment (Begum and Saini, 2017) to dismantling, exposing, and challenging systemic issues that manifest racism and racial inequalities; evaluating and redressing power structures; understanding how students experience differently the University and the curriculum (in is broadest sense), and open critical discussion.

In summary

BME students are less likely to achieve a first or upper second-class degree than White students. This is an inequity and an issue of social justice. The BME attainment gap was the backdrop for this evaluation of the experiences of the hidden curriculum of BME H&SC students, thematically analysed through a critical race lens. The project's aim was met, although, it would be foolish to assume that simply enacting the recommendations from this paper will solve the BME attainment gap, however, they are a step in the right direction. Prioritisation of the recommendations requires meaningful dialogue with students.

We encourage all academics to consider not just what elements of their course maybe supporting the status quo and therefore, inadvertently supporting systemic racism, but more importantly, to ask what am I doing to fight racism and support social justice, viewing the curriculum and the hidden curriculum through a critical race lens.

The recommendations made may be applicable to other HEIs with a diverse student cohort where the attainment gap is prevalent.

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