A Qualitative Study of Race, Identity and Educational Achievement
The Experiences of Minority Ethnic Women

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INTRODUCTION

•The underachievement of black pupils remains a documented fact in UK history as the educational attainment gap between black and white pupils remains consistently widened (DfEs, 2006b;)

•Most studies tend to focus on within the group differences, deceptively over emphasizing higher attainment levels of black girls in comparison to black boys. However, statistical data reveals that the attainment levels of black girls are below national average when compared to white girls (Rollock, 2007).

• Key debates aimed at bridging achievement gaps have become polarized, focusing primarily on Socio Economic Constructs and Iqualitatve measures, emphasising the low academic attainmemt of black boys, with limited consideration given to cultural needs and experiences as well as the underachievement of black girls in comparison to the wider group (McLoyd, 1998; Denmack et al, 2000)

Aims :
To explore the educational experiences of black women who have attended UK elementary and secondary schools.

To examine the extent to which individual experiences, perceptions and interpretation of race and identity issues may be linked to the underachievement of black girls.

METHODS

•A qualitative design using semi structured interview questions to obtain data .

•An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to explicate data (Smith et al., 2009).

•Interviews were recorded, transcribed and systematically examined for themes and meanings.
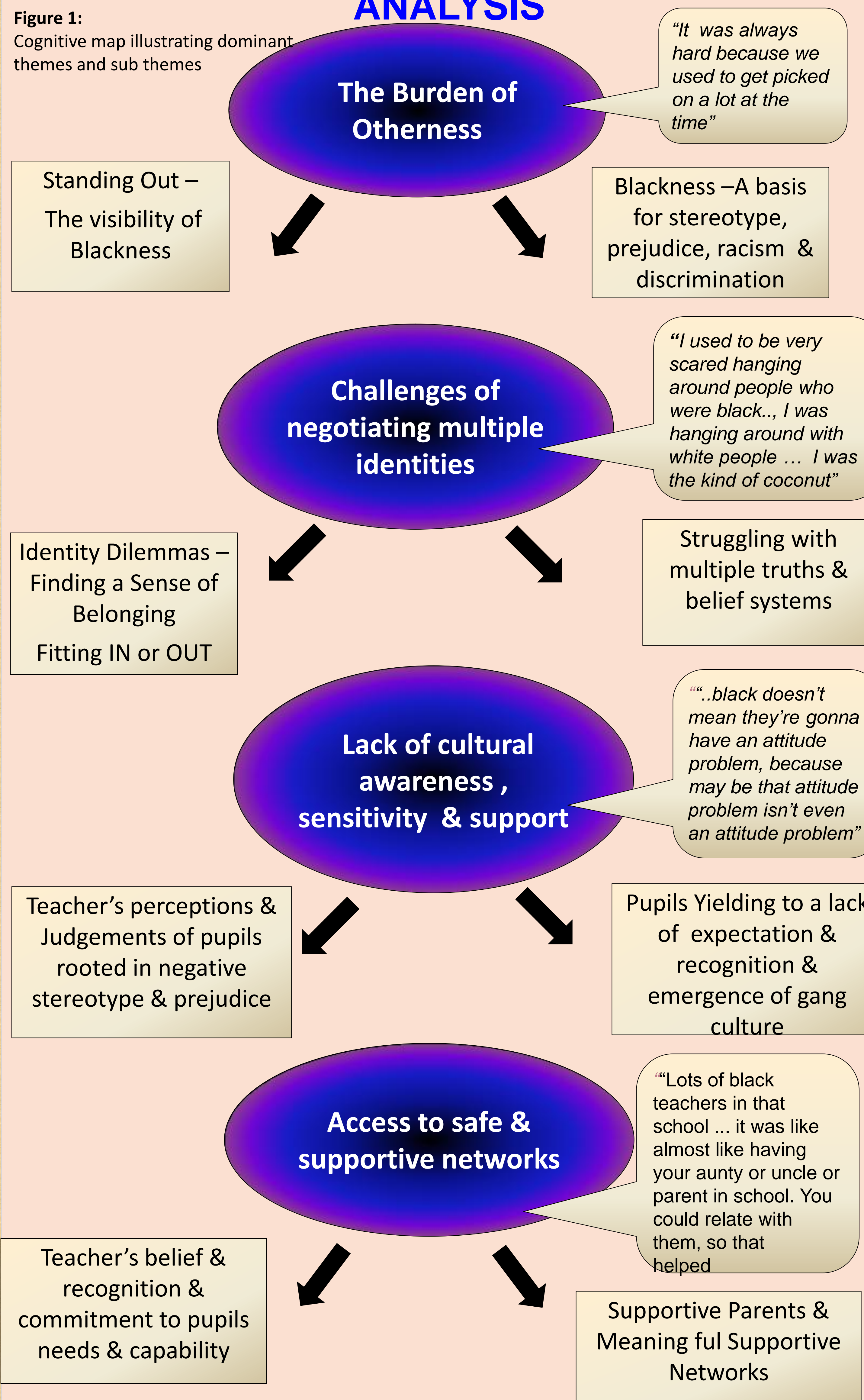
•N= 6 (Smith, 1996). Black females of African or Caribbean background, aged between 19 and 24 , attended Primary & Secondary Education in the UK. Based on a non-probability purposive sampling (Kruger, 1988 p. 150).

•Ethical Approval obtained from the University ethics committee

•Informed consent was sought from participants.

ANALYSIS

Figure 1: Cognitive map illustrating dominant themes and sub themes

The Burden of Otherness

Standing Out – The visibility of Blackness

Blackness –A basis for stereotype, prejudice, racism & discrimination

"It was always hard because we used to get picked on a lot at the time"

Challenges of negotiating multiple identities

Identity Dilemmas – Finding a Sense of Belonging
Fitting IN or OUT

Struggling with multiple truths & belief systems

"I used to be very scared hanging around people who were black.., I was hanging around with white people … I was the kind of coconut"

Lack of cultural awareness , sensitivity & support

Teacher's perceptions & Judgements of pupils rooted in negative stereotype & prejudice

Pupils Yielding to a lack of expectation & recognition & emergence of gang culture

""..black doesn't mean they're gonna have an attitude problem, because may be that attitude problem isn't even an attitude problem"

Access to safe & supportive networks

Teacher's belief & recognition & commitment to pupils needs & capability

Supportive Parents & Meaning ful Supportive Networks

""Lots of black teachers in that school ... it was like almost like having your aunty or uncle or parent in school. You could relate with them, so that helped

DISCUSSIONS & CONCLUSIONS

Otherness ' Blackness' - Perceived a significant basis for prejudice, stereotype and scapegoating. However, leads to hyper-vigillance to threat and long-term psycho-emotional problems which distort perceptions and erodes learning capacity.

Negotiating Mulltiple Identities – Conflicting environmental influences lead to complex identity issues and possible risk of rejecting own cultural identity in order to fit-in with dominant groups in the search for a sense of belonging.

Teacher's lack of cultural awareness and understanding - Generates complex problems for black pupils and negates learning outcomes. Links with culturally similar groups or individuals & culturally competent teachers & networks mediate the challenges of otherness & promotes learning.

•**Finding safe and supportive connections** - appears to bolster coping skills. Parental involvement & aspirations VS teacher's perception, belief about pupil''s capabilities, recogniition & support of students needs fosters positive teacher-pupils relationship. Student's friendship networks crucial to this process.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

* Professional investment in cultural competence and sensitivity practice would contribute significantly in making the school environment a safe place to meet the needs of black pupils .
 * Parental involvement should be encouraged both at primary and secondary education stages for effective support.
* Preventative & early intervention support required to proactively manage identity issues in school and beyond.
*The teaching team to reflect the ethnic diversity of students.
•Measurement of Black pupils's academic & social attainment as a performance monitoring tool for effective teaching, inclusion & anti discriminatory practices in schools.
• **Future Research:**
Further studies should seek to recruit a wider and diverse sample for a comparative analysis as well as investigate the experiences of school professionals when dealing with black pupils, for more effective interventions for educational success. Longitudinal studies to measure effects of teacher's belief & recognition on attainment.

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