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Inequality in attainment

Despite the best efforts of the widening participation initiative, the attainment gap in higher education between black and minority ethnic students and their white counterparts remains. The breadth of research around BME attainment presents more questions than answers.

Is it possible to separate a student from their wider context, the places where they grow, live and age? We know that people achieve mastery, self-efficacy and optimum levels of performance through the interaction between their ability, volition and the occupation they choose to engage in; all with the assumption that their environment is an enabling one. So how does inequality pose barriers to BME student attainment in higher education?

As John McKinley said: “Sometimes it feels like this. There I am standing by the shore of a swiftly flowing river and I hear the cry of a drowning man. So I jump into the river, put my arms around him, pull him to shore and apply artificial respiration.” We could substitute “drowning man” for “BME student” and “artificial respiration” for “academic support”. “Again and again, without end, goes the sequence...I am so busy jumping in, pulling them to shore, applying artificial respiration, that I have no time to see who...is upstream pushing them all in.”

If we want to find solutions, we must focus upstream, where the real problems lie. We must modify the economic, political and socio-economic factors – poor housing, job insecurity and social exclusion – that are the precursors of inequality.

At the same time, how can higher education institutions successfully address under-attainment, when society seems to tacitly promote inequality? Like all relationships, trust is a fundamental ingredient. BME students may mistrust the systems and institutions that claim to be interested in their attainment and success. They may approach academic studies with trepidation because they are sceptical of whether there is equality of opportunity in higher education. In a society that is clearly unequal, they may have been socialised to formulate their “academic best self” as inferior to their white counterparts. And since higher education generally promotes a normative ideology that is unreflective of BME students’ values, culture and beliefs, it may be difficult to cultivate academic competence in the face of such academic oppression; after all, education is supposed to be liberating.

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