Interview with Kia Taylor-Powell – GCYFRG Dissertation Winner 2024 – 2nd Prize

What inspired you to choose your dissertation topic, and how did you narrow down your focus?

At the start I had very *very* different ideas, so it was difficult to narrow them down. I knew I wanted to focus on an aspect of race in geography. I felt it was missing from the discipline or brushed to the side, but a very big part of my life. I wanted my research to put discussions on race centre stage! This topic was personal to me and something I'm quite passionate about seeing more of.

The process involved lots of mind maps, and doing some reading on the ideas I had. A lot was determined by what was feasible, time bound, and cost effective – this helped to narrow down ideas.

At the time, many different 'decolonising the curriculum' movements were taking place, so that is where my ideas related to school and education stemmed from. There seemed to be very little research on black students in secondary schools, especially in the northeast of England. Most of the research I did see was heavily based on demographic statistics and educational outcomes – almost nothing which sought to uncover how students themselves experience school. This gap is what led to my main research questions, how black African and Caribbean students experience educational environments and the curriculum. From there, once I had the main core of the research, it exploded into many avenues I could explore.

How did you find the dissertation experience? What were the highs and lows (challenges and rewards)?

Overall, I *really* enjoyed doing the dissertation, it was by far my favourite part of the degree!!

Some challenges for me came with administrative obstacles and the ethics of doing a dissertation in a secondary school. I planned on doing a comparative study, but one school dropped out (this is part of the research process, so be prepared for rejection!). The process involved a lot of thought and conversation with my supervisor and the head teacher at the school. It's crucial to be organised, plan ahead, and be very clear about what you intend to do. I felt this was a brilliant learning curve.

Writing was both a joy and a challenge. Getting your research to tell a story is very tricky. It felt like I scaled a mountain when it was complete!

The highs for me were doing the focus groups and analysing that data. Year 10s – 13s have so much amazing things to say, brilliant contributions! I absolutely loved hearing their thoughts, ideas, passions, and building relationships in the group. It was a real honour to portray a glimpse of their perspective, showcase their potential, and speak with teachers. It felt like a step towards making positive change in the school system.

I got the chance to see their ‘diversity day’ with dancing and traditional dress, that was a big highlight!

What advice would you give other undergraduate students undertaking a (GCYFRG-related) dissertation?

Plan ahead! Working with Children, Families or Young People will most likely involve DBS checks, consent from parents or guardians, and collaborating with teachers if you’re going into schools. You must be ahead of the curve to get your research collected in time. (That means reaching out to schools/stakeholders, sorting out your DBS and any other safeguarding protocols as soon as you can).

I would also advise to communicate clearly and concisely with all the stakeholders involved (parents, teachers, etc). They will want to know what you’re doing, why, and how, so it’s important to have a clear view in your head about what you want to get out of this research and how you plan on analysing and presenting it.

Working with young people is a massive privilege, so don’t let any of the additional admin put you off!