

# Race, higher education and special educational needs and disabilities

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**AUTHOR**

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# Summary

Drawing on survey data of 224 students at a London-based university, this study brings attention to ‘ecological niches’ that combine to produce contexts that are likely to have an effect on the access, participation and graduate outcomes of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). While the results suggest dissonance between students’ and academics’ attitudes and actions relating to equality, diversity and inclusion, the findings provide the groundwork for larger-scale research and scholarly activities. They also present an opportunity for strategic development linked to United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 4 (quality education); 10 (reduced inequalities); and 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions).

# 1. Introduction

In the UK, questions about the overrepresentation of BAME groups with SEND (particularly Black students of Caribbean descent (BSCD)) have been raised for more than six decades. ‘The widely-held belief that Black children were somehow educationally subnormal’ (Demie & McClean, 2017, p. 1) was first articulated by Coard (1971) to express his concern that large numbers of children from BAME backgrounds were being unjustifiably labelled. Coard (1971) supposed that teachers had a poor understanding of the needs of BSCD, which led to stigmatisation, lowered expectations and self-esteem, school exclusion and poor educational outcomes (Demie & McClean, 2017; Hamilton, 2018). In the 1980s, both the Rampton Report (DfES, 1981) and the Swann Report (DfES, 1985) found corroborating evidence to suggest that BSCD were still underachieving, especially when compared to their White peers (DfES, 1985). Over 30 years later, Gillborn et al.’s (2016) report on the changing landscape in English education systems highlighted how, on average, BAME students’ attainments consistently improved, but for ‘Black Caribbean and Mixed Race (White/Black Caribbean) students the improvements [were] tempered by significant and persistent race inequalities’ (Gillborn et al., 2016, p. 44). In an article discussing the cross-fertilisation of critical race theory and disability studies, Liasidou (2014) asserts that it is unsurprising that Black students are over-represented in SEND (Tomlinson, 1982), and especially where non-normative SEND categories (such as moderate learning difficulties and social, emotional and mental health disabilities) are concerned. Arguably, these categories of SEND are predicated on ‘arbitrary and subjective evaluations that are influenced by prejudice and discrimination’ (Liasidou, 2014, p. 723).

It is more than 50 years since Coard’s (1971) *How the West Indian child is made educationally sub-normal in the British school system* was first published, and since then, legislation and guidance have addressed discrimination in the English education system. For instance, with the introduction of the SEND Code of Practice (2014) and the Further Education Code of Practice (2014) the duties and responsibilities of local authorities, health bodies, schools, colleges and further education (FE) providers are comprehensively asserted. Furthermore, under the Equality Act (2010)

all education providers (including Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)) must make available ‘reasonable adjustments’ to ensure that students with SEND can fully access and enjoy all aspects of education. Higher Education (HE) students are also supported by government-funded postgraduate/disabled students’ allowances (DSAs). Notwithstanding, it is deeply concerning that disproportionalities continue to exist based on race/ethnicity and SEND in HE. Notably, BAME students and students with SEND (especially those with mental health needs) are less likely to remain in HE, or graduate with good outcomes and progress on to highly skilled jobs or postgraduate study (Hubble et al., 2021). This remains the case, even after prior attainment, age and gender are controlled. Indeed, White students’ outcomes are better than students of all other ethnicities, even if they start university with the same entry grades as their BAME peers (Universities UK, 2019). However, it might be argued that disparities are not because of differences between BAME and White HE students in their relative abilities, but as a result of persistent racial inequalities that infiltrate their environments. Bronfenbrenner (1993) identifies the following salient environments: (1) the microsystem (that is students’ immediate environment); (2) the mesosystem (connections between microsystems – for example family and university); (3) the exosystem (factors beyond students’ immediate environment – for example their support network); (4) the macrosystem (for example cultural norms and values); and (5) the chronosystem (for example historical events and developmental transitions).

Across the world, Bronfenbrenner’s (1993) ecological systems theory has been applied to educational and social contexts. Findings have demonstrated that this framework is well suited to researching vulnerable groups (for example Eriksson et al., 2018; Henderson & Baffour, 2015) and can play a role in supporting social justice (Koller et al., 2020). It is against this background that a rationale for the present pilot study emerges. While the HE sector is placing a renewed focus on tackling racial inequalities, this study paves the way for a larger study that aims to take an ecological approach to identify and organise interactive factors that explain the racialised experiences of university students.

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In this pilot study, however, the ecological influence of mesosystems within the context of a London-based university campus milieu are of particular interest. Specifically, the study aims to bring attention to differences between SEND (that is students who self-identify as having SEND) and non-SEND students' experiences of microaggressive and explicit forms of racial prejudice and discrimination. According to Bronfenbrenner, 'When ecological factors converge together to form predictors that may be more (or less) favourable to human development, an ecological niche is created' (Crawford, 2020, p. 3). Using an intersectional lens, this study aims to reveal 'ecological niches' that may detrimentally affect BAME university students with SEND. To my knowledge, there is no research examining intersectional discrimination within HE in this way.

# 2. Methodology

## 2.1 DESIGN

As part of a larger study examining HE students' experiences of racism, this study is conducted on a pilot basis to determine the potentialities of future research.

## 2.2 SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Overall, 224 students from one London-based UK university were included in demographic analyses

(see tables below). Within this sample, 74 participants identified as being from a White ethnic background; 136 identified as being from a BAME ethnic background; and 14 participants did not disclose their ethnicity (see Table 2.1). Most participants were aged 18–24 (n = 108, 51.4%) and 35–44 (n = 62, 29.5%). There were 134 female, 79 male and three non-binary participants. Eight students did not disclose their gender identity. Age and gender of participants are summarised in Tables 2.1 and 2.2.

**Table 2.1**  
Participants' ethnicity and age

Age	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	Total
White	37, 50%	21, 28.4%	10, 13.5%	4, 5.4%	2, 2.7%	74
BAME	71, 52.2%	41, 30.1%	17, 12.5%	6, 4.4%	1, 0.7%	136
Total	108, 51.4%	62, 29.5%	27, 12.9%	10, 4.8%	3, 1.4%	210

**Table 2.2**  
Gender of participants and age

Gender identity	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	Total
Female	69, 51.5%	38, 28.4%	20, 14.9%	5, 3.7%	2, 1.5%	134
Male	40, 50.6%	23, 29.1%	10, 12.7%	4, 5.1%	2, 2.5%	79
Non-binary	3, 100%	-	-	-	-	3
Prefer not to say	1, 16.7%	3, 50%	2, 33.3%	0	0	6
Other	0	1, 50%	0	1, 50%	0	2
Total	113, 50.4%	65, 29%	32, 14.3%	10, 4.5%	4, 1.8%	224

**Table 2.3**

Students who identified as having an additional need

Age	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	Total
White	7, 33.3%	7, 33.3%	4, 19.0%	2, 9.5%	1, 4.8%	21
BAME	10, 47.6%	6, 28.6%	4, 19.0%	1, 4.8%	0	21
Male	5, 41.7%	2, 16.7%	1, 8.3%	2, 16.7%	2, 16.7%	12
Female	10, 32.3%	12, 38.7%	8, 25.8%	1, 3.2%	0	31

Table 2.3 illustrates the characteristics of students who identified as having an additional need. Within this sample of 46 participants, 21 reported that they were from a White ethnic background; 21 reported that they were from a BAME ethnic background; and four participants did not disclose their ethnicity. Of this sample, 31 were female; 12 were male; and three did not disclose their gender identity.

### 2.3 PROCEDURE

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee. Thereafter, all HE students at one London-based university were invited to participate in the study. The Qualtrics survey included a series of questions, scales and open-ended items, and was broken down into three sections. First, demographic information was collected, including details of participants' gender, age, ethnicity, level of study, faculty in which they were studying, and

qualifications. Second, using adapted surveys (Johnson et al., 2017), participants were asked to rank (on a five-point Likert scale) the effectiveness of support structures at the HEI. There were several open questions, allowing for elaboration. Third, several questions (adapted from a campus diversity survey) were asked to better understand and compare the racialised experiences of students with SEND and without SEND.

### 2.4 ANALYSES

Data were analysed using SPSS with a series of descriptive and comparative analyses. Although SEND and non-SEND participants often reported similar levels of racialised discrimination, where significant differences between the participants' 'yes' and 'strongly dis/agree' responses came to light, these were extracted and grouped into themes (see Tables 2.2, 2.3 and 3.1).

# 3. Discussion of results

The results from this pilot study bring attention to the differential racialised experiences of university students with SEND compared to those without SEND. We identified two particularly concerning issues relating to interpersonal discrimination and microaggressive insults.

## 3.1 INTERPERSONAL DISCRIMINATION

Discrimination occurs when a person is treated unequally because of their group membership.

**Table 3.1**  
Interpersonal discrimination

	Reported	SEND	Non-SEND
Been ignored after expressing my ideas or sharing my comments because of my race/ethnic origin	Yes	21.7%	10.5%
Been in a situation where a staff embarrassed, patronised or treated me negatively because of my race/ethnic origin	Yes	17.8%	5.6%
Been in a situation where a student embarrassed, patronised or treated me negatively because of my race/ethnic origin	Yes	21.7%	10.4%

Notably, although both SEND and non-SEND participants reported that their fellow students and university staff had treated them in a demeaning manner (because of their race/ethnicity), by and large, students with SEND were twice as likely as non-SEND students to reveal that they were subjected to denigrating treatment. In other words, students with SEND were much more likely than non-SEND students to report that they were the victims of subtle, aversive and direct forms of race-based interpersonal discrimination. Therefore, it can be deduced that the message conveyed to BAME students with SEND is that their presence and their contributions are not valued by some staff and peers.

While there are different types of discrimination, interpersonal discrimination in this context ‘includes both verbal content as well as nonverbal and paraverbal processes (e.g., posture and voice quality, respectively)’ (Persky et al., 2016, p. 2). Bearing this definition in mind, in this study there were several significant variations between participants’ ‘yes’ responses, as shown in Table 3.1.

While there is a paucity of research in this area of study, researchers have consistently reported the prevalence of interpersonal discrimination in universities, and about the harmful consequences of this. For instance, research relating to the non-academic aspects of student life found that over 50 per cent of Black participants experienced racism in their student halls perpetuated by peers and staff (Halpin, 2022). The researchers surmised that BAME students’ academic outcomes and mental health were detrimentally affected. In other studies, fear of stigmatisation led some university students with diagnoses of autism to avoid asking for help and/or support (Cai & Richdale, 2016).

### 3.2 MICROAGGRESSIVE INSULTS

A microaggressive insult is a prejudicial comment or action that offends a marginalised group or person (Sue et al., 2007). In this study, it is significant that, at roughly twice the rate, students with SEND were

more prone than non-SEND students to encounter thinly veiled comments pertaining to their intellectual capabilities. Students with SEND reported that they suffered such behaviours simply because of their racial heritage or ethnic identity (see Table 3.2).

**Table 3.2**  
Microaggressive insults

	Reported	SEND	Non-SEND
Put down intellectually because of my race/ethnic origin	Yes	19.6%	10.4%

Put differently, although the reasons why students encounter microaggressive insults are complex, this study has found that the reasons more often intersect with race/ethnicity for students with SEND. These

findings are somewhat reminiscent of times when educational professionals supposed that both BAME and SEND children and young people were uneducable (University College London, 2020).

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## 4. Conclusion

In this pilot study, students with overlapping intersectional identities (that is BAME and SEND) were considered in terms of ecological niches that might cause disadvantage and discrimination. While additional research investigating this topic is warranted before the findings may be generalised to a larger population, there is clear evidence that SEND does not affect all students in the same way. The results reveal that students with SEND are much more

likely to encounter specific forms of interpersonal and microaggressive discrimination simply because of their BAME identity. The author surmises that Bronfenbrenner's (1993) theory holds great promise for informing future research and practice, and may be yet another avenue for informing work concerning longstanding BAME–SEND access, participation and achievement gaps. This paper is timely given the current SEND review (DfE, 2022).

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