

Student Devised Accompanying Piece

Introduction

The conversation well-being or mental health in context of students, particularly in higher education can usually see the how the economic environment, cultural, social, cultural and social structure impact their university experience overall [1]. The experience of a student from a black and ethnic minority background and subsections such those that are part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual and other sexualities (LGBTQ+) and disabled are likely to experience an enhanced version of these struggles. My spoken word poem 'Flourish' aims to give an insight and explore how the structure of higher education can have biases towards how the well-being, in this poem, black students has been rooted as a barrier and lead to their potential failure.

Spoken Word Poem as a Medium

I wanted to use a form creativity that would draw out emotion to feel the topic spoken about and elements of the BME experience in higher education to be aligned with not only those that have gone through the same experience but for those who didn't know the impact of this barrier to stir up a reaction to take action to dismantle these problems. I decided that a spoken word poem would be the right presentation to display the theory I've learned in this module. As well as my personal experience, I've also based the poem on the common experiences other black students have vocalised.

Wellbeing as a black student

In week five of the Understanding Wellbeing module, the topic of Failure and Wellbeing was presented with guest speaker Professor Jonathan Heron. He quoted from author Samuel Beckett *'Ever tried. Ever Failed. No Matter. Try Again. Fail Again. Fail Better'* promoting the theory that failure instead of being something of a negative experience not to be proud of, for it to be an experience to grow and take a lesson from. However, in the experience of many black students' failure is infused as something that shouldn't be tolerated or encouraged in their home, often because of culture. The line in the poem which says, *'the one who's family believes she will be the one to finally defeat waves of privilege that they found themselves wiped out to?'* gives an insight to how much doing well means to one's family, from my own experience I was privileged enough to be the first in my family to go to university as my parents did not have the financial means to do such at my age. This is where a black student like me would begin to feel the pressure and fear arising trying not to disappoint. The topic of mental health in the black community is rarely spoken about and when it is, often it is spoken about in a negative light because of cultural models of illness and stigma [2]. This pushes black students to one aspect of endurance I highlight in the poem which is resorting to keeping in the mounting problems they're facing; sometimes ignoring and other times they are fully aware their mental state is carrying a lot of weight. Another aspect of endurance I highlight is trying to get through education with barriers of not only being more likely to fail or also being expected to fail but the microaggression accompanied with it [3]. This is not only conducted by teaching academics but also by white peers, the line saying *'odour of their hesitancy lingers in the air long enough to inhale, choking out any self-belief left inside of me'* meaning a lot of the inequalities black students perceive is not as straightforward and open.

A supportive relationship between student and academic staff is needed for student success [4]. The lack of academic staff that black students can identify with is a stressor that prevents them from seeking help from wellbeing services due to fear of stereotyping which includes the measuring of against white norms [5], in the poem I describe it as a 'lottery', due to the very slim chance of a black student actually receiving a counsellor that truly understand their issues. When black students do find the courage to seek help in their institute, they're often watering down how they feel because wellbeing advisors did not take their issues seriously or they had to explain their inequality because they simply did not understand [6]. I express this issue in the line *'Your confusion to why my identity causes mental health issues..... before I even speak forces me to edit myself to shift your thoughts and escape the judgement, just for you to paste a format of help that only matches the destination of whiteness'*. The attainment of a 1st or a 2.1 degree for full-time students shows a significant gap between black students and white students. Only 53% of black students with reported mental health conditions actually achieve this revealing that black students are indeed being failed [7], many choosing to either drop out to find help for their wellbeing elsewhere or stay on their course with intense issues with their wellbeing.

Empowerment from Resilience

In week six of this module, Self-Maintenance was brought as topic presented by Jaeda Goodman. Along with the theory failure and wellbeing, I used the practise of self-maintenance in the poem to highlight that although there may be social structures rooted as a barrier to our wellbeing there are ways as an individual and as a community that we can uplift each other's wellbeing when higher education institutes are not providing the standard support that we need. The practise of the ten keys to happier living: GREAT DREAM with the help of one another in our small self-made spaces.

The resilience needed to carry on in an environment where we have no control in our treatment is our key reaction to bounce back. The engagement in activities to promote and actively press for change is our way to channel our hopelessness, angers and hurt to something that can be seen as 'failing better' [8]. *'Your silence forces us to script a different storyline to wellbeing, casting people who we can identify with allowing us to direct how we truly feel'* is my way of describing what taking my own wellbeing into my own hands feels like. Having to go outside the university to find what I need to voice my own issues freely, without judgement and to actually make progress to get my wellbeing on a path that I am satisfied with. The empowerment brought about by resilience highlights how strong the BME community is in number. Of course, without higher education institutes opening the doors to better representation with a more diverse staff to cater to the needs of these students that are at a default disadvantage, BME students have no choice but to continue to raise awareness, join causes to be the voice of the voiceless and remain resilient, constantly think of the next reaction. Institutes continuously developing culturally competent training and providing counsellors that actually understand racism is imperative to create a system that is equally accessible to all students [9]. The start of the poem I'm addressing the structural biases as 'they', whereas at the end of the poem I'm addressing directly to them. I do this to highlight the theory of endurance and resilience discussed in the module in week five. Endurance is usually seen in a more unpleasant connotation; the experience isn't enjoyed yet you try to continue in the situation. However, resilience is a change in thinking

and a growth in mindset which makes it even more crucial in the self-maintenance of wellbeing.

Closing thoughts

The dismantling of institutionalised racism and systematic biases found in higher education against students' needs to go beyond the recognition of it. The lack of cultural competence from academic staff is resulting in the failing of a wide group of students who are not able to voice their current wellbeing states. The creation of safe spaces by these groups are being used as a starting point for this deeply rooted issue. Until higher education institutes can proactively join to create support that these groups can personally identify with, the resistance to get through university with the help of their spaces is what will aid in the self-maintenance of our wellbeing.

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