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Spaces of Possibility or Sites of Reproduction? B.A.M.E Academics and the Promise of Alternative Higher Education in the UK

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Abstract

Guided primarily by Critical Race Theory (CRT), this study examines the experiences of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (B.A.M.E) academics in UK higher education, with particular attention to alternative higher education providers (AHEPs). Drawing on semi-structured interviews with twenty academics across six campuses, the research interrogates systemic barriers, career progression, workplace culture, and the psychological implications of navigating academic life. Thematic analysis, informed by CRT and supplemented by concepts such as epistemic injustice and cultural taxation, reveals persistent inequalities: opaque promotion processes, glass ceilings, and reliance on precarious contracts. Participants described the pressures of performance metrics (KPIs), which often held them accountable for factors beyond their control and contributed to stress and reduced autonomy. While inclusivity was celebrated in cultural and student-facing activities, participants questioned whether such initiatives amounted to tokenism in the absence of structural change and leadership diversity. Experiences of microaggressions, accent bias, and emotional labour underscore the racialised dimensions of academic work and their mental health consequences. Nevertheless, opportunities emerged within AHEPs, particularly in widening participation and fostering diverse student communities. The findings suggest that AHEPs represent potential spaces of innovation but only if guided by sustained commitments to equity, transparency, and anti-racist practice.

Keywords: B.A.M.E academics; Alternative higher education providers; Career progression; Structural inequalities; Critical Race Theory; Mental health.

1. Introduction

The experiences of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (B.A.M.E) academics within UK higher education have drawn growing scholarly attention, reflecting persistent concerns about equity, representation, and institutional racism. Despite successive policy interventions, evidence consistently reveals entrenched structural inequalities that undermine the professional and personal wellbeing of B.A.M.E staff.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a valuable framework for understanding these dynamics. CRT posits that racism is not an aberration but a permanent and systemic feature of social structures, including education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Applying CRT allows us to interpret the barriers facing B.A.M.E academics not as isolated challenges but as products of institutionalised whiteness. Concepts such as *interest convergence* highlight how diversity is advanced only when it serves institutional interests, while *counter-storytelling* underscores the importance of centring B.A.M.E voices in analysing exclusion.

Previous research has identified tokenism (Adisa et al., 2025), epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007; Rollock, 2021), and cultural taxation (Tate & Bagguley, 2017) as recurring features of academic life for minoritised scholars. These insights suggest that career progression, workplace culture, and wellbeing are shaped by systemic inequities embedded in institutional norms. Yet, while much scholarship has focused on traditional universities, the role of Alternative Higher Education Providers (AHEPs) remains under-explored.

AHEPs present a paradox. On the one hand, they serve highly diverse student populations and are positioned as innovative, flexible institutions (Klemenčič, 2020). On the other, their reliance on precarious contracts and performance-driven managerialism risks reproducing the very inequities they appear to challenge (Avis & Orr, 2022). This study examines the experiences of B.A.M.E academics in AHEPs through the lens of CRT, asking whether these institutions function as spaces of possibility or as sites of reproduction.

2. Literature review

Research on the experiences of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (B.A.M.E) academics in UK higher education consistently demonstrates that racial inequality is a systemic and enduring feature of the sector. Despite numerous diversity and inclusion initiatives, structural barriers remain deeply embedded in recruitment, promotion, and leadership practices. Scholars such as Rollock (2019, 2021) and Arday (2018, 2022) have shown how underrepresentation at senior levels, combined with racialised expectations of performance and leadership, creates what Rollock terms "racial battle fatigue." From the perspective of Critical Race Theory (CRT), these findings are not surprising: racism is understood not as an aberration but as a permanent and ordinary feature of institutions, reproduced through policies and practices that appear neutral yet sustain whiteness as the norm.

B.A.M.E academics often face precarious employment, including zero-hours contracts and insecure roles that limit their professional development (Myers, 2017; Arday, 2022). Even those on permanent contracts frequently describe promotion pathways as opaque, heavily reliant on informal networks and sponsorship (Bhopal & Jackson, 2013). These dynamics

illustrate how meritocracy is undermined by hidden gatekeeping practices. While Bourdieu's notion of social capital illuminates the role of exclusive networks, CRT situates these inequalities within broader structures of racialised power, emphasising that exclusion is not accidental but systemic.

The professional culture of universities further compounds these challenges. Racial microaggressions, hypervisibility, and organisational denial of racism are widely reported (Rollock, 2021; Belkin et al., 2024). These experiences exemplify epistemic injustice, whereby the credibility of BAME scholars is undermined on the basis of identity rather than expertise. Such dynamics reflect CRT's insight that knowledge production is not neutral but shaped by the interests of dominant groups. In this context, the emotional labour demanded of B.A.M.E academics becomes especially acute, as they are often expected to act as role models, mentors, and diversity champions while their contributions remain undervalued in promotion criteria (Tate & Bagguley, 2017). This phenomenon of cultural taxation not only exacerbates stress and burnout but also reinforces the racial division of academic labour.

The mental health consequences of navigating such environments are significant. Studies have documented widespread experiences of anxiety, depression, and imposter syndrome among B.A.M.E academics, intensified by the lack of culturally competent institutional support (Arday, 2021; Seo et al., 2022). CRT helps us to see this not as individual pathology but as the outcome of structural conditions that erode psychological safety while protecting institutional reputations. Diversity policies often enhance the symbolic capital of universities while failing to dismantle underlying inequities (Bhopal, 2020; Ahmed, 2012).

Against this backdrop, Alternative Higher Education Providers (AHEPs) have been proposed as potential spaces of innovation. Their diverse student populations and flexible pedagogical approaches suggest the possibility of more inclusive environments (Fielden, 2015; Klemenčič, 2020). Yet research cautions that without explicit commitments to anti-racism, AHEPs risk replicating the exclusionary practices of traditional universities (Avis & Orr, 2022; Richards et al., 2023). CRT offers a critical lens through which to examine this paradox: rather than assuming that novelty guarantees equity, it directs attention to how power operates in these institutions, asking whether they disrupt or reproduce systemic racial hierarchies.

2.1 Research questions

Three research questions were formulated to better contextualise the study

1. How do managerial and progression practices within AHEPs reproduce or challenge racialised inequities in the careers of B.A.M.E academics?

2. How do inclusion initiatives and classroom dynamics reflect processes of institutional whiteness and epistemic injustice?

3. What structural reforms are necessary for AHEPs to move from sites of reproduction to spaces of possibility, and how can CRT inform these transformations?

3. Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods design; however, the present article focuses solely on the qualitative findings. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 B.A.M.E academics working across six campuses of an alternative higher education institution. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to capture variation in role, career stage, gender, and ethnicity. To ensure consistency while sharing the workload, five members of the research team each conducted four interviews.

The interview schedule comprised 12 open-ended questions organised into four broad thematic areas: (1) systemic barriers in non-conventional universities; (2) inclusivity and institutional support within alternative providers; (3) career progression, job satisfaction, and mental health; and (4) unique challenges and opportunities in alternative higher education settings. These areas were informed by a systematic literature review previously undertaken by the research team, which is reported separately.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed using Otter.ai and Evernote. The resulting dataset comprised 45,610 words (104 pages). Data analysis employed a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). NVivo software, with its integrated AI-assisted tools, supported coding, identified emerging patterns, and generated relevant visualisations. This improved the efficiency and transparency of the analytical process. It also allowed the research team to rigorously identify recurrent themes across the dataset and produce a detailed interpretation of participants' experiences.

3.1. Ethics Statement

This study received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of an Alternative Higher Education Institution and was conducted in line with the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) guidelines, the UK Data Protection Act (2018), and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2016). All participants provided informed consent after receiving detailed information about the study, and their participation was entirely voluntary. To safeguard anonymity, pseudonyms were used for individuals, and the institution itself was anonymised by being referred to simply as *"this institution."* Sensitive data were securely stored on password-protected systems, with retention limited to five years.

Given the sensitive nature of the research, participants were reminded of their right to withdraw without consequence, and measures were taken to minimise psychological risk, including neutral interview language and signposting to support services where needed. Organisational permission was obtained prior to data collection, and only anonymised, aggregate findings are reported in publications.

3.2. Data Visualisation

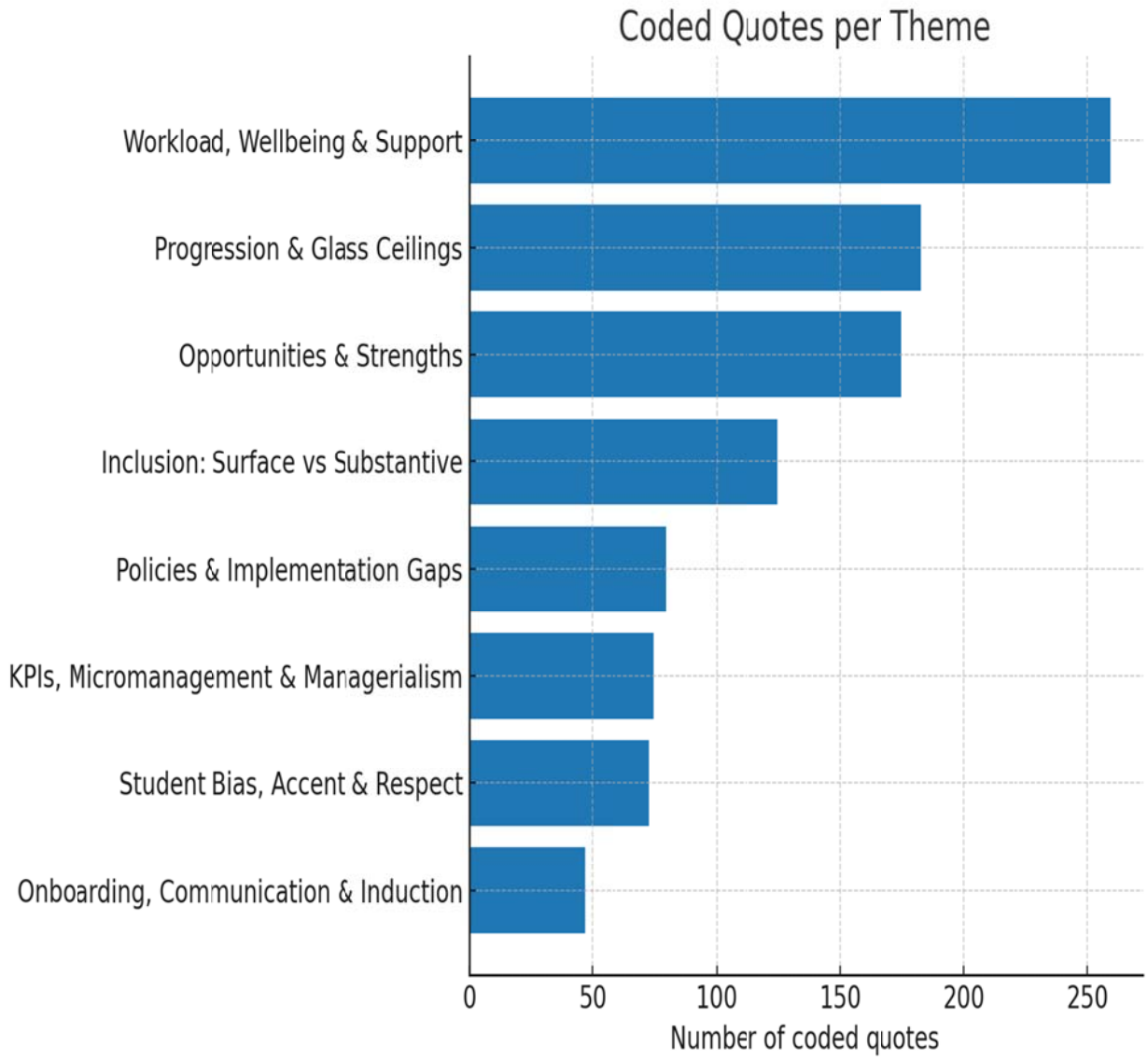

Figure 1. Thematic Data Visualisation

Data visualisations like the bar chart above help to complement the qualitative analysis by illustrating the prevalence and distribution of themes and the number of coded quotes. The visual was not intended as quantitative statistics but as aids to convey patterns in the coded data, enhance transparency, and contextualise the narrative by showing the breadth of evidence underpinning each theme.

4. Results

4.1. Onboarding, Communication & Induction

Many participants reported unclear onboarding processes and limited early support. “Not seeing the manager… no clarity regarding expectations” (Academic 1) was a common refrain.

Others highlighted inconsistencies in policy delivery across campuses. From a CRT lens, this lack of transparency functions as a structural barrier: those outside dominant cultural networks (often B.A.M.E staff) are less able to navigate informal rules. Where line managers were responsive, participants felt supported; but inconsistent application reflects how institutional practices reproduce inequality under the guise of administrative oversight.

4.2. Progression & Glass Ceiling

Experiences of progression diverged sharply. Some described successful promotions, yet others encountered opaque processes and blocked leadership pathways. "Systemic separation of Blacks from Management" (Academic 3) reflects how leadership structures remain racially stratified. Participants who met formal performance standards still felt stalled: "I've been trying for a promotion… and I have a good score" (Academic 9). From a CRT perspective, these accounts reveal how *interest convergence* operates: diversity is tolerated when it serves institutional needs, but advancement is restricted when it might disrupt established hierarchies. Exclusion from informal networks further illustrates Bourdieu's concept of social capital, showing how merit is mediated through racially exclusive gatekeeping.

4.3. KPIs, Micromanagement & Managerialism

Across accounts, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) were a major source of frustration. Academics were held accountable for student attendance and submissions - factors often beyond their control. As one noted, "if you do not hit the KPIs… it doesn't matter how good you are" (Academic 5). CRT helps us see these regimes not as neutral but as racialised technologies of control: they shift institutional accountability onto individual staff, disproportionately penalising B.A.M.E academics already engaged in additional "credibility work" in classrooms. This echoes broader critiques of neoliberal managerialism, where performance metrics cloak systemic inequities in the language of efficiency.

4.4. Inclusion: Surface vs. Substantive

Inclusion was often celebrated through cultural events and symbolic gestures - "staff bringing food in, sharing cultures" (Academic 12). While appreciated, many questioned whether these translated into structural equity. "On the surface, it looks clear, and they talk about it" (Academic 2) captured the sense of performativity. From a CRT perspective, these practices embody Ahmed's (2012) notion of "institutional diversity work": diversity is publicly celebrated but not embedded in power structures such as leadership representation or mentoring. The gap between symbolic inclusion and substantive equity reproduces whiteness as the institutional norm.

4.5. Student Bias, Accent & Respect

Several participants described being pre-judged in classrooms due to accent or appearance. "Maybe… from the beginning, the students have in their minds that you might not be a qualified teacher" (Academic 6). While some managed to establish authority through performance or publications, others noted persistent credibility challenges. These dynamics exemplify *epistemic injustice*: knowledge is devalued not for its content but because of the

speaker's identity. CRT highlights how such bias is racialised, linking classroom dynamics to broader structural hierarchies of knowledge in academia.

4.6. Workload, Wellbeing & Support

Participants frequently reported excessive workload and blurred boundaries, with KPIs and after-hours demands intensifying stress. Some recounted supportive managers or useful HR responses, but others felt isolated. CRT underscores how these pressures intersect with race: B.A.M.E academics often face *cultural taxation*, taking on disproportionate pastoral and diversity work that remains undervalued in promotion. The uneven availability of support mechanisms reflects institutional fragility—wellbeing is contingent on local goodwill rather than structurally guaranteed.

4.7. Policies & Implementation Gaps

Participants drew a sharp distinction between written policies and actual practice. "I don't think policies necessarily hinder; it is the action" (Academic 2). Some saw policies applied unevenly, with greater flexibility granted to certain groups or external hires. From an institutional theory perspective, this reflects the decoupling of formal policy from lived practice. CRT pushes this further: the unevenness is not random but embedded in systemic racial hierarchies, where policies are mobilised to preserve rather than disrupt privilege.

4.8. Opportunities & Strengths

Despite challenges, participants also pointed to opportunities: widening participation, collegial staff culture, and - in some cases—competitive salaries. "There are a lot of opportunities, but because you are so busy, you don't have time to grasp them" (Academic 17). From a CRT view, these positives demonstrate *sites of possibility*: moments where AHEPs can diverge from mainstream inequities. Yet without structural change, such opportunities risk being undermined by the same systemic barriers identified across themes.

5. Discussion

Anchored in Critical Race Theory, the findings reveal how the everyday conditions of B.A.M.E academics in Alternative Higher Education Providers (AHEPs) are shaped by racialised structures embedded in ostensibly neutral managerial practices. Performance regimes such as KPIs illustrate this dynamic clearly: framed as objective measures, they hold staff accountable for factors beyond their control, while obscuring how institutional responsibility is displaced onto individuals. CRT helps us to see KPIs not as benign tools but as racialised technologies of surveillance that reproduce inequity under the guise of efficiency.

Career progression demonstrates a similar paradox. While some participants reported successful promotions, many described opaque pathways and enduring glass ceilings. These experiences resonate with CRT's emphasis on the permanence of racism in institutional structures. Even when formal equality of opportunity is proclaimed, advancement depends heavily on access to networks and informal sponsorship, which Bourdieu's concept of social capital helps to explain. For B.A.M.E academics, exclusion from these spaces compound

disadvantage, producing the racialised "battle fatigue" documented in earlier studies (Rollock, 2019).

Inclusion practices presented another contradiction. Cultural events and prayer facilities were valued, yet many participants perceived these as surface-level gestures rather than evidence of structural equity. This aligns with Ahmed's (2012) analysis of diversity work, where institutions deploy visible signs of inclusion to enhance reputational capital without redistributing power. From a CRT perspective, this performativity sustains whiteness as the default framework of leadership and decision-making. Without tangible representation at senior levels and transparent progression routes, symbolic inclusion risks entrenching rather than dismantling inequities.

Classroom dynamics further exposed systemic inequities. Reports of students questioning the competence of B.A.M.E lecturers, often based on accent or appearance, exemplify epistemic injustice: knowledge is discredited because of who speaks it. This adds an extra layer of "credibility work" for B.A.M.E staff, which intersects with performance metrics in damaging ways. If student evaluations and attendance are linked to promotion, then bias directly influences career progression, reinforcing racial hierarchies in subtle but powerful ways.

Workload and wellbeing narratives confirm how structural inequalities are lived. B.A.M.E academics frequently shoulder disproportionate emotional and pastoral labour - a phenomenon of cultural taxation that drains research capacity while going unrewarded in promotion criteria. CRT helps to read this not as a series of isolated burdens but as a systemic redistribution of labour, where marginalised academics subsidise institutional claims to diversity at the cost of their own progression and wellbeing.

Taken together, the findings show that AHEPs risk replicating the same inequities found in traditional universities, despite their stated commitment to widening participation and diverse staff bodies. Yet they also demonstrate that more equitable practices are possible: supportive managers, collegial staff networks, and inclusive facilities highlight that local leadership and institutional will, can disrupt patterns of exclusion. From a CRT standpoint, these moments represent *spaces of possibility*, contingent on whether institutions embed structural accountability or rely on symbolic gestures.

Ultimately, the study underscores that systemic inequities will not be undone by cultural celebrations or surface-level diversity. Structural transformation requires transparent promotion frameworks, reformed performance metrics, anti-bias interventions in teaching evaluation, and tangible commitments to leadership diversity. Without such reforms, AHEPs will remain sites of reproduction rather than engines of equity.

6. Recommendations and Conclusion

The findings of this study underline that the challenges faced by B.A.M.E academics within Alternative Higher Education Providers (AHEPs) are not incidental but rooted in racialised institutional structures. Guided by CRT, it becomes clear that meaningful change cannot be achieved through surface-level gestures or isolated acts of goodwill; instead, systemic

transformation is required. A set of interlinked recommendations emerges from the data, aimed at dismantling entrenched inequities while fostering genuine spaces of possibility.

First, the need for transparent, equitable career progression is paramount. Promotion frameworks must be made public, with explicit criteria that move beyond narrow reliance on student outcomes or teaching metrics. As participants noted, opaque processes allow bias to flourish. By introducing clear progression pathways, decoupled from student-dependent KPIs, AHEPs can begin to counteract the hidden barriers that disproportionately affect B.A.M.E staff. Such reforms would align with CRT's call for structural accountability, ensuring that meritocracy is more than a rhetorical claim.

Second, managerial practices require critical reform. Current KPI systems place responsibility for systemic issues onto individual staff members, reinforcing racialised inequalities by penalising those already burdened with credibility work in the classroom. Institutions should design performance measures that account for contextual factors, incorporate qualitative indicators such as peer observation and curriculum leadership, and balance accountability with professional autonomy. Without such recalibration, KPIs risk functioning as racialised tools of surveillance, deepening inequity rather than enhancing quality.

Third, inclusion must be reimagined as more than symbolic celebration. While cultural events and diverse staff bodies are important, they cannot substitute for structural equity. Institutions should establish mentoring and sponsorship programmes for underrepresented staff, set measurable targets for leadership diversity, and ensure that inclusion is reflected in decision-making structures. CRT emphasises that diversity without power redistribution reproduces whiteness as the institutional norm. Substantive inclusion therefore demands resources, accountability, and a willingness to confront the discomforts of systemic change.

Fourth, the burden of cultural taxation must be addressed directly. B..AM.E academics are often expected to provide pastoral support, act as diversity champions, and shoulder emotional labour without institutional recognition. AHEPs should formally acknowledge this labour within workload models, provide protected time for scholarship, and ensure that contributions to inclusion are valued in promotion processes. Recognising and resourcing this labour is essential not only for equity but also for staff wellbeing.

Fifth, AHEPs institutions must confront epistemic injustice within teaching and evaluation systems. Student bias, particularly accent discrimination and assumptions of incompetence -emerged as a recurring theme. To prevent these biases from shaping careers, student evaluations should be triangulated with peer review and teaching portfolios, with safeguards to identify and mitigate discriminatory comments. Embedding anti-bias training in student induction programmes would further support the creation of respectful learning environments.

Finally, wellbeing must be structurally guaranteed rather than dependent on managerial goodwill. This requires resourcing staff-specific welfare services, embedding early-warning systems for workload risk, and cultivating cultures where seeking support is normalised

rather than stigmatised. CRT reminds us that racism's effects are not only professional but also psychological; institutions therefore carry a responsibility to address the mental health consequences of systemic inequity.

Taken together, these recommendations emphasise that AHEPs cannot assume their alternative status automatically makes them more inclusive. Instead, they must commit to deliberate, systemic reform, embedding equity into progression, performance, inclusion, evaluation, and wellbeing.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that AHEPs are characterised by a tension between possibility and reproduction. On the one hand, their diverse student populations, collegial cultures, and innovative pedagogies offer opportunities to challenge the exclusionary practices of mainstream universities. On the other, without structural reforms, they risk reproducing precisely the inequities they are positioned to overcome. Guided by CRT, the findings underscore that racism is not undone through symbolic inclusion but requires sustained commitments to transparency, accountability, and anti-racist practice. Only by addressing the systemic roots of inequity can AHEPs move from being sites of reproduction to genuine spaces of possibility for B.A.M.E academics.

7. Limitations

This study, while offering important insights, has some limitations that should be acknowledged. The dataset is drawn from a single Alternative Higher Education Provider, and while participants represented diverse roles and backgrounds, the findings cannot be generalised across the sector. Future research would benefit from comparative studies across multiple institutions to examine whether the patterns identified here are systemic or context specific. In addition, although thematic analysis supported by CRT enabled rich interpretation of participant experiences, the reliance on self-reported data means that accounts are shaped by individual perceptions and memory. Finally, the research team's positionalities, while a strength in centring B.A.M.E voices, may also influence interpretation; reflexivity was built into the process, but complete neutrality is neither possible nor desirable within a CRT-informed framework.

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Declaration of interest statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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