

Forming equitable partnerships with black students

Melanie-Marie Haywood
Birmingham City University

Abstract

Looking across the field of research on student and staff partnerships, I realise there has been insufficient intentional investigation into the implications of the power struggle that is still evident between staff and students. This struggle is one that comes from the expectations, experiences, and emotions of all parties involved, but also the society and environment within which the partnership is expected to take place. Partnerships are conceptualised as having a meaningful outcome that should feed back into the organisation that initially “suggested” partnership, and provide a platform for change (Mitchell, Cordell & Fam, 2016; Kligyte, 2021). Student staff partnerships should produce new knowledge that can be used to re-imagine the status quo and make meaningful change for the benefit of similar stakeholders, to the student, and also for the organisation.

Introduction

In every UK Higher Education (HE) organisation I have worked with, black students (and staff) often experience the approach to ‘partnership’ as something predatory, largely because the principals of equity are rarely taken into consideration. Without addressing identity, positionality, and their implications for equitable partnerships when racism is a critical factor, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) will not be able to create effective partnerships with black students.

Racism is always a critical factor when dealing with students of colour. In conversations with Black students across the sector, it is clear that HEIs often create relationships that never evolve into partnerships and continue to marginalise black students and staff. We can see evidence of this from the growing body of research into creating partnerships, mentorships, and relationships with students, yet the ethnicity attainment gap still persists, despite 15 years of monitoring, sector regulatory change, and institutional activism to change the outcomes for black students. According to the Office for Students “*Evidence shows that there are differences at every stage of the student lifecycle in the experiences of students from different ethnic backgrounds.*” (OFS, 2021). It is my opinion that Black students are not particularly demanding, or have high expectations in HE. That being said, as a black woman, I recognise I might have a more subjective view.

This reflective discussion will use the framework of Partnership Outcome Spaces as posited by Kligyte et.al. (2021: 4) to drill deeper into the effective design of partnerships with black students. This framework posits that there are four key areas for effective staff-student partnerships:

[Firstly] define the situation outcome space as the challenge that student-staff partnerships seek to address, for example, issues in curriculum, learning and teaching or whole-of-institution practices. In many practice-led student–staff

partnerships, improving the problem situation is the focal point of the activity that brings a partnership together. Second, we identify new knowledge created through unusual configurations of experts and non-experts assembling around a shared problem space as another important outcome space. Learning, the third outcome space is defined as both growth and development in an individual's knowledge and skills, as well as mutual learning, frequently discussed as a key outcome in both transdisciplinarity and student-staff partnerships. In contrast to Mitchell, Cordell, and Fam's (2015) framework, we see mutual learning as a specific type of learning, but not the only kind of learning that can take place in a partnership. Fourth, the relationships outcome space emphasises that the evolution of relationships through the process of partnership could be seen as a worthy outcome in itself.

Whiteness, Institutional superiority, and power structure – a situation within a situation

The vast majority of professors and senior lecturers in the UK are white. Furthermore, disproportionately few are black - while 89.1% are white, 4.3% of all UK HE professors are Asian, only 0.7% are Black (Advance HE, 2021). This immediately poses a problem when looking at who holds the authority for knowledge, and what acceptable knowledge is in HE. For those HEIs that do report on their non-academic staffing we can still see a staggering limitation in the representation of black staff in any position of leadership or seniority. Already we can see a dismal picture of the ability for a black student to see someone that looks like them in positions of leadership during their university experience. This issue of representation is critical in the discourse around creating effective partnerships, as it has become clearer to me that the power struggle in the partnership is one of the major hurdles to a partnership transitioning from a relationship with imbalanced input and leadership, to one of equitable input and leadership by both/all parties. The question of who is creating these partnerships therefore arises.

Haywood & Darko (2020) found that relationships have higher value to black students when they are formed with black staff members, whether in one-to-one mentorships or in community spaces made by and for black people. The authenticity wherein the relationship is formed between a black staff member and a black student has been noted repeatedly by black employees in the universities I have worked with. Black employees often call for the reconsideration of workload allocation and recognition and reward models because they are doing the work of three colleagues without recognition. Black students will often come to Black staff first, or only come to them for help. Evidence of the trust found between people of colour articulated more easily in these "black" spaces, but translating them to non-black spaces is extremely difficult. It becomes more difficult when faced with the predominance of white spaces in mentorship, leadership, and teaching positions.

Due to the historical, societal, and institutional racism that persists in the UK, HEIs constantly find themselves in a conundrum when attempting to create meaningful partnerships with black students, despite having (in most cases) no black employees in positions of senior leadership. Senior leadership roles have implications for institutional sway in terms of power, the ability to influence policy, and also budgetary management. If HEI's perpetuate white leadership, what room is there for forming equitable partnerships with black students at the level of strategic and institution-wide change? Essentially, when seeking to

form learning partnerships with black students, the issue that the partnership seeks to solve will always be dual in nature: a pedagogical issue, but also an anti-racist issue. The difficulty for black students is that the real burden of the 'anti-racist situation' will always fall to them when partnered with a white member of staff, Thus immediately creating an imbalance in the partnership that makes it inequitable. Ultimately, my experience has shown that true partnership can only be formed when there is less or no onus on the student to balance the racial power dynamic. This is easiest when there are employees of colour in the space. As such, my first recommendation to create equitable partnerships with black students is to increase representation of black staff in leadership.

New knowledge, good knowledge, and curriculum imagination

Black students and staff are often those called upon to speak to the nuances of racism, decolonisation, and anti-blackness. While this is not inherently problematic, there is often the assumption made that there is enough knowledge to glean from the black student on these topics, but not enough value to investigate how else a black student can meaningfully interact with their learning environment. The increased push to decolonise the curriculum and create anti-racist universities in the UK is very welcomed, yet there is often a lack of real investigation or action into creating equitable partnerships with black students across the entire university experience. When combined with the pedagogical issues that black students face, we find again a duality in the "*a shared problem space*" that Kligyte et. al (2021) identify in this framework for partnership.

There is enough pedagogical and evidence-based research to show that black students needs are different – notwithstanding the diversity within the grouping of black students. When black students are given autonomy to co-create their learning experiences, partner in curriculum change, and re-imagine what has been traditionally considered to be "good knowledge", I find that students feel a stronger sense of belonging, more relevance, and ultimately have better outcomes in their academic journey. The challenge institutions face is that this progress is often limited to individuals or small groups, and never enough to influence institutional change and rethink the procedures, policies, and practices that perpetuate the marginalisation of black students. The other challenge institutions face is that they are never in a position to collectively and accurately gather data from these moments of progress because of the legacy of institutional racism, lack of trust, and overall disengagement from black students.

Reimagining the curriculum then, means seeking to understand who the learners are, and how their lives can be brought into the learning space. When a black student presents what they hold as knowledge, do we reject it because it veers away from the standard curriculum? Or is it rejected because it forces us to inquire, and learn outside of what we think we should learn? In proposing to colleagues that we diversify assessment in an institution, and provide students with assessment options, I've been told that inclusivity should not sacrifice academic rigour. More than once. This is a perfect example of not listening and being more intentional about maintaining your status quo, than learning something new that will better your students.

Mutual Learning - The third outcome space

Learning, the third outcome space is defined as both growth and development in an individual's knowledge and skills, as well as mutual learning, frequently discussed as a key outcome in both transdisciplinarity and student–staff partnerships.

So far, the discussion has primarily focused on the barriers that prevent institutions and pedagogy from creating effective and equitable partnerships with black students. However, when looking at mutual learning as proposed by the framework, we can see a solution and turnaround in these barriers. Mutual learning is, in my experience, the key to creating an equitable partnership with black students. Though employees are often placed into relationships with black students that require them to engage, I have been able to work backwards from these spaces to look at how we can develop meaningful mutual learning *for* partnership, not just *from* partnership.

Black students are usually placed into these fora because they have some skill or experience that speaks to the problem that is to be solved. I have observed that these students emotional needs are rarely ever considered in preparation for these spaces. It is not enough to bring the student into the space, it is essential to also consider and understand where they are coming from, and how that will frame their contributions. Furthermore, those who are to be on the receiving end of the black students contributions are rarely ever prepared to listen. While there may be silence in the room, there is also often a lack of understanding that often times results in dismissal, gaslighting, or responses that infer complete misunderstanding of what the student wants to convey.

Preparing students effectively for partnership

Empowering black students requires an understanding of what they intend to bring to the table. I have been able to do this best through a combination of planned training for the exercise, and using principals of conversational and culturally relevant pedagogy. For example, Ledley, a black male Caribbean mature student is employed as a student partner in curriculum design. While it is crucial for Ledley to understand the principles and nuance of curriculum design in their institution, it is also important that Ledley feels confident to speak to his own experiences with the subject and the curriculum and also about the facilitators and modes of assessment. This confidence is built through what I call a 'skin to skin' method of nurturing the person. This requires 1-1 interaction - monthly, bi-weekly, or as much as Ledley needs but is also reasonable for the employee who supports Ledley. This also requires investment in Ledley as a person, and not just the initiative of curriculum development for institutional gain. It is in this process of skin-to-skin that I was able to identify that Ledley would more suited to contributing to other areas of strategic importance than he initially thought he would. It was also through this process that Ledley was able to identify his career goals, find meaning, and consider his prospects for employment in the work he conducted at the university.

Preparing the employees for partnership

Although I discussed student preparation earlier, the onus of preparation should be on the employee. Educators in the university are crucial to the development of black students. We

impact the emotional, financial, and social development of the student at a very crucial moment in their existence. Yet, it is the student that gives value to the profession of teaching. The successful learning of all students gives an educator their worth. While the development, marketisation and commodification of HE has made it difficult to focus on this, it is this regular reminder that has been the foundation of any equitable and successful partnership with black students. With this in mind, using the principles of cultural relevance, creating a partnership with black students requires that those in leadership take the initiative to ensure that their teachers are supported to understand how to listen to black students. The spaces where black students have felt heard have always been spaces that sought to understand them, took the time to ask more, and followed up with clear feedback on what has been done as a result of their contributions. These spaces, in my experience, have also had a black person that students trusted in them.

Mandatory EDI training is not a solution but rather something that ignites more questioning in those who care about these issues. Preparation therefore should focus in on positionality, identity, and the nuance of ethnicity. It should focus on the role of the teacher, and their ability to create meaningful spaces to allow black students to bring themselves into. This does not have to be an 'all knowing' space. It is not possible for colleagues, particularly those who are not black, to understand the nuance of blackness and how its non-homogeneity feeds into pedagogy and institutional decision-making. It is, however, possible for colleagues to create spaces that allow the decentring of whiteness, colonialism, and all other collective behaviours that marginalise black students. In other words, take yourself out of the centre. This applies to black staff as well – my own positionality and identity have at times been a barrier to my own ability to step down off the “academic responsibility” high horse in order to ensure that students were being supported rather than led. Whenever I facilitate reflective training with colleagues, I always start with my own positionality and explain how I am still learning to be what my students need me to be.

Conclusion - Evolution of relationship to partnership

It can be argued that the nature of staff-student relationships means that there is no possibility of an equitable partnership, because of the inherent power structure that requires the student to “need” the superior for success in university. This success could be academic, professional, or simply meeting a need to be treated with respect.

However, my experience has shown that when there is clear intention as to the nature of the partnership, and clear understanding of one's positionality, identity, and role, relationships can evolve into partnerships. For me, the indicator of a relationship changing to partnership, is seeing and hearing students valuing their experiences, becoming clearer and more outspoken about their needs, and taking the opportunity to teach other students about their learnings. When students can articulate that they felt wanted, safe, and challenged in their university experience, they have become partners. It has become clearer to me that the fixation with metrics and monitoring of student data can often be at odds with the need to understand the people behind the data, and create meaningful engagement, relationships, and partnerships with them. If UK HE really wants to make progress with the issues around attainment gaps for non-traditional students, and improve the quality of education for all, there needs to be a refocusing on belonging, identity, and the person.

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