



## **“You’re meant to just firm it”**

### **A Critical Narrative Analysis of Black Male Secondary School and Mental Health Experiences**

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## Contents

|                                                                            |    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Front Page .....                                                           | 1  |
| Acknowledgements.....                                                      | 2  |
| Contents .....                                                             | 3  |
| List of Abbreviations .....                                                | 7  |
| Abstract .....                                                             | 8  |
| Chapter 1 Introduction .....                                               | 9  |
| 1.1 Context and rationale .....                                            | 9  |
| 1.2 Note on Terminology.....                                               | 10 |
| 1.3 Aim and Research Questions .....                                       | 11 |
| 1.4 Overview of the Study .....                                            | 11 |
| 1.5 Reflexivity and positionality.....                                     | 12 |
| 1.6 Structure of the thesis .....                                          | 13 |
| Chapter 2 Literature Review .....                                          | 14 |
| 2.1 Introduction.....                                                      | 14 |
| 2.1.1 Background.....                                                      | 14 |
| 2.1.2 Theoretical Orientation .....                                        | 14 |
| 2.2 Disparities in mental health pathways .....                            | 15 |
| 2.2.1 Early intervention and pathways to support .....                     | 15 |
| 2.2.2 School exclusion and long-term trajectories .....                    | 17 |
| 2.3 Systemic and cultural barriers.....                                    | 18 |
| 2.3.1 Structural racism and institutional harm .....                       | 18 |
| 2.3.2 Racialised masculinity, adultification and emotional expression..... | 20 |
| 2.3.3 Stereotypes, representation and school belonging .....               | 21 |
| 2.3.4 Whiteness, epistemic injustice and institutional norms .....         | 22 |
| 2.3.5 Mistrust, stigma and help-seeking.....                               | 24 |
| 2.4 The Role of Educational Practitioners .....                            | 25 |
| 2.4.1 Legislative context and responsibilities .....                       | 25 |
| 2.4.2 Practice and the position of Educational Psychology .....            | 26 |
| 2.5 Gaps in the Literature and rationale for the study.....                | 28 |
| 2.6 Conclusion .....                                                       | 29 |
| Chapter 3 Black Liberation Psychology as a Theoretical Lens .....          | 30 |

|                                                                                      |    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| 3.1 Introduction.....                                                                | 30 |
| 3.2 Liberation and Critical Consciousness.....                                       | 31 |
| 3.3 Empowerment and Praxis .....                                                     | 32 |
| Chapter 4 Methodology .....                                                          | 33 |
| 4.1 Introduction.....                                                                | 33 |
| 4.2 Philosophical Assumptions.....                                                   | 33 |
| 4.2.1 Power .....                                                                    | 33 |
| 4.2.2 Ontology .....                                                                 | 34 |
| 4.2.3 Epistemology .....                                                             | 34 |
| 4.2.4 Axiology .....                                                                 | 35 |
| 4.2.5 Philosophical Paradigm .....                                                   | 35 |
| 4.3 Theoretical and Psychological Framework.....                                     | 36 |
| 4.3.1 Framework Alignment.....                                                       | 36 |
| 4.3.2 Consideration of an Alternative Framework .....                                | 36 |
| 4.3.3 Critical Consciousness, Empowerment and Praxis in Practice .....               | 37 |
| 4.4 Methodological Approach.....                                                     | 38 |
| 4.4.1 Narrative Inquiry.....                                                         | 38 |
| 4.4.2 Participant Selection, Profile, and Sampling - Black men.....                  | 38 |
| 4.4.3 Participant Selection, Profile, and Sampling - Educational Practitioners ..... | 39 |
| 4.4.4 Reflexivity about Power Dynamics and Positionality in Recruitment.....         | 40 |
| 4.4.5 Recruitment of Black Male Participants .....                                   | 40 |
| 4.4.6 Recruitment of Educational Practitioners .....                                 | 41 |
| 4.4.7 Managing Power and Expectations .....                                          | 41 |
| 4.5 Data Collection Process .....                                                    | 42 |
| 4.5.1 Stage 1: Focus Group with Black Male Participants .....                        | 42 |
| 4.5.2 Stage 2: Co-created Artefact Session with Black Male Participants.....         | 43 |
| 4.5.3 Stage 3: Practitioner Reflection Session .....                                 | 44 |
| 4.5.4 Justification for collective storytelling.....                                 | 45 |
| 4.6 Data Analysis .....                                                              | 46 |
| 4.6.1 Analytic Framework: Critical Narrative Analysis .....                          | 46 |
| 4.6.2 Analytic Process: From Transcripts and Artefacts to Interpretive Insight ..... | 46 |
| 4.6.3 Integration of co-created artefacts as narrative data .....                    | 48 |
| 4.6.4 Interpretation and Reflexivity .....                                           | 48 |
| 4.6.5 Methodological Rigour and Trustworthiness .....                                | 48 |

|                                                                                                                |    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| 4.7 Ethical Considerations .....                                                                               | 49 |
| 4.7.1 Care for participants.....                                                                               | 49 |
| 4.7.2 Researcher Well-being .....                                                                              | 50 |
| 4.7.3 Ethical Rigour .....                                                                                     | 50 |
| 4.7.4 Reflexivity as an ethical stance.....                                                                    | 51 |
| 4.8 Methodological Limitations.....                                                                            | 51 |
| 4.8.1 Retrospective accounts .....                                                                             | 52 |
| 4.8.2 Generalisability .....                                                                                   | 52 |
| 4.8.3 Researcher positionality .....                                                                           | 52 |
| 4.8.4 Academic Constraints .....                                                                               | 53 |
| 4.9 Conclusion .....                                                                                           | 53 |
| Chapter 5 Analysis .....                                                                                       | 54 |
| 5.1 Introduction.....                                                                                          | 54 |
| 5.2 Co-created Artefacts .....                                                                                 | 55 |
| 5.2.1 Written messages.....                                                                                    | 55 |
| 5.2.2 Poem .....                                                                                               | 58 |
| 5.3 Narratives .....                                                                                           | 59 |
| 5.3.1 Narrative 1: Belonging and not belonging.....                                                            | 59 |
| 5.3.2 Narrative 2: Racism - interpersonal and institutional.....                                               | 60 |
| 5.3.3 Narrative 3: Representation and relatability .....                                                       | 61 |
| 5.3.4 Narrative 4: Expression, culture, and misunderstanding.....                                              | 62 |
| 5.3.5 Narrative 5: Adaptation, code-switching, and identity .....                                              | 63 |
| 5.3.6 Narrative 6: Community as support and the school-community divide .....                                  | 64 |
| 5.3.7 Narrative 7: Accessing help - relatability, safety, and the limits of school-based support.....          | 65 |
| 5.3.8 Narrative 8: Resilience and navigation - survival and psychological endurance .....                      | 66 |
| 5.3.9 Narrative 9: Class and cultural distance - navigating Whiteness, privilege, and social misalignment..... | 68 |
| 5.4 Conclusion .....                                                                                           | 69 |
| Chapter 6 Discussion .....                                                                                     | 70 |
| 6.1 Revisiting the research questions .....                                                                    | 71 |
| 6.2 Narrative movements to structural conditions.....                                                          | 72 |
| 6.3 Educational Practitioner Reflective Session .....                                                          | 73 |
| 6.4 What these narratives ask of Educational Psychology practice .....                                         | 75 |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 6.4.1 Moving beyond individualised frameworks.....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | 75  |
| 6.4.2 Moving towards systemic and anti-racist practice.....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | 76  |
| 6.4.3 Reframing resilience .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | 77  |
| 6.4.4 Reflexivity, ethics and the position of the EP .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | 78  |
| 6.4.5 A reflective framework for Educational Psychology practice .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | 78  |
| 6.5 Implications for my practice as an Educational Psychologist .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | 80  |
| 6.6 Conclusion .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | 81  |
| Chapter 7 Conclusion .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | 82  |
| <p>This study set out to examine how retrospective narratives of secondary school experiences, as shared by individuals who identify as Black men, construct meaning around mental health and support within school contexts. Through the men’s narratives of belonging, misrecognition, adaptation, and endurance, the study demonstrates how distress and support are experienced, interpreted, and negotiated within racialised and institutional conditions over time. In doing so, the thesis argues that Black boys’ accounts must be recognised as vital forms of knowledge for reimagining more just, relational, and anti-racist school practices. ....</p> |     |
| 7.1 Contribution to knowledge and practice .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | 82  |
| 7.2 Limitations of the study .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | 82  |
| 7.3 Directions for future research.....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | 83  |
| References .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | 85  |
| Appendices .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | 95  |
| Appendix A1: Black Men Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | 95  |
| Appendix A2: Educational Practitioner Reflective Session Information Sheet and Consent Form .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | 101 |
| Appendix B: Ethics Approval Letter .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | 111 |
| Appendix C: Narrative mapping and analytic development .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | 112 |
| Appendix D: Example Focus Group Transcript Extract.....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | 121 |
| Appendix E: Educational Practitioner Reflective Session Graphic .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | 122 |

## **List of Abbreviations**

BLP - Black Liberation Psychology  
CAMHS - Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services  
CNA - Critical Narrative Analysis  
CRT - Critical Race Theory  
EMHPs - Educational Mental Health Practitioners  
EP - Educational Psychologist  
EPs - Educational Psychologists  
SC - Social Constructionism  
SEMH - Social, Emotional and Mental Health  
SEND - Special Educational Needs and Disabilities  
SENDCo - Special Educational Needs Coordinator

## **Abstract**

This study explores how Black men make sense of their mental health experiences within secondary school contexts and how these accounts can inform school-based practice. Drawing on Black Liberation Psychology and Social Constructionism, the research adopts Emerson and Frosh's (2009) Critical Narrative Analysis to examine how participants construct meaning in relation to schooling, distress, and mental health support.

Data were generated through a focus group with four Black men reflecting retrospectively on their secondary school experiences, followed by a second session in which participants co-created artefacts, including a collective poem and written messages for educational practitioners. These were treated as interconnected spaces for meaning-making, enabling both dialogic and creative forms of expression.

The analysis generated nine interpretive narratives that illustrate how distress was experienced and understood within racialised school environments. Mental health was constructed not simply as an individual psychological concern, but as shaped by repeated experiences of racial harm, misrecognition, conditional belonging, and adaptation. Participants challenged deficit-based interpretations by positioning their responses as meaningful adaptations to institutional conditions. Strategies such as code-switching, emotional restraint, and reliance on peers were understood as necessary responses to these environments.

The findings highlight how school-based mental health support can become inaccessible when the racialised and relational dimensions of Black boys' experiences are overlooked. The study contributes to Educational Psychology by foregrounding lived narratives as valuable forms of psychological knowledge and demonstrating the impact of racism on Black boys' mental health within school contexts. It further challenges individualised and Westernised understandings of mental health and calls for more relational, culturally responsive, and liberatory approaches to Educational Psychology and school-based mental health practice.

## Chapter 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Context and rationale

Rising levels of psychological distress among children and young people in the United Kingdom (UK) have drawn increasing attention from educational systems and mental health services (NHS Digital, 2023). Within this context, persistent racial inequalities continue to shape how emotional need is identified, interpreted, and responded to (Devonport et al., 2023). For Black boys, experiences of support are shaped by broader structural conditions, including racism and unequal access to care (Cokley et al., 2014; Lindsey, Brown & Cunningham, 2017). Research also highlights how racism affects children and young people's mental health through both direct experiences and the anticipatory burden of navigating how they may be perceived across social and institutional spaces (Ghezze, Adebisi, & Mustafa, 2022).

Schools are central to these processes. As key environments for early identification and response, they play a significant role in shaping how emotional experiences are understood and supported (Department for Education, 2018). However, schools are also shaped by wider social, cultural, and racialised norms that influence how mental health is constructed (Gillborn, 2008; Perera, 2020), meaning that the school environment cannot be understood as neutral. Within these contexts, Black boys' emotional expressions and responses to these conditions are often interpreted through behavioural or disciplinary lenses (Graham & Robinson, 2004; Walker, 2021), influencing whether support is offered and whether it is experienced as accessible, meaningful, or safe. This positions schools not only as sites of support, but also as contexts in which racialised meanings of distress may be produced and reinforced.

A key gap within this literature concerns whose accounts are centred in understanding these inequalities. Existing research has documented disparities in disciplinary practices and school exclusion, alongside inequalities in mental health support for Black young people (Demie, 2019; Stewart-Hall et al., 2023; NHS Race & Health Observatory, 2022). However, much of this work has focused on outcomes, patterns, or practitioner interpretations, with comparatively less attention given to how Black males themselves make sense of these experiences (Ghezze et al., 2025; Leath et al., 2025). Where lived experience is included, it is rarely treated as knowledge in its own right (Watkins, Abelson & Jefferson, 2013), reflecting broader epistemic hierarchies within psychological research that privilege institutional and professional accounts over those most affected. Without centring Black men's own narratives, understandings of mental health and support within school contexts risk remaining partial and reproducing the very forms of misrecognition they seek to address.

This study, therefore, foregrounds the retrospective narratives of Black men to examine how meanings of schooling, distress, and support are constructed over time. Rather than treating participants' accounts as illustrations of already established disparities, storytelling is

approached as a form of knowledge production through which dominant educational and psychological framings of Black boys can be questioned.

The study contributes to knowledge in four key ways. Conceptually, it reframes school-based distress as relationally and structurally produced rather than located solely within the individual. Methodologically, it contributes to a limited body of UK-based research that foregrounds Black men's retrospective storytelling and artefacts as sites of collective meaning-making. Theoretically, it extends the application of Black Liberation Psychology (BLP) within Educational Psychology by demonstrating its relevance for interpreting school-based experiences and challenging individualised framings of distress. Professionally, it offers implications for Educational Psychology and school-based practice by illustrating how support may become inaccessible when racialised dimensions of experience are not considered.

## **1.2 Note on Terminology**

For this study, I use the term "Black" to refer to individuals identifying as Black, Black British, Black African, Black Caribbean, Black African-Caribbean, Dual or Mixed Black heritage, Black Indigenous, or any other Black background. I use the terms "men" to refer to adults who identify as male, and "boy" to refer to young people and adolescents who identify as male. The term "secondary school" refers to educational settings in the UK for young people aged 11 to 16.

Recent research cautions against the use of umbrella terms such as "BAME" (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic), as these can obscure distinct histories and lived experiences (Ghezae et al., 2025). I therefore use the term "Black" deliberately to foreground the shared processes of racialisation that are central to this study. At the same time, I recognise that no single term can fully capture the complexity and diversity of identity, including the breadth and heterogeneity within those who identify as Black. I capitalise "Black" to reflect its use as a socio-political identity rather than a descriptive category. As Guthrie (2004) suggests, this recognises "Black" as a collective identity shaped by shared historical and structural conditions.

In this study, I draw on the World Health Organisation's (2025) broad conceptualisation of mental health as a state of mental well-being that enables individuals to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, and contribute to their communities. However, I use the term "distress" to move beyond universalised or clinical framings and to foreground lived and contextually situated experiences. This conceptualisation is informed by literature that emphasises the social, institutional, and relational conditions through which emotional challenge is experienced and understood (Fernando, 2017; Bryant-Davis & Moore-Lobban, 2020; Devonport et al., 2023).

### 1.3 Aim and Research Questions

This study explores how individuals who identify as Black men retrospectively narrate and make sense of their secondary school experiences in relation to mental health and support, and how these narratives might inform school-based practices for Black boys.

The following research questions guide the study:

- How do individuals who identify as Black men narrate and make sense of their experiences of mental health during their time in secondary school?
- How can these narratives inform school-based practices that support the mental health of Black boys?

### 1.4 Overview of the Study

Data were generated through a focus group with four Black men reflecting on their secondary school experiences. A second session invited these participants to co-create a poem and a series of written messages addressed to educational practitioners. These data sources are treated as interconnected narrative spaces that capture both retrospective reflection and collective meaning-making. The co-created artefacts are therefore understood not as a separate dataset, but as an extension of the focus group dialogue, through which participants re-articulated and developed shared meanings. This reflects narrative and participatory approaches that understand creative and collaborative outputs as important sites of expression and knowledge production (Clandinin, 2022; Call-Cummings & Dazzo, 2023).

In addition, the study included a reflective session in which educational practitioners engaged with the artefacts produced by the Black men. While this session did not form part of the primary dataset for analysis, it was included as a praxis-oriented component of the study, creating space for critical reflection on how the men's narratives might inform educational and psychological practice.

These methodological choices are underpinned by the study's theoretical and epistemological commitments. This study is informed by BLP and Social Constructionism (SC). Together, these frameworks position psychological distress as relational, contextual, and inseparable from power. BLP provides a political and ethical grounding, recognising distress as a meaningful response to racialised and oppressive conditions, while centring the knowledge and lived experiences of Black people and communities (Bryant-Davis & Moore-Lobban, 2020). In this study, I use the term "Blackness" not as a demographic descriptor alone, but as a socio-political and analytic position through which dominant psychological and educational narratives can be questioned (Nobles, 2006). It refers to the racialised experiences and conditions that shape how knowledge, distress, and schooling are

understood. SC complements this by emphasising how meanings are constructed through language and interaction within broader institutional contexts (Burr, 2015).

These theoretical commitments inform the study's analytic approach. Drawing on Emerson and Frosh's (2009) Critical Narrative Analysis (CNA), participants' accounts are treated as socially and politically situated rather than neutral recollections of events. This allows attention to be paid not only to what is said, but also to how participants construct themselves, make sense of their experiences, and position themselves in relation to broader systems of power (Emerson & Frosh, 2009). The narratives are therefore understood as acts of interpretation and resistance that challenge deficit-based framings (Frosh, 2010).

### **1.5 Reflexivity and positionality**

I did not arrive at this research as a detached observer. I came carrying memory, experience, and a deep commitment to Black young people navigating systems that often fail to recognise their emotional lives (Grills, Aird, & Rowe, 2016). This commitment is also grounded in my community, where too many young Black men carry distress privately (Meechan, John, & Hanna, 2021), as well as in my personal and professional investment in equity, justice, and the empowerment of Black communities.

On reflection, my motivation began long before this study, with the younger version of me, a Black girl in secondary school, navigating racial discrimination while sensing the pressures placed on her Black male peers. I noticed that Black boys appeared to be positioned differently within school, carrying burdens I could not yet name. I did not then have the language of systemic injustice. However, I sensed that what was often read as defiance could also be a response to forces larger than us as individuals. This understanding has remained with me, and motherhood later deepened it.

Raising Black boys in a world where their vulnerability is often mistaken for danger has heightened my awareness of the significance of everyday school experiences. I am acutely aware of how expressions of frustration, heightened emotional intensity, or even childhood play can be read as threat or defiance (Bryan, 2020), with consequences for whether support is offered and how it is experienced (Fernando, 2017). Professionally, I have observed similar patterns, particularly where responses to distress are not experienced as culturally safe or affirming. These observations connect with literature suggesting that Black boys' distress may be pathologised, criminalised, or overlooked (Lindsey, Brown, & Cunningham, 2017).

This work was also informed by what often remains unspoken within some Black communities. Conversations about mental health can carry cultural and familial stigma that values endurance over disclosure (Keating & Brown, 2016). I understand this not as a deficit within Black communities, but as connected to wider histories of mistrust, racialisation, and unequal care. Personally, and as a parent, I understand the pressures to be strong, to

succeed, and to survive in systems not built for us. This helps me understand why some Black boys may feel the need to protect themselves against a world that too often misreads their vulnerability, emotion, or self-expression (Meechan, John, & Hanna, 2021). As a practitioner, I also see the cost of this, including emotional suppression, hypervigilance, internalised oppression, and coping strategies that may be protective in one context yet costly in another. This has strengthened my commitment to holding this complexity in mind, both the cultural scripts of strength and resistance, and the socio-political and historical conditions that make such scripts necessary.

It is from this position that I came to this research: as a Black British Caribbean woman, a mother to Black British African-Caribbean sons, and a trainee Educational and Child Psychologist, with personal and professional investments in the questions I ask. This journey required reflexivity, humility, and a willingness to be unsettled.

Reflexivity, therefore, remained central throughout the research, not as a procedural step but as an ongoing ethical and analytic practice. I remained attentive to not appropriating or conflating participants' experiences, taking care not to overidentify, presume understanding, or claim resonance with the meaning of their stories. This aligns with Jorgensen and Phillips' (2002) view of reflexivity as a process of recognising how interpretation is shaped by historical, social, and cultural contexts, supporting accountability and relational engagement rather than authoritative judgement.

## **1.6 Structure of the thesis**

This thesis is organised into seven chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 reviews literature on Black boys' schooling experiences and mental health, identifying the conceptual and methodological gaps that the study addresses. Chapter 3 introduces BLP as the primary theoretical lens, focusing on liberation, critical consciousness, empowerment, and praxis as concepts that inform the interpretation of participants' narratives.

Chapter 4 outlines the methodology, including the philosophical assumptions, research design, data collection, analytic framework, and ethical considerations. Chapter 5 presents the analysis, beginning with the co-created artefacts and moving on to nine interrelated narratives. These are examined as socially and politically situated accounts through which participants position themselves, make sense of their experiences, and resist dominant framings of Black boys within school contexts.

Chapter 6 brings the findings into dialogue with the wider literature and theoretical frameworks, considering their implications for Educational Psychology practice, particularly systemic, anti-racist, and reflexive approaches to support. Chapter 7 concludes the thesis by synthesising the key findings, clarifying the study's contribution to knowledge and practice, acknowledging limitations, and identifying directions for future research.

## **Chapter 2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

#### **2.1.1 Background**

Building on the rationale established in Chapter 1, this chapter reviews the literature on Black boys' schooling experiences, mental health, and access to support.

National data suggests that approximately one in five children and young people aged 8 to 25 in England experience a probable mental health need (NHS Digital, 2023). Within this broader context, UK-based research consistently highlights significant mental health inequalities affecting Black boys and Black men. Existing literature documents disparities in areas including exclusion, pathways into mental health services, and access to early support. However, much of this work has focused on quantitative outcomes and institutional patterns, offering more limited insight into how young Black males themselves experience, interpret, and make sense of distress within school environments.

This gap is particularly important given that young Black males' school experiences often unfold within contexts shaped by racism, heightened behavioural surveillance, and inadequate access to support (Gillborn, 2008; Walker, 2021). These issues may become especially pronounced during adolescence, a developmental period in which mental health difficulties frequently emerge or intensify, while access to timely and appropriate support may become increasingly unequal (Mind, n.d.).

Understanding mental health within these school contexts, therefore, requires attention not only to prevalence or service access, but also to the racialised conditions shaping how distress is recognised, understood, and responded to. This chapter examines literature across education, psychology, and mental health, with particular attention to how race, power, and institutional practice shape experiences of secondary school. In doing so, it identifies limitations within the existing evidence base and establishes the need for a framework capable of addressing both structural inequality and lived experience.

#### **2.1.2 Theoretical Orientation**

This study is situated within critical debates in education and psychology, foregrounding the structural, relational, and discursive conditions shaping Black boys' schooling experiences and access to mental health support. Two complementary theoretical perspectives guide this literature review: Black Liberation Psychology (BLP) and Social Constructionism (SC).

BLP provides the study's primary political and ethical framework by positioning psychological distress as an understandable response to oppression rather than as an individual deficit. Its value within this review lies in foregrounding the historical, cultural, and socio-political realities of Black people and communities, while challenging dominant psychological models

that individualise suffering and obscure structural harm (Montero, 2009; Nobles, 2006; Bryant-Davis & Moore-Lobban, 2020). Within this framework, Black boys' emotional distress is understood in relation to school environments shaped by racial norms, institutional power, and broader histories of marginalisation. However, applying BLP within UK Educational Psychology also requires caution. Much of the liberation psychology literature emerges from diverse geographical, historical, and disciplinary contexts and cannot simply be transferred into UK school systems without attention to local policy, practice, and racial histories. This review, therefore, draws on BLP as a critical and interpretive lens rather than as a standalone explanation of Black boys' experiences within UK schools.

SC complements this perspective by emphasising that meanings surrounding mental health, behaviour, and social norms are not fixed or neutral, but shaped through language, cultural practices, and power relations (Burr, 2015). A critical constructionist orientation enables attention to how institutional discourse influences what becomes recognised, legitimised, or problematised (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002).

This perspective differs from more individualised psychological approaches, which may locate distress primarily within cognitive, emotional, or developmental processes. While such perspectives can offer important insight into individual experience, they may become limited when distress is separated from racism, institutional practice, and wider relations of power. This review, therefore, does not reject psychological understandings of distress but instead situates them within the racialised contexts in which Black boys' experiences are lived and interpreted.

Bringing BLP and SC together allows attention to both the material effects of racism and the meanings through which those effects become recognised, minimised, or challenged. While BLP foregrounds oppression, resistance, and collective healing, SC supports analysis of how categories such as "behaviour" and "mental health need" are constructed within educational and psychological discourse. Together, these perspectives provide the conceptual foundation for the study's narrative orientation. Within school and mental health systems, Black boys are often positioned through dominant narratives such as disruptive, threatening, or hard to reach (Graham & Robinson, 2004; Walker, 2021). A narrative lens, therefore, enables attention to how such meanings are produced, sustained, and resisted through language, power, and institutional practice across educational and psychological contexts. This framing provides the basis for examining inequalities in mental health pathways and school-based responses.

## **2.2 Disparities in mental health pathways**

### **2.2.1 Early intervention and pathways to support**

Within the context of these broader structural and relational dynamics, Black males are less likely than White males to seek formal support for emotional distress or mental health

concerns (Lindsey, Brown, & Cunningham, 2017). Adult data highlights longstanding inequalities in access to early and voluntary mental health support, with Black men more likely than their White counterparts to encounter services through coercive routes, including detention under the Mental Health Act, longer inpatient stays, and placement on Community Treatment Orders (Care Quality Commission, 2024). These patterns suggest that support is often accessed only once distress has intensified, raising important questions about how earlier experiences of need may have been overlooked or managed within school contexts.

A key debate within this literature concerns whether such disparities are best understood through individual or cultural explanations, such as stigma or reluctance to seek help, or through institutional factors including service inaccessibility, racialised risk assessment, and limited culturally responsive provision.

Similar inequalities are evident within child and adolescent mental health pathways, where young people from racially minoritised groups are underrepresented in early intervention and community-based services, yet overrepresented in more acute or crisis-led routes of support (NHS Race & Health Observatory, 2022). These broader disparities are also reflected in literature focusing more specifically on Black young people. Earlier work identified the underrepresentation of Black children and young people in referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) (Malek & Joughin, 2004), alongside evidence of elevated risk in other areas, including higher reported rates of suicide among Black males aged 13 to 24 (McKenzie & Bhui, 2007). Together, these studies suggest that support for Black boys and young men is often accessed through crisis-led pathways rather than through early or preventative forms of care. However, much of this evidence is drawn from referral patterns, service-use data, and institutional outcomes, which can identify disparities in access while offering more limited insight into how Black boys and their families themselves experience, interpret, or navigate these pathways.

This is significant because these studies imply that distress may only become visible to services once it aligns with institutional thresholds of risk. As in the adult literature, disparities for children and young people become even more pronounced when examining routes into support. Black young people are estimated to be up to ten times more likely than their White peers to enter mental health services through statutory routes such as social care or the youth justice system, rather than through primary care or voluntary pathways (Bhui et al., 2003; Chui et al., 2021; NHS Race & Health Observatory, 2022). These patterns raise important questions about whose distress is recognised early, whose is minimised, and whose becomes visible only at crisis point.

These disparities are often interpreted through deficit-oriented explanations focused on stigma, reluctance to seek support, or cultural attitudes. Although such factors may shape experiences in complex ways, explanations that foreground them in isolation risk obscuring institutional mistrust, racialised interpretations of distress, and unequal access to culturally

responsive care (Cokley et al., 2014; Meechan, John, & Hanna, 2021; Mclean, Campbell, & Cornish, 2003). A more critical reading instead positions inequalities in access as shaped through the interaction between institutional practices and understandable experiences of mistrust towards services and support systems (NHS Race & Health Observatory, 2022; Cokley et al., 2014).

This distinction is central to the present study, which is concerned not only with disparities in access, but also with how Black men retrospectively make sense of these pathways within the context of schooling.

### **2.2.2 School exclusion and long-term trajectories**

Black boys face well-documented inequalities within the education system, including disproportionately high rates of both fixed-term and permanent exclusion compared with many other pupil groups (Demie, 2019). Research consistently shows that they are more likely to be removed from mainstream educational settings and placed in Pupil Referral Units (Gill, Quilter-Pinner, & Swift, 2017; Stewart-Hall, Langham, & Miller, 2023). These patterns position exclusion as a significant educational inequality and raise important questions about how Black boys are perceived and responded to within school systems.

A key issue within this literature concerns how behaviour is understood and managed within schools. Exclusion is often justified through categories such as “disruptive” or “challenging” behaviour (Demie, 2019), yet these categories are not neutral and remain open to interpretation. This creates space for racialised assumptions to shape how behaviour is judged, sanctioned, and escalated, contributing to the disproportionate disciplining and exclusion of Black boys (Cokley et al., 2014; Warren, 2005).

Black boys’ expressions of frustration, disengagement, emotional withdrawal, or restlessness may therefore be more readily perceived by adults as threatening or defiant rather than as possible indicators of distress, racial harm, or unmet need (Walker, 2021). Emotional difficulty may consequently become reframed as behavioural concern, increasing the likelihood of missed opportunities for early mental health support (Cokley et al., 2014). This is not to suggest that all behavioural incidents should be understood as expressions of distress, but rather that the literature consistently highlights how racialised perceptions can shape whether behaviour is interpreted as communicative of need or responded to through disciplinary frameworks. This contradiction becomes particularly visible within the categorisation of Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs under the SEND Code of Practice, where behaviour is formally recognised as potentially communicative of underlying need (Department for Education, 2015). Despite this, Black boys remain disproportionately excluded for “persistent disruptive behaviour” (Stewart-Hall et al., 2023). For Black boys, this tension is shaped by assumptions surrounding threat, maturity, and

responsibility, making the interpretation of behaviour central to whether support or punishment follows.

The consequences of exclusion extend beyond schooling. Experiences of exclusion are associated with alienation, mistrust, and psychological distress (Sian, 2019; Ford et al., 2018), while also contributing to longer-term patterns of marginalisation, including increased contact with the criminal justice system, where Black men remain disproportionately represented (Lammy, 2017; Phillips & Bowling, 2020). However, caution is needed here. Framing exclusion primarily through later criminal justice outcomes arguably risks reproducing deterministic narratives about Black boys' futures. For this reason, the present study attends not only to the longer-term implications of exclusion but also to how Black men retrospectively make sense of school experiences within and beyond deficit-oriented or trajectory-based narratives. This leads into the broader structural and cultural conditions considered next.

## **2.3 Systemic and cultural barriers**

### **2.3.1 Structural racism and institutional harm**

Building on the preceding discussion of exclusion and pathways to support, research across education and psychology positions institutional racism, racialised gender norms, and unequal power relations as central to understanding Black boys' experiences within schools. This section examines how structural racism operates through broader social inequalities and school practices to shape emotional well-being.

One strand of this literature examines the relationship between socioeconomic inequality, racism, and mental health. Cokley et al. (2014) highlight how race, class, and structural disadvantage can intersect to shape both experiences of distress and access to equitable support. National policy literature similarly identifies disproportionate levels of poverty among Black young people, with economic disadvantage strongly associated with increased mental health risk (Office for National Statistics, 2020; Department for Work and Pensions, 2024). This literature highlights that experiences of racism and inequality are often shaped through overlapping social and structural conditions. However, a critical reading informed by BLP and social constructionism suggests that broader structural indicators alone cannot fully capture the everyday, relational, and institutional ways these inequalities are lived and navigated within school contexts.

Educational institutions frequently operate through White, middle-class norms, leaving Black boys and other marginalised groups at a systematic disadvantage (Gillborn, 2008; Perera, 2020; Demie, 2022). Within these environments, racism may manifest through explicit prejudice, racialised expectations, and everyday microaggressions that shape practitioner responses and decision-making (Graham & Robinson, 2004; Goodwin, Chen, & Long, 2021). Structural racism is analytically significant here because it shifts attention away from isolated

incidents and towards the wider school conditions within which emotional distress becomes recognised, minimised, or disciplined.

The psychological impact of these experiences is substantial. Mind (2021), for example, found that 70% of young people who had experienced racism at school reported negative effects on their well-being and mental health. Research with Black families similarly highlights the cumulative psychological impact of everyday racism, including microaggressions, colourism, and anti-Blackness, on both parents' and young people's mental health (Simela et al., 2024). Distress may therefore emerge not only through overt incidents of racism, but through the accumulation of repeated racialised experiences across everyday school life.

Repeated exposure to racial discrimination has increasingly been conceptualised within trauma-informed frameworks as psychologically and developmentally harmful (Bryant-Davis & Moore-Lobban, 2020; Comas-Díaz & Rivera, 2020; Simela et al., 2024). Much of the literature on racial trauma originates from the United States. While conceptually valuable, its transferability to UK school contexts requires careful consideration, given differing educational structures and racial histories. UK-based reviews nevertheless indicate comparable patterns of psychological harm associated with racism and marginalisation (Devonport et al., 2023; Mind, 2023). At the same time, tensions remain around how racism-related distress is conceptualised. Trauma-informed frameworks can play an important role in naming the psychological effects of racism, yet they may also risk translating structural violence into individual symptoms if institutional conditions remain insufficiently considered.

Within school contexts, racism may become embedded within policies, disciplinary practices, the curriculum, and everyday interactions, producing environments in which Black boys' distress is more readily understood through behavioural or disciplinary frameworks (Gillborn, 2008; Graham & Robinson, 2004; Demie, 2022). Responses such as hypervigilance, withdrawal, anger, or disengagement may therefore be treated primarily as behavioural concerns rather than understood in relation to chronic racialised stress. This highlights the importance of examining school practices and institutional responsibility alongside psychological understandings of racial trauma (Bryant-Davis & Moore-Lobban, 2020).

Collectively, these studies position racism as central rather than peripheral to Black boys' school-based mental health experiences. However, a limitation within parts of this literature is that racism is acknowledged as harmful without fully examining how schools themselves may reproduce or sustain that harm. The present study responds to this by foregrounding Black men's accounts of how school environments shaped the meanings attached to distress, behaviour, and support.

### **2.3.2 Racialised masculinity, adultification and emotional expression**

Racism intersects with gendered expectations that shape how Black boys' emotions, behaviour, and vulnerability are perceived. Stereotypical portrayals of Black masculinity frequently position Black males as naturally tough, emotionally contained, or aggressive, constraining the space available for vulnerability (Meechan, John, & Hanna, 2021). From an early age, Black boys encounter expectations that emphasise strength, control, and emotional stoicism (Watkins & Neighbors, 2007; Watkins, Abelson, & Jefferson, 2013). Young people themselves often describe these pressures through messages about needing to "be a man", which may discourage vulnerability and help-seeking (YoungMinds, 2023). Emotional expression is therefore shaped not only by individual feeling, but also by how Black boys anticipate being perceived by others.

Lindsey, Brown, and Cunningham (2017) and Howard et al. (2012) similarly argue that dominant constructions of Black masculinity place pressure on Black boys and men to embody toughness and self-reliance. Importantly, these expectations shape not only how emotions are expressed, but also whether distress is recognised or disclosed. Nevertheless, there is a need to avoid reproducing singular or deficit-oriented narratives of Black masculinity. Emotional restraint may function not only as a barrier to help-seeking, but also as an adaptive response to racialised surveillance, vulnerability, and anticipated misrecognition.

These expectations are further compounded by processes of adultification. Black boys are often perceived as older, less innocent, and more responsible than their White peers, resulting in children being treated as more mature and less deserving of protection than their chronological age would suggest (Davis & Marsh, 2020). These dynamics extend into everyday classroom interactions, where teachers' interpretations of routine behaviour may be shaped by racial bias (Owens, 2023). As a result, Black boys' distress may be more readily overlooked, as their behaviour becomes interpreted through disciplinary or criminalising frameworks (Davis & Marsh, 2020; British Psychological Society, 2025). This can reduce opportunities for care, support, and protection within educational and safeguarding contexts (Hines et al., 2021).

These pressures also extend beyond school into wider cultural and relational contexts. Family narratives, emotional socialisation, and community experiences influence how Black boys come to understand and express distress. However, these experiences cannot be separated from broader histories of racism and mistrust of formal institutions. In some Black families and communities, emotional vulnerability may be discouraged in favour of resilience and self-reliance, while mental health difficulties may be framed as reflecting weakness or as affecting "other" people (Meechan, John, & Hanna, 2021; Majors, Simmons, & Ani, 2020).

Families may also prepare Black young people for anticipated racism by encouraging them to adapt their speech, behaviour, or self-presentation in order to appear less threatening or more acceptable within predominantly White spaces (Condon et al., 2022; Ghezae, Adebiyi,

& Mustafa, 2022). This form of racial socialisation may function simultaneously as care, protection, and preparation for navigating racialised environments. Strategies such as emotional restraint, self-monitoring, or adapting behaviour may therefore be psychologically costly while also functioning as protective responses within school contexts (Condon et al., 2022; Ghezae, Adebisi, & Mustafa, 2022). The present study explores how such strategies are retrospectively narrated and understood within Black men's accounts of secondary school.

Within classrooms, these pressures may be intensified through processes of identity negotiation. Abdi (2015) describes a "racialised classroom experience" in which Black young people are positioned as "other" and must navigate what Fanon (1967) termed a "doubled self", attempting to remain acceptable within racialised systems while remaining aware of how they are seen. Academic engagement may be read as "acting White" (Phoenix, 1997), while behaviours aligning with stereotypes of Black masculinity may be pathologised. Identity negotiation therefore becomes a continuous and embodied process shaping how Black boys are perceived, positioned, and made to feel within school environments.

Emotional expression is therefore closely tied to belonging. Whether Black boys are recognised as credible, vulnerable, and deserving of protection shapes how they are positioned within school communities. These dynamics intersect with broader stereotypes, institutional expectations, and questions of belonging explored in the following section.

### **2.3.3 Stereotypes, representation and school belonging**

Stereotypes of Black boys as "troublesome", "aggressive", or "academically limited" are reinforced through wider societal narratives and everyday interactions within schools (Noguera, 2009). These dominant constructions shape not only how Black boys are perceived by others, but also how they may come to understand themselves over time. Internalised racism, whereby societal prejudice becomes incorporated into self-belief, has been linked to psychological distress and reduced sense of agency (Ricci et al., 2023). In this way, stereotypes and low expectations may affect both self-esteem and what Black boys come to believe is possible or expected of them (Ghezae, Adebisi, & Mustafa, 2022).

These pressures are also reflected in young people's own accounts. Research from the Centre for Mental Health (2024) highlights the persistence of the "strong Black person" stereotype, with some Black young people describing pressure to appear emotionally resilient or avoid being perceived as "weak" when experiencing mental health difficulties. This suggests that stereotypes influence not only external perceptions, but also emotional self-presentation and willingness to seek support. These experiences are closely tied to questions of recognition and belonging within school environments, including whether Black boys encounter adults who reflect, understand, or affirm aspects of their lived experience.

Questions of representation within the school workforce may reinforce or disrupt these dynamics. In 2024, approximately 83% of teachers in England identified as White British, highlighting the continued under-representation of racially marginalised staff within education (Department for Education, 2025). The limited presence of Black practitioners, particularly within leadership and decision-making roles, may reduce opportunities for Black boys to see themselves reflected among those holding authority within schools (Walker, 2021). Young people have similarly highlighted the importance of culturally responsive practitioners, suggesting that adults who share, or meaningfully understand, their lived experiences may feel easier to trust and relate to when discussing mental health concerns (Centre for Mental Health, 2024).

At the same time, representation alone does not guarantee relational safety or anti-racist practice. A sole focus on workforce diversity risks reducing what is also a broader institutional issue concerning power, culture, and whose knowledge is legitimised within schools. Without wider structural change, Black boys' emotional experiences and concerns may still be overlooked or misinterpreted (Demie, 2022).

These dynamics extend beyond support and representation into broader questions of school belonging. Belonging is commonly understood as involving emotional, social, and relational connection to place and community (Kapoor & Tomar, 2016). For Black boys, however, belonging cannot be separated from racial positioning within school environments. When Black boys rarely encounter adults who look like them in positions of authority, when their histories and cultural narratives remain marginal within the curriculum, and when stereotypes continue to shape behavioural expectations (Gillborn, 2008; Demie, 2022), belonging may become experienced as conditional rather than secure. Belonging, therefore, involves more than physical inclusion within school spaces. It also concerns whether Black boys experience themselves as recognised, valued, and psychologically safe within those environments. This reframes belonging as a question of recognition and legitimacy rather than simple presence, with important implications for how support is experienced and accessed. For the present study, this distinction is important because participants' accounts of belonging are approached not simply as reflections on representation, but as narratives about whether school environments felt conditional, affirming, or emotionally safe. These questions of belonging are closely connected to whose norms, knowledge, and experiences are centred within schools, explored further in the following section through literature on Whiteness and epistemic injustice.

### **2.3.4 Whiteness, epistemic injustice and institutional norms**

Building on the discussion of belonging and representation, literature on Whiteness, understood here as the institutional and cultural positioning of White norms and experiences as standard or universal (Gillborn, 2005; Abdi, 2015), helps explain how racialised norms and knowledge hierarchies are maintained within schools. Research in

predominantly White secondary schools suggests that Whiteness often operates as an unnamed cultural standard (Gillborn, 2005; Bennett & Lee-Treweek, 2014), with much of its power residing in its invisibility (Chadderton, 2012).

When Whiteness functions as the cultural norm, racial difference becomes more visible and more readily scrutinised. This can make it difficult for practitioners to recognise how their own assumptions shape interpretations of behaviour and emotions (Gillborn, 2005; Chadderton, 2012). As a result, some forms of communication and emotional expression are normalised, while others are more likely to be problematised or sanctioned. These dynamics shape how Black boys experience school environments. Dovidio, Gaertner, and Saguy (2009) suggest that while race may be less central to the identities of some White students, it is often a more salient aspect of self-concept for Black students. Rankin and Reason (2008) similarly argue that a dimension of White privilege lies in being able to disengage from race as a structuring force. In contrast, Black boys may experience school as persistently racialised, whether this is explicitly acknowledged or not.

Abdi (2015) further conceptualises Whiteness as something reproduced through discourse, institutional practice, and cultural norms rather than simply through the presence of White individuals. This shifts attention towards whose knowledge, experiences, and ways of being are legitimised within schools. Questions of representation therefore extend beyond workforce demographics to the epistemological foundations of education and mental health support, including dominant therapeutic models, professional training, and assumptions about what constitutes “appropriate” behaviour, communication, or help-seeking (Care Quality Commission, 2010; Fernando, 2017; Youth Access, 2025).

Fricker’s (2007) concepts of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice are useful here. Testimonial injustice occurs when individuals are afforded reduced credibility as knowers, while hermeneutical injustice occurs when dominant interpretive frameworks are insufficient for making sense of particular experiences. Within school contexts, Black boys may experience testimonial injustice when their accounts of racism or distress are minimised, doubted, or reframed as behavioural concerns. Hermeneutical injustice may similarly occur where racial harm is understood primarily through individual acts of prejudice rather than structural or institutional racism. This aligns with Dotson’s (2014) argument that epistemic authority is unevenly distributed, with dominant groups more readily positioned to define reality while marginalised perspectives are dismissed or overlooked.

These ideas help explain how Black boys’ interpretations of racism, distress, and support may be displaced by dominant institutional understandings, shaping whether support is experienced as credible, validating, or safe. However, while epistemic injustice offers a useful framework for understanding misrecognition, it is less able to address how educational systems might move towards more responsive and anti-racist forms of practice. This limitation is important because the present study is concerned not only with identifying

forms of misrecognition, but also with how Black men's narratives might inform change within school systems.

### **2.3.5 Mistrust, stigma and help-seeking**

Alongside unequal routes into formal support, it is also important to consider why support may not always feel credible, accessible, or safe. A key debate concerns whether mistrust is framed as a barrier located within Black communities, or as a response to histories of exclusion, discrimination, and misrecognition within educational and mental health systems. Experiences of racism within schools are frequently minimised or inadequately addressed, shaping whether schools are experienced as trustworthy sources of care (Gillborn, 2008; Graham & Robinson, 2004). In this context, some Black boys may rely more heavily on family, peers, and community networks, while distress within school settings remains unspoken due to fears of misunderstanding or discrimination (Chatmon, 2020; Meechan, John, & Hanna, 2021). Recent work similarly highlights the importance of addressing racism and everyday microaggressions within educational environments as part of improving young people's mental health and wellbeing (Centre for Mental Health, 2024).

Cultural and spiritual understandings of distress may also shape help-seeking. In some contexts, mental health difficulties are interpreted through spiritual or moral frameworks, including beliefs about spiritual affliction (Auguste & Rasmussen, 2019; Devonport et al., 2023). Where distress carries particular cultural meanings, disclosure may feel especially risky within environments already experienced as unsafe (Chatmon, 2020). These understandings are often framed within the literature as barriers to support, particularly through discussions of stigma, reluctance to disclose distress, or culturally specific beliefs about mental health (Meechan, John, & Hanna, 2021; Devonport et al., 2023). However, this risks positioning cultural interpretations as problematic while leaving dominant mental health frameworks uninterrogated. Alternative perspectives may instead highlight the cultural limitations of Eurocentric mental health models rather than simply indicating reluctance to seek help.

Mistrust of formal mental health services must also be situated within broader historical and institutional contexts. Some Black communities describe services as "unapproachable", "unkind", and "discriminatory" (Meechan, John, & Hanna, 2021; Devonport et al., 2023). Historical experiences of misdiagnosis, coercive intervention, and the pathologisation of Black communities contribute to understandable scepticism towards statutory systems (McClean, Campbell, & Cornish, 2003). Parents and carers may therefore anticipate discrimination within professional services and prepare children and young people for unfair treatment (Hughes et al., 2006), while also feeling hesitant about engaging with systems they do not fully trust (Crozier, 2005; Mind, 2023). Within this context, community-based and informal support may feel more accessible and culturally meaningful. Black young people often describe family, peers, faith communities, and community organisations as

central sources of support, reflecting relational and collective understandings of wellbeing that may not align with dominant clinical pathways (Meechan, John, & Hanna, 2021; Chapman-Hilliard & Adams-Bass, 2016). This does not necessarily reflect rejection of formal services, but a preference for support experienced as more relationally and culturally attuned.

Conversely schools and statutory services have often struggled to engage meaningfully with these forms of care. Black families are sometimes described as “hard to reach”, with limited attention given to how services themselves may be experienced as culturally inaccessible or epistemically unsafe (Crozier, 2005; Meechan, John, & Hanna, 2021). Such framings risk locating responsibility within families while leaving institutional expectations and practices insufficiently examined. Lower engagement with school-based mental health support should therefore not be understood simply as reluctance or refusal, but associated with questions of trust, credibility, and institutional accountability (Crozier, 2005; Mind, 2023).

Collectively, this literature suggests that Black boys’ distress is shaped through intersecting experiences of racism, gendered expectation, epistemic injustice, and unequal access to support. Read through a narrative lens, these dynamics reveal how dominant stories about Black boys circulate across schools and mental health systems, shaping both institutional responses and the terms through which young people may come to understand themselves. This provides the basis for considering the role of educational practitioners, who are often positioned to interpret, respond to, and make decisions about Black boys’ emotional well-being within school systems.

## **2.4 The Role of Educational Practitioners**

### **2.4.1 Legislative context and responsibilities**

Given the preceding discussion of structural inequality, interpretation, and mistrust, educational practitioners in the UK hold statutory responsibilities for identifying, safeguarding, and responding to young people’s mental health and wellbeing within school settings. A range of legislative and policy frameworks, including the Children and Families Act (2014), the Education Act (2002), the Equality Act (2010), the SEND Code of Practice (2015), Working Together to Safeguard Children (2023), and Keeping Children Safe in Education (2023), collectively establish duties to safeguard and promote pupils’ wellbeing.

More specifically, the Children and Families Act (2014) and the SEND Code of Practice (2015) require schools to identify and respond to Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs through early intervention, graduated support, and collaborative work with families and professionals. The Equality Act (2010) additionally places a duty on schools to prevent discrimination, promote equality of opportunity, and foster good relations between groups, including in relation to race. Alongside this, safeguarding guidance emphasises the

importance of recognising contextual harm and responding appropriately to concerns affecting children's welfare.

Collectively, these frameworks establish clear responsibilities for recognising distress, responding to need, and ensuring equitable support. However, while statutory guidance addresses safeguarding, SEMH, and equality, it does not always specify how schools should recognise or respond to the racialised dimensions of mental health experience. As a result, considerable scope remains for interpretation in practice, particularly where distress is shaped by racism, exclusion, adultification, or institutional mistrust.

#### **2.4.2 Practice and the position of Educational Psychology**

Within school settings, teachers, teaching assistants, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinators (SEND-Cs), and pastoral staff are often among the first professionals positioned to notice or respond to distress (Cokley et al., 2014; Department of Health, 2017; Shelemy et al., 2019). Where concerns escalate or require more targeted input, Educational Mental Health Practitioners (EMHPs) and Educational Psychologists (EPs) may then become involved. EMHPs typically provide low-intensity interventions, often informed by Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), while EPs more commonly contribute through consultation, assessment, formulation, and work at a systemic level, although involvement is often commissioned in response to needs positioned within individual children and young people. Although CBT may be valuable for some young people, its prominence within school-based mental health provision can arguably narrow how distress is understood, particularly where racialised or structural dimensions of experience are insufficiently considered. CBT-informed approaches often focus on supporting individuals to identify and modify thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, which may risk locating distress primarily within the young person rather than within the wider social and institutional contexts shaping their experiences (Watkins & Shulman, 2008; Bryant-Davis & Moore-Lobban, 2020). From a BLP perspective, this raises important questions about whether interventions address the conditions contributing to distress or primarily support adaptation to them (Montero, 2009).

Across educational and mental health professions, the literature consistently suggests that training does not always prepare practitioners to address racism, racial trauma, or the specific mental health experiences of Black boys (Demie, 2019; Woodley, 2021). The Centre for Mental Health (2023), for example, reports that fewer than one third of teachers have received training on racism or microaggressions, despite 94% believing such training should be available to all school staff. Without explicit engagement with race and power, practitioners may as a result unintentionally reproduce frameworks that individualise distress while overlooking structural harm. Young people themselves have similarly called for more explicit discussion of racism, discrimination, and mental health within schools to improve understanding and reduce stigma (Centre for Mental Health, 2024).

Educational Psychology occupies a particularly complex position within these dynamics. Traditional EP practice has often centred individual assessment and cognitive or behavioural formulation, at times abstracted from wider socio-political contexts (Gould, 1981; Gillborn, 2008). Although systemic and relational approaches are now more strongly emphasised, tensions remain between institutional demands and anti-racist aspirations (Agyeman & Lichwa, 2020). EPs may simultaneously contribute to SEND identification, assessment, and statutory processes while also supporting inclusion, belonging, and whole-school wellbeing. This creates the risk that culturally situated survival strategies are interpreted through deficit-oriented frameworks. It also reflects a broader professional question concerning whether Educational Psychology primarily supports individuals within existing systems or can additionally contribute to institutional change. The present study is positioned within this latter possibility while recognising the constraints of statutory and organisational systems.

The historical foundations of Educational Psychology further complicate this position. Early EP practice was closely connected to psychometric testing, intelligence measurement, and wider traditions of scientific racism and eugenic thinking, which contributed to the racialised classification of Black children within education systems (Coard, 1971; Gould, 1981). Although contemporary practice has shifted considerably, these histories remain important within critical Educational Psychology literature (Wright, 2020), particularly where assessment frameworks continue to rely on normative assumptions that may not adequately reflect racially marginalised groups. Such approaches risk reinforcing deficit interpretations and contributing to disproportionate categorisation within SEND systems (Fernando, 2017).

Agyeman and Lichwa (2020) argue that EPs hold a responsibility to challenge systemic oppression by critically examining how racism and inequality may be reproduced through assessment, consultation, and service delivery. While these concerns remain, it is important to acknowledge the significant work taking place within Educational Psychology to strengthen anti-racist practice. For example, Sakata et al. (2024) developed a culturally responsive consultation tool to support practitioners' critical reflexivity and cultural attunement, encouraging deeper consideration of how culture, identity, and power shape consultation processes. Alongside this, the Division of Educational and Child Psychology (DECP, 2023) developed the *self-assessment Framework for Promoting Racial Equity in Educational Psychology Services*, providing Educational Psychology Services with a structured framework to critically reflect on, evaluate, and strengthen racial equity across service delivery, leadership, workforce development, and organisational culture. Building on these developments, Harrison and Atkinson (2025) argue that Educational Psychology Services must move beyond implicit commitments to equality by embedding explicit anti-racist approaches across training, supervision, and systemic work. These developments reflect growing recognition of the need to embed anti-racist practice within Educational Psychology, while also highlighting that this work remains an ongoing process requiring continued critical reflexivity and systemic action. This requires practitioners to remain attentive to how their

own positioning shapes interpretation, expectation, and response (Graham & Robinson, 2004; Gillborn, 2008; Schouler-Ocak, 2015).

From a critical perspective, reflexivity alone may be insufficient where institutional structures, statutory demands, and resource constraints limit the extent to which practice can be transformed. EPs may therefore experience tensions between generating evidence for statutory decision-making and recognising the limitations of standardised assessment; between supporting individual young people and addressing systemic inequity; and between collaborative work with schools, critically challenging school practices. Anti-racist Educational Psychology practice cannot, therefore, be understood as a straightforward extension of existing roles, but as an ongoing process of negotiation and critical engagement within constrained systems.

Educational practitioners, and EPs in particular, are therefore not positioned outside these dynamics, but embedded within them. Their interpretations, assessments, and recommendations shape how Black boys' distress is recognised, categorised, and responded to, while also holding potential to challenge deficit framings and support more contextually grounded practice.

## **2.5 Gaps in the Literature and rationale for the study**

This literature review highlights important gaps in how Black boys' schooling and mental health experiences are currently understood within educational and psychological research. While existing literature consistently documents racial inequalities in exclusion, behaviour management, and mental health pathways, less attention has been paid to how Black males themselves make sense of these experiences and how such accounts might inform school-based practice.

Research concerning Black boys within education has often focused on behavioural outcomes, disciplinary processes, service access, and practitioner interpretation (Gillborn, 2008; Graham & Robinson, 2004; Perera, 2020; Demie, 2022; Walker, 2021). Although this work is important in evidencing structural inequality, it offers more limited insight into how Black boys understand experiences of distress, support, belonging, adaptation, and survival within school environments.

Recent literature further strengthens the case for examining racism as a determinant of young people's mental health. Meechan, John, and Hanna (2021) highlight the complex relationship Black boys may have with mental health support and call for further research to inform culturally responsive provision. Similarly, Ghezae et al. (2025) identify consistent associations between experiences of racism and poorer psychological outcomes among racially minoritised children and young people, emphasising the need for research that attends to intersectional factors and avoids homogenising racialised groups. Alam, O'Halloran, and Fowke (2024) similarly argue for research that moves beyond broad

“minoritised” categories to explore the experiences of specific racialised groups in greater depth.

Alongside this conceptual gap, there remains a methodological gap. Much of the existing literature continues to privilege professional and institutional interpretations of distress over Black boys’ own accounts of meaning, support, and emotional experience. Dominant psychological frameworks may therefore individualise distress while paying insufficient attention to the relational and structural conditions through which it is produced and understood.

Although some recent work has begun to challenge these assumptions through more participatory and culturally responsive approaches, this remains a comparatively underdeveloped area within UK-based research. Leath et al. (2025), for example, argue that traditional research approaches can misrepresent the lived realities of Black young people and reinforce deficit narratives. Watkins, Abelson, and Jefferson (2013), Cokley et al. (2014), and Myers and Speight (2010) similarly emphasise the importance of culturally congruent frameworks that account for race, gender, and socio-political context. However, there remains limited UK qualitative research adopting liberation-informed approaches to explore how Black males narrate and make meaning of their school and mental health experiences.

These concerns are further reflected in a co-created review by Youth Access (2025), developed in partnership with Black young people and specialist organisations, which argues that inclusion alone is insufficient within systems that continue to reproduce exclusion and harm.

Taken together, these gaps point towards the need for research that centres Black men’s narratives of secondary school and mental health within a contextually grounded and liberatory framework. The present study responds to this need through a critical narrative approach that foregrounds lived experience while situating participants’ accounts within the wider institutional conditions shaping them.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has critically reviewed literature relating to Black boys’ schooling and mental health experiences, foregrounding how race, power, and institutional practice shape how distress is understood and responded to within school contexts. Across the literature, Black boys emerge as more likely to experience behavioural surveillance, exclusion, adultification, and forms of support that overlook the racialised conditions shaping their experiences. The review has also highlighted tensions between statutory responsibilities, practitioner roles, and everyday school practice, suggesting that legal duties alone do not ensure culturally responsive or anti-racist support.

Read through BLP and SC, the literature suggests that Black boys' mental health cannot be understood solely through individualised frameworks of need or coping. Rather, distress emerges through broader institutional conditions and dominant narratives surrounding Black masculinity, vulnerability, credibility, and belonging. These perspectives also draw attention to how meanings of distress and support are shaped within educational and psychological systems.

The chapter therefore establishes the need for research that centres Black men's accounts of schooling, distress, and support within racialised educational contexts. In response, the present study adopts a critical narrative approach to explore how these experiences might inform more relational, culturally responsive, and anti-racist approaches to supporting Black boys' mental health.

## **Chapter 3 Black Liberation Psychology as a Theoretical Lens**

### **3.1 Introduction**

While the previous chapter reviewed the wider literature, this chapter outlines Black Liberation Psychology (BLP) as the study's primary theoretical lens. I use BLP to hold together the psychological, political, and collective dimensions of these experiences.

My engagement with BLP developed throughout the research process. At the outset of this study, my thinking was informed by Martín-Baró's (1994) Liberation Psychology, whose emphasis on oppression, power, and social transformation provided an important foundation for understanding the relationship between psychological wellbeing and structural injustice. However, as my engagement with the literature deepened, it became apparent that a framework explicitly centred on Black histories, epistemologies, and lived experiences was needed to address the research aims. Whilst BLP builds on the emancipatory foundations of Liberation Psychology, it extends these ideas by placing Black experiences, resistance, and cultural knowledge at the centre of psychological theory and practice. Consequently, BLP was adopted as the primary theoretical lens for this study because it offered a more appropriate framework through which to understand and interpret the narratives of Black men.

Psychological approaches that prioritise disorder, pathology, or individual functioning may offer useful insights, but can overlook the broader socio-political conditions through which distress is produced and interpreted (Myers & Speight, 2010). This can be limited in accounting for the racialised and institutional conditions shaping Black boys' experiences of schooling and mental health. BLP provides an alternative framework that foregrounds racism, power, lived experience, resistance, and collective healing within understandings of psychological well-being.

Rooted in the work of Frantz Fanon and further developed by scholars such as Na'im Akbar, Wade Nobles, Kobi Kambon, and Amos Wilson, BLP attends to the psychological impact of racialised oppression while also foregrounding resistance, cultural continuity, collective healing, and empowerment (Akbar, 1996; Belgrave & Allison, 2018).

While acknowledging the value of BLP in centring histories of oppression, resistance, and Black psychological wellbeing, this study does not position BLP as a singular or complete explanation of participants' experiences. Rather, it operates alongside narrative and social constructionist perspectives to examine how experiences are lived, interpreted, and negotiated over time. Using BLP within a doctoral research context also requires critical caution. Liberation-oriented frameworks can risk becoming aspirational if disconnected from the material and institutional conditions through which change is constrained.

### **3.2 Liberation and Critical Consciousness**

What resonated most deeply with me about BLP was its commitment to liberation. This aligned with both the aims of the research and my developing identity as an Educational and Child Psychologist. Liberation reframed my role not as someone seeking to 'fix' Black boys, but as someone creating space for participants' accounts to be heard without pathologising them, while remaining mindful that empowerment cannot simply be granted by the researcher. Within this study, liberation is therefore understood not as an individual achievement, but as closely connected to recognition, dignity, social justice, and the conditions that shape psychological well-being (hooks, 1994). However, this study does not claim to liberate participants or transform school systems directly. Rather, BLP is used as a critical lens through which dominant psychological framings of Black boys' distress can be questioned, and participants' accounts recognised as legitimate forms of knowledge.

BLP also closely aligns with Freire's (1970) concept of conscientization, or critical consciousness, which involves developing awareness of oppressive social conditions and recognising how these shape identity, experience, and opportunity. Before developing critical consciousness, individuals may internalise deficit-based narratives about their abilities, worth, and belonging, accepting these as personal failings rather than locating them within broader systems of inequality. Such processes may shape how individuals understand themselves and their place within the world (Steele, 2011). Developing critical consciousness can therefore support resistance and identity reclamation by enabling individuals to recognise and challenge oppressive structures (Bryant-Davis & Moore-Lobban, 2020). At the same time, awareness alone does not remove structural harm, and recognising oppression may itself be emotionally difficult while individuals remain positioned within unequal systems. In this study, critical consciousness is therefore understood not as an outcome but as a way of interpreting how participants named, questioned, and made sense of their experiences.

BLP further emphasises that liberation and well-being are collective rather than solely individual processes (Akbar, 1996). This challenges Westernised psychological frameworks that prioritise individual resilience detached from community, culture, and shared experience (Belgrave & Allison, 2018). These ideas shaped the methodological approach of the study by foregrounding relational safety, collective dialogue, and participants' authority over the interpretation of their own experiences. They also informed an analytic focus on how participants connected experiences of distress, identity, and support to wider cultural and institutional conditions. However, within institutional settings such as schools, the possibilities for liberation and critical consciousness remain constrained by broader structural realities, raising important questions about how far awareness alone can translate into meaningful systemic change.

### **3.3 Empowerment and Praxis**

Empowerment sits at the heart of BLP and is understood not as a fixed outcome, but as an ongoing relational process shaped through praxis. Drawing on Freire (1970), praxis refers to the continuous relationship between critical reflection and action, through which oppressive social conditions can be recognised and challenged. Within BLP, this involves confronting systemic racism while affirming Black humanity, knowledge, and lived experience (Grills, Nobles, & Hill, 2018).

Empowerment develops when people are able to critically examine and name the conditions shaping their lives. As Afuape and Oldham (2022) argue, change cannot begin without recognising the structures through which oppression operates. Within educational contexts, this raises important questions about how practitioners understand racism, power, belonging, and emotional well-being within school systems.

In this study, praxis is understood modestly and critically. Rather than claiming to transform institutions directly, the research sought to create space for Black men's accounts to be shared, reflected upon, and brought into dialogue with educational practitioners. This positioned the study as more than an exercise in interpretation alone, while remaining attentive to the institutional constraints that may limit possibilities for change. Praxis, therefore, became less about producing immediate transformation and more about fostering critical reflection capable of unsettling dominant assumptions about Black boys' distress and school experiences.

This orientation also shaped the analytic process. Analytically, this meant attending to how participants narrated distress, identity, and support in relation to racialised school environments. In this sense, knowledge within the study was understood as relationally and collaboratively produced, with participants positioned as legitimate knowers of their own experiences. This positioning is particularly relevant within Educational Psychology, where practitioners work across both individual and systemic domains, and where BLP offers a

framework for critically examining how these roles are negotiated within unequal institutional contexts.

## **Chapter 4 Methodology**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter outlines the methodological foundations of the study and explains how the research questions and theoretical positioning shaped the research design, data generation, and analytic approach. It details the philosophical assumptions underpinning the study, the rationale for the chosen methods, participant recruitment, ethical considerations, and methodological limitations.

### **4.2 Philosophical Assumptions**

The methodological choices within this study are grounded in assumptions about knowledge, experience, meaning, and power. I distinguish here between my personal philosophical positioning and the research-specific framework adopted for this study. As a Black woman, mother of Black sons, and Trainee Educational and Child Psychologist (TEP), I approached the research aware that I could not position myself as separate from the social contexts, discourses, and power relations shaping the narratives I explored. Smith's (2021) work on *Decolonising Methodologies* challenged the illusion of neutrality and, for me, raised important questions about the ethics and politics of this research: "whose research it is, who owns it, who designed its questions, who carries it out, and who writes it up" (p. 46). These questions reinforced how positionality and power shape both research and lived experience.

#### **4.2.1 Power**

In this study, I understand power as operating across relational, structural, and systemic levels (Azmanova, 2018). Relationally, power is enacted through social interaction, language, and discourse, influencing how people position themselves and others. Structurally, it operates through institutional norms and practices that organise opportunities and constraints. Systemically, it reflects wider socio-political arrangements that privilege some groups while marginalising others (Azmanova, 2018; Forst, 2017).

From a Social Constructionist perspective, I also understand power as continually produced and reproduced through everyday interactions, cultural practices, and social narratives (Burr, 2015). This is particularly relevant to Black boys' school and mental health experiences, where power influences how identities, behaviour, and need are interpreted (Givens et al., 2016). Methodologically, this required me to attend to power across recruitment,

facilitation, analysis, and representation, particularly in how participants' narratives were heard and interpreted.

#### **4.2.2 Ontology**

Ontology concerns what exists and what constitutes reality (Crotty, 1998). I approached ontology both as lived experience and as a political stance, shaped by my experiences as a Black woman, a mother to Black sons, and a TEP. I adopted a critical relational ontology, understanding reality as relational and shaped through interaction, history, and power (Kaipayil, 2003). I therefore rejected the notion of a detached, objective reality in which a single truth can be discovered. Instead, I understood participants' stories as multiple and coexisting realities, situated within broader socio-political and historical contexts.

This position aligns with the view that social realities emerge within historical and structural contexts, including colonial legacies, racial hierarchies, and systemic inequalities (Bhambra, 2014; Zembylas, 2017). Methodologically, this supported my use of collective storytelling, through which participants' accounts were understood in relation to wider relational, and institutional contexts.

#### **4.2.3 Epistemology**

Epistemology examines how we come to understand reality, whose knowledge is valued, and why (Hathcoat, Meixner, & Nicholas, 2019). For this research, I approached epistemology from a Social Constructionist (SC) perspective, adopting a critical orientation to examine how meanings surrounding behaviour, mental health, and support are produced through institutional discourse and shaped by relations of power and inequality (Burr, 2015; Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). Within this position, knowledge is never neutral; it is shaped by who is permitted to speak, whose experiences are legitimised, and the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which understanding takes place.

In line with Fricker (2007), I also recognise that those most affected by racial marginalisation and oppression may experience epistemic injustice, where their capacity as knowers is dismissed or undervalued. The voices claiming universality are often privileged, while others are silenced. This also echoes Huber's (2009) observation that Eurocentric frameworks establish boundaries around what is considered "legitimate" knowledge, privileging Western approaches while dismissing alternative ways of knowing.

Although I adopted SC for this study, I personally hold a broader critical realist worldview. Critical realism, as developed by Bhaskar (1975), distinguishes between the empirical (what can be observed), the actual (events that occur regardless of observation), and the real (the underlying structures and mechanisms that produce these events). From this perspective, social structures and inequalities are understood to have real effects on lives and

opportunities, even when they are not immediately visible or explicitly recognised. As a Black person, I experience racism as concrete and recognise that structural inequalities have real effects, even when they remain unspoken.

Initially, I considered adopting critical realism because of its focus on deeper causal structures, including the institutional racism and systemic inequalities shaping Black boys' mental health experiences (Bhaskar, 2013). However, as I reflected further on the aims of this study, it became clear that a Social Constructionist paradigm aligned more closely with the research questions. My intention was not to identify universal causes or explain mental health outcomes through fixed structures. Rather, I wanted to examine how Black men narrated and interpreted their secondary school experiences within wider social, cultural, and institutional contexts. SC, therefore, offered a more appropriate framework. This shift reflected methodological alignment rather than a rejection of my foundational beliefs: for this study, meaning and knowledge were best understood as co-constructed through relationships, discourse, and power.

#### **4.2.4 Axiology**

My values were central to this research and informed the study design, participant engagement, analysis, and representation of participants' accounts. At the heart of the study were commitments to justice, care, emancipation, and relational accountability. These commitments required ongoing attentiveness to whether the research reproduced deficit-based framings or instead created space for recognition, resistance, and alternative understandings of Black boys' distress and schooling experiences.

This axiological position aligns with BLP, Narrative Inquiry, and CNA, which each treat participants' accounts as socially and historically situated rather than detached from relations of power. My values were therefore not separate from the methodological process, but shaped how participants' narratives were engaged with, interpreted, and ethically represented throughout the study.

#### **4.2.5 Philosophical Paradigm**

Social Constructionism is the guiding paradigm for this research, reflecting the study's commitment to understanding knowledge and meaning as socially produced through interaction, discourse, and culture (Burr, 2015; Gergen, 2015). A critical orientation within SC enabled attention to how dominant discourses shape which knowledge is legitimised and which experiences are marginalised.

This paradigm aligned with the study's focus on Black men's narratives, as it allowed experiences of schooling, distress, and support to be examined as situated and co-constructed rather than fixed or individually located. It is also connected with Smith's (2021)

questions of “whose interests” research serves and “who will benefit from it” (p. 46), by foregrounding questions of power, representation, and accountability within knowledge production.

These philosophical positions underpin the methodological choices that follow, shaping how participants were engaged, how data were generated, and how narratives were interpreted.

### **4.3 Theoretical and Psychological Framework**

Building on these philosophical assumptions, this section outlines how BLP guided the research design, participant engagement, and analytic process. I focus on how BLP informed dialogue, co-construction, empowerment, and praxis within the study.

#### **4.3.1 Framework Alignment**

Building on the critical relational ontology and social constructionist paradigm underpinning this research, BLP provided the primary theoretical lens through which I approached participants’ experiences. While SC provided the epistemological foundation for understanding knowledge as socially produced, BLP provided the psychological and political lens through which participants’ experiences were interpreted. Its emphasis on cultural affirmation, empowerment, and liberation offered a way to explore the experiences of Black men with depth, nuance, and respect (Belgrave & Allison, 2018).

This framework directly influenced what I attended to during data analysis, including how participants positioned themselves, how power operated within their narratives, and how meaning was collectively produced and negotiated.

#### **4.3.2 Consideration of an Alternative Framework**

At the beginning of this research journey, I was initially drawn to Critical Race Theory (CRT). Literature exploring racism and mental health inequalities among Black young people draws attention to how race and power operate within educational and psychological systems (Cokley et al., 2014; Devonport et al., 2023). CRT is unapologetic in exposing the ways race and power are embedded within social and institutional systems, and I was particularly drawn to its commitment to counter-storytelling, which aligns with the idea that marginalised voices can challenge dominant narratives and question what counts as legitimate knowledge (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). However, as I reflected further, I continued to feel a sense of insufficiency. I found myself asking what follows? How do we move beyond recognising structural harm and towards approaches that also attend to meaning, agency, and possibility? My aim was not only to identify racism and institutional inequality, but also to create opportunities for reflection, dialogue, and praxis. In this sense, I

became increasingly aware that, while CRT is invaluable in exposing structural racism, some critiques suggest that its emphasis can remain weighted towards the analysis of oppression rather than questions of transformation or liberation (Cole, 2020). BLP therefore offered a framework that aligned more closely with the methodological aims of this study, particularly its emphasis on collective meaning-making, empowerment, and praxis.

#### **4.3.3 Critical Consciousness, Empowerment and Praxis in Practice**

Freire's (1970) notion of conscientisation influenced how I approached both the design and analysis of this study. I wanted to create spaces in which Black men could pause, reflect, and critically examine the systems shaping their school-based mental health experiences. It was important that these spaces remained dialogic and collaborative, allowing participants to speak openly, listen to one another, and reflect collectively on their experiences. These intentions were grounded in principles of BLP that emphasise cultural knowledge, collective strength, and connection (Nobles, 2006). In this way, I aimed to centre participants' knowledge and engage with them as active contributors to meaning-making rather than passive participants.

In practice, this informed the design and facilitation of group-based discussions that extended beyond data collection alone. These became spaces of exchange, recognition, and collective reflection. Participants moved between personal experience and shared insight, often linking individual stories with wider social and institutional structures. Through these narratives, they challenged deficit-based framings and reclaimed language for describing their own realities. What emerged closely resembled what Case and Hunter (2012) describe as a *counterspace*, one that resists deficit-oriented views of marginalised identities and instead nurtures affirmation, validation, and collective well-being.

Empowerment within this process was not something I could give as a researcher, but something enacted through the ways participants storied and interpreted their experiences. Analytically, this required me to attend to how power operated within the stories shared and within my own interpretive stance. I therefore approached participants as co-theorisers, recognising their insights as central to both interpretation and the implications of the research.

Praxis was also central to this process. The study moved beyond reflection and description towards action. Participants co-produced creative artefacts, including written messages and a poem, which were later shared with educational practitioners. These artefacts carried participants' voices into new spaces, prompting reflection and dialogue. This created a methodological bridge between lived experience and professional reflection, grounding the research in both relational and transformative intent. The details of how these stages unfolded are explored later in this chapter.

## **4.4 Methodological Approach**

### **4.4.1 Narrative Inquiry**

Informed by the philosophical and theoretical positions outlined above, this section details the approach adopted to generate and analyse participants' narratives. Choosing a methodological approach was never purely a pragmatic decision for this study; it was also an ethical and political one.

Narrative Inquiry is a qualitative research approach concerned with how individuals interpret and communicate their lives through storytelling, while recognising that stories are shaped by social and historical contexts across time (Clandinin, 2022; Daiute, 2014; Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022). As Toliver (2021) asserts, "storytelling is an essential component of Black existence" (p. xiv), reflecting the importance of narrative as a means of survival, resistance, and cultural expression. Similarly, Fanon (2005) emphasises that reclaiming one's voice in the face of colonial oppression is central to liberation. In this sense, Narrative Inquiry created space for participants to revisit and re-articulate their experiences, challenge dominant discourses, and generate insights that could inform practice (Call-Cummings & Dazzo, 2023).

Detached measures or quantitative approaches could not have captured the depth, nuance, or contextual realities that this research sought to understand. Such approaches risk reducing complex lived experiences to an assumed objective reality that can be measured (Hammersley, 2013), while overlooking the ways systemic and structural forces shape experience.

Like any methodological approach, Narrative Inquiry carries potential limitations. Participants' narratives were inevitably shaped by their interactions with me as the researcher, which may introduce subjectivity (Clandinin, 2006). However, from a Social Constructionist and BLP perspective, this intersubjectivity was understood as an inherent part of knowledge production, reflecting the relational and socially situated nature of meaning-making (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002; Nobles, 2006; Call-Cummings & Dazzo, 2023). Maintaining reflexivity throughout the process helped ensure that interpretive decisions remained ethically and philosophically consistent with the study's commitments to empowerment and participant agency.

### **4.4.2 Participant Selection, Profile, and Sampling - Black men**

This study involved four Black men aged 21 to 26 years, all fluent in English and having attended secondary schools in the UK. Participants were invited to self-identify their racial and ethnic backgrounds through an open-ended question rather than predefined categories. The group included individuals who identified as Black Caribbean, Black African, Black British, and Mixed White and Black Caribbean.

At the time of the study, the participants were receiving support from a community-based mental health organisation working with Black men experiencing mild to moderate mental health needs. This organisation volunteered to participate in the research and acted as the recruitment site. It positions itself as a healing justice initiative, promoting holistic wellness through practices that encourage movement, stillness, grounding, and opportunities to feel fully seen and heard. Central to its work is fostering connection, community, solidarity, and togetherness, creating spaces where individuals can share experiences, express themselves culturally, build supportive networks, and engage collectively in empowerment (Anonymous organisation website, 2025).

Methodologically, I recognised that participants' engagement with this supportive space could offer valuable insight into what community mental health support looks like for Black men and how such experiences might inform school-based interventions. It also created opportunities for participants to reflect on how earlier intervention may have shaped their later experiences. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, with the organisation acting as a gatekeeper and facilitating access. Information about the study was shared through the organisation, and individuals who met the inclusion criteria volunteered to participate.

#### **4.4.3 Participant Selection, Profile, and Sampling - Educational Practitioners**

The second participant group consisted of six practitioners employed by organisations, services, or schools providing school-based mental health support for young people within a single UK local authority. They participated in a structured reflective session in response to the artefacts created by the Black male participants, contributing to the study's praxis-oriented focus on bringing lived experience into dialogue with educational practice.

Purposive sampling ensured that practitioners had relevant professional experience and the authority to engage critically with the artefacts, offering potential implications for school-based mental health practice. The group included the local authority's Principal Educational Psychologist, an Educational Psychologist, two Educational Mental Health Practitioners, a Principal Exclusions Officer, and a Director of Inclusion, SEMH and Wellbeing.

Engaging with both participant groups required attentiveness to how my identities and experiences could shape interactions, influence participation, and affect interpretation. I recognised that both the focus group and reflective session were relational spaces, co-constructed through power. Reflecting on these dynamics helped me maintain a critically reflexive approach, ensuring ethical and philosophically aligned practice throughout the research process.

#### **4.4.4 Reflexivity about Power Dynamics and Positionality in Recruitment**

My positionality, both personally and professionally, played an important role in recruitment decisions and influenced access, rapport, and engagement with both participant groups. I occupied what Dwyer and Buckle (2009) describe as “the space between,” a fluid insider-outsider position. While I share some cultural and racialised experiences with the Black men, I do not fully share their lived realities. I am conscious of practices such as code-switching and the significance of meaningful silences, where negotiation, self-monitoring, withholding, or what remains unsaid may also communicate experiences shaped by racialised contexts and relationships, alongside the ongoing psychological effects of structural racism. At the same time, I remain aware of the interpretive authority, institutional connections, and academic privilege I hold in this context. These asymmetries could not be removed, but they were explicitly recognised and navigated throughout the recruitment process.

Race and gender were the primary inclusion criteria, reflecting the study’s focus on Black men’s experiences. However, I remained aware that Black men’s experiences are not homogenous and are shaped by intersecting factors such as class, sexuality, ability, and cultural heritage (Ferguson, 2004; Young, 2004). Although these axes were not included as formal inclusion criteria, an intersectional sensitivity was maintained throughout the analysis, incorporating identity factors raised by participants. This approach aligns with BLP’s understanding of identity as fluid, situated, and socio-historically embedded (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). Nevertheless, focusing recruitment primarily on race and gender is acknowledged as a limitation, as it restricts the extent to which intersecting identities can be systematically explored.

#### **4.4.5 Recruitment of Black Male Participants**

Access to Black male participants was facilitated through a single community organisation, which presented both opportunities and challenges. The organisation’s culturally supportive environment helped enable participants to share experiences openly, fostering trust and generating rich, contextually grounded narratives. However, recruiting through a single service may also have introduced positive bias by prioritising the perspectives of individuals already engaged with mental health support, potentially under-representing those less connected to such services.

My shared racial identity may have supported rapport and participants’ willingness to share personal experiences. At the same time, gender differences and my professional positioning as both researcher and practitioner may have influenced participants’ narratives, particularly where I may have been perceived as unable to fully inhabit their lived realities. These reflections required ongoing attentiveness to power, trust, and relational dynamics across the study, helping maintain ethical and methodological coherence.

#### **4.4.6 Recruitment of Educational Practitioners**

Recruitment of educational practitioners was informed by both methodological and reflexive considerations. Their inclusion supported the study's praxis-oriented aim of bringing participants' narratives into dialogue with those able to influence school-based responses and support. This created space for practitioners to engage critically with Black men's accounts and reflect on the implications for educational practice.

This decision was also informed by my own positioning as a TEP. Through practice, I have observed how expectations around strength, resilience, and emotional containment are often placed on Black individuals within educational systems, alongside the psychological costs this can carry (Meechan, John, & Hanna, 2021). These insights shaped my concern that Black boys' distress may be both experienced and interpreted within constrained institutional frameworks.

At the same time, I remained critically aware that practitioners, including myself, are embedded within the very systems this study seeks to examine. This introduced an important tension: while practitioners may contribute to change, they may also unknowingly reproduce the conditions that contribute to misrecognition and inequality. Their inclusion therefore enabled engagement with this tension directly, encouraging reflection on how professional roles, assumptions, and practices shape responses to Black boys' mental health.

#### **4.4.7 Managing Power and Expectations**

Participants in both groups may have viewed my professional role and shared racial understanding as connected to the possibility of change, which could have influenced the stories or reflections they chose to share. To help mitigate this, recruitment materials and verbal briefings explicitly stated that participation in the study would not lead to immediate changes in practice. Emphasis was placed on the research aim of informing understanding rather than promising direct outcomes.

Throughout the recruitment process, I remained attentive to issues of trust, rapport, and emotional safety. Reflexive note-taking supported continued attention to how both groups' accounts were heard, interpreted, and represented within the research process. For the Black men, this meant consistently placing their narratives at the centre. For the educational practitioners, it involved encouraging reflexive engagement with the Black men's narratives without imposing my own interpretations onto their responses. These methodological choices helped maintain attentiveness to power dynamics throughout the recruitment process and reflected the relational and ethical commitments of BLP (Watkins & Shulman, 2008).

## 4.5 Data Collection Process

Building on the methodological and philosophical foundations of SC and BLP, this study followed a three-stage qualitative design aligned with the research questions. The design was intentionally sequential, reflecting the study's theoretical commitment to co-construction and praxis by enabling participants not only to share experiences but to actively shape how those experiences were represented and communicated.

Although Stage 1 is described as a focus group, the process shared characteristics of an emancipatory circle within an emancipatory participatory research approach. Rather than functioning solely as a researcher-led method of data collection, the group created a collaborative space in which participants reflected on one another's experiences, engaged in shared dialogue, and co-constructed meaning. In this way, participants were positioned as active producers of knowledge rather than passive sources of data, reflecting the emancipatory principles underpinning this research. This approach also aligns with decolonising research methodologies, which challenge traditional Western assumptions that knowledge is something to be extracted by researchers and instead recognise multiple ways of knowing and generating knowledge (Smith, 2021). Consequently, conventional researcher-led methods of data collection may inadvertently privilege Western assumptions about what constitutes credible knowledge and constrain the ways in which Black participants choose to express, negotiate, and make sense of their experiences. Whilst the term *focus group* is retained throughout this thesis to accurately describe the method employed, the process reflected the participatory and emancipatory principles underpinning this research.

First, retrospective narratives were gathered through a focus group with the four Black men. Second, the same participants took part in a follow-up creative session in which they co-produced artefacts addressed to educational practitioners, communicating key aspects of their experiences. Third, these artefacts were shared with the group of educational practitioners in a reflective session designed to support professional engagement and consider implications for practice.

### 4.5.1 Stage 1: Focus Group with Black Male Participants

The first session focused on narrative exploration, providing a relational space for participants to reflect on their secondary school and mental health experiences, respond to one another's accounts, and co-construct meaning through shared dialogue. The focus group lasted approximately 80 minutes. I used open-ended prompts to guide discussion, emphasising active listening and allowing complexity to emerge rather than following a rigid script (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

These prompts invited participants to reflect on what stood out about their time at secondary school, whether and how race and gender shaped those experiences, how they

made sense of particularly challenging moments, how they would describe their emotional and mental health during that period, what forms of formal or informal support were available, what was missing from school-based support, and what appropriate mental health support for Black boys might look like in secondary schools.

The session was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure participants' voices were accurately represented. Data were stored securely, anonymised, and handled in accordance with ethical protocols (see Ethics section).

#### **4.5.2 Stage 2: Co-created Artefact Session with Black Male Participants**

The second session took place approximately two weeks after the first focus group and involved the same four participants. This session lasted approximately two hours and invited the Black men to engage creatively with their stories, moving beyond a standard member-checking procedure. The purpose was to move beyond retrospective reflection and support participants in collaboratively shaping how their experiences might be communicated to those working within school-based mental health systems.

Together, the group co-created artefacts intended for educational practitioners. Consistent with BLP, this approach validated multiple forms of knowledge and challenged Eurocentric hierarchies of truth (Grills, Nobles, & Hill, 2018). In line with Dillard (2000), these culturally indigenous ways of knowing demonstrate how artful forms such as storytelling, metaphor, and poetry can function as legitimate methods of generating and theorising lived experience.

Methodologically, the artefact served as a form of member validation, a practical enactment of the research paradigm, and an additional co-constructed form of narrative expression that supported credibility.

The final form of the artefact was decided collaboratively within the group. While I offered broad suggestions consistent with the study's BLP framework and its emphasis on multiple forms of knowledge expression, participants ultimately determined the final format. The group initially proposed developing a music video as a way of communicating their experiences to educational practitioners, reflecting a culturally meaningful and accessible form of expression. From a participatory perspective, this suggestion aligned closely with the study's commitment to co-production and participant-led knowledge creation. However, the production of a music video was beyond the practical scope, time, and resources available within this doctoral research project. As a result, the group collaboratively agreed to produce a set of written reflections alongside a collective poem, enabling the central messages and intended audience to remain participant-led whilst remaining feasible within the constraints of the study.

Using flipchart paper, participants organised their reflections under a series of headings, including: *How you (school and mental health staff) can support us*; *What we want you to know about our experiences*; *What we want you to know about our families, culture and community*; *What matters for our mental health*; and *What our message would be for our Black boys*. Participants contributed points under each heading as they discussed them together, frequently referring back to moments raised during the first focus group, checking agreement, and collectively deciding what should be included.

The group also co-created a poem beginning each line with the word *Imagine*. This emerged organically when one participant suggested that practitioners needed to imagine what these experiences felt like. Other participants then contributed additional lines, building on one another's ideas through a collaborative and iterative process. One participant took responsibility for writing the poem on behalf of the group, incorporating suggestions as they were discussed. The group then collectively reviewed, reordered, and read the poem aloud, reflecting a shared process of authorship and meaning-making.

This session was not audio-recorded. Instead, the written artefacts themselves were retained as data. Consistent with the study's commitment to multiple forms of knowledge production, these artefacts were not treated as a separate phase of data from the focus group transcript, but as a continuation and intensification of the same meaning-making process. This extended the narrative process across multiple forms of expression, including both spoken and creative texts (Clandinin, 2022; Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022).

Both this session and the first one took place in person within the trusted environment of the community organisation, a familiar space where participants had previously accessed mental health support. I remained attentive to the significance of this location, including the sense of safety and cultural belonging it provided. During my second visit, I noticed the distant clatter and chatter of dominoes being played in a neighbouring room, a culturally familiar sound within Caribbean community spaces. I treated this reflexively, recognising how place, sound, and cultural familiarity shaped the relational conditions in which meaning was generated. I considered these environmental and cultural factors analytically, recognising how context co-shapes meaning, in line with a social constructionist understanding of relational and situated knowledge (Burr, 2015).

#### **4.5.3 Stage 3: Practitioner Reflection Session**

The third stage involved a separate reflective session with six practitioner participants from the same local authority. This was designed as a collaborative reflective space lasting approximately 75 minutes, in which practitioners were invited to engage with the co-created artefacts, critically reflect on current practice, recognise existing strengths, and consider implications for improving school-based mental health support for Black boys. This stage is discussed further in the Discussion Chapter.

The purpose of this session was not to generate additional primary data for formal analysis, but to create a structured opportunity for practitioners to encounter the Black men's narratives and reflect on what these experiences might mean for professional practice.

I made an intentional methodological decision not to include this session within the primary data set. Maintaining the analytic focus on the Black men's narratives ensured that the study remained centred on their meaning-making rather than shifting interpretive authority towards practitioner responses. While the reflections from this session cannot be claimed as primary findings, they constitute an important praxis-oriented extension of the study.

During the session, I observed moments of discomfort within the conversations, which I interpreted as markers of authentic engagement with the narratives and their implications for practice (Whitney & Evered, 2022). This discomfort appeared particularly connected to discussions of racism, institutional responsibility, and the possibility that well-intentioned professional practices may nevertheless contribute to experiences of misrecognition or exclusion. Rather than attempting to resolve these tensions, the session encouraged practitioners to remain with moments of uncertainty and critical reflection. The final graphic representation of the reflective session was later shared with both participant groups (see Appendix E).

#### **4.5.4 Justification for collective storytelling**

The decision to use focus groups for the Black male participants rather than individual interviews reflected a commitment to understanding meaning as relationally produced. Consistent with SC and BLP, I understood knowledge to emerge through interaction, as stories were shared, echoed, extended, and collectively contested (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

The group context enabled participants to respond to one another's accounts, affirming and complicating them, making visible the social and collective dimensions of storytelling. I observed how subtle gestures, such as a nod, pause, or shared laughter, became part of this interactional process.

In line with social constructionist principles, I did not seek to establish a single or objective truth. Instead, I aimed to create a space in which participants could collaboratively challenge dominant ideologies, reveal their social consequences, and generate new meanings (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). Through this process, participants created a counterspace in which one another's experiences were affirmed, critical consciousness was fostered, and the interdependence central to empowerment within BLP was enacted.

Although I cannot confirm with certainty the extent to which the Black men knew one another prior to the study, all were attending the same optional, self-referral community-based organisation for Black men's mental health support. It is therefore likely that they had

encountered one another in that setting. This potential familiarity could have supported openness in discussion and contributed to a sense of shared recognition within the group.

#### **4.6 Data Analysis**

Consistent with the study's social constructionist and liberation-oriented framework, I required an analytic approach that moved beyond description to attend to narrative meaning, power, contradiction, and silence. I therefore sought an approach capable of holding the Black men's stories as situated forms of knowledge, while examining how voice, language, and narrative structure shaped what was said and what remained unsaid.

##### **4.6.1 Analytic Framework: Critical Narrative Analysis**

I adopted Critical Narrative Analysis (CNA) as a framework capable of holding this depth and complexity. By integrating narrative analysis with critical discourse analysis, CNA examines how stories are performed, how they reflect and shape social realities, and how wider power relations and institutional discourses influence them (Emerson & Frosh, 2009; Call-Cummings & Dazzo, 2023).

Rooted in critical theory, it attends to both the structure and context of narratives, questioning how language sustains or challenges inequalities (Souto-Manning, 2014). This approach aligns closely with the study's commitment to SC, which understands experience as relational and socially shaped (Burr, 2015). It is also consistent with the principles of BLP, which foreground the psychological consequences of structural racism and the importance of collective, culturally grounded meaning-making in understanding Black mental health.

When considering possible analytic approaches, I initially explored thematic analysis because of its flexibility and systematic approach to identifying patterns across data. However, I was concerned that its emphasis on coding and categorisation could fragment participants' stories, detaching them from the relational, affective, and socio-political contexts. CNA, in contrast, preserved the fluidity and depth of participants' voices while situating their accounts within the wider structures that shaped them.

##### **4.6.2 Analytic Process: From Transcripts and Artefacts to Interpretive Insight**

In line with narrative inquiry, I distinguish throughout this study between participants' *stories* and the broader *narratives* constructed through analysis. *Stories* refer to the Black men's accounts of particular experiences shared during the focus group discussions. In contrast, *narratives* refer to the wider interpretive structures through which these experiences are organised and given meaning across time (Clandinin, 2022).

The analytic process moved from individual stories towards broader narratives that reflected shared patterns across accounts, consistent with narrative inquiry's concern with how lived experience is organised socially and interpretively (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022; Call-Cummings & Dazzo, 2023). I followed Emerson and Frosh's (2009) CNA framework, viewing participants' stories as the starting point for narrative interpretation, where meaning is constructed within socio-historical and cultural contexts. Focus group discussions were anonymised and transcribed verbatim, with pauses, overlaps, interruptions, hesitations, and unfinished speech noted as meaningful communicative acts within participants' collective storytelling and meaning-making (see Appendix D).

The analytic process unfolded across several interconnected stages, moving from immersion in the data to narrative mapping and finally to the development of interpretive narratives. First, I engaged in repeated immersive readings of the data to develop early narrative mappings, attending to emotional charge, repetition, shifts in positioning, and the ways participants narrated their school-based mental health experiences.

During this initial immersion, I engaged in close *noticing*, recording detailed margin notes and attending to tone, pauses, laughter, hesitation, repetition, emotional intensity, and moments of silence. I also noted my own embodied and affective responses as a Black woman listening to the men's stories. This early noticing was not treated as interpretation in itself, but as an attunement to how meaning was carried not only through words, but through rhythm, emotional register, and what remained unsaid. These early observations later informed the narrative mappings and interpretive development, shaping how I understood moments of distress, protection, resistance, and silencing.

The analytic process was iterative rather than linear, involving continuous movement between the data and the theoretical frameworks (Emerson & Frosh, 2009). I analysed the data across three interpretive levels: the micro (language, metaphor, repetition, and affect), the meso (interactional positioning and co-construction of meaning), and the molar (structural, institutional, and racialised discourse) (Emerson & Frosh, 2009). I attended to tensions and movements both within and across participants' stories, exploring how experiences were organised, positioned, and given meaning. To support methodological transparency, a detailed account of the iterative analytic process, including narrative mapping and micro–meso–molar reading, is provided in Appendix C.

Through this process, I developed nine interpretive narratives that brought together shared storylines across the men's accounts. Each represented a distinct yet interconnected narrative movement through which experiences of harm, belonging, adaptation, resistance, and care were organised and understood. This involved identifying key tensions, including resilience and vulnerability, visibility and invisibility, and care and punishment, to illuminate how participants navigated identity and emotional well-being within racialised and power-laden structures.

#### **4.6.3 Integration of co-created artefacts as narrative data**

As outlined previously, following the focus group, the same four participants took part in a second session in which they co-created a poem and a set of written messages addressed to educational practitioners, alongside an additional message they chose to direct towards younger Black boys.

During analysis, I repeatedly moved between the transcripts and the artefacts to construct interpretive narratives, attending to metaphor, collective voice, repetition, and emotional emphasis across both data sets.

#### **4.6.4 Interpretation and Reflexivity**

Drawing on Haraway's (2013) concept of situated knowledges, I recognised that my historical and social positioning shaped the interpretations I produced. Reflexivity was therefore central throughout the analytic process, requiring transparency about my assumptions and ongoing attentiveness to how power shaped both the stories shared and my role in interpreting them.

Consistent with Jorgensen and Phillips (2002), I approached analysis as an iterative and dialogic process that critically challenged dominant assumptions while foregrounding marginalised perspectives. This felt especially important given the racialised discourses that have historically constructed Black men's experiences through deficit-based and pathologising narratives (Young, 2004).

My interpretive stance was guided by the principles of BLP and Souto-Manning's (2014) conceptualisation of narratives as cultural productions. I understood participants' stories not merely as accounts of experience, but as sites of meaning-making, self-definition, and critical reflection on institutional and social life (Call-Cummings & Dazzo, 2023).

Neutrality was neither possible nor desirable; my positionality shaped how I listened, interpreted, and represented the narratives I encountered. In line with Emerson and Frosh's (2009) approach within CNA, I moved across emotional, linguistic, and socio-political layers of meaning, treating reflexivity as an ongoing dialogue between self, data, and theory.

#### **4.6.5 Methodological Rigour and Trustworthiness**

Methodological rigour in this study was understood as both a procedural and reflexive practice, requiring transparency, consistency, and critical engagement with the analytic process. To support this, I maintained a detailed audit trail documenting analytic decisions, narrative mappings, and moments of uncertainty, enabling the development of interpretations to be traced over time (see Appendix C).

Regular supervisory discussions provided opportunities for critical dialogue in which emerging interpretations were questioned, refined, and deepened. This supported credibility by ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts rather than being shaped solely by my own assumptions. Alongside this, I kept a reflexive journal to document my responses, positionality, and interpretive decisions, enabling ongoing scrutiny of how my perspectives influenced the analytic process.

Credibility was further strengthened through the second participant session, in which transcripts from the initial focus group were revisited and developed through the co-creation of artefacts. This extended beyond traditional member-checking by enabling participants to actively shape how their experiences were represented and interpreted within the study.

Although the study does not seek statistical generalisability, transferability was supported through the provision of rich, contextualised accounts of participants' experiences, enabling readers to consider how the findings may resonate with other educational or professional contexts.

Rigour within this study was understood not solely as procedural consistency, but as ongoing attentiveness to how participants' experiences were interpreted and represented. Sustained reflexivity, repeated engagement with the data, and supervisory dialogue supported continued reflection throughout the analytic process.

## **4.7 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations informed every stage of this research, from design and participant engagement to analysis and representation. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Sheffield (see Appendix B), ensuring compliance with institutional and professional standards, including the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2021).

For me, ethics extended beyond formal compliance into a relational practice of care, requiring attentiveness to participants' dignity, agency, and emotional safety while resisting extractive approaches to research with marginalised communities.

### **4.7.1 Care for participants**

I followed the British Psychological Society's principles of respect, social responsibility, integrity, and maximising benefit while minimising harm (BPS, 2021). Informed consent was treated as an ongoing dialogue rather than a single procedural event. Participants were provided with comprehensive information about the study's aims, scope, and voluntary nature, and were given time to reflect and ask questions before consenting.

At the start of each session, I collaboratively established shared agreements with participants about how discussions would be held, together with opportunities for breaks to support comfort, agency, and emotional safety. Recognising that discussions of mental health and racialised experience may carry emotional risk (Potthoff et al., 2023), I worked closely with the community organisation to ensure that staff support was available for the Black men throughout the process. All participants were also provided with tailored resource sheets, including culturally competent services and crisis support.

Initially, I considered recruiting school-aged participants in order to capture experiences in real time. However, I decided that the ethical risks of inviting young people to discuss current challenges outweighed the potential benefits. Retrospective reflection with adult participants may have enabled more considered, emotionally manageable narratives while still generating insights relevant to the study's aims. All Black male participants were already engaged with the community-based mental health support organisation, which may also have supported their readiness to participate.

#### **4.7.2 Researcher Well-being**

The intersections between this research and my own life required additional ethical consideration. As a Black woman and mother of Black sons, the narratives I encountered often resonated with deeply personal experiences and fears. Engaging with stories of marginalisation and trauma, therefore, constituted ongoing emotional labour, consistent with observations by Mallon and Elliott (2019) regarding the demands placed on researchers working with sensitive material.

I supported my own well-being through supervisory debriefs, reflective journaling, and grounding practices, remaining attentive to my emotional responses and carefully navigating the overlap between my personal and professional identities.

#### **4.7.3 Ethical Rigour**

Ethical practice was maintained through both relational care and procedural safeguards. The Black men were recruited through a single community organisation supporting Black men experiencing mild to moderate mental health needs. Working collaboratively with the organisation helped ensure that participation was appropriate and aligned with the inclusion criteria, while also protecting those experiencing more severe distress or fluctuating capacity to consent.

Participants were provided with clear and accessible information sheets and consent forms outlining the study's aims, procedures, potential risks, and their right to withdraw at any time without affecting their existing support from the organisation (see Appendix A). Verbal briefings and opportunities for questions were also provided to ensure consent remained

fully informed. Participants were reminded that the study aimed to explore lived experience rather than provide an intervention, and that direct changes to practice could not be guaranteed. At the same time, the study was designed to foreground voice, reflection, and collaborative meaning-making in ways that aligned with its liberatory and empowerment-oriented commitments.

For the Black male participants, focus group sessions were held within the community organisation's premises. For the educational practitioner participants, the reflective session took place in a room within the local authority building. Holding discussions within familiar settings supported confidentiality, accessibility, and continuity with participants' existing contexts.

All digital data was managed in accordance with strict ethical protocols to ensure confidentiality and security. Consent forms submitted via Google Forms were downloaded as encrypted PDFs and securely stored within the University's research system. Focus group recordings were captured using University devices, uploaded immediately to secure storage, and deleted from the recording devices. All data were transcribed manually, with pseudonyms applied to participants, places, and organisations to protect identities. Recordings were then deleted following transcription in line with GDPR and institutional guidance.

#### **4.7.4 Reflexivity as an ethical stance**

For me, ethics functioned not only as a procedural framework but as a living practice of care, requiring continual attentiveness to power, vulnerability, and representation. Informed by Smith's (2021) *Decolonising Methodologies*, I continually questioned issues of ownership, design, and representation, recognising that ethical responsibility extends beyond formal compliance to include the cultural and relational dimensions of knowledge production.

Ethics was therefore inseparable from the epistemological and emancipatory principles of BLP, guiding my decisions to protect participants while ensuring that their stories were handled with integrity, dignity, and respect.

#### **4.8 Methodological Limitations**

The methodological limitations of this study are understood as part of its situated and reflexive design. Rather than being treated solely as weaknesses, they clarify the conditions under which knowledge was produced and the boundaries of what the study can claim.

#### **4.8.1 Retrospective accounts**

I deliberately chose not to include school-aged participants. Focusing on adults reflecting retrospectively on their past allowed for deeper meaning-making and broader commentary on how mental health support for Black boys and young men has been experienced across time. However, this decision excludes the immediate and situated voices of those currently navigating school systems. The accounts presented here are therefore reflective rather than contemporaneous, highlighting patterns across time while not capturing the lived immediacy of present pupil experiences.

#### **4.8.2 Generalisability**

The findings emerge from a small sample within a specific geographic and relational context. They are also drawn from participants who access a community organisation dedicated to affirming Black identity and promoting culturally responsive support. While this provided a rich and trusting environment for participants to share their stories, it also means that the findings cannot be generalised beyond this context.

The narratives reflect complex constellations of identity shaped by intersecting factors such as class, geography, sexuality, and cultural heritage, many of which extend beyond the scope of this study. The intention is not to universalise Black men's experiences, but to illuminate specific realities rooted in their socio-historical and structural contexts.

#### **4.8.3 Researcher positionality**

My positionality shaped the analytic process and, consequently, the findings. My interpretive lens, guided by commitments to justice and liberation, influenced what I attended to within participants' stories and how I constructed meaning from them (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). While reflexivity and supervision supported critical awareness, the interpretations presented here remain situated and partial rather than neutral or universal.

Reflexive supervision formed an important part of this process. Both the research supervisors identified as Black women, creating a supervisory space in which conversations of race, racism, and Black experiences could often be explored with shared cultural understanding and critical engagement. However, shared racial identity does not equate to shared lived experience or identical perspectives. There remained the potential for assumptions of common understanding and blind spots, particularly if similarities in racial positioning were assumed to reflect homogeneity of experience. Consequently, critical reflexivity remained essential throughout supervision, requiring ongoing reflection on how

our individual positionalities, experiences, and interpretations shaped meaning-making and ensuring that participants' narratives remained central to the analytic process.

#### **4.8.4 Academic Constraints**

This research was conducted within the framework of a doctoral course and was therefore shaped by institutional expectations relating to scope, time, and format. These academic conditions imposed practical and representational boundaries that influenced methodological choices and the level of participatory engagement that could be facilitated.

Recognising these constraints is an act of transparency: while I aimed to pursue liberatory practice, the work remains embedded within the very structures it seeks to challenge. Nonetheless, I sought to work against these boundaries by creating space for complexity, resistance, and relational meaning-making within the limits of an institutional framework.

#### **4.9 Conclusion**

This chapter outlines the study's methodological approach, including the decisions, negotiations, and ethical considerations that shaped it. Each choice was guided by SC's philosophical commitments and BLP's liberatory principles, with a focus on centring Black men's narratives as situated forms of knowledge.

Through Narrative Inquiry and CNA, I sought to honour the depth, contradictions, and socio-historical positioning of participants' experiences while maintaining methodological and ethical rigour. Reflexivity remained integral throughout, as I considered how my positionality as a Black woman, mother, and practitioner shaped interpretation.

The limitations of retrospective accounts, the localised sample, and wider academic constraints are understood as conditions of the research process rather than weaknesses alone. Transparency about these constraints strengthens the study's integrity and clarifies the conditions under which knowledge was produced.

Overall, the methodological design created a research space that centred Black men's voices while maintaining coherence between the study's philosophical assumptions, theoretical positioning, methodological approach, and ethical commitments. Through collective storytelling and co-created artefacts, the study operationalised key principles of BLP, particularly voice, relational engagement, and praxis. These choices provide the foundation for the following chapter, which presents the participants' narratives and the interpretive insights developed through analysis.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents narratives of Black men reflecting on their secondary school experiences and the meanings they attach to mental health, belonging, support, and survival within those spaces. Drawing on CNA (Emerson & Frosh, 2009), I approached these accounts as socially and politically situated stories through which Joel, Isaac, Jay, and Leon (pseudonyms) make sense of their identities, relationships, and challenges within racialised school contexts. The narratives are approached as accounts shaped by lived experience, interaction, and power. Throughout this chapter, I refer to Joel, Isaac, Jay, and Leon collectively as “the men” to reflect the relational nature of their storytelling.

The chapter draws on two interconnected sources of narrative data: a focus group discussion and a set of co-constructed artefacts, including a collective poem and written messages addressed to educational practitioners. While the focus group generated dialogic and retrospective accounts of school life, the artefacts function as produced narratives that condense and intensify meaning in a more direct and expressive form.

The narratives were developed through iterative readings of the focus group transcript and artefact texts. These storylines do not function as fixed themes in a thematic sense. Instead, they are brought together as interconnected interpretive narratives that capture movement, tension, and shifts in meaning across the men’s accounts of school life.

Grounded in BLP and SC, the chapter centres the men’s knowledge as situated and legitimate, attending to their experiences in ways that move beyond deficit-based or individualising framings. Rather than presenting a single or coherent account of Black men’s mental health experiences, the analysis holds together multiple and sometimes contradictory narratives of psychological harm, adaptation, resistance, strength, survival, and care as they unfold within secondary school contexts.

In line with Emerson and Frosh’s (2009) CNA, the narratives in this chapter are examined for their performative, relational, and political functions rather than their factual accuracy. They are approached as acts of interpretation through which the men negotiate identity and interpret their experiences within broader institutional contexts. Analytically, attention is paid to how meaning is constructed through language, emotional expression, and interaction, alongside the wider power relations shaping these accounts.

The analysis, therefore, operates across multiple levels, attending to narrative meaning within the men’s language and emotional expression, the dynamics of the focus group discussions, and the wider racialised discourses shaping school life. The quotations presented throughout the chapter are selected as analytically significant moments within the narratives, capturing shared storylines, emotional weight, and the ways meaning emerges through interaction. Across the narratives, certain analytic threads recur, including misrecognition, adaptation, and institutional response. Rather than being repeatedly re-

explained, these threads move across the men's accounts and take on different meanings within each narrative context.

## 5.2 Co-created Artefacts

Alongside the transcript of the focus group discussion, the co-created artefacts (written messages and a poem) can be understood as a form of collective narrative work, in which experiences are not only shared but also re-articulated to foreground common concerns, emotional weight, and calls for change. Consistent with the study's liberatory and narrative orientation, the artefacts are presented in full and prior to the focus group analysis intentionally, allowing the men's words to be encountered directly before being interpreted through my analytic voice. Presenting both the written messages and the co-created poem in their entirety also helped preserve their collective, relational, and emotional qualities, rather than fragmenting them into shorter extracts removed from their original context. Original spelling, grammar, and phrasing have been retained in order to preserve authenticity, voice, and meaning-making, recognising that editing participants' language risked reshaping how their experiences and intentions were communicated.

### 5.2.1 Written messages

#### *How you (school and mental health staff) can support us*

- *Let us be us, don't make us hide away or think that we are being too Black. The fact that we can not express ourselves impacts our mental health.*
- *Educate yourself - if you do your research, you could use that to relate to us.*
- *Cater to us, include our foods, etc., normalise our culture so we feel accepted.*
- *Diversify the curriculum.*
- *Put us on our pedestal. We deserve it too.*
- *Include our interests. Healing looks different for us. Dont ignore our music - we speak and open up through rhymes so dont criminalise it. Sports as well.*
- *We need our boys, they get it. Don't separate us because you think we are a gang.*
- *Learn how we express ourselves then you will understand us.*
- *Check in on us, really though and care.*
- *Take our lead sometimes and let us help you to get it.*
- *Understand that we are yutes experiencing racism. That is traumatic. We just get punished for our retaliation.*
- *Support us with racism or find someone who can.*
- *Believe us. Learn from us when we say you are singling us out. It could be your unconscious biases.*
- *Link with our community.*

- *Diversity in the staff team.*
- *Focus on training - not equality training, but training that tells our story and reality.*
- *Create safe spaces for us and ask what that is because it might look different to what you think a safe space is.*
- *Create alternative modes of healing. Create interventions that specifically address the mental health challenges of black yutes.*
- *Normalise mental health for us. Be patient with us getting there.*

#### *What we want you to know about our experiences*

- *You mispronounce our name too often, the impact is big.*
- *When you show different histories, you need to know how that can impact us. You can't keep putting white people on top.*
- *Be aware that things are happening at home that you might not understand.*
- *Everyone is expecting us to be strong all of the time.*
- *You cant help us with our mental health if you think it is separate from us being Black.*

#### *What we want you to know about our families, culture and community*

- *Family. They give us pressure - they have come here for us to do good.*
- *Our families might not be aware or accepting of mental health. They had their struggles that were extreme, generational trauma, colonialism, wars, migration, racism, poverty. Suppression was the only way.*
- *They prepare us for school and for the discrimination, etc. To code-switch. To also be proud of who we are. Its a hard balance and sometimes we dont get it right.*
- *A feel of belonging.*
- *Non-judgemental.*
- *Somewhere we can fully be ourselves.*
- *A safe space.*
- *Acceptance.*
- *Role models of the same skin colour who understand and have grown up with similar backgrounds and experiences.*

#### *What matters for our mental health*

- *That there is someone that we can talk to who understands.*
- *There's a disconnect between home and school. At home we might be told to man up.*
- *That we are seen - we are already judged and you give up on us too soon and judge our culture.*

- *For you to stop blaming us and our families or our community about stigmas etc – there's a reason mental health struggles or your support don't sit well with them.*
- *Outlets of expression.*
- *Don't criminalise or medicalise our behaviour or expression. Being loud or animated doesn't mean we are being aggressive.*
- *Remember that we are in racist systems. Exclusion leads to prison. If our behaviour is labelled as bad and aggressive instead of needing help, that stops us from getting support but sets the trajectory for our lives.*
- *We need to see positive Black male role models, not the negative stereotypes.*
- *Alternative forms of therapy. Not just CBT. It could also be mentorship or music or spiritual things.*
- *Knowing that we can fully open up to someone that wants to really listen and help.*
- *Not being discriminated because of the way we express ourselves.*
- *Physical activity and extra-curricular activities help our well-being.*
- *We need freedom from believing emotions make us weak.*

#### *What our message would be for our Black boys*

- *Dont be afraid to speak up. You dont have to hold your cards to your chest.*
- *Talk to people who care, find your circle to talk about your feelings too.*
- *Check on your brothers.*
- *Be expressive.*
- *Be vocal.*
- *Emotion and feelings matter - let them out.*
- *It's ok to be different, its what makes us unique.*
- *Stand up to injustice.*
- *Embrace who you are and where you come from.*
- *We know it is heavy. We have got you.*
- *Your not alone my brother. Help can and should look however you need it to be.*

### 5.2.2 Poem

*Imagine being told to be yourself but not too Black*  
*Imagine having to shrink just to survive*  
*Imagine walking in already labelled*  
*Imagine your boys being your safe space but being seen as a gang*  
*Imagine laughing too loud*  
*Imagine experiencing racism*  
*Imagine your reaction to racism being the real problem*  
*Imagine getting punished for pain no one helped you carry*  
*Imagine just being told to calm down when no one knows why*  
*Imagine holding things from home that no one cares about and that is not understood*  
*Imagine being told to behave but not taught how to feel*  
*Imagine never being believed*  
*Imagine everyone expecting you to be strong all the time*  
*Imagine the pressure from family who just need you to survive*  
*Imagine your culture never being included unless it's being blamed*  
*Imagine only seeing people like you as bad*  
*Imagine needing help but not being able to trust it*  
*Imagine hearing the statistics*  
*Imagine being watched more than everyone else*  
*Imagine being seen as a problem and as dangerous as a kid*  
*Imagine your name gets said wrong again and again like it dont matter*  
*Imagine your music getting called aggressive*  
*Imagine how you speak getting called aggressive*  
*Imagine your energy getting called aggressive*  
*Imagine always having to code-switch and adapt to white norms*  
*Imagine being a kid but never really being treated like one*  
*Imagine being disciplined more than supported*  
*Imagine nobody asking what's actually going on*  
*Imagine starting to believe you are actually the problem*  
*Imagine carrying all of that into every lesson every day*  
*Imagine you're meant to just firm it*

*From Joel, Isaac, Leon and Jay*

### 5.3 Narratives

The nine narratives presented below were developed through an iterative and reflexive analytic process across both the focus group transcript and co-constructed artefacts (see Appendix C). While presented separately for clarity, they remain closely connected and often overlap across the men's accounts.

#### 5.3.1 Narrative 1: Belonging and not belonging

Across the men's stories, I interpreted a persistent sense of non-belonging. Moments of connection were narrated against a broader and more enduring experience of disconnection. Acceptance within school appeared conditional, fragile, and actively regulated through institutional expectations and responses. This sense of not belonging shaped their mental health at a time when they did not yet have the language to name it. As Jay reflected, *"even though I probably didn't at that age, like register it on a psychological level, it was still something that was felt."* His words reflect how the emotional weight of exclusion was felt long before it could be understood or articulated as psychological distress.

During the focus group, belonging was often spoken about through the language of otherness. Jay narratively positions Black boys as excluded from the normative structures of the school environment rather than as failing to belong. He reflected, *"we felt like we was other to them."* He added, *"I just never felt belonging in the school,"* reinforcing the sense that non-belonging was experienced as enduring. This lack of belonging was closely tied to how, as Black boys, the men felt that their bodies, voices, and energy were received. Joel reflected this when he said, *"our energy and our expressiveness, or how we were... there's no room for that."* Here, Joel positions himself as constrained by the school environment, where his ways of being are treated as excessive and unacceptable.

Ways of being were narrated as taking up too much space. Natural expressions of self were monitored, softened, or suppressed in order to avoid negative attention. The collective poem further emphasised these experiences of constrained belonging: *"Imagine being told to be yourself but not too Black,"* and *"Imagine being a kid but never really being treated like one."* Belonging is not narrated as something gently withheld, but as something actively regulated, where authenticity becomes risky and childhood feels conditional.

Across both the focus group and the artefact creation, moments of belonging were located primarily within relationships with one another rather than with the institution itself. During the group discussion, the men frequently affirmed each other's reflections through shared language, brief interjections, overlapping speech, and the completion of one another's sentences. These moments of resonance often occurred without the need for explanation or elaboration. Utterances such as *"yeah," "yeah yeah," "100 per cent,"* and sounds of agreement such as *"mmm"* functioned as relational markers, signalling recognition, shared

understanding, and alignment. Within the interactional flow of the group, these responses did not operate as interruptions, but as affirmations.

This collective narration allowed speakers to continue without needing to justify or defend their experiences, suggesting a shared and already understood sense of recognition within the group. This sense of collective understanding was echoed in the poem through the line, *"Imagine your boys being your safe space but being seen as a gang."* Here, peer relationships are positioned as spaces of emotional refuge while simultaneously being misread and judged.

For the men, school was experienced as a space where acceptance had to be negotiated rather than assumed. Everyday interactions, behavioural expectations, and institutional responses shaped whether they felt recognised, protected, or welcomed within the school community. Belonging therefore became closely tied to emotional safety, identity, and self-worth.

### **5.3.2 Narrative 2: Racism - interpersonal and institutional**

While belonging was experienced as fragile and conditional, racism shaped how that belonging was actively disrupted and regulated within school spaces. Across the men's accounts, I interpret racism as a central and emotionally charged feature of school life, embedded within everyday interactions, disciplinary responses, and institutional cultures. These experiences shaped how the men understood authority, safety, and care within educational settings.

Jay recalled an incident during a football game in which a racial slur was directed at him by a White peer. He explained, *"They punished us for retaliating, but they didn't punish the racism."* As this account was shared, the other men responded with recognition. Leon noted, *"I can also think of one of them as well,"* situating Jay's experience within a wider pattern. Their responses were repeatedly treated as the problem, while the racism that preceded it was left unaddressed.

A consistent narrative structure emerged: racism occurred, school staff responded to the Black boys' reactions rather than to the racism itself, and accountability was unevenly distributed. The incident came to symbolise a broader pattern in which Black boys' distress was minimised while their behaviour remained under scrutiny. *"Looking back... it makes sense... because of the system... like institutional racism."* This marks a shift toward a broader structural understanding of racism, where what once felt shocking became expected and understood.

This growing understanding also affected trust. Jay stated, *"When it comes to racism, you can't trust the school to deal with it... You have to handle it yourself."* Rather than feeling supported, the men described learning to contain and manage racism themselves. This was

echoed in the poem: *“Imagine your reaction to racism being the real problem”* and *“Imagine you’re meant to just firm it,”* where responsibility is shifted onto Black boys to absorb and endure racism. These lines emphasise the emotional labour involved in navigating racism within school spaces, and the ongoing demand to tolerate injustice without recognition or support.

The written messages made these experiences explicit. The men wrote, *“Understand that we are yutes experiencing racism. That is traumatic. We just get punished for our retaliation,”* and *“Support us with racism or find someone who can.”* These statements name racism as trauma and reposition educational practitioners as responsible for recognising and responding to it.

The narratives construct racism as both interpersonal and institutional, locating individual incidents within broader structural conditions. The men describe themselves as both survivors of racial harm and resisters of unfair treatment, challenging school-based narratives that frame their behaviour as problematic and instead understanding their actions as responses to racialised injustice.

### **5.3.3 Narrative 3: Representation and relatability**

These experiences of racism were closely tied to questions of representation, trust, and whether the men felt understood or emotionally safe within school. For the men, the absence of representation was experienced as a profound loss. *“There was no representation in the school... that’s why we couldn’t relate or chat to anyone.”* In this account, absence is directly linked to silence. Without adults who understood their cultural worlds, school was narrated as a space where they were physically present but not truly seen. Isaac echoed this sense of disconnection when he said, *“There wasn’t nobody that looked like they would get any of this.”* I interpreted the phrase *“get any of this”* to gesture to the wider cultural, familial, and racialised contexts the men experienced as unrecognised within school.

Without staff who could read their behaviour through a culturally informed lens, their emotions were often interpreted as defiance, disruption, or aggression. This was made explicit when they later addressed educational practitioners directly through written messages. Under the heading ‘What matters for our mental health’, they wrote, *“That we are seen – we are already judged and you give up on us too soon and judge our culture.”* Then, under ‘What we want you to know about our experiences’, they stated, *“You can’t help us with our mental health if you think it is separate from us being Black.”*

Alongside the absence of representation described across the men’s accounts of their own schooling, they also spoke about encounters in adulthood, which highlighted what they felt had been missing at the time. Isaac reflected on encounters with Black staff in schools he has since worked in, contrasting these experiences with his own secondary school years. He

noted, *“When there’s a safe teacher, like a Black teacher, the connection that young people have... it’s like, I wish we had that in school.”* These teachers were narrated as practitioners who could read beneath the surface of behaviour, recognising when actions or expressions were shaped by racism, pressure, or culturally situated ways of communicating rather than defiance. In these contexts, support felt more accessible, as they did not need to translate or defend themselves in order to feel recognised.

The limits of a lack of representation were also apparent in how the men spoke about institutional power. In the focus group, they described how Black staff were often positioned in roles with limited authority, meaning that care and advocacy could be offered, but only within narrow institutional boundaries. This concern with power was also apparent in the written messages, where the men wrote, *“Put us on our pedestal. We deserve it too.”* Here, the demand is not about staffing, but about how Black boys themselves are positioned within school environments. The statement calls for Black boys to be recognised as worthy and valued within educational settings.

Representation therefore extended beyond visibility alone, shaping whether Black boys felt recognised, emotionally safe, and able to access support. In its absence, school norms continued to operate through interpretive frameworks aligned with Whiteness, influencing how behaviour, expression, and distress were perceived.

#### **5.3.4 Narrative 4: Expression, culture, and misunderstanding**

The absence of culturally resonant understanding shaped how the men’s communication, movement, and emotional expression were interpreted within school. A mismatch between Black boys’ styles of expression and institutional expectations meant that ordinary ways of being were often read through racialised lenses as disruption, threat, or deviance. For the men, this misrecognition shaped not only disciplinary responses, but also whether it felt emotionally safe to express themselves within school.

Isaac reflected, *“School don’t know how to deal with Black masculinity and that kind of energy... they criminalise it.”* Here, Black masculinity, energy, and expressiveness are treated as problems rather than culturally situated ways of being. He described how forms of expression that felt ordinary within Black homes and communities, including communication through hands, voice, and movement, were often interpreted very differently by school staff unfamiliar with those cultural contexts. Without that understanding, expressive communication was reduced to stereotypes of being *“loud,” “aggressive,”* or *“a bad yute,”* with meaning imposed through pre-existing assumptions about Blackness and masculinity. They learned to monitor themselves, soften their tone, restrict their movement, and adapt how they spoke in order to avoid negative attention. These experiences were powerfully captured in the poem: *“Imagine your music getting called aggressive... Imagine how you speak getting called aggressive... Imagine your energy getting called aggressive.”*

The men spoke about how school constrained the forms of communication and creativity that felt most meaningful to them. Jay reflected that *“the education system privileges European ways of learning and expression.”* In contrast, expressive, embodied, and collective forms of engagement were marginalised. Importantly, the men also described moments where expression was affirmed rather than constrained. A community-led breakdancing programme offered a rare sense of “release” and “belonging”, where movement was celebrated rather than policed. These moments stood in contrast to school experiences and functioned as counter-narratives, showing how expression could become a source of joy and emotional safety.

The written messages to educational practitioners included explicit statements about the conditions the men identified as necessary for support and understanding. The men stated, *“Include our interests. Healing looks different for us. Dont ignore our music – we speak and open up through rhymes so don’t criminalise it,”* and *“Dont criminalise or medicalise our behaviour or expression. Being loud or animated doesn’t mean we are being aggressive.”* Across the men’s accounts, the misreading of culturally situated expression shaped not only disciplinary responses, but also whether emotional distress was recognised, legitimised, or overlooked within school.

### **5.3.5 Narrative 5: Adaptation, code-switching, and identity**

In response to repeated misrecognition within school, the men described adapting themselves to navigate these environments more safely. I interpreted a narrative of adaptation and code-switching shaped through family, peers, and wider structural realities. One reflection captured this clearly: *“Our parents taught us from young how to adapt and hybrid and code switch.”* Code-switching was therefore narrated not simply as communication, but as an intergenerational strategy of protection.

The men described switching how they spoke, dressed, moved, and even the music they admitted to enjoying. Leon reflected, *“I had to put on an act... whereas back around my community, I can be fully myself.”* School is positioned as requiring an “act”, while community allows the full self to be expressed.

Over time, these acts shaped how the men understood their identities. At times, they described moments of resistance and reclamation, experimenting with bringing more of themselves into school spaces. Isaac reflected, *“Let me just... I kind of just stopped switching how I talk and spoke a bit more how I speak, and it felt really good in my system... like I felt a lot more myself and more connected to my identity.”*

I interpreted “Let me just” as signalling a moment of hesitation and internal negotiation, as though speaking naturally involved risk rather than ease. The phrase suggests a temporary release from the constant monitoring of self-presentation, where authenticity had to be consciously chosen rather than taken for granted. The sense of it feeling *“good in my*

*system*” further positions this shift as an embodied release from the labour of continual self-surveillance.

The men also described adaptation as collective rather than solely individual. Code-switching was learned at home, reinforced through peer relationships, and carried into school as a shared understanding of how to navigate institutional expectations. This was reflected in the poem: *“Imagine always having to code-switch and adapt to White norms.”* The phrase *“always having to”* conveys the relentlessness of this demand.

The men spoke of constant self-vigilance, navigating the awareness of where certain versions of themselves were permitted and where they were not. They reflected on the complexity of this balance directly, stating, *“They prepare us for school and for the discrimination... to code-switch. To also be proud of who we are. It’s a hard balance and sometimes we don’t get it right.”*

I interpreted this as capturing the tension between protection and authenticity, where adaptation involves not only managing risk but also maintaining pride in identity. The phrase *“sometimes we don’t get it right”* reads almost as a plea for understanding, signalling how much is being carried and negotiated beneath the surface.

The written messages further reinforced this narrative. The men wrote, *“Let us be us, don’t make us hide away or think that we are being too Black. The fact that we cannot express ourselves impacts our mental health.”* Here, adaptation is linked directly to psychological harm. Code-switching is constructed not simply as a communicative skill, but as an emotional burden shaped by racialised misrecognition and institutional norms organised around Whiteness. The men’s stories position adaptation as a necessary strategy for navigating unequal school spaces.

### **5.3.6 Narrative 6: Community as support and the school-community divide**

Where school required ongoing adaptation, community was narrated as a space of recognition and cultural familiarity. Across the men’s accounts, community spaces were associated with shared understanding and emotional safety, while school was often experienced as limited in its ability to engage with the fuller contexts of their lives.

Isaac reflected this powerfully when he stated, *“There’s an ignorance... it starts and stops there, it starts and it stops there.”* The repetition gives the statement a sense of closure, suggesting that schools often stopped at behaviour itself rather than engaging with the wider contexts shaping it. Within these accounts, distress was therefore frequently interpreted as disruption rather than as communication of need.

In contrast, community spaces were narrated as places where explanation and translation were less necessary. Joel spoke about the importance of community figures with lived experience, describing men *“of the same skin colour who understand and have grown up*

*with similar backgrounds and experiences.*” He contrasted this with school, where teachers often *“don’t want to get to that deeper level and find out why someone might be like that,”* positioning community as more willing to engage with the realities shaping young people’s behaviour and emotional lives.

This divide between school and community was also reflected in how the men understood the longer-term consequences of school exclusion. Jay spoke about a peer who he felt had been *“put on a trajectory to jail,”* adding that *“you can trace the thread of where it started from in school.”* This account was narrated without exaggeration, but with a clear sense of clarity. School was described as an environment where patterns of misinterpretation, punishment, and exclusion accumulated over time, with consequences extending far beyond school itself.

The written messages further emphasise this divide. Addressing educational practitioners directly, the men wrote, *“Link with our community,”* and named the tension between home and school explicitly, stating *“There’s a disconnect between home and school. At home we might be told to man up”*. The accompanying line, *“Normalise mental health for us. Be patient with us getting there,”* suggests that vulnerability around mental health is a gradual and relational process shaped by cultural histories and lived realities. What is being asked for here is not judgement but understanding, and relational patience.

Importantly, the men did not position community as a replacement for schools. Rather, their narratives highlighted the consequences of a persistent disconnect between school and community contexts. Schools were often experienced as engaging with behaviour in isolation from the wider realities shaping young people’s lives, including family pressures, racism, and broader structural inequalities. In contrast, the men’s accounts emphasised that emotional well-being could not be separated from these relational and social conditions. The absence of a meaningful connection between school and community, therefore, limited opportunities for recognition, trust, and care.

### **5.3.7 Narrative 7: Accessing help - relatability, safety, and the limits of school-based support**

These dynamics became particularly visible when the men described attempts to access support within school contexts. I interpreted these accounts as reflecting forms of support that felt relationally distant and culturally misattuned, where disclosure carried uncertainty rather than safety. As a result, help-seeking was often experienced as another space in which misunderstanding or misrecognition was likely.

Isaac described attempting to access counselling support, only to realise that he could not speak freely within the relationship. He reflected, *“I did go to the school counsellor... she just couldn’t relate. She was a nice woman and that, init, but she was White and just certain tings that I would have needed to get off my chest, I couldn’t say to her, because she just*

wouldn't understand it." The barrier to support was not the absence of care, but the absence of shared context through which distress could be understood and spoken about safely.

The men repeatedly returned to a narrative that there was *"no one in school"* they could genuinely turn to during challenging moments. Reflecting on racial incidents, Isaac stated, *"There wasn't necessarily anyone in school or a teacher who I could go and chat to."* Speaking more generally, Leon shared, *"There's little point in me talking to them about what's going on in my family. They're not gonna understand. So there's no point."* The phrase *"no point"* conveys an expectation that disclosure would not lead to recognition, support, or meaningful response.

A recurring narrative across the men's accounts was that school staff lacked curiosity about the wider realities shaping Black boys' lives. Reflecting on his Black nephew, who was currently attending school, Leon explained, *"He might just need that extra TLC... but they won't want to know that. It's easier for them to say, kick him out."* Across these stories, seeking support was constructed as emotionally risky, particularly where personal, racialised, or family experiences were unlikely to be met with care or understanding.

In the absence of accessible support within school, the men described turning to peers instead. Emotional challenges were often kept to themselves or among friends. Leon reflected, *"I just dealt with it and kept it between us,"* capturing how emotional containment became both protective and collective.

The artefact narratives brought these barriers into sharper focus by directly addressing educational practitioners. The men wrote, *"Believe us. Learn from us when we say you are singling us out. It could be your unconscious biases."* Here, the issue is not framed simply as misunderstanding, but as credibility. The men position themselves as knowers of their own experiences, while practitioners are positioned as frequently failing to recognise that knowledge. Not being believed was narrated as reinforcing silence and discouraging emotional openness.

This was echoed in further statements: *"You can't help us with our mental health if you think it is separate from us being Black,"* and *"Create alternative modes of healing. Create interventions that specifically address the mental health challenges of Black yutes."* These statements do not reject support itself, but rather call for forms of care capable of recognising the racialised and cultural realities shaping distress. Help-seeking was therefore constructed as inseparable from trust, recognition, and prior experiences of being misunderstood within school contexts.

### **5.3.8 Narrative 8: Resilience and navigation - survival and psychological endurance**

In the absence of accessible and trusted support, the men described developing ways of enduring and navigating these environments. Resilience was not constructed as an inherent

trait or individual strength, but as a necessary response to repeated experiences of racism, exclusion, and emotional constraint. Jay articulated this when he reflected, *"It taught me, and us how to navigate within them kind of spaces, as a form of like, how to be resilient."*

School was narrated as a training ground for navigating further educational spaces experienced as racially or culturally excluding. Isaac reflected, *"We can go inside these man's universities... and not feel intimidated... we've been training for it."* The vigilance and self-monitoring learned within school were carried forward as forms of preparation for navigating what was described as White institutional spaces with *"elite energy"*.

Crucially, resilience was not located solely within the individual. It was narrated as collective and relational, *"Each other... just stick together. That's how we were resilient."* Within these relationships, the men described sharing humour, protection, and strategies for survival through which racism, exclusion, and emotional strain were collectively managed and made sense of. The collective poem captures this tension through the lines, *"Imagine your boys being your safe space but being seen as a gang"*, and *"Imagine you're meant to just firm it."* Together, these lines show how peer solidarity functioned as protection, while emotional endurance was still expected.

Experiences of racialised exclusion, institutional injustice, and emotional silencing were framed as challenges to be endured rather than addressed. This expectation of constant strength was made explicit in the written messages, where the men shared, *"Everyone is expecting us to be strong all of the time"*, alongside *"We need freedom from believing emotions make us weak."* The phrase *"freedom"* signals a desire to be released from compulsory emotional toughness rather than a rejection of strength itself.

This endurance was also situated within broader intergenerational contexts. In another written reflection, the men explained, *"Our families might not be aware or accepting of mental health. They had their struggles that were extreme, generational trauma, colonialism, wars, migration, racism, poverty. Suppression was the only way."* This account positions emotional suppression not as a personal or cultural failure, but as a historically shaped survival strategy, where the expectation to *"be strong"* is inherited as well as imposed, shaped by families who themselves navigated conditions where emotional expression carried risk and survival required suppression.

This narrative of resilience is made especially visible in the messages the men addressed to younger Black boys. They wrote, *"Don't be afraid to speak up... Talk to people who care... Check on your brothers... Embrace who you are... Stand up to injustice... We know it is heavy... You're not alone, my brother. Help can and should look however you need it to be."* These messages reframe earlier experiences of endurance, encouraging expression, connection, and support in ways that move beyond silence and self-containment.

Across these narratives, resilience is constructed not as an individual trait, but as a socially and historically shaped response to repeated racialised experiences. Endurance, adaptation,

and peer solidarity functioned as necessary strategies for navigating school environments experienced as unsafe or misrecognising. At the same time, the men's accounts gesture towards alternative possibilities for Black boys, where strength does not depend upon emotional suppression, and where vulnerability, care, and collective support can coexist with resilience.

### **5.3.9 Narrative 9: Class and cultural distance - navigating Whiteness, privilege, and social misalignment**

These experiences were further shaped by classed and cultural expectations embedded within school environments. Across the men's accounts, school was narrated as organised around White middle-class norms that shaped how behaviour, communication, and emotional expression were interpreted. Jay articulated this when he reflected, *"There's a Whiteness, but there's also a class element."* In this framing, race and class operated together in shaping how Black boys were positioned within school spaces.

The men described a persistent contrast between their home or community environments and the social world of school. Teachers' expectations of behaviour, emotional expression, and communication were narrated as reflecting White, middle-class norms. Jay stated, *"Their idea of what behaviour should look like... what a model pupil should look like... is different."* Although never explicitly defined, the figure of the *"model pupil"* emerged across the men's accounts as a powerful and unspoken standard against which they were measured.

Participants described navigating unfamiliar social expectations that produced heightened self-awareness and hyper-visibility. Distress was narrated as arising not only from overt racism, but also from the quieter and more relentless labour of negotiating environments in which they felt socially and culturally misaligned.

The men also described how limited cultural familiarity among school staff intensified this divide. Jay noted, *"They don't have exposure to certain communities... so they don't understand."* Within these accounts, those perceived as closer to dominant classed and racial norms were more readily supported and believed, while Black working-class boys were positioned under greater suspicion and disciplinary scrutiny.

The men learned early to anticipate misunderstanding and to regulate their emotions, language, and behaviour accordingly. The collective poem echoed this experience, stating, *"Imagine walking in already labelled"* and *"Imagine being watched more than everyone else"*, condensing experiences of entering school spaces already shaped by assumption and surveillance.

The written messages further articulated how class, culture, and mental health intersected within school experiences. Under the heading 'What matters for our mental health', the men

wrote, *“For you to stop blaming us and our families or our community... there’s a reason mental health struggles or your support don’t sit well with them.”* Here, the men challenge deficit-oriented assumptions about Black families and communities, instead positioning mistrust and disengagement within wider experiences of racism and misrecognition.

This wider structural framing was reinforced through the statement, *“Remember that we are in racist systems. Exclusion leads to prison.”* Experiences of school exclusion were therefore connected to broader trajectories of marginalisation and criminalisation rather than understood as isolated educational events.

## **5.4 Conclusion**

Across these narratives, the men described school not simply as a site of learning, but as a racialised environment that shaped how they understood themselves, their emotional safety, and their place within institutional spaces. Joel, Isaac, Jay, and Leon’s accounts repeatedly returned to experiences of misrecognition, surveillance, exclusion, and relational distance in relation to their mental health and well-being. At the same time, their narratives also reflected creativity, adaptability, collective care, and forms of survival developed in response to these conditions.

The men positioned themselves as navigating institutional environments organised around implicit racialised and classed norms. Teachers and school staff were frequently constructed as gatekeepers of legitimacy, shaping whose behaviour was understood, whose distress was recognised, and whose actions were sanctioned. School therefore emerged not as a neutral space, but as one organised around unspoken standards of acceptability that shaped how the men were judged, interpreted, and positioned.

Mental health emerged not as an abstract psychological concept, but as something lived through everyday experiences of exclusion, adaptation, vigilance, expression, and belonging. Experiences of code-switching, hypervigilance, and relational unsafety were deeply intertwined with the men’s emotional well-being. At the same time community, peer solidarity, and cultural expression functioned as crucial sources of protection and meaning-making. Resilience, within these narratives, was not framed as an individual trait but as something cultivated collectively and contextually in response to structural conditions.

The poem and written reflections deepen the spoken accounts by offering collective narratives that speak directly to educational practitioners. These artefacts move beyond reflection towards collective articulation and demand, expressing both the emotional weight of schooling and the conditions men identify as necessary for genuine support and healing. In this way, the artefacts do not simply illustrate the focus group findings; they extend them into collective calls for recognition, support, and change.

This chapter has illustrated how Black boys' school experiences are inseparable from wider social, cultural, and institutional conditions. The narratives did more than recount past events; they actively reinterpreted experiences of distress, exclusion, and adaptation as meaningful responses to unequal environments. Across the stories, the men positioned themselves in multiple and shifting ways: as outsiders within school spaces, as survivors of racialised harm, as protectors of one another, and as resisters of institutional narratives that framed them as problematic, aggressive, or deficient. At the same time, schools and educational practitioners were frequently positioned as gatekeepers of legitimacy, discipline, and belonging, shaping which emotions, behaviours, and experiences were recognised or dismissed. Through these narrative positionings, their accounts call for more relational, culturally grounded, and critically reflexive approaches to support.

The next chapter builds on these narrative insights to explore their implications for school-based and Educational Psychology practice, considering how the voices of the men can inform more culturally grounded, relational, and liberatory approaches to supporting Black boys' mental health. In line with the study's foundation in BLP, these implications are framed not only as matters of service improvement but as questions of justice and collective responsibility.

## **Chapter 6 Discussion**

This study set out to answer two research questions: How do individuals who identify as Black men narrate and make sense of their experiences of mental health during their time in secondary school? and how can these narratives inform school-based practices that support the mental health of Black boys?

As a Black woman, a practitioner, and a mother to Black boys, I recognise that my interpretation is inseparable from my own social and personal positioning. Yet, I approach Jay, Isaac, Leon, and Joel's narratives as situated and valuable forms of knowledge, rather than as experiences requiring validation or verification.

Within the focus group, there were moments when the men appeared to position me as an insider, speaking in ways that assumed shared understanding and required little explanation. At other times, they explained their experiences more explicitly, suggesting a shifting sense of me as both insider and outsider. These moments highlighted the relational and fluid nature of positionality within the research space, reflecting methodological literature that positions researcher identity as shifting across interactions and participant perceptions rather than existing within a fixed insider-outsider binary (Bukamal, 2022). My identity as a Black person appeared to facilitate connection and trust, while my identity as a woman, researcher, and practitioner situated me differently within the interaction. This dynamic shaped not only what was shared, but also how it was communicated and understood.

Across the men's narratives, what stays with me most is the way distress moves yet remains consistently present. It runs through their accounts of school experiences and, although differing at times in how it was embodied, remains present through redirected, constrained, or silenced emotional expression. This distress appeared to take shape through repeated unjust encounters within the school environment, which in turn influenced how emotion, safety, and support were understood. I found myself wondering what it might have taken for this distress to move differently, and what conditions would have allowed it to be recognised, responded to, or held in other ways.

To make sense of this movement, I drew on SC, which attends to how meanings attached to behaviour, emotion, and help-seeking are produced through discourse. From this perspective, the men's distress was not simply individual or internal but shaped through racialised institutional meanings attached to Black masculinity, behaviour, emotion, and vulnerability within school spaces.

Building on this, a BLP lens draws attention to how these patterns are not only interpretive but political. The men's accounts suggest that learning how to endure and adapt within school environments became necessary for navigating racialised conditions.

This chapter moves from the narrative findings presented in Chapter 5 towards their wider theoretical, structural, and professional implications, with particular attention paid to institutional responsibility and Educational Psychology practice.

## **6.1 Revisiting the research questions**

What emerged through Jay, Joel, Isaac, and Leon's storytelling was not a straightforward account of "mental health difficulties" in conventional psychological terms. Instead, distress required narrative interpretation, becoming visible not through explicit diagnostic language but through how the men storied their experiences of school.

Across their accounts, distress was woven through the men's efforts to manage themselves within spaces that did not reliably recognise, affirm, or protect them. Experiences of not belonging, misrecognition, unfair discipline, and pressure to adapt to dominant norms were consistently linked to narratives of withdrawal, hypervigilance, and reliance on self, peers, or community. These experiences were therefore central to how mental health was understood and made meaningful.

In relation to the first research question, the men did not structure their stories around named mental health difficulties or specific episodes of support. Instead, mental health was constructed through relationships, racism, institutional responses, and the ongoing labour of navigating school safely as Black boys. This suggests that psychological distress was experienced through, rather than separate from, the conditions of schooling.

In relation to the second research question, the narratives suggest that support cannot be understood solely in terms of access to services or interventions. Rather, support depended on whether relationships within school felt trustworthy, culturally responsive, and emotionally safe enough for distress to be expressed and recognised. This shifts attention away from intervention alone towards the relational and institutional dynamics that shape whether support feels possible or meaningful for Black boys.

Across both questions, the narratives emphasise the need to listen beyond surface accounts of behaviour or help-seeking and instead attend to the movements within the men's stories: from othering to conditional survival, from racial harm to self-reliance, from expression to restraint, from attempted help-seeking to withdrawal, and from adaptation to moments of reclamation. It is within these narrative movements that mental health challenges are most clearly located, and where the institutional and relational dynamics that represent support as unsafe, inaccessible, or irrelevant become visible.

## **6.2 Narrative movements to structural conditions**

Interpreting the narratives in relation to one another invites a shift in perspective. Rather than positioning distress solely as something schools respond to, the men's accounts suggest that aspects of the school environment itself contributed to the production and management of distress. Across the narratives, emotional difficulty emerged through repeated experiences of racialisation, misrecognition, surveillance, and adaptation within school spaces, rather than as something separate from schooling itself.

A central movement across the narratives was the gradual shift from attempts at belonging and authenticity towards withdrawal, endurance, and self-monitoring. Over time, the men described learning to regulate their language, behaviour, emotional expression, and visibility in response to how they were perceived within school. This movement resonates with literature on racialised adaptation, code-switching, and psychological self-monitoring within educational contexts (Ghezae, Adebisi, & Mustafa, 2022; Walker, 2021). Importantly, these adjustments were not narrated as freely chosen acts of self-development, but as necessary responses to environments that failed to recognise or hold them in their fullness.

The narratives further suggest that school environments frequently interpreted Black boys' emotional expression through behavioural and disciplinary frameworks rather than relational or emotional ones. Expressions of confidence, passion, frustration, or protest were often repositioned as aggression or defiance, reflecting wider literature on the racialised interpretation of Black boys' affect and behaviour within schools (Graham & Robinson, 2004; Walker, 2021). In describing themselves as viewed as older, more and less innocent than their peers, the men's accounts resonate with literature on racialised adultification and criminalised surveillance, in which Black boys are positioned as more culpable, mature, and dangerous than their White peers (Davis & Marsh, 2020; Hines et al., 2021). Their accounts

also align with research demonstrating that behaviours are more readily constructed as threatening or problematic when associated with Black pupils (Owens, 2023), contributing to disproportionate disciplinary responses within school contexts (Demie, 2019; Stewart-Hall, Langham, & Miller, 2023).

Importantly, racism was not narrated solely through overt incidents, but through repeated experiences of disbelief, minimisation, silence, and punishment. The men described school environments in which responses to racism focused more readily on Black boys' reactions than on the racial harm itself. Drawing on Fricker's (2007) framework, these experiences reflect forms of epistemic injustice, in which the men's accounts, emotions, and interpretations were not afforded credibility. Over time, these experiences appeared to shape how trust, safety, and help-seeking were understood.

The narratives, therefore, move beyond documenting experiences of exclusion alone. They make visible how repeated racialised misrecognition became internalised as conditions requiring emotional restraint, hypervigilance, and adaptation. At the same time, the men positioned themselves not only as subjects of these conditions, but also as active resisters of them. Across the narratives, peer relationships, humour, cultural expression, and collective care functioned as forms of protection, affirmation, and survival. In this sense, the stories operated as resistant narratives that challenged deficit-based understandings of Black boys' behaviour and emotional expression.

Together, the narratives suggest that racialised school environments demanded endurance from Black boys while offering limited emotional safety in return. This shifts analytic attention beyond individual vulnerability or help-seeking towards the institutional conditions within which emotional restraint and adaptation became necessary. The study, therefore, both resonates with and extends existing literature on racialised schooling by foregrounding how structural conditions are not only experienced but psychologically navigated, embodied, and resisted (Grills, Aird, & Rowe, 2016; Afuape & Oldham, 2022). The narratives suggest that survival was achieved, but liberation was not.

### **6.3 Educational Practitioner Reflective Session**

The narratives shared by Jay, Joel, Isaac, and Leon function as a direct institutional address to those working within the systems they were required to navigate. The artefacts were addressed to educational practitioners and included a poem and written reflections on what the men wanted practitioners to understand about their experiences and mental health.

To honour this direct address and extend the study's praxis-oriented design, I facilitated a reflective session with six educational practitioners from the same local authority. The intention was not to generate additional research data, but to create a structured space in which the men's narratives could enter into dialogue with those positioned to influence

systemic change. Reflections from this session were captured visually through a graphic representation, which is included in Appendix E.

Practitioners were first invited to read the written messages individually and to sit with them before discussion began. As practitioners began to share their reflections, the discussion repeatedly returned to how easily Black boys' experiences can become rendered invisible, minimised, or misrecognised within school systems, reflecting wider literature on institutional racism and epistemic injustice within education (Gillborn, 2008; Fricker, 2007). Practitioners reflected on how behaviour may be interpreted through racialised assumptions, including adultification and gang stereotyping, and how responses to racism may be misread within disciplinary frameworks.

After this initial discussion, I read aloud the poem the men had co-created, which moved through a series of repeated invitations to imagine everyday experiences. The reading of the poem marked a notable affective and reflexive shift within the room. The silence that followed felt analytically significant, appearing to create space for both emotional engagement and reflexive consideration of the men's experiences. Practitioners described the narratives as heavy, exhausting, and deeply sad, reflecting on the cumulative emotional labour involved in navigating school environments where Black boys may feel persistently judged, misunderstood, or required to adapt themselves in order to feel safe.

This response can be understood as a moment of critical engagement in which lived experience disrupted taken-for-granted professional assumptions and opened space for reflexive awareness (Freire, 1970; Afuape & Oldham, 2022). As the discussion developed, practitioners reflected on their own positioning as White women and considered how racism may operate not only institutionally, but also through their unconscious assumptions shaping interpretation and response.

It was also notable that, within the artefacts, the men appeared to assume that the educational practitioners engaging with their narratives would be White. This may have shaped not only what was shared, but also the emotional orientation of the messages themselves. In the written messages directed towards practitioners, the tone at times felt more direct and explanatory, as though the men were attempting to make visible experiences that may otherwise remain misunderstood or minimised within institutional spaces. In contrast, the messages directed towards Black boys carried a greater sense of empathy and collective empowerment, reflecting forms of relational care and shared understanding that resonate strongly with BLP. Interpreted reflexively, I was conscious that this reading was shaped by my own positioning as a Black woman, particularly in how I responded to moments that seemed to shift between institutional address and collective affirmation. This further reflects how Whiteness can operate as normative within school and professional spaces, shaping assumptions about care, understanding, and authority (Walker, 2021), and reinforces the importance of considering how institutional structures,

professional cultures, and staffing patterns may contribute to experiences of cultural distance and mistrust.

The practitioners also expressed a strong desire for the men who contributed to the study to know that their narratives had been heard. Participants reflected on the importance of listening carefully to lived experiences and acknowledged that engaging with these narratives prompted them to reconsider aspects of their practice and the systems within which they work. Interpreted through a BLP lens, this emphasis on being heard and taken seriously felt particularly significant, given the wider narratives of misrecognition and silencing described throughout the study.

The reflective encounter itself also carried important implications for practice. The session demonstrated how narratives grounded in lived experience can disrupt dominant assumptions, invite critical reflection, and open possibilities for rethinking how schools interpret behaviour, respond to distress, and conceptualise mental health support for Black boys. From a BLP perspective, this reflective encounter can be understood as an act of praxis in which lived experience serves as a catalyst for critical consciousness and for possibilities of institutional transformation (Freire, 1970; Comas-Díaz & Rivera, 2020).

From my position as a facilitator, researcher, TEP, and Black woman, I was aware of holding multiple positions within the room. I was both presenting the men's narratives and witnessing how they were received. Hearing practitioners articulate feelings of heaviness, shame, and responsibility highlighted the emotional force of the men's narratives. At the same time, I was conscious that the men whose stories had prompted this reflection were not present in the room. This raised questions for me about what it means for narratives of racialised experience to be heard within professional spaces, and how those moments of reflection might translate into meaningful changes in practice. I left the room holding Jay, Joel, Isaac, and Leon's stories and the responsibility of what they ask of practice.

## **6.4 What these narratives ask of Educational Psychology practice**

### **6.4.1 Moving beyond individualised frameworks**

Reflecting on the Black men's narratives across both the focus group transcripts and artefacts, I began to question whether the difficulties they described are overlooked within educational practice, or whether they are interpreted primarily through White, Western, and individualised assumptions about mental health and behaviour.

Despite contemporary moves towards systemic and relational practice, EPs are still frequently regarded as professionals with expertise in assessing individual children and young people, identifying needs, and recommending interventions. This professional positioning can risk locating distress primarily within the individual rather than within the broader contexts shaping their experiences.

Across the men's narratives, distress was closely connected to experiences of misrecognition, surveillance, racialised discipline, and the ongoing need to adapt themselves within school environments. Interpreted through dominant school-based mental health frameworks, these experiences risk being reduced to individual categories such as SEMH need, emotional dysregulation, or difficulties with help-seeking. Through this lens, professional responses may prioritise helping Black boys develop coping strategies, resilience, or emotional literacy within existing school structures. While such approaches may offer practical value, the men's narratives suggest they can inadvertently address the consequences of distress while leaving the racialised and institutional conditions producing that distress unaddressed.

From a BLP perspective, this also requires Educational Psychology practice to move beyond approaches that position Black boys primarily as subjects of assessment or intervention, and towards practices that recognise them as active knowers of their own experiences. Consultation, formulation, and decision-making processes may therefore need to place greater emphasis on collaboration and the meaningful involvement of young people in shaping interpretations of distress and accessible and appropriate support. Such an approach shifts practice away from positioning Black boys as passive recipients of support and towards working collaboratively with them in ways that recognise voice, agency, and lived experience as central to ethical practice.

More broadly, these narratives call for a shift away from predominantly individual formulations of need towards approaches that foreground the relational, systemic, and racialised conditions within which distress emerges. This is not to suggest that Black boys' experiences of distress are less psychologically significant, nor to dismiss the importance of recognising emotional and mental health needs. Rather, the concern is how distress becomes conceptualised when racialised and structural conditions are obscured within individualised formulations of need.

#### **6.4.2 Moving towards systemic and anti-racist practice**

These narratives suggest the need for Educational Psychology practice to move beyond individual casework towards systemic, anti-racist approaches that challenge adultification, exclusion, and behaviour management practices that disproportionately position Black boys as problematic.

A whole-school anti-racist approach positions leadership, policy, curriculum, staff development, and community partnerships as interconnected environments that shape mental health and belonging (CRED, 2025). This closely reflects recent Educational Psychology guidance calling for explicit anti-racist service development, including professional learning, reflective supervision, and systemic review of racial inequities in referral pathways, exclusions, and outcomes (Harrison & Atkinson, 2025). These implications

are further reinforced by current local authority frameworks, which position school-based prevention, community partnership, and culturally responsive support pathways as central to improving outcomes for young Black men and boys (Islington Health and Wellbeing Board, 2025).

The men's narratives may also help explain forms of mistrust towards formal mental health support identified within wider literature (Meechan, John, & Hanna, 2021; Mind, 2023), showing how mistrust may be institutionally produced and reinforced through repeated experiences of misrecognition and cultural distance.

In this sense, anti-racist Educational Psychology practice should not be understood as an additional strand of work, but as a necessary condition for creating ethically responsive and psychologically safe school environments.

#### **6.4.3 Reframing resilience**

The men's narratives challenge psychological constructions of resilience as an individual internal trait. Instead, resilience is positioned as a necessary strategy for navigating harmful and racialised school environments.

This understanding is consistent with recent UK literature suggesting that Black young people may adapt their behaviour and presentation in anticipation of racism and negative perception, as a means of self-protection (Ghezae, Adebisi, & Mustafa, 2022). Read in this way, the narratives invite EPs to question whether well-being is truly being prioritised when resilience itself becomes the desired outcome of support.

The men's accounts, in contrast, suggest that endurance was sustained through shared understanding and relational forms of care. What may be professionally recognised as "resilience" emerged within the narratives as collective survival in response to ongoing structural conditions. The men consistently described peer relationships and community spaces as emotionally protective, affirming, and safe. Practices or formulations that separate Black boys from these relational worlds risk overlooking crucial sources of emotional sustenance and meaning-making.

A liberatory approach recognises how mental health is supported through belonging and connection. This also resonates with race-informed therapeutic literature that positions healing as relational, culturally grounded, and responsive to racial trauma (Comas-Díaz & Rivera, 2020). The narratives, therefore, shift attention away from resilience as an individual outcome and towards the racialised school conditions within which such endurance becomes necessary.

#### **6.4.4 Reflexivity, ethics and the position of the EP**

These implications speak directly to how EPs are trained and positioned within practice. The men's narratives demand that EPs ground their practice in relational accountability and structural awareness. What becomes particularly salient is that EPs are not neutral observers of systems that may cause harm, but practitioners positioned within the institutional structures shaping young people's experiences.

Across the narratives, the men repeatedly returned to the need to be believed, understood, and protected from misinterpretation in order to feel safe seeking support for their mental health. The narratives therefore suggest that interventions, referral pathways, or cultural competence training alone are insufficient without sustained practitioner reflexivity around power, credibility, privilege, and lived experience. Recognition and credibility emerged not as peripheral to support, but central to it. Creating spaces in which Black boys' experiences are listened to and treated as legitimate forms of knowledge may itself represent an important relational and ethical dimension of Educational Psychology practice. This was also reflected within the practitioner reflective session, where practitioners emphasised the significance of hearing and taking the men's accounts seriously.

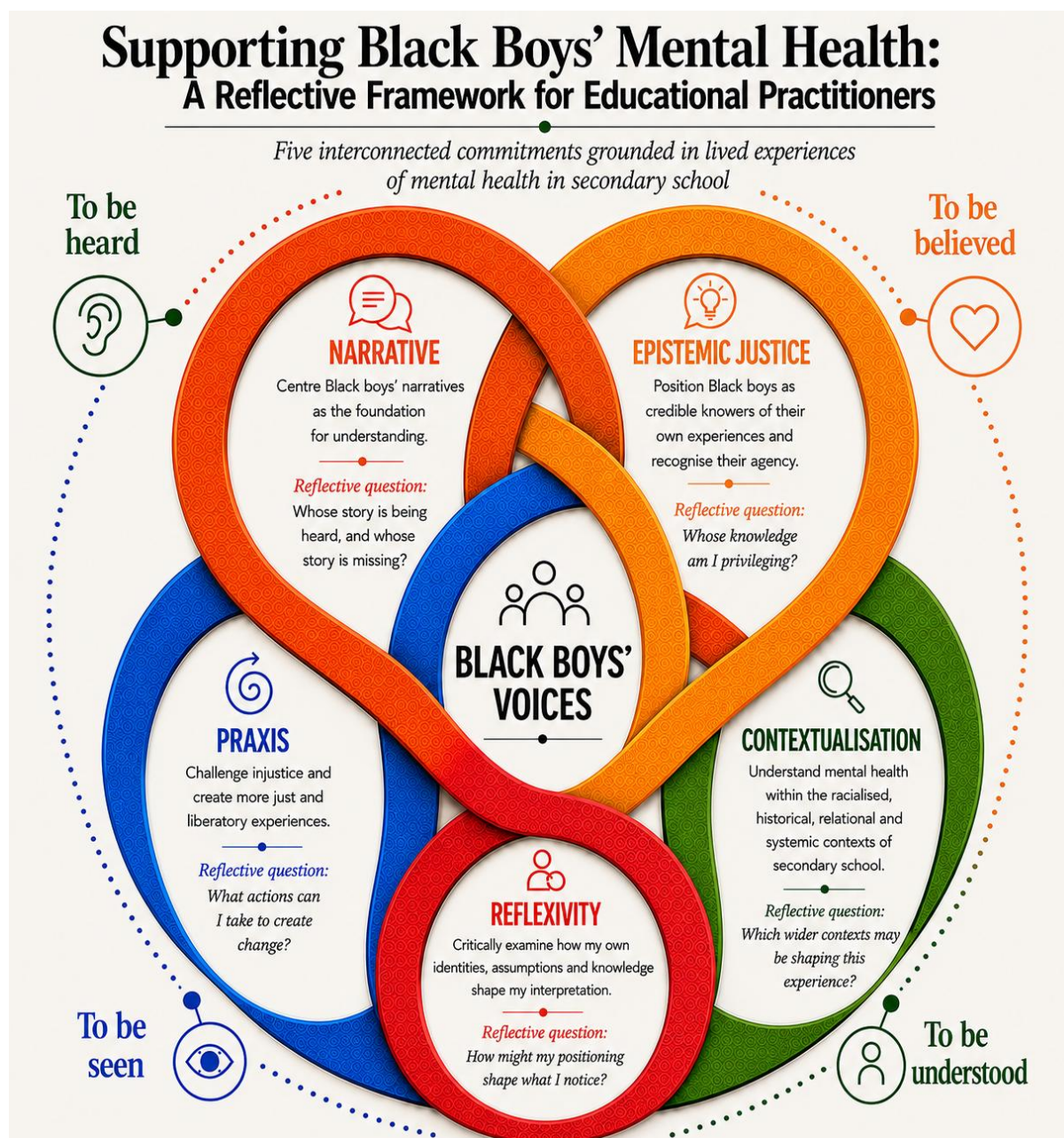
Ethical positioning is also central to these implications. The narratives raise questions about how professional neutrality operates within contexts shaped by racial inequality and unequal school experiences. This study, therefore, calls on EPs to critically examine how their practices may reinforce misrecognition, silencing, and unequal conditions of belonging; to reflect on how distress is recognised and care distributed within schools; and to advocate for forms of psychological support grounded in justice, dignity, and the lived realities of those they claim to serve.

#### **6.4.5 A reflective framework for Educational Psychology practice**

The implications discussed throughout this chapter can be synthesised into a reflective framework intended to support educational practitioners working with Black boys and young Black men. Rather than functioning as a prescriptive checklist, the framework presents five interconnected commitments grounded in the narratives of the Black men who participated in this study. Together, these commitments encourage practitioners to engage critically with how they listen to, interpret, and respond to Black boys' experiences of mental health within secondary school contexts. The framework is intended to support praxis by translating the study's findings into considerations for relational practice and systemic change across educational contexts.

**Figure 6.1**

*Supporting Black Boys' Mental Health: A Reflective Framework for Educational Practitioners*



The framework should not be understood as a linear model or set of sequential stages. Rather, the five commitments are interconnected and mutually informing, reflecting the relational and systemic nature of educational practice. Positioned around Black boys' voices, the framework reinforces that practitioners' understanding, reflection, and action should remain grounded in the lived experiences and knowledge of Black boys themselves. It is intended to support ongoing critical reflection rather than provide a definitive model of

practice, recognising that anti-racist and liberatory practice requires continual reflexivity, contextual understanding, and a sustained commitment to action.

### **6.5 Implications for my practice as an Educational Psychologist**

Reflecting on this study as a whole, I have become increasingly aware of its implications for my practice as a TEP. Listening to and being moved by the men's stories has intensified tensions I was already carrying while working within systems repeatedly experienced by Black people as harmful.

As a Black practitioner and TEP, I remain deeply conscious that the profession carries a racist history. While this history has already been outlined in the literature review, its relevance remains highly evident in contemporary practice, particularly as recent literature continues to identify racial disproportionality in exclusion, SEND identification, and SEMH categorisation (Strand & Lindorff, 2018; Wallace & Joseph-Salisbury, 2022; Harrison & Atkinson, 2025). For me, this is not only a historical issue but an ongoing professional and ethical concern. Listening to Jay, Joel, Isaac, and Leon's narratives reinforced how school and support systems may continue to operate through frameworks that leave racialised harm insufficiently recognised or addressed.

As a practitioner working within these systems, I have become increasingly aware of the tension between my professional role and my ethical commitments. This research has strengthened my understanding of my responsibility to actively challenge practices that may reproduce harm. This has had direct implications for how I now listen to, formulate, and hold young people's narratives within practice. The research has changed how I understand my role in moments of interpretation. I now more actively question whose meanings are privileged, how credibility is assigned, and whether distress is being understood within its relational and racialised context.

In addition, a significant consideration within my practice has been my commitment to narrative approaches. This research has reinforced the value of creating space for individuals to narrate openly, while thickening stories through attention to the broader contexts, meanings, and power relations shaping experience, rather than thinning narratives into simplified and individualised explanations.

I have become more intentional about attending to context, history, and meaning, and about resisting the urge to translate experience too quickly into what is understood as 'professional' language. This has felt central to my ethical practice, particularly when working with those whose voices have historically been marginalised or mistrusted.

BLP has provided an important grounding framework for these implications. Concepts such as empowerment, collective meaning-making, and the political nature of distress are no longer abstract ideas to me; they are principles increasingly shaping my consultation,

formulation, and systemic work within schools. This has strengthened my commitment to questioning psychological frameworks that individualise distress while leaving oppressive conditions relatively unexamined.

These shifts in my thinking were further strengthened through the practitioner reflective session. It created a rare space where uncertainty, discomfort, and responsibility could be held collectively across departments and services that support children and young people. It demonstrated the value of slowing down, critically examining practice, and creating shared spaces to reflect on how systems and services operate.

Finally, this research has encouraged me to be more explicit about where I stand as a TEP and more committed to practices that prioritise recognition, dignity, and justice. As a Black woman and practitioner, these narratives do not sit at a distance from me; they shape how I understand my role and responsibility within the systems I work in.

Jay, Joel, Isaac, and Leon's narratives have left me holding a question: am I helping Black boys survive school, or am I working toward conditions in which they no longer have to?

## **6.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has interpreted the men's narratives in relation to the study's research questions, attending to what their stories reveal about how mental health is experienced and made meaningful within secondary school contexts.

In tracing the movements within these narratives, I situated the men's stories within broader structural conditions, examining how Whiteness, racialised adultification, institutional racism, and epistemic injustice shaped the ways distress was experienced, interpreted, and responded to within school contexts.

Through a BLP lens, the narratives highlight the distinction between survival and liberation, suggesting that the men learned to endure school, navigate risk, and protect themselves from harm. At the same time, the institutional conditions requiring such endurance remained largely unaddressed. The men's accounts, therefore, reveal how survival became necessary within school environments that offered limited safety, recognition, or liberation.

This chapter has also positioned the men's narratives as an opportunity to rethink Educational Psychology practice while also identifying possibilities for change. Their accounts call on EPs to move beyond individualised and decontextualised frameworks towards relational, culturally grounded, and justice-oriented approaches. Importantly, they also require EPs to undertake ongoing reflexive and anti-racist work in examining how their own positioning, assumptions, and practices may contribute to or disrupt processes of harm within schools.

## **Chapter 7 Conclusion**

This study set out to examine how retrospective narratives of secondary school experiences, as shared by individuals who identify as Black men, construct meaning around mental health and support within school contexts. Through the men's narratives of belonging, misrecognition, adaptation, and endurance, the study demonstrates how distress and support are experienced, interpreted, and negotiated within racialised and institutional conditions over time. In doing so, the thesis argues that Black boys' accounts must be recognised as vital forms of knowledge for reimagining more just, relational, and anti-racist school practices.

### **7.1 Contribution to knowledge and practice**

This study makes four key contributions to knowledge and professional practice.

Conceptually, it centres the retrospective narratives of Black men as legitimate sources of knowledge about secondary school experiences and mental health. In doing so, it addresses a gap in the literature that has often prioritised outcomes, institutional pathways, and practitioner interpretation over lived meaning-making.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of combining CNA with co-created artefacts and collective meaning-making processes, offering a reflexive and participatory approach to understanding school-based distress grounded in participant-led expression.

Theoretically, it extends the application of BLP within Educational Psychology and school-based mental health research by demonstrating how Black boys' distress is relationally, culturally, and structurally produced rather than located solely within the individual. In doing so, the study positions survival, adaptation, collective care, and resistance as psychologically meaningful responses to racialised school environments, challenging dominant Westernised understandings of school-based mental health.

Professionally, the study contributes to Educational Psychology practice and wider educational and mental health provision by challenging individualised and decontextualised approaches to Black boys' mental health and emphasising the need for relational, anti-racist, and culturally grounded forms of support. The findings invite Educational Psychologists, school staff, and wider educational practitioners to critically examine how distress is interpreted, how care is distributed, and how institutional practices may reproduce or disrupt conditions of misrecognition, exclusion, and harm.

### **7.2 Limitations of the study**

This study was intentionally focused and narrative in scope in order to prioritise depth of storytelling and meaning-making. The narratives shared by the four men therefore cannot

and should not be understood as representative of all Black boys' experiences of secondary schooling. Rather than aiming for generalisability, the study offers contextually grounded insights that may be conceptually and professionally relevant for similar educational and mental health contexts.

The findings are also shaped by the specific context of participation, including the men's engagement with a community-based organisation supporting mental health and well-being. This context may have shaped both what participants chose to share and how experiences were narrated and interpreted. In addition, the practitioner reflective session was intentionally excluded from the primary dataset, meaning that practitioner perspectives function as a reflective extension of the study rather than as an evidential basis for broader claims. These limitations clarify the scope and situated nature of the study's contribution while also highlighting areas requiring further exploration.

### **7.3 Directions for future research**

The narratives point towards several directions for future research examining how Black boys' mental health is shaped by social relationships, power, and school structures.

The men in this study spoke about learning from an early age how to manage themselves within racialised environments. They described navigating school expectations, including code-switching and negotiating how they expressed themselves. Future research could focus on these early school years and explore how racialised expectations around behaviour and emotion begin to shape mental health trajectories. Longitudinal narrative research could extend this by examining how early experiences shape later identity, help-seeking, and meaning-making.

There is also scope for research that attends more explicitly to difference and intersectionality within Black men's and Black boys' experiences. The men in this study shared common storylines, but they also mentioned the role of class, family context, and migration histories in shaping how mental health was experienced and narrated. Future studies could explore how differing intersections, including across different Black identities and contexts, shape distress, resilience, and help-seeking, in order to resist the tendency to treat Black boys as a homogenous group.

Further work is also needed that centres collective and community-based understandings of mental health. The narratives in this study highlight the importance of relationships, peers, and communities in understanding school-based mental health experiences. Exploring collective approaches to care and mental health support, and how they interact with institutional practices, could offer an important contrast to dominant individualised models and frameworks.

There is also room for more explicitly participatory and creative methodologies. The co-created poem and written messages in this study became a powerful site of meaning-making and institutional address. Future work could extend this by involving participants more directly in research design, including research questions and analysis. This aligns closely with liberation-oriented psychology and challenges traditional hierarchies of expertise.

This study highlights the importance of centring Black male narratives while attending to the conditions that shape their experiences. From a BLP perspective, the task for future research is not to better support adaptation within existing systems, but to transform the structural conditions that produce distress, opening possibilities for liberation, dignity, and collective care as foundational, rather than exceptional conditions of educational practice.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A1: Black Men Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form



- *The term "Black" refers to individuals identifying as 'Black', 'Black British', 'Black African', 'Black Caribbean', 'Black African-Caribbean', 'Dual or Mixed Black Heritage', 'Black Indigenous' or 'any other Black Background'.*
- *The term "Man" or "Men" refers to adults who identify as 'Male.'*
- *The term "Boy" refers to young people and adolescents who identify as 'Male.'*
- *The term "secondary School" refers to all UK educational institutions for young people between the ages of 11-16.*

#### Participant Information Sheet

**Research Project Title:** School-Based Mental Health Support for Black Boys

**Researcher:** Lerece Kinsiona

**Institution:** University of Sheffield

#### Information Sheet for Sample A

##### Invitation to Take Part

I invite you to participate in a research project focused on school-based mental health support for Black boys. Before you decide whether to participate, please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. It is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. If you have any questions or require more details, feel free to ask. Please take the time to decide if you want to take part.

##### What is the Purpose of the Project?

The aim of this research is to explore the experiences of Black males' mental health during their secondary school years, and their perceptions of school-based mental health support. The study aims to gather in-depth insights from Black men over the age of 18 who are currently accessing an organisation that provides a service for mild-moderate mental health needs. It will gather their stories, reflecting on their lived experiences and forms of support that were or were not accessible to them during their time at secondary school. Additionally, it seeks to engage educational practitioners to reflect on these lived experiences and how they can influence or improve their practices or services to support the mental health needs of Black boys during their secondary school years.

The research aims to collect and analyse data, not to provide immediate changes to practices or services. While participants' input may contribute to broader changes, improvements are not guaranteed, and the focus of the study will remain on understanding lived experiences.

This research is being conducted as part of the Doctorate in Education and Child Psychology at the University of Sheffield.

##### Why have I been chosen?

You have been invited to participate in this research because:

- You identify as a Black man\*
- You are aged over 18 years.
- You attended a UK-based Secondary School\*
- You speak fluent English.
- You are not experiencing severe mental health concerns (e.g., psychosis, severe depression)
- You are currently accessing a mental-health-based service offered by an organisation participating in this research.

There will be up to 6 participants participating in this phase of the research. Up to an additional 6 educational practitioners will be recruited as participants for a later research phase.

### **What Will I Be Asked to Do?**

As a participant in this study, you will be asked to take part in a Focus Group, then at a later date, participate in a Workshop. You will be asked to:

- Participate in a focus group of up to 6 participants for 60-90 minutes to reflect on your experiences at secondary school and any available support for mild-moderate mental health needs. It will be conducted in a familiar environment, where the organisation's sessions are conducted. The focus group will be guided by open-ended questions that you can answer however you wish or choose not to answer. Questions will be designed to avoid deeply distressing prompts and instead be solution-focused and future-orientated, focusing on recommendations for change. This focus group will be audio-recorded for the researcher to transcribe.
- Participate in a workshop for 60-90 minutes with the same (up to 6) focus group participants. It will be conducted in a familiar environment, where the organisation's sessions are conducted. During the workshop, you will be given the transcriptions from the focus group, with the opportunity to check the data before using the discussion to co-create a creative piece (such as a poem or written reflection) that represents the strengths, barriers, and challenges in school-based mental health support for Black males. This creative piece will be shared during a Focus group of up to 6 educational practitioners for reflection, and discussions of how this insight could inform their practice or services. You will be asked not to include any identifying details. All pieces will be reviewed by the researcher to ensure anonymity before sharing.

### **Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you choose to participate, you will be given this information sheet to keep (and asked to sign a consent form). This research is separate from any services the mental health organisations may offer, and your involvement will not influence your ongoing support or the services you may receive. You can withdraw at any time by contacting the researcher, Lerece Kinsiona; [Lkinsiona1@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:Lkinsiona1@sheffield.ac.uk).

If you decide not to take part or withdraw at any time from this research, you do not have to give a reason, and there will be no negative consequences without any adverse effect on your relationship with the organisation or their access to support services.

Please note that if you decide to withdraw your participation during the study, you cannot withdraw the data you have contributed up until that point. Due to the nature of focus groups, it will not be possible to delete individual contributions from the audio recording once the session is complete, as individual voices may not be clearly identifiable or separable.

### **Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?**

Yes, the focus group will be audio recorded, which will then be transcribed and anonymised, ensuring that the information you have given is not identifiable. The audio recordings of your discussions made during this

research will be used only for analysis. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the research team (the researcher and research supervisors) will be allowed access to the original recordings.

The anonymised transcription from the focus group will be analysed and shared through the research findings.

The creative piece that will be co-created in the workshop will be shared directly with the educational practitioners as part of a focus group, analysed and shared through the research findings.

### **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

Risks will be managed and mitigated where possible to ensure appropriate protection and well-being of all participants. However, discussing your experiences could potentially bring up emotional responses, and topics of discussion may be triggering to share or listen to. There is a risk of re-traumatisation and whilst confidentiality will be encouraged and expected, there is a risk of unintended disclosure of personal information from other participants. Participating in the focus group and workshop may cause tiredness, discomfort, or exhaustion.

You will be free to skip any questions you do not feel comfortable answering, take a break, or withdraw from the study at any point. If you feel distressed during your involvement with the research, the organisation will provide details of how to seek follow-up support from them, the researcher will be available for a debrief and information about support services will be given and signposted to.

### **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for taking part in this research, it is hoped that this work will give insight into the Black Male Secondary school experience, insights into the strengths, barriers and challenges of seeking appropriate support for mild-moderate mental health needs, and insights to potential recommendations and improvements for educational practitioners and services currently responsible for supporting Black boys mental health needs.

### **Will My Participation Be Confidential?**

Yes, your personal information (name, contact details, etc.) will be kept confidential. Any data collected will be anonymised, and your name will not appear in any published results. Your words may be quoted in reports or publications, but you will not be identified.

In exceptional circumstances, if there is a risk to the safety of a participant or others (e.g., in cases of abuse or immediate danger), confidentiality may need to be breached.

### **Data Protection**

Your data will be used solely for the purpose of this research. All transcripts will be stored securely, and your responses will be anonymised. Data will be stored in compliance with the university's data protection policies.

Personal data will remain confidential and will not be shared with anyone outside of the research team (the researcher and research supervisors) unless required by law or in cases where there is an immediate risk of harm to yourself or others.

All digital data, including recordings, will be stored in a password-protected and encrypted format. This will be on a secure, University-approved server or platform.

All identifiable personal data (such as names and contact details) will be securely destroyed when the research project is completed, once all analysis, reporting, and internal and external project requirements have been concluded.

This research is carried out 'in the public interest' in accordance with data protection legislation. Further information can be found in the 'University's Privacy Notice' by visiting [www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general). Some of your data collected during the research will be defined in the legislation as

more sensitive (information about race or ethnicity, and mental health conditions), so we need to let you know that the use of this data is necessary 'for archiving purposes in the public interest, scientific research purposes or statistical purposes'

The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means that the University of Sheffield is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

#### **What happens to the results of the research?**

Please be aware that this research may lead to publications such as journal articles, reports, or web pages. This will be accessible to all interested parties. Your personal information, including your name, will not be in these publications, and all data will be anonymised. You can obtain a copy of the published results by contacting the researcher.

#### **Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

This project has been ethically approved by School of Psychology at the University of Sheffield.

#### **What if something goes wrong and I wish to complain about the research or report a concern or incident?**

If you would like to complain about any aspect of the research or if you feel that you have been exploited, abused or harmed as a result of taking part in the research, please contact Mary Chilokoa; [m.chilokoa@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:m.chilokoa@sheffield.ac.uk). If you feel your complaint has not been handled in a satisfactory way you can contact the Head of the School of Education, Rebecca Lawthom; [r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk). If your complaint is about how your personal data has been handled, you can find information about how to raise a complaint in the University's Privacy Notice by visiting [www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general)

#### **How Do I Get More Information?**

If you have any questions or need more information about the study, please contact the researcher, Lerece Kinsiona; [Lkinsiona1@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:Lkinsiona1@sheffield.ac.uk)

#### **Thank you**

Thank you for considering taking the time to participate in this research project.

- The term “Black” refers to individuals identifying as ‘Black’, ‘Black British’, ‘Black African’, ‘Black Caribbean’, ‘Black African-Caribbean’, ‘Dual or Mixed Black Heritage’, ‘Black Indigenous’ or ‘any other Black Background’.
- The term “Man” or “Men” refers to adults who identify as ‘Male.’
- The term “Boy” refers to young people and adolescents who identify as ‘Male.’
- The term “secondary School” refers to all UK educational institutions for young people between the ages of 11-16.

### **Participant Consent Form**

**Research Project Title:** School-Based Mental Health Support for Black Boys: Insights from Liberation Psychology

**Researcher:** Lereece Kinsiona

**Institution:** University of Sheffield

#### **Participant Consent Form for Sample A**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact email: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Inclusion Criteria:**

- You identify as a Black man\*
- You are aged over 18 years.
- You attended a UK-based Secondary School\*
- You speak fluent English.
- You are not experiencing severe mental health concerns (e.g., psychosis, severe depression)
- You are currently accessing a mental-health-based service offered by an organisation participating in this research.

#### **Please indicate your response:**

1. I fulfil all of the inclusion criteria listed above to participate in this research.

**Yes / No**

2. I have read and understood the project’s participant information sheet.

**Yes / No**

3. I have been given the chance to ask questions about the project.

**Yes / No**

4. I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.

**Yes / No**

5. I agree to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include:
- Participating in a focus group for 60-90 minutes to discuss secondary school-based experiences of mental health and support
  - Participating in a workshop, for 60-90 minutes co-creating a creative piece informed by the focus group discussion
6. I understand that by choosing to participate as a volunteer in this research, this does not create a legally binding agreement nor is it intended to create an employment relationship with the University of Sheffield.  
**Yes / No**
7. I understand that I can withdraw from the research/study at any time, and there will be no consequences for me if I choose to withdraw. If I choose to withdraw, it will not be possible to remove the research data I have already contributed.  
**Yes / No**
8. I understand that my participation is voluntary.  
**Yes / No**
9. I understand that the focus group I participate in will be audio recorded, which will then be transcribed and anonymised, ensuring that the information I have given is not identifiable.  
**Yes / No**
10. I understand and agree that the data collected during the course of the project might be openly shared, and/or used for additional or subsequent research in publications such as, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that I will not be named in these outputs.  
**Yes / No**
11. I understand that immediate changes to practices or services should not be expected. While my input may contribute to broader changes, improvements are not guaranteed, and the focus of the study will remain on understanding lived experiences.  
**Yes / No**
12. I understand that in exceptional circumstances, if there is a risk to the safety of a participant or others (e.g., in cases of abuse or immediate danger), confidentiality may need to be breached.  
**Yes / No**

**Name of Participant [printed]:**

**Signature:**

**Date:**

**Project Contact Details**

**Researcher:**

Lerece Kinsiona  
Lkinsiona1@sheffield.ac.uk  
University of Sheffield

**Supervised by:**

Mary Chilokoa, m.chilokoa@sheffield.ac.uk

**Head of Department:**

Rebecca Lawthom; [r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk)

## Appendix A2: Educational Practitioner Reflective Session Information Sheet and Consent Form



- The term “Black” refers to individuals identifying as ‘Black’, ‘Black British’, ‘Black African’, ‘Black Caribbean’, ‘Black African-Caribbean’, ‘Dual or Mixed Black Heritage’, ‘Black Indigenous’ or ‘any other Black Background’.
- The term “Man” or “Men” refers to adults who identify as ‘Male.’
- The term “Boy” refers to young people and adolescents who identify as ‘Male.’
- The term “secondary School” refers to all UK educational institutions for young people between the ages of 11-16.

### Participant Information Sheet

**Research Project Title:** School-Based Mental Health Support for Black Boys: Insights from Liberation Psychology

**Researcher:** Lereece Kinsiona

**Institution:** University of Sheffield

#### Information Sheet for Sample B

##### Invitation to Take Part

I invite you to participate in a research project focused on school-based mental health support for Black boys. Before you decide whether to participate, please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. It is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. If you have any questions or require more details, feel free to ask. Please take the time to decide if you want to take part.

##### What is the Purpose of the Project?

The aim of this research is to explore the experiences of Black males’ mental health during their secondary school years, and their perceptions of school-based mental health support. The study aims to gather in-depth insights from Black men over the age of 18 who are currently accessing an organisation that provides a service for mild-moderate mental health needs. It will gather their stories, reflecting on their lived experiences and forms of support that were or were not accessible to them during their time at secondary school. Additionally, it seeks to engage educational practitioners to reflect on these lived experiences and how they can influence or improve their practices or services to support the mental health needs of Black boys during their secondary school years.

The research aims to collect and analyse data, not to provide immediate changes to practices or services. While participants’ input may contribute to broader changes, benefits or improvements are not guaranteed, and the focus of the study will remain on understanding lived experiences.

This research is being conducted as part of the Doctorate in Education and Child Psychology at the University of Sheffield.

##### Why have I been chosen?

You have been invited to participate in this research as you are a practitioner employed by an organisation, service or school that offers school-based mental health support for children or young people at secondary

school. There will be up to 6 participants participating in this phase of the research. Up to an additional 6 participants who identify as Black males will be recruited as participants for an early research phase.

### **What Will I Be Asked to Do?**

As a participant in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in a focus group that will act as a workshop for 60-90 minutes, reflecting on a creative piece (e.g., poem or written reflection) created by Black men reflecting on their secondary school experiences and school-based mental health support. It will be held in person in a designated room in the local authority's building, facilitated through the prompt of open-ended questions. During this workshop, you will also reflect on potential actions and discuss how insights might inform practice and school-based mental health support for Black boys. Reflections and discussions will be noted within a graphic representation which will be presented in the final write-up of this research to give insight into the reflections and actionable insights of educational practitioners in response to the creative piece.

### **Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you choose to participate, you will be given this information sheet to keep (and asked to sign a consent form). This research is separate from any organisation or service. You can withdraw at any time by contacting the researcher, Lereece Kinsiona; Lkinsiona1@sheffield.ac.uk.

If you decide not to take part or withdraw at any time from this research, you do not have to give a reason, and there will be no negative consequences.

Please note that if you decide to withdraw your participation during the study, you cannot withdraw the data you have contributed up until that point.

### **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

Risks will be managed and mitigated where possible to ensure appropriate protection and well-being of all participants. However, discussing highly sensitive topics may lead to a range of potential emotional and psychological distress or be triggering for those sharing or listening.

Whilst confidentiality will be encouraged and expected, there is a risk of unintentionally disclosing your reflections from other participants. Participating in the focus group may cause tiredness, discomfort, or exhaustion.

You will be free to skip any questions you feel uncomfortable answering, take a break or withdraw from the study at any point. If you feel distressed during the research, the researcher will be available for a debrief and information about support services will be given and signposted to.

### **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for taking part in this research, it is hoped that this work will give insight into the Black Male Secondary school experience, insights into the strengths, barriers and challenges of seeking appropriate support for mild-moderate mental health needs, and insights to potential recommendations and improvements for educational practitioners and services currently responsible for supporting Black boys mental health needs.

### **Will My Participation Be Confidential?**

Yes, your personal information (name, contact details, etc.) will be kept confidential. Any data collected will be anonymised, and your name will not appear in any published results. Your words may be quoted in the graphic representation and therefore in reports or publications, but you will not be identified.

In exceptional circumstances, if there is a risk to the safety of a participant or others (e.g., in cases of abuse or immediate danger), confidentiality may need to be breached.

### **Data Protection**

Your data will be used solely for the purpose of this research. All transcripts will be stored securely, and your responses will be anonymised. Data will be stored in compliance with the university's data protection policies.

Personal data will remain confidential and will not be shared with anyone outside of the research team (the researcher and research supervisors) unless required by law or in cases where there is an immediate risk of harm to yourself or others.

All digital data, including recordings, will be stored in a password-protected and encrypted format. This will be on a secure, University-approved server or platform.

All identifiable personal data (such as names and contact details) will be securely destroyed when the research project is completed, once all analysis, reporting, and internal and external project requirements have been concluded.

This research is carried out 'in the public interest' in accordance with data protection legislation. Further information can be found in the 'University's Privacy Notice' by visiting [www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general). Some of your data collected during the research will be defined in the legislation as more sensitive (information about race or ethnicity, and mental health conditions), so we need to let you know that the use of this data is necessary 'for archiving purposes in the public interest, scientific research purposes or statistical purposes'

The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means that the University of Sheffield is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

### **What happens to the results of the research?**

Please be aware that this research may lead to publications such as journal articles, reports, or web pages. This will be accessible to all interested parties. Your personal information, including your name, will not be in these publications, and all data will be anonymised. You can obtain a copy of the published results by contacting the researcher.

### **Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

This project has been ethically approved by School of Psychology at the University of Sheffield.

### **What if something goes wrong and I wish to complain about the research or report a concern or incident?**

If you would like to complain about any aspect of the research or if you feel that you have been exploited, abused or harmed as a result of taking part in the research, please contact Mary Chilokoa; [m.chilokoa@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:m.chilokoa@sheffield.ac.uk). If you feel your complaint has not been handled in a satisfactory way you can contact the Head of the School of Education, Rebecca Lawthom; [r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk). If your complaint is about how your personal data has been handled, you can find information about how to raise a complaint in the University's Privacy Notice by visiting [www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general)

### **How Do I Get More Information?**

If you have any questions or need more information about the study, please contact the researcher, Lerece Kinsiona; [Lkinsiona1@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:Lkinsiona1@sheffield.ac.uk)

### **Thank you**

Thank you for considering taking the time to participate in this research project.

- The term “Black” refers to individuals identifying as ‘Black’, ‘Black British’, ‘Black African’, ‘Black Caribbean’, ‘Black African-Caribbean’, ‘Dual or Mixed Black Heritage’, ‘Black Indigenous’ or ‘any other Black Background’.
- The term “Man” or “Men” refers to adults who identify as ‘Male.’
- The term “Boy” refers to young people and adolescents who identify as ‘Male.’
- The term “secondary School” refers to all UK educational institutions for young people between the ages of 11-16.

### **Participant Consent Form**

**Research Project Title:** School-Based Mental Health Support for Black Boys: Insights from Liberation Psychology

**Researcher:** Lerece Kinsiona

**Institution:** University of Sheffield

### **Participant Consent Form for Sample B**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact email: \_\_\_\_\_

Organisation, service or school: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Inclusion Criteria:**

- You are aged over 18 years.
- You speak fluent English.
- You are a practitioner employed by an organisation, service or school that offers school-based mental health support for children or young people at secondary school

### **Please indicate your response:**

13. I fulfil all of the inclusion criteria listed above to participate in this research.

**Yes / No**

14. I have read and understood the project’s participant information sheet.

**Yes / No**

15. I have been given the chance to ask questions about the project.

**Yes / No**

16. I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.

**Yes / No**

17. I agree to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include:

- Participate in a focus group that will act as a workshop for 60-90 minutes, reflecting on a creative piece (poem and written reflections) created by Black men reflecting on their secondary school experiences and school-based mental health support
18. I understand that by choosing to participate as a volunteer in this research, this does not create a legally binding agreement nor is it intended to create an employment relationship with the University of Sheffield.  
**Yes / No**
19. I understand that I can withdraw from the research/study at any time, and there will be no consequences for me if I choose to withdraw. If I choose to withdraw, it will not be possible to remove the research data I have already contributed.  
**Yes / No**
20. I understand that my participation is voluntary.  
**Yes / No**
21. I agree that my words may be quoted in the graphic representation and therefore in reports or publications, but I will not be identified.
22. I understand and agree that the data collected during the course of the project might be openly shared, and/or used for additional or subsequent research in publications such as, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that I will not be named in these outputs.  
**Yes / No**
23. I understand that immediate changes to practices or services should not be expected. While my input may contribute to broader changes, improvements are not guaranteed, and the focus of the study will remain on understanding lived experiences.  
**Yes / No**
24. I understand that in exceptional circumstances, if there is a risk to the safety of a participant or others (e.g., in cases of abuse or immediate danger), confidentiality may need to be breached.  
**Yes / No**

**Name of Participant [printed]:**

**Signature:**

**Date:**

**Project Contact Details**

**Researcher:**

Lerece Kinsiona  
Lkinsiona1@sheffield.ac.uk  
University of Sheffield

**Supervised by:**

Mary Chilokoa, m.chilokoa@sheffield.ac.uk

**Head of Department:**

Rebecca Lawthom; [r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk)

## Appendix A3: Organisational Information Sheet and Consent Form



\*

- The term “Black” refers to individuals identifying as ‘Black’, ‘Black British’, ‘Black African’, ‘Black Caribbean’, ‘Black African-Caribbean’, ‘Dual or Mixed Black Heritage’, ‘Black Indigenous’ or ‘any other Black Background’.
- The term “Man” or “Men” refers to adults who identify as ‘Male.’
- The term “Boy” refers to young people and adolescents who identify as ‘Male.’
- The term “secondary School” refers to all UK educational institutions for young people between the ages of 11-16.

**Research Project Title:** School-Based Mental Health Support for Black Boys

**Researcher:** Lereece Kinsiona

**Institution:** University of Sheffield

### Information Sheet for Organisation

#### Invitation to Take Part

I invite your organisation to participate in a research project focused on school-based mental health support for Black boys. Before you decide whether to participate, please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. It is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. If you have any questions or require more details, feel free to ask. Please take the time to decide if you want to take part.

#### What is the Purpose of the Project?

The aim of this research is to explore the experiences of Black males’ mental health during their secondary school years, and their perceptions of school-based mental health support. The study aims to gather in-depth insights from Black men over the age of 18 who are currently accessing an organisation that provides a service for mild-moderate mental health needs. It will gather their stories, reflecting on their lived experiences and forms of support that were or were not accessible to them during their time at secondary school. Additionally, it seeks to engage educational practitioners to reflect on these lived experiences and how they can influence or improve their practices or services to support the mental health needs of Black boys during their secondary school years.

The research aims to collect and analyse data, not to provide immediate changes to practices or services. While participants’ input may contribute to broader changes, benefits or improvements are not guaranteed, and the focus of the study will remain on understanding lived experiences.

This research is being conducted as part of the Doctorate in Education and Child Psychology at the University of Sheffield.

#### Why have I been chosen?

Your organisation has been invited to participate in this research as it provides a service that supports the mild-moderate mental health needs of Black Males\*. Only one organisation will participate in this study, with up to

6 Black Male participants who access that organisation. Up to an additional 6 educational practitioners will be recruited as participants for a later research phase.

### **What Will I Be Asked to Do?**

As the organisation participating in this study, you will be asked to:

- Advertise for between 4-6 participants who access your services.
- Provide a familiar and confidential space for the participants to participate in 2 Focus Groups which will be held on separate dates and last between 60-90 minutes.
- Offer follow-up support for the participants recruited through your organisation.

The following inclusion criteria apply for the participants eligible for this study:

- Identify as a Black man\*
- Aged over 18 years.
- Attended a UK-based Secondary School\*
- Speak fluent English.
- Not experiencing severe mental health concerns (e.g., psychosis, severe depression)
- Currently accessing a mental-health-based service offered by an organisation participating in this research.

A participant information sheet is available for more information on their involvement.

### **Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you choose to participate, you will be given this information sheet to keep (and asked to sign a consent form). You can withdraw at any time by contacting the researcher, Lerece Kinsiona; Lkinsiona1@sheffield.ac.uk.

If you decide not to take part or withdraw at any time from this research, you do not have to give a reason, and there will be no negative consequences. Please note that if you decide to withdraw your participation during the study, the data contributed up until that point will be retained.

### **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

Risks will be managed and mitigated where possible to ensure appropriate protection and well-being of all participants. However, the participants recruited through your organisation will be discussing experiences that could potentially bring up emotional responses, and topics of discussion may be triggering to share or listen to. Therefore, the participants may experience distress that requires additional support from the organisation.

### **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for taking part in this research, it is hoped that this work will give insight into the Black Male Secondary school experience, insights into the strengths, barriers and challenges of seeking appropriate support for mild-moderate mental health needs, and insights to potential recommendations and improvements for educational practitioners and services currently responsible for supporting Black boys mental health needs.

### **Will My Participation Be Confidential?**

Yes, your personal and organisation's information (name, contact details, etc.) will be kept confidential. Any data collected will be anonymised, and your name or organisation will not appear in any published results.

In exceptional circumstances, if there is a risk to the safety of a participant or others (e.g., in cases of abuse or immediate danger), confidentiality may need to be breached.

Your data will be used solely for the purpose of this research. All transcripts will be stored securely, and your responses will be anonymised. Data will be stored in compliance with the university's data protection policies.

Personal data will remain confidential and will not be shared with anyone outside of the research team (the researcher and research supervisors) unless required by law or in cases where there is an immediate risk of harm to yourself or others.

All digital data, including recordings, will be stored in a password-protected and encrypted format. This will be on a secure, University-approved server or platform.

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### **Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

This project has been ethically approved by School of Psychology at the University of Sheffield.

### **What if something goes wrong and I wish to complain about the research or report a concern or incident?**

If you would like to complain about any aspect of the research or if you feel that you have been exploited, abused or harmed as a result of taking part in the research, please contact Mary Chilokoa; [m.chilokoa@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:m.chilokoa@sheffield.ac.uk). If you feel your complaint has not been handled in a satisfactory way you can contact the Head of the School of Education, Rebecca Lawthom; [r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk). If your complaint is about how your personal data has been handled, you can find information about how to raise a complaint in the University's Privacy Notice by visiting [www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general)

### **How Do I Get More Information?**

If you have any questions or need more information about the study, please contact the researcher, Lerece Kinsion; [Lkinsiona1@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:Lkinsiona1@sheffield.ac.uk)

### **Thank you**

Thank you for considering taking the time to participate in this research project.

- The term “Black” refers to individuals identifying as ‘Black’, ‘Black British’, ‘Black African’, ‘Black Caribbean’, ‘Black African-Caribbean’, ‘Dual or Mixed Black Heritage’, ‘Black Indigenous’ or ‘any other Black Background’.
- The term “Man” or “Men” refers to adults who identify as ‘Male.’
- The term “Boy” refers to young people and adolescents who identify as ‘Male.’
- The term “secondary School” refers to all UK educational institutions for young people between the ages of 11-16.

## Consent Form

**Research Project Title:** School-Based Mental Health Support for Black Boys: Insights from Liberation Psychology

**Researcher:** Lereece Kinsiona

**Institution:** University of Sheffield

### Consent Form for Organisation

Personal Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Job Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Organisation Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact email: \_\_\_\_\_

### Inclusion Criteria:

- You are aged over 18 years.
- You have the permission to act and consent on behalf of the organisation.
- The organisation I act on behalf of provides a service that supports the mild-moderate mental health needs of Black Males\*

### Please indicate your response:

25. I fulfil all of the inclusion criteria listed above to participate in this research.

**Yes / No**

26. I have read and understood the project’s participant information sheet.

**Yes / No**

27. I have been given the chance to ask questions about the project.

**Yes / No**

28. I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.

**Yes / No**

29. I agree to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include:

- Advertising for between 4-6 participants who access your services and meet the criteria for the research.

- Providing a familiar and confidential space for the participants to participate in 2 Focus Groups.
  - Offer follow-up support for the participants recruited through your organisation should they request it.
30. I understand that by choosing to participate as a volunteer in this research, this does not create a legally binding agreement nor is it intended to create an employment relationship with the University of Sheffield.  
**Yes / No**
31. I understand that I can withdraw from the research/study at any time, and there will be no consequences for me if I choose to withdraw. If I decide to withdraw participation during the study, the data contributed up until that point will be retained.  
**Yes / No**
32. **Yes / No**
33. I understand that my participation and that of the organisation is voluntary.  
**Yes / No**
34. I understand and agree that the data collected during the course of the project might be openly shared, and/or used for additional or subsequent research in publications such as, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that I will not be named in these outputs, nor will the organisation.  
**Yes / No**
35. I understand that immediate changes to practices or services should not be expected. While input may contribute to broader changes, improvements are not guaranteed, and the focus of the study will remain on understanding lived experiences.  
**Yes / No**
36. I understand that in exceptional circumstances, if there is a risk to the safety of a participant or others (e.g., in cases of abuse or immediate danger), confidentiality may need to be breached.  
**Yes / No**
37. I agree that the organisation I act on behalf of will offer follow-up support for the participants recruited through the organisation should they request it.  
**Yes / No**
38. I have the permission to act and consent on behalf of the organisation.  
**Yes / No**

**Name [printed]:**

**Signature:**

**Date:**

**Project Contact Details**

**Researcher:**

Lerece Kinsiona

Lkinsiona1@sheffield.ac.uk

University of Sheffield

**Supervised by:**

Mary Chilokoa, m.chilokoa@sheffield.ac.uk

**Head of Department:**

Rebecca Lawthom; [r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk)

## Appendix B: Ethics Approval Letter



Downloaded: 30/03/2026  
Approved: 23/05/2025

Lereece Marie Kinsiona  
Registration number: 230108268  
Psychology  
Programme: DEdCPsy Doctor of Educational and Child Psychology

Dear Lereece Marie

**PROJECT TITLE:** School-Based Mental Health Support for Black Boys: Insights from Liberation Psychology  
**APPLICATION:** Reference Number 067582

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 23/05/2025 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 067582 (form submission date: 20/05/2025); (expected project end date: 30/08/2026).
- Participant information sheet 1151966 version 2 (20/05/2025).
- Participant information sheet 1151967 version 2 (20/05/2025).
- Participant information sheet 1151968 version 2 (20/05/2025).
- Participant consent form 1151969 version 2 (20/05/2025).
- Participant consent form 1151970 version 2 (20/05/2025).
- Participant consent form 1151971 version 2 (20/05/2025).

If during the course of the project you need to [deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation](#) please inform me since written approval will be required.

Your responsibilities in delivering this research project are set out at the end of this letter.

Yours sincerely

Department Of Psychology Research Ethics Committee  
Ethics Admin  
Psychology

Please note the following responsibilities of the researcher in delivering the research project:

- The project must abide by the University's Research Ethics Policy: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/research-services/ethics-integrity/policy>.
- The project must abide by the University's Good Research & Innovation Practices Policy: [https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly\\_fs/1.6710661/file/GRIPPolicy.pdf](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.6710661/file/GRIPPolicy.pdf).
- The researcher must inform their supervisor (in the case of a student) or Ethics Admin (in the case of a member of staff) of any significant changes to the project or the approved documentation.
- The researcher must comply with the requirements of the law and relevant guidelines relating to security and confidentiality of personal data.
- The researcher is responsible for effectively managing the data collected both during and after the end of the project in line with best practice, and any relevant legislative, regulatory or contractual requirements.

## Appendix C: Narrative mapping and analytic development

This appendix documents the staged and reflexive analytic process that the study's nine narrative findings were developed. It provides insight into how meaning was constructed across the focus group data and co-produced artefacts (poem and written messages) using Critical Narrative Analysis informed by Emerson and Frosh (2009), interpreted through a Social Constructionist and Black Liberation Psychology lens.

### Stage 1: Noticing (Focus group and artefact data)

Following transcription, I engaged in repeated immersive readings of the focus group transcript and artefacts. At this stage, I undertook close 'noticing' and recorded margin notes attending to:

- Tone, pauses, laughter, hesitation and rhythm
- Repetition and emotional emphasis
- Shifts in positioning and power
- Moments of silence or avoidance
- My own embodied and affective responses as a Black woman researcher

This stage functioned as attunement rather than coding, allowing me to identify where emotional meaning was carried not only through words, but through affect, rhythm, and what remained unsaid. These early observations directly informed the later narrative mappings and micro-meso-molar readings. Reflexive notes were recorded throughout this stage to make visible how my positionality and affective responses shaped interpretation.

#### Extracts from reflexive journal:

The men often laughed when sharing experiences that felt painful or emotionally heavy. Maybe the laughter is doing different things at different moments? Discomfort? Protection? Coping?

Some silences felt significant. So much seemed to be 'said' in those pauses. I wonder whether it was emotion, resonance, pain, reflection... maybe all at once? The meaningful silences feel familiar to me too, which raises questions about how quickly shared understanding can be assumed when experiences resonate personally.

Individual and collective language "I" and "we" shifted constantly, especially when discussing racism or belonging. Positioning felt relational... "us" and "them".

## Stage 2: Early narrative mapping

I generated early narrative clusters by attending to repetition, emotional charge, shifts in tone, contradiction, collective meaning-making, and how distress, survival, and support were narrated in relation to school experiences and mental health. This was treated as the development of interpretive narratives rather than the identification of fixed themes.

### **Narrative 1: Belonging and not belonging**

#### Focus group mapping:

- “We felt like we was other to them.”
- “Even at that age... not feeling belonging was something that was felt.”
- “There was no room for our energy and our expressiveness.”

#### Artefact mapping:

- “Imagine being told to be yourself but not too Black.”
- “Imagine being a kid but never really being treated like one.”
- “Imagine walking in already labelled.”
- “Imagine being watched more than everyone else.”
- “That we are seen – we are already judged and you give up on us too soon and judge our culture.”

### **Narrative 2: Racism - interpersonal and institutional**

#### Focus group mapping:

- “They punished us for retaliating, but they didn't punish the racism.”
- “Looking back... it makes sense... because of the system... like institutional racism.”
- “When it comes to racism, you can't trust the school to deal with it... you have to handle it yourself.”

#### Artefact mapping:

- “Imagine your reaction to racism being the real problem.”
- “Understand that we are yutes experiencing racism. That is traumatic. We just get punished for our retaliation.”
- “Support us with racism or find someone who can.”
- “Remember that we are in racist systems. Exclusion leads to prison.”

### **Narrative 3: Representation and relatability**

#### Focus group mapping:

- “There was no representation in the school... that's why we couldn't relate or chat to anyone.”
- “There wasn't nobody that looked like they would get any of this.”
- “When there's a safe teacher, like a Black teacher... the connection young people have is mad.”

Artefact mapping:

- “Put us on our pedestal. We deserve it too.”
- “Believe us. Learn from us when we say you are singling us out. It could be your unconscious biases.”

**Narrative 4: Expression, culture, and misunderstanding**

Focus group mapping:

- “School doesn’t know how to deal with Black masculinity... they criminalise it.”
- “How young Black boys express themselves... gets seen as threatening or aggressive.”
- “The education system privileges European ways of learning and expression.”

Artefact mapping:

- “Imagine your music getting called aggressive.”
- “Imagine how you speak getting called aggressive.”
- “Imagine your energy getting called aggressive.”
- “Include our interests. Healing looks different for us... don’t criminalise it.”
- “Don’t criminalise or medicalise our behaviour or expression.”

**Narrative 5: Adaptation, code-switching, and identity**

Focus group mapping:

- “Our parents taught us from young how to adapt and hybrid and code switch.”
- “I had to put on an act...”
- “I stopped switching how I talk... more connected to my identity.”

Artefact mapping:

- “Imagine always having to code-switch and adapt to White norms.”
- “Let us be us... The fact that we cannot express ourselves impacts our mental health.”

**Narrative 6: Community as support and the school-community divide**

Focus group mapping:

- “You can trace the thread back to school.”
- “They don’t want to get to that deeper level...”
- “There’s an ignorance... it starts and stops there.”

Artefact mapping:

- “Link with our community.”
- “There’s a disconnect between home and school.”

**Narrative 7: Accessing help - relatability, safety, and the limits of school-based support**

Focus group mapping:

- “She couldn’t relate.”
- “There’d be no point in saying anything.”
- “He might just need that extra TLC...”

#### Artefact mapping:

- “You can’t help us with our mental health if you think it is separate from us being Black.”
- “Create alternative modes of healing.”
- “Everyone is expecting us to be strong all of the time.”
- “Normalise mental health for us.”
- “Stop blaming us and our families.”

#### **Narrative 8: Resilience and navigation - survival and psychological endurance**

##### Focus group mapping:

- “How to navigate within them spaces.”
- “We’ve been training for it.”
- “Just stick together.”

##### Artefact mapping:

- “Imagine you’re meant to just firm it.”
- “We need freedom from believing emotions make us weak.”

#### **Narrative 9: Class and cultural distance - navigating Whiteness, privilege, and social misalignment**

##### Focus group mapping:

- “There’s a Whiteness, but also a class element.”
- “Model pupil.”
- “They don’t have exposure.”

##### Artefact mapping:

- “Imagine your boys being your safe space but being seen as a gang.”

#### **Narratives to Black Boys**

Although the artefacts were addressed to educational practitioners, the men also chose to write messages they would give to younger Black boys. These messages were treated as a continuation of the same narrative work.

- “Don’t be afraid to speak up.”
- “Talk to people who care.”
- “Check on your brothers.”
- “Be expressive.”
- “Stand up to injustice.”
- “You’re not alone, my brother.”

Extracts from reflexive journal:

Certain experiences keep resurfacing across the discussions. Racism moves into belonging, belonging into adaptation, then into emotional safety or survival. It doesn't feel simple to separate.

The men often built on each other's accounts. It felt less like individual storytelling and more like collective storytelling. Strong sense of shared understanding and meaning-making.

Emotional tone shifted quickly. Humour, frustration, reflection, exhaustion... sometimes within the same story.

Even with the overlap and movement across the discussions, some narrative groupings were beginning to take shape. They still felt fluid and interconnected rather than fixed, but certain tensions and storylines kept resurfacing. Words like "aggressive" and "adapt" kept repeating across both the focus group and artefacts. The repetition feels not only important but layered.

Stage 3: Development of interpretive narratives

At this stage, I moved from early narrative mapping to constructing interpretive narratives, bringing together shared storylines across participants' accounts. I examined how each cluster functioned as a developing storyline, attending to how experiences were organised and given meaning across participants' accounts. This involved considering:

- Narrative beginnings
- Core tensions
- Emotional turning points
- Consequences
- Movement across time

Narrative 1: Belonging and not belonging

**Narrative movement:** Othering; emotional displacement; relational withdrawal; conditional survival

Positioning as "other" from early school experiences; belonging felt absent; emotional displacement carried in the body; withdrawal from institutional belonging; survival through conditional adjustment.

Narrative 2: Racism – interpersonal and institutional

**Narrative movement:** Racial harm; institutional misrecognition; loss of trust; self-reliance

Experiences of racism; school responses minimising or reframing harm; emotional reactions positioned as the problem; trust in school withdrawn; expectation that racism must be managed alone.

#### Narrative 3: Representation and relatability

**Narrative movement:** Absence of representation; emotional isolation; recognition; awareness of limitations.

Lack of culturally resonant adults; silence and isolation; rare experiences of being understood; recognition that representation exists but with limited power

#### Narrative 4: Expression, culture, and misunderstanding

**Narrative movement:** Cultural expression; racialised misunderstanding; regulation; emotional restraint

Natural expression narrated as misread and as aggression or threat; behavioural regulation; suppression or softening of self; emotional restraint as a condition of safety

#### Narrative 5: Adaptation, code-switching, and identity

**Narrative movement:** Early guidance to adapt or code-switch; continuous self-monitoring; tension between selves; reclamation

Code-switching learned early; constant monitoring of speech and behaviour; identity split between spaces; moments of bringing more of the self into school contexts.

#### Narrative 6: Community as support and the school-community divide

**Narrative movement:** Institutional disconnection; community grounding; contrast in understanding; divide.

School experienced as disinterested in wider contexts; community as a site of understanding and care; contrast between school and community responses; awareness of a divide.

#### Narrative 7: Accessing help - relatability, safety, and the limits of school-based support

**Narrative movement:** Attempted help-seeking; cultural misattunement; withdrawal; peer relationships.

Attempts to access support; experiences of being misunderstood or not believed; help-seeking felt unsafe; emotional containment within peer relationships

#### Narrative 8: Resilience and navigation - survival and psychological endurance

**Narrative movement:** Pressure; collective navigation; normalisation of endurance/resilience; questioning strength

Resilience through repeated exposure to racialised pressure; navigation learned collectively; endurance becomes expected; later reflection on the emotional cost of always having to “firm it.”

#### Narrative 9: Class and cultural distance - navigating Whiteness, privilege, and social misalignment

**Narrative movement:** Cultural misalignment; heightened scrutiny; emotional vigilance; constrained legitimacy

School norms shaped by middle-class Whiteness; distance from the “model pupil”; increased surveillance and scrutiny; ongoing vigilance; legitimacy experienced as conditional.

#### Extracts from reflexive journal:

I notice myself feeling drawn to certain narratives more quickly than others, particularly around belonging and adaptation. I wonder how my own experiences of navigating institutional spaces may be shaping what feels immediately visible?

As I kept returning to the transcripts it helped me to question and critique my initial interpretations

The narrative groupings are becoming clearer. The men move backwards and forwards across experiences. Some tensions keep resurfacing across different narratives like wanting belonging but expecting misrecognition... adaptation as protection and loss... resilience but exhaustion.

#### Stage 4: Micro-Meso-Molar interpretive reading

I then analysed the data to see how these narratives were constructed at different analytic levels across both focus group dialogue and the co-created artefacts.

| <b>Narrative</b>                   | <b>Micro (language, repetition, and affect)</b>                                                                         | <b>Meso (positioning, resonance, and collective meaning-making)</b>                                      | <b>Molar (wider institutional, structural, and racialised discourses)</b>              |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Belonging and not belonging</b> | Language of “other”, “felt”, “labelled”; embodied sense of exclusion; affective weight of not being treated as a child; | Black boys positioned as culturally out of place within school; peers as sites of recognition and mutual | Whiteness as normative standard of belonging; racialised adultification of Black boys; |

|                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                            |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                                      | condensed expressions of denied belonging                                                                                              | understanding; institution positioned as withholding belonging                                                                                                      | conditional inclusion within schooling                                                                                     |
| <b>Racism interpersonal and institutional</b>                                        | Language of “us”/“they”; injustice; intensified emotional charge through repeated narration                                            | Schools positioned as minimising or reframing racism; Black boys positioned as punished responders instead of harmed subjects; collective sense-making of injustice | Institutional racism within disciplinary systems; racialised surveillance and criminalisation embedded in school practices |
| <b>Representation and relatability</b>                                               | Language of absence, isolation, and invisibility; relief when encountering cultural recognition; not being understood                  | Limits on advocacy and protection; Black boys positioned as unsupported within staff hierarchies;                                                                   | Structural Whiteness; racialised exclusion                                                                                 |
| <b>Expression, culture, and misunderstanding</b>                                     | Repetition of descriptors such as “aggressive”; misreading of tone and energy; suppression of expressiveness                           | Black cultural expression positioned as risk; school positioned as regulator of acceptable emotion and behaviour                                                    | Pathologisation and criminalisation of Black affect; Eurocentric behavioural norms; medicalisation of distress             |
| <b>Adaptation, code-switching, and identity</b>                                      | Language of “act”, “switch”; relief and grounding in moments of authenticity                                                           | Black boys positioned as responsible for fitting in with unfamiliar institutional norms; families positioned as protective                                          | Racialised pressures; Whiteness as institutional norm; survival through adapting.                                          |
| <b>Community as support and the school - community divide</b>                        | Language of care, grounding, protection; contrast between school and community; emotional safety articulated through shared experience | Community positioned as site of understanding and recognition; school positioned as disengaged from context and depth.                                              | Disconnection between school and racialised communities                                                                    |
| <b>Accessing help - relatability, safety, and the limits of school-based support</b> | Language of disbelief, isolation, and unmet need; silencing; mistrust of institutional support.                                        | Black boys positioned as misunderstood help-seekers; practitioners positioned as                                                                                    | Racialised barriers to care; epistemic injustice; behavioural framings of distress                                         |

|                                                                                               |                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                                               |                                                                                                   | culturally distant or disciplinary                                                                                   |                                                                                                           |
| <b>Resilience and navigation-survival and psychological endurance</b>                         | Language of “firm it”, “training”; emotional containment; burdened strength; endurance normalised | Black boys positioned as self-reliant survivors; peers positioned as collective protection and emotional support     | Self-responsibility; racialised survival; endurance under ongoing structural constraint.                  |
| <b>Class and cultural distance - navigating Whiteness, privilege, and social misalignment</b> | Language of “model pupil”, exposure, unfamiliarity; hyper-visibility.                             | Teachers positioned as culturally distant interpreters; Black working-class boys measured through middle-class norms | Intersection of race and class in schooling; middle-class Whiteness as institutional measure of normality |

Extracts from reflexive journal:

I keep noticing how meaning seems to emerge across multiple layers of the discussions at once. Within the words themselves, the interaction between them, and the wider contexts shaping what is spoken about, softened, laughed through, or left unsaid.

It's like it all seemed to come together... the alignment with adultification, criminalisation, whiteness, Eurocentric norms, epistemic injustice, survival...

Stage 5: Final narrative formation

The final nine narrative findings therefore represent a synthesised narrative construction developed across:

- Retrospective focus group narratives
- Collective artefact narratives
- Micro-meso-molar interpretive layering

These stages illustrate how the analysis chapter was developed through an iterative, reflexive, and critically grounded narrative process.

## Appendix D: Example Focus Group Transcript Extract

|              |                                                    |
|--------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| [...]        | indicates a pause, hesitation, or trailing speech  |
| [--]         | indicates interrupted or unfinished speech         |
| [overlaps]   | indicates overlapping speech                       |
| [interrupts] | indicates a speaker interrupting another speaker   |
| [inaudible]  | indicates speech that was unclear in the recording |

Jay

Yeah, I think, like having something like football, which was like the main thing in my life, helped me kind of just stay focused. I would say, though, like reflecting on, like mental health and how I understand it nowadays, though, like I did, there was like a subconscious thing where I did [...] struggle to [...] I just never felt belonging in the school. And so having that sense of, like not feeling belonging, even though I probably didn't at that age, like register it on a psychological level, it was still something that was felt. Of not belonging, and like, yeah, having to kind of, I think also we have, like, one of our skills, being able to be like our parents, yeah, have, like, taught us from young how to be like, adapt and and code switch as well, and I think if it wasn't for those skills that we were just like another yout from ends that didn't have those skills, we would have struggled a lot more, but we kind of learned how to kind of navigate and look at this [--]

Joel

mmm, Yeah [interrupts]

Issac

one hundred percent [overlaps]

Jay

And just also each other, like, just stick together [...] Like, that's how we were resilient.

Leon

Yeah, to his point, I mentioned in there, I've more, I think, specified for some sort of a mental state, but definitely adapting, just a case of changing who we're talking, how we talk, I can little things like, I don't know. I would, to be honest, I really know. I still didn't know. But like having a hood up, sounds crazy. You know, it's cold outside. I was to walk into class, and I knew, let's say my cousin there yet, and it was, I don't know, let's say my English class or something like that, which was, I remember my English class for some years. It was, like, predominantly white. I mean, it was kind of split for my English. So my English was a lot of white people in there. I wouldn't walk in with my hood up, even if I might have been cold, because I might look abit thuggish, or I don't want teachers think I'm like that so I take it down naturally and just talking [inaudible], I said, maybe the music I listened to, I wouldn't if a teacher would ask me, for example, I wouldn't be so comfortable to say oh K-Trap

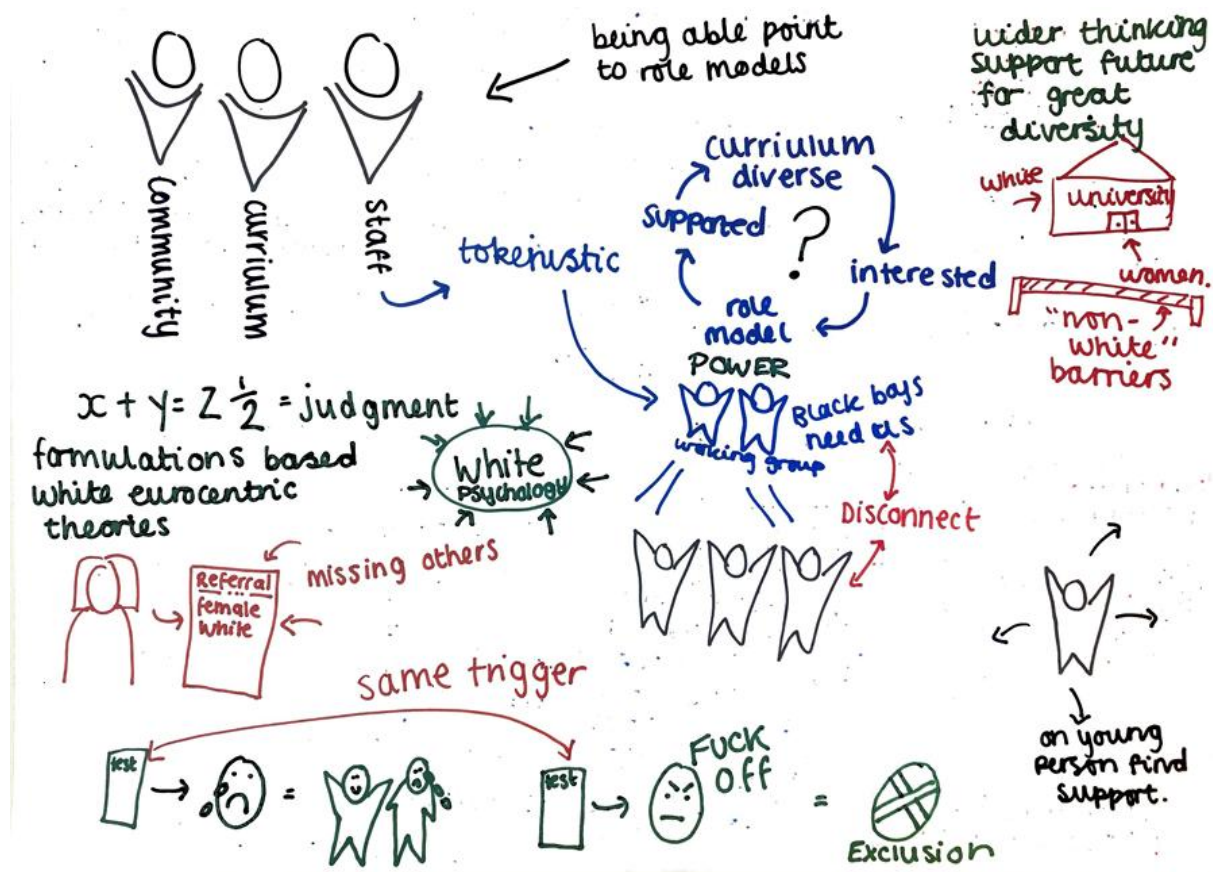
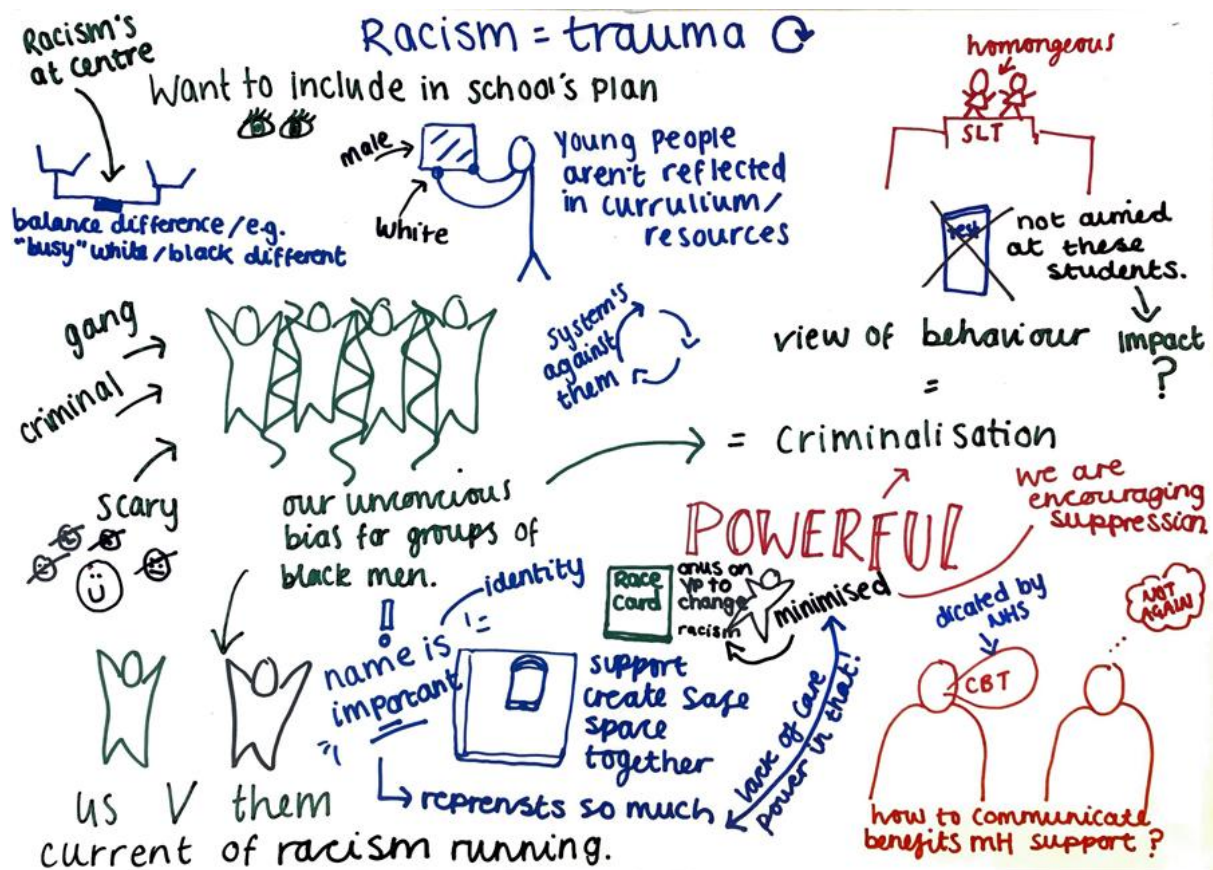
Issac

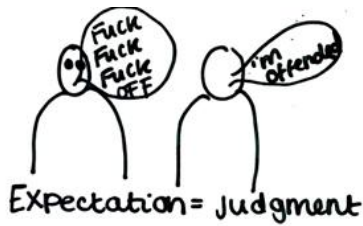
mmmm [overlaps]

Leon

Or whoever it was at the time, I might say something like Bob Marley, when as a realism it wasn't but it's they don't like accepted in there sort of world. So for me to say and feel shame that it's that type of music, jewellery, having jewellery, I don't know, stuff like

# Appendix E: Educational Practitioner Reflective Session Graphic

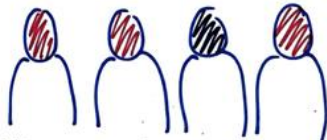




Power threat meaning framework

We really need to

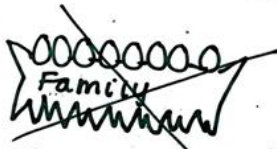
listen to the men;  
e.g. through rhyme.



always visible being black.  
not a choice

Situation is  
Shit

→ I feel  
ashamed



I'm going to put this on my whiteboard.

# LISTEN

and  
hear them

"tell them  
we listened!"



constant

Being told to behave  
but not taught how to  
feel.



real

ongoing

→ powerful.