ROTA Community Research Partnership Report

Education and Employment

2024

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Acknowledgements

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CHAIR'S INTRODUCTION

I am immensely proud to present the report of the Race on the Agenda Community Research Partnership. This landmark initiative embodies our commitment to fostering equity and empowerment within our Black and Global Majority (BGM) communities. At its core, this report is a testament to the power of participatory research—a methodology that prioritises collaboration, co-creation, and shared ownership between researchers and the communities they serve.

Participatory research bridges the gap between academia and lived experience. By involving community members as equal partners in the research process, it seeks to dismantle traditional hierarchies, ensuring that those closest to the challenges are also the architects of the solutions. This ethos underpins our work, bringing together Peer Researchers and community members to co-create knowledge, address pressing issues, and drive meaningful, actionable anti-racist strategies.

Our partnership is guided by core principles of justice, equity, mutual respect, co-learning, and empowerment. These principles resonate in every aspect of our work, from the recruitment and training of Peer Researchers to the dissemination of findings. The lived experiences of our communities have been central to shaping the research process and its outcomes, ensuring that the insights generated are both authentic and impactful.

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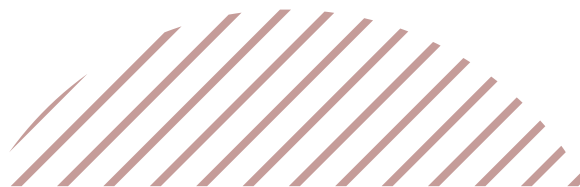
This report is not merely a compilation of data—it is a call to action. It highlights the urgency of addressing systemic inequities in education and employment and demonstrates the vital role of community-driven solutions in achieving sustainable change. By centring the voices of those historically excluded from decision- making processes, we can begin to unravel the structural barriers that perpetuate inequality.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to our Peer Researchers, whose dedication, resilience, and insights have been instrumental in shaping this work. Their contributions exemplify the transformative potential of participatory research. I also wish to acknowledge the unwavering support of Propel London and the City Bridge Foundation for funding this program, as well as our members, staff, volunteers, and Board members, whose collective efforts have made this partnership possible.

As we move forward, I invite all stakeholders to reflect on the findings and recommendations presented in this report and to join us in our commitment to creating a more equitable and inclusive society. Together, we can build a future where the voices of all communities are heard, valued, and empowered to lead

With gratitude,
Ali Ahmed
Chair, Race on the Agenda

Executive Summary

The ROTA Community Research Partnership (RCRP) is the flagship new partnership initiative from Race on the Agenda (ROTA). Enabled through funding from City Bridge Foundation via Propel, the RCRP will run for three years from 2024-2027. During the partnership, ROTA will recruit, train, and support the independent work of 30 Peer Researchers (PRs), seeking to conduct race equity research within their communities, focusing on different themes for each of the three annual cohorts.

For the 2024 cohort, PRs have been conducting innovative research around the themes of *education* and *employment*, and how racial inequities affect their communities in these areas. The findings that are presented in this report speak to the need for urgent practice and policy reforms across the schools, universities, and employment sectors, particularly for minoritised women and others facing additional, intersectional inequities. We have drawn on data from our PRs to make a series of specific recommendations, concerning both the specific areas that they have been working in, and the sectors as a whole.

This project has also demonstrated the transformative power of community-based participatory research (CBPR) methods. CBPR seeks to centre the expertise and lived experience of members of minoritised or otherwise under-represented communities in research, empowering these individuals to shape the course of the research which has a direct impact on the inequities faced by members of their communities. Although these approaches have been drawn on since the 1970s, in recent years more groups seeking to conduct race equity research have been using CBPR methods. With the RCRP, we demonstrate that these approaches should be considered among the most effective and equitable ways to address the issues faced by Black and Global Majority communities. We hope that the specific RCRP framework that we will be developing over the next three years can serve as a blueprint for other race equity organisations and researchers in this space moving forward.

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The Context

The Black and Global Majority (BGM) community faces a wide range of challenges in education and employment. These issues are compounded by the intersectionality of identities, where discrimination differs based on race, gender, and other factors. Despite these complexities, recurring themes of overt and covert racism consistently emerge in both sectors, with significant implications for wellbeing, opportunities, and outcomes.

BGM Children and Young People in Education

BGM children and young people (CYPs) experience disproportionate disciplinary action in schools, including detentions, suspensions, and expulsions, often stemming from racial profiling, criminalisation, and adultification. Black boys, for example, are frequently perceived as more threatening than their White peers, leading to harsher punishments for minor infractions. High-profile incidents, such as the strip search of a BGM girl known as Child Q in 2020, underscore the severe consequences of these biases.

Overt racism from peers also affects BGM students, with incidents of racist language and bullying reported even among young children. Covert discrimination is equally pervasive, seen in policies such as hair regulations that disproportionately target Black children by deeming natural hairstyles unprofessional. Although the Equality and Human Rights Commission issued updated guidance in 2023, its impact remains uncertain.

The curriculum further marginalises BGM students, focusing predominantly on "fundamental British values" and neglecting the histories and contributions of the BGM community. This lack of representation, coupled with insufficient emotional and wellbeing support—particularly for BGM girls—fosters disengagement, feelings of exclusion, and diminished aspirations.

Barriers in Employment

Stereotypes that harm BGM students in schools persist in the job market, where biases undermine hiring, career advancement, and workplace inclusion. Studies show that job applicants with African or Asian-sounding names must apply twice as often as their White peers to secure interviews, with disparities continuing at every stage of the hiring process. Even when employed, BGM workers face significant pay gaps, career stagnation, and insecure working conditions.

In 2022, BGM workers earned significantly less than their White counterparts, with Black, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi groups experiencing some of the largest disparities. Women from BGM backgrounds encounter even greater challenges, often described as facing "double jeopardy" due to both racial and gender discrimination. A lack of mentorship, support structures, and representation in leadership roles exacerbates these issues. As of 2021, no Black individuals held CEO, CFO, or Chair roles in FTSE 100 companies.

Overt racism in workplaces is also prevalent. A 2021 study found that 60% of Black employees and 42% of Asian employees experienced racism at work, including verbal or physical abuse.

The Education-Employment Pipeline

Structural racism connects the challenges in education and employment for BGM individuals. Discriminatory practices in schools lead to disengagement and lower attainment, which hinder job prospects. This creates a pipeline from exclusionary educational environments to limited opportunities in the workforce, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage. Addressing these issues demands systemic reform in policies and practices across both sectors.

The RCRP Framework

The ROTA Community Research Partnership (RCRP) framework is a transformative approach to community-based participatory research (CBPR). It positions Peer Researchers (PRs) as central figures in the research process, empowering them to design and lead projects that address the critical issues facing their communities. Unlike traditional models that overly rely on external "expert" researchers, the RCRP framework fully decentralises research facilitation, allowing PRs to act as Principal Investigators of their projects. ROTA provides training and logistical support, fostering a collaborative research environment while maximising the value of PRs' lived experiences and community expertise.

A cornerstone of the RCRP is its adherence to the principles of peer research developed by the Young Foundation. These principles ensure community involvement, high-quality findings, mutual learning between professional and peer researchers, and equitable participation throughout the research process. For example, PRs are involved in all research stages, from question development to dissemination of findings, and receive formal recognition and compensation for their contributions. Ethical considerations, such as informed consent and data protection, are rigorously applied, while findings are made publicly available in accessible formats.

In 2024, the RCRP recruited nine PRs from a pool of 52 applicants through a transparent and inclusive process. These PRs, selected for their research skills and community connections, brought diverse expertise, including academic credentials and grassroots advocacy experience. They underwent a bespoke five-day training program covering CBPR fundamentals, qualitative and quantitative research methods, data analysis, and self-care during research.

PRs developed and executed their research projects on education and employment, themes identified as priorities by RCRP members. Despite challenges such as participant recruitment and technical issues, PRs successfully produced robust datasets informed by community-specific knowledge. ROTA supported PRs throughout the process with ongoing training, check-ins, and tailored resources.

The RCRP framework demonstrates the power of community-driven research to generate actionable insights and policy recommendations. By centring community voices and fostering equitable collaboration, RCRP serves as a model for impactful CBPR practices, ensuring research outcomes align with the needs of marginalised groups while advancing broader systemic change.

The 2024 Cohort: Findings at a Glance

Peer researchers in the 2024 cohort undertook research with members from 9 specific intersectional BGM communities. The findings that they gathered deliver some key insights into the realities faced by groups that have historically been underrepresented in research and have enabled us to develop a range of specific recommendations for stakeholders and lawmakers in these areas. PRs' research areas and key findings are as follows:

1. Jamila Thompson: Black girls' experiences in London schools

Jamila undertook research with Black girls in schools, seeking to capture her participants' experiences of racism and misogynoir within and outside of the classroom. Her research uncovered serious issues with a lack of culturally competent care and support for the girls, who are subject to discrimination, sexualisation, and adultification, with a lack of allyship from both White girls and Black boys.

2. Murray Chamberlain: Looked after BGM girls and young women in education.

Murray's research, informed by her years of experience working in the sector, was designed to explore the challenges faced by BGM girls in care in the British education sector. Her findings outline a set of systemic failures which prevent proper support structures from being put in place, leading to feelings of isolation from her participants, and an ensuing disengagement from school.

3. Stella Abu: BGM children with SEN, and their families

Stella drew on her experiences both as the mother to children with special educational needs (SEN) and as someone who has spent over a decade working to support other families with SEN children, to design a programme of research aiming to identify the issues faced by BGM parents with SEN children in schools. Her research highlights the lack of culturally competent support amongst schools and local authorities and demonstrates the need for urgent reform in this area.

4. Gabriella Okoobo: Supplementary education for Black girls

Gabriella undertook this research whilst working as a mentor during a summer school for Black girls in London, organised by Akoma and Milk Honey Bees. This summer school was designed to address some of the challenges Black girls face in regular education, centring creativity, healing, and the affirmation of girls' identities. Gabriella's findings speak to the power of supplementary education for minoritised children, and we have drawn specific suggestions for ways in which their practices could be adopted by more mainstream schools.

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5. Yashaswi Shetty: The experiences of South Asian students in the UK

Yashaswi sought to conduct lived experience research with other South Asian migratory students, to assess and capture their experiences of minoritisation within the UK. Her exploratory study demonstrates the need for more funded research in this area as, despite their increasing importance to the UK's university ecosystem, there appears to have been very little consideration of how growing anti-migrant sentiment is affecting BGM students.

6. Isha Negi: BGM academics in the British HE sector

Also conducting research in and around the British universities sector, Isha's research was designed to explore the issues faced by academics, researchers, and lecturers from BGM communities within higher education. Her findings demonstrate the need for more culturally competent mentorship and advocacy, the lack of which is significantly affecting both the wellbeing and career prospects of those in the sector.

7. David Kennedy: Black employees working in finance

David undertook a programme of research with his fellow Black graduates working in the finance sector, to understand what was being done to support minoritised junior staff in the sector. His research demonstrates that, whilst there have been very positive developments in recent years, more work needs to be done to ensure better mentorship is available, and that persistent issues with a work culture that privileges White employees remain.

8. Judith Ibukunlayo: Black women in the rail sector

With over a decade of experience working in the sector, Judith's research was designed to capture the experiences of 'double jeopardy' minoritised Black women working in the UK's rail network. Her research shows that persistent issues with racism and misogynoir have a huge effect on the wellbeing of these women and that the sector needs to do more to support their development and occupational health.

9. Kwesi Ochosi: Activist perspectives on issues in education and employment

An experienced community organiser, Kwesi's research focussed on the perspectives of peers in the Black-led activist space on the issues facing our communities in education and employment. His research highlights how grassroots initiatives, community-led solutions, and intercommunity solidarity are critical to counteracting systemic failures and advancing equity. Emphasis is placed on empowering Black families and holding governments accountable under international law, including relevant UN frameworks.

Policy and Practice Recommendations

As is evident from the findings presented above, there are significant challenges and issues faced by our Peer Researchers and their communities across the sector. To address these, we propose the following policy and practice recommendations, which are outlined fully at the end of this report:

For Government:

1. **Mandatory Anti-Racist Training for Teachers:**

   - Integrate robust anti-racist training into teacher-training programmes and continuous professional development.
   - Ensure a strong intersectional focus at the national level to address systemic biases, such as the underdiagnosis of SEN in Black children and the adultification of BGM girls in care.
   - Require cultural competency training at the local level, tailored to the needs of diverse communities, co-designed with experts by experience.

2. **Mandate Data Transparency in Schools:**

   - Require schools to publish disaggregated data on pupil outcomes (e.g., disciplinary actions, suspensions) while safeguarding privacy.
   - Publish data on staff and governors to monitor representation and hold schools accountable for equity.

3. **Increase Support for BGM and Minoritised Children:**

   - Provide additional resources and recognition for pupils balancing educational challenges with racial discrimination or emotional labour.
   - Encourage schools to adopt an intersectional approach to celebrating achievements.
   - Increase funding for staff training, pastoral care, and classroom resources to ensure equitable support for all pupils and address teacher retention issues, especially among BGM staff.

4. **Require Large Businesses to Sign Up to the Race at Work Charter:**

   - Mandate companies with over 250 employees to commit to the charter's actions, such as zero-tolerance policies on racism, publishing ethnicity data, and promoting mentorship and career progression for BGM employees.
   - Explore making key elements of the charter legally enforceable to ensure accountability.

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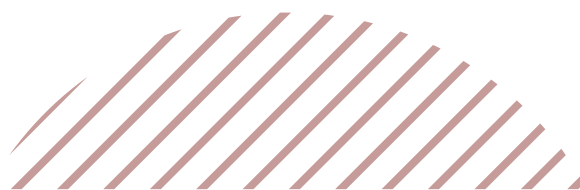
For Universities:

5. Increased Funding for BGM and International Students and Staff:

- Allocate funds to support community-building, mentorship programmes, and culturally informed career guidance.
- Provide additional resources for early-career researchers and academic staff to foster professional development and representation.

6. Cultural Competency Training for All Staff:

- Mandate training for all student-facing roles to reduce feelings of isolation and alienation among BGM and international students.
- Co-design training programmes with affected communities and lived experience experts.

For Industry:

7. Adopt Blind Job Application Processes:

- Implement name-blind application systems to address biases in recruitment.
- Monitor and publish data on the impact of these processes to measure progress in increasing BGM representation.

8. Sector-Wide Mentorship and Networking Programmes:

- Fund mentorship opportunities connecting junior BGM employees with senior executives across industries.
- Support the creation of industry-specific networks to nurture and advance BGM talent.

9. Cultural Competency Training for Managers:

- Require training for all team managers to address unconscious bias and systemic racism.
- Equip managers with tools to support BGM employees effectively, improving retention and career progression.

Implementation and Monitoring:

- **Community Involvement**: Involve BGM communities and lived experience experts in designing and delivering these recommendations.
- **Outcome Metrics**: Establish clear success indicators, such as increased BGM staff retention, improved pupil outcomes, and reduced disciplinary disparities.
- **Phased Approach**: Prioritise actions with immediate impact, such as data transparency and training, while building infrastructure for long-term measures like mentorship programmes.

Introduction

Research into the issues faced by Black and Global Majority (BGM) communities in the UK and beyond has traditionally failed to properly centre the lived experiences of these same communities. Instead, figures from the academic and research sectors have attempted to draw research findings from BGM groups without proper consultation or input from participants beyond singular survey or interview responses. This 'extractive model' has seen the perspectives and expertise of BGM communities co-opted by external researchers to enhance their personal and career capital, whilst maintaining imbalanced power dynamics between decision-makers and the BGM communities they ostensibly serve..

Enabled with funding from the City Bridge Trust, through __Propel__, over the next three years, we will:

- *Develop research capacity throughout our partner organisations and wider BGM community, by providing dedicated research training and support to our partners.*
- *Support the development of 30 innovative research projects with our partners, enabling them to work within their communities to carry out lived experience research that makes a tangible difference.*
- *Co-produce four impactful reports with our partners and their organisations, and coordinate campaigns to drive systems change, ensuring that policy and practice come to better reflect the priorities of London's diverse BGM communities.*

The RCRP will achieve these objectives by partnering with one cohort of Peer Researchers per year. Each cohort will be centred on two of ROTA's six strategic priority areas. For the 2024 cohort, Peer Researchers have been conducting research into the ways inequalities have affected BGM communities in the areas of __education__ and __employment__. The 2025 cohort will focus on __housing__ and __health & wellbeing__, while the 2026 group will be researching __migration__ and the __criminal justice system__.

Our focus on education and employment for 2024 reflects the dire situation faced by members of our communities in schools, colleges, universities, and in the wider labour market, as we continue to recover from the pandemic, and associated economic and social aftershocks. As we outline in the below sections, the wave of social justice protests in the

summer of 2020 and beyond have had an ultimately negligible effect on the lived experiences of our children and young people in education, who are still subject to hugely disproportionate levels of formal and informal exclusions and other disciplinary measures, alongside discrimination and overt racism from both teachers and peers. Similarly, in the job market, members of our communities are still facing significant pay gaps, a lack of satisfactory inclusive measures and support, and career stagnation – assuming that they have managed to receive an employment contract in the first place, given the significant, disproportionate employment rate for BGM Londoners. We go into greater detail, and outline existing work in these areas, in the next sections.
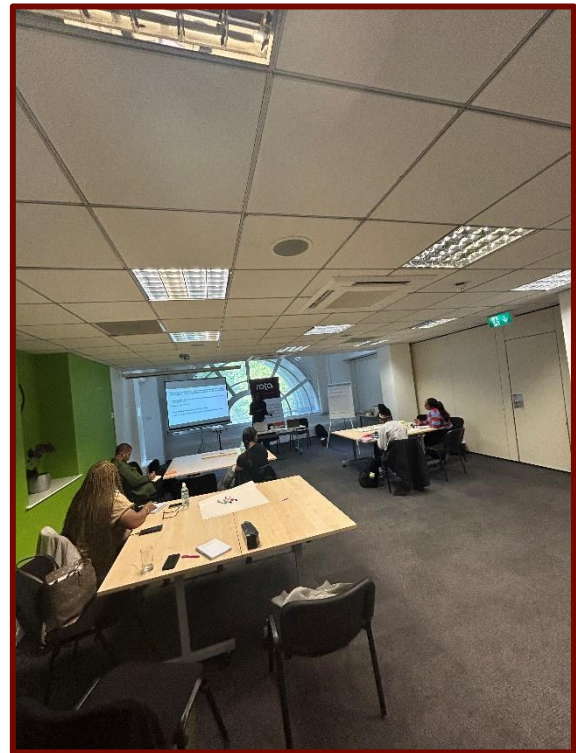
Our Peer Researchers have been conducting research with their communities to address issues in and around those outlined above. A key priority for the RCRP has been emphasising the importance of intersectionality in research. Too much effort has been put into replicating work that addresses the priorities of demographically narrow groups, even within the BGM community. As such, we have sought to ensure that as wide a set of perspectives as possible have been brought into research from our 2024 cohort, and will work to also embed these priorities into work by future cohorts.

RCRP Training Session

A Peer Researcher presenting their research findings

The Context: Black and Global Majority Experiences in Education and Employment

The issues faced by members of the BGM community in the education and employment sectors are wide and varied. This broad plurality is further complicated when the intersectional nature of our identities, and the forms of discrimination that we face – that which affects Black men may not apply to women of women of mixed heritage, just as the experiences of neurotypical South Asian children cannot be said to mirror those with autism. However, reviewing existing work from academic researchers and colleagues within the anti-racism sector on the experiences of BGM groups in schools, universities, and the job market reveals several consistent themes. These can broadly be grouped as either *overt* or *covert* instances of racism and discrimination, both of which have hugely negative implications for the outcomes, wellbeing, and prospects of BGM individuals within education and employment. In this section, we outline these broad, consistent themes, going into further detail about the specific contexts in which our Peer Researchers have been working in their respective chapters.

Undersupported and overdisciplined: BGM children and young people in the education sector

The overt experiences of racial discrimination in schools and the education sector reported by CYPs and researchers are often framed according to the significant 'discipline gap' that characterises the different treatment of White and minoritised children within schools. As <u>colleagues</u> report, Black and Mixed-Race in particular face hugely disproportionate disciplinary action in schools up and down the country. Punitive measures undertaken by schools range from detentions and isolation to suspension and expulsion, drastically affecting pupils' sense of belonging and support and, in the long term, their prospects. Reasons given for the racialised discipline gap often centre on ideas of <u>profiling, criminalisation, and adultification</u>. Black boys, for example, may be seen as more 'threatening' to teachers than white girls, as a result of prevalent stereotypes and racism within wider society. Teachers may, in turn, deem it more necessary to isolate or exclude Black boys for indulging in low-level disruptive behaviour, for which their White counterparts would receive a verbal warning. This is also compounded by adultification and the assumption that minoritised children are more culpable for their actions than their White counterparts, and can be treated and disciplined as adults. The practices of profiling, criminalisation, and adultification are demonstrated in the negligent, unacceptable treatment of Child Q in 2020 by the Metropolitan Police and staff at her school in Hackney, which saw the child handed over to the police for an unaccompanied strip-search as a result of an assumption her criminality, with devastating effects for her mental health and engagement in her education. Beyond discrimination from staff and the school establishment, there has been increasing concern in recent years of the effects of overt racism from peers in

school for minoritised children. _The Mirror_ reported earlier this year that over 60 pupils were sent home per day, on average, during the 2022-2023 school year for using derogatory, racist language. Even more concerningly, figures from the Department for Education show that this includes children as young as four years old, meaning that BGM pupils are having to cope with racist language and discrimination from their first years in the education system.

These issues are compounded by the even more widespread series of covert discriminatory practices and behaviours faced by BGM CYPs in schools and education. On the disciplinary aspect, this includes the practice of hair discrimination. Over the past decade or so, there have been a large number of reports of Black children, and those with Afro-textured hair, being sent home, excluded, or otherwise punished for wearing their hair in comfortable or natural styles, such as in cornrows, which are deemed by schools to be 'unprofessional', or an otherwise violation of uniform policies. As Stephanie Cohen highlighted in 2021, hair is a 'grey area' in the Equalities Act 2010, meaning that pupils who are subject to hair discrimination have had no legal recourse. New guidance to schools was issued from the Equalities and Human Rights Commission in 2023, encouraging sensitivity to different hair textures in uniform policies, although we are yet to see if this is sufficient. Another key issue highlighted by researchers has been the lack of dedicated support for BGM pupils within school settings to help them cope with, and challenge, instances of micro-aggressions, such as hair discrimination, and other associated issues. This has been particularly pronounced in the post-pandemic era. Authors have highlighted how BGM girls in school are particularly left out of vital emotional and wellbeing support, largely owing to the above-discussed issues of adultification prevalent in schools. In addition to these issues, BGM students and researchers have also discussed the significant issues presented by the content which is delivered to pupils. Since 2013, those in secondary schools have been taught a curriculum heavily focused on 'fundamental British values' and 'our island story', with both narratives centring on a highly exclusive conceptualisation of British history and society. BGM pupils have reported significant issues in this area, often with no positive narratives centring BGM voices and experiences anywhere in the core curriculum or school resources, leading to feelings of exclusion, and not 'belonging'. This is also a significant problem in the universities sector, where the lack of centralised curriculum oversight and narrow demography of university lecturers has led to extensively 'whitewashed' curricula.

The effects of these issues on BGM CYPs are significant. Beyond the 'official' exclusion rate, which in any case disproportionately affects BGM children, research from ROTA has shown that an even higher proportion of BGM children, including those from the Gypsy, Roma, and Traveler communities, are subject to 'informal' exclusions at a far higher rate than White peers. This practice sees pupils deemed as 'troublemakers' or 'disruptive' unofficially removed from the regular classroom, with schools failing to go through formal disciplinary procedures which would also ensure that mitigations are in place to ensure that pupils still have access to high-quality education.
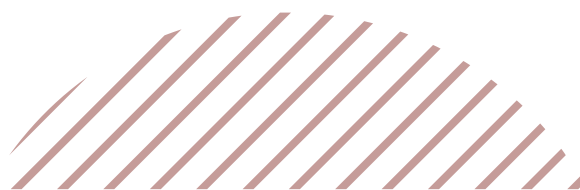
The disproportionate use of these practices reflects the profiling, criminalisation, and adultification of BGM children already discussed above, and ultimately leads to a further entrenchment of inequality in our communities. If our children are *de facto* removed from the classroom, without any mitigations in place, their ability to reach their full educational potential is severely undermined. This is also reflective of a broader trend of disengagement for BGM pupils from the classroom and curriculum. Several respondents to a recent survey discussed their treatment from teachers, alongside the lack of a representative and diverse curriculum, as undermining the extent to which they were able to feel invested in school and their education. Similar results were found in research from ROTA into the significantly higher dropout rate for Black university students. Interview respondents noted issues including whitewashed curricula, a lack of positive role models, support, and mentorship, and feelings of isolation and alienation from the rest of the student body. The effects of these issues are clear: the attainment and wellbeing of BGM pupils in schools and universities are being adversely affected by either negligence, apathy, or overt racism in school and university policies. As research from our Peer Researchers in the coming chapters demonstrates, these problems are even more pronounced amongst pupils facing multiple layers of discrimination on account of their intersectional identities.

Career stagnation and a lack of role models in the labour market

The same prevalent stereotypes which result in the over-discipline of BGM children in the classroom appear to be also working to prevent adults in our communities from joining the workforce. A 2020 study found that applicants with distinctly African or Asian-sounding names had to submit twice as many applications before being granted a job interview, and that after this point, the number receiving offers is still disproportionately low. At the interview, the same structural biases that result in hair discrimination in schools can also adversely affect applicants, with selection panels deeming the diction and/or appearance of BGM interviewees to be less 'professional' than White applicants. Again, these issues affect women from BGM communities even more than men. A recent report found, for example, that only 17% of surveyed employers had a representative proportion of BGM women on their staff. The unwillingness of employers to hire BGM workers means that members of our communities are far more likely to be in low-paid and insecure work. A 2022 report from the Youth Futures Foundation found that young BGM adults, and in particular young BGM women, were by far the most likely to be working in insecure and low-paid jobs. Similarly, recent research from the Trade Union Congress also found that BGM women were nearly three times as likely as White men to be employed on 'zero-hours' contracts. These issues were brought into stark relief during the pandemic when BGM workers were 26 times more likely to be dropped by their employers following the end of governmental support for businesses. The situation has not drastically improved in the following years, with ONS data from 2022 showing that only 69% of non-White Britons were employed, compared with 77% of their White counterparts. For younger groups, this disparity is even more marked, with 58% of White people in employment, compared with 39% of young BGM workers.

When in work, members of our communities are also faced with significant shortfalls in pay. Research has consistently shown that racially minoritised groups, and especially BGM

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women, receive far less pay for similar work than their White peers. ONS figures from 2022 revealed that Black groups earned between 6.5% and 5.6% less than their White counterparts. A recent study from the McKinsey Institute for Black Economic Mobility found that these figures may be far worse, with its authors concluding that on the whole, Black, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi groups earned up to 16% less than White employees and that this figure is even lower for women from these demographics. Whilst the new Labour Government has pledged to address ethnic pay gaps in their 2024 election manifesto and subsequent King's Speech, we are yet to see the form that this legislation will take. In the meantime, as several authors note, the experiences of BGM groups, and women in particular, in the workplace as a result of these wide pay gaps remain under-discussed and poorly understood. Their effects, however, are devastating. A 2020 report from the Runnymede Foundation highlighted how pay gaps and career stagnation served to effectively reinforce existing racial inequalities in the UK, preventing BGM groups from attaining the same success as their White colleagues, regardless of ability. As such, working to overcome these issues remains a core priority for those hoping to achieve racial equity.

Beyond the very tangible issue of pay inequality, members of the BGM community also face a host of more covert, insidious forms of discrimination in the workplace. One of the most frequently discussed issues is a lack of advancement for junior employees, resulting in career stagnation and, over the medium-to-long term, poor retention rates of BGM employees across the job market. This ultimately means that BGM groups are even more severely underrepresented at the upper levels of management across the public and private sectors. A 2021 report found there to be no Black Chairs, CEOs, or CFOs at any FTSE 100 company. The figures are marginally better for other BGM groups, with the BBC reporting this year that there were 12 racially minoritised chief executives across the FTSE; however, this still only amounts to 13% of available positions, and as such is still unrepresentative. Researchers have argued that a key problem for BGM employees hoping to advance their careers is that the 'model worker' is still positioned as being a White, middle-aged and middle-class man. Behaviours and characteristics which deviate from this supposed 'standard' are deemed unprofessional, and individuals exhibiting them are often passed over for advancement by managers accordingly. The YFF, for example, found that over 50% of young Black workers felt that their employers frequently underestimated their abilities. Another key issue here is the lack of adequate mentorship and support available to young BGM workers. An inevitable consequence of a lack of representative senior staff, the inability of many companies to offer tailored support to young BGM workers, including an acknowledgement of their racialised identities, has served to create a vicious cycle across many industries. Once again, this situation is far worse for BGM women, deemed 'double jeopardy' minorities by some researchers. Finally, there is the very real problem of overt racism in the workplace. 2021 research from Pearn Kandola found that 60% of Black people, and 42% of Asians had experienced racism in the workplace in the UK and that 20% of these had experienced physical or verbal racial abuse.

Structural Racism and the education-employment Pipeline

As the researchers reviewed in this chapter make clear, structural racism remains a pervasive issue in both the sectors of education and employment in the UK. Pervasive stereotypes continue to result in the over-discipline of BGM children in school, leading to disengagement and poor attainment. At the same time, inadequate safeguarding is preventing already disadvantaged pupils from accessing the support that they need, and who are instead excluded, formally or informally, from the rest of the school population. Children who manage to avoid exclusion are still subject to everyday discrimination from both teachers and peers, including through racist school uniform policies, and are forced to engage in a national curriculum which has been found time and time again to be wholly outdated and containing fundamentally racist content which has a detrimental effect on the worldviews and wellbeing of BGM students. Upon leaving school, young BGM workers experience many of the same forms of discrimination during their pursuit of work, with many employers continuing to perceive minoritised people as less attractive employees, leading to many being forced into insecure and poorly paid work. Within the workplace too, for those able to gain employment, harmful stereotypes and other forms of structural racism mean that BGM workers are negatively affected by career stagnation, a lack of support infrastructure and mentorship, and overt racism from peers and superiors. Crucially, as researchers note, there is a correlation between how BGM children are treated in school, and their later opportunities in the job market. Even if we were to disregard the discriminatory practices of many employers, the over-discipline and profiling of BGM pupils in schools often lead to lower overall attainment, owing to the understandable disengagement of pupils from what they may see as an unduly custodial and punitive school system. There is thus a direct pipeline from poor treatment in schools, to poor performance on the job market, representing a significant barrier to social mobility and perpetuating further cycles of disadvantage and discrimination. These issues need serious attention.

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The ROTA Community Research Partnership

The desperate need for further research into the issues faced by members of our communities in the education and employment sectors is clear. But who should carry out this research? As a by-and-for membership organisation, it has long been ROTA's position that those most affected by racial inequity and injustice are those best placed to develop solutions to the issues that they face on a day-to-day basis, and to partner with organisations like ours to increase awareness, challenge policy and practice, and ultimately drive systems change. This commitment to the concept of 'nothing about us, without us' is what led us to develop the ROTA Community Research Partnership, which officially began its first year at the end of January 2024. Central to the mission of the RCRP has been both working to support research with real importance to our partners, and to develop a framework by which equity organisations can seek greater inclusion and participation from the communities that they serve. As such, the strategies that we have been developing, and will continue to revisit and refine over the next two years, are of equal importance to the success of the partnership as the data gathered by our Peer Researchers, and any changes to policy and practice that we can achieve. Below, we will discuss some of the major influences on this approach and present a more comprehensive overview of the RCRP framework as it currently stands.

Community-Based Participatory Research

The approaches that we have taken in developing the RCRP are by no means without precedent. Rooted in the 'action research' methods which were pioneered during the 1940s and 1950s, community-based participatory research (CPBR) emerged during the 1970s and 1980s through the work of radical Latin American researchers such as Paolo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda. At their heart, CBPR methods exist to challenge and re-formulate the traditional dynamics between those conducting social research, and those participating in it. The traditional, 'extractive' research model sees university-based and/or educated researchers 'parachuting in' to different communities to conduct research activities exclusively informed by their own academic training and scholarly publications. Here, researched communities exist only as the 'object' of research, having very little input on the gathering or interpretation of data beyond their participation in interviews or surveys designed by the researcher and their

colleagues. CBPR methods instead recentre these dynamics, recognising researched communities as experts in their own right, particularly when it comes to gathering and interpreting data pertinent to their own social and cultural experiences. Researchers working within this framework accordingly seek to position participants and participant communities at the heart of their activities, with a significant degree of input on the design of research, gathering of data, and interpretation and presentation of results.

Over the past 20-30 years, there have been a growing number of studies which attest to the efficacy and benefits of CBPR approaches. Researchers have highlighted how Peer Researchers (PRs) generally have a far more developed understanding of their own research context than 'traditional' researchers can hope to gain in their comparatively brief time 'in the field'. This means that communities are, as a rule, far more qualified to identify the issues that are of the most significant local importance than external researchers, making PRs invaluable in the design of studies. When it comes to gathering data, those already within the community are best placed to identify the best research participants with the most relevant lived experience that speaks to the studies' aims. In the case of qualitative research, shared lived experience and prior association can also mean that PRs are often excellent candidates for actually carrying out research activities, particularly when given a short, intensive course in research methods. Finally, after primary data-gathering, the inside knowledge, shared parlance, and intrinsic understanding of research communities' specific nuances and unwritten social rules mean that PRs are an invaluable resource when it comes to analysing and presenting findings.

Since the 1980s, CBPR approaches have been used to conduct research with several groups which had until then often been labelled dismissively as 'hard to reach', providing researchers with a ready excuse to further neglect already marginalised communities. Many of these took the form of public health intervention. For example, several projects throughout the late 1990s and 2000s sought to work with minoritised, 'hard to reach' groups including the LGBTQI+ and BGM communities to pioneer effective interventions, spread awareness, and document the effects of the HIV/AIDS crisis. Similar work was carried out with communities of individuals with substance use disorders during the 2000s and 2010s, and recent work has sought to explore the experiences of those with long-term disabilities and mental health conditions. More generally, several recent organisations in the UK and beyond have sought to carry out CBPR-informed public health research with minoritised communities, often with overwhelmingly successful outcomes. Similar results have been reported when co-producing projects with British children and young people (CYPs) in educational and extra-curricular settings, with researchers emphasising the positive outcomes of empowering CYPs to make a tangible difference to research in these settings. Using CBPR approaches to conduct race equity research is a newer application of the method. However, projects from the UK and beyond over the last 15 years or so have demonstrated the crucial role that these methods can play in rebalancing the research dynamic for racially minoritised groups. This is especially important given the historical problems and persecution faced by BGM communities in the UK and beyond by the academic and research establishment. Beyond the kinds

of extractive research practices outlined above, far more serious abuses of BGM communities have been carried out through the manipulation of research findings to emphasise the inferiority of our populations, and work associated with scientific racism and the eugenics movement over the past 150 years, which continues in some areas to this day. This has resulted in a fundamental, and justified, mistrust of the research establishment across swathes of the BGM community. Reformulations of the researcher-researched dynamic are a crucial, and overdue, step in repairing relations here and creating research that truly serves our communities.

In practice, there are several ways in which researchers can achieve greater community involvement, with varying degrees of power and autonomy given to these communities, as <u>Roche, Guta, and Flicker</u>v highlighted in their 2011 discussion on the principles of peer research. At one end of the scale, it has become common practice, and often a *de facto* requirement in public policy research, to assemble an advisory committee either including or composed exclusively of individuals from the community under research. The power given to these committees varies from project to project, and some have criticised this approach for essentially allowing researchers to pay lip service to the principle of power-sharing in research without giving committees any ability to effect change. However, in general, advisory committees will review and comment on any plans for research and dissemination activities, at a minimum. Other studies may employ members of the community under research to serve as Peer Researchers or Community Researchers, under the direction of the professional research team. In this instance, the PRs may have some *ad hoc* ability to impact the research methods (choosing not to ask a specific question, or to probe in a different direction during an interview), but will still essentially be engaging in research activities designed by external researchers. At the other end of the spectrum are truly co-designed research projects. Here, the community under study will be involved in the design of the course of research from its very inception, with meaningful input into the area of focus, co-production of research methods and data gathering, and joint responsibility for analysis and dissemination. Hailed as the 'gold standard' for decentralising 'the researcher' in race equity work, it is this latter model that we sought to build the RCRP around.

The RCRP Framework

However, it became clear during the planning for our 2024 cohort that this model still placed too much emphasis on the input of 'expert' researchers, and that for our intended purposes, we would need to address our centrality as research facilitators even more than is typical in co-production studies. As such, the framework that we are developing seeks to wholly empower and centre our research partners to pursue work that they have identified as being of critical importance to their own communities. PRs, in this instance, are positioned essentially as the principal investigators – to use academic parlance – of their research projects, with ROTA on hand to deliver any necessary training and research support during these projects. This model has several key benefits, which work to maximise the advantages of CBPR methods. Chief

amongst these is the acknowledgement and utilisation of PRs' expertise in their communities and the challenges that they face. At present, for example, ROTA researchers have expertise in education policy and the delivery of national curricula. Whilst certainly relevant to the aims for this year's RCRP cohort, the scale of issues faced by intersectional BGM communities across the education and employment sectors is far broader than we can hope to address internally. By recruiting PRs with existing research interests and lived experiences in these areas, we have been able to ensure that any results delivered do chime with the needs of their communities, and not just with the ruminations of external researchers. We conduct a more thorough evaluation of the advantages and challenges presented through our developing framework in the concluding chapter. For now, we present the methods that we have used during the different phases of the 2024 RCRP cohort, following a discussion on the principles of peer research which have been developed by the Young Foundation.

Community research principles

To ensure the efficacy of the partnership, so that any data was sufficiently robust and that findings were valid and actionable, whilst Peer Researchers were supported in a collaborative environment, we decided to base our RCRP framework on the 10 principles of peer research developed by the Young Foundation:

1. **Peer research projects actively involve members of the researched community in the process of generating new knowledge about, or understanding of, their communities.**
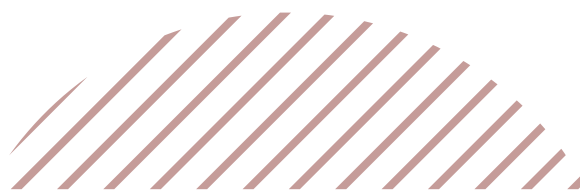
Our PRs have been central to all research activities, and we have worked to ensure that their expertise and lived experiences have been the core focus for the direction of each project.

2. **Peer research projects answer a genuine research question and seek to produce high-quality findings.**

We supported PRs to develop testable research questions around which to structure their research activities and have worked to help ensure that all relevant protocols are followed to produce high-quality, robust findings.

3. **Both professional researchers and peer researchers benefit from taking part and gaining new perspectives to help strengthen their research practice.**

The research environment fostered during the partnership has been mutually beneficial. PRs have received high-quality, bespoke research training relevant to their research areas, and have in turn contributed to significant learnings for ROTA researchers around their research contexts and new methods for gathering data and engaging communities.

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4. **Peer research projects strive to involve peer researchers in as many aspects of the research process as possible.**

By centering our PRs, we have empowered them to identify, design, and pursue the research that they deem most important to their communities. They have been intimately involved in all aspects of the research process, with ROTA on hand to provide logistical and research support where requested.

5. **Peer researchers are informed about the impact of their work and how the findings are being used.**

Our work to drive impact and affect change as a result of PRs data is ongoing. However, PRs have been and will continue to be informed about the impact of their work, and we hope to continue our collaborative and co-productive relationships in this area beyond the conclusion of the partnership.

6. **Peer research is considered a research approach like any other, with limitations and biases that should be considered and controlled for.**

We have sought to consider and mitigate any limitations, and control for biases, throughout the training and research processes. PRs have been encouraged to consider their own positionality when designing and carrying out their work, and we have sought to place findings within their wider context and compare findings with similar research to demonstrate their validity and contribution to existing knowledge.

7. **Findings produced via peer research are made publicly available where possible with the results published in an open and accessible formats for audiences including stakeholders and research participants.**

This publication, and any further publications produced from RCRP research, will always be publicly available and accessible. We are also considering alternative ways to present findings, to further their dissemination and impact potential.

8. **Peer researchers are both adequately compensated and acknowledged in project results and publications, and they are actively involved in 'sharing out' findings.**

All PRs have been paid a fee of £3,000 for their contributions to the partnership. We have also established an RCRP authorship policy which means that they will always be credited for the work that they have carried out, and any benefits which derive from this work. They have been encouraged to be as active as possible in sharing and disseminating findings in whatever format they deem suitable and have been offered support to do so.

9. **Peer research programmes are evaluated for their research outputs, data quality, participant experience and wider societal or policy impact.**

We seek to champion CBPR methods and approaches throughout our work. As such, we have built-in evaluations of the impact of our work on PRs and their communities throughout the research process and will be sharing these findings, our learnings, and areas for improvement in the conclusion of this report.

10. **The leaders of peer research projects take into consideration legal and ethical issues surrounding copyright, intellectual property, data-sharing agreements, confidentiality, attribution and the impact of any activities on communities.**

We have carefully considered the best ways to ensure that the partnership can be operated in the most mutually beneficial, equitable, and ethical way possible, whilst ensuring that findings can be gathered and utilised effectively. Research ethics was a central component of our training sessions, and all participants were able to give informed consent to take part in research activities, with strict confidentiality arrangements, meaning that only PRs are aware of any participants' identities. To ensure safeguarding, any PR carrying out work with children needed to hold a valid DBS certificate, which we arranged for those who needed one. All data processing has been GDPR compliant, with ROTA serving as the controller of data, whilst any findings produced by PRs are co-owned by them, meaning that they can produce further research outputs independently of ROTA, or without collaboration and support.

These principles have been highly instructive in developing our framework, and we hope that this project can work to further demonstrate the power of community research and CBPR methods. Below, we outline the precise methods that we drew on during this year's cohort.

Peer Researcher recruitment

To ensure that any research produced reflected the priorities of our members, and to take advantage of our existing productive partnerships, we sought to conduct the majority of our recruitment from within our broad membership of nearly 3,000 anti-racist organisations and partners. We put together and circulated an invitation to submit applications to our members in early April 2024. We gave an estimate of the time commitment that PRs could expect to give and highlighted that PRs would receive a fee of £3,000 throughout the partnership. We also circulated the advert to our followers on social media, specifically Twitter/X, Facebook and LinkedIn. However, the vast majority of applicants were from our membership. We also held two recruitment events in May 2024, including presentations on the aims of the partnership and expectations of PRs, and a Q&A session. These events were both well attended, with around 20 potential applicants coming to each session.

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Applicants were invited to submit a research proposal for consideration by our selection committee. This was designed to be as simple to fill in and accessible as possible. Applicants were first asked to detail their proposed project in 500 words or less, focusing on: (i) the group that they were hoping to conduct work with; (ii) why the research was important; and (iii) what their ideal outcomes of the research would be. They were then asked about how their proposed research fitted within the themes of 'education' and 'employment', their relationship with the community they were hoping to conduct research with their access to participants, and if they had any specific research methods in mind. In the second section, participants were asked some details about themselves, including the London borough in which they were based, their membership or partner organisations, any research experience applicants had, and restrictions on their availability and work entitlement.

In total, 52 completed applications were submitted. These were initially looked at and scored independently by ROTA's Research and Policy Coordinator, and Training and Engagement Manager, on a rubric which we developed to address the core competencies required to carry out the PR role satisfactorily. We developed this rubric regarding existing guides on conducting CBPR work from Guta, Flicker, and Roche. We then compared the scores given by our assessors and calculated a minimum threshold for shortlisting. A total of 15 applicants were invited to take part in a 30-minute-long interview, which we held remotely over two days.

At the interview, we assembled a three-person panel, comprised of the ROTA Research and Policy Coordinator, Training and Engagement Manager, and Education Policy Researcher. The interview was split into three sections: the first set of questions concerned participants' application, and their research proposals; the second set was concerned with the applicants' learning styles, experiences with receiving training, and capacity for self-care and management during the research process; and the final set of questions concerned applicants'' experiences with, and competencies for, conducting research, along with any specific support that they would need to deliver their research. Applicants were scored live by all three committee members during the interview, and scores were compared and collated at the end of each day, where we also discussed the other strengths of each applicant. We ultimately offered PR positions to 10 applicants. One, unfortunately, dropped out due to unexpected commitments before training had begun.

Across the first cohort, there was a wide range of research experiences, and nearly all PRs (and the majority of applicants) had had some experience with research in the past, either as researchers or participants. Of the final nine PRs, two were current PhD students, one was a Master's student, and another had just finished their Master's degree and was planning to apply for a PhD. The rest of the cohort had either an undergraduate degree or no degree, and most were actively engaged in research, campaigning, or advocacy activities within their communities. The level of expertise the cohort was bringing to our partnership was therefore very high.

Training

We decided that the best way to deliver our initial research training would be through a bespoke five-day intensive course. Designed by our Training and Engagement Manager and Research and Policy Coordinator, the training covered six key areas: (1) background to CBPR and peer research; (2) research admin, informed consent, and participant recruitment (3) quantitative research methods (surveys and questionnaires); (4) qualitative research methods (interviews and focus groups); (5) research analysis; (6) self-care and seeking support during research.

These modules were delivered during days 1-3, on the Monday-Wednesday of week one. The high level of expertise already present within the cohort meant that we were able to move through the basics very quickly, since most were already familiar with basic research terminology and methods, and we were also able to rely on the experience of our PRs to foster a very collaborative environment within our training sessions. This was again crucial to achieving the decentralised framework that we had hoped to develop, as ROTA staff were able to learn as much, if not more, from the cohort of PRs than we were delivering within the sessions. PRs also set up a WhatsApp group to discuss the training and their research development, independently of ROTA.

Following this period of initial training and PRs presentations (see below), we held 5 additional in-person training sessions, going over plans for delivering research, recruiting participants, and carrying out data collection, as well as providing a space for Q&A and discussion between PRs and ROTA staff. We also held 3 online check-ins to discuss PRs' progress and any difficulties that they may have been facing and also set up a booking page for PRs to book a 30-minute informal chat with the Training and Engagement Manager and Research and Policy Coordinator, which a number of the PRs took advantage of.

Research design

For week two of the five-day intensive training course, PRs were asked to prepare a short 10–15-minute presentation on their proposed research, including the community in which they were working, a summary of the issues that they were hoping to address, and the research methods that they thought most appropriate in achieving these aims. PRs then received constructive feedback from the rest of the cohort, and ROTA staff, and were sent away to work on their final research proposal for the next fortnight.

At the next session, PRs came equipped with their completed research proposals, including a detailed breakdown of their research methods, and draft questionnaires and/or interview scripts. PRs discussed these collectively with ROTA staff and noted down final adjustments and potential recruitment strategies. PRs drew primarily on the core methods that we had collectively discussed, centring on surveys, questionnaires, focus groups, and research interviews. Some data collection strategies

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did change throughout the research because of practical difficulties, leading one PR to change their initial plans to conduct formal research interviews, instead deciding to use participant observation techniques and *ad hoc*, unstructured interviews, leading to an especially rich dataset.

Data collection

Once PRs were happy with their research methods, we encouraged them to begin participant recruitment as soon as possible, given the difficulties that this process can so often bring up. Recruitment and data collection began around August of 2024. PRs initially prepared participant information sheets and consent forms, to ensure that all study participants were giving evidenced, informed consent to participation in the study, and were aware of what would be happening with their data.

As is typical in conducting social research, PRs experienced a range of foreseen and unforeseen issues during data collection. Participant recruitment was a consistent issue across several PR studies, particularly those relying on a very specific participant population. The project working with South Asian international students, for example, required significant additional support from ROTA to attract enough participants, despite a significant amount of work from the PR running the project. We circulated adverts to our membership and the wider community on social media, and also introduced a £25 prize draw to incentivise participation, eventually recruiting enough participants to supplement primary and secondary qualitative findings from the PR. Another PR was forced to return to their interview notes to re-formulate their dataset after unexpected IT issues meant that they had lost a number of their research transcripts.

Nearly every PR experienced issues of some kind during data collection, as is typical of the research process. However, none reported anything of serious concern, either for the integrity of their project or for safeguarding purposes, and all were eventually able to pull together exceptionally strong, illuminative datasets which went on to inform the analysis outlined in later chapters.

Data processing and analysis

Whilst the broad principles of data analysis were discussed during the initial training, we held an additional in-person training session to discuss the data processing protocols that we were hoping that PRs would achieve before handing their data over to ROTA to author this report.

Those working with survey data were asked to, if possible, build and conduct their surveys using Microsoft Forms. The benefits of this software are that it is easy to use and intuitive, that it is free to use, and that results can be ported into an Excel spreadsheet in real-time, allowing for insights to be developed easily throughout the research. Once they had completed their data collection, PRs were asked to conduct

an initial analysis of their survey data, including: coding any qualitative findings into the minimum number of themes to enable a robust and comprehensive analysis; considering the implications of any themes in quantitative findings given their prior knowledge of the participant population; putting together any graphs or other illustrations from the data set that they thought pertinent for later analysis; using their experience and knowledge of the participant population to conclude the data set; and formulating any relevant policy and practice recommendations from the data.

Those working with qualitative data had additional steps to complete. Initially, interview and focus group recordings had to be transcribed and anonymised. To do this, we recommended using the built-in AI transcription feature in Microsoft Word, since again, the software was free and simple to use, and was already plugged into the Microsoft ecosystem, with which we were conducting most of our research activities. PRs then had to manually check through transcripts for accuracy and any extant identifiers, before coding findings individually and collectively. We recommended that coding be carried out using the free and intuitive Taguette software. PRs were again asked to: condense tags across their data set into the minimum number of themes to enable a robust and comprehensive analysis; together any illustrations (such as word clouds) from the data set that they thought pertinent for later analysis; use their experience and knowledge of the participant population to conclude the data set; and formulate any relevant policy and practice recommendations from the data.

Following the deadline for PRs to submit their data, we held one final in-person session to consider the implications of their collective findings. This meeting was held in mid-November. PRs were asked to prepare a short 10–15-minute presentation, outlining their key findings and any policy and practice implication of their data, alongside any reflections that they had from tier experiences during their data collection. Following the presentations, we had a collaborative discussion session, where we sought to put together a set of overarching policy and practice recommendations drawn from across PRs collective projects.
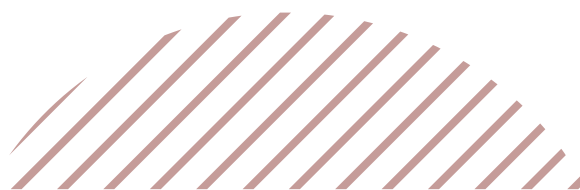
Interrogating the Experiences of Race, Racism, and Misogynoir for Black Girls in Education

Peer Researcher: Jamila Thompson

A range of measures, including the underline guidance provided by Safeguarding and Child Protection, and, Keeping Children Safe in Education policies, and the Equality Act 2010 suggest that equality, human rights, and child protection laws work together to safeguard all children, including those from Black and Global Majority backgrounds. However, the 2022 revelation of the horrific and unlawful state-sanctioned sexual assault' of Child Q reminded us that Black children are not safe, and Black girls are not safe, even in schools. An investigation concluding that "racism was a likely factor" in the Metropolitan Police's strip search of the schoolgirl in 2020. This incident, along with others such as the tragic murder of 15-year-old Elianne Andam, highlight the need to elevate the narratives and experiences of Black girls. In particular, we must address issues such as adultification, misogynoir, sexual harassment, and racism, all of which are prevalent within the education system. The safety of Black and Global Majority girls requires urgent attention.

Through this research, our Peer Researcher, Jamila Thompson, sought to share the stories of Black girls, and provide them with a safe space to address, articulate, and reflect on their experiences. Jamila's background in the education system, along with her lived experiences as a Black woman and Black girl in education, meant that she was well prepared to approach this project within a community she understands well. With 10 years of experience in education, Jamila has taught, mentored, and supported hundreds of Black girls in London. She has been a qualified teacher for eight years, and has served as the Ethnic Minority Achievement Coordinator and Head of Sociology & Religious Education. These roles have equipped her with the expertise to examine this research from an educational, inclusion, and sociological perspective. Jamila additionally had the invaluable experience of teaching at OYA! (Organisation of Young Africans), a supplementary Saturday school for children of African and Caribbean descent in North West London, which allowed her to connect with more Black girls for this research.

Jamila's work revealed that issues of race, racism, and misogynoir continue to manifest in the education sector. Even where the Black girls we spoke to had not personally experienced racism, they were aware of other people's experiences or encounters that they might describe as examples of racism. Many participants indicated that while they had not necessarily experienced racism from their teachers, they believed that some white teachers displayed ignorance regarding the experiences of Black people, culture, and students. All interview participants discussed the intersections of their identities as both Black and female.

One student explained that she found it difficult to speak with white girls about being a Black girl or with Black boys for the same reason, as there was often a lack of understanding stemming from the impacts of racism and patriarchy. Additionally, some of the younger girls were unfamiliar with the term "misogynoir." Participating in the research allowed them to access this language, helping them better articulate their racialised and gendered experiences. A significant issue for some of the older girls was the lack of allyship from Black boys regarding topics affecting Black girls, particularly issues of misogynoir and sexual assault. The visibility of being Black in environments where there were few other Black individuals was also significant for the girls, although for different reasons

Background

Historically, Black populations in England have had a difficult relationship with the English education system and concerns around Black children in schools have been present as far back as the Windrush Generation when England invited her "colonial subjects" to rebuild the "mother land". The treatment of Black Caribbean children in England's schools illustrated the presence of institutional racism. Biased examinations led to Black children, and particularly those of Caribbean heritage, being labelled as educationally 'subnormal' at an alarming rate, in comparison to their white counterparts, and other BGM children. This resulted in Black children attended schools for children with severe Special Educational Needs (SEN) that they did not have. The low expectations of Black boys and girls led to the growth of the supplementary school movement to instil pride, culture, history and confidence in Black children, in order to combat the institutional racism they faced in the schools, the continued efficacies of which we return to later in this report (Andrews, 2024).

As we highlight in the introductory chapter, over the last 30 years, Black boys and Black children of from Caribbean backgrounds, have been identified as a vulnerable group because of their high exclusion rates in comparison to their White counterparts. This overrepresentation in is a concern that has been present for decades, and a significant number of studies and interventions have been run to explore its causes, effects, and possible solutions to the issue. However, as the NEU noted in a 2023 report, existing government data and academic statistics have focused on Black

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boys, and that "further attention on the specifics of Blacks girls' experiences in school in the United Kingdom is perhaps overdue". These research findings suggest that Black girls are indeed experiencing issues of *race*, gender and class in parallel with Black boys. In recent years, there have been growing concerns about increased police presence in schools in areas with larger BGM and working class communities. Initially, much of the talk was around boys from these communities who were, and still are, having increased interactions with the police. However, the incident of Child Q revealed to many that both Black boys, *and* Black girls, are victims of police presence in schools, and that the adultification of Black boys which leads them being sanctioned of fear, is the same adultification which led to a Black, teenage girl being strip searched without the presence of a safe adult, guardian or knowledge of parents. Whilst the adultification of Black girls in schools has been a growing topic in US literature for over a decade now, the Child Q incident has been the real catalyst for more research to be done in the area of adultification and misogynoir in the UK.

As noted in the introduction, <u>adultification to the phenomenon where adults in positions of power and authority fail to ascribe "childhood status"</u> to certain children and young people due to stereotypes about their class and race. These stereotypes and preconceived notions about who qualifies as 'a child' result in children from specific racial and class backgrounds being denied the protections of childhood and treated as adults prematurely. While any child can experience adultification, the NEU report highlights <u>a clear bias in the UK towards the adultification of Black boys and girls</u>. This research examines the experiences of Black girls through the lens of intersectionality and misogynoir, as their experiences of adultification reflect the dual impacts of being both gendered and racialised within a society that views them as "other." This study aims to illuminate the challenges faced by Black girls, provide recommendations for improving their experiences, and contribute to the growing body of work addressing the intersection of race, gender, and class in shaping the lives of young people in the UK.

Methods

The primary research methods that we drew upon in this project were a mixed methods approach to gain both quantifiable data to draw some broad conclusions and qualitative to humanise the individual experiences of the girls who participated. Initially, we wanted to conduct focus groups with a few groups of girls but logistically, it was not possible. In total, we conducted a survey with thirty-eight girls as well as six in-depth interviews with Black girls in various parts of England, aged 11-19. Recruitment was conducted from within Jamila's existing network of students that she had previously taught, and their peers.

The survey focused on the whether Black girls themselves had experienced racism in schools or witnessed racist behaviour, and if so, by whom towards whom. The survey also gave space girls to write about anyone of their experiences as well as to identify whether their school acted correctly to address the racism or whether the girls had any suggestions on how to improve things. However, these themes were explored in more

depth through the interviews. The survey also captured the age of the participants, the area of England where they lived, and how they identified ethnically.

The quantitative findings from the surveys were analysed both at population level and qualitative survey findings, along with interview findings, were coded inductively, and grouped together to provide several themes for analysis.

Due to the research context, it was important to include Black girls as much as possible in the research process, ensuring they indeed were co-creators of knowledge and that the research represented them well. To do this, an ex-A Level Sociology student Jamila's, Nada Mohammed, was invited to help with some aspects of the methodology including editing and proofreading documents, creating recruitment flyers and posting them on social media, sharing the research more generally with her peers, creating Eventbrite pages for participants to sign up for the focus groups and more. Nada was an integral part of this research, and it would not have been such an easy process without her help and support – thank you Nada.

Nada's contribution highlights the enormous ability, creativity and potential our Black girls have. What some lack is the opportunity to help shape the narratives that pertain to them, and access to those creating this knowledge. We sincerely hope that this research demonstrates the power of such co-creation, and encourages others to give more Black girls these opportunities to both support their own communities, and their own successes in the future.

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Results

Surveys

The survey was conducted using Google forms and the link was shared across social media. The only criteria for participants were that they had to identify as a girl and identify, or be racialised, as Black for the purpose of the research.

In terms of the demographics of the girls who participated in the survey, in terms of age, most participants identified as 17 (37%) whilst our lowest groups were those aged 15 and 16. Many of the participants were sixth form or college students and so were more inclined to participate in the research as they genuinely had points that they wanted to share. The fact that 15- and 16-year-olds are preparing for GCSEs may be a factor in their low participation. In addition, in terms of ethnicity, majority of participants (76%) identified solely as African and around 16% as Caribbean. It would have been interesting to see more Caribbean responses given the statistics on Black Caribbean children in schools and to potentially make a comparison between the Black African experience and the Black Caribbean experience. In terms of location, nearly three quarters were from London, with 20% living in Northwest or South East England.

When asked if they themselves had experienced racism or misogynoir in education, the vast majority, nearly three quarters, answered yes. 18% answered unsure which may reflect their lack of understanding around the word "misogynoir". Participants were also asked if they had witnessed other people experiencing racism in education. This time, a larger percentage (84%) answered yes with 13% percent of participants still unsure.

Have you witnessed or experienced the following?

	Racist or Derogatory Language	Negative Stereotyping	Hair Discrimination	Language Discrimination
I have experienced (from my peers)	18	20	10	12
I have experienced (from my teachers)	10	12	15	8
I have seen other Black girls (from peers)	20	18	14	16
I have seen other Black girls (from teachers)	12	15	18	10
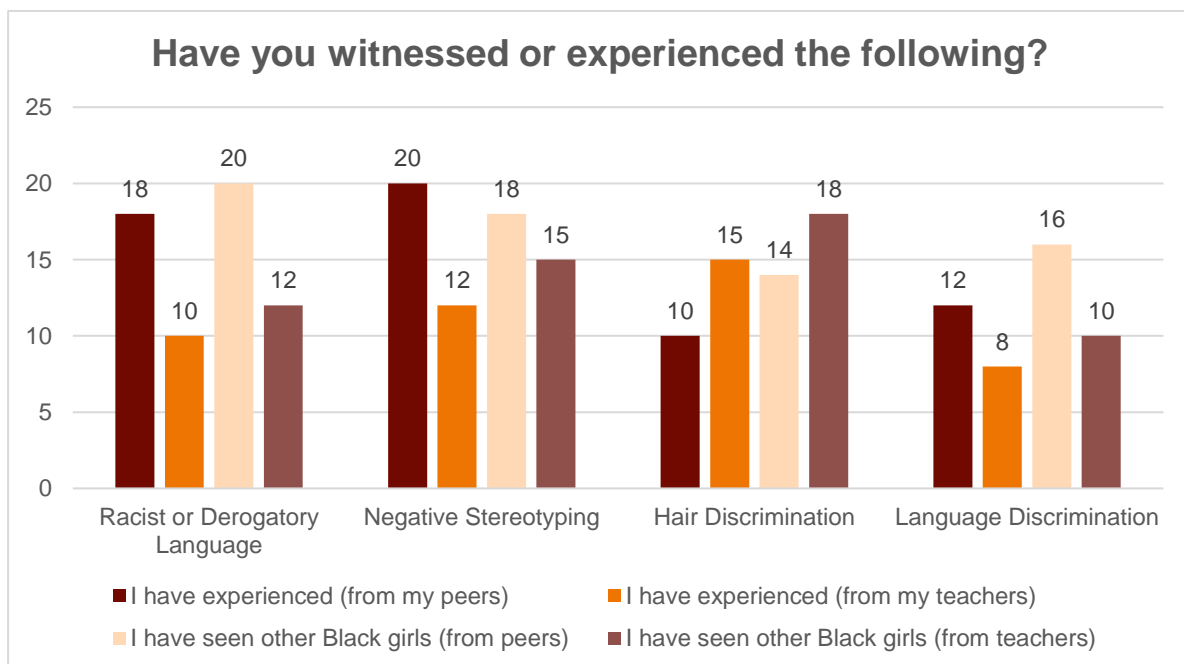
Participants were asked to identify if they had experienced or witnessed the following incidents in school: racism or derogatory language, negative stereotyping, hair discrimination, language discrimination, use of language such as "angry" or "aggressive", violence, violent threats, being called the wrong name or mistaken for another student, and more severe punishments than other student. Participants were also asked who experienced the incidents and by whom.

From these questions, the key findings were that 84% of girls had either experienced some form of racism from their peers, witnessed racism against Black girls by their peers and/or by teachers. 81% had also experienced some form of racism from teachers. Some other key findings were:

- 55% of girls had experienced racist or derogatory language by their peers and 65 had witnessed other Black girls experience this.
- 60% had experienced negative stereotyping from their peers and 36% experienced by their teachers
- 36% of girls experienced hair discrimination and being called words such as "angry" and aggressive" by their peers.

- Nearly half had been mixed up with another Black person by their peers or a teacher
- Around 60% of girls experienced hair discrimination from teachers and 36% had seen it happen to other Black girls
- More than 10% of girls had experienced or witnessed violence or violent threat by their peers or teachers towards themselves or other Black girls.

Participants were asked to elaborate and explain their answers. Many of the explanations echoed what was heard in the interviews with other girls.

An 11-year-old participant wrote:

"The teacher called a Black girl a monkey and said nigga"

A 16-year-old girl form London wrote:

"I was permanently excluded wrongfully because of my race"

An eighteen-year-old girl form East London shared:

"I have experienced racist and derogatory comments made to me and against my peers all throughout school, I have experienced sexual assault and gotten the proper support after it happened"

On hair discrimination, a 17-year-old from London wrote:

"Negative stereotypes like being told we're too loud and sensitive also we weren't allowed coloured braids like blonde or ginger because they weren't "our" natural hair colours"

A 17-year-old girl form South East England shared her experience of negative interactions between Black students, their teachers and their peers:

"An older student at my school were pressing at her nose, making a 'pig nose' while "laughing at me which felt like she was making fun of my ethnic features. I reported it my teacher, they did not deal with appropriately. There has been times where a teacher has called me aggressive for standing up myself. I do remember times that I have compared to other Black girls that I don't believe we look alike. I seen it happen to other Black people. There was an incident recently when a white girl made some racist comment to Black girl. The Black girl was villainised and made to be seen as the perpetrator in the situation. from as long as I remember, we were never allowed to have coloured braids. So I never bothered to wear it . remember another time in primary school when we were playing The Lion King, I had the role of Rafiki. I had decided to take out my hair and it was in one big Afro puff. My teacher turned around to me and said my hair was really good for the role. These were just some of my racist experiences".

Another sixth former from London wrote about her interaction with a Professor from Sheffield University:

"Overall in my previous school environment, seeing as it's in an incredibly diverse area, my experiences with racism are considerably reduced compared to when I'm outside my area. Nonetheless, I've still witnessed the use of the N word by non-Black pupils and derogatory caricatures made, teachers perpetuating a violence stereotype through the breaking up of groups of Black students. I've also had a personal experience where a PhD professor from the University of Sheffield came into our school as part of long term work to improve diversity initiatives. She had been working with members of the student parliament, and as part of the group, we wore coloured rosettes like the ones people wear on their birthday. Whilst in discussion, she took it upon herself to comment on it and joke that "if the light went out, all I'd see is the badge". For context, I was the only Black girl in the room at that moment".

A nineteen-year-old girl from South East England shared her experiences of being called a derogatory term by a member of staff:

"A dinner lady called me a bitch despite the fact I was told by a teacher that I'm allowed to skip the queue due to having a disability. The school did nothing to safeguard me from this staff and they remained at the school with no repercussions taken".

Another student shared on language policing:

"There was a girl in my English class, who mostly spoke in pidgin English, and she got told off by the English teacher for doing so."

When asked who they told about their experiences of racism, most girls identified their parents, friends, and siblings as the main people they shared their experiences with. Sixty-three percent of girls told their parents about the racism they faced, roughly 60% told their friends and 34% told their siblings. A small number of girls (15%) answered "no one".

Who do you tell about the racism you experience or witness?

Category	Percentage
Teachers	15.8%
Other members of staff	23.7%
Friends	57.9%
Siblings	34.2%
Parents	63.2%
Other family members	7.9%
No one	15.8%
Students at school	2.6%
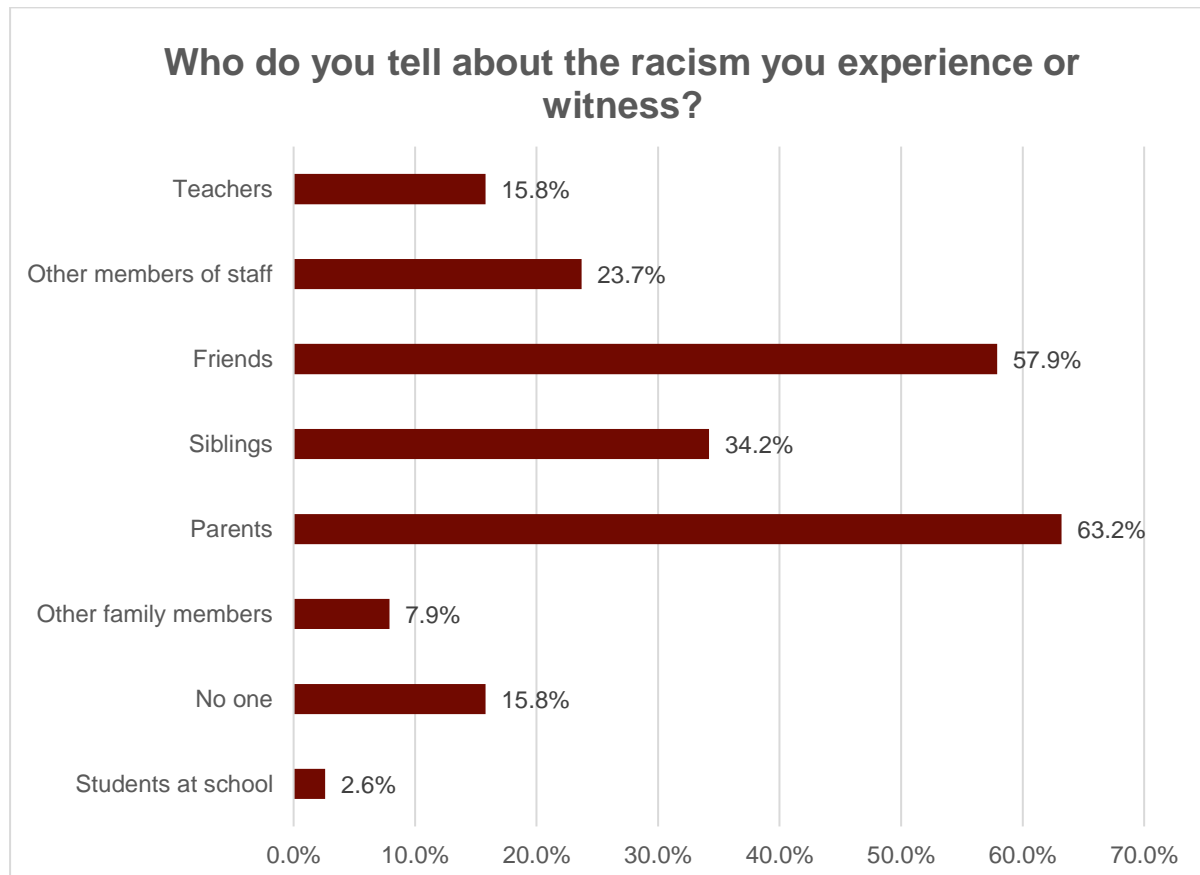
When asked how well they thought their education settings managed racism, most girls were in the middle (29%), 21% thought their setting managed it well and 24% thought their setting managed it badly. More than 10% of girls thought their school managed racism very well, although 15% said their setting managed racism very badly. Participants were asked to elaborate on their answers, with some stating that individual teachers often tried to help but did not have a voice in the school. Many others noted that racism, or rather the racist action in question, is often seen as a "joke" by teacher and so, they do not always deal with it correctly.

How well do you think racism is dealth with at your school/college/university?

Chart data:
- 1: 10.5%
- 2: 21.1%
- 3: 28.9%
- 4: 23.7%
- 5: 15.8%
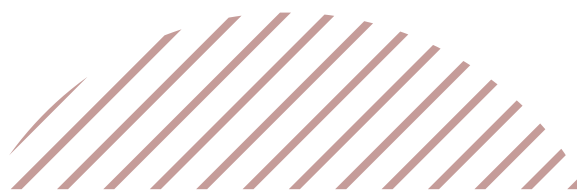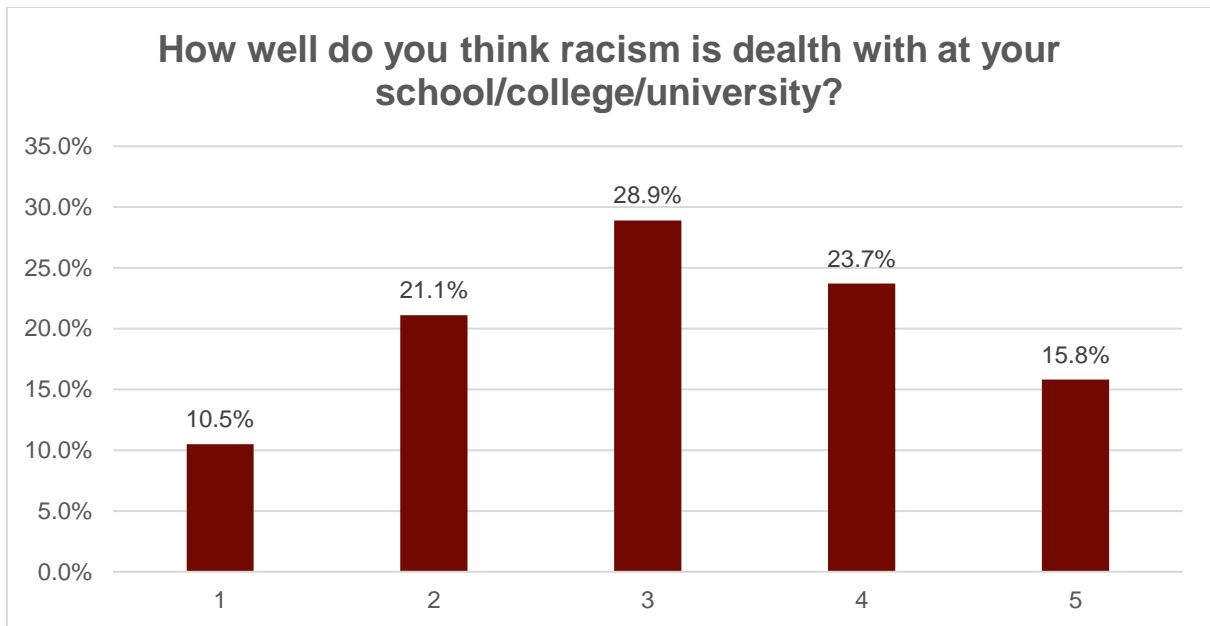
Finally, participants also felt that more could be done to eradicate racism in schools and to ensure that where there is racism, there are appropriate punishments. Some of the recommendations for improving experiences racism in schools were:

- Recruiting "diverse staff"
- Establishing "accountability for actions"
- Schools should implement zero tolerance racism policies
- More education on racism and microaggressions
- Matters of racism should be taken seriously and action should be taken to address complaints
- "More teacher training on handling the issue" and "training schools how to address poor behaviour without the employment of negative, racist language."

- "More Black teachers are needed, particularly Black female teachers. I believe representation really matters in incidents like these, and lived-in, first-hand experiences are required. But to do that schools as institution need to be more accustoming to young Black women who want to pursue a career in education"
- More history, education and "understanding of how the Black ethnic minority has emerged from a prominent moment in history and how we've created and identified our own community of likeness"

Focus Groups and Interviews

Focus group were originally intended to be the main focus of this research, enabling the girls to co-create the data as well as shared their lived experiences with their peers in a safe space. Unfortunately, recruitment and timing issues meant that we did not manage to speak with as many participants as we had hoped, although we interview four girls individuals, and two participants together. The conversations were rich, revealing, and very much led by the young people who took part. The sessions revealed patterns of anti-Black school policies and practices, hair discrimination, higher expectations of Black girls than Black boys and feelings of lack of solidarity amongst Black girls and their white female and Black male counterparts. There were also discussions on sexualisation and sexual violence, and the incident concerning Child Q.

Anti-Black school policies and hair discrimination

Five out of six Black girls expressed complaints about anti-Black school policies, particularly around hair discrimination. On student noted that she had been asked to change the colour of her braided hair extensions to a "natural hair" colour by a teacher. She noted that when Black girls have hair extensions that are not dark brown or Black, teachers are "quick to ask them to take it out" in comparison, "white girls are allowed to dye their hair any colour in the rainbow but that's okay". Establishing uniform policies which state that students are only allowed 'natural hair colours', and subsequently penalising Black students when their hair colour choice is not Black or Brown is anti-Black as it assumes that all Black people's hair is monolithic, and can only be dark. Allowing white students to then have Black, Brown, Blonde or Red hair reinforces this as whilst these are all natural hair colours, assuming that Black children cannot also have these hair colours naturally is problematic and ignorant.

Another participant explained that "girls in my school were not allowed to sit their exams because they were wearing a bonnet" because it was "unprofessional". The participant further explained that this was unfair because generally Black girls' hair takes more time and effort to do, deemed by many to be a waste of valuable time on exam days, leading some to simply wear the bonnet instead. In addition, the participant argued that the idea that a bonnet is 'unprofessional' "does not make sense" because "most people know how to dress in a professional setting. We are not going to wear a bonnet to work in an office. But we are at school, so just let us be kids". This was an interesting perspective, as it suggested that Black girls, and maybe children in general, know how to code switch and thus where Black girls may wear bonnets, or young people may wear tracksuit bottoms and hoodies, these young people are aware that this attire would not work in another setting.

The uniform policies discussed by participants seemed to reflect a degree of anti-Blackness, highlighting the tendency of educational institutions to police what children can and cannot wear beyond what is reasonably necessary. Targeting the natural hair and hairstyles of Black girls, and problematising their cultural hair practices, can have a detrimental impact on their mental health and sense of self. Such actions reinforce
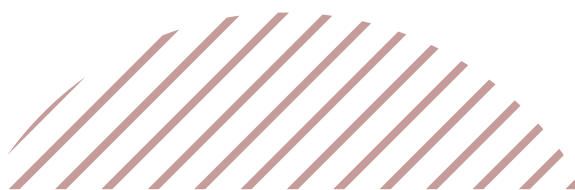
the notion that being "Black" equates to being "unprofessional," untidy, or inadequate.

Sexualisation and Sexual Violence

The sexualisation and sexual assault of Black girls was another significant issue discussed by participants. One girl, who attended the same school as Child Q explained that, whilst the Child Q incident was very sad, "it was not the first time that something like this had happened". They went on to discuss how students in the school, predominantly girls, staged a protest the day after the incident "where lots of people went round talking about their experiences of sexual violence in schools". The action revealed that sexual violence was more prevalent than the students thought and that many of them had similar experiences.

Another participant mentioned that comments were often made about Black girls' bodies when they were wearing school uniform because of the way in which the uniform "fits on their bodies". The participant mentioned teachers making comments about Black girls who were "bigger" or "curvier", particularly in sixth form when students can wear their own clothes. The participant noted that "skinnier girls could wear the same thing but Black girls because we have a bigger bum or breasts, we are getting in trouble… they should not even be looking". These comments on the policing of Black girls' bodies, particularly those with curvier figures, is concerning, as it reinforces this idea of Black girls being sexualised or being seen as provocative because of how their clothes fit their bodies. Another, participant shared a similar experience and asked "what do they want me to do? Like this is my body".

There was a clear sense of frustration by some Black girls about how their bodies were viewed and policed by others, and the fact that the onus was on them to do something about it. In the case with Child Q and the participant from her school, there was also a sense of isolation as they experienced lack of solidarity from their peers in these situations (discussed more below). It is also important to note the impact sexualisation and sexual violence can have on the self-esteem and mental health of Black girls. Having your body policed and having to police your own body to stay "safe", illustrates that Black girls are not safe in schools and need more support.

"The White girls don't get it, and the Black boys don't get it either" – Inadequate Support and Solidarity from Peers

An important revelation from all participants, to varying degrees, was the lack of support and solidarity Black girls felt from their peers.

The participant from the same school as Child Q noted that "when we did the protest, the boys decided to play football… because the protest was happening at the end of lunch so they knew teachers would be busy with us and not looking for them". There was a strong sense of disappointment at the fact that boys, particularly Black boys, did not see they need to advocate for Black girls who were experiencing, and sharing experiences of, sexual violence. Another participant noted that she did not feel her brother even understood what she goes through as Black girl because "he is boy" and

"they don't really care about these things [racism and sexism]".

Another participant noted that she couldn't speak to white girls, and she could not speak to Black boys about her experiences because their "whiteness" meant that the "white girls cannot relate to my experience of being Black and the boys have patriarchy". Here, students were highlighting the intersectional nature of their experience of being both Black and female. The same student also mentioned that being "queer" was also another barrier as she did not have many queer or queer Black people around her either.

Another participant noted that she was happy to be part of the research project as "there is nowhere else to speak about this stuff", and "people get offended when you start speaking about racism". This illustrated the importance of providing Black girls with a safe space to exist and to share their lived experiences without fear of being policed or causing "offence". Again, this level of isolation, lack of solidarity and advocacy for Black girls by their peers reinforces the need for issues of race and racism to be understood within the context of mental health and potentially causing low self-esteem. Moreover, the findings illustrate the discourse of Black girls, as well as other marginalised and minoritised groups, feeling both seen and unseen, visible and invisible in education settings. Black girls are seen through a stereotypical lens which renders them "angry", "aggressive", having an "attitude" or being perceived in sexualised ways. Simultaneously, Black girls are invisible because of the lack advocacy and acknowledgement of their experiences of race, racism and misogynoir.

Higher Expectations of Black girls vs. Black girls having higher expectations of themselves

Interestingly, two discourses emerged around the theme of adultification during the focus groups and interviews. One concerned teachers having higher expectations of Black girls than Black boys in class. One participant noted that teachers expected the boys to misbehave in class, but when the girls did it was "more of a big deal". The same participant also noted that boys seemed aware of these lower expectations, and therefore played into that in class by displaying low level disruption – i.e. talking in class. Black girls were expected to be mature, or at least, *more* mature than the Black boys. Here, we can understand this high expectations of Black girls' maturity as one aspect of their "adultification" as Black girls as not given the same space as others to simply be children and instead, "Black girls are not getting the benefits of being viewed as innocent". Another participant mentioned that Black girls get less help from teachers and are expected to just "get on with it ourselves". A US study by Georgetown Law researchers found that Black girls as young as 5 years old were 'seen as less innocent, and needing less support, than white girls of the same age' which led 'teachers and other authority figures to treat Black girls as older than they actually are and more harshly than white female students, with the disparity being particularly wide for 10- to 14-year-olds'. Moreover in the UK, some of the impacts of the adultification of Black girls have been identified as increased disciplinary action, reduced support, pressure to conform and identity development (believing they need

to act like adults). Therefore, the findings of this research reinforce the existing links between experiences of Black
girls in the UK and the US and the ways in which issues of race and racism transcend geography because the socio-historical context in which race has and continues to exist.

In contrast, a student from an all-girls grammar school in Birmingham explained that the nature of her school fostered high expectations among all pupils, and as one of the few Black girls in her year group, she held particularly high expectations for herself, aspiring to be the top student among her peers. She reflected that her experience in a predominantly white, all-girls grammar school differed from that of participants who attended predominantly Black or Global Majority schools, noting that the focus in her environment was more on academic attainment and less on "race." She shared that her mother had raised her to recognise racism as an issue but not to dwell on it, which she believed may have caused her to unknowingly be a victim of racism without realising it. Additionally, she observed that while her year group was relatively "passive" on issues of race, racism, and discrimination, her sister's year group was much more "vocal." She recounted an incident in which her sister, after speaking out about racism, was given "anger management classes," which she found problematic as it involved labelling the "victim" as "angry" rather than addressing the root cause of the issue—racism.

The findings are particularly interesting as they highlight a dual aspect of the adultification of Black girls. On one hand, it is problematic and has negative implications. On the other, the responses of the Black girls suggest a self-imposed adultification, where they strive to be mature and aware of the negative perceptions held by others, in an effort to combat the adverse effects these perceptions could have on their sense of self.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The research highlights the need for greater support and recognition of Black girls' experiences in schools. While Black boys have rightly been a focus for some time, this research, alongside the incident involving Child Q, underscores the urgency of addressing Black girls' experiences of racism in schools with care and priority. As such, we would like to make the following policy and practice recommendations:

1. **Anti-Racism Training**: Mandatory anti-racism training must be included in all teacher training programmes across the UK. This training should adopt an intersectional approach to understand the varied experiences of different Black and Global Majority (BGM) communities and must be informed by contemporary research and academic literature.

2. **Anti-Racism Continuing Professional Development (CPD)**: All teachers should undertake mandatory annual anti-racism CPD. This training should be delivered by practitioners specialising in anti-racism, particularly anti-Black racism and misogynoir, rather than general Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) experts. Like the initial training, it must utilise an intersectional approach and be informed by up-to-date research.

3. **Mental Health and Wellbeing**: Recognise the impact of racism on the mental health of BGM children and provide culturally sensitive mental health resources for young people and their families. Teachers should also receive training and resources to better support students' mental health and wellbeing.

4. **Diverse Teaching Staff**: Schools must work towards ensuring their teaching staff reflect the communities they serve. This includes recruiting more Black female teachers and other Global Majority educators.

5. **Decolonising the Curriculum**: The national and exam curriculums should be decolonised so that BGM students can see themselves represented in textbooks, history, and learning. This would address the ways in which the curriculum perpetuates histories of racism.

6. **Updating Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) Education**: PSHE curriculums should be updated to provide students with the language and concepts to articulate their lived experiences, such as "misogynoir" and "intersectionality." Schools should also ensure that PSHE or "drop-down" days include opportunities to discuss race, racism, adultification, and misogynoir.

7. **Celebrating Culture and Diversity Year-Round**: Schools should acknowledge culture and diversity throughout the year, not just during Black History Month. This should include teaching about topics such as Black women's natural hair, Black music and cuisine, and languages like patois and pidgin. Where possible, schools should collaborate with external organisations specialising in this work to avoid tokenistic efforts.

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8. **Reviewing Existing Policies**: Schools must review and refine policies that may be perceived as anti-Black. Creating an anti-racist council comprising students, teachers, and parents can ensure that BGM students have a voice in shaping policies related to culture and identity, such as hairstyle, hijab, and language policies.

9. **Addressing Sexual Violence and Harassment**: Schools should assess the prevalence and nature of sexual violence through surveys and engage with students to implement appropriate support systems, such as workshops and targeted support groups.

10. **Engaging with Communities and Experts**: Schools should consult with community groups and experts when implementing new curriculums or policies. Organisations like The Black Curriculum and Everyday Racism could provide valuable input for curriculum development and CPD training.

11. **Language in Training**: Remove the term "unconscious bias" from training courses and address the "existing bias" that impacts BGM students in education.

12. **Dedicated Anti-Racism Roles**: Every school in the UK should appoint a teacher or staff member with a Teaching and Learning Responsibility (TLR) for anti-racism, akin to roles supporting pupil premium students.

13. **Encouraging Practitioner Research**: The government should support universities to offer research opportunities for Early Career Teachers and experienced educators to explore specific educational issues, such as the experiences of Black girls in schools. Practitioner-researchers could use their findings to inform school policies and practices to combat racism, sexism, and other issues.

14. **Updating Teaching Standards**: The teaching standards, which guide teacher training and lesson observations, should be updated to include specific expectations around anti-racism and inclusion. This would ensure teachers are accountable for fostering anti-racist practices in classrooms and throughout schools

They Saw Me as Bad, Black, and In Care" The Educational Experiences of Looked-After Girls and Young Women from Black and Global Majority Communities

Peer Researcher: Murray Chamberlain

Research addressing the experiences of looked-after young people is severely underrepresented in the UK and beyond. When focusing specifically on looked-after women and girls from Black, Global Majority (BGM) communities, this research gap becomes even more pronounced. This project seeks to amplify the perspectives of these often-overlooked individuals, showcasing the power of community-driven research to bring their voices to the forefront of academic and policy discussions.

Murray Chamberlain, who led this project, is deeply engaged in advocacy and research for looked-after young women and girls, having spent several years working in the sectors of girls and young women in London affected by family breakdown, abuse, and adversity. Recognising the critical absence of evidence on the intersectional experiences of looked-after BGM women and girls, Murray has produced impactful data that illuminates the unique challenges they face in education.

The research highlights significant inadequacies in the pastoral and educational support available to this group, drawing attention to how their intersecting identities shape their educational journeys. It underscores the importance of supportive relationships, high expectations, encouragement, and stable care placements in fostering academic success and improving broader life outcomes. The findings present actionable insights for schools and policymakers, offering clear steps to better support these minoritised individuals.

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Background

The term 'looked after' was introduced to the UK in the Children's Act 1989 to refer to children in public care, including those in foster care or residential placements, alongside those residing with their parents but also holding a care order. Care orders are granted by the courts under Section 31 of the Children's Act, placing a child compulsorily in the care of a designated local authority, who assumes parental authority, alongside the parents of the child. The number of looked-after children in the UK has increased year-on-year, and there are now around 83,000 children in care. Children enter care for various reasons. Around 66% started to be looked after as a result of abuse or neglect; 12% because of family dysfunction; 9% because of absent parenting; and 7% because families were in acute distress. 2% entered care because of a child's disability, and another 2% because of a parental disability or illness. Finally, 1% entered care as a result of 'socially unacceptable behaviour'. A significant number of looked-after children are classified as 'unaccompanied asylum-seeking children', comprising 9% of the total care population (up from 6% in 2020).

Children from Black and Global Majority backgrounds are significantly over-represented in the care system. Despite only comprising 2.9% of the total population, 11% of looked-after children are from mixed backgrounds. Similarly, 7% identify as Black, whilst those from African, Caribbean, and Black British backgrounds only comprise 4% of the total population. Asian children are under-represented in the care population, comprising around 5% of looked-after children, compared to 9.3% of the total UK population.

Much of the current research on the experiences and outcomes of looked-after children has failed to consider the specific disadvantages which are faced by those from BGM backgrounds. This is a significant omission, given the fact that BGM children are far more likely to be in care, and far *less* likely to leave the care sector, with a significantly lower number of adoption orders granted. This knowledge gap is particularly pronounced for girls and young women within the education sector, for whom several unique challenges arise, including high rates of school exclusion, frequent placement changes, and experiences of social discrimination. These factors lead to added difficulties in educational achievement and mental health, as well as a heightened risk of exposure to unsafe relationships and environments. Research into looked-after BGM children more broadly in education has highlighted how significant attainment gaps often result from feelings of exclusion and victimisation from teachers, viewed as 'insensitive' to the unique challenges faced by these children, and thus overly 'judgemental'. This is in addition to the inequities already adversely affecting BGM children within the sector, such as low expectations, adultification, and criminalisation. However, there is limited specific research on the experiences of looked-after BGM girls in these spaces. This research has sought to explore the perspectives of these individuals and highlight areas for improvement in policy and practice when it comes to provisions of care and support within British schools.

Methods

To properly centre the perspectives and experiences of the looked-after girls and young women from BGM communities that this research is concerned with, the project has centred on gathering data through a series of semi-structured interviews with participants from this demographic. Research was conducted in this manner with four such girls and young women. Additionally, another set of four interviews was run with social care professionals who work with looked-after BGM women and girls, to further contextualise their responses.

Participants were largely recruited through the Peer Researcher's extensive network of contacts. The women and girls who were recruited all identified as being from BGM backgrounds, and all had the experience of being looked after. The social care professionals who were recruited all have experience working with girls from this background. Interviews were largely conducted in person during the Peer Researcher's other activities. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. However, unforeseen IT issues meant that several transcripts were lost. Fortunately, the Peer Researcher took copious notes during interviews, and these were used in conjunction with surviving transcripts for analysis.

Interviews with the young women and girls largely centred on their experiences both within care, and within educational settings, and their perspectives on how their racialised identities may have affected these experiences. Interviews with the social care professionals covered similar themes, but instead focussing on participants' experiences working to support the children in their care, and perspectives on the children's health and wellbeing in response to their experiences within the education sector.

Transcripts and interview notes were coded inductively, revealing several common themes and experiences across the interview sample, discussed fully below.

Results

When asked about their experiences in school and the education sector more broadly, the young women and girls who were interviewed brought up several key issues, much of which echo the limited existing research on the topic and were further exemplified through discussions with the care professional participants. These included:

Systemic bias and stereotyping

One of the most frequently discussed topics at the interview was the extent to which looked-after BGM women and girls are perceived by school staff. Participants highlighted that teachers seemed to assume that they were more prone to disruptive

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behaviour and were thus subject to harsh punitive measures and additional scrutiny. They discussed how prevalent stereotypes of Black girls in particular as being particularly 'aggressive' or prone to 'attitude' often lead staff to escalate conflicts, further eroding trust between students and teachers. One participant noted, for example, that "Everything you do is very heightened...every single move you make, everyone's watching you". Participants noted that these feelings of over-discipline and over-surveillance within schools made them feel isolated and singled out, whilst also unable to properly engage in school activities because of the assumption of poor attitude and behaviour held by staff.

As highlighted in several of the reports and papers outlined in the background chapter, these feelings of alienation and isolation are unfortunately common amongst BGM pupils in British schools. However, our interviews illustrate how the intersections of participants' identities as both BGM and in care serve to heighten the negative attention they receive. The girls who were interviewed mentioned feeling as though negative perceptions of both BGM pupils and looked-after children, were combined in teachers' presuppositions of wrongdoing on their part, seen as inherently problematic or disruptive. Crucially, this often means that the pupils are not receiving the support that they should be, instead being picked on disproportionately for supposedly poor behaviour. As one participant put it "You always feel like you're having to defend yourself against people who are supposed to be helping you".

The feelings of these participants were also picked up by the education professional who was interviewed during this research. When asked how looked-after BGM girls were treated by their colleagues, the participant responded: "I don't think they're disciplined in the same way...there's always a favour for White looked after children over Black children". This highlights how pupils' BGM identities, and the negative stereotypes and perceptions placed on such children in some schools, can actively prevent them from accessing the same support networks as looked-after children who are not racialised, despite their need for this support being equal or greater. Poor behaviour from a White child in care may be excused because of their looked-after status, whilst BGM pupils are not afforded the same leniency. Instead, the interview participant also echoed the feelings of the pupils who were interviewed, noting that, if something were to go wrong in the school, "the school would assume that it would have something to do with these specific girls".

Lack of cultural understanding

Many of these issues ultimately stem from a lack of racial and cultural sensitivity among school staff, which leads to misinterpretations of culturally specific behaviours, language, and expressions. This in turn often escalates conflicts and further alienates students from the BGM community in general, who feel misunderstood and unfairly penalised. For looked-after BGM pupils, who may be living or studying in areas with less cultural diversity, these issues can be far more pronounced.

Issues around a lack of cultural understanding from teaching staff and school colleagues ran through each of the interviews that we ran with the young women and girls in care. They highlighted how preconceived biases and misunderstandings around race and care status shape the way educators perceive and treat them, leading to self-censorship, and reinforcing the feelings of isolation and not 'belonging' that are already stoked up by negative stereotyping. One participant noted that they could not express themselves freely in school after a series of negative experiences: "I started to see that I'm too aggressive for white people...they didn't want to be around me", even though the participant did not mean to address their colleagues or teachers with any sort of aggression. Instances of cultural disconnect, such as educators reacting negatively to culturally specific language, reveal a lack of racial sensitivity. When combined with the prevalent stereotyping of these pupils, these issues are even more serious. One participant in particular noted that they did not feel as though they could build a good working rapport with school staff or their colleagues: "I know they saw me as bad, Black, and in care".

Lack of representation and advocacy

Throughout the interview series, there was a recurring sense that these young women lack advocates within the school system to guide them towards supportive services. Without someone to refer them for additional resources like tutoring or mental health support, they often miss out on opportunities that could vastly enhance their educational experience. Part of this problem is, of course, systemic. The financial stability across the education sector over the past decade or so has been a national cause for concern, with less and less dedicated pastoral services available for all pupils, as we discuss more below. However, without more advocates within the school infrastructure and beyond, the BGM women and girls that we interviewed felt as though they were seen as a burden on limited school resources, rather than among those most in need of them. One young woman, for example, noted that "the school's already under a lot of pressure...they want you to mess up so that it's easy to kick you out no one wanted to have a black care kid in the first place. OFSTED makes them accept us". The perception amongst these individuals that the school effectively wants them to fail ties in with the issues of negative stereotyping and systemic bias already outlined and ultimately results to further entrenching the girls' feelings of not belonging in the spaces that they occupy.

Combined with associated problems around the lack of dedicated, individualised support, was thought by participants to be a significant contributing factor to exclusion and isolation within the schools. As one care professional highlighted, "There would usually be a step-by-step process before they would exclude looked after children, but it's straight-up exclusion for these girls sometimes". It is not hard to see how participants feel as though staff would rather see them removed from the school, rather than receive the support that they need. Discussing the wide absence across schools of champions for BGM pupils in care, the education professional that we interviewed pointed out that "When you're White and in the care, you can see the support, if you're black and in the care you're almost lucky for them to find someone that's going to

advocate for them". Unfortunately, the feelings of rejection at the hands of institutions that should be set up to support our participants do not end at the school gate. One young woman that we interviewed told us that "every time they [the school] called my care home ...they would agree with the school instead of advocating for me". In many cases, it appears as though looked-after BGM girls are lacking any real source of support and advocacy, a significant shortcoming in care and safeguarding which requires urgent attention. Without adequate support and encouragement, these young women may enter a cycle of disengagement, impacting their confidence and reducing their motivation to pursue additional educational or extracurricular activities. Consequently, they internalise negative experiences and find it difficult to envision themselves in positive roles within school and society.

Impact on self-esteem and educational aspirations

The frequent stereotyping and biases that BGM women and girls in care endure, along with the lack of dedicated support and advocacy that they are forced to cope with, significantly erodes self-esteem and lead to disengagement from education, with many young women internalising these negative experiences. This is exemplified in the summary given by one young woman that we interviewed of her educational achievements to date: "I haven't stayed in a school long enough to, like...have any significance in that type of way. I've just been a bad kid, black and in care". These negative self-perceptions are worsened by the fact that school reward systems frequently fail acknowledge the accomplishments of the girls that we spoke to. As one of the care professionals that we interviewed highlighted, "it's more time like the good white child that gets awarded...never, not once was it a young girl of colour or somebody that was in care". Whilst their personal circumstances – along with the frequently discussed issues of negative stereotyping within school settings – may mean that the achievements of pupils from these backgrounds may not be as overwhelming as those of pupils not experiencing these hardships, the lack of any acknowledgement for their efforts underscores the failure of schools to take a holistic approach in appraising and rewarding achievement. As another care professional noted, "I don't feel like individual circumstances are taken into account... I think that's an injustice to them".

Lack of Trauma-Informed Support

The issues raised by our interviewees highlight the absence of trauma-informed care within schools, such as on-site therapeutic resources, which could help students better manage emotional challenges. The interviewee suggests that a greater focus on well-being over academic metrics would benefit these young women significantly. The absence of supportive interventions means these young women face additional emotional challenges without adequate outlets or support, negatively impacting their educational experience. As one participant highlighted, "there needs to be more open conversations about how looked-after children actually feel and how they cope with it". These issues are, of course, compounded by the racialisation of the children that we spoke to, another remarking "treat me like how you'd want to treat your own child it doesn't matter that I'm black and don't have my own family I'm just a kid".

For Black and Global Majority looked-after girls, a trauma-informed and culturally responsive approach in education is crucial to address their unique experiences and challenges. This approach would involve educators who are trained not only to understand the impacts of trauma but also to be sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of these young women, ensuring they feel seen, understood, and supported within educational spaces. The absence of culturally responsive, trauma-informed education perpetuates negative experiences for Black and Global Majority looked-after girls, who often face systemic bias and stereotypes in schools. Without educators trained in both trauma and cultural sensitivity, these young women continue to be misunderstood, unfairly disciplined, and excluded, which deeply affects their self-worth and academic aspirations. Implementing this type of support would acknowledge their complex backgrounds and validate their identities, allowing them to engage more fully with education in a safe and supportive environment.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Black and Global Majority looked-after girls face significant and intersecting barriers in the education system, rooted in systemic bias, cultural misunderstandings, and a lack of trauma-informed support. These challenges are exacerbated by harmful stereotypes, insufficient advocacy, and the failure to acknowledge or respect their unique cultural identities and personal experiences. Consequently, many become disengaged, experience low self-esteem, face harsher disciplinary measures, and have limited access to supportive resources, reinforcing feelings of invisibility and exclusion.

To address these systemic issues, it is essential to adopt a culturally responsive and trauma-informed approach that fosters belonging, respect, and empowerment. Such an approach would not only improve their academic outcomes but also enhance their emotional well-being, leading to better life chances.

We would recommend the following changes to policy and practice as a starting point, so that schools can begin to address the systemic inequities faced by these young women, creating an educational environment that supports, uplifts, and empowers them to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally.

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1. **Mandatory Cultural Competency Training for Educators**: Ensure all school staff receive regular training to recognise and challenge systemic bias, stereotypes, and unconscious bias. This training should focus on understanding the cultural backgrounds and lived experiences of Black and Global Majority looked-after girls.

2. **Integrate Trauma-Informed Practices**: Provide educators with the tools to support students who have experienced trauma, including recognising trauma responses and creating safe, supportive classroom environments that minimise re-traumatisation.

3. **Strengthen Advocacy and Mentorship Programmes**: Establish mentoring initiatives that pair looked-after girls with role models from similar cultural backgrounds. Train advocates to ensure these young women have a voice in their education and access to the necessary resources.

4. **Reform Disciplinary Policies**: Review and revise school disciplinary measures to ensure they are fair, focusing on restorative practices rather than punitive approaches that disproportionately affect Black and Global Majority pupils.

5. **Expand Access to Mental Health and Emotional Support Services**: Increase the availability of culturally sensitive counselling and well-being services tailored to the specific needs of looked-after girls, addressing both trauma and systemic inequities.

6. **Foster Community Engagement**: Work collaboratively with carers and community organisations to build trust, share resources, and create a supportive network for students.

7. **Establish Accountability Measures**: Introduce systems to monitor and evaluate the impact of culturally responsive and trauma-informed initiatives, ensuring they effectively reduce disparities and improve outcomes for Black and Global Majority looked-after girls.

By prioritising these measures, schools can begin to address the systemic inequities faced by these young women, creating an educational environment that supports, uplifts, and empowers them to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally.

Navigating Special Educational Needs Provisions in London Schools as Black and Global Majority Families

Peer Researcher: Stella Abu

Schools should, and often do, serve as a core part of the network that is developed in order to support children with special educational needs (SEN). However, given the issues faced by BGM pupils and their families in the education sector more broadly, how does the support received by members of our communities compare to that given to other families, and do these structural issues create additional barriers to support for BGM families? Whilst there has been a significant amount of research into the efficacies of SEN support in British schools, there has been little work that has sought to approach this through an intersectional lens and assess the role of additional inequities in the role that support networks play for members of BGM communities.

The Peer Researcher who led this innovative programme, Stella Abu, brings a wealth of lived experience and expertise to the field. As a mother to BGM children with SEN, Stella founded a support organisation for families with SEN children in her local area of Greenwich. She also works as a facilitator and group leader for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, focusing primarily on supporting those from BGM backgrounds. With over 15 years of dedicated experience, Stella has developed deep insights into the challenges these groups face in accessing appropriate educational support. Her work has enabled her to design targeted research that addresses the significant knowledge gap between the experiences of BGM families and their White counterparts in this area.

The research revealed that, although families generally felt supported, they encountered significant challenges in navigating the system. These challenges were shaped by cultural sensitivity and intersectionality, with influencing factors including language, ethnicity, bias or judgment, immigration status, disability, dietary preferences, and cultural expectations associated with being Black. The interplay of these intersecting identities significantly affected how Black families engaged with the system and accessed support. Language barriers stood out as a significant issue, often limiting parents' understanding of available resources and the support provided.

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Background

In England, <u>16.3% of pupils are identified with Special Educational Needs (SEN), comprising 13% with SEN Support and 3.3% requiring Education, Health, and Care (EHC) plans</u>. SEN Support addresses needs such as speech and language difficulties, moderate learning challenges, and social or emotional issues, while EHC plans cater to more complex conditions like autism spectrum disorders and severe learning disabilities, integrating support from education, health, and social care. Diagnoses of SEN have risen significantly, with EHC plans increasing by 64% since 2016, reflecting improved awareness but also straining resources. Challenges include delays in assessments, inconsistent quality of provision across local authorities, and limited school funding. Tackling these issues requires greater investment and a standardised approach to ensure equitable and effective support for all children.

In England, children from Black and Global Majority (BGM) backgrounds experience both over- and under-representation in certain types of Special Educational Needs (SEN). Approximately 17% of Black children and 16% of Asian children have SEN, compared to 13% of White British pupils (Department for Education, 2023). Black Caribbean pupils are disproportionately diagnosed with Social, Emotional, and Mental Health (SEMH) needs, being <u>twice as likely to receive this diagnosis compared to their White British peers</u>. However, Black children are under-represented in conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Speech, Language, and Communication Needs (SLCN), with diagnostic rates significantly lower than expected, likely due to cultural biases and gaps in awareness among professionals. Researchers have identified a link between inadequate diagnosis and support, and the prevalent stereotypes and profiling of Black children returned to frequently throughout this report. Behaviours exhibited by potentially SEN pupils from this cohort are <u>instead assumed to be indicative of 'poor behaviour' or otherwise reflective of teachers' low expectations</u>. This creates additional barriers for parents and pupils seeking to access the support that White children are more readily offered. Asian children, particularly those from Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds, are similarly under-identified for ASD, <u>with rates up to 50% lower than those of White British pupils</u>. Parents from these communities face barriers including language challenges, cultural stigmas, and limited access to information, often leading to delayed or missed diagnoses and inadequate support. Addressing these disparities <u>requires culturally competent diagnostic frameworks, better community engagement, and targeted outreach efforts</u>.

There has not been enough research into the actual effects of these difficulties on the children, parents, and families who are unable to access appropriate support within school settings. What research that there is points to feelings of isolation and hopelessness for those affected, and the need for urgent reform in this area. One recent study highlighted that Black parent with autistic children felt especially vulnerable when attempting to navigate what they felt to be inaccessible levels of bureaucracy when seeking to access diagnoses and support for their children, <u>who in turn also reported feeling victimised for assumed behavioural issues by teachers</u>.

Specifically discussing the parental experience, other authors have noted that much more support is needed to assist parents both through the logistical process of accessing support for their children, and emotionally, highlighting potential issues of cultural stigma within BGM communities which can further isolate parents, and are thus forced to rely on <u>the inadequate support from local authorities</u>. Owing to these issues, and the extent to which racist stereotypes often hamper attempts to access diagnoses and support for children, another report concluded that BGM parents feel as though the current 'colour blind' system for SEN support is inadequate, and that teachers, schools, and <u>local authorities instead need to recognise and mitigate the specific difficulties faced by BGM families in this area</u>. However, more research which centres these perspectives is needed to properly identify and situate these problems – a knowledge gap that this project has sought to address.

Methods

The primary research methods that we drew upon in this project were a mixed methods survey, and a focus group with parents of BGM children with SEN. Originally, the survey was only going to include BGM parents. However, we decided to also incorporate the perspectives of White parents from Stella's local area as well, to compare and contrast the differing perspectives of these groups on the accessibility of support for their children. In total, 31 parents took part in the questionnaire, including 20 from BGM families, 9 from White families, and two others who did not wish to disclose their ethnicities. 7 BGM parents also took part in the focus group discussion. Recruitment was carried out from within our Peer Researcher's extensive network of contacts, including from a number of the support groups that she works with.

The survey was focused on the experiences of parents of children who either had SEN support or an EHC plan. Participants were asked questions on the support that they and their children were able to access, the quality of this support, and any perceived barriers to support, including participants' ethnic identities and any associated cultural differences. Since this survey did not capture data concerning issues with the diagnosis of SEN children and the potential inability of parents to access support, these themes were centred in the focus group discussions, where we also discussed issues with the delivery of support and other issues faced by SEN BGM children in school settings.

The quantitative findings from the surveys were analysed both at the population level and, where relevant, by comparing the different responses given by White and BGM participants. Qualitative survey findings, along with focus groups, were coded inductively, and grouped together to provide several themes for analysis.

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Results

Surveys

The surveys were only disseminated to parents whose children were already receiving support from their school, either through a dedicated SEN support plan or EHC plan, or, in the case of one parent, with a more informal arrangement (see the chart below), with the vast majority being on an EHC plan. As such, they do not capture data concerning the difficulties faced by parents who are unable to access such support. With that in mind, the results reported by this cohort of parents are, on the whole, positive, and speak to the benefits for families who are able to access support within schools.

What Level of Support is Your Child Currently Receiving?

- SEN support
- An EHC
- Both SEN support and an EHC
- Informal support
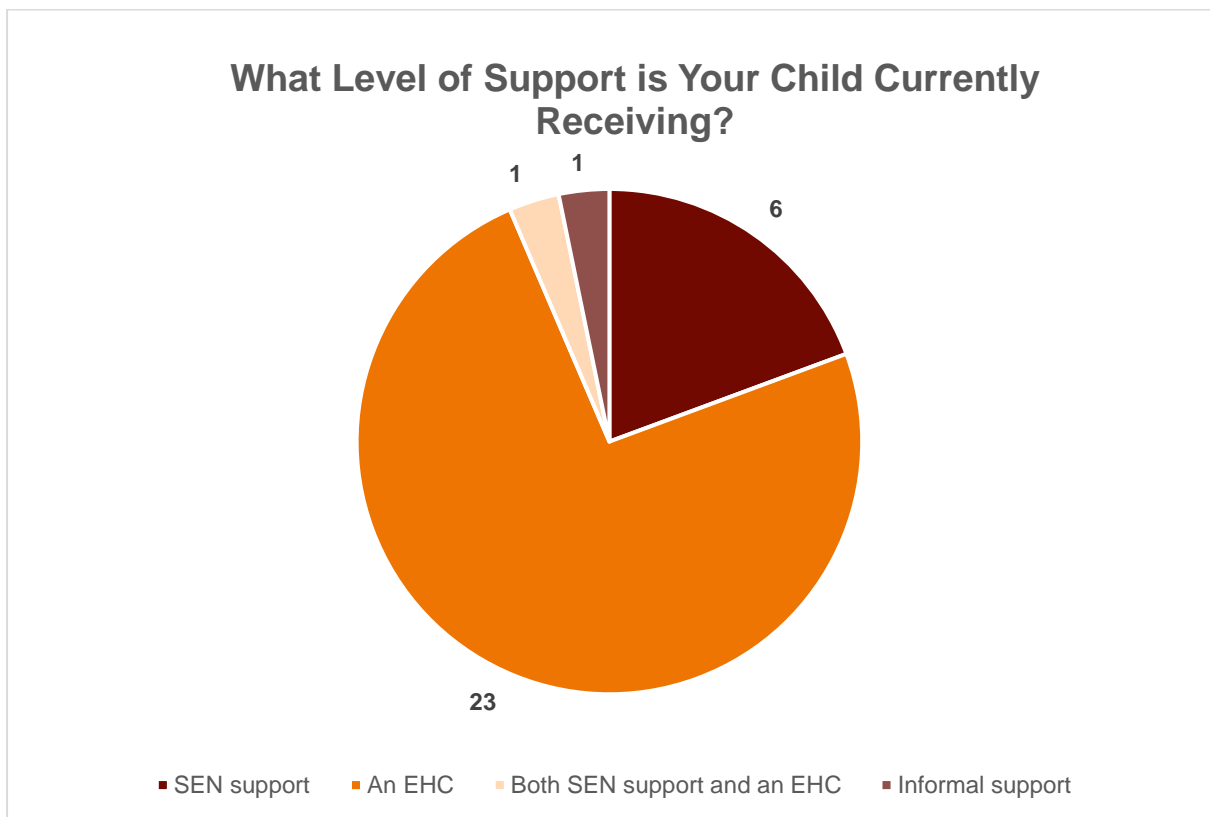
When asked how satisfied they felt with the level of support given to their children, a slight majority of parents (45%) felt 'somewhat satisfied', an additional 16% reporting that they were 'very satisfied'. Broken down by ethnicity, it is interesting to note that BGM parents were, on the whole, more satisfied than White parents, although the BGM group also had far more 'very dissatisfied' responses.

How satisfied are you with the support that your child is recieving?

All parents
- Very dissatisfied: 10%
- Somewhat dissatisfied: 29%
- Somewhat satisfied: 45%
- Very satisfied: 16%

BGM parents
- Very dissatisfied: 15%
- Somewhat dissatisfied: 20%
- Somewhat satisfied: 55%
- Very satisfied: 10%

White parents
- Very dissatisfied: 0%
- Somewhat dissatisfied: 44%
- Somewhat satisfied: 33%
- Very satisfied: 22%
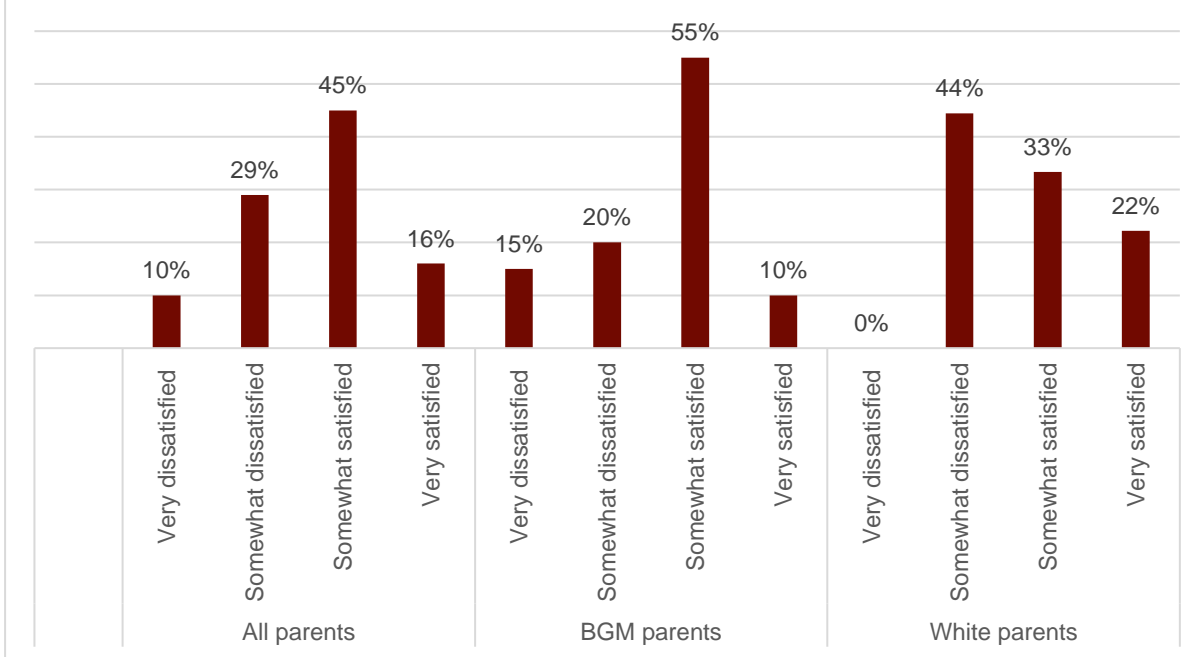
These findings were also reflected in responses when parents were asked whether their children's schools were putting in place all of the support that their children were entitled to. A slim majority of participants agreed that the schools were, and this figure is slightly higher among those from BGM families.

Is the school/educational setting putting in place the support your child/young person is entitled to?

- Total: Yes 61%, No 39%
- BGM parents: Yes 65%, No 35%
- White parents: Yes 56%, No 44%

Yes ■ No ■

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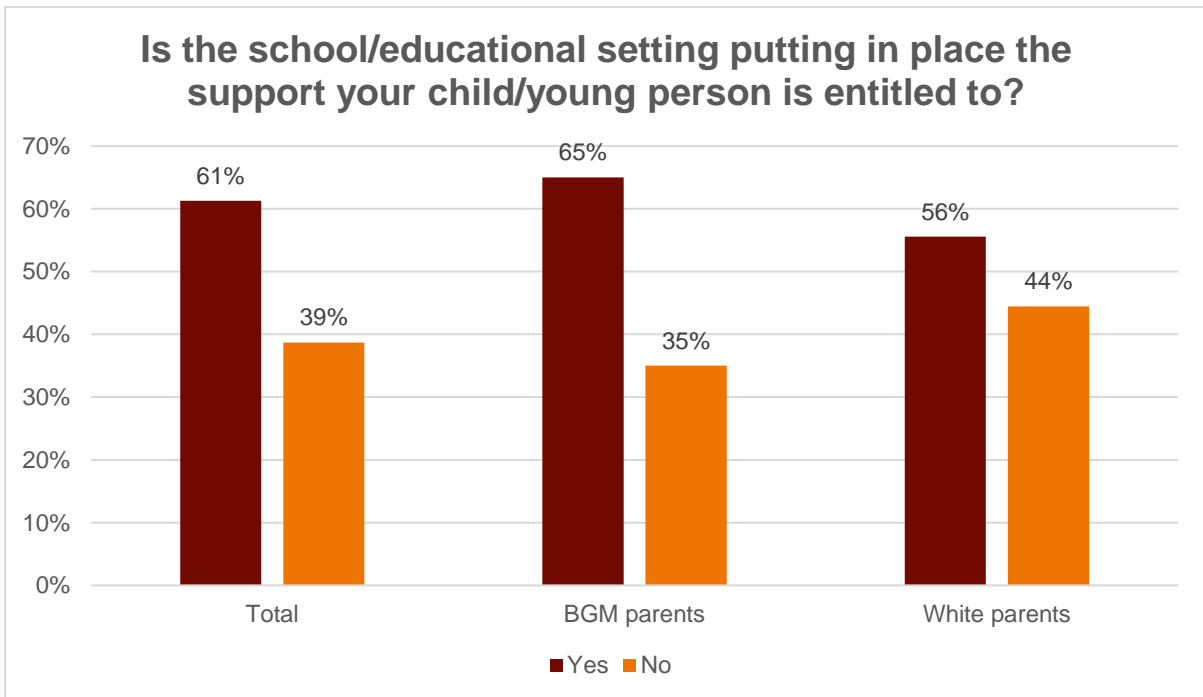
When asked to explain their responses, a number of parents who answered 'no' spoke to issues with school resourcing (e.g. "we have had to intervene in numerous occasions. SENDCo knowledge and experience is inadequate. There is also a chronic shortage of professional SaLTs and OTs"; "Lack of staff to run support groups"), or a perceived lack of communication from the school ("As a parent, not listened to, I can't make decision on my child education. We are not getting support entitled to"). Equally, however, others answering 'yes' spoke to the positive impact of school support, either through providing additional resources and support ("they provided a laptop to help with his communication") or clear communications ("…If I have concern, the school gives me support and signpost me to professional if they have to").

Similarly, when asked if their child was able to access the support that they needed, participants on the whole agreed that they had. However, the margins in this instance are much slimmer, with a number of participants reporting grievances in this area from both the White and BGM cohorts of parents.

My child has been able to get the support that they need

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Total	13%	32%	45%	10%
BGM parents	15%	25%	55%	5%
White parents	0%	44%	33%	22%
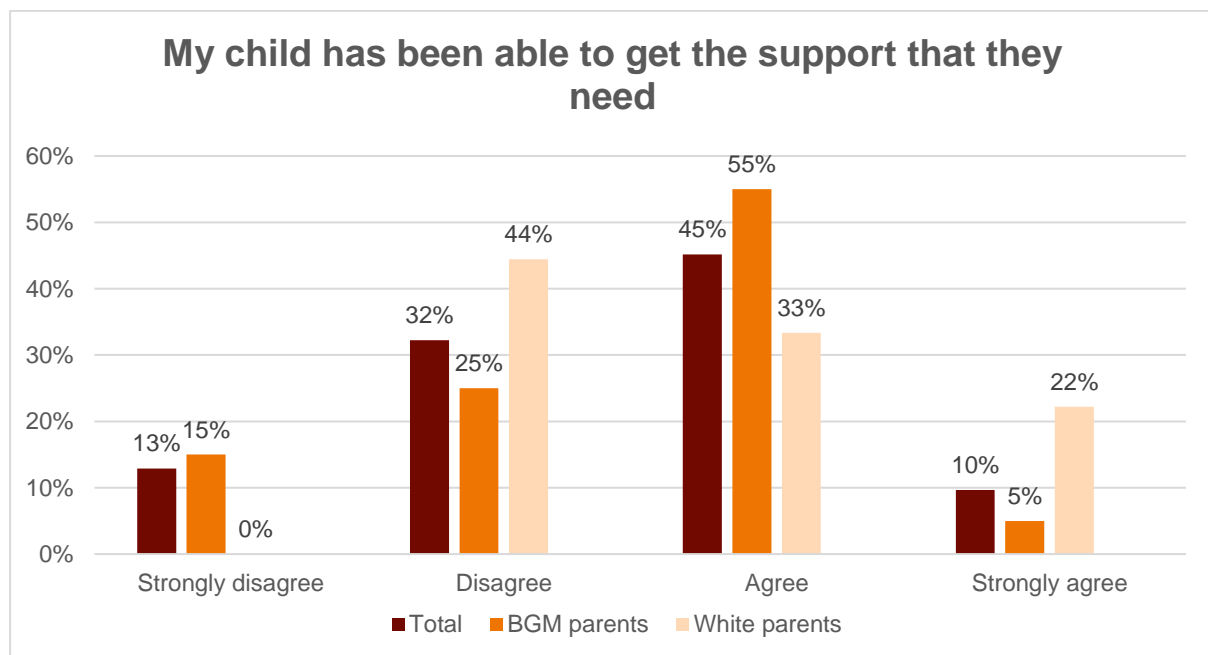
Participants also felt that, on the whole, they were listened to by their children's schools and were able to be a part of decisions made on behalf of their children. It is again interesting to note the lower levels of satisfaction in this area from the White parents, however, this is again caveated by the smaller sample size.

I feel listened to and can take part in decisions made about my child's education

Response	Total	BGM parents	White parents
Strongly disagree	13%	10%	11%
Disagree	26%	20%	44%
Agree	45%	55%	22%
Strongly agree	16%	15%	22%

Legend: Total, BGM parents, White parents
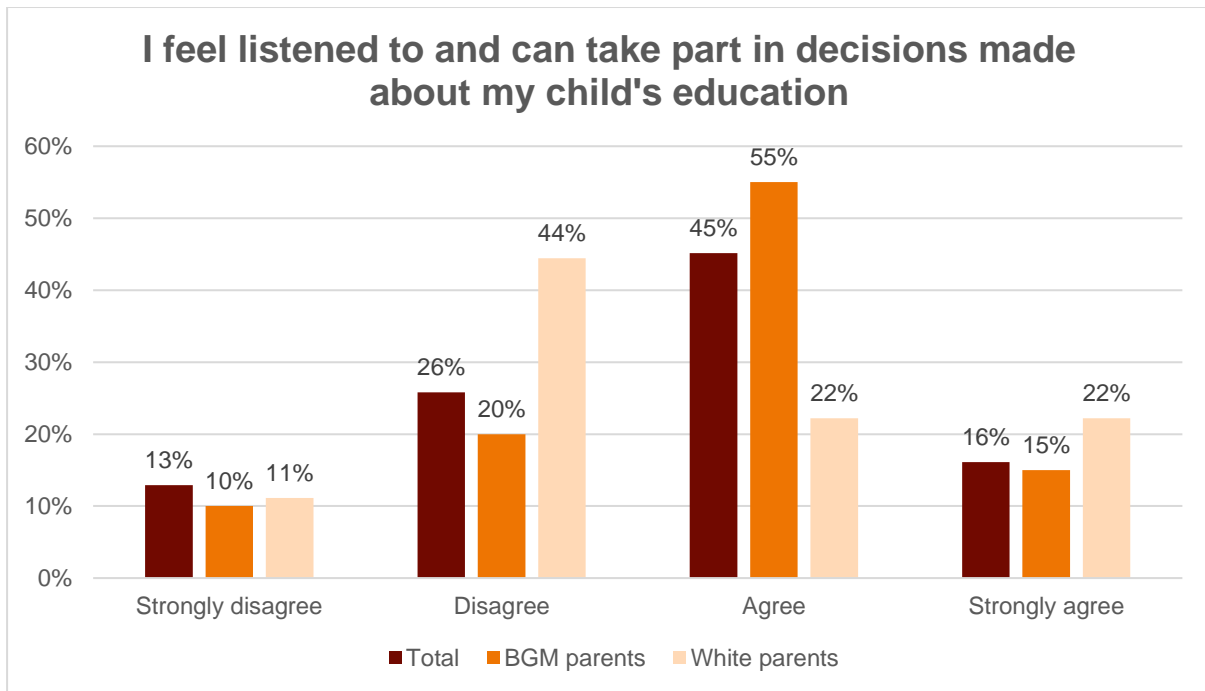
Finally, the majority of parents reported feeling well supported by their child's school, and this response was fairly consistent across both ethnic demographics.

I feel well supported by my child's school/educational setting

Response	Total	BGM parents	White parents
Strongly disagree	16%	15%	11%
Disagree	13%	10%	22%
Agree	58%	65%	44%
Strongly agree	13%	10%	22%

Legend: Total, BGM parents, White parents
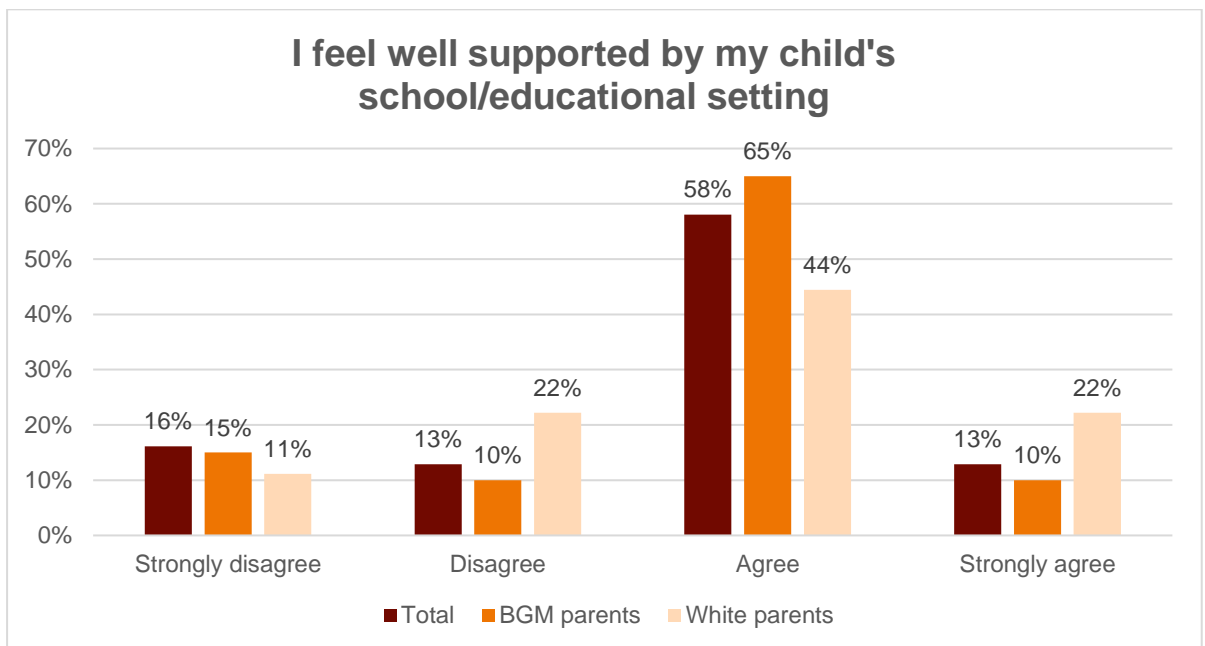
The BGM parents who took part in this survey were then asked to reflect on whether they had felt discriminated against because of their ethnicity, and that of their children. The majority of participants responded that they had not – however, a quarter did feel as though they were not receiving equitable treatment, compared to their children's White peers. When asked to explain their responses, participants noted feeling as

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though resources were not being allocated fairly to all children ("Because everyone else is getting support. My son is not and it's been ongoing for years now. He is at a disadvantage compared to his peers"), or that their treatment had been otherwise different ("I feel if my son and I were white, the college would have been proactive in meeting the educational needs of my son"). However, it must be noted that the majority of respondents did not feel this way, instead responding with comments such as "I have been welcomed with open hands", or "Because they treat everyone equal despite the ethnicity".

Do you feel discriminated against because of your ethnicity?

No	75%
Yes	0 / 25%
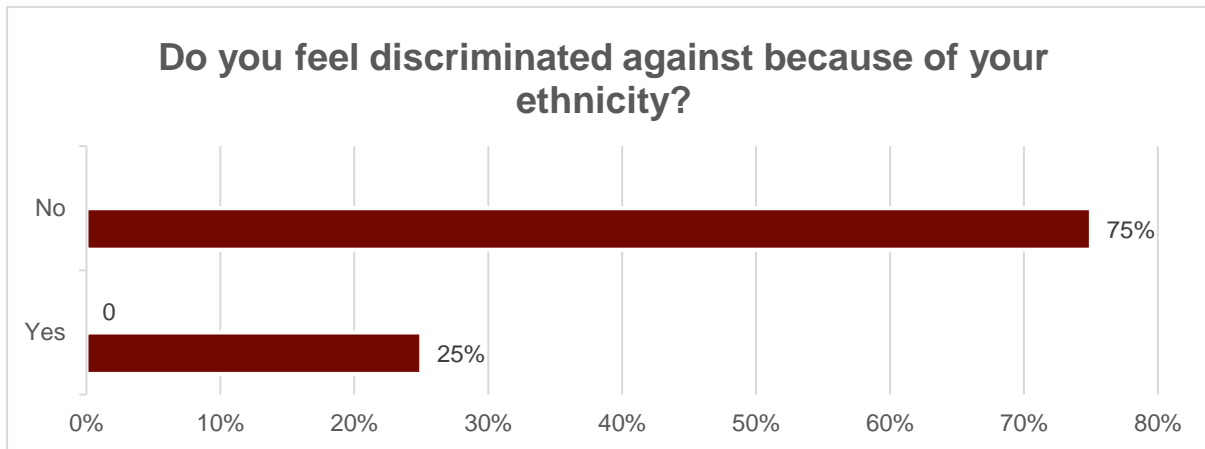
Finally, participants were asked to declare how confident they felt raising questions and concerns with their child's school. The vast majority of parents felt able to raise these concerns.

How confident do you feel about raising concerns with your child's school about the education support your child is receiving?

Very unconfident	Somewhat unconfident	Somewhat confident	Very confident
6%	3%	55%	35%
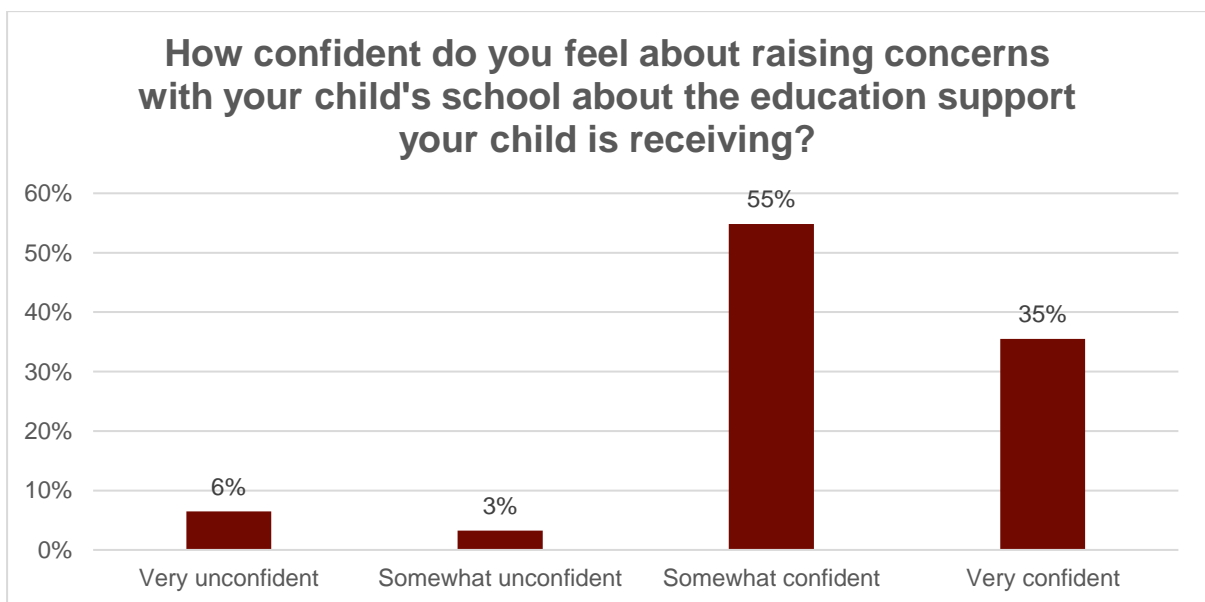
On the whole, our survey responses highlight that, for parents of children whose SEN status is recognised, the support available is useful, accessible, and makes a tangible difference to their lives, and those of their children. This is felt across both BGM and White families. The issue remains, however, of the issues faced by families who are unable to access these services, which we explored in our focus groups discussions.

Focus Groups

The focus group discussion which was run by our Peer Researcher was designed in order to get richer insights into the issues faced by BGM families when attempting to access SEN support for their children, along with other issues their children face in the school system. The session, involving seven participants, revealed a pattern of systemic failures that disproportionately impact families from Black and Global Majority (BGM) backgrounds. From delays in assessments to inadequate resources and cultural misunderstandings, these barriers leave many parents feeling excluded, unsupported, and unable to access the help their children need:

Institutional Bias and Barriers to Diagnosis

Parents repeatedly expressed concerns about institutional bias, particularly regarding the processes for diagnosing SEN in children. One parent observed that "schools should be held more accountable to work on institutional prejudice and bias."

For families from BGM backgrounds, navigating the diagnosis process was often fraught with challenges. Many felt that their children's needs were either overlooked or misunderstood due to racial or cultural biases. This lack of understanding could delay diagnosis, leading to missed opportunities for early intervention. Parents described how this not only hindered their children's educational progress but also exacerbated feelings of frustration and marginalisation.

Addressing institutional bias in the diagnostic process requires schools to ensure that assessments are culturally sensitive and that staff are trained to recognise and address unconscious biases, particularly those which lead teachers to mischaracterise 'poor behaviour' as a function of pupils' ethnicities, rather than as a potential SEN requiring support.

Gaps in Communication and Transparency

A lack of clear communication from schools and local authorities was another significant barrier identified by parents. One participant explained, "I would appreciate more communication from the SEND assessment and review department so I don't feel blindsided."

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Families often described feeling left in the dark about the steps required to secure a diagnosis, the status of their child's assessments, or the support available while waiting. This lack of transparency created uncertainty and added to the emotional strain of navigating an already complex system.

Parents emphasised that better communication would help them feel more informed and empowered during the diagnostic process. Regular updates, clear timelines, and accessible information about next steps are crucial to building trust and ensuring families are not left feeling abandoned. The lack of support in navigating these processes is particularly pronounced for those who speak English as an additional language, with these parents noting exceptional difficulties in accessing proper support.

Inadequate Resources for Diagnosis and Support Services

Parents highlighted the severe shortage of resources, both for diagnosing SEN and for providing ongoing support. One parent expressed frustration at the lack of funding, saying, "Schools should receive more funding to allow them to provide opportunities for SEND children and young people."

Another parent pointed out the difficulty of accessing specialised services: "Providing a setting that meets my child's needs, especially around services like occupational therapists and speech and language therapists."

Many families spoke of extended waiting times—up to two years—for assessments or therapies, leaving their children without the support they needed during crucial developmental periods. This delay often meant that children's needs went unaddressed, causing them to fall further behind academically and socially.

The shortage of professionals, such as educational psychologists and speech therapists, was particularly problematic, with schools often unable to provide these services internally. Parents stressed that without timely and comprehensive assessments, securing an accurate diagnosis and appropriate support for their children was nearly impossible.

Exclusion from the Diagnostic and Support Process

A recurring theme was the sense of exclusion many parents felt when trying to advocate for their children. One parent explained, "The schools should listen more to us parents regardless of our background or ethnicity because we are our children's first educators."

Parents often felt dismissed or sidelined when raising concerns about their child's development. This was especially pronounced for BGM families, who described how cultural differences sometimes led to their concerns being minimised or misunderstood.

The exclusion of parents from the diagnostic and support process not only undermined their confidence in the system but also delayed access to necessary interventions. Families called for schools to value their input and involve them as equal partners in identifying and addressing their children's needs.

Challenges in Accessing Appropriate Support

Even after a diagnosis was secured, parents reported significant difficulties in accessing appropriate support for their children. One parent shared, "I would appreciate if my child is included more and treated as part of the school."

Families described how their children were often excluded from activities or placed in settings that did not adequately meet their needs. This lack of inclusion extended to support services, with some parents feeling that their children were not given the same opportunities as others.

For many BGM families, cultural barriers further complicated access to support. Some parents spoke of stigma within their communities around SEN, while others described how schools failed to provide culturally appropriate interventions. These challenges left families feeling isolated and unsupported, further widening the gap between their children's needs and the help they received.

Emotional Impact on Families

The emotional toll of trying to secure a diagnosis and appropriate support was a significant theme throughout the discussion. One parent described the experience as "very lonely and isolated a lot of times," adding that "Black SEND families should be supported more to improve mental health and wellbeing."

Parents spoke candidly about the stress and exhaustion they felt while navigating a system that seemed unresponsive to their needs. The uncertainty around diagnosis and the long waiting times for assessments compounded these feelings, leaving many families struggling to cope.

The lack of mental health support for both children and parents was another major concern. Families felt that more could be done to provide culturally sensitive mental health resources and to reduce the stigma around seeking help.

Barriers at Transition Points

Transition periods, such as moving from primary to secondary school or from secondary school to college, were identified as particularly challenging. Parents described these times as moments when their children's needs were often overlooked or poorly understood, leading to gaps in support.

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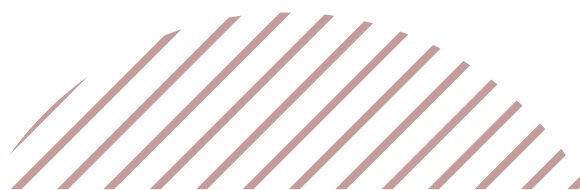
One parent highlighted the importance of addressing these transitions, noting that without proper planning and communication, their children were left struggling to adapt to new environments. The lack of tailored support during these critical periods further underscored the systemic failures in providing comprehensive and continuous care for SEN children.

Emotional Toll and Mental Health Impacts

The emotional impact of navigating the SEND system was deeply felt by families, particularly those from BGM backgrounds. One parent described the experience as "very lonely and isolated a lot of times," adding that "Black SEND families should be supported more to improve mental health and wellbeing."

Parents spoke candidly about the stress and exhaustion of constantly advocating for their children in a system that seemed unresponsive to their needs. Many felt that there was insufficient support for their mental health as caregivers, as well as for their children, who often struggled with the pressures of being in a school environment that did not fully understand or accommodate them.

Participants emphasised the need for mental health resources tailored to the unique challenges faced by BGM families, along with greater efforts to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health within these communities.

Barriers to Accessing Support

Underlying all these themes was a shared frustration with the systemic barriers that prevent families from accessing proper support for their children. Participants identified several critical issues:

- **Transition Phases**: Moving from primary to secondary school, or from secondary to college, was highlighted as a particularly challenging period due to the lack of tailored guidance and support.

- **Waiting Times**: Extended delays for assessments and therapies left families in limbo, unable to secure the help their children urgently needed.

- **Cultural Barriers**: Some parents noted that cultural stigma around SEND within their communities further complicated their efforts to seek support, while schools often failed to provide culturally sensitive interventions.

These barriers, combined with a lack of resources and poor communication, created a profound sense of frustration and disillusionment among participants.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research demonstrates a significant issue in the provision of SEN support in British schools. Whilst families who are receiving support speak to its hugely positive impact on their children, far too many BGM families face significant barriers when attempting to access assistance in the first place. Issues such as institutional bias, cultural misunderstandings, and inadequate resources present additional hurdles, which many find incredibly difficult to navigate alone.

Parents from BGM backgrounds face unique challenges, including delays in diagnosis, lack of communication, and cultural stigma, which are further compounded by stereotypes that mischaracterise their children's needs. These barriers often result in missed opportunities for early intervention, inadequate educational support, and emotional strain on families. Parents repeatedly emphasised that, while support is invaluable once accessed, the processes for obtaining it are overly complex, inconsistent, and, in many cases, culturally insensitive.

Addressing these issues requires moving beyond offering support only to those who can navigate the system. We propose the following policy and practice recommendations to begin rectifying these issues, and to move towards greater equity for BGM families of children with SEN:

1. **Review**: Regularly assess support services and policies to identify disparities for Black children with SEN, addressing institutional bias, cultural insensitivity, and inequities in resource allocation. Ensure policies promote cultural competence and hold schools accountable for fair practices.

2. **Engagement**: Actively collaborate with BGM families to understand their experiences and preferences. Treat parents as equal partners in decision-making, fostering trust through transparency and culturally sensitive communication.

3. **Interventions**: Provide tailored, evidence-based interventions such as speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, and mental health support. Ensure equitable access to assistive devices and culturally relevant resources to enhance learning.

4. **Parental and Community Partnerships**: Build partnerships with Black-led community organisations to co-create and deliver culturally sensitive support services. Establish community-led advisory groups to

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parents as experts in their children's needs.

5. **Information Accessibility**: Increase accessibility to information about SEN support, benefits, rights, and entitlements. Provide clear, concise updates about the diagnostic process and available services, with enhanced interpretation services for families with language barriers.

6. **Address Stigma**: Implement awareness campaigns to challenge cultural taboos and stereotypes about SEN. Address unconscious bias and systemic inequities in educational policies and classroom practices through training and advocacy.

7. **Waiting Well**: Provide families with clear communication about waiting times for assessments and therapies, along with interim support options such as temporary interventions, guidance, and resources to mitigate delays.

8. **Transition Support**: Develop targeted guidance and support for children with SEN during key transitions, such as moving between school stages or into further education. Ensure these transitions are planned collaboratively with families to avoid service gaps.

9. **School Support**: Promote a whole-school approach that fosters an inclusive, welcoming environment for all families. Encourage schools to celebrate diversity and actively involve families in creating a warm and supportive community culture.

10. **Individualised Support Plans**: Create, regularly update, and monitor EHCPs and SEN support plans to reflect the unique needs of each child. Ensure assessments and plans account for cultural and linguistic diversity, and provide regular opportunities for parent input and review.

11. **Mental Health and Wellbeing**: Provide culturally sensitive mental health resources for both children and families. Reduce stigma around seeking mental health support and address the emotional toll of navigating the SEN system with accessible, inclusive services.

An Alternative Model for Education? Exploring the Power of Black-Led Supplementary Schools with Akoma

Peer Researcher: Gabriella Okoobo

Throughout this report, we have returned time and again to the issues faced by BGM children within mainstream British schools. Issues of profiling, over-discipline, and alienation within educational settings mean that schools often fail to properly nurture the development of BGM pupils, whilst for Black girls, the intersecting impacts of racism and sexism are compounded by limited access to spaces where their identities are affirmed and celebrated. Against this backdrop, Black-led supplementary schools have emerged as a powerful alternative, offering culturally relevant education, fostering self-esteem, and building community among young Black learners.

In this study, our Peer Researcher Gabriella Okoobo took on a participant-observer role during a series of week-long pop-up summer schools. The initiative was run by Akoma, alongside mentors from Milk Honey Bees, both Black-led organisation which seek to re-frame and reimagine narratives for Black girls in schools, emphasising healing, creativity, community-building, and positivity. By observing its curriculum, practices, and the experiences of its participants, Gabriella explored how such initiatives address the limitations of formal education. This project ultimately explores the ways in which the Akoma summer school disrupts systemic inequalities by providing a safe and affirming space for cultural pride, creativity, and personal growth, and

asks whether these models could offer a blueprint for reimagining education more broadly.

Drawing on interviews, participatory observations, and reflections from participants, this research sheds light on the transformative potential of programmes like Akoma. It highlights the significance of fostering a sense of belonging, promoting autonomy, and equipping Black girls with the tools to navigate and challenge the inequities they face in mainstream education. Ultimately, this study situates Black-led supplementary schools as a critical intervention in the fight for an equitable and inclusive education system, questioning whether these initiatives could serve as a template for reforming the British educational landscape.

Background

Supplementary education encompasses programs designed to enhance or support mainstream schooling. Emerging in response to the racism in school curricula and policies for children of the Windrush Generation, these programs, which can include academic tutoring, language instruction, and cultural education, are particularly prevalent in urban areas across the UK. In recent years, between 3,000 and 5,000 supplementary schools have been identified nationwide, serving diverse communities with tailored support. Many of these programs address gaps in mainstream education by focusing on small group teaching, cultural heritage, and community engagement, providing an alternative for families seeking to enrich their children's educational experiences.

For BGM communities, supplementary education offers a critical resource. These schools often aim to counteract the systemic disadvantages faced by children in mainstream schooling, as we have discussed throughout this report, including underrepresentation, lower academic expectations, a lack of culturally responsive curricula and care, and the continued effects of profiling, criminalisation ,and adultification. Instead, organisations like Akoma, alongside ROTA members such as the Rustam School and Eastside Young Leader's Academy provide lessons in BGM history, language, and life skills, fostering a sense of identity and belonging. Such

programs are vital in addressing educational disparities and promoting well-being among marginalised groups.

The benefits of supplementary education are manifold. These programs often feature smaller class sizes, personalised attention, and culturally relevant teaching that enhances engagement and academic achievement. Additionally, they foster community connections and support students' emotional and social development, creating a holistic model that many argue surpasses traditional schooling in its inclusivity and effectiveness. For families dissatisfied with the one-size-fits-all approach of mainstream education, supplementary schools represent a community-driven, empowering alternative that prioritises the unique needs and aspirations of young learners, and serves to challenge negative stereotypes and narratives around minoritised students.

Methods

The research employed participant observation as the primary method for capturing the experiences of young Black girls involved in a supplementary education programme, led by our Peer Researcher. This qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of participants in their natural settings, facilitating a nuanced understanding of how they navigate educational spaces outside of traditional schooling. Gabriella took on a mentoring role during the summer school, and drew on her comparative lived experiences establish an effective rapport with the girls to creating a safe, comfortable environment for open dialogue.

The original plan had been to conduct more formalised semi-structured interviews and surveys with Akoma participants. However, it quickly became clear that this would not be feasible without disrupting the programme for the girls who took part, and instead we chose to carry out more informal research capitalising on Gabriella's situation within the programme, and drawing on opportunistic methodologies, which resulted in a far richer dataset than we had initially hoped for.

Throughout the observation process, the Gabriella attended sessions, closely observing interactions, activities, and conversations among the girls and mentors. The researcher took field notes, which were later analysed for recurring themes, such as the girls' perceptions of mainstream schools and the role that the supplementary education progr amme played in providing alternative educational experiences. Participant observation allows researchers to engage with participants in a way that offers richer insights than more formal research methods. This was particularly important in a context where the girls' voices and experiences might otherwise be overlooked or misunderstood.

Gabriella also engaged in informal conversations with the girls during and after sessions, allowing them to reflect on their experiences and share their feelings about both their formal schooling and the supplementary programme. This method helped

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Race on the Agenda

to uncover deep-seated feelings of exclusion and frustration with mainstream education, which the girls expressed through candid discussions about their schools' lack of cultural relevance, underrepresentation of Black staff, and the challenges of navigating predominantly white academic spaces. Such insights are often difficult to capture through structured surveys or interviews alone. By positioning themselves within the community, the Peer Researcher was able to capture an authentic and comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences.

Also a photographer, Gabriella captured images of the programmes she attended during her time with Akoma, which have been used to illustrate this chapter.

Participant Observation Reflections

The Akoma programme emerged as a response to the systemic failings many Black girls face in mainstream British schools. By centring their identities, fostering creativity, and building community, these week-long programmes provided a stark contrast to the rigid, often exclusionary norms of formal education. Observing them revealed not just the vibrant environment cultivated by mentors and participants but also the deep frustrations these girls experience in their regular schooling.

Problems with Regular Schooling

When discussing their experiences within regular schooling, the girls who took part in the Akoma summer school highlighted a number of the issues already bought up throughout this report. A common issue was a lack of representation. One girl lamented the lack of diversity in her school, saying, "there are more white kids in our school. There are like almost mixed-race kids… only like 3". Her experience of isolation was compounded by the gentrification of the area. The course leader explained, "the schools are missing out on funding because there is not enough young children in the area, which the schools rely on". This funding shortfall was exacerbated by the gentrification process, leading to closures and consolidations of schools, which further marginalised the students who remained. One girl's feeling of alienation was made clear: "I have no one that looks like me in my class… some boys are black, but the girls are white".

Girls also spoke of chaotic environments within their regular schools, and the general lack of control that teachers had. One commented that: "my school is very ghetto. I just don't really like the people there... everyone is just a bit crazy. It's very chaotic, there are many fights". Asked about her teachers, she replied that "they can't keep the kids under control. They keep on failing badly behaved children. They can't just kick them out... so they find that very hard. But I feel like they should because they are just taking up all of the teachers' attention when they should be focusing on people that are actually here to learn. Our school is like a dumping ground. Because whenever someone from a bad school is kicked out they always send them to our school. Like every single time". She went on to say "I don't get how they always pass Ofsted". Her

friend, from the same school, added: "it's because when Ofsted comes they have a site where they put bad children. So then they're not really in the school Some of the kids will come back later but some also stay there".

The lack of resources in state schools was another pervasive issue. One girl remarked when asked about arts and crafts in her regular school: "we have to use a lot of cheap stuff and it will take so long to get things, and people would be snatching everything. And everything is secondhand in our school".

However, not all students experienced these challenges in the same way. A younger girl offered a more positive perspective, mentioning, "The teachers are really nice. We also have this really nice library. It's like a forest kind of. And it has a bunch of forest cushions and a big poofy orange chair".

Community Building

The Akoma programme sought to build a space for Black girls to foster a sense of community and solidarity, something that was often missing in their regular schools. From the moment the programme began, mentors initiated ice-breaking sessions that allowed the girls to quickly form bonds with one another. This sense of connection was palpable from the first day, with many of the girls happily playing together and sharing experiences.

Communal activities throughout the week enhanced this sense of community. One of the girls suggested a pyjama party, and this idea evolved into a creative camping session. One of the mentors organised the event, which saw the girls arrive in their pyjamas or comfortable outfits, ready for a day of fun and relaxation. This informal, low-pressure setting allowed the girls to bond over shared snacks, laughter, and stories. This sense of carefree enjoyment, where the girls could simply be themselves without judgment, was a stark contrast to the structured, often isolating experiences they had in regular school settings.

For many of the participants, the most significant takeaway from the programme was the opportunity to be surrounded by other Black girls. At the end of the week, one reflected, "It's been really good [to be surrounded by other Black girls]". This sentiment was echoed by another, who said, "[It] was really fun. I felt more like myself as well". For some of the girls. Akoma stood in contrast to the predominantly white environments of their regular schools, and even for those who were not as minoritised in their normal schooling, the inclusive atmosphere of the supplementary programme highlighted the power of community building among those who shared similar cultural backgrounds and experiences, and of a safe space for Black girls to share and learn together.

The Power of Creative Expression

One of the core tenets of the Akoma programme was an emphasis on creative expression, often missing in the girls' regular schools, as many of the participants

discussed. One girl admitted "the teachers just really get on my nerves. Like, I like art but I didn't choose it for my GCSE's because they would give me some bad teachers". She expressed her frustration with the lack of autonomy and independence afforded her in school, noting that "the type of art I like... they would let you put your headphones in and allow you to get on with it. Sometimes they allow you to do that". The focus in school was often on mechanical or technical aspects rather than fostering genuine creativity or self-expression. Girls also discussed feeling as though schools did not value creativity enough, as one highlighted: I feel like they think that arty things aren't really education. You need to get into a proper job. Not something like that".

In stark contrast, the supplementary programme encouraged experimentation and individual expression. Activities like creative photography, sewing, collage making, and drumming allowed the girls to explore their interests and develop their skills in a supportive environment. One girl shared, "It's hard to describe but we do lots of things at school. But not like this". The freedom to explore different creative forms without restrictions or judgment was a liberating experience for many of the girls, who expressed great enjoyment and pride in their efforts. When asked what their favourite aspects of the programme were, the drumming course and photography masterclass were frequently referenced. Girls also drew contrasts in the resources and support available to them at the summer school and in their regular classrooms, many noting that Akoma was far better equipped and resourced, which in turn enabled greater artistic experimentation and expression.

Fostering Engagement and Activism

In addition to creativity, the supplementary school programme provided opportunities for the girls to engage with important social and cultural issues, fostering a sense of activism and responsibility. One girl reflected on the programme's focus on cultural learning, noting, that the programme was special "because you learn about your culture".

This idea was embedded throughout the programme. On the first day, mentors facilitated a discussion on "Black Girl Dreams". Girls were encouraged to articulate their aspirations, ranging from becoming a lawyer, an actor, a model, to an astronaut. Each dream was met with supportive nods and words of encouragement from the mentors and peers, creating a powerful sense of pride and possibility.

Similarly, the photography masterclass saw the photographer sharing her portfolio and books with the girls. She went on to discuss career and focus on amplifying black beauty, offering insights into how marginalised communities are often excluded from mainstream fashion narratives. This seemed to resonate with the participants, who took great interest in discussions around unequal beauty standards in popular culture. This was later reflected in the decorations that the girls made to adorn their tents during the camping session, which included garlands that read "Black and Beautiful, Proud and Growing".

Creative camping session. Photo: Gabriella Okoobo

Two girls painting. Photo: Gabriella Okoobo
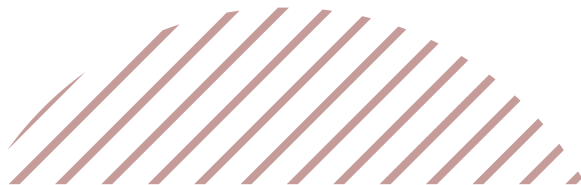
Black Girl Dreams. *Photo: Gabriella Okoobo*
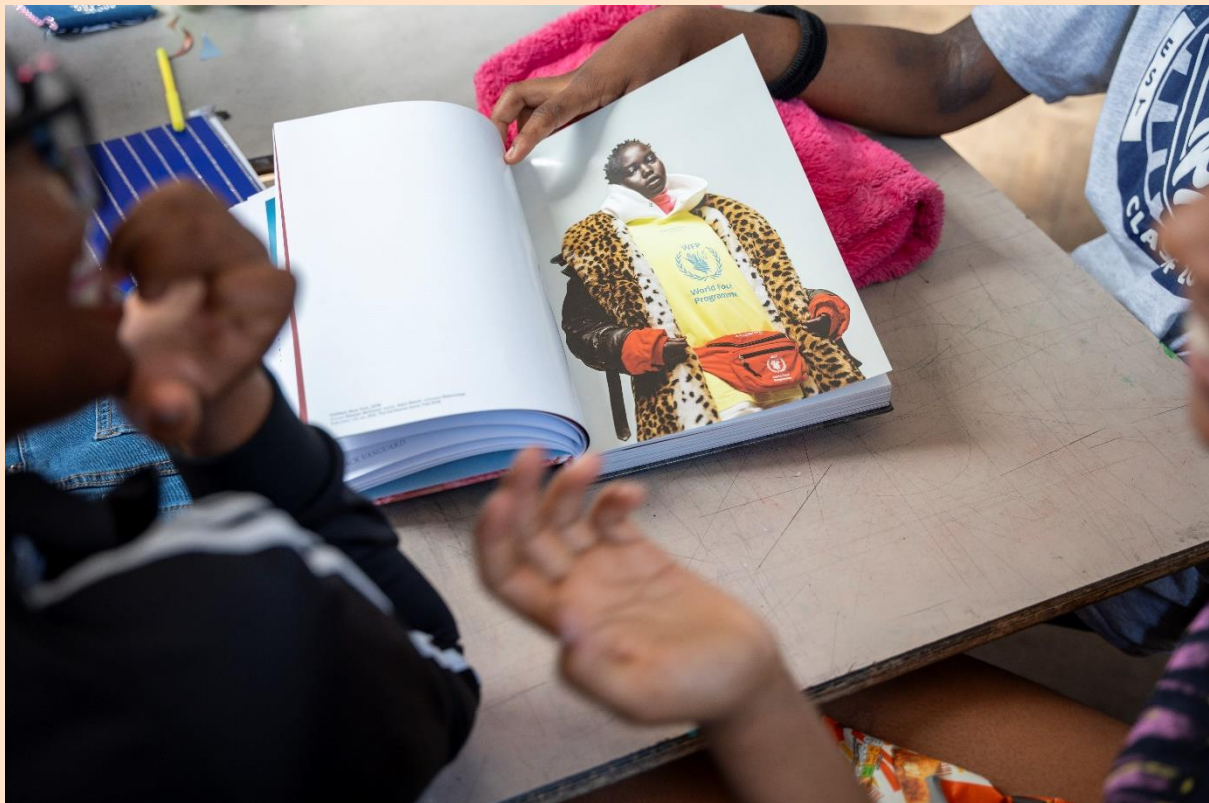
Inspecting the photographer's work. *Photo: Gabriella Okoobo*

Girls making friends. Photo: Gabriella Okoobo

Black and Beautiful, Proud and Growing. Photo: Gabriella Okoobo
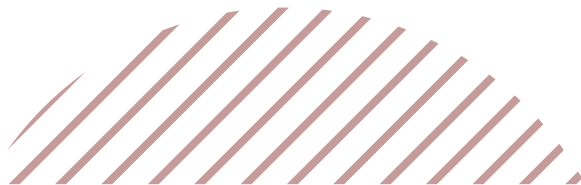
The programme also introduced the girls to activism through discussions about climate justice and social responsibility. During a session led by a climate activist, participants were encouraged to think about and discuss the climate school strikes, initially pioneered by Greta Thunberg. One girl thoughtfully commented that "they didn't see the point of being in school that day. And because they will live on this Earth longer than older people, they felt it was their responsibility to take action". The idea of youth-led activism resonated strongly with the girls, highlighting their awareness of the pressing issues facing their communities and the planet. They also discussed the unequal effects of the climate emergency, with countries in the Global South, such as Burkina Faso, experiencing the worst effects of the crisis whilst contributing comparatively little to its propagation. The activist led the group in discussing these issues, raining important questions around our collective responsibilities and ability to take meaningful action. Closer to home, the story of Ella Roberta, a young girl who died from an asthma attack caused by air pollution, helped to highlight the intersection of race, youth, and environmental issues. Inspired by these issues, the girls later took part in a creative project involving upcycling clothes, engaging actively with environmental issues, and drawing on them to begin developing and practicing a sustainability mindset.

Positive Mentorship and Role Modelling

The programme's mentors played a crucial role in creating a positive and supportive environment for the girls. Mentors were briefed on the specific challenges the girls faced, ensuring that they were able to offer sensitive and informed support. Throughout the programme, mentors were actively engaged with the girls, ensuring that each child felt included and celebrated. One girl's minor conflict over a broken phone was diffused by the group leader, demonstrating the mentors' ability to manage issues with patience and understanding.

This hands-on, emotionally intelligent mentorship contrasted sharply with the more detached approach often found in regular schools. The mentors didn't just teach—they supported, guided, and celebrated the girls in every activity, helping them to build confidence, explore new interests, and feel valued.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

This research has illuminated the transformative potential of Black-led supplementary schools like Akoma, showcasing their capacity to address the systemic inequities faced by Black and Global Majority (BGM) children within mainstream education. By fostering cultural pride, creativity, and a sense of community, these programs provide a much-needed counterbalance to the alienation and over-discipline that BGM pupils often encounter. Akoma's success underscores the need to reimagine education systems in ways that affirm diverse identities and equip students to thrive academically and socially.

To integrate the insights from Akoma into mainstream schooling, the following actionable recommendations are proposed:

1. **Culturally Responsive Curricula**: Schools should adopt curricula that reflect the histories, achievements, and contributions of BGM communities. This would provide all students with a richer understanding of cultural diversity and foster a sense of pride and belonging among BGM pupils.

2. **Inclusive Representation**: Increase the representation of Black and ethnic minority educators and mentors in schools. This can create role models for BGM students and ensure that diverse perspectives are embedded into the teaching environment.

3. **Creative Expression as Core Learning:** Incorporate arts, music, and creative workshops into the regular curriculum. Providing opportunities for students to explore their identities and develop new skills fosters engagement and promotes holistic development.

4. **Mentorship Programs**: Establish mentorship initiatives that pair students with empathetic and culturally aware adults who can provide guidance, support, and positive role modeling.

5. **Student-Led Community Building**: Create safe spaces and peer-led groups for BGM students to share experiences, celebrate their identities, and address issues they face in schools.

6. **Teacher Training and Awareness**: Implement regular professional development focused on anti-racism, unconscious bias, and strategies to support intersectional identities in the classroom.

7. **Parental and Community Involvement**: Strengthen partnerships between schools, families, and community organisations to ensure students' diverse needs are understood and met.

By integrating these practices, schools can move toward a more equitable and inclusive education system that not only mitigates the shortcomings of current practices but also empowers all learners to realise their potential

The Experiences of South Asian Students in British Universities

Peer Researcher: Yashaswi Shetty

The numbers of South Asian students in the British universities sector has grown significantly in recent years. A large number of these students have migrated to the UK as international students, whilst the growth in the British Asian population means that an increasing number of home students of Asian descent are also enrolling in universities year-on-year. However, research into the experiences of these students has not kept up with their increasing over-representation in the sector. The funding cuts to universities that began in 2010 has led to a steep rise in international admissions, owing to the higher fee that universities are able to charge students from overseas. The international prestige of British universities, alongside good economic opportunities for those who remain in the country after graduation, means that universities have been able to recruit significant numbers of students from BGM-majority countries, with a significant number of these enrolments coming from South Asia. Other students of South Asian descent are British citizens, but migrated to the UK along with their families partially because of our international reputation for educational excellence. However, this is coming at a time of increased hostility towards migrants, Muslims, and BGM groups in general, as evidenced in the 2024 Summer Race riots. It is therefore imperative that we develop a greater understanding of the extent to which South Asian students experience racialisation in the UK, both on and off campus.

The Peer Researcher who developed and carried out this research, Yashaswi Shetty, is an international student who moved from India to the UK to carry out her studies. Having also taken on part-time work outside of the university, Yashaswi has developed an interest in, and lived experiences of, the ways in which the experiences of South Asian students in the UK are affected by their racialisation. Having developed a Master's dissertation on the effects of racial and caste discrimination in India, Yashaswi drew on both her lived experiences and research background to expand the scope of this study to explore how her peers across the British universities sector have been impacted by racism in the UK, and what provisions are made by their institutions to advocate for them in this area.

This exploratory study shows the clear need for more dedicated research in this area. Whilst a combination of factors meant that we were unable to recruit as many participants as we had hoped for, those who did contribute spoke to the difficulties faced by South Asian students navigating life in the UK, and the need from greater support from universities. At a time when migrant students are effectively "propping up" the universities sector, it is clear that far more time and resources need to be put into ensuring their safety, security, and ability to make the most of their time in the UK

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Background

Migratory students, including international students and those who migrated to the UK as children partially for the education system, form a significant and growing proportion of the UK's higher education population. International enrolments accounted for approximately 26% of all students in the 2022/23 academic year. Non-EU students dominate this group, with over 663,000 enrolled compared to 95,000 from the EU. Among non-EU students, South Asia is a key region of origin, with India leading as the largest source country for international students, followed by Pakistan and Bangladesh as the fourth and seventh-largest contributors, respectively. Enrolments from India alone increased by over 50% between 2020 and 2023, reflecting the global appeal of UK universities for students from the region. Meanwhile, many children who migrated to the UK for education access also contribute to this demographic shift, adding layers of cultural diversity and unique lived experiences to the higher education landscape. At Russell Group universities, the reliance on and representation of migratory students is even more pronounced. International students constitute 46% of postgraduate research enrolments,, and in fields like engineering and technology, this proportion rises to 60%. In recent years, South Asian students have seen significant growth at these elite institutions, with the number of Indian students increasing by 200% over the past five years. Targeted recruitment strategies, regional offices, scholarships, and the reintroduction of the post-study work visa have driven this surge. Similarly, UK-born migratory students from diverse cultural backgrounds enrich university life and bring unique challenges to institutional policies.

Since 2010, international student numbers in the UK have increased by over 70%, driven by policies promoting global recruitment and a growing reliance on higher tuition fees to offset reductions in public funding for universities. International students pay considerably higher fees than domestic students, with non-EU enrolments forming the majority of this growth. Their fees contribute substantially to university budgets, often comprising 20–30% of total income at institutions such as those in the Russell Group. This income is crucial for addressing funding gaps in domestic education, sustaining research, and supporting overall institutional operations. In 2022/23, international students contributed £37.4 billion to the UK economy, demonstrating their pivotal role in both higher education sustainability and the broader financial landscape.

Since 2010, the number of migratory students, including international and those who arrived in the UK as children, has increased substantially. Policies promoting global recruitment and high tuition fees for international students have been designed to offset reductions in public funding for universities. International students, who pay considerably higher fees than domestic students, have driven much of this growth. Their fees often constitute 20–30% of total income at institutions such as those in the Russell Group, funding domestic education, sustaining research, and supporting institutional operations. Migratory students, even those who grew up in the UK and studied in its schools, add economic and cultural value to universities, though often

overlooked in statistical reporting. In 2022/23, international students alone contributed £37.4 billion to the UK economy, underscoring their pivotal role in both higher education sustainability and the broader financial landscape.

However, the vast expansion of migratory student numbers, and their increasing importance to the university sector, has not been matched by adequate research into their lived experiences. This gap includes both international students and those who arrived in the UK as children. What research we do have, often not directly commissioned by the universities themselves, speaks to the urgent need for more work in this area. One study, which analysed international prospectuses from universities in the USA, Canada, and the UK, found many institutions were engaging in "diversity washing", giving potential students the impression that university towns and campuses were safe spaces for BGM students, but without putting in place the necessary structures to ensure that racism is actually challenged. This is particularly pressing, given the issues raised by international students in these contexts. In a 2019 report from the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), researchers found that international students were subject to significant racism and microaggressions from both students and staff at their universities, several recounting 'jokes' from lecturers to the effect of "if you don't complete the assignment and turn up on time, I'll have you sent back home!". These students also reported feeling hyper-visible on campus as a result of the broad lack of BGM diversity within British universities, as we highlighted in the first chapter of this report. The extent of these issues are laid out in another study from 2013, which found that around 50% of international students surveyed had experienced of racism whilst in the UK, with 30% reporting some form of racist abuse, including physical attacks Of these, the EHRC report found that only 30% felt confident in actually reporting these incidents, and that this figure was substantially lower amongst Asian students.

Methods

The main aim of this exploratory study was to begin developing an understanding of the ways in which South Asian migratory students experienced racialisation in the UK. As such, we had initially hoped to carry out a series of interviews and focus groups with affected students. However, we faced significant challenged with participant recruitment, with many potential respondents telling us that they were not comfortable with the potential for being identifiable through interview recordings or transcripts, which itself speaks volumes abut the extent to which these students are made to feel safe and secure in UK universities. In order to better accommodate our participants, we instead circulated a mixed methods survey, including questions on: (1) if and how their lives had changed since moving to the UK; (2) participants' social lives; (3) their lives on campus; (4) any issues faced by participants with their self-esteem and identity since moving; (5) their experiences with the 2024 Race Riots; and (6) their wider experiences of racism and discrimination in the UK.

A number of recruitment strategies were followed. Invites were sent around the Peer Researcher's immediate network, and through a range of student societies for SouthAsian students at universities across the UK, alongside university staff, academics, activists, and other stakeholders. Later, to encourage more participants, we also introduced an incentive prize draw for a £25 voucher, and circulated the survey invite on a number of relevant Facebook pages set up for the community of international students in the UK, and across ROTA's membership. Ultimately, eight participants took part in this research, from a range of South Asian backgrounds, four of whom were international students, three had migrated as children, and one was a second-generation British citizen. Owing to the sample size, these results should not be taken as conclusive, rather, the insights given by participants demonstrate the need for more dedicated and resourced research in this area, in order to develop a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of the challenges faced by migratory students in British universities.

Results

Questions on participants' lives in the UK

When asked how their lives has changed since moving to the UK, answers were broadly split amongst participants. An equal number felt as though economic prospects were better in the UK compared to their home countries as did not, although a majority did feel as though their standards of living had improved. A slim majority also felt as though they were generally safer in the UK, and a clear majority felt as though their social lives had improved somewhat.

How Has your Life Changed Since Moving to the UK

I feel like my prospects of economic prosperity are better in the UK: Strongly disagree 13%, Somewhat disagree 38%, Somewhat agree 38%, Strongly agree 13%

My standard of living has improved since I moved to the UK: Strongly disagree 25%, Somewhat disagree 13%, Somewhat agree 38%, Strongly agree 25%

I feel safer living the UK: Strongly disagree 13%, Somewhat disagree 25%, Somewhat agree 50%, Strongly agree 13%

Living the UK has improved my social life: Strongly disagree 0%, Somewhat disagree 25%, Somewhat agree 75%, Strongly agree 0%

■ Strongly disagree ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Strongly agree

These responses illustrate the extent to which moving to the UK (or abroad, more generally) for study can significantly broaden the scope of opportunities available to students. As such, they broadly reflect the advertising presented to prospective students by universities hoping to recruit more international enrolments.

Questions on participants' social lives

This is also broadly reflected in participants' responses to questions concerning their social lives in the UK. A majority of respondents noted that they felt both comfortable and confident socialising with those from outside their cultural background, a large number emphatically so. That said, half did recognise the role that shared cultural experiences had in developing friendships with those from similar backgrounds. The friendships that participants had formed appear to have been generally organic, with most participants disagreeing with the idea that they had befriended people from similar backgrounds based on this shared cultural experience. Participants were evenly split when asked if they were more likely to be friends with those from their own cultural background.

Social Life

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I am more comfortable and confident when I am interacting with people from similar cultural backgrounds	38%	25%	25%	13%
Shared experiences and a similar upbringing have played a vital role for me in building strong connections with friends	25%	25%	50%	0%
Befriending people from similar cultural backgrounds was a conscious decision	25%	50%	25%	0%
I am more likely to be friends with South Asians or those belonging to communities with similar social/cultural values	25%	25%	25%	25%

■ Strongly disagree   ■ Somewhat disagree   ■ Somewhat agree   ■ Strongly agree

These responses suggest that most South Asian migratory students are fairly cosmopolitan, happy to build organic, genuine friendships and social connections with those from within and outside of their own cultural backgrounds. As such, they could

also be said to reflect the narrative presented to prospective students of a global community within British university campuses.

Participants' lives on campus

Participants were also, on the whole, positive about the role that universities played in ensuring that this vision of a global community was upheld in their campuses. The majority of participants agreed that they had ample opportunities and support to engage in extracurricular activities that reflected their interests and cultural background. The majority also felt as though their cultural background is reflected and valued by their university – however, it must be noted that a significant minority did not agree with this statement. On the whole though, respondents did agree that their universities provide them with resources and support to achieve both socially and academically, and that meaningful action was taken to address and prevent discrimination and harassment. The vast majority also reported feeling safe and respected in all aspects of their life on campus, and that their universities were working actively to ensure that the university was a supportive environment for minoritised students. Finally, a significant majority of participants also agreed that their universities were truly multicultural and diverse.

Campus Life

Statement	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I have ample opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities that reflect my interests and cultural background	13%	25%	38%	25%
I feel that my cultural background is respected and valued by others at my university	0%	38%	50%	13%
My university provides adequate resources and support that help me succeed academically and socially as an international student	0%	13%	75%	13%
My university takes meaningful action to address and prevent discrimination and harassment	25%	13%	50%	13%
I feel safe and respected in all areas of campus life	0%	13%	50%	38%
My university actively works to create a supportive environment for students from marginalized or underrepresented groups	0%	25%	63%	13%
My university hosts a truly multicultural and diverse environment (this includes not only students, but also faculty and support staff)	0%	13%	50%	38%

■ Strongly disagree   ■ Somewhat disagree   ■ Somewhat agree   ■ Strongly agree

These results are particularly interesting, as it also seems as though migratory students we surveyed are happy with the provisions and support offered to them as racialised individuals within the university, and it would be very useful to repeat this aspect of the research with a broader and more diverse sample from across the UK. Participants were also given a free answer section, and asked to note down any additional ways in which they university could support them as international students, leading to some insightful comments, such as: "there are no initiatives by the university that provide resources or opportunities to socialise with people of similar backgrounds. There are no clubs/societies. I feel that South Asian students are looked down upon unfortunately"; and "[they] can provide employment opportunities to international students". Comments were otherwise positive. However, participants were not so positive about their experiences beyond the university campus.

Participants' identity and self-esteem in the UK

A majority of participants noted that they had changed their clothing, language, or accent in order to fit in when in the UK. Similarly, three quarters of participants either somewhat or strongly agreed with the statement "I feel I have to work harder than other to gain the same level of recognition or respect". A significant majority of 75% also felt as though people made negative assumptions about them based on their ethnicity, and a majority also felt as though their ethnic minority status could negatively impact their self-esteem in the UK. All participants did, however, agree that they were comfortable embracing all aspects of their ethnic identities, whilst the majority also disagreed with the idea that it was challenging to balance their cultural identities with British societal expectations. That said, a majority also agreed that they felt self-conscious about their accents, that they were concerned about being stereotyped as South Asians in the UK, and that they were conscious of their ethnic identity in social settings.

These results suggest that participants do not feel entirely safe and comfortable in social settings in the UK. Issues to do with stereotyping, feeling 'hyper visible' on account of their racialisation, and as such feeling the need to 'self censor' behaviours and cultural traits in order to fit in speak to the wider social hostility towards migrant groups in the UK, with one student mentioning that they felt the need to act as a "model citizen" at all times. This suggests that more could be done in order to make international students more aware of these issues prior to enrolment, and more welcome upon arrival. Once again, more data is urgently needed in order to gauge how widespread these issues truly are.

Identity and Self-Esteem

I have changed aspects of myself (e.g., clothing, language or accent) to fit in better with the culture in the UK
- Strongly disagree: 13%
- Somewhat disagree: 25%
- Somewhat agree: 38%
- Strongly agree: 25%

I feel that I have to work harder than others to gain the same level of recognition or respect
- Strongly disagree: 13%
- Somewhat disagree: 13%
- Somewhat agree: 38%
- Strongly agree: 38%

I feel that people make assumptions about my abilities or character based on my identity
- Strongly disagree: 13%
- Somewhat disagree: 13%
- Somewhat agree: 63%
- Strongly agree: 13%

My ethnic identity can negatively impact my self-esteem
- Strongly disagree: 25%
- Somewhat disagree: 25%
- Somewhat agree: 38%
- Strongly agree: 13%

I feel comfortable embracing all aspects of my ethnic identity
- Strongly disagree: 0%
- Somewhat disagree: 0%
- Somewhat agree: 63%
- Strongly agree: 38%

I find it challenging to balance my cultural identity with societal expectations in the UK
- Strongly disagree: 25%
- Somewhat disagree: 38%
- Somewhat agree: 38%
- Strongly agree: 0%

I feel self-conscious about my accent when speaking
- Strongly disagree: 13%
- Somewhat disagree: 25%
- Somewhat agree: 38%
- Strongly agree: 25%

I am concerned about being stereotyped based on my cultural or ethnic background
- Strongly disagree: 0%
- Somewhat disagree: 25%
- Somewhat agree: 63%
- Strongly agree: 13%

I am conscious of my ethnic identity in social settings
- Strongly disagree: 0%
- Somewhat disagree: 25%
- Somewhat agree: 50%
- Strongly agree: 25%

Legend: ■ Strongly disagree ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Strongly agree

Participants' reactions to the 2024 Race Riots

These issues are thrown into stark relief by participants' thoughts and experiences around the August Race Riots, prompting feelings of instability, isolation, and compromising participants' feelings of safety and security in their new homes. The majority of participants agreed that the riots made them feel uncertain about their future in the UK, likely as a result of rioter's stated aims to 'remove' all migrants from

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the country. Half also noted that they did not feel as though support and communications from their universities during the riots were adequate, and a significant majority felt as though the riots made it unsafe for them to move freely in public. Fortunately, however, the majority felt safe to move around their campuses, although a significant number did not, whilst most participants also noted feeling unsafe moving around their neighbourhoods.

Reactions to 2024 Race Riots

It made me feel uncertain of my future in the UK
- Strongly disagree: 25%
- Somewhat disagree: 0%
- Somewhat agree: 50%
- Strongly agree: 25%

I received adequate support and communications from my university during the time of the riots
- Strongly disagree: 13%
- Somewhat disagree: 38%
- Somewhat agree: 25%
- Strongly agree: 25%

It made me feel unsafe to move freely in public places at large
- Strongly disagree: 25%
- Somewhat disagree: 0%
- Somewhat agree: 63%
- Strongly agree: 13%

It made me feel unsafe to move freely on campus
- Strongly disagree: 25%
- Somewhat disagree: 38%
- Somewhat agree: 25%
- Strongly agree: 13%

It made me feel unsafe to move freely within my neighbourhood
- Strongly disagree: 25%
- Somewhat disagree: 0%
- Somewhat agree: 50%
- Strongly agree: 25%

Legend: ■ Strongly disagree ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Strongly agree
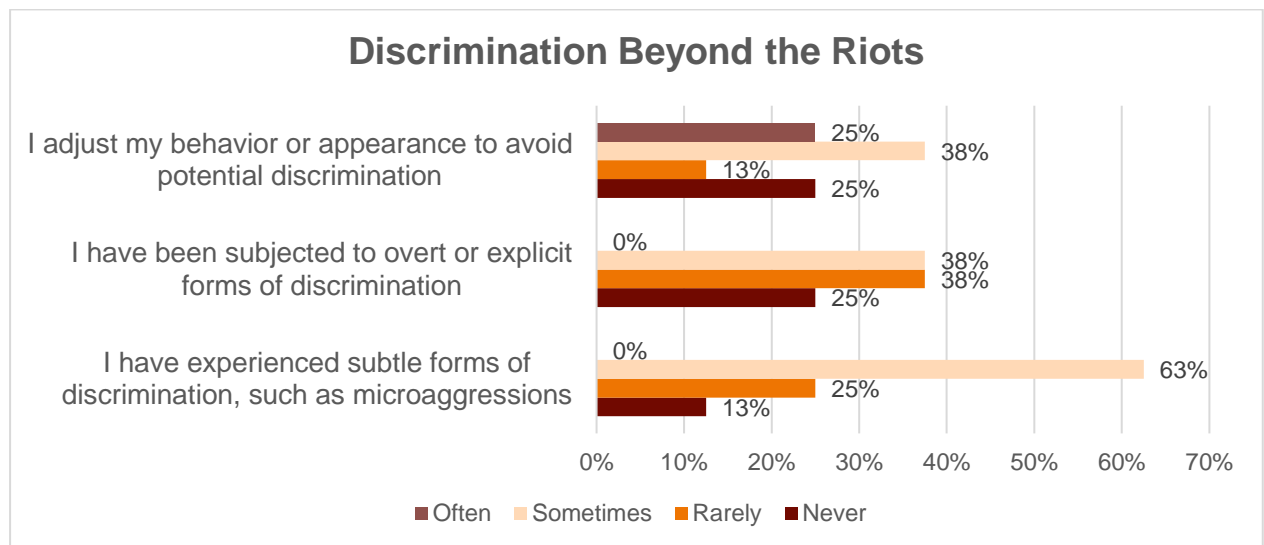
These responses highlight the deep feelings of insecurity amongst participants when faced with the scale of anti-migrant feeling within the UK, and the violence that this can bring about. Although much of this is out of the universities' control, participants do highlight that more effective communications and support should be an operational priority for their institutions during events such as the riots. That most did feel safe on their campuses is a positive step, but universities need to be doing more to ensure the safety of their students beyond the immediate university area.

Participants' experiences of discrimination beyond the riots

Beyond the context of the riots, participants' experiences of racism and discrimination are also significant. Most participants felt it necessary often, sometimes, or rarely to adjust their behaviour or appearance in order to avoid potential discrimination, and many either had either sometimes or rarely been subject to overt discrimination, with

even more reporting that they had experiences more subtle forms of discrimination, including microaggressions.

Discrimination Beyond the Riots

I adjust my behavior or appearance to avoid potential discrimination
- Often: 25%
- Sometimes: 38%
- Rarely: 13%
- Never: 25%

I have been subjected to overt or explicit forms of discrimination
- Often: 0%
- Sometimes: 38%
- Rarely: 38%
- Never: 25%

I have experienced subtle forms of discrimination, such as microaggressions
- Often: 0%
- Sometimes: 63%
- Rarely: 25%
- Never: 13%

■ Often ■ Sometimes ■ Rarely ■ Never

Participants were also asked to outline any instances of racism or discrimination that they had experienced. One mentioned "blatant racism, even 'jokes' which are not actually funny about stereotypes as an Indian", whilst another highlighted "mostly micro aggressions. Where I've been picked out from a crowd of white people in public settings & unfairly targeted". Another student highlighted racist comments that they had received from a member of staff at their university. When asked about coping strategies or things that they did to avoid potential discrimination, one respondent noted "changed my accent to speak in fluent British English", echoing the sentiments of another participant: "accent "code switching". subtle change in accent depending who I'm talking to".

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings from this exploratory study underscore the urgent need for more extensive and focused research on the experiences of South Asian migratory students in UK universities. These students face unique challenges tied to their racialisation, social integration, and feelings of safety and security, particularly in the broader sociopolitical context of increasing hostility toward migrants and ethnic minorities. While the participants of this study largely appreciated the opportunities offered by their universities, their experiences also highlighted significant gaps in institutional support, particularly during moments of crisis such as the 2024 Race Riots.

Despite their critical role in sustaining UK universities financially and culturally, international students from BGM backgrounds remain underrepresented in academic research, particularly in the context of their lived experiences. Institutions have been slow to address the systemic issues that marginalise these students, often leaving them vulnerable to microaggressions, overt racism, and broader societal hostility.

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As such, we recommend the following actions:

1. **Increased Funding and Dedicated Research**: Universities and research funding bodies must prioritise research into the lived experiences of BGM migratory students. This includes directly commissioning and funding longitudinal and intersectional studies that can provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by South Asian students and other BGM groups. This research must extend beyond broad analyses and delve into nuanced topics such as cultural adaptation, caste dynamics, and racialisation.

2. **Improved Institutional Support Structures**: Universities should enhance their support mechanisms for migratory students, particularly those from BGM backgrounds. This could involve creating targeted initiatives, such as mentorship programs and culturally sensitive mental health services, designed to address the unique challenges faced by these groups, or establishing dedicated clubs and societies for South Asian students to foster a sense of community and belonging.

3. **Proactive Communication During Crises**: Universities need to develop and implement robust communication and safety protocols to support students during periods of sociopolitical unrest, such as race riots or anti-migrant protests. Institutions must ensure students feel safe both on and off-campus through clear, transparent communication and practical measures, such as increased campus security and accessible support services.

4. **Tackling Racism Beyond Campus Boundaries**: Recognising that much of the discrimination experienced by migratory students occurs off-campus, universities should partner with local councils and community organisations to create safer environments for their students. Universities must also take an advocacy role in challenging societal racism, aligning themselves with broader anti-racist movements.

5. **Pre-Arrival Orientation Programs**: Introduce robust pre-arrival orientation programs that educate incoming students about cultural expectations, potential challenges, and resources available to them. These programs should include honest discussions about racial dynamics in the UK and how students can navigate and seek support for issues such as discrimination.

6. **Reevaluation of Recruitment Practices**: Universities should ensure that recruitment materials reflect the realities of life in the UK for BGM students and avoid practices such as "diversity washing." Institutions should actively work toward creating environments that meet the expectations they set for incoming students regarding inclusion, diversity, and safety.

7. **Broader Awareness and Training Initiatives:** Mandate anti-racism and cultural competency training for all staff and students, ensuring a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by international and racialised students. Such initiatives should focus on dismantling stereotypes, addressing microaggressions, and creating a genuinely inclusive university culture.

By taking these steps, universities can better support South Asian and other BGM migratory students, ensuring that their contributions to the academic and cultural life of the UK are met with environments that affirm their dignity, safety, and potential for success.

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"If there were more people who look like me…I would just be a PhD student instead of a Black PhD student"
Exploring the experiences of Black and Global Majority people in postgraduate research study

Peer Researcher: Isha Negi

More people than ever are undertaking postgraduate research (PGR) degrees in the UK. These include PhD programmes, for many a vital stepping stone for a career in research and academia. Despite this, there is a significant lack of progression to the PGR stage for Black and Global Majority students, compared with the much more diverse student population in undergraduate and Master's degree programmes.

The Peer Researcher who undertook this research with us, Isha Negi, has been working to support students in higher education for a number of years, including through the In2research programme. In2research is a one-year programme developed by In2scienceUK and University College London, designed to enhance access to postgraduate research degrees for people from low socioeconomic backgrounds and under-represented groups. For the 2024/25 programme cohort, 82% of participants came from UK-domiciled BGM groups. In recent years, there has been an increased focus on widening access to postgraduate research degrees. Whilst this is a welcome change, it is just as important that BGM PhD students are able to thrive in academic spaces. Isha wished to explore the experiences of participants as PhD students and beyond. Through her work, Isha has

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cultivated a network of PhD students and a depth of knowledge in higher education, enabling and enriching this programme of research.

The results from Isha's study show the urgent need for more tailored, culturally-informed and competent support for BGM postgraduate researchers (PGRs). At present, this lack of support, along with a wider absence of BGM role models, advocates, and mentors for junior researchers is seriously affecting the wellbeing, mental health, and motivation of these PGRs, leading many to question their ambitions to pursue a career in academia. This feeds back into the underrepresentation of BGM academics, a destructive cycle preventing higher education and research from properly representing the communities that the sector serves

Background

In the 2022/23 academic year, there were <u>73,705 postgraduate research (PGR) students in the UK with a permanent UK home address, of whom only 20% identified as Black, Asian, Mixed, or Other ethnicities</u>. This represents a significant decline from the 40% of undergraduates and 37% of postgraduate taught (PGT) students identifying similarly. This drop-off mirrors the "<u>leaky pipeline</u>" phenomenon, a term often used to describe the underrepresentation of women in STEM disciplines.

The causes for this are manifold. Racial inequalities continue to be a pressing issue in higher education, as we have discussed elsewhere in this report. Students from BGM groups often experience an <u>undergraduate awarding gap</u>, achieving lower degree outcomes than their White peers. They are <u>also less likely to attend Russell Group or research-intensive universities</u>, and are less likely to complete their first degrees, as <u>ROTA have discussed previously</u>.

The nature of education varies across institutions, and this is especially true at the PGR level, where each PhD is highly individualised and specific. Much of the current research into the experiences of BGM students focuses on undergraduates, with less attention given to postgraduate taught students and very little to those in postgraduate research. While efforts have been made to address access, widen participation, and tackle the underrepresentation of BGM individuals, there is a pressing need to improve the experiences of those who do enter these spaces. <u>Retention and attrition remain significant challenges,</u> as simply increasing access is insufficient. Greater emphasis must be placed on creating a more inclusive and hospitable academic environment to support these students effectively.

Methods

Research was carried out in two phases: an online survey; followed by semi-structured interviews. The survey included questions using Likert scales to measure participants' experiences of various aspects of the PhD journey, along with two open-ended questions. It was distributed through the researcher's networks at UCL, In2scienceUK, and social media platforms. The survey received 37 responses, and those respondents who indicated they were happy to be interviewed were contacted, resulting in nine interviews. The survey findings informed the themes and questions for the interviews, which centred on applications, supervisors, support services, and representation.

We decided to not directly ask participants about their experiences of racism for a number of reasons. Firstly, we wished to avoid overwriting narratives of racism on the participants' experiences of academia, and instead allow them to raise this if they felt comfortable. Secondly, discussing racist experiences can be (re)traumatising, and we did not want to highlight these issues if we were not able to adequately provide the

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required care and support. Lastly, we wanted to gain a holistic understanding of participants' experiences as PhD students, not just as BGM PhD students.

The interviews were conducted virtually, recorded, and transcribed, with certain details about participants' backgrounds and institutions removed to maintain anonymity. The transcripts were then subjected to thematic analysis. Recruiting participants presented some challenges, as BGM PhD students make up a small percentage of the UK PhD population. However, the close-knit nature of some BGM student communities and the peer researcher's connections with BGM PhDs facilitated word-of-mouth recruitment. Although focus groups were initially planned, scheduling difficulties led to the decision to conduct interviews instead. To encourage participation, interviewees were offered gift vouchers.

Recruiting Black male PhD students proved particularly difficult. Only four survey responses were received from this demographic, and all declined to take part in interviews.

Results

Survey results

The survey received 37 responses, of these 78% were current PhD students, 76% were cis women and 24% were cis men. All participants identified as being from a BGM group, with the majority coming from Black (43%), Asian (35%), and mixed-heritage (19%) backgrounds.

The majority of participants were based in Science, Technology, Engineering and Medicine (STEM) departments (51%), whilst an additional 27% were based in a social sciences department. Only 5% of participants were based in an Arts & Humanities department, whilst 16% responded that they were based in an 'Other' department or faculty.

Overall satisfaction

Overall, how would you rate your experience of postgraduate research study?

2.89
Average Rating

Level 4	8
Level 3	17
Level 2	12
Level 1	

Respondents' overall satisfaction rating for their postgraduate research experience on a 1-4 scale was 2.89. There were some differences when the data was split by gender, discipline, ethnicity, and year of study. For male STEM PhD students, the average rating was 3.6, whereas for women in STEM this dropped to 2.8, below the average. For women PhD students in the social sciences, this was even lower at 2.4.

Asian respondents reported the highest satisfaction at 3.2, for respondents from mixed or multiple ethnic groups this was 3.0, and for Black respondents this was 2.6, lower than the average rating. This indicates that Black PhD students are less satisfied with their postgraduate research experience.

Participants' perspectives on their PGR experiences

Respondents views on the above statements were measured using Likert scales, the statements focused on experiences of the application process, representation, support services, experiences of racism, and careers after academia.
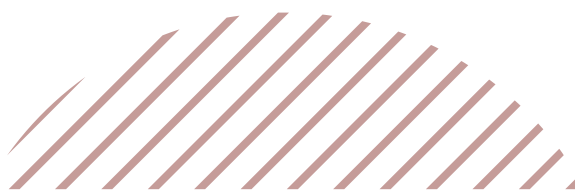
The majority of participants felt as though they had received enough support during the PGR application process. However, participants were less confident in their knowledge on funding applications, and knew less people who they could discuss PGR study with prior to application. These could both be said to speak to the lack of proper BGM representation within the research sector, and suggest the need for more tailored support for these applicants even prior to the submission of applications.

This lack of representation is most acutely reflected in the next set of questions. The vast majority of participants disagreed with the idea that they were properly represented in their faculties and departments, their institutions, and their wider academic fields.
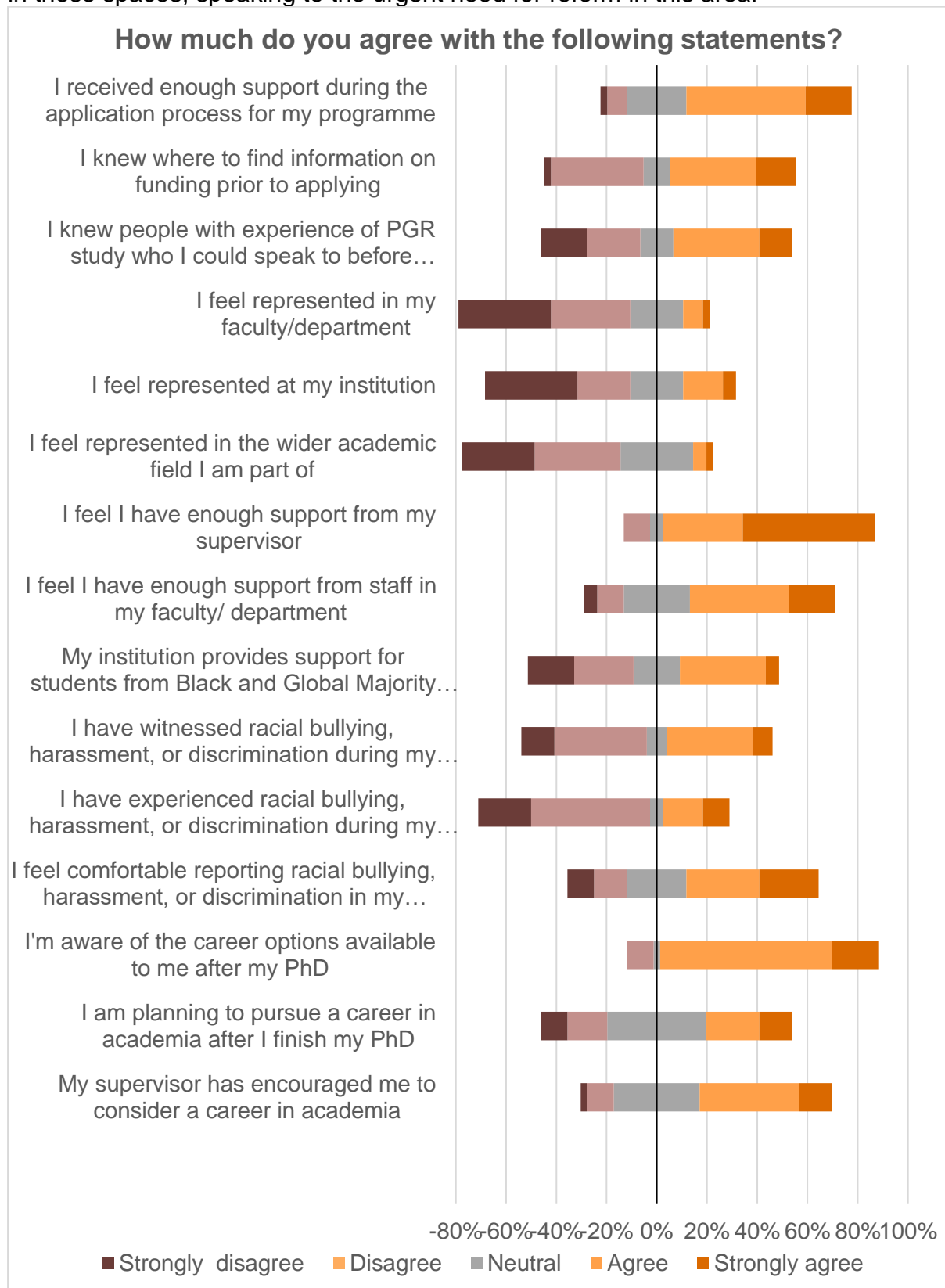
That said, participants did broadly feel as though they received enough support from their supervisors, and other staff in their faculties and departments. This feeling is less prevalent, however, when it comes to the support participants receive from their institutions as BGM PGRs.

Concerningly, a significant minority of students agreed that they had witnessed racial bullying, harassment, or discrimination during the course of their studies, reflecting findings from the migratory students discussed in the last chapter. Fewer participants reported directly experiencing such discrimination, and the majority felt confident reporting instances of racial bullying or harassment. However, these responses again speak to the need for greater cultural competency for staff and fellow students, and for greater support for BGM PGRs.

The vast majority of participants were aware of the career options available to them following their studies. However, opinions were split on whether they had planned on continuing on in academia, although the majority of their supervisors had encouraged them to consider this career path. As we discuss below, it appears that much of this

hesitancy is a reflection of the lack of representation and support for BGM researchers in these spaces, speaking to the urgent need for reform in this area.

How much do you agree with the following statements?

Legend: Strongly disagree · Disagree · Neutral · Agree · Strongly agree

Statements (top to bottom):
- I received enough support during the application process for my programme
- I knew where to find information on funding prior to applying
- I knew people with experience of PGR study who I could speak to before…
- I feel represented in my faculty/department
- I feel represented at my institution
- I feel represented in the wider academic field I am part of
- I feel I have enough support from my supervisor
- I feel I have enough support from staff in my faculty/ department
- My institution provides support for students from Black and Global Majority…
- I have witnessed racial bullying, harassment, or discrimination during my…
- I have experienced racial bullying, harassment, or discrimination during my…
- I feel comfortable reporting racial bullying, harassment, or discrimination in my…
- I'm aware of the career options available to me after my PhD
- I am planning to pursue a career in academia after I finish my PhD
- My supervisor has encouraged me to consider a career in academia

Axis: -80% -60% -40% -20% 0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

Open answer questions

The survey included two open-ended questions at the end: "If you were to go back and apply for a PhD again, is there anything you would do differently?" and "Is there anything you wish you'd known before you started your PhD?"

Responses to the first question highlighted several key areas. Many respondents expressed a wish that they had sought more knowledge about the PhD experience, such as speaking to former students, exploring different types of programmes like Doctoral Training Programmes, and considering the learning environment, including teaching methods and the types of lab equipment used. Some mentioned wishing they had investigated funding options more thoroughly and applied earlier, as well as considering other institutions. A smaller number of respondents reflected on the value of exploring alternative opportunities, such as taking time out between degrees, working in industry, or pursuing opportunities abroad. These responses point to a lack of knowledge and clarity about the realities of a PhD and its demands. This could reflect the 39% of participants who indicated that they did not know anyone with experience of postgraduate research study who they could consult before applying, discussed above. Given the underrepresentation of people from BGM backgrounds in PGR study, this suggests potential applicants may have a smaller pool of individuals to seek advice from.

Responses to the second question fell into three main themes. Firstly, many participants mentioned the high cost of pursuing a PhD, including hidden expenses such as conferences, lab equipment, and travel. Secondly, a significant number of responses focused on a lack of understanding about the nature of PhD study. Respondents wished they had known that their responsibilities would extend beyond research to include teaching, presenting, and attending conferences. They also noted that they were unaware of how much project management is involved, how independent the work is, and how isolating the experience can be. Lastly, some responses touched on career-related concerns, expressing a wish that they had known about the often-precarious nature of academic job markets and the importance of networking and developing transferable skills.

Interviews

The nine interviews which were conducted built on from the survey responses. After conducting a thematic analysis of the transcripts, the following themes were identified:

Experiences of PhD Applications

The application process for PhD programmes is complex and varies significantly across disciplines, institutions, and programme structures. This variability can make it challenging to navigate and access the necessary information to craft a competitive application.

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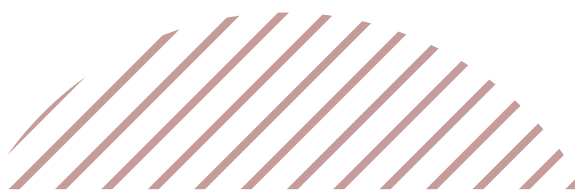
Participant C, a mixed-ethnicity cis woman and third-year PhD student in Social Sciences at a non-London Russell Group university, described the workload involved in applying:

"It is a lot of work to set up…not only because you're writing the research proposal, but because, you know, trying to understand like the funding model."

For Participant H, a South Asian cis man and second-year PhD student in STEM at the University of Liverpool, the process felt unnecessarily overwhelming due to inexperience:

"For my field, it's actually really simple, but then since it was my first ever time applying to a PhD…I think all of the terms, you know, were confusing me initially…back then I didn't know much. That's why I guess I overcomplicated. I was writing research proposals and I was researching all of this, spending hours and hours."

Encouragement from academic mentors or employers played a key role in motivating some participants to pursue a PhD. Participant D, a Black cis woman who graduated in 2023 from a London-based Russell Group university in Arts and Humanities, shared:

"I thankfully had a really good mentor during my master's and she was the one who…made me feel like it was possible for me to do [a PhD]."

Similarly, Participant B, a Black cis woman and second-year PhD student in Social Sciences at a non-London Russell Group university, credited her manager:

"My manager started asking me…are you thinking of a PhD? We would love to support you and advise you on that."

However, the lack of representation of BGM academics limits access to role models. Participant A, a South Asian cis man and first-year PhD student in STEM at University College London, explained how impactful this could be:

"Representation kind of links similarly to being a role model…if I was…an undergrad and I had had potential role models…diverse researchers…probably aspire to be like them. probably try to, you know, achieve maybe some of the things they've done".

Participant C agreed, highlighting that:

"Having a trajectory you can potentially follow…to have someone who has an experience that they can map out and that you can use as like a frame of reference is really helpful…yes, seeing that you can achieve it, but like seeing a bit more specifically how it can be achieved?".

Lack of Knowledge

A consistent theme among participants was the lack of clarity about what pursuing a PhD entails, including the solitary nature of the experience and the expectation to independently address gaps in knowledge.

Participant C reflected on the uncertainty of responsibilities in her mixed-methods project:

"Particularly about like how much is your responsibility and how much is your supervisor's responsibility. So like one issue I had was that there was a lot of stuff I don't know because I'm doing a mixed methods project and I'm from a more qualitative background…And when I tried to make that clear to my supervisor, she was very much like what I can't teach you this kind of like you have to teach yourself."

Other participants, like Participant B, found the transition from research assistant roles to PhD studies challenging:

"I didn't expect to experience it because I was working before I started the PhD, I was working as a research assistant…in my mind I was like, OK, I'm sort of prepared for this world, but a PhD is just is very different. You're on your own."

The responsibilities beyond research, such as attending conferences and teaching, also came as a surprise to many, as Participant H noted:

"I didn't expect it, you know, as a student, I have to also…attend conferences…network with people and all of that."

The Cost of EDI Work

Participants highlighted the additional labour of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) work often placed on BGM PhD students.

Participant C articulated the pressure to be a visible figure:

"I think the uni is really good at saying like we are inclusive, we have this one person and…you then think oh well, if I'm successful, I have to be visible…you're not allowed to just exist in the way that…average white academics exist."

Participant D echoed these sentiments, reflecting on how her research focus was overshadowed:
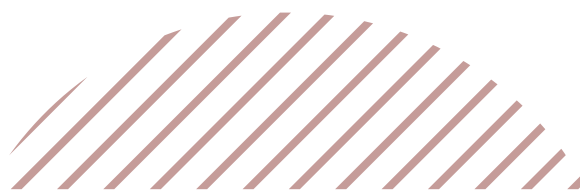
"All the stuff I was doing was always this, like race work, representation work diversity work, never my actual research. And it took up so much of my time and my energy."

There were parallels between Participant C and D's experiences of being treated as experts on race equality and EDI work, simply by nature of being from BGM backgrounds. This also involved the erasure of their actual research focus, as highlighted above:

"*I just feel like we're adultified when it comes to like EDI work specifically*" - Participant C

"*All the stuff I was doing was always this, like race work, representation work diversity work, never my actual research. And it took up so much of my time and my energy, and, like, sapped my will to live like even thinking about, like, the ways that people would overwrite this expertise on me when I didn't have it*" - Participant D

Underrepresentation

The underrepresentation of BGM students often results in hypervisibility and feelings of isolation. Participant B remarked:

"I often feel like I stand out a lot and people are surprised I'm here…if there were more people who look like me in the institution I'm in or just in academia in general, it wouldn't be weird because I would just be a PhD student instead of a Black PhD student...The othering would be less. Like, yeah, I'm just a person studying…being defined by your skin colour is annoying sometimes, even if it's in a positive way…I shouldn't be the exception. It should be normal"

The lack of representation also impacted how comfortable participants felt asking for help.

"*Sometimes there are things that I feel more comfortable discussing…with people that I feel may understand my experience more like bless him my supervisor's a great guy, but there's some things I just don't feel particularly comfortable talking to him about, not because I don't think he'll sympathise with me, but he won't understand*" - Participant B

"*I'm thinking I don't want to look like the black girl who can't keep up*" - Participant D

Participant A linked the lack of representation to a wider systemic issue.

 *"**It seems like a system sort of thing…It's got you thinking and working in one particular way…if you don't really fit into that, whether that's from your diverse background or what you're used to, I think you'll struggle and I think that's why there's very, very low diversity up top**"*

Allyship

When discussing representation, or its lack thereof, there seemed to be an underlying resignation and acceptance of the endemic underrepresentation of BGM people in academia.

Participant F, a cis woman of mixed ethnicity in the first year of her STEM PhD programme at a London university, remarked:

*"**I kind of didn't, really take it into consideration because I knew it would be not very likely for [my supervisor] to represent me…I didn't really expect to have a supervisor from like a global majority background**"*

There were however, some positive reflections of supportive white mentors and allies.

*"**Even though there's no direct representation like, he's not like me, you know brown BME or anything like that. But I think some of the qualities and understanding and the flexibility are there just because of the dynamics that he's used to, diverse and real mix of genders and all sorts**"* **- Participant A**

Far more work needs to be done to improve BGM representation in academia, but in the meantime, (white) allies can do a lot to support the students who are already in these spaces.

Lack of support services

A common thread across the interviews was the complexity and availability of support services. Whilst students were aware of the avenues for support which existed, they were not always confident in accessing these, for a number of reasons. These included a fear of looking like they weren't smart or capable enough, not knowing how to ask, and a fear that they wouldn't be understood.

Participant D talked about how their hesitance in seeking support was directly linked to their position as a Black woman in academia.

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"I didn't feel like I had many people to ask or any sort of way of preparation of like what that would look like…I didn't know what it was supposed to be like to do a PhD…because you are so out of place being a black person doing a PhD in the UK anyway…you don't want to do anything that makes you seem even less like you belong there"

This echoes the sentiments of imposter syndrome expressed by Participant B:

"And even though the support was offered, in my mind, it was also like maybe they want to support me extra because they don't think I can do it".

Participants also highlighted just how lonely and isolating the PhD experience is, and this is exacerbated when the student is the only person from a BGM background in their environment.

Participant B highlighted:

"I think people don't realise how lonely the PhD experience can be and so actively creating spaces where we can get together in our second and third years as well…Going on in your second and third year, there's the assumption that people have community and I'm lucky that I have, but I know people who've struggled to connect and that doesn't change…after the first year, they're still searching for their people so having more spaces or like actively creating spaces for PhDs to come together would be quite cool"

The importance of community building by and for BGM PhD students was noted:

"I feel supported by other students…we have built a very good community. …But I don't think there are as many inbuilt structures to like do that community building and I think actually a lot of them have been built by students. So I work with a friend. We're in charge of the Black Post Graduate students group. And that's like, like, no one's pushing for that like on a staff level institution level. But we have, yeah, just actively made it a space to like, look out for each other" **– Participant C**

"I think that creating this space for us to be together…so people can meet each other and network in informal ways. Putting us together in affinity groups, where people are able to meet people who are teaching them, maybe mentorship pairs as well…But then also just providing the resources that people can get on with it themselves" **– Participant D**

Cultural expectations around asking for help were also mentioned:

"…my parents are kind of like that as well. Like they don't necessarily like reaching out. So I feel like maybe that's something that's just kind of like culturally or in our household" **- Participant F**

"Being the children of immigrants means that you internalise and learn how to not show the people around you, that you are struggling or have any needs" - **Participant D**

Participant D also highlighted the importance of proactively offering support to BGM students, if they are more likely to be reluctant to reach out.

"So if you want support, you have to reach out for it yourself. I think that there should be a lot more in the way of checking in. Particularly for first gen academics because I think it comes down to cultural competency. Again, you know, one of the things that I noticed the most going through university at all stages is that white people know how to ask for things. They know how to ask for support and help, people who are older know how to ask for support and help, men know how to ask for support and help. I was none of those things and I did not know how to ask, so I needed to be asked. I needed someone to ask me to help me."

Retention

Participants highlighted significant barriers to retaining Black and Global Majority (BGM) academics in academia, including a lack of opportunities, insufficient funding, tokenistic gestures, and an absence of visible role models or clear career pathways. These challenges are compounded by the structural inequalities within academic institutions, which often leave individuals feeling unsupported and isolated.

A recurring theme was the lack of secure or funded opportunities for career progression. For instance, Participant G, a South Asian cis woman who graduated in 2024 from a London-based Russell Group university in Arts and Humanities, expressed her frustration:

"A bit demoralising to look at…I'm doing a postdoc, so at the end of this academic year, that's the end of my job there…looking at the department who are permanent staff feels quite depressing because it's like, well…they're all white. So do I have a job after this? Like, probably not. And most institutions are kind of similar and history's quite bad particularly…I feel like…my future is limited."

This sentiment highlights how the underrepresentation of BGM academics in permanent roles leads to feelings of exclusion and a lack of long-term prospects.

Participants also raised concerns about tokenistic opportunities, where their presence in academic spaces is celebrated superficially rather than meaningfully supported. Participant C, a mixed-ethnicity cis woman and a third-year PhD student in Social Sciences at a non-London Russell Group university, spoke about the additional burdens placed on BGM academics:

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"I'm just cautious of going to an institution and being celebrated in a way that's just asking me to be on specific committees and doing a lot of work that isn't actually part of my job description. So I want to stay in academia, but I'm just, I don't want academia to kill me, basically. And I feel like choosing to stay comes with, yeah, a very active effort to build up I guess like protective mechanisms, basically, and I do feel like a lot of my PhD has been that as well."

This highlights the extra emotional labour and administrative responsibilities often placed on BGM academics, which can detract from their core research and career goals, contributing to burnout.

The absence of role models and supportive networks was another factor influencing retention. Participant G reflected on how the lack of diversity in institutions impacts her willingness to remain in academia:

"I think if I was in a place where there are a lot of people who were like a good support network and stuff like that then I probably would and if I ended up in an institution where I'm the only person of colour, I think it would be difficult to do it for like a long time."

This underscores the importance of representation and community in fostering a sense of belonging and long-term commitment to academia.

Overall, the testimonies reveal a structural failure to address the unique challenges faced by BGM academics, leading many to question whether staying in academia is worth the emotional and professional cost.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings here speak to entrenched issues in the universities sector. Participants consistently reported feeling under-supported, with a concerning number noting either witnessing or being victims of racial abuse, discrimination, or insensitivity. Issues of under-representation and a lack of mentors and champions from the BGM community were also very common. These problems could be actively feeding into the slowing of efforts to make the universities sector more representative, with many participants unsure about a career in academia as a result of the issues outlined above.

In order to address this, we recommend that universities and government take the following steps:

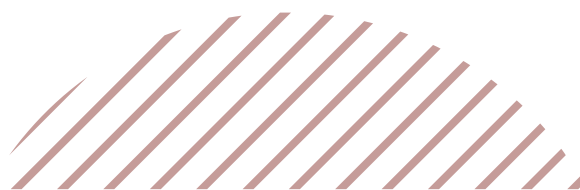1. **Proactive and Tailored Support Across All Stages**

- Academic institutions should implement proactive measures to ensure support is accessible without placing the burden on students to seek it out. This could include regular check-ins, culturally competent pastoral care, and workshops tailored to the needs of BGM students.

- Undergraduate and postgraduate taught (PGT) supervisors should actively encourage BGM students to consider pursuing a PhD. Supervisors should highlight opportunities, provide guidance, and offer encouragement to demystify the process.

- Introduce specialised mentoring programs for BGM applicants, offering guidance both before and during the application process and throughout their PhD journey.

2. **Enhancing Support During the Application Stage**

- Provide targeted workshops and advisory sessions for prospective applicants, particularly BGM students and first-generation students, to navigate the complexities of PhD applications.

- Advocate for greater transparency from funding bodies and institutions regarding assessment criteria, funding availability, and application procedures. Clearer and more consistent information would significantly reduce barriers to entry.

3. **Facilitating Opportunities for Community Building**

- Institutions should actively create and resource spaces where postgraduate researchers (PGRs) can connect and build supportive communities. This includes providing physical spaces, funding, and institutional support to enable networking, collaboration, and peer support among BGM students.

4. **Appropriate Resourcing for Liberation and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Work**

- Institutions must ensure that BGM students are not overburdened with liberation or EDI work simply because of their identity. Such work should be optional, well-resourced, and compensated appropriately.

- Avoid tokenistic approaches and recognise that being from a BGM background does not equate to expertise in EDI. Institutions should allocate specific resources and hire trained professionals to lead this work.

5. **Platforming Research Over Racial Trauma**

- Provide opportunities for BGM students to showcase their academic work and research interests. Institutions should actively avoid reducing these students to their racial identity or focusing solely on their experiences of racial trauma.

6. **Equipping Supervisors to Provide Effective Support**

- Doctoral schools should invest in training supervisors to better support BGM students. This includes workshops or modules on cultural sensitivity, inclusive mentoring, and recognising implicit biases.

- Supervisors who have never worked with BGM students should be guided on how to provide care and support without overemphasising race. The aim should be to foster sensitivity and openness, encouraging supervisors to learn and adapt to the diverse needs of their students.

By implementing these recommendations, academic institutions can create a more inclusive, supportive, and equitable environment for BGM PhD students, enabling them to thrive both academically and personally.

Navigating Spaces
The Experiences of Black Professionals in the Rail Sector

Peer Researcher: Judith Ibukunlayo

Despite growing attention to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), Black professionals in the railway sector continue to experience significant challenges to workplace integration, career progression, and equitable treatment. The industry's historical and structural barriers, coupled with inadequate diversity policies, leave many Black employees feeling isolated and limited in their professional advancement. Additionally, the compounded effects of race and, for Black women, gender create unique experiences of marginalisation and "oneness" that are not adequately addressed by current inclusion efforts.

This research has sought to understand how Black professionals in the railway sector navigate these challenges and what specific structural and cultural changes are necessary to foster a truly inclusive environment. Key questions include:

- How do Black professionals in the railway sector perceive and experience inclusion within their workplaces?
- How do intersectional identities (e.g., race and gender) influence the workplace experiences of Black professionals, particularly women, in the railway industry?
- What role do current diversity and inclusion policies play in either supporting or hindering Black professionals' career advancement and sense of belonging?

The Peer Researcher who developed and carried out this project, Judith Ibukunlayo, has spent over 10 years working within the rail industry. She therefore possesses significant firsthand knowledge and lived experiences pertinent to this research, which have proved invaluable in the formation of research questions and design. Her identities as both a Black woman and rail industry professional, have enabled her to develop nuanced insights into the perspectives of her participants. Judith is also currently pursuing a PhD in a similar field, bringing a range of additional expertise and experience to the RCRP.

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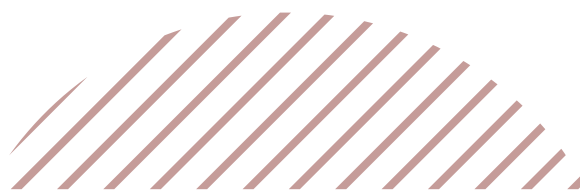
Background

Whilst precise figures from across the industry have not been compiled, it is clear that both women and Black and Global Majority groups are under-represented in the rail sector workforce and, despite DEI efforts, subject to significant pay gaps. 2020 figures from the Office of Rail and Road revealed that only 16% of the rail workforce was female. The majority of these workers are in administrative and operational support, as the BBC reported last year that only 8.5% of train drivers are women. The representation of BGM groups is slightly more proportional, with Network Rail reporting in 2022 that 9.5% of its workforce were drawn from ethnically minoritised backgrounds – although this is still well below the 18% of the total UK population who identify as being from BGM backgrounds. There is also evidence that individuals from both of these groups are subject to the issues of career stagnation and discrimination outlined in the first chapter of this report, resulting in significant inequalities in pay. Network Rail reported in 2023 that their total median gender pay gap was 9.3%, below the national average of 14.3%. The pay gap for BGM groups was reported as *above* the national average of 2.3%, at 6.2%. There is also evidence that Black women in particular suffer additionally from their status as 'double jeopardy' minorities. Network Rail also highlights in their report that the pay gap for Black women stood at 14.1% in 2023, down from a 2022 peak of 16.1%.

These figures go some way to demonstrating the issues faced by women and BGM employees within the UK rail network. However, they cannot be said to tell the whole story. Much like other intersectional groups whose views are reflected in this report, there is a real lack of dedicated research that has been conducted on Black women working in this sector. Many of the studies which have been conducted centre on issues of violence and bullying that such women have faced. One paper from 2023 found there to be a significant risk of violence towards Black women working on the frontline in the rail industry from members of the public, and that this risk had increased exponentially since the turn of the millennium. These risks do not appear to be isolated to public-facing roles. A 2022 study found there to be a significant problem of workplace bullying, racism, and misogyny towards Black women in the sector, with researchers noting that the scores for serious instances of PTSD, stress, and anxiety for these women were twice the national average, understandably leading many Black women to leave the industry. Another study from 2022 found that older women from the BGM community were by far the most likely to have suffered bullying and harassment in the rail industry and pointed to the failure of unions such as the RMT to effectively advocate for their racialised female members.

These studies speak to deeply rooted issues within the rail sector. We are still, however, lacking the wealth of research which is needed to begin the address these problems, which centre the views and perspectives of the women involved. This project has been designed to begin filling the significant knowledge gap in this area, with regards both to the structural inequalities represented in career stagnation and pay gaps, as well as the day-to-day instances of microaggressions, racism, misogyny,

and misogynoir that participants experience in their work on Britain's rail network.

Methods

The main research methods used in this study were qualitative interviews and focus groups, to properly capture the lived experiences of the participants. A smaller number of qualitative questionnaires were also circulated to those who could not spare time at the interview or were otherwise uneasy about the possibility of being identified through interview recordings, for fear of jeopardising their careers.

Several recruitment methods were employed. Initially, women from within the Peer Researchers' existing network were approached with invitations to take part. Additional participants were recruited through ROTA's extended network, by approaching contacts within relevant trade unions and professional organisations with invitations to circulate information on the study. A total of 53 participants took part in this research, drawn from 12 organisations in the rail industry. Although the main focus was on the experiences of Black women, 15 Black men also took part in the study, to explore differences in experience between male and female employees.
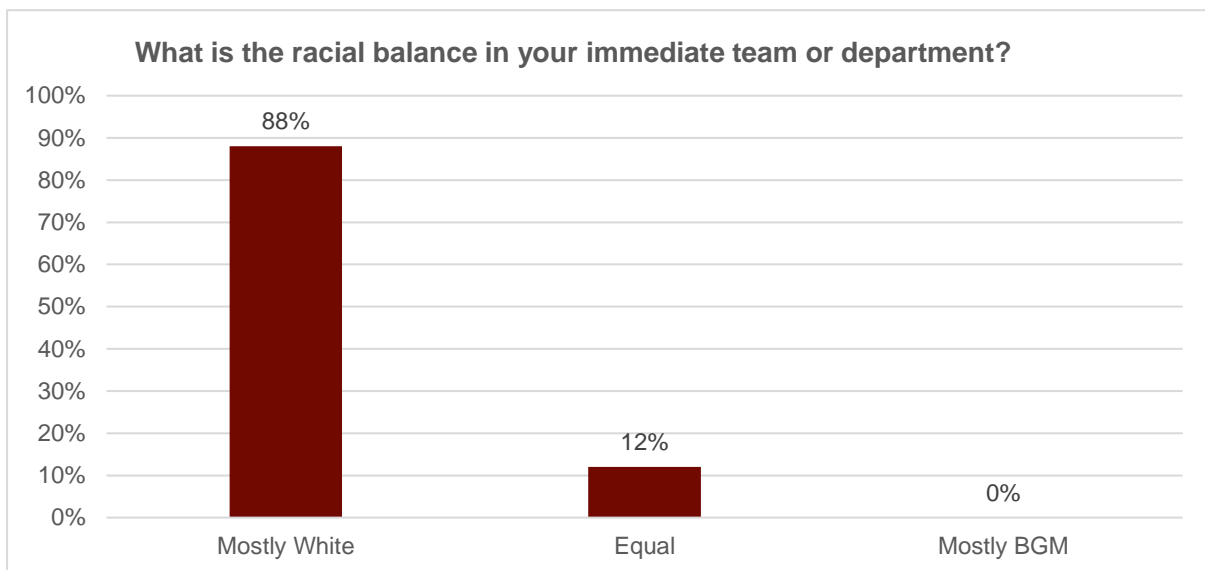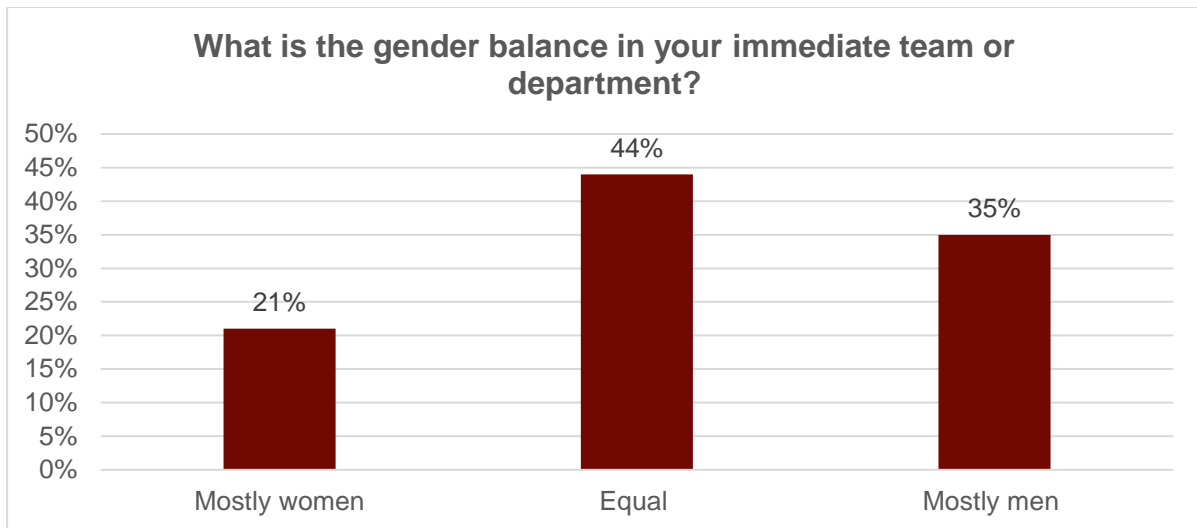
Interviews, focus group discussions, and questionnaires with participants covered several areas, which were informed by the Peer Researcher's lived experiences and previous research. Questions broadly centered on participants' experiences at work as racialised and gendered minorities, their treatment by colleagues and superiors, any barriers that they felt were present to their progression, as well as any coping strategies and mechanisms that participants tended to employ at work. Transcripts and questionnaire findings were coded inductively, revealing many common themes and experiences across the interview sample, discussed fully below.

Results

Common areas for discussion across the interview, focus group, and questionnaire sample included:
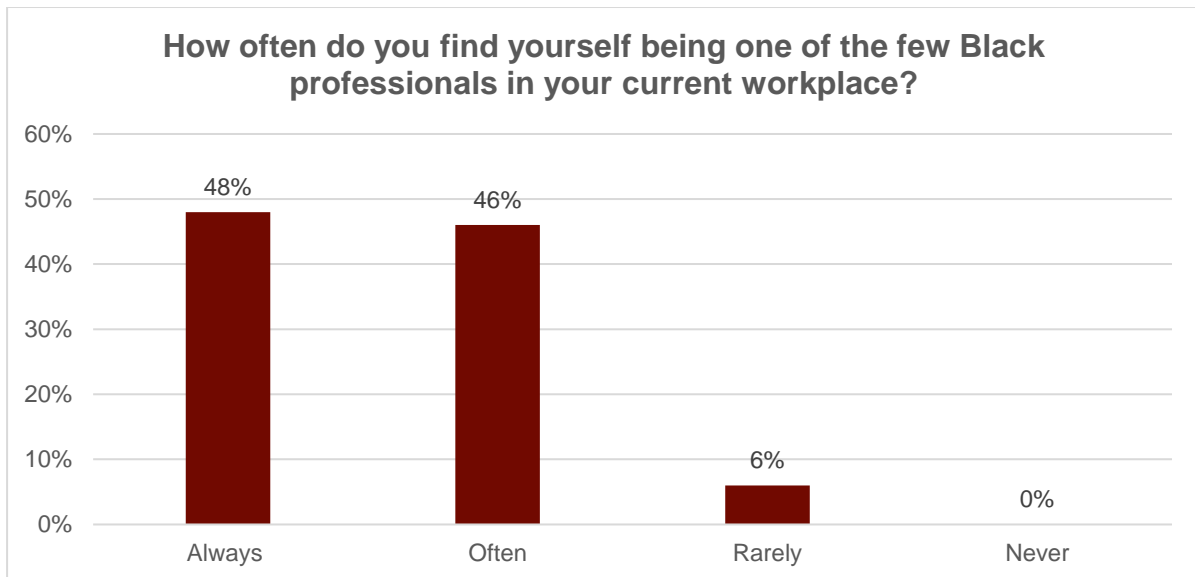
Work Environments

Participants were asked to describe the composition of their immediate team and department according to gender and racial balance. Results are shown in the graphs below:

What is the gender balance in your immediate team or department?

Category	Percentage
Mostly women	21%
Equal	44%
Mostly men	35%

What is the racial balance in your immediate team or department?

Category	Percentage
Mostly White	88%
Equal	12%
Mostly BGM	0%

It is interesting to note the high number of participants who stated that their immediate teams had a good gender balance. However, given the figures outlined above, this is likely a result of the fact that women in the industry tend to be siloed in specific operational areas. The results from the question on ethnic balance are not surprising but do speak to wide feelings of 'oneness' that may be felt by BGM employees in the sector. This sense is heightened by the results of the next question participants were asked:

How often do you find yourself being one of the few Black professionals in your current workplace?

Always: 48%
Often: 46%
Rarely: 6%
Never: 0%

These findings go some way to contextualising the further issues highlighted by participants throughout this research, which we discuss below.

Underrepresentation

Echoing the findings outlined above, many participants reported feelings of isolation due to the underrepresentation of BGM individuals across the sector. One participant shared, "Being the only Black person in my team, I often feel I have to work twice as hard to be recognised." Others highlighted the emotional and mental toll of constantly needing to prove themselves in spaces where they felt alone, with one noting, "It can be emotionally and mentally draining to constantly prove yourself in a space where you're the only one."

A recurring theme was the pressure to 'fly the flag' for inclusivity and representation because of their ethnic identities. These efforts sometimes backfired, further eroding participants' sense of safety and security at work. For instance, one employee shared, "I felt unable to advocate as my race put me at a disadvantage. I was told I was trying to drive a woke agenda." Such hostility left many participants feeling isolated and emotionally drained. Another explained, "Generally, you always feel isolated whenever you attend meetings, and you are the only Black person seated at the table."

Additionally, many participants described the heightened pressure to perform because of their underrepresented identities. As one stated, "I have felt that a lot is expected of me as a Black person. I have to put in more effort to prove myself." This constant scrutiny often likened to being under a "microscope," frequently led to burnout and feelings of inadequacy. Participants also noted that the lack of visibility within their teams negatively impacted their confidence, as their ideas or contributions were often overlooked. One participant explained, "It takes more effort to be heard in a room where no one else looks like you", underscoring the persistent need to assert their expertise to gain recognition.

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These issues are more pressing for the 'double jeopardy' Black women who took part in this research. These included feelings of feeling disempowered to actively take part in discussions, as one participant told us: "Being in meetings as the only Black woman and also being on the lowest band, I often felt hesitant to speak up". These sentiments were echoed by other women, who also highlighted that "when I voiced my concern during the meeting, I was unfortunately mislabelled as aggressive", pointing to other issues of stereotyping and the negative framing of Black voices which have come up frequently in this report. Seniority does not appear to insulate Black women from these racist assumptions, leading to self-censorship, as one participant noted: "Leading a project as not only a woman but black has meant I more often than not bit my tongue, so I do not come across and an 'Angry Black Woman'".

These issues ultimately stifle participation, marginalising the voices of Black women, and, and amplifying feelings of isolation. The emotional labour of constantly monitoring how their contributions are perceived adds a significant burden to Black women in male-dominated, racially homogenous spaces. Moreover, the lack of allies within these industries exacerbates these challenges. Without the necessary support to challenge biases or foster change, Black women often feel undervalued and experience heightened isolation and burnout. The pervasive groupthink mentality, where diverse opinions are silenced or dismissed, leaves Black women struggling to assert their perspectives and breakthrough systemic barriers.
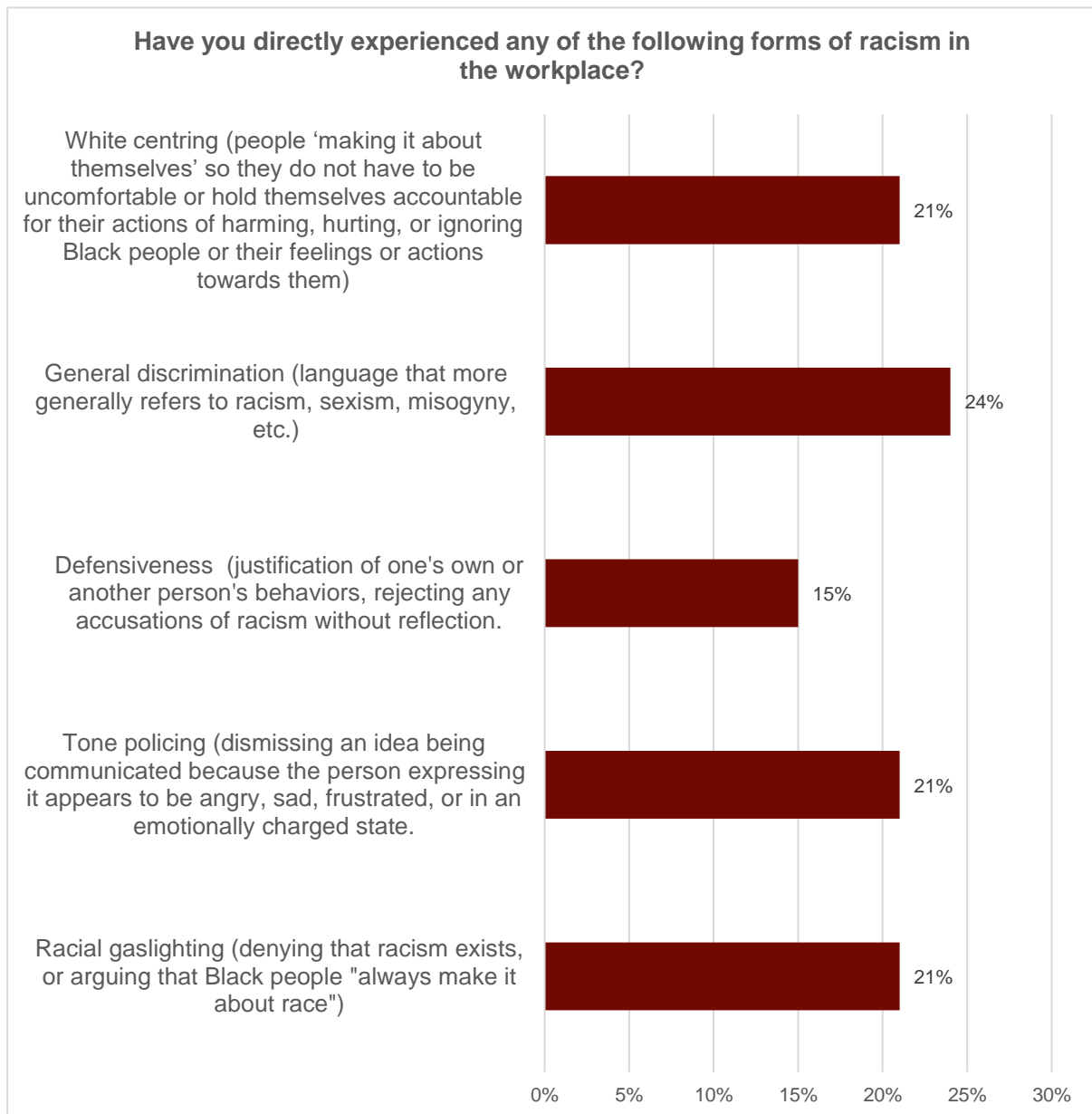
A major factor behind the significant pay gaps faced by members of the BGM community, and BGM women, in the rail sector, participants were asked to identify what they considered to be the reasons for the broad lack of equal representation in leadership across the industry. Participants highlighted a range of answers, including systemic barriers, such as a lack of real commitment to DEI initiatives, or their reduction to a 'tick box', tokenistic exercise or, as one participant put it, "visibility without true inclusion". These feelings were shared by one participant who had advanced to a management position, who remarked that "it's lonely at the top, even though the spots aren't enough for everyone. And because of that, people often cut others off to maintain their position", also adding that "you *become* a token… the rainbow in the box".

Others discussed feelings of cultural and social exclusions and alienation. One woman noted that "Black professionals are not a part of the 'good old boys' club.' The railway industry has always been majority White". These sentiments were echoed by another participant, who also highlighted that "There is a tendency to trust people familiar to one's type, which attributes to this phenomenon", which may go some way to explaining the broad lack of BGM leadership in the sector. Ideas around a ceiling to advancement were shared by other participants that we spoke to. One, for example, remarked that "there is a noticeable lack of Black professionals in leadership roles, which often creates a barrier to growth". Without proper representation at decision-making levels, there is little incentive for industries to implement policies and practices which could help underrepresented groups to advance properly, creating a negative feedback loop which stifles career opportunities and representation for minoritised individuals. Responding to our question on barriers to advancement, one participant replied succinctly: "lack of developmental opportunities for Black professionals".

Racism, abuse, and discrimination

When asked if they had experienced different forms of racism directly, a significant proportion of participants reported that they had. Their responses are outlined below:

Have you directly experienced any of the following forms of racism in the workplace?

Form of racism	Percentage
White centring (people 'making it about themselves' so they do not have to be uncomfortable or hold themselves accountable for their actions of harming, hurting, or ignoring Black people or their feelings or actions towards them)	21%
General discrimination (language that more generally refers to racism, sexism, misogyny, etc.)	24%
Defensiveness (justification of one's own or another person's behaviors, rejecting any accusations of racism without reflection.	15%
Tone policing (dismissing an idea being communicated because the person expressing it appears to be angry, sad, frustrated, or in an emotionally charged state.	21%
Racial gaslighting (denying that racism exists, or arguing that Black people "always make it about race")	21%

Beyond the more covert, insidious forms of discrimination represented in a lack of representation and advancement, it is concerning to see how many members of our community are subject to more direct instances of racism and misogyny within the rail sector. This is particularly noteworthy as 'general discrimination', the least subtle form of discrimination listed, has been experienced by most participants.

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When asked to outline their experiences, the employees that we spoke to note a range of discriminatory practices, ranging from the covert to the more overt. On the former, one woman discussed the subtle ways in which she felt her colleagues and managers undermined her contributions: "I get that look that suggests I am smart for a Black person or articulate for someone who looks like me, it doesn't help that my skin makes me look younger than I am so there is a lot of surprise in terms of my level of knowledge and gas lighting before I am reprimanded on small issues". The idea that their gendered and racialised identities lead team members to consider our participants as somehow 'underqualified' was widely reported – one woman also remarked that "when taking over a new project, the period immediately after is mostly spent proving myself, explaining everything I do and show what I am doing". Another added that "I am judged before I am asked questions or even before I am understood".

These issues were also reported in recruitment situations. One participant recounted: "I had an interview for a position some years ago and did not get the job because despite the interview being successful the manager decided to put names in a hat and ask the team members who they would like to work with. This meant that my competence, work ethic and personality were discounted, and 'familial' bonds (based on race) were prioritised". This reflects broader issues in the recruitment of Black and other minoritised staff discussed in the introductory chapter of this report.

At the other end of the spectrum, some of those who we interviewed discussed heinous instances of overt racism and discrimination from colleagues and superiors. As one participant, for example, recounted: "A senior leader on the team openly called me out in front of everyone, saying I only got the job because I'm Black. She went on to claim that if you're a person of colour, disabled or a part of the LQBTQ community the company would hand you a job just to boost their diversity and inclusion stats. It was a shocking and offensive way to make me feel like I didn't deserve the job". Another remembered how "I faced racial abuse and bias early on. At one job, my manager threw a book at me to help her son with homework, which left me feeling very vulnerable and isolated". This latter incident was made worse by the fact that the participant in question was in a vulnerable position on a temporary contract, and as such felt as though she had to put up with this level of discrimination and exploitation. Discussing instances such as these, one woman wondered whether workplace discrimination played a wider role in stifling diversity, commenting that they had "seen numerous people similar to me as Black treated poorly to the extent that they force them to make decision i.e. look for another employment. The moment you challenge, the expectation is that you are likely to show the race card".

Lack of role models and support

A final common issue brought up by the employees that we spoke to was the lack of role models and culturally competent support available to them within the workplace. This is evident in the responses to the two following questions which we put to our interviewees:

How important are role models to you when working as a Black professional in a corporate environment?

Category	Percentage
Extremely important	55%
Very important	36%
Moderately important	5%
Not important	4%

Do you have access to role models within your organisation who share similar experiences or backgrounds?

Response	Percentage
No	62%
Unsure	17%
Yes	21%
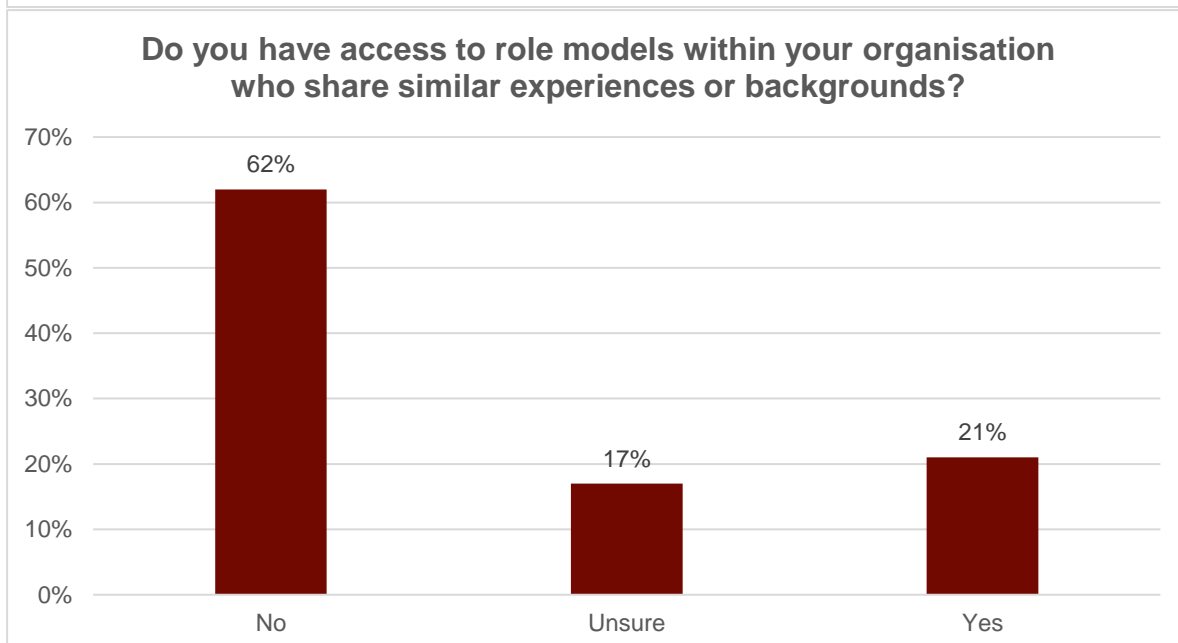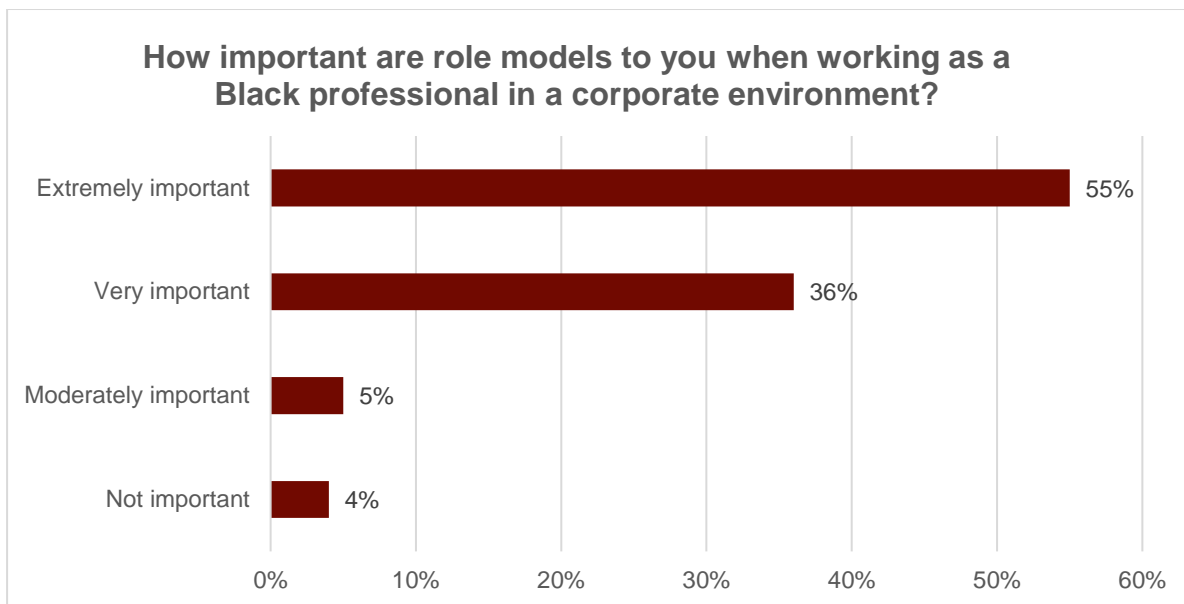
Access to role models and mentors with shared experiences is critical for the personal and professional growth of Black professionals in corporate environments, especially in sectors as unrepresentative as the rail industry. Over 90% of respondents emphasised the importance of role models in fostering career development and acting as a source of support. However, more than 60% reported a lack of representation within their organisations, leaving them without mentors who understand their culturally specific experiences, and the unique challenges that their intersectional identities bring up. One respondent expressed the need for greater representation: "We need more Black professionals in our company, and I always tell young people to ask for mentorship and training. It is crucial to stay relevant, work hard, and reach out to those who can help guide you."

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Mentorship and training emerged as vital tools for navigating these gaps. One person that we spoke to highlighted the importance of "working smart" to master their craft, using mentorship and skill development as cornerstones for career success. Building a network of trusted advisors who could provide guidance and support was seen as essential to overcoming workplace challenges and fostering resilience. This proactive approach helped individuals not only advance their careers but also mitigate the isolating effects of underrepresentation.

Community upliftment further emerged as a powerful coping mechanism. Many respondents viewed their successes as a means to inspire and empower others. As one put it, "I think it's crucial to uplift other Black professionals — to teach them what we've learned. If we don't pass on our knowledge, there's no point in our achievements." By mentoring and supporting others, they found purpose in their challenges, transforming personal struggles into a collective effort to improve representation and equality. This commitment to passing on knowledge and building community underscores the transformative potential of mentorship and shared experiences in creating inclusive workplaces. Another participant, when asked about mentorship that she was involved in, emphasised the importance of supportive leadership that focuses on potential and skills rather than background. "Throughout my career, I've had great leadership that was there to give me opportunities. They weren't looking at what colour I was; they were looking at my potential and skills. I try to do the same for others behind me," she shared. This positive experience with mentorship and leadership became a model for this participant, who later embraced her role as a mentor to foster a supportive environment for others to thrive.

By mentoring and supporting others, respondents found purpose in their challenges, transforming personal struggles into a collective effort to improve representation and equality. This commitment to passing on knowledge and building community underscores the transformative potential of mentorship and shared experiences in creating inclusive workplaces. However, examples of effective mentorship in this space are, as we have seen, severely limited for BGM employees, and BGM women in particular, significantly limiting the scope for such employees to receive these significant benefits.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research reveals persistent barriers faced by Black professionals in the rail sector, particularly Black women, who encounter the compounded challenges of underrepresentation, systemic inequities, and the emotional toll of "onlyness." The findings underscore the urgent need for structural and cultural shifts to create truly inclusive work environments. To address these challenges, the rail industry must go beyond tokenistic diversity efforts and implement meaningful, sustained change that centres on the voices of marginalised employees.

Policy Recommendations

1. Comprehensive DEI Strategy

Develop and implement a robust DEI framework that goes beyond numerical targets to focus on equity in recruitment, retention, and progression. Policies should explicitly address intersectional inequalities, ensuring that the experiences of Black women and other underrepresented groups are considered.

2. Data-Driven Accountability

Regularly collect and analyse workforce data, disaggregated by race and gender, to monitor representation, pay gaps, and promotion rates. This data should inform targeted interventions, with transparent reporting to stakeholders. This is already done by Network Rail. Other organisations across the sector need to follow their example.

3. Anti-Discrimination Training

Mandate comprehensive, ongoing training programs for all employees, particularly managers and leaders, on recognising and addressing unconscious bias, microaggressions, and structural discrimination. Such training should incorporate intersectionality and emphasise the unique experiences of Black women.

Practice Recommendations

4. Mentorship and Sponsorship Programs

Establish formal mentorship and sponsorship initiatives to connect Black employees with senior leaders who can advocate for their development. Mentors must be equipped to provide culturally competent guidance to navigate systemic barriers.

5. Inclusive Leadership Development

Create targeted leadership pipelines to prepare Black professionals, particularly women, for senior roles. Include tailored training and access

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to high-visibility projects to build the skills and confidence necessary for advancement.

6. Safe Reporting Mechanisms

Ensure robust systems are in place for employees to report discrimination without fear of retaliation. Regular audits should assess the effectiveness of these mechanisms, with clear consequences for non-compliance.

7. Employee Networks and Allyship

Support and expand employee networks, such as Cultural Fusion, to provide safe spaces for marginalised employees. Foster allyship by engaging the wider workforce in creating an inclusive culture.

Through these measures, the rail industry can address the systemic challenges highlighted in this research, fostering a workplace that values diversity, equity, and inclusion for all employees.

Diversity in Finance
The Perspectives of Minoritised Employees in the Finance Sector

Peer Researcher: David Kennedy

The number of Black and Global Majority staff in the finance sector is disproportionately low, particularly at senior levels. In recent years, many firms have sought to introduce equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives that aim to recruit more underrepresented staff, including those from racially minoritised backgrounds. Whilst this has led to moderate increases at the graduate level, there has not been enough work carried out to explore the experiences of those currently working in the sector, and thus what more can be done by firms in the space to improve the retention of these employees, as well as their job satisfaction and wellbeing in the workplace.

Our Peer Researcher, David Kennedy, set out to design and implement a research study to explore this knowledge gap. A relatively recent graduate working in the finance sector, David drew on his lived experiences as a young Black man in this space in order to develop his research methods. His insider status was also very beneficial in his efforts to recruit participants, as he was already connected with a number of networks in the sector. He settled on a mixed methods approach in order to capture rich, comparable data concerning his participants' experiences of racialisation and minoritisation in the sector, drawing on both a mixed methods survey and qualitative interviews.

David's findings demonstrate that, whilst there have been significant strides made by the industry over the last decade or so, more investment and effort is needed in order to better support employee who are People of Colour[1] (PoCs). Participants reported still feeling as though the work culture was set up to privilege White employees. Similarly, a lack of mentorship from more senior PoC managers, and of culturally competent support had also left many feeling isolated and alienated from the wider pool of employees in the sector.

[1] Our Peer Researcher, David, elected to use People of Colour (PoCs) to refer to the communities with which he conducted his research, rather than Black and Global Majority (BGM), as we have used elsewhere in this report.

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Background

A significant EDI push from the financial sector in recent years has resulted in an improvement in the proportion of PoC employees. Prospects recently presented data from the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA), showing that 17% of the workers in the sector were from Black of Asian backgrounds. This increase reflects the sector's concerted efforts to diversify talent pipelines through targeted recruitment initiatives. Leading firms have introduced programs aimed at engaging PoC graduates, such as early-career outreach in underrepresented communities, partnerships with organisations supporting diverse talent, and mentorship schemes to support Participants throughout the application process, as discussed in a 2022 report from the FCA. Additionally, the adoption of blind recruitment practices, which remove identifying details from resumes, has become more prevalent, helping to reduce bias and promote fairer hiring outcomes. These measures, alongside internship programs specifically designed for underrepresented groups, signal the sector's growing commitment to fostering a more inclusive workforce at entry-level and mid-career stages.

Despite progress in diversifying the UK finance sector, young PoC employees face structural barriers that impact their early career development. Research shows that PoC professionals are less likely to secure roles in high-growth areas of finance, such as investment banking, where competition is fierce and networks often play a decisive role. Disparities in access to mentorship and sponsorship are also significant. A 2021 report from Reboot highlights that only 40% of UK financial services firms provide mentorship support aimed at career development for ethnic minority employees. Additionally, a 2023 article in *Investment Week* reports a decline in EDI scores within the financial services industry, suggesting that efforts to support Black employees, including mentorship programs, may be stagnating. PoC employees are disproportionately represented in lower-paying roles, with fewer opportunities for upward mobility. The 2021 Reboot report also found that 48% of PoC employees felt their career progression to be slower than their White colleagues, whilst the 2024 Reboot report found that 61% of PoC respondents reported a lack of PoC role models at their firms. These structural inequalities, combined with inconsistent implementation of diversity and inclusion policies across firms, contribute to a slower pace of career progression for young PoC employees in the sector.

Qualitative research exploring the lived experiences of young PoC employees in the UK finance sector remains limited, despite its critical importance in understanding workplace dynamics. Existing studies reveal recurring themes, such as feelings of cultural isolation, the need to self-modify behaviours to align with workplace norms, and the psychological toll of being underrepresented in historically White-dominated spaces. Interviews with PoC employees in finance have highlighted a "double burden" of proving their competence while navigating subtle forms of bias and exclusion in professional settings. While these studies provide valuable insights, they are relatively small in scale and lack the longitudinal scope needed to track changes

over time. This gap in research underscores the urgent need for more extensive, intersectional, and sector-specific qualitative studies to inform targeted interventions and create equitable environments for PoC employees in finance.

Methods

The primary data presented in this study is drawn from a survey which was circulated amongst PoC employees in the finance sector, alongside a series of semi-structured interviews undertaken with individuals from the same demographic. The main aim for the survey was to capture the perspectives of those at the beginning of their careers in the sector, and as such most of the survey participants had less than 2 years of experience, and 90% were under the age of 30. The purpose of the interview was to gather perspectives from those with more experience in the sector around how EDI initiatives and work culture had changed over the course of their careers. As such, more senior staff were approached for this phase of the research, and these participants had a mean age of 37.

The survey was focused on participants' recent experiences of racialisation and EDI in the finance sector. They were asked questions on their motivations for joining the sector, the skills and attributes they thought most useful for those working in finance, any direct experiences of discrimination, and the measures they thought it important for the sector to adopt in order to further challenge racial inequities in the space. The interviews were semi-structured, with a core focus on participants' perspectives on the changing nature of EDI in the finance sector, and their thoughts on measures which were still needed. Participants were widely recruited through our Peer Researchers' extended network, including both junior and senior employees within the sector working across various lines of business and a range of firms.

Results

Both the qualitative and quantitative elements of this study provided broadly complimentary data. As such, we have analysed and presented our findings below according to a number of common themes, drawing in data from both the surveys and interviews.

Participants' education and upbringing

For interview participants, there was a clear emphasis on academic achievement and career success from an early age, often instilled by their families. One interviewee shared how her mother told her she would go to university before she even knew what university was, reflecting the strong expectations placed on her. Many of these participants came from working-class backgrounds where values of hard work and enterprise were central. Notably, four interviewees mentioned having at least one parent involved in business or finance, highlighting the importance of early role models, and raising questions about the perceived accessibility of these careers to

those without such connections to the sector.

Participants reported that the type of university they attended had a significant impact on their career opportunities. A majority — 54% — attended Russell Group universities, with this figure rising to 59% among the survey respondents, many of whom were enrolled in graduate schemes. Additionally, 59% of survey participants studied finance or business-related degrees. This underscores the importance of equitable access to high-ranking universities for racialised students, and the continued issues posed by typically lower admissions to elite universities amongst PoC communities, as these institutions still act as key pipelines to lucrative careers. Surprisingly, many survey respondents ranked "financial knowledge" as one of the least helpful factors in their career progression, despite the prevalence of finance-related degrees. This suggests that perceived barriers for those without finance degrees may be overstated. For many interview participants, university was a transformative period. Living alongside diverse peers helped broaden their horizons, often influencing career aspirations and introducing them to opportunities like graduate schemes and internships. Several interviewees noted they only learned about these opportunities through university friends or flatmates. This highlights the importance of raising awareness about these options before students enter university, as some internships require applications as early as the first year. Such initiatives are especially critical for racial equity, as racialised students may lack the informal networks that provide this information. Survey results underscored the importance of internships for securing roles in finance. Among survey participants, 43% obtained their graduate schemes through return offers from previous internships, compared to just 29% who were directly recruited in their final year. Early experiences like spring weeks (short internships typically in the first or second year) were pivotal, making it crucial to inform future students about these pathways. Ensuring racialised students are aware of and can access these opportunities is vital for promoting equity in the sector.

Survey Participants' Alma Mater

- Russell Group Graduate   - Graduate from Other University
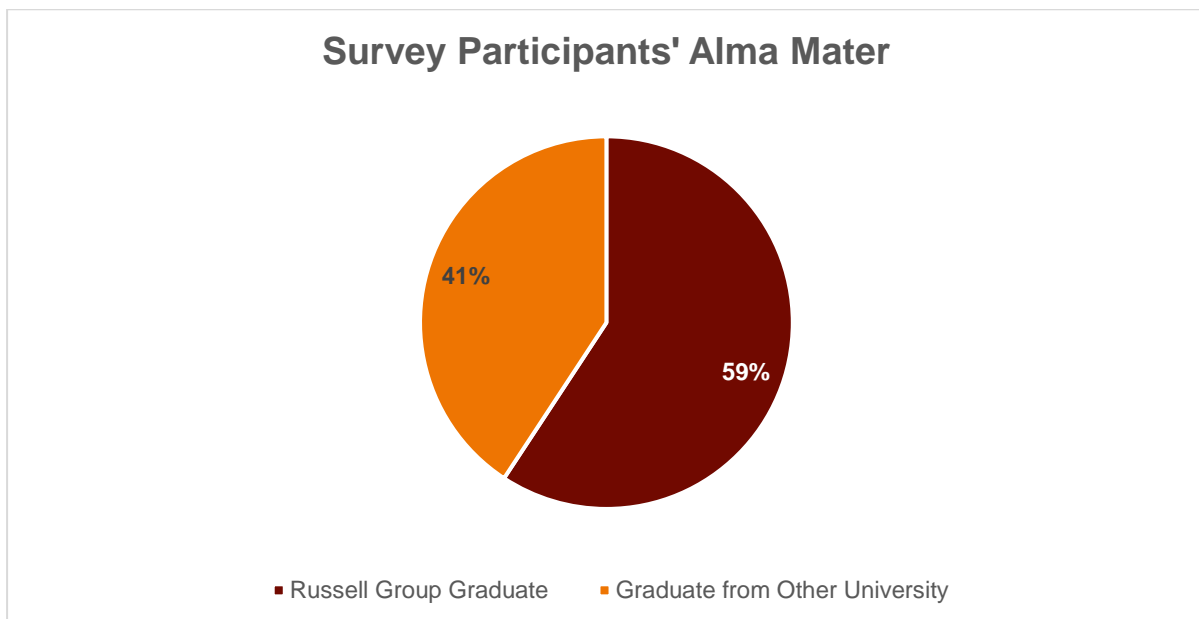
When it came to entering the finance sector, survey participants emphasised the accessibility of the profession compared to others such as law, medicine, or architecture. Unlike these fields, which often require extensive additional qualifications, many roles in finance are open to graduates with only a degree. Even for more technical roles like Chartered Accountancy (ACCA) or Asset Management (CFA), employers frequently sponsor these qualifications, lowering the barriers to entry. For some survey participants, the willingness of finance firms to sponsor visas was another crucial factor. This accessibility is particularly important for addressing racial inequities, as it allows international talent and those from underrepresented groups to enter the sector. Interestingly, both survey and interview participants described "falling into" finance rather than pursuing it as a deliberate choice, drawn by its stability and lucrative opportunities. This highlights a potential gap in career guidance for racialised young people, who may not be actively encouraged to pursue finance but instead discover it through chance.

Interviewees highlighted generational differences in career pathways. For those entering finance 20 years ago, it was often possible to build a career without a degree by starting in entry-level positions such as bank branches or call centres. Today, however, the expansion of higher education, outsourcing of entry-level roles, and changing labour markets mean these routes are less accessible. While efforts to improve ethnic diversity in finance are evident, the sector risks losing socioeconomic diversity unless initiatives like Degree Apprenticeships are expanded. This generational shift disproportionately affects racialised communities, who are more likely to be impacted by the intersection of race and class barriers.

Younger survey participants were particularly drawn to the finance sector by its career prospects. A third of survey respondents cited future career opportunities as their main motivation for entering the industry, reflecting its strong appeal as a platform for long-term growth. For racialised participants, the promise of financial stability and upward mobility may be especially compelling, highlighting the importance of creating inclusive pathways that address structural barriers to entry.

Keys to Success in the Finance Industry

Many of those interviewed shared their perspectives on what has contributed to their success in the finance industry. Across the board, hard work and determination were identified as essential traits. These findings underline the resilience required to succeed in a demanding field but also reveal gaps in systemic support for PoC professionals. For many interview participants, the values of hard work and enterprise instilled by their families played a pivotal role. Some credited their success to the strong work ethic imparted by their parents, reflecting cultural expectations of striving for excellence. Beyond personal effort, the importance of people skills was repeatedly emphasised. Survey participants ranked these skills as the most critical factor in their career progression, underscoring that finance is a people-driven business where networks and relationships are key.

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However, access to influential networks remains uneven. Interviewees noted the critical role of mentors and sponsors, yet the lack of representation at senior levels means PoC employees often rely on White mentors to guide them through unwritten rules. Participant #9, for instance, highlighted how mentorship from senior white colleagues taught him the sector's "secrets" and helped him navigate its complexities. While this support was invaluable, it also underscores the systemic issue of insufficient PoC leaders who can offer culturally nuanced mentorship and advocacy. This absence risks perpetuating the cycle of underrepresentation and exclusion for future PoC talent. Several interview participants demonstrated entrepreneurial approaches to their careers. Participant #7, for example, accepted roles that others avoided, which allowed them to gain unique experiences and stand out. Similarly, Participant #9's philosophy of seeing problems as opportunities reflects a mindset that enables adaptability and innovation. However, the pressure to constantly prove oneself in an industry that lacks sufficient PoC representation adds an additional layer of emotional labour. As Participant #16 candidly noted, "not everyone is going to like you, and you're not going to like everyone". This resilience is crucial but raises questions about the mental health impact of navigating predominantly White spaces.

Participants shared moments of pride, often tied to achieving recognition for their performance. However, for senior PoC professionals, these moments were frequently accompanied by a bittersweet realisation of their isolation at higher levels. Participant #5, for instance, spoke of being one of only two Black women in her role nationally. While proud of her achievements and her ability to represent her community, she expressed disappointment at the lack of diversity among her peers. This duality highlights the systemic barriers that continue to limit the progression of PoC talent into leadership roles. Despite these successes, significant challenges remain. Many participants pointed to structural issues within the finance industry, including frequent corporate restructuring. Such upheavals disproportionately affect PoC professionals, who are more likely to be in junior or precarious roles. One participant recalled a restructuring that resulted in 25% of their team being laid off, leaving those remaining to manage increased workloads with fewer resources. This creates a challenging environment for career progression and raises concerns about equity in decisions surrounding layoffs and promotions.

Participant #3 described the difficulty of managing client relationships as an Indian woman in a predominantly white male space. Other participants shared experiences of being burdened with managing teams through complex transitions, often without the necessary support or recognition. These pressures highlight the intersectional challenges faced by female PoC employees, who must navigate both racial and gender biases in their professional lives. The demanding nature of the finance industry also places strain on personal lives. Historically, the lack of flexible working options exacerbated these challenges. One participant shared how a request for compressed hours was denied, forcing them to change roles to be closer to family. Another had to rely heavily on extended family for childcare support. While newer policies around flexible working and paternity leave represent progress, they are not yet universally adopted. These practices will be crucial for retaining diverse talent.

The findings underscore the urgent need to address the lack of PoC leaders and mentors in finance. Representation at senior levels is not just a symbolic victory—it provides critical support systems for aspiring professionals and ensures diverse perspectives are included in decision-making. Mentorship programmes specifically aimed at PoC employees could help bridge this gap, but they must be paired with systemic changes that address barriers to progression. Efforts to improve ethnic diversity in recruitment must also be matched by strategies to retain and develop PoC talent. Without this, the finance industry risks losing out on the full potential of its workforce and perpetuating cycles of exclusion. By fostering inclusive environments, encouraging equitable access to leadership roles, and ensuring meaningful mentorship, the sector can begin to address these disparities and create a more representative and innovative workforce.

Discrimination in the Finance Industry

The findings reveal troubling disparities in experiences of discrimination within the finance sector. Among those interviewed, 46% had either experienced or witnessed racism, while 40% reported encountering sexism. These figures are stark and point to persistent barriers for underrepresented groups. Notably, sexism was more frequently described through first-hand accounts, such as Participant #11's experience of having a job offer rescinded upon disclosing her pregnancy. In contrast, accounts of racism were more evenly split between first- and second-hand experiences, reflecting the multifaceted and often covert nature of racial discrimination. Survey participants, predominantly early-career professionals, reported significantly lower levels of discrimination, with 70% stating they had not experienced or witnessed racism or choosing not to disclose. 26% had encountered racism, 19% classism, and 11% sexism. This generational divide suggests improvements in workplace culture, but it also highlights the limited exposure of younger employees, 75% of whom had been in the industry for less than two years. These findings corroborate Participant #1's observation that while progress has been made in addressing sexism, racism and classism remain pressing and complex challenges.

Several interviewees raised concerns about more subtle forms of bias. For instance, 20% cited instances of accents being mocked, particularly those of Asian and African heritage. These microaggressions, though less overt than other forms of discrimination, perpetuate exclusion and harm. The lack of PoC leaders exacerbates these issues. Without diverse leadership, there are fewer advocates to challenge discriminatory practices or create inclusive spaces. Interviewees highlighted the absence of mentors and sponsors who understand the specific challenges faced by PoC professionals. This gap forces many to rely on white colleagues for guidance, as seen with Participant #9, who benefited from mentorship but noted the limitations of cultural misalignment.

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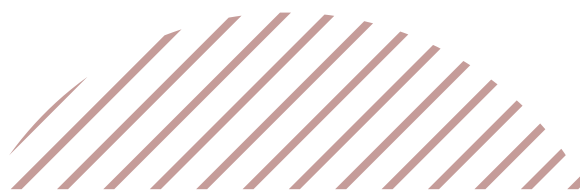
This underrepresentation also perpetuates tokenism. Participant #5's account of being one of only two Black women in her role nationally illustrates the isolating experience of "flying the flag" for an entire community. While her achievements are commendable, they underscore the need for systemic change to ensure that PoC professionals are not exceptions but integral members of the workforce at all levels. The findings also highlight the compounded barriers faced by those navigating multiple forms of discrimination. For example, Participant #3 described the dual pressures of managing client relationships as an Indian woman in a predominantly white male environment. Such experiences are indicative of the intersectional biases that persist in the industry, where gender, race, and class often converge to create unique challenges. Encouragingly, the generational divide in reported discrimination suggests that workplace attitudes are improving. Survey participants—who are predominantly younger—noted fewer instances of overt racism and sexism, reflecting shifts in organisational policies and societal norms. However, these improvements should not detract from the ongoing need to address more insidious forms of bias and systemic barriers, and may also be a reflection of the comparatively less time that these participants have actually spent in the industry.

Participants' Experiences of Discrimination in the Workplace

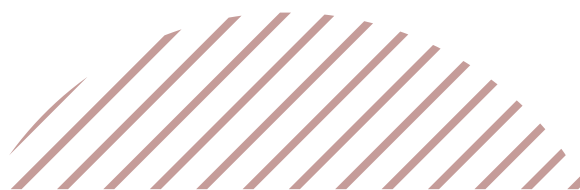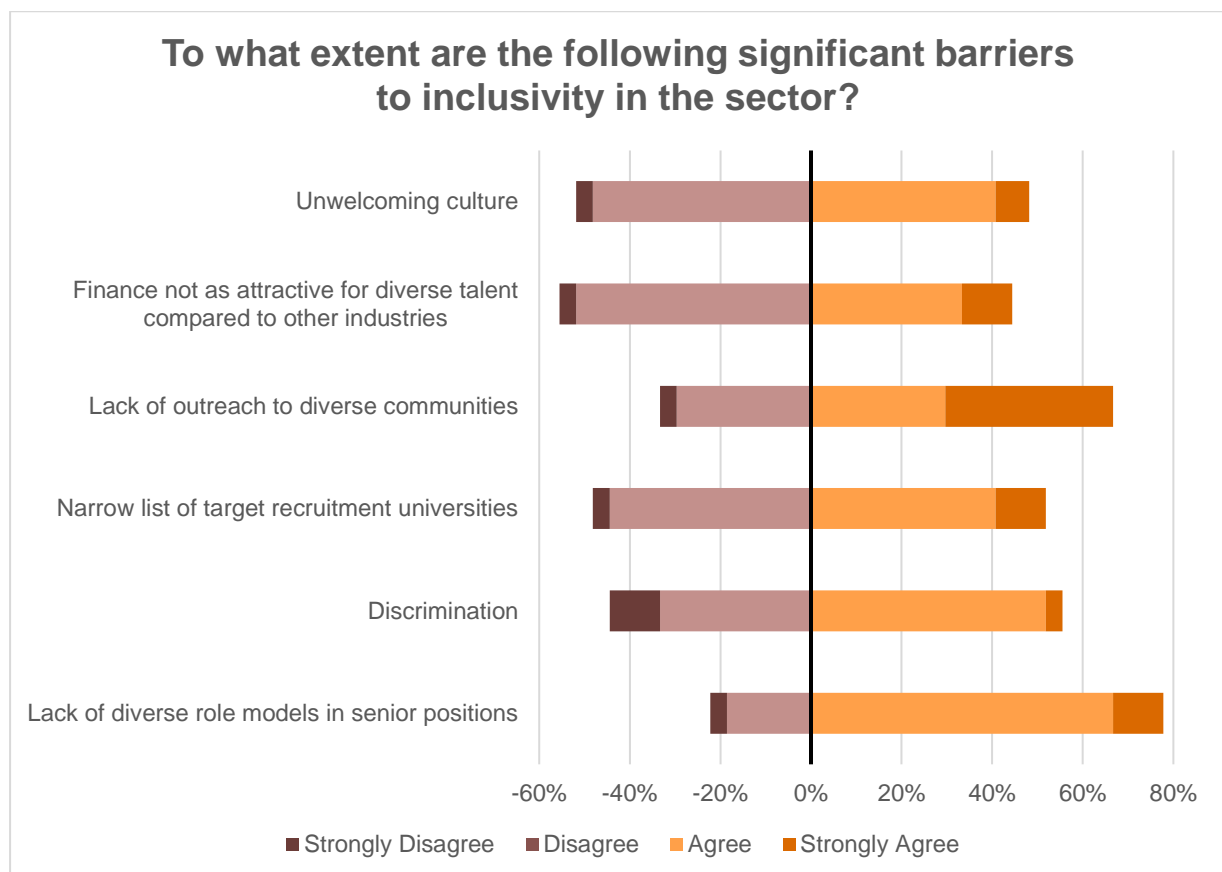| Category	Percentage
None/Prefer not to say	70%
Classism	19%
Racism	26%
Sexism	11%
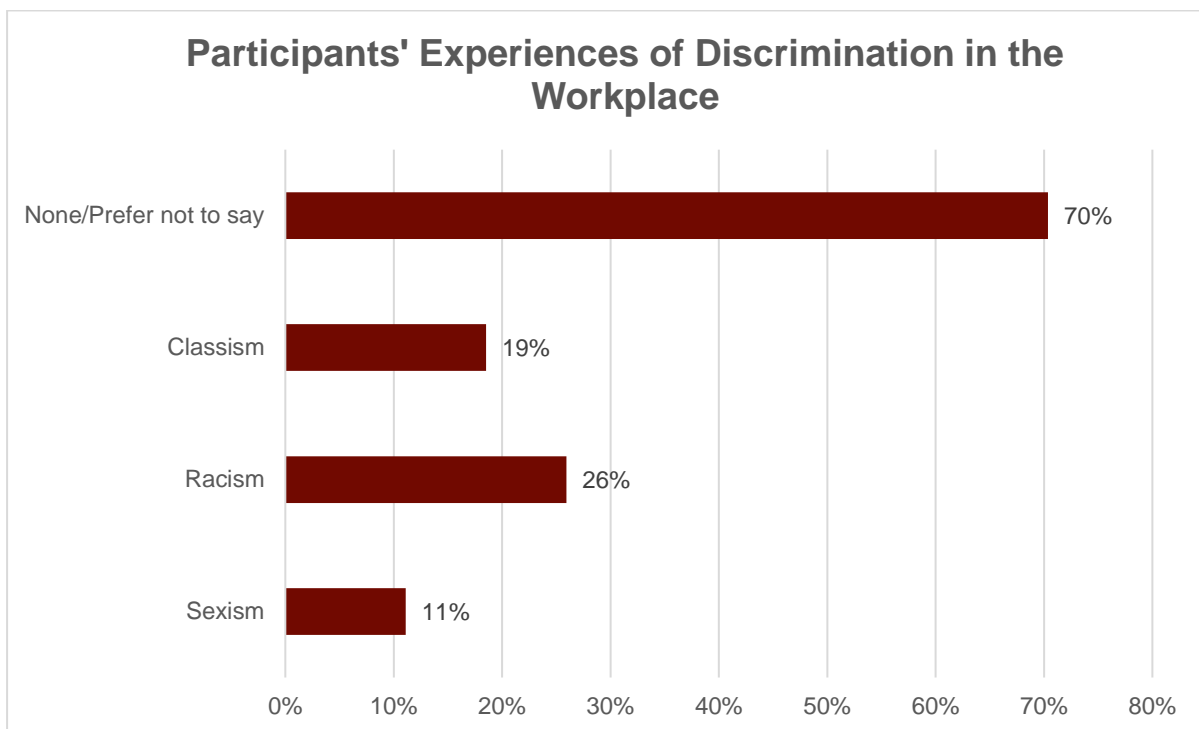
Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach. Organisations must prioritise the recruitment, retention, and progression of PoC professionals, not just to improve representation but to create environments where diverse talent can thrive. This includes establishing mentorship and sponsorship programmes specifically for PoC employees, ensuring that they have access to the guidance and advocacy necessary for career progression. Anti-discrimination training must also evolve to address subtle biases, such as accent discrimination and microaggressions. Additionally, companies should implement transparent reporting mechanisms and

robust support systems for those who experience discrimination. Finally, fostering a culture of inclusion requires leadership accountability. Diverse leadership teams are more likely to prioritise equity and challenge the status quo. Without this commitment, progress will remain slow and uneven, and the finance industry risks alienating a significant portion of its talent pool. By addressing these challenges head-on, the sector can build a more equitable, innovative, and representative workforce.

Perspectives on Diversity in Finance

The interviews reveal a nuanced and evolving picture of diversity within the finance sector. For many senior professionals who have spent decades in the industry, there is a clear acknowledgment that progress has been made. However, the consensus remains that significant work is still required. Among survey respondents, the sector was rated on average a 6 out of 10 for diversity—a balanced but far from aspirational score. One of the most striking findings is the stark contrast between diversity at junior and senior levels. While entry-level positions appear to attract a relatively diverse talent pool, this representation diminishes sharply at higher levels. The absence of diverse senior role models perpetuates a cycle where aspiring professionals from PoC backgrounds struggle to envision themselves in leadership roles. Significantly, 80% of survey respondents identified the lack of diverse leaders as the most significant barrier to broader inclusivity within the sector.

To what extent are the following significant barriers to inclusivity in the sector?

Legend: ■ Strongly Disagree ■ Disagree ■ Agree ■ Strongly Agree

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Some senior leaders are actively working to change this narrative. Participant #5, for instance, has made significant strides in improving Black representation within her team. Her efforts underscore a broader trend: teams led by diverse leaders are more likely to prioritise inclusivity in their recruitment and promotion practices. Conversely, less diverse leadership teams risk perpetuating homogeneous cultures that fail to attract or retain underrepresented talent. The key challenge, then, is initiating that crucial first wave of diversity at the leadership level. The diversity landscape also varies across subsectors within finance. Participant #4 pointed out that while the FinTech space might lack visible diversity compared to traditional corporates, it fosters a culture where individuals feel more seen and heard. In contrast, Participant #14 described the private banking sector as particularly challenging, with limited diversity and a tendency to prioritise "palatable" groups, such as white women and East Asians, over others, including Black professionals. This highlights the need for targeted interventions, such as the '10,000 Black Interns' programme, which has successfully created pathways for underrepresented groups.

Another point of contention is the potential misrepresentation of progress through inflated diversity metrics. Several interviewees noted that firms often rely on international hiring to bolster diversity figures, which may not reflect genuine progress in cultivating homegrown talent from underrepresented backgrounds. This practice risks masking systemic issues within the UK talent pipeline and underscores the importance of focusing on equitable opportunities for local Participants. International comparisons further contextualise the UK's progress. Participants #15 and #6, who have worked in France and New York respectively, observed that despite its challenges, the UK finance sector is ahead of these markets in promoting diversity. Participant #6, for example, was surprised to find that the New York financial sector appeared less committed to diversity initiatives than London. This sentiment was echoed by several professionals who had chosen to remain in the UK after initially relocating for education or work, citing the relative openness of the industry here.

Nevertheless, the data reveals persistent scepticism about the sector's commitment to diversity. A significant 68% of survey respondents believe that the industry is not doing enough to address its shortcomings. This dissatisfaction is compounded by the lack of visible and sustained efforts to tackle systemic barriers, especially at senior levels. Ultimately, the findings call for a multi-pronged approach to diversity. Organisations must prioritise the progression of PoC professionals into leadership roles, ensuring that they are not only represented but also empowered to drive meaningful change. Specific programmes aimed at underrepresented groups, transparent metrics for measuring progress, and sustained investment in mentorship and sponsorship schemes are essential. Addressing the nuances of diversity across subsectors and avoiding tokenistic practices will be key to building a truly inclusive industry.

Do you think enough is being by the sector to deal with the lack of diversity in the industry?
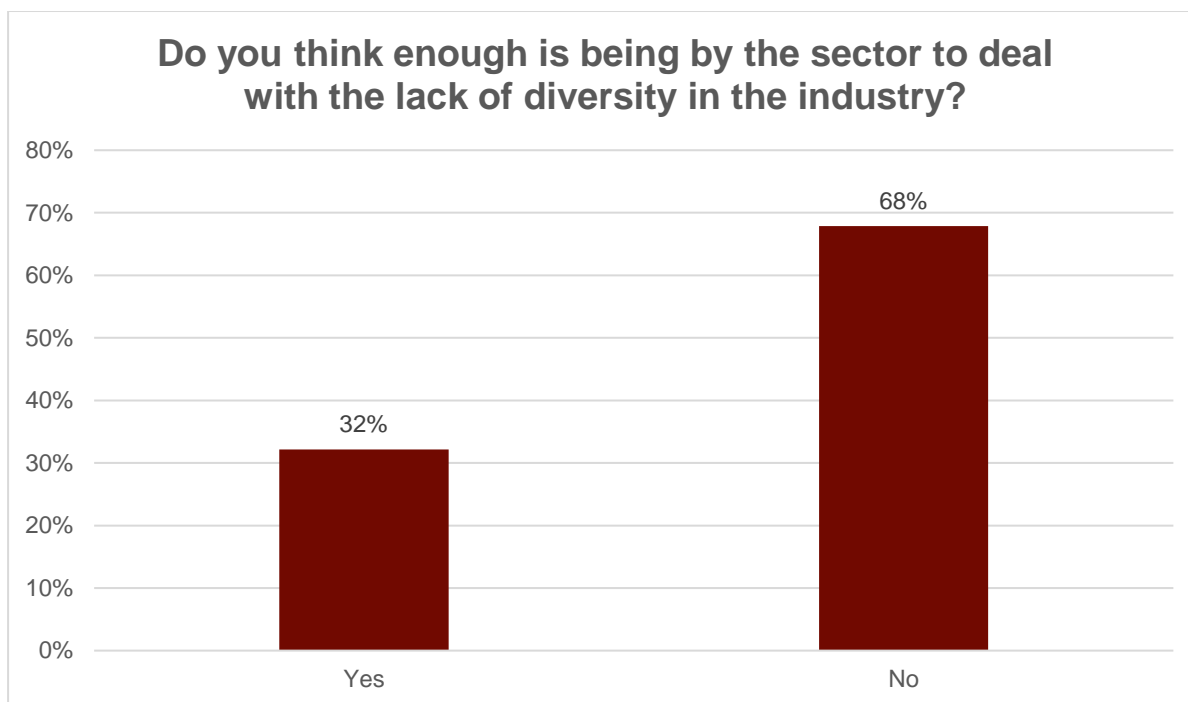
Conclusion and Recommendations

To improve diversity in the finance sector, a proactive and inclusive approach is necessary. Starting recruitment earlier and engaging with diverse students across various schools and universities is essential. Many students are unaware of the wide range of career opportunities in finance, so conducting outreach initiatives and explaining career pathways can broaden access.

It is essential that the following proposals are implemented carefully, and care is taken to avoid tokenism. Diverse talent must be recognised for their skills and potential, not merely as a means to meet quotas. Doing so will not only improve the working life of PoC employees in the sector, but will also improve the diversity of opinion, perspectives, and lived experiences within the sector, and accordingly have positive implications for the culture of firms operating in finance.

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1. **Ethnicity Pay Gap Reporting**: Introduce ethnicity pay gap data to highlight disparities between junior and senior positions, similar to the gender pay gap. This data can serve as a powerful tool to drive change.

2. **Contextual Hiring**: Implement contextual hiring, which considers an applicant's socio-economic background, school, and area. This measure, while primarily addressing socio-economic inequality, would disproportionately benefit diverse applicants.

3. **Increased Engagement Between ERGs and Communities**: Boost engagement between Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) and local communities, schools, and educational systems. This approach offers a more authentic way to inspire young people and demonstrates a firm's genuine commitment to diversity and inclusion.

4. **Diverse Waitlists**: Create waitlists for candidates with potential who may not be ready for the role but can be mentored into it. This is particularly useful if certain communities are being disproportionately rejected at a specific stage of the application process.

5. **Expand Degree Apprenticeships**: Offer degree apprenticeships, allowing students to earn a degree part-time while working. This initiative targets students who may prefer vocational education and can serve as a counter to the focus on elite universities.

6. **Fostering a Thriving Environment for Diverse Talent**: Implement initiatives such as buddy programs, mentorship opportunities (both traditional and reverse mentoring), and networking events to support diverse employees and introduce them to the sector.

7. **Diverse Interview Panels**: Ensure diverse representation on interview panels by including at least one interviewer from a PoC, which can help reduce bias in the hiring process.

8. **External Hiring for Senior Roles**: Focus on headhunting diverse candidates for senior positions to ensure leadership reflects the sector's commitment to diversity and inclusion.

The Perspectives of Black Community Activists on Issues Facing BGM Groups in Education and Employment

Peer Researcher: Kwesi Ochosi

Throughout this report, we have discussed many of the issues facing our communities in the education and employment sectors. We have sought to centre the knowledge, expertise, and lived experiences of our Peer Researchers and their communities throughout, providing a platform for racialised individuals to identify and problematise the issues facing their communities.

We have, therefore, until this point not engaged as much with members of the activist community as might be expected in a report such as this. However, those for whom activism and community organising represent both lives and livelihoods, stand at the front line of efforts to challenge racism and racial injustices everywhere in society, including in the education and employment sectors. These individuals therefore have significant knowledge and lived experiences relevant to the work presented in the above chapters. Here, we centre the expertise of those in the activist community, and ask them to give their perspectives on the issues we have discussed throughout this report.

The Peer Researcher responsible for this research, Kwesi Ochosi, is a reparation advocate and United Nations Fellow for People of African Descent. He has strong links with the activist and community organisation sectors, drawing on over a decade of experience in advocating for systemic change and social justice for people of African heritage in the UK. Born and raised on the Patmore Estate in Nine Elms, South London, Kwesi's personal journey has been shaped by lived and professional experiences of systemic inequalities, including school exclusion, police and state violence, and racial injustice in housing, education, and employment. His extensive connections with grassroots organisations and local leaders, as well as his ongoing work with the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, have positioned him uniquely to engage with the community in a way that fosters trust, collaboration, and impactful outcomes.

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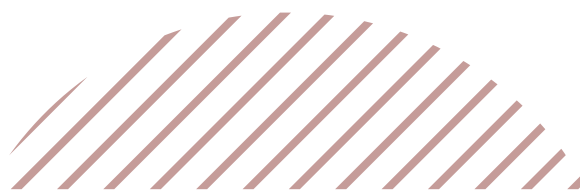
This research highlights the invaluable contributions of activist perspectives in addressing systemic racism in education and employment. Participants demonstrated how lived experiences of racism—beginning in childhood and continuing through schooling and workplaces—serve as catalysts for grassroots activism and community organising. Their reflections reveal how institutional racism perpetuates cycles of inequality, from the school-to-prison pipeline to discriminatory employment practices that undermine economic stability. Activists emphasised the need for community-led initiatives, such as Pan-African supplementary schools and Black-led industries, to counteract systemic failures.

The findings underscore the importance of integrating activist insights into anti-racism research to ensure it is both grounded in lived experience and oriented towards tangible change. Participants stressed the necessity of empowering Black families, mobilising young people, and holding the Government accountable for their obligations to People of African Descent under International Human Rights Law. The need for intercommunity dialogue and solidarity was also acknowledged, and the importance of fostering alliances across marginalised groups to advance equity. By drawing on the strategies and resilience of activist communities, this research offers actionable pathways to challenge systemic racism and promote justice in education and employment

Background

Over the past decade, Black-led activist and advocacy groups in the UK have faced substantial challenges in their efforts to combat systemic racism and advocate for social justice, including in the education and employment sectors. Austerity measures during this period have disproportionately impacted marginalised communities, exacerbating existing racial disparities and limiting the capacity of Black-led organisations to address systemic issues effectively.

The United Nations has highlighted how such economic policies have deepened social inequalities in the UK, and acknowledged that these issues are linked with wider, historical injustices faced by people of African heritage worldwide. Since 2002, the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent has been established to support human rights advocates working in this area. This includes Black-led groups in the UK facing additional socio-economic pressure as they work to dismantle structural barriers in education and employment. The work of the UN Working Group of Experts includes the establishment of the Permanent Forum on People of African Descent, as well as the launch of the First International Decade for People of African Descent, which concluded in 2024. More recently, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has announced a Second International Decade for People of African Descent, commencing this year (2025-2034), and reaffirmed the longstanding commitment to a new UN Declaration for the Rights of African Peoples.

In addition to the disproportionate impact of Government austerity measures, the rise of far-right movements and the resurgence of overt racism have further complicated the advocacy efforts of Black led activist groups. Events such as the August 2024 racist riots, which targeted Black communities, immigrants, and Muslims, illustrate the persistent threat of racial violence and the resulting trauma within marginalised groups. These incidents not only heighten fear but also create additional hurdles for activist groups striving to promote racial equity in schools, workplaces, and beyond.

Despite these adversities, Black-led activist groups have demonstrated resilience, developing intergenerational strategies to confront hate and advance systemic change. Grassroots initiatives have played a pivotal role in defending human rights for decades, with a new generation of activists continuing the work of organising supplementary schools, mentorship programs, and employment support initiatives to counteract the systemic failures of public institutions. Their work has underscored the importance of addressing racial inequities at the intersection of education and employment, recognising that these sectors are deeply interconnected and essential to achieving long-term equity.

Integrating the insights of Black activist groups into anti-racism research provides invaluable benefits, particularly in the context of education and employment. Activists bring lived experiences of systemic discrimination and human rights advocacy that illuminate both the structural inequities faced by Black students and workers, and the steps being taken to address them at the national and international level. Their initiatives—ranging from addressing the school-to-prison pipeline to advocating for Black-led industries—demonstrate practical, community-driven solutions that can inform policy and research.

Methods

The primary data collection for this research took place through 12 semi-structured interviews that the Peer Researcher ran over October 2024. Participants were asked questions on their pathways into activism and community advocacy, their experiences of institutional racism, their perspectives on institutional racism in education and employment, and the potential solutions to these issues that can be sought from United Nations bodies like the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent.

Recruitment largely took place from within the Peer Researchers extensive network of contacts within the space. Participants came from a range of activist, campaigning, and legal advocacy backgrounds, including those working for youth organisations, parents' advocacy organisations, a supplemental school for Black pupils, a racial justice organisation, an anti-police and state violence organisation, and a human rights civil society organisation with UN ECOSOC status.

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All participants were also parents or guardians, which enabled many to speak from both personal and professional experience about the issues facing Black children and young people (CYPs) in this area. 7 out of the 12 participants were women, and all were persons of African heritage.

The interviews were transcribed, and transcripts were analysed inductively, with a number of key themes emerging for discussion.

Results

Participants' Inspiration for Activism

For many participants, personal experiences of racism served as a catalyst for their activism. These encounters often began in childhood. Participant 1 recalled, "Coming to the UK as a child and being called a 'monkey' and a 'nigger'… that was the start of it". Similarly, Participant 10 described how their schooling experiences opened their eyes to systemic racism: "The British education system radicalised me… I had a reason to feel disrespect for my teachers. They were racist".

Family influence was another crucial factor, with parents and elders providing both inspiration and guidance. Participant 9 described their father, a Black theologian, as a formative role model: "My father… didn't just talk about injustice; he was an activist… He was the blueprint for how a Black minister must use their position". For Participant 7, their father's role at the United Nations instilled a lifelong responsibility to address oppression: "I've always felt a responsibility to do something about injustice and oppression".

Parenthood and the desire to protect their children also emerged as significant motivators. Participant 4 articulated this clearly: "Structural racism poses so many threats to my son… that inspires me to fight racism as a community leader and as a mother". Participant 11 echoed this sentiment, reflecting on the difficult balance between shielding children from harsh realities and preparing them for life in a racist society: "No one wants to traumatise their children with the truth, but you have to prepare them for the racist world".

Many participants channelled their activism into grassroots initiatives and community organising. They sought to create or maintain spaces where systemic inequities could be addressed collectively. Describing a Pan-African supplementary school founded in the 1980s, Participant 2 explained, "We recognised racism as a structural issue… we felt we had no choice but to organise our own schools". Education was seen as a critical tool for empowerment. As Participant 2 put it, "Education was the only way we could prepare our young ones for their future".

Institutional Racism in Employment and Its Impact

Participants highlighted how institutional racism in the workplace perpetuates economic inequality and poverty within Black communities. These disparities were seen as deeply entrenched, with Black households disproportionately affected. Participant 10 observed, "Today Black households are at a huge disadvantage because we're disproportionately unemployed… This impacts everything from diet and mental health to educational attainment". The destructive impact of unemployment on family stability was a recurring theme. Participant 2 reflected, "Unemployment can destroy a Black family… It's hard to keep a family together when one or both parents are unemployed". The mental health challenges linked to workplace discrimination were also significant. Participant 11 shared the emotional toll: "I end up going home feeling angry… I suffer depression… I should be able to buy the things my family needs". To combat these barriers, many participants stressed the need for self-sufficiency and the creation of Black-led industries. Participant 12 argued, "Until we control our own schools, universities, and hospitals, we [Black people] will suffer. We need our own jobs".

Institutional racism in education

Participants described education as another site of systemic racism, with Black children disproportionately targeted and disciplined. Participant 1 noted the double standards that exist: "Black children… realise that white children can behave one way without any real punishment, but if they act the same way, the whole world will crash down on them", reflecting the findings from several other researchers earlier in this report.

Educational inequality was seen as contributing to cycles of underachievement and incarceration, often referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline. Participant 3 stated, "Schools are getting away with scapegoating Black children… When children get caught in that cycle of underachievement and poverty, it typically leads to imprisonment".

Parents also spoke of the psychological toll on families as they witnessed their children being mistreated in schools. Participant 11 expressed frustration, saying, "Sometimes I feel like punching the parents of the little brats being racist towards my children. Sometimes I feel like punching the teachers".

To counteract these systemic failures, participants emphasised the importance of community-led initiatives, such as supplementary schools. Participant 2 highlighted their success: "In our [supplementary] school, these exact same children are attentive and eager to learn. It's all about the schools". These sentiments chime with the results that Gabriella Okoobo presented earlier in this report, concerning her experiences working on the Akoma programme in London.

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The intersection of racism in education and employment

The intersection of racism in education and employment created compounding challenges for families. Participants described how navigating racism in these two domains placed immense burdens on parents. Response 1 explained, "The racism impacting their children also impacts their lives as parents… All of this is impacted by race and racism".

Economic pressures were seen as contributing to a decline in collective activism, with some participants lamenting the erosion of community cohesion. Response 10 reflected, "Our community used to be much stronger… But now everyone is only focused on themselves or their own family. The sense of community cohesion has gone".

Despite these challenges, participants expressed hope for systemic change and highlighted the resilience of Black families. Participant 5 asserted, "Even if we do nothing, things will continue to get worse until we're forced to do something… I have hope".

Strategies for greater community Control and Anti-Racism Advocacy

Participants proposed several strategies to empower the Black community and strengthen anti-racism efforts in Britain, with a strong emphasis on gaining greater control over public spending, particularly in education and employment. Mobilising young people emerged as a key focus. Participant 1 emphasised the importance of political engagement, stating: "We need more young people involved in politics. We need more Black families to vote. But more than that, we need young Black people to become local councillors and school governors". However, political disillusionment posed a significant challenge. Participant 2 admitted, "Black people don't vote because they feel it's hopeless…I don't vote either. I just don't see the point in the parliamentary political process". Conversely, Participant 4 highlighted the transformative potential of collective action: "It feels like most Black people don't vote, and I can't blame them… But unless we approach the situation together, we won't get anywhere".

Participants frequently pointed out the structural nature of racism and the inequities in resource allocation that perpetuate systemic disadvantages. Participant 4 observed, "Racism ensures that Black people struggle. That's the purpose of racism. It's all by design. It's structural". This sentiment was echoed by Participant 10, who stated, "Structural racism is underpinned by the taxpayer. We pay for substandard education... racist policing... and the expanding prison estate". Participant 6 added, "They don't want to create new job opportunities. They don't want to spend money on youth workers and youth centres. They're happy with things as they are". These comments underscore the necessity of Black communities gaining control over public spending to address systemic inequities. Participant 4 argued, "We need our own schools. Full stop. Let's start there... If Black women are so many times more likely to

die in childbirth, why do we not have our own hospitals?"

Participants also emphasised the need for building community power and fostering alliances with other marginalised groups. Participant 5 highlighted shared struggles with the white working class, stating, "Better schools, housing, and healthcare for me should equal the same for you. Black activists need to get through to white working-class voters who live in the same locality and would benefit from radical new policies". Furthermore, participants advocated for holding politicians accountable through strategic voting, boycotts, and direct action. Participant 7 urged, "We should still be using our vote to remove politicians who we know are racist or insincere about the communities they serve". Participant 10 advocated for bolder measures: "Boycott, divestment, and sanctions. The UK government needs to be fully held accountable for violating the human rights of Black families and children in the UK".

Many participants identified education as a critical area where Black communities could make the greatest difference by taking control of public spending. Participant 1 noted, "Parents would be very interested to know how much money is spent on their child's education... I've always been a big supporter of parents having more control of what goes on in schools". Participant 4 argued, "For education, it's much simpler. It's the best place to start to solve all our problems". Several participants referenced past successes of Black-led initiatives and lamented their decline, as well as the lack of statutory funding that contributed to it. Participant 8 stated, "Back in my day, we used to have our own schools... Where did they go? Why did we stop supporting them?" Participant 10 noted, "After the Brixton Uprisings in the 80s, the government started to provide funding for Black-led health services and youth services. Then the activists got complacent".

Despite these historical successes, participants acknowledged challenges to unity and implementation. Participant 5 commented, "We would have a huge fight on our hands... We would also need to agree how to spend the money, and that always causes arguments and disagreements". Participant 7 warned, "The politicians will do everything in their power to stop that... How do you keep people together? It's very difficult, no?" Despite the challenges, participants expressed optimism about the next generation's ability to lead change. Participant 9 noted, "I have faith in the youth. They will be the ones to take control of things... Then we will begin to see change". Participant 12 stressed the importance of unity and collective action, stating, "When thousands of people come out onto the street, that is the only time they listen to us... We need to go back to how we used to move".

Participants overwhelmingly believe that Black communities gaining control over public spending could address systemic inequalities, particularly in education and employment. While significant challenges remain, including structural barriers, internal disunity, and complacency, there is a strong call for self-sufficiency, collective action, and the revival of community-led initiatives to effect meaningful change. By focusing on education and fostering alliances across marginalised groups, Black communities can create a foundation for sustained empowerment and systemic transformation.

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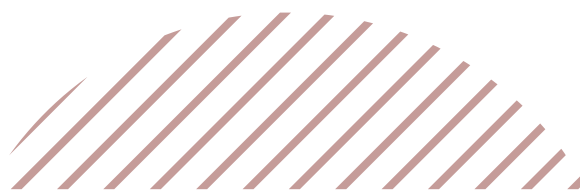
Hopes and Challenges for Systemic Change

While participants were sceptical about the UK government's willingness to fulfil its longstanding anti-racism obligations under international law, they expressed hope that the Black community could continue building on the growing recognition of their human rights by advocating collectively. Unity within the Black activist community was unanimously viewed by participants as essential to their national and international demand for systemic change. Participant 1 urged, "These initiatives and pledges and obligations mean nothing if we don't hold them to account. We have to put our differences aside and be united for once". Participant 7 highlighted the role of the wider community in these efforts, stating "Most people don't know how many obligations the UK already has. We need to educate the masses about this otherwise the government will lead us in circles".

Intergenerational engagement with the United Nations was similarly viewed by participants as essential to applying sufficient pressure on the UK Government to fullfil its obligations. Participant 3 stated, "It can't just be a conversation between academics. People in our community who have done the work for years must be heard. The younger activists coming up now, they must be heard too". This approach was also viewed as the best way for younger activists to avoid the mistakes of the past. Participant 1 cautioned, "As parents, guardians and care workers, we need to ensure young Black people have a seat at the table. Otherwise they simply become the table".

Nearly every expression of hope shared by participants was related to international law and the work of the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent. However, there was also some scepticism about the impact of the previous UN International Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024), and the announcement of a Second UN International Decade for People of African Descent (2025-2034) which commences this year. As Participant 2 put it. "Even though I supported the first decade… I sometimes struggled to understand what it all means. Now that a second decade seems imminent I would love to see wider community participation. No more making decisions without us". Participant 7 highlighted the successes of Black activists and advocates despite a lack of support from the UK Government, "There was a lot that went right with the first decade… we've managed to push the reparation debate into the mainstream. But... more pressure needs to be put on the UK to ensure the second decade is better supported".

Genuine grassroots involvement was seen as essential for drafting a meaningful and comprehensive national race action plan, as mandated by the 2001 UN Durban Declaration and Programme of Action. Participant 5 stressed, "All the people on the frontline every day doing good things in the community… they have the answers". There was also widespread agreement from participants about the need for the UK

Government and other anti-racism institutions to comply with existing legal obligations that have been established by Black-led advocate groups over the decades. As Participant 7 firmly put it, "The laws are already there. The UN recommendations, the treaty bodies… What we need is compliance... That needs to be the basis of any action plan". To ensure the plan's success, participants called for enforceable demands and accountability mechanisms, as well as a united front to ensure its implementation. Participant 1 concluded, "We need to write the plan and give it to them. Otherwise, they'll come up with the usual dross and we'll just accept it as usual".

Ultimately, participants expressed faith in the resilience of Black communities, and the potential of future generations to lead transformative change in the UK. As poetically put by Participant 9, "Well, I believe that children are the future. Teach them well and let them lead the way! I have every faith that our youth will carry the torch forward".

Conclusion

This report has illuminated the unique insights and contributions of Black community activists in addressing systemic racism in education and employment. By centring the lived experiences of activists, it has become clear that the struggles faced by Black communities in these sectors are both historical and deeply interconnected, with cycles of discrimination beginning in early education and persisting into adulthood. These challenges are embedded in structural inequalities that disproportionately affect Black individuals and families.

The perspectives shared by activists reveal the enduring impact of institutional racism in both education and employment. From discriminatory disciplinary practices in schools to workplace inequities that perpetuate economic disparities, these systemic failures necessitate urgent action. Activists' accounts demonstrate how racism in education lays the foundation for the economic marginalisation of Black communities, creating barriers to progress that often feel insurmountable. Despite these obstacles, the resilience and determination of activists have fostered community-driven solutions, such as supplementary schools, grassroots initiatives, and advocacy for Black-led industries. Crucially, these steps towards transformative change are taking place at the national and international level.

Moreover, the report highlights the critical role of community-led initiatives and political mobilisation in dismantling these entrenched inequalities. Activists have emphasised the importance of empowering Black families and mobilising young people to engage in local and national politics, hold institutions accountable for their international human rights obligations, and push for transformative policies. The strategies proposed— ranging from fostering alliances with other marginalised groups, to direct engagement with the United Nations —underscore the necessity of collective, sustained efforts in the fight for justice.

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Ultimately, this report underscores the value of integrating activist perspectives into broader anti-racism research and policy development. This is especially true of their contributions to the development of International Human Rights Law pertaining to specific injustices faced by people of African heritage. By grounding advocacy in lived experience and community expertise, the fight against systemic racism can be informed by practical, actionable strategies that address root causes rather than surface symptoms. The resilience and innovation of Black activist communities offer a powerful blueprint for transformative change, ensuring that future generations are better equipped to navigate and challenge the systemic barriers that persist in education and employment.

Policy and Practice Recommendations

As is evident from the findings presented above, there were many key challenges and issues faced by our Peer Researchers and their communities across the sector. To address these issues, we propose the following policy and practice recommendations.

For Government:

1. Introduce robust, mandatory anti-racist training for teachers in British schools:

This should be organised both as a major element in all teacher-training programmes, and mandated in teachers' continued professional development. At the national level, training should have a strong intersectional focus, equipping teachers to overcome systemic biases that lead to, for example, an underdiagnosis of Black children with SEN, or the adultification of BGM girls in care. Locally, teachers should undergo cultural competency training, enabling them to best serve the diverse community in which they are situated.

At both the national and local levels, training should be co-designed with those who are experts in issues of racialisation in the school sector, with a heavy emphasis on those who are experts through lived experience.

2. Mandate greater data sharing from schools.

As it stands, schools are not required to publish disaggregated data on their pupils, including those subject to disciplinary action, suspension, and informal exclusion. This data is crucial for BGM communities to monitor the activities of their local schools, and to quickly identify any issues potentially caused by systemic racism, misogyny, ableism, or any combination of these. Whilst this must be organised in a way that protects pupils' privacy and identities, greater transparency can only serve to improve the service delivery of schools for their students.

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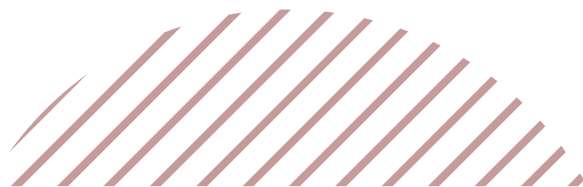
This should also be reflected in data published on staff and governors. In 2023, the DfE encouraged schools to begin compiling and publishing this data, but this was not mandatory. Given the issues brought about by a lack of culturally competent support and governance in schools detailed throughout this report, this data should be published as standard, to facilitate closer monitoring of the extent to which staff and governors are representative of the communities which they serve.

3. **Significantly increase schools' capacity to support BGM and other minoritised children.**

Throughout our case studies with those in and around the school sector, a recurring issue is a lack of recognition given to BGM and minoritised children for their efforts. Due consideration should be given to those who are often balancing their participation in school with significant additional emotional and psychological labour in their home lives, and facing a range of discriminations whilst doing so. Classroom performance is not a level playing field, and failing to recognise and celebrate the additional efforts of BGM children can lead to further disengagement from often already hostile school environments. Equipping and encouraging schools to take an intersectional lens in the celebration of pupils' achievements will help to address these issues.

However, both this and the points outlined above, cannot be achieved without additional funding to enable schools to build staff capacity in light of this increase in workload. For too long already overworked teachers have been told to do more with less. This poses many significant issues, including a lack of time for continued professional development, delivering proper pastoral care to pupils, and relying on insufficient classroom resources to deliver content, all of which have led to a retention crisis in teaching, felt most acutely amongst BGM staff. A real funding commitment from the Government will allow teachers the time to properly serve their communities and deliver for their BGM pupils, as all teachers will want to do.

4. Require Large Businesses to Sign up to the Race at Work Charter

Beyond the school sector, the 'employment' studies detailed in this report show several issues for BGM employees working in the private sector, including a lack of access to mentorship and network-building, an absence of culturally competent support, and often stagnant careers, characterised by a lack of training and progression. These issues are felt most acutely by 'double jeopardy' BGM women in the workplace.

At present, country signatories of the Race at Work Charter commit to seven key actions to advance racial equity in the workplace. These include appointing a senior sponsor for race to ensure accountability and leadership on race initiatives and capturing and publishing ethnicity data to track and share progress. They must also implement a zero-tolerance approach to racism, fostering inclusive workplace policies and responses. Supporting career progression for ethnic minority employees, engaging managers in delivering diversity and inclusion goals, and providing workplace mentoring or sponsorship are critical components. Additionally, they promote inclusive supply chains by encouraging diversity among suppliers.

Signatories to this charter are reporting positive steps taken within their companies as a result of this action. We propose that the Government should require large businesses with over 250 employees to sign up for the Race at Work Charter and to consider what functions of the charter could be made legally enforceable.

For Universities

5. Provide more funding to support BGM and international students and staff

As our case studies concerned with the universities sector show, BGM students and staff, including those who have come from overseas to join the universities, are consistently let down by institutions that have nonetheless become reliant on the income and expertise that international students and staff provide.
Common issues include a lack of community-building, institutional and

peer support for students, and a lack of mentorship, peer support, and progression for BGM staff. Universities should address this as a matter of some urgency, given the increasing importance of these individuals for the UK's Higher Education ecosystem
.

In the first instance, universities should make more funding available for these communities. For students, this could include funding for setting up societies and support networks for BGM and international students and culturally competent and informed career guidance. For staff, this would mean additional funding to facilitate mentorship and network-building for BGM academics and early-career researchers.

6. Mandate cultural competency training for all staff.

The primary and secondary findings detailed in this report also demonstrate the issues brought about by a lack of cultural competency amongst some university staff, leading to feelings of isolation and alienation for BGM and international students. Universities should seek to rectify this immediately, mandating cultural competency and sensitivity training for all student-facing roles. This training should be co-designed with affected communities, and in particular with those who are experts through lived experience.

For Industry

7. Adopt blind job application processes.

Many of the issues faced by BGM employees in the private sector detailed in this report are partially caused by a lack of representation of BGM employees, and often BGM women, in the industries that our Peer Researchers have been working in. Greater representation enables a more diverse range of views and opinions to be incorporated into the governance structures of private organisations, and more equitable policies to be put into place.

However, structural and systemic biases often prevent such employees from even being granted an interview. As such, we recommend that companies across the private sector introduce name-blind job application

processes and appraise candidates purely on the strength of their applications and qualifications. As our secondary research during this report demonstrates, companies who have adopted such practices report an increase in BGM staff, which can only serve to improve their service delivery in both the short and long term.
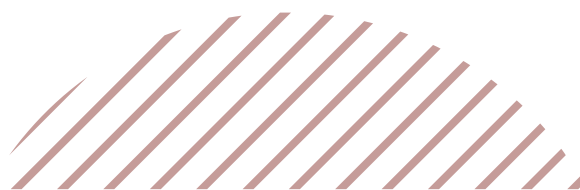
8. Provide sector-wide funding to facilitate networking and mentorship for junior BGM employees.

Beyond being granted a seat at the interview table, however, BGM employees frequently face difficulties navigating the cultural norms of industries which were not established to serve members of our community equally. A lack of mentorship, role models, and support for progression was the number one concern for most participants across all three of our employment case studies. As the respondents from one study put it: "You can't be what you can't see".

In time, we hope that blind application processes will enable more BGM staff, and BGM women in particular, to advance to decision-making roles within every industry in the UK. However, for the time being, wide job sectors should make funding available to enable mentorship for junior employees from BGM executives across their sectors. This in turn will enable companies to nurture talent within their organisations, with the support of external mentors.

9. Mandate cultural competency training for all managers.

Finally, we recommend that all private companies consider mandating cultural competency training for all staff who manage a team. Issues of unconscious bias and systemic racism continue to negatively affect BGM employees across all industries. Equipping managers to recognise and mitigate these, whilst supporting their BGM staff, is likely to significantly improve the wellbeing of these staff, improving retention rates whilst enabling companies to further develop and progress their BGM talent.

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Reflections and Learnings

The first RCRP cohort was, on the whole, very successful. Our Peer Researchers planned and executed exceptional research programmes, generating a wide range of policy recommendations and impactful data. This report marks the beginning of a continued effort to drive meaningful change based on their work. However, this inaugural year has been a learning curve for all involved. Developing a new participatory research model inherently requires iterative development, and we are eager to evaluate and build on our strengths over the next two years.

We envision the RCRP Framework as a dynamic tool that will grow and evolve as the programme expands. To that end, we are committed to publishing our evaluations and other learnings so that others may adapt and benefit from our approach. We aim to demonstrate the immense value of centring our BGM communities in research that directly concerns them, amplifying their voices as we work towards racial equity in the UK.

Reflections on Year One

Participant recruitment in the first year was highly successful. We benefited from an engaged membership that actively shared our call for applicants, enabling us to attract a strong pool of candidates. Many of these applicants came from research and policy backgrounds, with several holding or pursuing postgraduate degrees. This significantly enriched the cohort's talent and expertise, facilitating productive peer-to-peer learning during training sessions.

The training sessions themselves ran smoothly due to the cohort's familiarity with key social research concepts and ethics. For many participants, these sessions served as "top-up" courses, enabling deeper communal discussions around practical challenges, such as designing and conducting field research. Research design also proceeded effectively, with Peer Researchers demonstrating flexibility and adaptability in capturing the necessary data from their participants. While trial and error was occasionally required, this adaptability ensured successful outcomes.

Recruiting participants for research proved to be a challenge for almost all Peer Researchers. In some cases, we had to implement last-minute participant incentives, yet a few
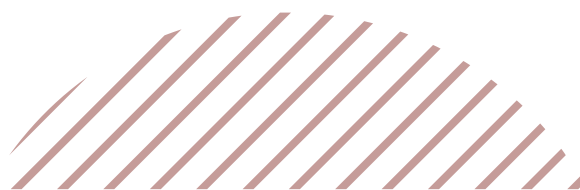
researchers still had to work with less data than anticipated. Despite these challenges, the cohort managed to navigate these hurdles effectively, and data gathering was ultimately successful.

The initial phase of analysis was particularly strong. Most Peer Researchers conducted their own analysis using tools such as Excel and Taguette (an open-source alternative to NVivo), extracting relevant themes and quotes to inform their policy and practice recommendations. However, synthesising the data and preparing this report proved more time-intensive than anticipated. The lack of a standardised format for data submission, combined with the diverse range of case studies and their varying levels of completeness, required significant effort to consolidate into a cohesive final report.

Additionally, short-term capacity issues at ROTA hindered our ability to amplify and celebrate the Peer Researchers' work during the programme's progression, and to conduct as thorough an evaluation of our approaches across the first year as we would have liked. Nevertheless, the RCRP Framework has demonstrated tremendous promise as a radically decentralised model for community-based participatory research, and we are excited to expand and refine this approach in the coming years.

Key Learnings for 2025

To strengthen the programme for the 2025 cohort, we plan to implement the following improvements to the RCRP Framework:

1. **Recruitment:** While the first cohort excelled, the prevalence of applicants with prior research experience suggests that our recruitment strategy may favour those with such backgrounds. Since most community members lack direct research experience, we will revise our recruitment strategies to attract a broader and more diverse applicant pool, ensuring a wider range of voices are amplified.

2. **Training:** The challenges faced by many Peer Researchers in participant recruitment highlight the need to address this area more thoroughly. In 2025, we will integrate discussions on effective recruitment strategies earlier in the training process to better prepare participants.

3. **Research Design:** Research design was a strength of the first cohort, but the ethical dimensions of their work placed a significant burden on the RCRP team. To address this, we plan to establish a standing ROTA Research Ethics Committee (REC) to rigorously assess all research activities, including those of the RCRP Peer Researchers, ensuring a more efficient and robust process.

4. **Data Synthesis and Write-Up:** Consolidating data from nine diverse case studies without a standard submission format proved unsustainable. For 2025, we will implement a standardised format for data submission, streamlining the synthesis and report-writing process.

5. **Communications and Outreach:** The adjustments outlined above will free up time for the RCRP team, enabling us to enhance our communications and outreach efforts. This will allow us to better showcase the impactful work of the next cohort of Peer Researchers and further amplify their voices.

6. **Evaluation:** For the 2025 cohort, we would like to more thoroughly embed evaluative practices into the RCRP. For 2024, we handed out anonymous evaluation forms to PRs upon the completion of their initial training, but relied on additional training sessions and progress check-ins to evaluate the progress and wellbeing of PRs thereafter. Introducing more anonymous feedback checkpoints would allow us to get a better understanding of PRs wellbeing, and enable us to respond more promptly to any feedback.

Through these developments, we aim to build on the successes of our first year and strengthen the RCRP Framework as an innovative and impactful model for participatory research.