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Relational mentoring in postgraduate research: Black scholars' experiences of the ASPIRE programme

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Abstract Black students' under-representation in postgraduate research (PGR) pathways within the UK higher education (HE) sector reflects persistent structural inequalities rather than episodic participation gaps. While widening participation scholarship has focused largely on undergraduate access, less attention has been paid to relational and epistemic barriers shaping doctoral trajectories. Grounded in critical race theory and anti-deficit scholarship, this article examines how Black scholars participating in a culturally grounded mentoring programme interpreted their experiences within racialised PGR contexts. Drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and dialogic 'listening rooms', analysed through reflexive thematic analysis and a multi-stakeholder round-table analysis, the study integrates Bell's (2018) concept of the permanence of racism, Delgado's (1989) counter-storytelling, and Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework alongside Ubuntu (Tutu, 1999) and Omoluabi (Oyeshile, 2021) philosophies. Findings indicate that participants described identity affirmation, bounded belonging and strengthened navigational agency. Rather than framing these shifts as remediation of deficit, the analysis interprets them as institutional recognition and activation of existing cultural wealth. The article conceptualises culturally grounded mentoring as relational equity infrastructure, operating within enduring institutional constraints advancing a theoretically integrated model to support Black scholars in PGR environments.

Keywords Postgraduate research; Black doctoral students; widening participation; mentoring; critical race theory; relational equity

Introduction

Despite sustained policy attention to widening participation, racial inequalities persist in postgraduate research (PGR) pathways in the UK higher education (HE) sector. Black students continue to be under-represented in doctoral study and the academic workforce, reflecting structural barriers that extend beyond access alone (Advance HE, 2024; HESA, 2024; Awolowo, 2023). While widening participation initiatives have largely focused on undergraduate entry and attainment, less attention has been given to the relational and institutional dynamics that shape PGR trajectories. As a result, the experiences of Black scholars navigating doctoral pathways remain comparatively underexplored within HE research.

Structural context: postgraduate exclusion and institutional normativity

Black students' under-representation in postgraduate research is frequently framed as a 'pipeline problem', implying that increasing undergraduate participation will naturally lead to greater doctoral representation. However, such explanations can obscure institutional dynamics that shape doctoral progression. Research highlights how funding inequalities influence postgraduate pathways, disparities in supervisory access, institutional gatekeeping practices and epistemic hierarchies that privilege particular research traditions and identities (Chakravorty *et al.*, 2021).

Critical race theory (CRT) offers a lens through which these dynamics can be understood. CRT scholars argue that institutional whiteness often operates through taken-for-granted norms of professionalism, intellectual authority and belonging, rather than through overt discrimination (Ahmed, 2012; Rollock, 2023). Within doctoral education, these norms may manifest through informal academic networks, unspoken supervisory expectations and narrow conceptions of scholarly legitimacy.

Belonging within such environments is therefore not neutral but racialised. Mainstream higher education discourse often frames belonging as integration into existing institutional cultures. Yet for racially marginalised scholars, belonging frequently involves navigating spaces where their presence is simultaneously

hypervisible yet epistemically marginal. Under such conditions, mentoring cannot simply facilitate adaptation to existing norms; it must also engage questions of relational recognition and epistemic affirmation. The Accomplished Study Programme in Research Excellence (ASPIRE) was developed within this structural context.

ASPIRE is a mentoring initiative designed to support Black scholars interested in pursuing doctoral education. The programme draws on African cultural principles, including Ubuntu, which emphasises relational interdependence and collective flourishing, and the Yoruba ethical framework of Omoluabi, which centres on integrity, responsibility and communal accountability. These philosophical foundations informed the programme's emphasis on relational mentoring and dialogic engagement. A fuller discussion of these perspectives is presented in the theoretical framework.

Purpose of the study

Rather than evaluating ASPIRE solely in terms of programme outcomes, this study examines how participants interpreted their experiences of belonging, identity and leadership within racialised postgraduate environments. The article has three central aims.

First, it examines how participation in a culturally responsive mentoring intervention shaped Black scholars' holistic experiences of postgraduate education, including identity affirmation, belonging, navigational awareness and agency. Second, it theorises these experiences through an integrated framework drawing on critical race theory alongside the philosophical principles of Ubuntu and Omoluabi, advancing a relational model of mentoring that challenges deficit-oriented narratives. Third, the study demonstrates the methodological contribution of 'listening rooms', a dialogic approach that centres collective narrative production when researching marginalised student experiences.

Importantly, the article does not position ASPIRE as a universally transformative model. Instead, the programme is examined as a critical case through which to explore how relational interventions operate within racialised institutional environments. Drawing on qualitative data generated through semi-structured interviews and listening rooms across three

cohorts, the study analyses how participants narrate shifts in identity, belonging, doctoral navigation and critical awareness.

By grounding theoretical interpretation explicitly in participant accounts, the article seeks to avoid the analytical leap from positive programme evaluation to claims of structural transformation. Instead, it offers a race-conscious account of how mentoring initiatives may function as relational equity infrastructures within HE systems, where structural inequalities remain embedded.

Through this analysis, the study adds to widening participation research by highlighting the lived experiences of Black postgraduate scholars. It brings together insights from critical race theory and African-centred philosophical traditions. It demonstrates how dialogic approaches, such as listening rooms, can be used to explore mentoring within racialised academic contexts.

Literature review

Black people's experiences in UK higher education and careers: a critical race theory perspective

CRT provides more than a general lens on inequality; it offers a structured analytical framework for understanding how racial power is normalised within institutions. Bell's (2018) principle of the permanence of racism suggests that racial inequity is not episodic, but structurally embedded within legal, educational and institutional systems. Within UK HE, this perspective shifts the focus from individual attainment gaps to systemic patterns of exclusion and epistemic marginalisation.

Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality further deepens this analysis by demonstrating how race intersects with gender, class and other identities to shape educational trajectories. For Black doctoral students in particular, racialised academic experiences are often compounded by gendered expectations and socio-economic constraints.

Delgado (1989) emphasises the importance of counter-storytelling as a method of challenging dominant narratives that position marginalised communities as deficient. Counter-narratives disrupt deficit framings by centring lived experience as

legitimate knowledge. In this study, the use of listening rooms aligns with this tradition, positioning participants' narratives not as anecdotal reflections but as epistemic interventions.

More recently, scholars such as Arday (2022) have extended CRT within UK higher education, highlighting how structural racism persists within institutional cultures despite diversity rhetoric. Arday argues that race equality initiatives often remain surface-level unless they address epistemic and relational dimensions of exclusion. This critique directly informs our conceptualisation of mentoring as relational equity infrastructure rather than remedial support.

One major challenge for Black students in the UK HE system is the emergence of impostor syndrome, a phenomenon characterised by a persistent belief in one's inadequacy despite evident success (McGee *et al.*, 2022). This phenomenon is exacerbated in educational contexts where dominant narratives are often Eurocentric, marginalising non-White experiences. Studies have shown that this syndrome can profoundly affect Black students' self-confidence and professional identity (Ball *et al.*, 2024; Draper-Rodi *et al.*, 2024; McGee and Martin, 2011).

Rollock (2023) highlights the psychological toll of navigating predominantly white academic spaces, where Black students may feel they are seen as representatives of their race rather than individuals with unique contributions. This perception can hinder Black students' ability to engage authentically in their academic pursuits. Andrews (2020) argues that the 'white gaze' and its implicit biases infringe upon the mental well-being of Black students, trapping them in a cycle of self-doubt and disengagement. Moreover, the impact of impostor syndrome extends beyond the classroom, affecting the development of professional identity. McGee and Martin (2011) have noted that Black academics often face additional pressure to validate their credentials, which can sometimes lead to over-analysis of their competencies relative to those of their peers. Consequently, these profound feelings of inferiority can deter them from seeking promotions or leadership positions, perpetuating systemic inequalities within academia (Ball *et al.*, 2024; Pusey-Reid *et al.*, 2022).

According to Vincent (2022), a significant aspect of Black people's experience within the UK higher education system is the pervasive lack of a sense of belonging. The HE environment can often feel alienating for Black students, compounded by the limited representation of Black faculty members and leadership (Marandure, Hall and Noreen, 2024). Lewis and Shah (2021) argue that as many academic institutions engage in diversity initiatives, the commitment to meaningful inclusivity is often superficial.

Research conducted by the Runnymede Trust (2020) reveals that Black students frequently perceive their educational environment as unwelcoming, often lacking relatable role models and mentors. This situation is alarming, considering the importance of representation in fostering a sense of belonging. Students who cannot find figures who mirror their identity and experiences may struggle to see themselves as part of the academic community.

In the same vein, King and Upadhyay (2022) assert that the absence of a supportive network can lead to isolation, with students grappling to connect with peers who do not share their cultural background or experiences. This struggle often leads to feelings of marginalisation, contributing to higher dropout rates among Black students.

Office for Students (OFS) data (2021) highlighted the progression gaps between Black and white students, drawing attention to persistent structural disparities. While subsequent reporting cycles indicate incremental shifts in some metrics, continuation and progression gaps for Black students remain a concern in national monitoring frameworks.

It is important to recognise that many national datasets group all 'ethnic minority' students together. While this can be useful for broad comparisons, it often masks the distinct experiences and patterns affecting Black students. For this reason, where the data allows, this study prioritises Black-specific statistics rather than relying on aggregated minority figures.

The number of Black individuals pursuing PhDs in the UK remains disproportionately low, with systemic barriers thwarting their academic ambitions (Chakravorty *et al.*, 2021). The challenges include inadequate financial support, limited access to

mentorship and the prevailing narratives of exclusionary whiteness in academia. A report by the OFS (2021) indicates that Black students are under-represented in postgraduate education, with particularly concerning statistics regarding Black male candidates. The systemic inequities present in undergraduate programs often extend into postgraduate education, resulting in fewer Black students progressing to PhD level.

The absence of Black role models exacerbates this issue. Without relatable figures, prospective PhD candidates may lack the motivation or resources to navigate the complex application and funding processes required to pursue higher degrees. The experiences of Black academics underscore the need for supportive programmes, such as mentorship and guidance, to increase Black PhD representation. Kerr (2022) asserts that initiatives to bolster Black academic presence in postgraduate programmes must be prioritised.

Accomplished Study Programme in Research Excellence (ASPIRE)

ASPIRE is an innovative, tripartite mentorship programme designed by Black academics to address the specific racialised needs of Black students. Sheffield Hallam University leads this programme in partnership with Manchester Metropolitan University and Advance HE. ASPIRE is funded by the OFS and Research England (RE). The programme is part of the 13 funded projects by OFS and RE in response to the call for funding competition to increase access and participation for Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups in PGR study (OFS, 2021).

ASPIRE aims to provide access to an excellent, personalised mentorship programme that enhances Black students' academic, social and network capital, creating a pathway into doctoral-level studies and academia (Awolowo, 2025). Each student is assigned a Black mentor who works with them to provide support throughout the six-month programme duration. The programme incorporates elements of informal mentorship into a formal mentorship scheme to support Black students interested in doctoral education (Awolowo *et al.*, 2025).

The programme is built on compassionate pedagogy rooted in the Ubuntu philosophy and Omoluabi ethos. It is structured

around five core pillars: professional and personal development, academic writing, employability, research skills, and project management. Each pillar is tailored to equip scholars with the essential skills to navigate academia and the professional world.

A commitment to compassionate pedagogy is central to ASPIRE's approach, which prioritises each scholar's individuality and unique experiences (Giroux, 2005). This approach fosters a supportive and inclusive learning environment where empathy, understanding, and inclusivity are embedded in all teaching practices (Noddings, 2003). ASPIRE instructors adapt their methods to diverse learning styles and needs, ensuring every scholar feels valued and empowered to grow (Freire, 1970). Beyond the classroom, this philosophy extends to mentorship, peer support and community engagement, promoting well-being and holistic development.

By combining these core pillars with compassionate pedagogy, ASPIRE creates a transformative experience that equips Black students with the skills, knowledge and confidence to succeed in academia, and beyond. Scholars develop critical competencies and experience personal growth and empowerment, thereby preparing them to reach their full potential (Freire, 1970; Awolowo *et al.*, 2024).

ASPIRE: integrating Ubuntu, Omoluabi, and compassionate pedagogy

Compassionate pedagogy has increasingly been discussed in educational scholarship as an approach that centres care, relational engagement and the recognition of students' lived experiences in teaching and learning. Scholars such as Freire (1970), Noddings (2003) and Zembylas (2013) have argued that education should move beyond the transmission of knowledge, to attend to the relational and ethical dimensions of learning environments.

Freire's concept of humanising pedagogy challenges deficit assumptions that frame learners as passive recipients of knowledge. Instead, he emphasises dialogic engagement, in which educators and learners co-construct knowledge. Noddings' work on the ethics of care similarly highlights educators' moral responsibility to cultivate relationships that support students'

intellectual and emotional development. Zembylas extends this perspective by drawing attention to the political and affective dimensions of education, arguing that emotions such as empathy and compassion can help confront marginalisation within institutional settings.

Within this study, compassionate pedagogy is understood not simply as an ethos of kindness, but as a deliberate relational orientation that recognises how students' social identities and experiences shape their participation in HE. For students from racially marginalised backgrounds, learning environments are often influenced by broader institutional dynamics that shape perceptions of belonging, recognition and legitimacy. In this sense, compassionate pedagogical practice involves acknowledging these realities while creating spaces where students' experiences can be recognised, rather than marginalised.

When considered alongside the African philosophical traditions of Ubuntu and Omoluabi, compassionate pedagogy takes on an expanded meaning grounded in relational responsibility and collective flourishing. Ubuntu, often expressed through the idea that 'a person is a person through other persons', emphasises interconnectedness and the importance of community in shaping individual identity and well-being (Okanda, 2024; Onwuatiegwu and Paul-Mgbeafulike, 2023; Awolowo, 2026). The Omoluabi ethos, rooted in Yoruba philosophy, foregrounds integrity, ethical conduct and respect in social relationships (Ipadeola, 2024; Oyeshile, 2021). Together, these philosophical traditions highlight the importance of character, responsibility and a sense of shared accountability in shaping how people relate to, and support, one another (Awolowo, 2026).

Within the ASPIRE programme, these philosophical perspectives informed the design of mentoring relationships that prioritised relational engagement and ethical responsibility. Rather than focusing solely on academic performance or instrumental outcomes, the mentoring framework emphasised mutual respect, dialogue and recognition of participants' experiences within HE. As Awolowo (2025) suggests, integrating African-centred philosophies within mentoring initiatives can help challenge

hierarchical assumptions that often shape traditional academic relationships.

Research also indicates that compassionate pedagogical approaches can be particularly valuable for students from marginalised communities, who may encounter systemic barriers within educational institutions (Camangian and Cariaga, 2022; Guberina, 2023; Vandeyar, 2023). Experiences of exclusion, stereotyping or limited representation can affect students' sense of belonging and academic confidence. Pedagogical approaches that prioritise relational engagement, recognition and dialogue can therefore play an important role in fostering environments where students feel valued and supported.

Bringing together compassionate pedagogy with the relational philosophies of Ubuntu and Omoluabi offers a framework for understanding mentoring practices that extend beyond individual support. When used together with Freire's humanising pedagogy and Noddings' ethics of care, these traditions highlight how mentoring can function as a relational practice that is grounded in recognition, dialogue and responsibility. In this sense, compassionate pedagogy moves beyond affective support toward a broader commitment to relational justice within educational spaces.

Deficit thinking and community cultural wealth

A central problem within widening participation discourse is deficit thinking; the framing of marginalised students as lacking aspiration, confidence or cultural capital (Smit, 2012). Deficit models position students as the problem, obscuring the structural inequalities embedded in institutional practices. Within postgraduate education, Black students are frequently described through narratives of low confidence, limited progression or 'underpreparedness', reinforcing individualised explanations for systemic disparities (Awolowo, 2025).

Smit (2012) argues that deficit thinking reproduces institutional dominance by shifting responsibility for inequality onto students themselves. Such framing not only misdiagnoses structural exclusion but also risks reinforcing internalised academic illegitimacy.

Yosso's (2005) theory of community cultural wealth offers a critical counterpoint. Rather than viewing marginalised students as lacking capital, Yosso identifies multiple forms of capital (aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant) that communities of colour already possess. From this perspective, mentoring should not 'repair' deficit students but recognise and activate existing cultural wealth within structurally exclusionary institutions.

This theoretical shift is crucial for interpreting our findings. When participants describe gaining confidence or navigational knowledge, these experiences are not framed as the acquisition of something previously absent. Rather, they reflect the recognition, validation and strategic activation of community cultural wealth, within academic contexts not originally designed to recognise it.

By integrating CRT with Yosso's counter-deficit framework, this study resists individualising Black students' experiences, and instead situates mentoring within broader structural conditions.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how Black scholars experienced participation in the ASPIRE mentoring programme. A qualitative approach was appropriate, given the study's focus on relational meaning-making, identity and institutional navigation within racialised contexts.

Data were collected through two complementary methods: semi-structured interviews and listening rooms. The study employed both approaches in order to generate distinct but complementary forms of data. Interviews enabled participants to reflect individually on personal experiences, including sensitive dimensions of academic identity, belonging and self-perception. Listening rooms, by contrast, were structured dialogic spaces, designed to facilitate collective reflection and counter-storytelling. The dual-method design aligns with critical race theory's emphasis on both individual lived experience and collective epistemic resistance. Rather than duplicating data, the methods served analytically distinct purposes.

Participants

Participants were drawn from three cohorts of the ASPIRE mentoring programme. A total of 36 participants were drawn from three cohorts of the ASPIRE mentoring programme to contribute to the study.

All participants self-identified as Black or mixed Black heritage. The programme was open to Black students from a range of national, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. While the study did not collect detailed demographic breakdowns of participants' specific national or ethnic identities (e.g., Black British, African, Caribbean), it is important to acknowledge that 'Black students' is not a homogeneous category. Differences in migration history, nationality, gender, socio-economic background and prior educational experience shape academic trajectories in complex and intersecting ways.

The analysis does not attempt to present a single or universal account of Black student experience. Instead, it highlights patterns that emerged across participants' narratives, while acknowledging that experiences vary and are shaped by diverse backgrounds and contexts.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their flexibility and capacity to generate in-depth insights into participants' perspectives (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Creswell, 2021). This method allows researchers to maintain control over key areas of enquiry while allowing participants to share their unique experiences (Silverman, 2005). As Denzin and Lincoln (2005) emphasise, interviews are co-constructed conversations, making them an ideal tool for exploring complex, subjective phenomena.

Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes, and explored participants' experiences of mentoring, belonging, academic confidence and institutional navigation. Interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of personal narratives, including experiences participants may not have wished to share in a group setting.

Listening rooms

Listening rooms involve guided conversations between two participants simultaneously, supported by prompt cards covering key themes. The conversations take place without the researcher's presence (Heron, 2020; Parkin and Heron, 2023).

This method fosters a more relaxed environment, allowing participants to express their thoughts freely, thereby enhancing the authenticity and validity of the collected data. Ten listening room sessions (involving twenty scholars in total) were conducted over three cohorts.

Each listening room session lasted an average of 75 minutes and was audio-recorded. Unlike traditional focus groups, listening rooms prioritised collective reflection and participant-to-participant dialogue. The sessions captured spontaneous interactions and collective reflections that may not have surfaced in traditional interviews.

This approach is informed by Delgado's (1989) concept of counter-storytelling within CRT, as well as dialogic qualitative traditions that emphasise shared meaning-making. While no qualitative method can fully remove researcher bias, listening rooms shift the emphasis toward collective narration by allowing participants to respond to, and build on, one another's experiences. In doing so, they can help reduce some of the extractive dynamics sometimes associated with one-to-one interviews.

The dialogic structure of listening rooms reflects Bakhtin's (1981) concept of dialogism, in which meaning emerges relationally through interaction rather than through isolated individual speech. The approach also aligns with Freire's (1970) emphasis on co-constructed knowledge.

Ethical approval was obtained from Sheffield Hallam University's ethics committee before data collection commenced. Participants' anonymity was maintained throughout the study, ensuring that no identifiable information was reported.

Researcher positionality

Given the racialised focus of this study, the positionality of the research team warrants explicit reflection. The lead author

identifies as a Black British academic and was directly involved in the development and delivery of the ASPIRE programme.

This positional proximity facilitated relational trust and access to participants but also introduced potential power dynamics and interpretive risks. Participants may have perceived the lead author as both an advocate for the programme and an institutional actor. While this positionality may have encouraged openness and candour among participants, it also required careful reflexive attention to ensure that programme advocacy did not shape interpretation or lead to confirmatory bias.

The positionality of the co-authors also informs the study's interpretive lens. Most of the authors identify as Black academics who were involved in the ASPIRE programme as mentors, bringing both lived experience of racialised structures within HE and professional engagement with mentoring initiatives designed to address them. This shared experiential perspective offered valuable contextual insight into participants' experiences, while also requiring conscious reflexivity to avoid assumptions arising from shared identity or professional proximity. One author, who served as a research assistant on the project and did not hold a mentoring role within the programme, contributed an additional layer of analytical distance during aspects of data management and interpretation.

To support reflexive rigour, the research team engaged in structured reflexive practices throughout the study. Reflexive journaling was maintained during both data collection and analysis, enabling the lead author to document assumptions, positional influences and evolving interpretations. Coding and theme development were collaboratively discussed among the research team to ensure that analytical decisions remained grounded in participants' narratives rather than predetermined expectations. Consistent with critical race theory, the study does not claim neutrality; instead, it adopts a stance of critical reflexivity and transparency regarding the influence of the researchers' positionality.

In addition, the inclusion of a multi-stakeholder round-table analysis of the listening room transcripts formed a deliberate methodological strategy to mitigate interpretive proximity, particularly given the lead author's role in programme design. By

inviting critique and reflection from individuals occupying different institutional positions, the study sought to balance relational closeness with analytical distance, thereby strengthening the credibility and trustworthiness of the interpretations presented.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). Analysis proceeded in six iterative stages: familiarisation with the data, initial coding, theme identification, theme review, theme definition and naming, and production of the analytic narrative.

Interview transcripts were read multiple times to ensure immersion. Initial coding was inductive, allowing themes to emerge from participants' accounts rather than imposing predefined categories. Codes were then examined for patterns across the dataset and grouped into candidate themes.

While the coding process began inductively, interpretation was informed by the study's theoretical framework. Consistent with CRT, analysis was attentive to counter-narratives, institutional permanence and expressions of resistance (Bell, 2018; Delgado, 1989). Particular attention was paid to how participants described navigating racialised institutional contexts, how they interpreted marginalising experiences and how collective dialogue shaped meaning-making.

To avoid deficit framing, participant accounts of confidence, aspiration and belonging were analysed through the lens of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). Rather than interpreting such accounts as evidence of prior absence or lack, the analysis examined how mentoring may have facilitated the recognition or activation of existing navigational and aspirational capital.

The research team engaged in collaborative analytic discussion to interrogate emerging interpretations. Where themes risked overstating structural transformation, they were revisited to ensure proportionality between the data and the claims. This process was further strengthened through a structured round-table analytical review involving multiple stakeholders for the listening room data. The round-table analysis did not serve as validation, but as a critical interrogation space where emerging

themes were challenged, reframed and tested against institutional realities.

Reflexive memos were maintained throughout the analytic process to document interpretive decisions, positional influences and shifts in thematic framing. This reflexive documentation supported transparency and mitigated the risk of confirmatory bias, given the lead author's proximity to the programme.

The final themes presented in the findings section of this article represent interpretive constructions grounded in participant narratives. They are not presented as universal truths about Black postgraduate experience, but as analytically derived patterns within this bounded case study.

Round-table analytical review

In addition to individual and team-based thematic coding, the listening room data were subjected to a structured round-table analytical review involving multiple stakeholders. Participants in this analysis included members of the research team, programme mentors and selected institutional stakeholders with experience in widening participation and doctoral education.

The purpose of the round-table review was not to validate predetermined conclusions, but to interrogate emerging themes, surface alternative interpretations and identify potential blind spots. This process aligns with participatory and dialogic qualitative traditions, which recognise knowledge as co-constructed rather than individually extracted.

While this process does not eliminate bias, it introduces plural interpretive perspectives and reduces the risk of singular narrative dominance. Consistent with CRT-informed reflexivity, the round-table analysis functioned as a critical checkpoint rather than a consensus exercise.

Findings

Rather than treating ASPIRE as an outcome-driven intervention, the findings are analysed as evidence of how racially minoritised students experience and negotiate postgraduate education within structurally racialised institutions. The themes that emerged reflect relational, epistemic and agentic shifts

situated within participants' broader encounters with racialised academic environments. Four interrelated analytic themes were identified:

- 1) Racialised self-doubt and identity reconstitution
- 2) Constructing counter-spaces of belonging
- 3) Acquiring navigational capital
- 4) Developing critical agency in racialised systems.

Racialised self-doubt and identity reconstitution

Participants often spoke about earlier academic experiences in which they felt uncertain about their place within the university. Several described periods of diminished self-belief and a sense of marginality within their academic environments. These accounts echo findings in CRT scholarship on racial battle fatigue (Smith, Allen and Danely, 2007) and stereotype management (McGee and Martin, 2011), which describe how Black students may come to internalise doubt about their abilities in predominantly white institutions. As one participant reflected:

Before ASPIRE, I didn't believe so much in myself. I knew I had a lot to offer, but I didn't know how to tell the world I have it.

Another stated:

ASPIRE shaped my confidence to stand in front of people and discuss my research regardless of the colour or the face of the people sitting there.

These accounts suggest more than a simple increase in confidence. Participants described a shift in how they saw themselves as scholars, moving from feelings of academic illegitimacy to a clearer sense of intellectual presence.

From a critical race theory perspective, such shifts can be understood as challenging deficit narratives that often position Black students at the margins of academic excellence. Within the mentoring relationships, participants experienced forms of recognition in which their intellectual contributions were affirmed rather than questioned. Importantly, these changes emerged through relational engagement rather than individual effort alone, highlighting CRT's emphasis on how identity is shaped within racialised institutional contexts.

Constructing counter-spaces of belonging

Participants consistently described ASPIRE as qualitatively distinct from their usual academic environments.

One listening room participant stated:

Networking is one of the biggest gains I got from ASPIRE.
Meeting other Black students who feel the same way I feel. It helped me realise I'm not alone.

Another stated:

When you see yourself in the midst of people of your colour, you feel asserted.

Although participants did not explicitly describe ASPIRE as a 'counter-space', their accounts closely resemble what Solórzano, Ceja and Yosso (2000) describe as spaces where racially marginalised students can develop alternative narratives and affirm shared identities. Participants' reflections suggest that feelings of belonging emerged not through assimilation into dominant institutional norms, but through recognition of shared racialised experiences. This distinction is important. Rather than emphasising inclusion within existing academic cultures, participants spoke about experiencing a sense of safety and affirmation through collective dialogue and cultural recognition.

In this sense, ASPIRE can be understood as a bounded counter-space; an environment that created temporary opportunities for recognition and support within wider institutional structures. While these experiences should not be interpreted as structural transformation, they suggest that programmes such as ASPIRE may offer relational interruptions within racialised academic environments.

Acquiring navigational capital

Participants repeatedly emphasised learning how to navigate doctoral systems and professional pathways.

One scholar noted:

The Aspire programme taught us how to find PhD opportunities, how to approach supervisors, and how to prepare our research proposals. That was an eye-opener for me.

Another explained:

After ASPIRE, I feel like pursuing a PhD is something achievable. I might not do it immediately, but I now know it's within my reach.

These accounts align with Yosso's (2005) concept of community cultural wealth, particularly in terms of navigational capital, or the skills required to navigate institutions that are not designed for racially marginalised communities.

Importantly, participants did not describe systemic barriers as disappearing. Rather, they reported increased competence in navigating them.

This distinction is analytically crucial: the programme enhanced institutional literacy and strategic awareness, not structural reform. By situating these findings within CRT's critique of institutional whiteness, the argument remains empirically grounded while theoretically robust.

These findings are also better understood through Yosso's (2005) framework of community cultural wealth. Participants' accounts suggest not the creation of new capital, but the validation and activation of navigational and aspirational capital already present within their communities. The mentoring environment functioned as a site where these forms of capital were recognised as legitimate within academic spaces.

Developing critical agency in racialised systems

Several participants described gaining language and confidence to interpret experiences of marginalisation.

One interviewee reflected:

We were told that you can never be intimidated. We were told to be resilient. We were told to be confident. My colour can never stop me. My gender can never stop me.

Another described becoming more conscious of subtle discrimination in academic spaces and feeling 'more prepared to handle it.'

These accounts point to the development of critical agency. Participants described becoming more able to recognise and respond to racialised dynamics in their academic environments

rather than internalising them as personal shortcomings. From a CRT perspective, this reflects the emergence of critical consciousness (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017), where individuals begin to identify and question the power structures that shape their experiences.

Discussion of findings

While participants described meaningful relational and developmental shifts, the importance of these findings lies in what they reveal about the wider institutional context. The data suggest that mentoring programmes grounded in culturally affirming philosophies can function as more than student support initiatives. They can also create relational spaces that help scholars navigate structural constraints within predominantly white institutions. Rather than simply encouraging Black students to adapt to inequitable systems, ASPIRE appeared to reshape participants' experiences of belonging, mentorship and professional development. It did so by recognising racial identity, collective support and critical awareness.

Relational counter-spaces as equity infrastructure

The evidence indicates that ASPIRE operated as a relational counter-space embedded within a predominantly white institution. Through racial recognition, shared experience and culturally grounded mentorship, the programme produced a bounded site of affirmation.

CRT reminds us that racism is normalised within institutions rather than abhorred. Within this context, counter-spaces do not overthrow institutional structures; they provide protective and generative environments in which marginalised students reconstruct identity and agency.

ASPIRE's significance lies in demonstrating how such spaces can be institutionally designed rather than informally emergent.

Belonging as racial recognition

The data complicate mainstream 'belonging' discourse in higher education, which often centres inclusion within dominant institutional norms. Participants' accounts suggest belonging emerged through racial recognition, not assimilation. This aligns

with CRT's emphasis on centring marginalised epistemologies rather than integrating them into dominant frameworks.

Thus, ASPIRE's relational architecture challenges universalist models of belonging and supports race-conscious institutional design. By explicitly rejecting deficit framings, ASPIRE challenges the pervasive assumption that Black students lack confidence or aspiration. Instead, the findings align with counter-deficit theory, demonstrating how institutional recognition of community cultural wealth can reshape participants' academic self-concept. This reframing shifts the locus of change from individual remediation to institutional recognition.

Leadership as relational responsibility

A third theme emerging from participants' accounts concerned evolving understandings of leadership. Participants frequently described leadership not as positional authority but as a relational responsibility grounded in community accountability and collective advancement. Engagement in the ASPIRE programme appeared to encourage participants to frame their academic aspirations in terms of supporting others, and widening opportunities for future scholars navigating similar structural barriers.

Participants' reflections can also be understood in relation to the African-centred philosophies that informed the programme. Ubuntu emphasises relational interdependence and collective well-being, while the Omoluabi ethos highlights integrity, responsibility and respect within social relationships. Viewed through these lenses, participants' accounts point to a model of leadership in which academic success is linked to responsibility toward others, rather than individual advancement alone.

These narratives also resonate with anti-deficit perspectives. Drawing on Yosso's (2005) concept of community cultural wealth, participants' reflections suggest expressions of aspirational and resistant capital. Rather than indicating that the programme created leadership capacity, participants described how the mentoring environment helped recognise and affirm values of communal responsibility that are often overlooked within competitive academic cultures.

At the same time, participants did not suggest that these experiences removed structural inequalities within higher

education. Instead, their reflections indicate a growing awareness of how to navigate racialised institutional contexts, consistent with critical race theory's recognition that systemic barriers persist (Bell, 2018). Within this context, leadership was often described as a relational practice, manifested by supporting peers, challenging deficit assumptions and contributing to collective academic progress.

From intervention to structural implication

While participants described meaningful relational shifts through the ASPIRE programme, these experiences should not be interpreted as evidence that structural inequalities within higher education have been resolved. Consistent with CRT's recognition of the persistence of systemic racial inequalities (Bell, 2018), mentoring initiatives operate within broader institutional constraints rather than transforming them. Participants' accounts, therefore, reflect changes in how individuals interpret and navigate academic environments, rather than indicating structural transformation of those environments.

Nevertheless, the findings carry important institutional implications. Participants' reflections on belonging, identity affirmation and leadership highlight how mentoring environments can recognise and validate the cultural wealth that Black scholars bring into academic spaces. Drawing on Yosso's (2005) framework, the programme appeared to create relational conditions in which aspirational and navigational capital could be acknowledged and mobilised. In this sense, mentoring functioned less as a corrective intervention and more as a relational infrastructure, supporting scholars navigating racialised institutional contexts.

While participants largely described positive relational experiences, implementing ASPIRE required significant coordination and institutional resources. Mentoring sessions were conducted alongside scholars' existing academic commitments, and some participants noted challenges in balancing programme participation with dissertation preparation or employment responsibilities. Maintaining consistent mentor engagement across cohorts also required sustained institutional commitment. A small number of participants suggested that clearer

communication regarding programme expectations and recognition processes would improve transparency.

These reflections highlight that culturally responsive mentoring is not self-sustaining; it requires structural embedding, administrative support and ongoing reflexive evaluation. Although ASPIRE represents a bounded case, the principles underpinning its design, relational mentoring, anti-deficit framing and dialogic engagement offer transferable insights for institutions seeking to widen participation within PGR pathways.

Conclusion

This study examined the lived experiences of Black scholars participating in the ASPIRE mentoring programme within the context of postgraduate research pathways in the UK higher education sector. Grounded in critical race theory and anti-deficit scholarship, the analysis explored how participants interpreted belonging, identity affirmation and leadership within racialised academic environments. Through interviews and dialogic listening rooms, the study highlighted how culturally grounded mentoring can create relational spaces in which existing community cultural wealth is recognised and mobilised.

Importantly, the findings should not be interpreted as evidence that structural inequalities within HE have been resolved. Consistent with CRT's recognition of the persistence of systemic racial inequities, participants' accounts instead suggest that mentoring initiatives operate within broader institutional constraints. The relational shifts described – particularly around belonging, leadership and navigational awareness – reflect how scholars interpret and negotiate these environments rather than the structural transformation of them.

At the same time, the study demonstrates that culturally responsive mentoring can play a meaningful role in shaping how scholars experience and navigate PGR spaces. By drawing on principles of relational recognition, dialogic engagement and anti-deficit framing, the ASPIRE programme created conditions in which participants could articulate shared experiences and develop collective strategies for navigating academic pathways.

The findings also highlight important operational considerations. Delivering the programme required sustained

coordination, institutional support and mentor commitment. Participants' reflections suggest that culturally grounded mentoring initiatives must be structurally embedded within institutional systems rather than treated as short-term interventions. Administrative support, clear communication and ongoing reflexive evaluation are therefore essential for sustaining such programmes.

Although this study represents a bounded case, its insights have broader relevance for institutions seeking to widen participation within PGR pathways. Rather than focusing solely on access or individual skill development, mentoring initiatives may benefit from attending to relational environments that recognise existing cultural wealth and foster collective dialogue.

Rather than presenting mentoring as a solution to structural inequality, this study shows how relational environments shape how scholars interpret and navigate academic systems in which racial inequalities persist. By bringing together critical race theory, African-centred philosophical perspectives and dialogic research methods, the paper highlights the importance of recognising lived experience when designing mentoring initiatives within PGR pathways.

Implications for practice and policy

The findings of this study carry important implications for institutions seeking to address persistent racial inequalities within PGR pathways. While mentoring programmes alone cannot dismantle structural barriers in higher education, participants' experiences suggest that relational environments play a significant role in shaping how scholars interpret and navigate academic spaces.

First, institutions should move beyond deficit-oriented approaches that frame Black students as lacking confidence, aspiration or preparedness. Consistent with Yosso's (2005) concept of community cultural wealth, participants' narratives demonstrate that many scholars already possess significant aspirational, navigational and resistant capital. Institutional initiatives should therefore prioritise recognising and affirming these existing forms of capital, rather than attempting to remediate perceived deficits.

Second, mentoring initiatives designed to support under-represented scholars may benefit from emphasising relational engagement rather than purely instrumental outcomes. The dialogic structure of the ASPIRE listening rooms created opportunities for participants to share experiences, recognise common challenges and develop collective strategies for navigating academic environments. Such dialogic approaches, grounded in Freirean traditions of collaborative knowledge production, may help foster a sense of belonging and mutual recognition among scholars navigating racialised institutional contexts.

Third, institutions seeking to replicate similar initiatives must recognise the operational and structural requirements for sustaining them. As participants noted, programmes such as ASPIRE require careful coordination, mentor commitment and clear communication regarding expectations and recognition processes. Culturally responsive mentoring is therefore not self-sustaining; it requires administrative support, institutional investment and ongoing evaluation.

Finally, policymakers and institutional leaders should consider how mentoring initiatives can complement broader structural reforms to widen participation in postgraduate research. While relational mentoring cannot substitute for systemic change, it can play a role in creating environments where scholars' identities, experiences and cultural knowledge are recognised within academic institutions.

Taken together, the findings suggest that widening participation in PGR cannot be addressed through access initiatives alone. Attention must also be given to the relational cultures through which scholars experience higher education. Mentoring programmes that recognise existing cultural knowledge, encourage dialogue and foster collective reflection may help create environments in which scholars feel recognised within academic communities. While such initiatives cannot resolve structural inequalities on their own, they may play a meaningful role in supporting scholars navigating doctoral pathways.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethical approval was obtained from the Sheffield Hallam University Research Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in accordance with institutional guidelines and ethical research practices.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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Authors' contributions

All authors have contributed to the various aspects of this work. Conceptualisation of the research idea: IFA, FSO, AA, EO, OA and OD; Literature review; FO, OD and IFA. Data collection IFA, AA, OD and OA; Data Analysis IFA, FSO and EO; write-up IFA, FSO, AA, EO, OA and OD.

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