



An exploration into black undergraduate student's views of academic success

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to explore black student's views of academic success. The perceptions of black undergraduate students have been documented in the past (Equality Change Unit, 2013, Atkins, 2012). However, existing research has failed to explore the direct perceptions of both male and female students in the United Kingdom. This study therefore provides a much-needed insight into the perceptions of black male and female undergraduate students in the United Kingdom.

Opportunity and snowballing sampling was used to recruit eight participants, (4 male, 4 female), self-identified black undergraduates who participated in semi-structured interviews. Data was analysed thematically, guided by Braune and Clarke (2006), where 8 key themes emerged in relation to the three research aims. Themes were found that directly related to specific research questions. In regards to the exploration of student's perceptions of the importance of academic success 3 major themes emerged, their impartial perceptions of importance, fear of failure and future planning. 3 themes evolved relating to the perceived contributors and barriers of academic success; black educators, support and guidance, and detachment from other race groups. Finally the pressure of black excellence and parental roles were the 2 themes that emerged relating to the aim of exploring perceptions of cultural values and expectations.

This study contributed to the limited amount of literature exploring black students direct perceptions of academic success. With high anticipations this study will be used as a contributor to any educational policies that eradicate any educational issues faced by black students.

KEY WORDS:	ACADEMIC SUCCESS	BLACK STUDENTS	UNDER- GRADUATES	SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS	THEMATIC ANALYSIS
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Introduction

It is worth noting that the terms 'academic success' and 'student success' have been used interchangeably in past research (York, Gibson and Rankin, 2015), however for the purpose of clarity 'academic success' shall be used in this proposal.

Academic success and defining the term is deemed to be subjective, as differences occur from person to person on what to expect, or what should be achieved from the completion of an academic course. The study of literature portrays specific attributes that persistently occur when studies have attempted to define the term. York, Gibson and Rankin's (2015) analytical literature review concluded that academic success is made up of six factors: "academic achievement, satisfaction, acquisition of skill and competencies, persistence, attainment of learning objectives and career success" (page 9). Black students' perceptions of surrounding academic success has been previously researched (Atkins, 2012; Rolland, 2011; Wood, 2012; VanTassle-Baska et al, 2004) but there is no known study that directly asks them to define the term by their own means. To fully understand the views of the individuals their existing knowledge must be considered.

Academic success in recent years has been measured by the retention of individuals in academia, degree levels attained and the employability rates after graduation (GOV.UK, 2014). Black students attending university in the United Kingdom (UK) contributed to 6.2% of total undergraduates as of the academic year 2013/14 (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2015). With black individuals making up 3.0% of the UK general population, (Office of National Statistics, 2011) it is evident that black students are over-represented in academic institutes, in regards to the reflection of the United Kingdoms (UK) population. However, over the years retention rates among students with a black racial identity have been continuously and considerably lower than the rates of other racial groups (GOV.UK, 2014)

Although the number of black, particularly female, students attending university is steadily increasing (Tatlow, 2015), Bhopal and Maylor (2014) highlighted that students with a Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) status "are not as successful as their white counterparts" (page 31) when attaining degrees, specifically declaring individuals of Black Caribbean ethnicity are still of the lowest achievers. This predicament is known as the attainment gap, which has been defined as "...the difference in 'top degrees' – a First or 2:1 classification – awarded to different groups of students." (Equality Challenge Unit, 2013). Overall black students had the largest ethnic attainment gap of 29.4% in the academic year 2012/13 with only 43.8% of the students achieving a top degree (Equity Challenge Unit, 2013).

A vast collection of research (Lee, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Becker and Luther, 2010) suggests that black students are underachieving due to both unavoidable factors such as level of parental education, a lack of multicultural curriculum and social-economic status and avoidable factors, irregular attendance and low teacher expectations. These findings, however, are based upon correlational studies that only take the factors assessed in their studies into consideration when in reality some of these factors may co-exist. Nevertheless, Wright, Wong and Newill's (2002) cross-sectional study revealed that exposing medical student to role models had an impact on their future decisions regarding their education. With this in mind, it should be questioned whether this is the same for students from a black racial

background. Byfield (2008) stated that black teachers are able to improve the experience of black male students in academic environments due to the recognition of kinship. Higher Education Statistics Agency (2011) reported that, in the top ten universities in the UK there was not a single black professor was employed. More recently, University College London (2014) claimed that out of the UK's 18,500 professors there were only 85 black professors. The lack of the study of black culture in academia may discourage students from wanting to engage continue or succeed in their studies. Banks' (1999) approaches to a reformation for a multicultural curriculum may need to be modified to adapt to the growing diversity of the UK.

Many professional individuals have noticed the apparent issue surrounding black academic success, leading to the development of organisations, such as Aim Higher, Black Student Union, and the Black Student Association, that are in different modes supportive of black students. However even with these organisations, and the interventions they have set up issues in black academic success still exist. This study hopes to contribute to the efforts of these organisations in tackling the observed issues by gaining a direct perspective of the individuals involved.

Rollock (2005) noted, "There had been no single government policy which has successfully closed the gap in achievement by ethnic group (page 17). Harper (2012) additionally stated, "...Educators, leaders and policymakers must do more of what works to enrol, retain, educate and graduate black [male] students."(page 19). This study therefore aspires to contribute to the development of new educational strategies or government policies that shall aid the improvement of black students both current and future academic experiences. In relation to York et al's (2015) six factors, this could result in increased degree attainments, higher satisfaction levels, and improved employability rates after graduation amid black students. An exploration of student direct perceptions and experiences is something that many of the existing studies are missing. This exploration allows for the voice of the student to be heard rather than the research being based around the opinions and experiences of academic professionals.

Studies examining issues surrounding academic success are conducted on a large scale mostly exploring BME students. However, it must be recognised that BMEs are not a homogeneous group; blacks are a subgroup of the BME population, their specific statistical data suggests that they could be considered the racial group most in need of a deeper exploration into their academic concerns. There is a concentration towards examining black males in academia, however research illuminates issues exist in both sexes that need to be addressed. Therefore this study intends to explore the views of both male and female students. As the research shows Black academic success is a global issue. The vast majority of the existing and mentioned research has been conducted in and on American students, another reason in further exploration of the topic was the obvious concern of black academic issues existing in the UK, that still needs to be focussed upon. This study intends to contribute and expand on the body of existing research to address problems on a UK national level.

Plentiful evidence explores the underachievement of black students but very few contribute useful theories or implementations that result in revolutionary change, something this study seeks to do. To advance from the problems black students face

in academia a critical examination of their personal experiences, perceptions and background must be conducted.

Research questions

The purpose of this research is to explore black undergraduate views of academic success. The experiences, perceptions and attitudes of the students regarding academic success shall be investigated in attempt at answering the specified question. The above mentioned points has lead to the discussion of several points, therefore the sub questions are as follows:

1. Is there a cultural pressure for black students to become academically successful?
2. What contributes to individuals' views on the importance of academic success?
3. Are there disparities that exist in educational institutes that have a detrimental impact of black students academic success?

Methodology

Methodological Design and Rationale

Previous research investigating similar topics use a range of quantitative methods (Williams, 2013), mixed methods (Parsons, 2013) and qualitative methods (Wood and Hilton, 2012). From the notion that this study did not aim to neither test a hypothesis, nor make any predictions of the findings, a qualitative approach was chosen. Quantitative research has been used and unintentionally further categorised black students. Harper (2008) determined that black undergraduate students are not a homogenous group; each individual has unique experiences and backgrounds that may contribute to their views or beliefs. This study aimed to explore black student's views of academic success from a social interpretivist position, therefore an interview method was used in an attempt to understand both with-in group differences and explore similarities in their cultural background. The use of semi-structured interview shall offer comparable but detailed data of these similarities and differences. The interviews allowed a direct understanding of *why* participants may have certain views on academic success. This is something other methods are either not as effective or incapable of achieving. Using individual interviews rather than focus groups eliminate the opportunity for individual perceptions to be lost in the voice of over-opinionated participants (Gill et al, 2008). Although focus groups would have provided peer support among the participants, as a method they do not allow for individualised and detailed views, of which are necessary to appropriately explore the research aims stated. Semi-structured interviews permits interviewer to prepare questions as well as having the ability to ask additional questions that cultivate from the participants responses. An in-person interview easily allows a rapport to be built between the interviewer and the interviewee, which in turn will enable more information to be gained from the participant. With relation to the first mentioned aim, in-person interviews allow a first-hand experience of the responsiveness from the participant, non-verbal as well as verbal cues enable deeper insight that are significant to exploration of perceptions of importance. Finally, data collected though a qualitative method can be analysed from different perspectives, resulting in authentic, specific and confirmable results.

Participants and Research Procedure

To attain eligibility for the study, participants had to be undergraduate students; selected, only where those who self-identified as having a black racial identity. Eight students, four males and four females, who attended universities located in the United Kingdom, were obtained through both opportunity and snowball sampling methods. Initially, potential participants were approached in university settings such as libraries, canteens and university commons, given participant information sheets (appendix 1) and verbally informed about the study. The study intended to avoid the snowballing sample method, the referral of individuals who potentially meet the criteria and may be interested in taking part, from others whom have already participated in the study (Streeton et al, 2004), as this method is more likely to provide a biased sample. However due to the difficulty in obtaining eligible participants this method was necessary, and for this reason, demographic variables were collected from participants to ensure gender and age variances existed within the sample (Table 1).

Table 1 - Participant Demographic Information and Interview Lengths

Pseudonym	Age At The Time Of Interview	Gender	Position In Education	Length Of Interview
Jerome	22	Male	3 rd year	42 MINUTES 43 SECONDS
Vincent	21	Male	3 rd year	35 MINUTES 12 SECONDS
Nathan	24	Male	2 nd year	39 MINUTES 22 SECONDS
Alex	34	Male	3 rd year	26 MINUTES 42 SECONDS
Chelsea	39	Female	2 nd year	31 MINUTES 40 SECONDS
Natasha	28	Female	2 nd year	22 MINUTES 52 SECONDS
Lorna	21	Female	3 rd year	34 MINUTES 07 SECONDS
Jennifer	23	Female	3 rd year	39 MINUTES 59 SECONDS

This research collected data from eight participants for several practical reasons. Firstly, using a smaller amount of participants in the same manner would not ensure that enough rich and meaningful data would be provided for the analysis. Although the number of participants may be deemed unrepresentative of the target population,

Crouch & McKenzie (2006) noted that too many participants in a study could cause difficulty in building a rapport between each participant and the interviewer. Studies (Dickinson-swift et al, 2007; Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005) have shown that rapport development can increase the willingness of participants to answer questions more openly. Also, McLeod (2014) noted that a large sample size could be too time consuming, therefore due to time constraints and the size of the research team, 8 participants, was considered to be a suitable amount.

A pilot interview was conducted to, assess the ordering and reflect on the feasibility of the interview questions, no adjustments were made to the questions, however due to the limited experience of the researcher, criticisms of interviewing skills was taken on board.

A consent form (appendix 2) was given to all participants to confirm their approval for participation, and for their data to be analysed and included in the write-up of the study. At this point, participants were asked to re-read the information sheet given to them during the recruitment stage, to remind them of the research aims and the agenda. In order to fully understand black student views of academic success, it is important to firstly acknowledge their individual definitions, however to ensure all student has a basic level of knowledge around the subject York et al's (2015) definition was provided at this stage.

In-person, semi-structured interviews made use of nine response driven questions (appendix 3), to allow the participants to openly discuss their experiences and perceptions on the topic. Participants were able ask for an elaboration on a question if there was any confusion or misunderstanding. Semi-structured interviews allow flexibility when asking questions in the interview. Questions were created to limit the participants' discussions steering off to non-important topics. The use of the pre-determined questions allowed for consistencies within data to be found, but also left opportunity to develop questions based on innovative views given by the participants. In simpler terms, questions were able to be asked and adjusted according to the participants' responses.

Individual interviews lasted between 26 and 42 minutes; these time periods provided time for a rapport to be built between the interviewer and interviewee. A connection between the two individuals leads to participants being more cooperative and comfortable, as mention above, resulting in more meaningful information being shared and a sharper understanding of their views. One-on-one interviews were chosen rather than a focus group or group interviews. In grouped conditions, some individuals may dominate the conversation and sway the opinions others to that of their own. Interviews were digitally audio recorded which permitted the researcher to focus on the upcoming questions and the replies given by participants, rather than transcribing and missing important details. At the end of the interview participants were be given debrief sheet (appendix 4) that informs them on the time period that allows them to opt-out of the study and provides contact details in case they have any further questions regarding the study. Interviews shall then be precisely transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis.

To reduce the chance any miscommunication or misunderstanding about the research, individuals were able to contact the researcher through university email accounts if they have any queries about the study.

Analytical Procedure

Thematic analysis involves... "identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Thematic analysis allows for a flexible examination of the data, similarities and differences can be revealed from the data without the dependency of a sole theory. Braun and Clarke's (2006) '15-point Checklist of Criteria for Good Thematic Analysis' (page 36) (appendix 5) was used as a guide to complete thematic analysis to an appropriate standard. After accurate transcription of each interview (appendix 6), data was intensely studied for familiarity. Codes were uncovered manually, and organised into topic relevant themes. Each dataset went through two rounds of coding to ensure no relevant quotes were missed. Both inductive and deductive approaches were used to analyse the data. Utilising both methods allowed new theories to emerge, whilst also making use of existing literature. Solely using a deductive approach limits the discoveries and adapts findings to fit existing literature and theories (Willig, 2013). Themes, taken from a semantic level, were then either developed, if rational, or repeatedly modified, if seen as problematic. Actual procedure for each of the participant's interviews was practiced as highlighted in figure 1.

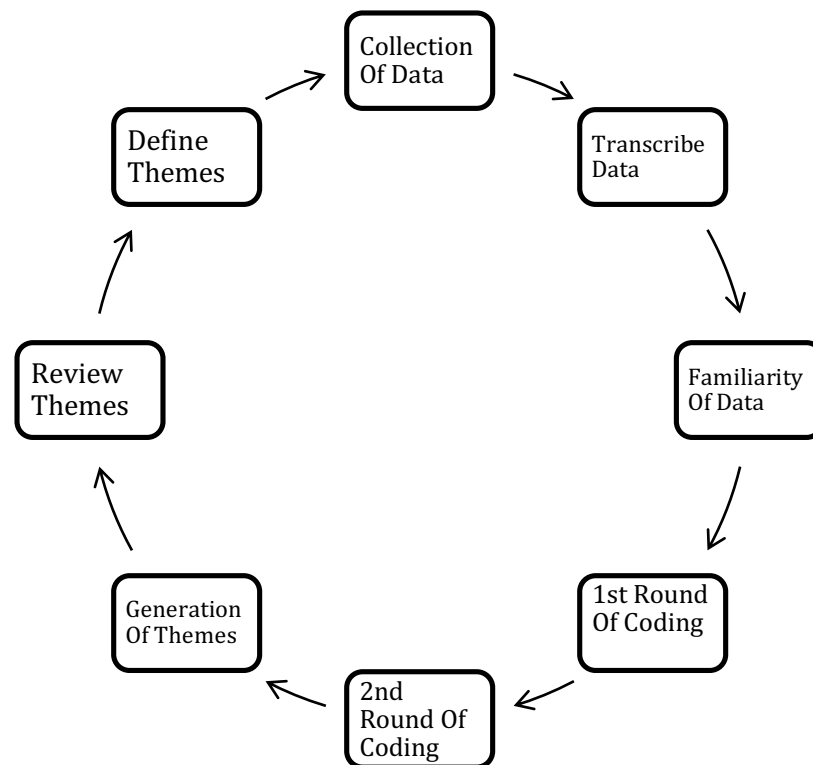


Figure 1 – visual illustration of analytical procedure

Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues were considered before commencing the research in accordance with the British Psychological Societies ethical guidelines. It was required that all individuals gave their permission to participate in the study and for their data to be used in the final analysis and write up. All participants were over the age of 18 and therefore were capable of giving their own consent. Participants were briefed about

both the nature of the research and the procedures of the study before partaking in the interview. Deceiving participants was not required in the study, as their open and honest opinions were required, this in hand restricted any opportunities that may have caused psychological harm. However, because the sample of participants contained of students, levels of emotional vulnerability were taken into consideration, as the topic of academic success could be regard as a sensitive topic. Participants may have been struggling with their studies and the discussion of the topic could of lead to feelings of uncertainty. Participants were therefore made aware of both their ability to refuse to answer any given question without reasoning, and their right to withdraw from participating in the study up to a given date. Participation was completely voluntary, the students were not pressured into participation or continuation of the study, and no incentives were made available. It is worth noting that no participant refused to answer any of the questions asked, and all participants contributed throughout the full duration of the study.

Data obtained from the interviews has been kept anonymous throughout, pseudonyms, of participants choice, were used to ensure anonymity. Confidentiality was not guaranteed due to the write up of the report. Participants were also made aware that the results of the study were likely to be discussed with an academic supervisor and that the results of the study could potentially be published at a later date. During the debriefing stage, participants were reminded of the research questions and aims and re-informed of the role that they played within the research. The study focused upon racial identify which some individuals may have had difficult times with in their past. Participants, therefore, were made aware that they was able to contact the researcher if they wish to address any issues and, if necessary, directed to external help if they experiences any feelings of discomfort following the interview. This, in turn decreased the risk of causing psychological harm to participants. One-on-one interviews can be considered a potential, but unavoidable, risk. The risk shall be minimised by conducting the interviews on university grounds. A more detailed account on ethical issues relevant to this study and how this study will address ethical issues is attached in Appendix 7.

Analysis and Discussion

As previous literature had failed to ask participants to define academic success there definitions were analysed independently to the analysis of overall themes. The analysis of the themes is discussed subsequent to this.

When asked to define academic success, participants voiced a range of perceptions of the term however, what was apparent in all eight definitions was the role of the self, highlighted in the following quotes.

Jennifer stated,

“A full, good education. Having the desire to learn more and actually completing that desire” (13-14)

Vincent expressed,

“Academic success is based upon the grades that you get, well that’s in simple terms anyway, you have to work hard” (12)

Lorna suggested academic success was,

“Achieving to the best of your abilities, no one can tell you your success because everyone has a different goal. Set your own goals, only you can perceive your own success” (6-8)

Alex voiced,

“Coming out of education and doing whatever you set out to do and being able to apply what you have learnt in class to skills out of educational environments”(8-10)

The concept highlights their perceptions of the importance of the role they play in their own academic journey. The student definitions of academic success can be combined to create a general overview of academic success, however disparities in their definitions still exist. With this in mind, it should be questioned why individuals place so much emphasis of the role of the self on academic success. It is suggested that future studies may wish to examine this finding since this study did intend to analyse their definitions solely but rather their perceptions and experiences of academic success in relation to the research aims.

After a close examination and deliberation of relevant codes, eight themes related to the research aims were defined (table 2).

Table 2 - Themes Related To Specific Aims

Aim	Themes
Importance of Academic Success	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Impartial Perceptions Of Importance 2. Fear Of Failure 3. Future Planning
Contributions and Barriers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Academic Support And Guidance 5. Detachment From Other Race Groups 6. Black Educators
Cultural Values and Expectations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Black Excellence Pressure 8. Parental Roles

Importance of Academic Success

In regards to the first aim of establishing the importance of academic success, three themes were found. Both, with and without the need of a prompt question, participants discussed their views on the importance of academic success.

Theme 1. Inconsistent Perceptions of Importance

The first theme of inconsistent perceptions was evident in all interviews. Participants highlighted both the advantages and disadvantages of academic studying as well as expressing conflicting perceptions.

Jerome expressed his awareness of his conflicting perceptions.

“I guess I’m mixed it’s kind of a complete waste of time but then can be really productive.” (23-24) “I don’t believe it’s an accurate reflection of your intelligence but I’m always encouraging my little brother to get his head down in school.” (122)

Nathan was aware that his previous educators shaped his conflicting perceptions.

“It’s taught in school that it’s basically a necessity, so I really couldn’t imagine not having a degree. But there are so many ways you can achieve your goals in life without attaining academic titles” (32-36)

Lorna expressed her conflicting views without the need of a prompt question.

“It’s necessary and easy in today’s world to get a degree but I feel like not everyone is academically talented or successful, like a lot of people just sort of have initiative but you have to find what works for you.” (65-69)

Jennifer explained how her perceptions have changed overtime.

“If you asked me ten years ago, I would of said a good education is the key to success. But now, not so much, having a degree is not as important as it used to be” (29-31)

One reason for their inconsistent perceptions this may be due to individual the subjective nature of academic success. as highlighted by York et al’s (2015) it has been difficult to define in past, the participants responses however, are able to fit to definition.

Theme 2. Fear of Failure

Despite the conflicting opinions on the importance of academic success, all students voiced their worry of academic failure.

Jerome

“I’ve retaken a lot of my exams. It’s annoying but I’m not a quitter, I keep at it until I pass, I know I have to do this.” (116-117)

Natasha

“I don’t want to be one of those people that are always complaining about going to work or hating their job or not liking their boss. So I need to work hard now just so I can enjoy life when I finish uni”. (63-66)

Alex

“I’m tired all the time and find it hard to concentrate, but this is the final stage now, graduation soon come and I can’t wait to be a graduate!” (146-147)

As all participants expressed their worry of failing their studies, it could be interpreted that becoming academically success is an important aim for them. The study was however unable to produce reasons for this fear of failure and recommends future studies to explore this in more detail. Most of the participants declarations of being determined to succeed were also voiced with aspects of there future in mind, which became another common theme, discussed below, in the literature following.

Theme 3. Future Planning

Expectedly, the theme of future aspirations was evident amongst the data

Jerome expressed frustration when he had found out news that would affect his career plans.

“I found out that the qualification that I am supposed to get at the end of this course might be void. So I won’t be entitled to the higher paying job that I wanted so what was the point in these 3 years.” (32-35)

Chelsea expressed her future education and career plans.

“I’m not stopping at just an undergraduate degree after a couple years as a councillor I want to become an educational psychologist.” (246-249)

Jennifer expressed

“I just can’t be doing any job, it’s not me, I want a professional job so this [studying for a degree] is the best way” (167-169)

Participants stressed the value of gaining a good education in order to pursue future career goals. Data also demonstrated that from the choice of courses taken to the grades attained from these courses would determine the future of the students, a wrong decision could be a fundamental mistake.

Although participants voiced their conflicting perceptions, therefore academic success could be considered an important factor. With the themes found in the data it is inferred that students used their future aspirations and the fear of failure to motivate their studies.

Contributions and Barriers

Three themes were found that associated with the research aim of exploring black students perceived contributors and barriers to academic success.

Theme 4. Academic Support and Guidance

Participants discussed their experiences of support and guidance as both a contributor and barrier to academic success.

Alex confirmed the support there is in his university for all students and envisioned support for black students.

“There is a lot of different types of support, we have student reps, and socials I guess. But yes I think there is no support for black students particularly, it may not be necessary for us but it wouldn’t hurt to try it out maybe someone who can vouch for us on our behalf as well as overcome any barriers such as languages, culture clashes would be useful” (307-213)

Jennifer explained the comfort she found in speaking to students rather than academic staff.

“At first, most things I needed to know I asked students that had already been to university. We had people to talk to but it was quite intimidating having meetings with someone I didn’t know” (324-327)

Chelsea discussed her struggles of not having any language support or guidance with her essay.

“I don’t have much confidence in essay writing, writing in proper English was a struggle. There should be more speaking assignments so can explain myself more” (47-51)

Universities currently provide various support staff to help with specific areas of concern. Rhamie and Hallam’s (2002) home community and home school models highlighted academic success is more likely to be achieved when a combination of support systems work in parallel. Rhamie (2012), later, established that a lack of support at school lead to a higher chance of individuals underachieving. From interpretation of Chelsea and Alex’s comments, this could be the reason on why black students are considered less successful than their white peers. In relation to the overall data, providing universities offer support staff that cater to the individual needs of the students would be a beneficial contributor. The use of mentors is known to be a successful intervention in aiding with academic achievement in school-aged children

Theme 5. Detachment From Other Race Groups

Detachment from other race group was evident when students discussed their preference of being in black centred environments and rallying for their fellow black peers.

Vincent voiced the community feelings of having black friendship groups.

“Being here [university] I made so many black friends, it’s great. Oh, my ACS (African Caribbean Society) friends have helped me find my place. We live together, party together, yeah we do everything together.” (264-268)

Jerome explained his dislike of racial stereotypes and his effort to succeed with his black friends.

“I don’t want to be what other people see as the typical black boy who lives a stupid life taking or selling drugs or both. With no ambition, I want me and my boys to be able to prove those people wrong”. (508-511)

Natasha bluntly expressed her friendship groups.

“I don’t really have close friends who aren’t black, well not close ones anyway” (68-69)

Data highlighted that students were very much aware of their racial identity, and tended to cluster with individuals that are alike. Tatum (2003) suggested that black student’s detachment from other race groups is a defence mechanism for coping with the bearings of institutionalised racism. When discussing his friendship groups at university Vincent failed to mention any non-black peers that he may have and avoided talking on the association of studying and his peers. This may be because black students may be sustaining from being associated with the other culture due to association of academic achievement with a ‘white identity’ (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986). However, it must also be considered whether students are aware of this association throughout their studies.

Theme 6. Black Educators

The theme of black educators was also discussed as both a contributor and barrier to academic success.

Natasha discussed the lack of black educators in her studies, and considered whether I had an impact on her academic achievements.

“I’ve never noticed but up until last year I had never been taught by a black person in school, college or university. I really enjoyed his lectures, I felt encouraged by his accent [Caribbean] and mannerisms. I suppose I’ve made it to uni, but who’s to say that hasn’t had an impact on my education or the way I learn”. (206-211)

Relating to her personal interest of black studies and history, Chelsea voiced her opinion on who should be nominated to teach specific subjects.

“Someone who has been through what we are going through would be more beneficial than someone who hasn’t, you’d get more passion from a black teacher.” (331-334)

Jerome also discussed the way black educators positively contribute to black students academic success and expressed his connections to black educators.

“I think having black lectures if anything helps black students, well I preferred them anyway especially in my younger years, they become more of a parental figure, so I was more likely to listen in class and feel more comfortable with them than with other teachers”. (218-220)

Jennifer however, considered the way black educators would not contribute to her academic success.

“I appreciate anyone who takes my needs as a student into consideration, I look beyond race when it comes to this. I’m paying for my education so I expect uni to provide someone that is educated and passionate about the subject. Race, gender or anything really is irrelevant as long I am learning”

The data highlights that black role models could be considered as an important contributor to academic success Data highlights that that the racial identity of educators does or could play a vital role in contributing to black students academic success. Seven of the eight participants acknowledged the lack of black educators, and expressed or insinuated on there being more black educators. Jennifer however appreciated the passion that comes from her lectures.

Cultural Values and Expectations

In regards to the exploration of cultural values and expectations two distinct themes were found.

Theme 7. Black Excellence Pressure

Participants discussed certain pressures of being a black student such as holding a specific job and expectations of subject choices.

Vincent highlighted the value of being a black student.

“To please my family, and make them proud I carried on studying, an education is something for your peers to be proud of.” (81)

Chelsea discussed her views on how she is perceived by other people.

“I don’t consider myself to be academically successful yet. Once I graduate and get to at least a masters level I can finally gain the title of an educated black woman”(336-339)

Lorna highlighted her insecurities and the pressures of having a certain degree.

“I would feel a type of way coming out with a degree in something that is not considered academic, well actually, I would not but I know someone would have something to say”(87-90)

Nathan also discussed this pressure.

“I’d rather just get a degree I don’t want then be considered man who couldn’t be bothered to get an education”(201-202)

This study supported Dandy and Nettelback’s (2002) study which highlighted that parents from ethnic minority backgrounds have higher educational standards and aspirations for their children compared to those from a Caucasian background. However when asked, participants expressed different perceptions of the pressure they face which suggests that they believe that all black students suffer the same pressure of them. From the data it is evident that this is not deemed accurate.

Theme 8. Parental Roles

Another theme evident in amongst the data is parental roles. Participants acknowledged the role that parents play in their studies and whether parents contribute to their studies.

Vincent acknowledged and appreciated his father’s financial support and active interests in his studies.

“My dad is my biggest role model, he has helped me with money whilst I’ve not been home and reads through my work. Because he has interests in my course it’s great to ask him to help me with my assignments”. (104-106)

Nathan described his mother as motivational and encouraged him to work hard academically in order to get where he wants to in life.

“I’ve been brought up being told that I have to work twice as hard to be half as good as others. She [mother] would always tell me to get my education and then I’m free to do anything I want”. (544-546)

Lorna also acknowledged the active support from her mother.

“Maybe without her push I probably would of just started work when I was just 15 or 16.... But with her guidance and stuff I ended up with an idea and knowing what I want to do”. (134-138)

Natasha expressed her lack of parental support and the impact it had on her university life.

“I have only recently started talking to my dad and step mum about my uni work and art stuff. I think if they had been there for me from day one my first year would probably have been easier”. (302-304)

The factor of parental support is also commonly found in previous studies (Byfield, 2008) exploring contributors to academic success. The fact that each participant expressed parental expectations and contributions of their studies suggests that general culture values within the black community exist. Participant, however, voiced differences in what the role their parents play. All eight participants recognised the value of having some type of parental role for their academic success, which suggests that the role of the parents in their child's education is undervalued.

Conclusion and Reflexivity

In summary, this study aimed to explore black undergraduate student's views of academic success. The study hoped to examine what contributes to the students perceptions of academic success, whether there is a cultural pressure for black students to become academically successful, and what factors students perceive as disparities that impact their success.

Previously stated by Harper (2008) this study highlighted that black students are not a homogeneous group and disparities exist within. Results of this study highlighted that there are values and expectations that do exist within the black community, however these values and expectations differ from each individual's surrounding community. Black students felt a cultural pressure exists, not only to be academically successful but on the subject choices they had made. Although the research highlighted some cultural expectations other research methods may be worthier at exploring cultural values and expectations. A study that explores the surrounding community of the students could develop these finding further.

In the opinion of the researcher it has been beneficial to focus upon individuals direct opinions to establish the perceptions of importance and to explore the contributors and barriers of black students academic success. Students perceived that the support from their parents was extremely beneficial to their success, however was weary of the support received by academic professionals. Therefore encouraging black students to strive for academic success must be approached with caution as it can be interpreted as an expectation, rather than a motivator.

The nature of quantitative studies means that the results of the study cannot be generalised to all black students. However this method was most appropriate as there was a lack of rich data specifically exploring this topic area in the UK. Future studies also may wish to explore international students independent of UK home students to explore whether being a UK or home student alters perceptions of academic success and highlight any differences in cultural values of Black African, Black Caribbean and Black British students. What also may be beneficial is a comparative study of black students at different levels of education may the perceptions of black students at to gain a more specific view on black students perceptions.

The reasoning for exploring this topic stemmed from engaging in countless conversations with my peers about black students in education. These conversations lead me to conduct independent reading outside of my university studies; the limited amount of research was not able to answer some queries I had. I felt that I had learned a lot more from engaging in conversations with my peers than exploring the literature, however the conduction of this study has greatly improved my knowledge of the subject.

My identification as a black student can also be considered as an advantage of being the sole researcher. The participants may have felt more comfortable discussing topics surrounding race with someone more alike and lead to more open responses being given. However, it is important to acknowledge that as a self-identified black student, my own individual experiences may have altered analytical findings of this particular study, it is also understood that the subjective nature of qualitative methods may result in slightly biased results. For these reasons, my own opinions and experiences were carefully considered throughout the duration of the research. Thematic analysis was also exhaustively examined to make up for my limited experience as an independent researcher.

The results of the study exceeded my expectations. Reflecting upon my views prior to the study I now believe I have reached a position what is more understanding of the heterogeneity of black students and the efforts they have made to remain in education and strive for success. It has given me great pleasure to conduct this study to voice the much-needed opinions of a group in which I am apart of.

It is with high anticipation, that this study will inspire or contribute knowledge to future studies and be used as a contributor to any educational policies that improve issues in educational settings faced by black students.

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