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# Black excellence: the affective experiences of Black working-class young people in an English secondary school

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## ABSTRACT

Affect and habitus are used in the paper to harness the intermingling of race and class in the young people's everyday identity practices at school, as they aspire to embody 'Black excellence'. This paper draws on ethnographic data collected with working-class Black-British young people aged between 16 and 18. Through the careful management of identity and reputation, the young people in this paper negotiate affective struggles to attain and secure a high academic status within a deeply neoliberalised school context. The paper argues that the identity discourse of 'Black excellence' connects dimensions of class and race in the young people's identity work. Black excellence is described as classed and racialised reflexivity which helped the young people pivot their identity as they sought to maximise their educational opportunities to transition into elite universities.

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## Introduction

Inequalities of class and race in youth have been explored in various qualitative and sociological studies, through various lenses, such as celebrity culture (Allen & Mendick, 2013; Mendick et al., 2018), friendships (Hollingworth, 2015, 2020; Hollingworth & Mansaray, 2012), aspirations (Allen & Hollingworth, 2013; Connolly & Healy, 2004; McLeod, 2015) and extra-curricular activities (Perrier, 2013; Vincent & Ball, 2007; Vincent, Rollock, et al., 2013). These inequalities have affected students from diverse backgrounds for decades as they transition to university. For example, in the UK, the intakes of Black students at elite universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge, have remained at less than 2% for many years, other Russell Group universities report an intake of students from various Black backgrounds as only 4%, whilst only 1% of university professors in the UK identify as Black (HESA, 2023). It is difficult to pinpoint where the issue

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starts, but the Lammy report (2017) highlighted how a disproportionately low number of 400 Black pupils (on average) obtain at least three As at A-level in England a year; a requirement to apply to selective universities. Whilst other reports point to how Black students are less likely to stay in higher education with lower retention rates and degree outcomes lower than average. This paper uses the lens of affect to explore a group of Black-British young people's experiences at school and how classed and racialising divisions continue to impact on their lives as they enact an identity discourse they refer to as Black excellence.<sup>1</sup>

Black excellence has been described as a term that represents both, how Black communities need to fight for their continued advancement in an unequal racially divided society (Scott, 2017); but it has also been used to denote the individual achievements of singular members of the Black community. Therefore, this paper considers the ways in which Black excellence is used by a group of young people to negotiate a reformed schooling system based on neoliberalism, creating strong ideological positions on 'how we value ourselves, and value others' (S. J. Ball, 2016, p. 1047). Importantly, when discussing neoliberalism, I focus on its effects on racialised and classed youth identities; neoliberalism becomes an institutional 'technology of governing' and self-governing (Ong, 2007, p. 4). The youth identity negotiations explored in this paper are presented as profoundly infused by a neoliberal context of schooling.

The UK school context has been opened up to neoliberal forces for many years.<sup>2</sup> The implications of neoliberalism in schools include a transformation of schools' cultures to help govern by 'performativity and accountability', giving saliency to a form of 'discipline' that serves to 'police' and to 'perform' (Perryman et al., 2018, p. 148) key traits of 'neoliberal subjectivity' (Rose, 2010). The paper argues that Black excellence became coopted by the school neoliberal governance in place, which goes beyond being just an economic policy and becomes a particular ethic 'of the self ... instilling a reflexive hermeneutics which will afford success to ... a subjective being, who aspires to autonomy' (Rose, 2010, pp. 151–157). The focus of a neoliberal subjectivity is to produce self-improving and self-accountable individuals who have clear life projects and as 'experts of subjectivity' find the 'most effective ways of managing malfunction and improving quality of life' (Rose, 2010, p. 151). Within the production of a neoliberal subjectivity, the young people leaned into Black excellence to curate an ambitious drive to become what they referred to as 'icons of Black excellence', but were also atomised by the neoliberal demand of self-responsibility.

The focus on affective responses and resistances highlights how the young people enacted 'elective affinities' underpinned by neoliberal, post-racial, hypermeritocratic ideals of identity in the young people's

interpretation of Black excellence (Zekpe, 2015, p. 696). These elective affinities of race and class have been explored by Skeggs through practices of respectability in young white women attending college in the 1990s (Skeggs, 1997). Like Skeggs' young women, the young people in this paper displayed an 'unswerving commitment' to a form of respectability that they identified as Black excellence, which demanded a display of classed behaviours amplified by discourses of merit in the educational environment (Skeggs, 1997, p. 160). In the same way Skeggs' work maps the practices of respectability in the young women's educational identities, this paper traces how affective experiences of Black excellence steer the young people towards delicately balanced classed and racialized identity processes. The affectively charged experiences of Black excellence help the young people envisage their own respectability production through the careful avoidance of the pathologizing often experienced by young Black students in a neoliberal educational era.

Black excellence, in this paper, is explored as contributing to the young people's ambivalences of identity where they are affectively sensing their way through schooling, not yet in elite universities but anticipating how they might evolve once they get there (Ahmed, 2014). The paper explores how young people's perspectives of Black excellence function as a compass to guide the young people's perceived mismatch between their working-class everyday life experiences so far, and the life experiences they anticipate they will have as they transition to university level. In understanding Black excellence, Bourdieu's (1977) habitus is useful to identify the enmeshed and relational nature of race and class. Bourdieu presents habitus as 'the structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (e.g. the material conditions of existence characteristic of a class condition) produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72). Importantly, the use of habitus is a heuristic device that positions life experiences, including feeling and emotion as structuring and form certain dispositions that feel innate and intuitive in individuals (Probyn, 2004). To this effect, the paper unravels the rich affective experiences of dislocation, displacement and processual identity in young people's lives by exploring the ways in which Black excellence worked as a 'racialised habitus' (Cui, 2016, p. 1152) for the young people, allowing them to mould themselves into what they perceived as affectively desirable classed and racialised positions. Habitus in this paper is interceded by the classed and racialised positions of a school environment functioning through a neoliberalism that transposes important aspects of the young people's identities to change and calibrate their adaptability in educational environments, such as elite universities. Yet, whilst Black excellence helped the young people to maintain their focus and ambition in education, it also exposed them to various

effects of the politics of neoliberalism that characterized their schooling experiences.

### Pivoting affect to understand race and class in education

In this paper I use feminist scholarship on affect to open up the dimensions of race and class. Affect has been used widely to explore what emotions do, rather than what they are. Hemmings (2005) 'affective dissonance' and Ahmed's work on the circulation of 'affective value' are used to understand how the identity discourse of Black excellence drives and contrives the young people's identity work, producing a politics of inequality in their schooling experiences (Ahmed, 2014, p. 11). Similarly, feminist scholarship has delved into using affect as a way to dismiss the belief that feminist scholarship is just identity politics, or that it only concerns women. Instead, through affect, feminist scholars have created an understanding of distinctions of inequality that show how the politics of emotion are used as exclusionary practices affecting many. Ahmed (2017) points out that affect is how 'you register something in the sharpness of an impression. Something can be sharp without being clear what the point is' (p. 22). Affect is particularly useful as it gives tangibility and substance to those feelings of discrimination, exclusion and displacement that are often elusive but felt strongly by those othered in education because of their class and/or race (Arday et al., 2021). The young people who took part in the research found themselves at the receiving end of 'microaggressions' (Arday & Mirza, 2018, p. 143), or disadvantaged by the 'operant nature' of Eurocentric, classed and racialised processes of education (Arday, 2019, p. 141). I analyse the young people's narratives and identity work by using affect to help explain those sensations in our experience that leave us with an 'impression that is not clear or distinct' but which matters as they edge us to an understanding of who we are and where we want to be (Ahmed, 2017, p. 27).

According to Ahmed, affect moves and flows, often sticking to moments, events and objects which become 'sticky, or saturated with affect as sites of personal and social tension' (2014, p. 11), this paper explores these tensions in the context of Black excellence. Black excellence worked as a school subculture for the Black-British young people, which gave a name to the young people's 'aspirations culture' and connects social class and racial identity in their pursuit of academic support and respectable post-school educational transitions. This paper sets out to explore what Black excellence means in these young people's lives how the affective motions identified in young people's narratives evoke what Brennan referred to as the 'politics of emotion', a conjunction of feelings, defined as 'those sensations that have

found a match in words' (Brennan, 2004, p. 19), but which are also contextual, spatial and which accumulate value over time.

The affective practices, resistances and responses emerging from Black excellence reinforce a duality associated with the educational success of young people from minority ethnic backgrounds. Namely, that their educational success depends on the erasure of identity categories, whilst also reaffirming that they are exceptional because they are Black young people from underprivileged backgrounds. These are discussed as 'actants' in a 'them and us' identity process which separates and isolates the young people from their peers and their communities (Reynolds, 2013, p. 484). The resulting duality from this neoliberalised hypermeritocratic system in which the young people are educated also implies that those who failed to reach educational opportunities are in some way deserving of their failure. Through affect, the experiences of the young people show how there are essential emotional practices that are distinctive in their efforts to inhabit identities they construct as Black excellence. In this paper, I analyse the young people's identity becomings within a neoliberal context of schooling where youth identity work is not just suppressed in a careful sanitising manner but becomes coopted by enterprising neoliberal school politics emphasising ambition, mastery of the self and individual responsibility.

### Fieldwork and methods

The paper presents qualitative data collected as part of a doctoral ethnographic study that I conducted at a large secondary school in London. The school has been anonymized as Richmond Academy and the research participants' names used are pseudonyms. As an ethnographer I entered fieldwork with an awareness of how, not just my participant observations and interviews, but also my practical and participatory experience constitute the ways in which my knowledge and understanding of the field emerges (Douglas-Jones et al., 2020). Having worked as an enrichment teacher, working occasionally on the extra-curricular support provided on Saturdays I secured entry to the research site through forging connections and establishing rapport. I took a short break from teaching and later after obtaining all consent forms from research participants and parents with the help of school communications, I started the data collection phase. I was at the research site for over three years, negotiating, participating, observing, a time which gave me insight and brought tremendous ethnographic value with 'depth' and 'density' (Todres & Galvin, 2005, p. 21) to understand the field and the young people's experiences. The ethical process involved a lengthy process of discussing consent with research participants and consent forms were signed by parents as well as the young people. Throughout the

research there was also ethical sensitivity to the busy educational lives and responsibilities that research participants had, and I made every effort to adjust the research schedule to be flexible to the needs of research participants. The ethnographic approach undertaken by the researcher was emphasised by heightened attention and participation in the research site which gave me what Tsing (2015), p. 37) calls the ‘art of noticing’.

I decided to conduct interviews to capture and understand the young people’s desire to transition to elite higher education as they were very active ‘social agents’, ‘able to articulate their own experiences and express their views’ making interviews a very suitable method (Shah, 2006, p. 208). An important part of conducting the research involved wrestling with my own ethnicity in this process. As a young woman from the global south, a migrant and more specifically from Latin America, with both indigenous and European ethnic roots, it is important to recognise that whilst my ethnicity is not white, I too benefit from Whiteness. My positionality and not identifying as Black are important since there is a need for reflexivity and care within this study as I analyse and report back on the data. As a researcher and educator, I write about Black boys’ experiences, but I also need to recognise how the aspects of Whiteness that have benefitted me, have also disadvantaged the research participants in this study. Researching and analysing the data from my positionality has allowed opportunities to understand the students’ educational hopes and futures in ways that challenge my own preconceptions. It has also given me the opportunity to remain sensitive to and expose the structurally violent ways in which Whiteness operates in the educational lives of the research participants.

The young people were interviewed at the beginning and at the end of their sixth form studies, which is the final stage of study before entering university education in the UK, resulting in 10 interviews. The research questions included were ethnographic in nature, asking research participants to tell their story, to explain, and it was in these initial interviews that Black excellence appeared as a ‘shared culture’ (Fairweather & Rinne, 2012, p. 475), the qualitative interviews allowed the researcher to gain depth in understanding research participants educational experiences. My positionality as a highly educated migrant eased research participants into discussing their migratory journeys and how they prized education.

Having conducted two interviews per individual research participant offered an insight into the affective transformation research participants felt they needed to undergo and how they anticipated any challenges to fitting into their university places. All research participants gave their individual consent to being interviewed and their parents also gave consent to their participation in the study. I also conducted 30 participant observations in classes as well as school assemblies. The qualitative data presented in this study was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The steps behind the thematic



approach were to read notes from participant observations and the interview data numerous times, followed by a stage of note-taking to produce pre-themes and identify key thematic positionings, then synthesized through the key term of Black excellence (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

### *School context and participants*

Richmond Academy was impacted by its precarious position as it transitioned from a comprehensive school to Academy status and this produced strong binaries for students, in terms of attainment, behaviour and belonging. At the time of the research, the school had over 1,300 students and had just been converted to Academy status after joining a Multi Academy Trust (MAT). Multi Academy Trusts were created as centralising bodies because of UK educational policy introduced in 2011, to run schools through a form of business model which reduces local government's direct responsibility for state-run schools, another extension of neoliberalism in education (Ball, 2016; Perryman et al., 2018). It is important to mention that the move towards becoming an Academy was strongly pursued by the school and it did not involve community consultations, rather, the school was interested in converting to increase resources and funding. At the time the research started, the conversion process was fully in place with immediate changes of leadership, 'purging teachers' who did not fit, whilst neoliberal models of school management encouraged 'the normalization of totalitarian practices through daily routines' (Kulz, 2021, p. 68).

All the young people were studying at the school's sixth form, identified as Black, were all preparing to transition to university at the end of their schooling and were willing to talk about their educational pathways and transitions. Most of these characteristics underpinned the selection criteria behind purposive sampling, with exclusion criteria including students who were planning gap years, who did not identify as Black and those who were not enrolled in the school's extra-curricular support. As a sampling approach, purposive sampling is used extensively in qualitative research to deepen the understanding around a particular phenomenon (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). With a focus on transitions in this study, purposive sampling allowed 'depth' in the data to explore the 'uniqueness' of experience in these participants' educational transitions (Teddie & Yu, 2007, p. 78), particularly when more elite universities continue to lag in recruiting students from ethnic minority backgrounds. An important limitation of this sampling approach is that it does not allow for a comparative sample with other students who do not subscribe to the identity discourse of Black excellence, or do not wish to pursue elite education. However, unlike many of their peers, these students described below were particularly outspoken in their determination to pursue more elite universities from the beginning of their



Participants (pseudonyms)	Age	Gender	Family background	Immigration generation universi	Born in the UK	Years since parents' immigration to the UK	University place
Brian	18	Male	Nigerian	First generation	No	>10 years	University College London (UCL)
Alain	18	Male	Senegalese	First generation	No	>10 years	University College London (UCL)
Zee	18	Male	African-Caribbean	First generation	No	>10 years	Exeter
Rick	17	Male	Nigerian	First generation	No	>10 years	University College London (UCL)
Harrison	17	Male	Nigerian	Second generation	Yes	>20 years	King's College London (KCL)

studies. All five research participants secured offers from three universities which are part of the prestigious UK Russell Group (QS, 2023).

### Race, class and education

Understanding the barriers to Black students' educational achievement is complex, but educational research over the years has provided significant points of departure to make sense of some of the more insidious inequalities, as well as the explicit disadvantages that students from minority ethnic backgrounds may face in education. An important side of the debate has been shaped by research by Gillborn and Youdell (2000), p. 42) identifying how the notion of 'ability' in the 'A to C economy' has led to a 'rationing' of educational opportunity affecting primarily students from minority ethnic backgrounds. Similarly, Bhopal (2018, p. 5) creates a distinction between the expansion of neoliberalism in education and the 'privileging of a free market', which in turns 'reinforces formations of whiteness', through cultural codes that overlook Black and Minority Ethnic groups. Therefore, identifying race inequalities in education as symptomatic of a system where inequality is not based on individuals' own barriers but as the very means upon which the system has been arranged is crucial for identifying discourses and practices that contribute to educational disparities. The significance of this paper lies in how it builds on this existing scholarship and permeates explorations of race and class through the identity discourse of Black excellence. Theoretically, the paper also charts an understanding of affect and habitus through both classed and racializing school experiences in the lives of Black-British young people.

In later research, Gillborn (2003, p. 105) argues how the educational discourse of 'raising standards' has meant that schools rely on exclusionary practices that offer quick fix solutions to meet the required educational attainment that secures their funding. Other research studies have also focused more deeply on how dimensions of class and race must be researched together to understand the more intersectional disadvantages impacting on young people's education. For example, research by Vincent, Rollock, et al. (2013) depicts a culture of low expectations that can hinder the educational opportunities available to students, creating a plateau in the educational progression of Black students, with racism in education becoming 'more subtle and insidious' with 'race changing how class works' (p. 929) particularly for students who seek to attain higher. These findings are important in this paper, as they seem congruent with the tensions identified in the young people's developing identities which they negotiated affectively, as they were 'feeling their way' (Ahmed, 2014, p. 1) towards educational achievement through Black excellence; a comparable identity marker to the respectability that the young women in Skeggs (1997) work were seeking to embody. Correspondingly, Black excellence embodied and calibrated research participants relations and behaviours in ways that show that it is too simplistic to just add race onto class. Rather, as this paper explores, the young people in this study were trying to envisage ways in which they could avoid being 'bodies out of place' (Ahmed, 2014, p. 2), by affectively self-steering and working on themselves into classed and racialised identity positions that they perceived as suitable to their educational futures.

Similarly, cultures of low expectations in education manifest in several modes of neglect or invisibility for Black students in education (Demie, 2021), but can also contribute to a negative hypervisibility of students' behaviour. Research points to how the hypervisibility of Black students can be very quickly stereotyped as 'at risk', 'angry' and problematic, a feature that has haunted the schooling of Black boys for decades (James, 2012, p. 464). To this effect, Archer, Hollingworth, et al. (2007) also explored how even when Black young people seek to establish a sense of style and taste they can be fixed in 'marginalised and disadvantaged social positions' which act as a 'double bind' in how important they are for identity production whilst also reproducing their identities as needing sanitisation and management when at school (p. 219–220). Importantly, this paper traces how research participants learn to 'how to play the game' (Rollock, 2022, p. 152), to curate a sense of self which appears as suitably classed and racialised to fit within the mainstream white culture of institutions. This paper is underscored by this research as it narrates what Ahmed (2014) refers to as 'affective economies' in education which act as 'kinds of orientations towards objects and

others, which shape individual as well as collective bodies' (p. 15). Some of the research around affect (Thrift, 2009, p. 175) points to how affect results in a 'set of embodied practices' that become contextualised, and as Rollock (2022) argues, needed for success and survival.

Educational research has mapped how social class can influence university destinations for young people, with friendships, local identities and dependency on local relationships influencing students from working-class backgrounds more prominently (Ball et al., 2007; Bathmaker, 2015, 2021; Lehmann, 2012; Reay, 2006). Educational research has also appraised how educational processes are also about the economic activity associated with education, the need to educate for employment, to gain qualifications that help the extraction of value causing a form of 'racial capitalism', also including negotiations of class which demand unspoken adherence to 'systems of domination' (Gerrard et al., 2022, p. 425). On racial capitalism, educational research depicts how racism and racial inequalities in education can be strengthened and also concealed through the growth of capitalism (Patel, 2021). The notion of Black excellence can help explain further how amalgamations of class and race underpin the affective experiences of young people in a nuanced neoliberal school where economic value goes beyond simple currency to social relations of 'capital', 'accumulating ... by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups ... These antinomies of accumulation require loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value, and racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires' (Melamed, 2015, p. 77).

Other scholarly work points to the convergence between class and race. The work by Warikoo (2019) analyses perceptions of merit to understand the role class and race play in the tangible enactments of social justice in elite universities. Warikoo's research (Warikoo, 2019) *The Diversity Bargain* delves into the complexities around understanding emergent issues in educational institutions. Warikoo's work focuses on how the very organisational cultures of elite universities can influence the perceptions of students across various markers of class and ethnicity. The notion of merit has also been useful for identifying how Black students struggle against social constructions of 'deservedness and entitlement' that 'result in an "other" ... widely viewed as underserving' (Schneider & Ingram, 2005, p. 2). This paper presents the affective relations identified in young people's experiences as they negotiate a school governance that constructs merit according to neoliberal and classed codes of behaviour. Like the educational research presented, this paper centers on traversing inequalities of class and race in education to understand the nuanced experiences of Black students. Yet, this paper is also about exposing some of the subtle layers of affect that make up the notion of merit in education. Affect theory helps to discern the experiences of the young people in a meritocratic system of school governance

where they have to culturally, socially and affectively adapt to neoliberal formations of identity.

### **'Turning the tide': fitting in the classed-racialised affective economy of the school**

The young people referred to Black excellence as an 'internal drive', a type of 'Black integrity' which shows 'inconformity' with traditional educational and life outcomes for Black people; and an 'ambition' to 'represent and be counted' in educational places where Black students have traditionally been excluded from. This section narrates how the young people felt a palpable affective dissonance towards the perceived classed and racialised assumptions they felt they have encountered at school. There are various affective responses such as, concealment, suppression and what has been termed 'meritocratic hubris' (Sandel, 2021, p. 14) in the young people's narratives. The young people's experiences are discussed in light of their pursuit of educational futures which is guided by an aspirations culture they refer to as Black excellence. I argue that Black excellence encapsulates elements of class and race in the lives of the young people, but which are also tainted by a neoliberal structure of feeling (Williams, 1977) demanding constant racial and class self-making and reinvention.

Richmond Academy prided itself on having extra-curricular provision which ran both on school days and Saturdays. However, this extra academic support was only available to a limited number of students, who were only able to attend if an invitation had been extended to them from key teachers. This section explores some of the strategies and management of identity that the young people used to secure their access to the Saturday school. Harrison and Alain described how their form teacher was always enforcing uniform policies, which meant that they were often 'picked on' and reminded of their 'lack of compliance', instead of being recognised for their improving educational attainment. Alain mentioned how his previous lack of uniform compliance meant that teachers asked him to 'show his commitment by looking smarter' and prove that he was 'worthy of the opportunity'. Similarly, Harrison asked about extra support with his university applications and was reminded that the 'Saturday school was for those who earned their place' and that he could start by 'wearing his uniform correctly everyday without fault'. The demand from teachers to work on their 'deservedness' and 'trustworthiness', by addressing their appearance at school, exemplifies how the construction of the notion of merit goes beyond cognitive or intellectual capacity and is instead defined by different gradients of classed and racialised behaviour (Schneider & Ingram, 2005, p. 3). Both Brian

and Rick described how they approached their mathematics teacher and were told to wait for spaces to become available as they were ‘not priority’, they were classed as ‘already doing well’, ‘would definitely go to university’. But as Rick explained, ‘I don’t just want to go to any uni, I am so close, I just need this, I am not going to Greenwich . . . I need A\* in further mathematics if I’m going to UCL’.

The clear competition that existed to access the extra tuition and support at Richmond Academy, some of which was delivered by PhD students from the prestigious universities the young people were pursuing, pushed the young people towards technologies of self-making integral for success in a neoliberalised educational context (Hardt & Negri, 2004). It is in these school negotiations that the dimensions of identity of class and race became very evident to the young people. Zee recounted how he knew he could not ‘push too hard even if treated unfairly’, but he just had to ‘be consistent and painfully polite’, because ‘anger doesn’t take anyone like me nowhere’. The disparagement and downplaying of emotions was a strong affective marker in the shaping of identities for the young people; they were too aware, ‘if you just make a fist or grunt a little . . . you’ve lost them’, Zee explained. As a result, avoidance of stereotypes that have historically been used to disadvantage working-class young Black males produced very careful identity negotiations for the young people (Taylor et al., 2019), and demonstrated their resourcefulness in managing their racialised and classed identities within the institution (Rollock et al., 2015). Similarly, Rick explained how he felt that he had to ‘turn the tide’ through ‘acting well . . . never emotional . . . never aggressive, never frustrated’, referring to how he felt overlooked by teachers who could not be ‘pushed too hard or they would turn against you’. As a result, repression emerged as a recurrent affective experience, a repression of emotions is still an emotion, a repression to avoid being a ‘spectacle’ can be just as complex as ‘speaking out’ and an important form of ‘critical resistance’ (Ahmed, 2014, p. 168).

The young people described how in their efforts to be included they also needed to avoid the stereotype of the ‘at risk’, angry Black boy which has haunted the schooling of Black boys for decades (James, 2012, p. 464). The young people described how ‘difficult’ it was to strike the right balance between gracefully accepting that they had to struggle harder to access opportunities, whilst also remaining consistent in their pursuit of opportunities, because as Rick describes, you are ‘not on anyone’s agenda’. Harrison explained ‘you can cut the atmosphere with a knife sometimes because you know you’re approaching [a teacher] and the whole vibe gets heavy . . . that’s when you have to be most controlled, most respectable’. The affect towards the young people was characterised by teachers pacifying reassurances and a palliative approach to the young people’s continuous attempts to attend the extra academic provision. Unsurprisingly, once all the young people were invited to the extra support sessions, at different points in time, they were very cautious about giving credit

to any of the teachers. Brian asserted how ‘it was about time . . . now everyone is like count yourself lucky to have access to all this . . . to me this is not luck, I tried hard enough, and I deserve the credit . . . that’s Black excellence’.

### **‘Blazing the trail’: preparing for elite post-school transitions through Black excellence**

As the young people moved through education, they developed a sense of determination to attend university because many of them understand it as Zee explains, ‘not an automatic next step after school for Black people around here’. Zee’s awareness is corroborated by plenty of educational research which over the years has shown how there is a spatialised and specialist way of benefitting from neoliberalised educational markets, which Ball and Vincent refer to as ‘grapevine knowledge’ (Ball & Vincent, 1998, p. 377). Although Zee is clear about his ambition to pursue university education, he is also aware that he needs to ‘rise above the rest’ and pursue what other participants referred to as ‘first-class’ or ‘elite’ institutions. A common theme running through most participants’ narratives was the need to differentiate themselves from what they regarded as ‘the normal crowd’ by ‘blazing the trail’, unlike those who might ‘put off uni’ or ‘follow friends to uni’.<sup>3</sup> To this effect, Brian commented, ‘I have come a long way since I joined, you come here [school], you speak barely any English and you’re Black, just the fact that your English improves is regarded as enough “progress” [using fingers to add quotation] . . . school should be about a lot more than just making sure I speak English, so I pushed my teachers to see what I mean by progress . . . they’re dealing with something different with me’. The need for differentiation that the young people felt was an important affective marker of Black excellence among the group. Differentiation was an act of refusal and resistance to the culture of low expectations that the young people had experienced at school.

Brian’s experiences are also reflected in other research participants’ experiences who described themselves as ‘changing their story’ or ‘asking for more than the usual’, as Alain explains: At first when you start asking for more support, it’s tricky because you’re a problem, you’re saying you want more, so like there’s not enough support . . . but you have to be sensible, not pushy but ambitious academically, say that you want to grow, but not pushy . . . make one teacher like you, get them on your side, always polite, always proper.

Brian’s and Alain’s passages offer some detail into how they invested time to ‘influence’ and ‘convince’ teachers that they were serious about their studies. Across all interviews, Black students expressed the need they had to manage their race in the public space of the school. It was in these careful management strategies that an affective continuum between

race and class emerges, as evidenced by Rick's conscious 'slowing down and enunciating', Harrison's efforts not to use 'slang' at school, and Brian's efforts to 'clean up' his 'act by not having any rap songs blasting as ringtones' on his phone. The deployment of more neutral and less identifiable accents was a strategy that I witnessed often as a researcher; the young people were very skilled at changing their intonation and adopting a very formal vocabulary within the threshold of the school. As described by Brian, 'I like to surprise people . . . they expect something and you go against the grain . . . yes, I'm Nigerian, I am Black, but a new kind, it's Black excellence'; Alain also added, 'school's no place for slang and this and that, there's enough of that among us [other Black students] . . . school's to show the best version of yourself'. The identity discourse of Black excellence helped students to calibrate their affective dispositions to address the misalignment of their habitus and the institution's (Bourdieu, 1977). The young people's negotiations were strategic, they captured their teachers' attention positively, as they were deeply aware of the 'classed geographies of a range of accents' and how they correspond with 'broader power structures' which contribute to specific social constructions of accents (Donnelly et al., 2022, p. 1011). These were important everyday strategies that show how all the young people were aware of how 'racial difference is invented, perpetuated and reinforced by society' (Gillborn, 2015, p. 278).

But often there were contradictions in young people's narratives regarding whether Black excellence could be attained equally by all. When Zee, Brian and Alain were asked whether Black excellence is something everyone in the Black community can have, they answered 'no', with Zee adding, 'you have to work hard and compete for that opportunity . . . make yourself known'. Similarly, Brian added, 'it's not just about wanting something, everyone wants nice things . . . but do you have what it takes, can you compete? And compete well'. Whilst Alain added, 'it's not so much about an equality, I know I have to work harder because I'm Black, I accept that . . . it's that you have to work on yourself . . . orient yourself . . . blinkered vision, a one-track mind to succeed'. All the young people referred to the need to be 'gracious', 'to act proper', 'to work on your image', 'look and sound the part and be respectable', particularly if, 'you are stepping outside of your local area, if you are outside of your comfort zone'. These perceptions of Black excellence as to do with being 'the best representation of one's self' (Scott, 2017, p. 111), place Black excellence firmly within the identity genealogies of the 'enterprising self' validated by neoliberalism whereby people must become resourceful 'experts of subjectivity' (Rose, 2010, p. 151). The understanding of Black excellence among the young people was heavily impinged by a rationalisation of identity as autonomous, capable of achieving success despite structural barriers through personal effort only.



There is an important distinction to be made at this point with regard to Black excellence as a gradient of what French economist Piketty refers to ‘hypermeritocracy’ (2014, p. 265). Whilst Black excellence has served the young people as a way to resist self-exclusion and cultures of low expectations, making them feel that they are the deserving ones in a ‘new meritocratic order’ (Piketty, 2014, p. 378); it has also served as a means to explain and justify why they are in a better position to become winners in society, as opposed to others. This is evidenced by Alain when he says, ‘I am here, I’m Black and from a poor area of south London and I’m going to study mathematics at UCL; my success past, present and future is down to me . . . you have to want it bad enough and focus’. Brian, who was also offered a place at UCL, speaks of how he is ‘not surprised or moved’ by his achievement, but instead feels like he ‘deserves it’ because unlike others in his community ‘who have a chip on the shoulder for being poor or Black’, he was ‘relentless, willing to change, to compromise, to grow’. Comparably, Harrison also expressed how being deserving will shape his behaviour, ‘I am going to a place where I will be a minority and so I won’t behave like one . . . I’m starting now, here at school . . . I won’t cry and holler if I get a good mark, it is an expectation, it’s the norm for me . . . I won’t conform to those stereotypes’.

The young people were therefore ‘self-steering’ (Rose, 2010, p. 154) away from what they perceived as ‘extreme’ or ‘over the top’ displays of emotion; they were very careful to avoid shame, not to seem joyous or overly surprised. Instead, they were trying to strike the right balance of emotion, displaying affective behaviours that showed that they were worthy recipients as they were ‘selected on the basis of their intrinsic merits’ (Piketty, 2014, p. 334). This creates a clear tension between perceptions of Black excellence as being about representation, equality and activism and Black excellence as being about the readiness of exceptional individuals who attain through merit in adversity (Scott, 2017). In this way, these passages indicate how Black excellence was coopted by a neoliberal subjectivity whereby the ‘self is . . . both an active self and a calculating self, a self that calculates about itself and that acts upon itself in order to better itself’ (Rose, 2010, p. 154).

Whilst the young people were very aware that there are several issues that held them back before and which they had to overcome to secure successful post-school transitions, they were also very opposed to the idea of becoming a voice for otherness or struggle, this appeared as important as succeeding in their education (Bobo, 2014, p. 189). This is explained further by Alain, I don’t want to be that guy you know . . . that difficult guy, or like the mouthy one, the one who’s angry or complaining . . . That’s not what I’m going to uni for . . . I’ve got lots of things coming my way, . . . those people at uni might be

very different from me, sound different to me and I don't want to stand out like that. The young people were very preoccupied with navigating effectively those classed and racialised perceptions that influence our 'fitting in' or 'standing out' in education as discussed by Reay et al. (2010, p. 107).

Black excellence was used by the young people to explain both, the desire to excel and the need for accepting separation and change, as Harrison explains, 'it's worth it, if you go to a top uni it will change your life ... I want to change mine, represent you know ... that's Black excellence'. On the one hand, Black excellence appeared as strong motivating discourse driven by the production of a deserving neoliberal subjectivity. Yet, on the other hand, there was a need to repress and manage that same raced and classed identity to continue to fit in, as Brian explained, 'once you make it you can't just stir things up because that's precisely what people expect, like if something is unfair it should be me who points it out? Why? Because I'm Black? Because I'm closer to the struggle'. The classed racialisation of educational opportunities that the young people describe as a 'dog eat dog' situation, was very present in their understanding of post-school transitions. All participants recognised that they would need to leave their communities and friends to secure the best opportunities, and not let 'friendships decide where to go'. As Zee asserted, 'I am going to Exeter, excited but it's going to be very different ... no one is going to have my back so'; similarly, Brian recognises that, 'getting into a good uni is only one step, you need to stay the course you know'. Yet, in the case of Zee and Brian and other research respondents, they were willing to resist the social pull from friends, communities and family, in order to access more prestigious institutions. Importantly, the young people both demonstrated their awareness of how stereotyped embodiments of race are used to decode their behaviour and that an affective resistance to these racialised and classed expectations is what makes them 'authentic' (Mendez, 2008, p. 221) in the context of Black excellence.

After the extraordinary efforts they had made to secure successful post-school transitions and to evade the school's culture of low expectations for Black students, they felt strongly that there was a 'price to pay' and that price was to 'sometimes look the other way' as Zee observed. Crucially, the young people's understanding of Black excellence seemed to diminish their solidarity with others as it allowed them to highlight how it was their self-accountability and adaptability that made them successful. Black excellence served as a drive but also helped in justifying structural inequalities at school on the basis of effort and merit only, rendering equality as only a matter of individual ambition and pursuit.

## Concluding remarks

Despite the plethora of research tracing the educational underachievement of working-class and Black students in education, some Black working-class students are performing very well at school. However, this paper addresses how for Black working-class young people there are emotional demands and affective economies that they had to contend with in order to inhabit identities that do not threaten their position as successful students. For the young people who took part in the study, remaining successful at the school implied an acceptance of the structured and legitimate codes of behaviour and affects associated with the idealised identity of the good student, and these idealised identities were very often conflicting with their own backgrounds. The young people expertly remained resilient and buoyant amidst an affective economy which they felt disadvantaged them because of their race and class. It was in these affective negotiations where the identity discourse of Black excellence helped them address the ambivalences the school culture held which contradicted their own educational ambitions. The young people explored school complexities and inequalities, such as cultures of low expectations for Black students, conformity with normal attainment and the need to repress emotions by drawing strength and purpose from the affective disposition of Black excellence. Black excellence guided the young people through 'dialectical confrontations' that were emotionally demanding on the young people, marked by affective resistances, and suppressed feelings in the face of unequal treatment.

Yet, some of the difficulties that arose through their adherence to Black excellence ideals were the exposure to effects of neoliberalism and declining associations with working-class and Black identity. In the case of the young people, they were anticipating the need to adapt to different environments and to move across racialised and classed 'sticky affective' situations (Ahmed, 2014, p. 15), as they prepared to enter elite universities. The hypermeritocratic school environment, aided by a 'fractious politics' of neoliberal competition and striving, gave the young people a perception that they 'deserved their success' and so had elevated themselves from the inequalities that impact those from their background (Sandel, 2021, p. 15). In their efforts to secure the best educational provision within their school, the young people experienced several tensions that placed demands on them emotionally and socially, as they were consciously decoupling from friends and community to prepare for transitions to elite universities (Reay et al., 2009). For the young people, the shifting dispositions needed to succeed in the school's affective economy meant that they were subliminally accepting of inequalities and constructed their deservedness in relation to a very limited sense of

solidarity with others in their position or worse positions. The affective and emotional impacts of living in a racialised, classed, competitive and unequal educational environment warrants further research to capture the diversified identity fluctuations in young people's lives.

## Notes

1. Black excellence has arisen both as a narrative that calls attention to perpetual social injustices on Black communities and celebrates the success of members of the Black community.
2. Neoliberalism in education has created various effects such as, the decreasing financial capabilities of local authorities, austerity as a funding strategy, and the government's public spending enfolded that seeks greater privatisation of public services (Kulz, 2021).
3. It has been well documented in educational research how there are classed and racialised post-school transitions whereby those institutions with lower status in university rankings tend to have a greater proportion of students from low-income and minority ethnic backgrounds (S. Ball et al., 1998; Reay, 2006).

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