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Reframing race and widening access into higher education

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Abstract
This paper draws attention to empirical work on widening access to understand the silence on race matters in English higher education. This work repurposes a critical race theoretical framework that offers a glimpse of how the issue of unequal access to higher education has been framed in the research field. It is argued here that the framing of widening access reveals a persistent colour-evasiveness that is dominant. The findings show that widening access policy has not benefitted students of colour as they are not accessing higher education with the same kind of success as their white peers. The paper concludes for a call for race-conscious interventions to remedy the continued race inequity in accessing highly rejective institutions based on the evidence gathered.

Keywords England · Fair access · Race · Widening participation

In 2018, the UK grime artist Stormzy offered to fund two scholarships to Black British students to attend the University of Cambridge (Siddique, 2018). By doing so, Stormzy drew attention to the issue of constrained access of Black students entering elite institutions. This is not only an issue in England. It is an international issue, particularly in settler colonial states where Black and Indigenous folks are not accessing higher education in the same way as their white counterparts such as the USA (Byrd, 2017), Canada (Association of Universities and Colleges in Canada 2011), and New Zealand (Theodore et al., 2016). For the purposes of this paper with a nod that whiteness manifests itself differently according to national contexts (Lentin, 2020), I highlight the case of England higher education to counter the dominant narrative of widening university access without racial implications. Inspired by critical race theorists (CRT) like Gillborn (2005) and the decolonising work of Tuhiwai-Smith (2012), I seek to address the lack of attention drawn to race inequality in widening access literature.

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This paper builds upon Gillborn's (2005) seminal work on how English educational policy is an act of white supremacy. I specifically focus on widening participation and fair access to students of colour.[1] I recognise the concepts of 'widening participation' and 'fair access' are distinguishable. McCaig (2018) refers to widening participation as impacting *demand-side*, and fair access as impacting the *supply-side* in examining the 'market' of higher education. But, for the purposes of this paper, I will refer to widening participation and fair access as *one*–widening access.

Even with the call of the UK government commissioned Dearing Report (1997) that offered a rationale for the roll out of widening access into higher education, race inequities have remained persistent throughout the sector. Students of colour are, for example, still not accessing elite, or 'highly rejective',[2] universities in the same way as white students (Pilkington, 2009). This unevenness has been a constant observation in the sector since the publication of the Dearing Report (1997). The Office for Students (OfS), the English university sector regulator, in 2018 found that the proportion of Black Caribbean and Pakistani students entering highly rejective institutions were lower than white British students (OfS 2018, 3). Moreover, even if they were to gain access into higher education regardless of highly rejective status, students of colour are persistently less likely to achieve similar degree outcomes than white students (Richardson et al., 2020). These observations of race inequity in higher education particularly on the matter of equal access are mute, and without action. This paper attempts to delve and better understand the silence. I will first lay out an argument that widening access policy has been colour-evasive (Annamma et al., 2017). Annamma et al.'s (2017) use of the phrase 'colour-evasive' extends Gotanda's (1991) critique of 'colour-blind' ideologies — that employ notions of meritocracy to discount historical, structural racism and white supremacy. The concept of colour evasiveness is an extension of Gotanda's critique of colour-blind ideologies to account for the intersection of ableism and white supremacy in education. As Annamma et al., (2017, 53) have argued, 'Color-evasiveness, as an expansive racial ideology, resists positioning people with disabilities as problematic as it does not partake in dis/ability as a metaphor for undesired'. This intersection of racism and ableism forefronts an *everyday eugenics* (Madriaga et al., 2011), that is (re)produced in English higher education in assessing indicators of merit and determining who is *able* to access higher education.

After linking widening access policy and practice to colour-evasiveness, I will draw attention to the literature — empirical work on widening access specifically — to understand the silence on race matters. Perhaps, in getting a glimpse of how the issue of unequal access to higher education has been framed in the research field, I can grasp the continued colour-evasiveness of widening access policy and vice versa (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012). By repurposing Gillborn's (2005) framework in analysing the racial implications of English educational policy, I will adopt a decolonial, reframed reading of texts (author), drawing from methods employed by Tuhiwai-Smith (2012) and Slee and Allen (2001).

[1] Throughout this paper, I prefer to use the phrase 'students of colour' rather than UK official category 'Black, Asian, and minority ethnic' employed in education statistics. The phrase 'students of colour' emphasises students being racialised in juxtaposition to a white norm (Gillborn 2005).

[2] The phrase 'highly rejective' is being employed in this paper instead of 'elite' or 'highly selective' universities to emphasise the role of gatekeeping processes in university access. https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/views/2021/05/03/what-do-terms-rejectivity-and-highly-rejective-mean-admissions-opinion

Colour-evasiveness and widening access policy

The emergence of widening access policy did not have students of colour in mind. This is possibly a result of a dominant narrative that has foregrounded ethnic minority 'success' in university participation. This narrative can be traced back to the wording of the Dearing Report (1997, chapter 7, para 7.16): 'Ethnic minorities as a whole are more than proportionally represented in higher education, compared to the general population'. Pilkington (2009, 17) expressed concern about this emphasis of 'success', as it masked, or pushed other observations of race inequality recorded in the report to the periphery such as students of colour mainly concentrated in less prestigious universities and achieving a lower rate of return on their qualifications than white students. This has become taken-for-granted knowledge, masked by the 'good news' statistic that students of colour are more than proportionally represented than white students in higher education (Pilkington, 2009, 17).

A further masking has taken place since the mid-2000s with a narrative of the underachievement of white 'working-class' in education policy discourse (Gillborn, 2008; Sveinsson 2009). Using Free School Meals (FSM) as a proxy for 'working class', politicians and the media have focused their attention on the underachievement of white pupils who receive FSM (Crawford, 2019; Gillborn, 2015). Gillborn (2015, 7) has indicated FSM is an indicator of 'pronounced economic deprivation and make up around 14% of the pupil population (one in seven)'. There is no doubt about the plight of families who are eligible and rely on the support of FSM. However, there was expressed concern that the use of this statistic was misleading, and its intended use by policymakers and the media was to silence critical discussion on systemic racism in education (Gillborn, 2015). Some of the questions spurred by Gillborn (2008, 2015) were (1) why focus vattention on the underachievement of white pupils who are eligible for FSM when they achieve at three times the rate of their Gypsy, Roma, and Travellers peers?; and (2) if FSM is a proxy for working-class, then does that mean 86% of the pupil population are middle-class? These critical questions were directly raised to the House of Commons Education Committee in 2013 as they sought to examine the underachievement in education by white children (HC142 2014). In its response to Gillborn and colleagues (CRRE, 2013), the Education Committee acknowledged in its report that using FSM as a proxy for working class was misleading (HC142 2014, 8), but for reasons of 'pragmatism' the Government maintained its use (HC142 2014, 10–11). On *We need to talk about whiteness podcast*, Gillborn (2020) voiced his reflections upon this outcome years later, 'This is not an innocent mistake… It is distorting educational priorities, and it is damaging kids of all ethnicities because actually policymakers have not shown any seriousness even about raising the attainment of those kids featured in those statistics'.

This narrative of the underachievement of white working-class children in schools has been held up in widening access into higher education policy with a 2016 Department for Business Innovation and Skills White Paper (DBIS 2016). Citing an Institute for Fiscal Studies report (Crawford & Greaves, 2015),[3] the Government White Paper (DBIS 2016, 55), stated:

[3] Crawford and Greaves (2015) never used the term 'disadvantaged background' in their Institute for Fiscal Studies report. They used their own conception of socio-economic background which entailed FSM, which has already been identified here as problematic (see Crawford 2019; Gillborn 2015), as well as POLAR data (an area-based measure of socio-economic position based on young people entering higher education institution at age 18) which has also been marked as problematic for lack of precision (Boliver and Powell 2021).

> ...only 10% of white British males from the most disadvantaged backgrounds enter higher education; they are five times less likely to go into higher education than the most advantaged white men and significantly less likely than disadvantaged men from [Black and minority ethnic] groups.

This statement not only echoed the 'success' of ethnic minority participation in higher education of the Dearing Report (1997). It also signified a continued silence of unequal access into higher education for students of colour by foregrounding a victimhood narrative of *white working British males* (Crawford, 2019).

Since the inception of widening participation outreach activities under Aimhigher and the establishment of the Office for Fair Access in 2004, the issue of students of colour and white students not accessing higher education in a uniform way has been peripheral. It has been colour-evasive, becoming more pronounced with policymakers and the media holding on to a misleading narrative of the plight of the white working class in education (Gillborn, 2015). It is misleading because it detracts attention away from the evidence of systemic racism and white supremacy prevalent in education in general. Crawford (2019, 429) offered a counternarrative and has shown evidence that almost 1 in 10 white pupils are eligible for FSM while 35.1% of Black African, 23.5% of Black Caribbean, 44.6% of Bangladeshi and 30.4% of Pakistani pupils are eligible for FSM. It is this statistic of 1 in 10 which has dominated education policy discourse impacting on the widening access into higher education agenda. Crawford (2019, 432–433) also presented evidence of the *hidden* 9 in 10 white pupils who are not eligible for FSM outperforming Black Caribbean pupils regardless of FSM status. This statistic, unfortunately, has not received the same attention by policymakers and the media.

Given this, I pivot to Gillborn (2005) and the idea that there is a *tacit intentionality* of white supremacy in English education policy making. While Gillborn (2005) examined education policy related to schools, I turn my attention specifically towards to widening access policy in English higher education. I am curious about the research undertaken under the banner of widening access and whether race/racism was even considered. I am also curious about the extent of colour-evasiveness in the research work, and how it may reflect policy priorities and discourses. The research questions driving this study have been framed by Gillborn (2005) and repurposed here to examine race and widening access in higher education: (1) Who or what is driving widening access policy, and what does it have to do with race? (2) Who are the beneficiaries, who wins and loses based on race because of widening access policy priorities? (3) What are the racial outcomes and effects of widening access policy?

Methods

To address these questions, I returned to the decolonising method of reframed reading of texts (Madriaga, 2020), that draws from the work of Tuhiwai-Smith (2012), and Slee and Allan (2001). Tuhiwai-Smith (2012) discussed reframing as a decolonising method, seeing how a problem or issue is defined, which then determines how best to solve the problem. For her, social problems that impact indigenous communities in settler colonial states, such as her context of New Zealand, are never solved due to the ways they have been framed with historical, structural racism ignored (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012, 154):

> [governments and social agencies] have framed indigenous issues in the 'indigenous problem' basket, to be handled in the usual cynical and paternalistic manner... Many indigenous activists have argued that such things as mental illness, alcoholism and suicide, for example, are not about psychological and individualized failure but about colonization or lack of collective self-determination.

Reflecting on this, I see the dominant narrative on race equity and university access masking historical and structural race inequalities, such as limited Black access into 'elite' institutions, with the 'good news' statistic that students of colour are *over-represented in higher education* (Pilkington, 2009, 17). Thus, there is a need to *reframe* this majoritarian view of widening access to account for the legacy of white supremacy in English education. This reframing method of Tuhiwai-Smith (2012) complements a deconstructed reading method employed by Slee and Allan (2001) in their work in progressing inclusive higher education.

Slee and Allan (2001, 177) employed deconstruction in reading a policy document, the UK Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) Code of Practice in Disability in Higher Education (1999), as they were suspicious of descriptions of inclusive education in such policy statements as posturing. They were dubious that these texts, in declarations of progress towards inclusion in educational settings, amounted to a little more than the assimilation of the marginalised, specifically those categorised and identified as disabled. In pushing forth the notion that inclusive education is a 'social movement against educational exclusion', they have argued that the possibilities offered by deconstruction positions the researcher as a 'cultural vigilante' (Slee & Allan, 2001, 180–181):

> …seeking to expose exclusion in all its forms, the language we use, the teaching methods we adopt, the curriculum we transmit and the relations we establish within our schools, further education colleges and universities… deconstruction is one kind of research which might induce some radical thinking about alternative practices.

The work I present here reframes the issue of widening access in English higher education by taking on a decolonial, deconstructive approach on reading a sample of empirical work. There are three reasons for taking this approach. First, this approach allows for matters of 'race' to be foregrounded (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008), which is consistent with the tenets of CRT (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This offers a counternarrative to the majoritarian story of race and English higher education in which proposed solutions to widening access are value-neutral and colour-evasive. The utility of the counternarrative as argued by Blaisdell (2021, 18) is to be able to 'identify and deconstruct the master narratives that impede racial progress in specific contexts, thus working towards its educative and disruptive functions'. Rooted in US legal scholarship (Bell, 1992; Delgado and Stefanic 2017), CRT has journeyed across disciplinary boundaries, and entered education via Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) seminal paper. Building on this tradition, the likes of Crawford (2019), Doharty (2018), Gillborn (2005, 2008), and Rollock (2012) have employed a CRT lens in English education. There is also specific CRT application in English higher education research, such as Bhopal (2022), Doharty et al., 2021, Joseph-Salisbury (2019), Madriaga (2020), and Sian (2019). Moreover, in staying true with CRT, experiential knowledge of people of colour, such as myself, is pivotal. Being a son of Filipino immigrants who resides in the UK has a role in how I read and analyse texts (Shahjahan et al., 2021). Second, in being a counternarrative, the research approach is aligned with 'refusal' work (Tuck & Yang, 2014). This entails not reproducing the

colonial practice of researching 'down' — the marginalised, the racialized, the disabled, the classed, and the gendered. As Tuck and Yang (2014, 817) argued, 'Refusal makes space for recognition, and for reciprocity. Refusal turns the gaze back upon power…' Thus, this examination of texts below is an instance of researching 'up'. Finally, the work conducted here has a goal of addressing and eliminating racial oppression in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Texts included in the analysis was systematically collected using the PRISMA checklist which is usually employed for systematic literature reviews (Moher et al., 2009). I initially focused on seeking articles from peer-reviewed academic journals. The key search terms included widening participation; widening access; fair access; race; or ethnic. These were used in Boolean 'and' combination with 'England' and 'higher education'. These terms were entered into my institutional library search, ProQuest, Ingenta Connect, JSTOR, British Education Index, and archives of major publishing companies (Taylor & Francis, SAGE, Wiley, and Springer). In addition to the articles found, I included grey literature with suggestions of particular sources from colleagues who specialise on widening access into higher education.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

In 2003, a White Paper on higher education was published which led to the creation of the Office for Fair Access and resources for university outreach activities (DfES 2003). In 2004, much of what was stated in the White Paper rolled out, hence the rationale for curating the literature from this time.

The inclusion criteria were:

- Peer-reviewed articles and grey literature published between 2004 and 2021
- Focus or partial focus on access into higher education
- Included any form of empirical data
- Focus on race and ethnicity in accessing undergraduate education
- Included race and ethnicity (those racialised) in the rationale or research design
- Collected data partially in England

The exclusion criteria were:

- Peer review articles and grey literature published before 2004 or after 2021
- Did not account for access into higher education
- Did not include any form of empirical data (i.e. fully theoretical or conceptual)
- Did not include race and ethnicity (those racialised) in the rationale or research design
- Collected data fully outside England

The initial search resulted in a total of 332 records after trimming down duplicate records (see Fig. 1). After screening the records according to inclusion and exclusion criteria, I was able to narrow down 47 full-text articles and reports to assess for eligibility. I assessed full-text articles and reports within NVivo 12, which was helpful in formulating thoughts and organising ideas when addressing the research questions. Full-text and reports eligibility for this study was then narrowed down records to 30 (see Table 1).

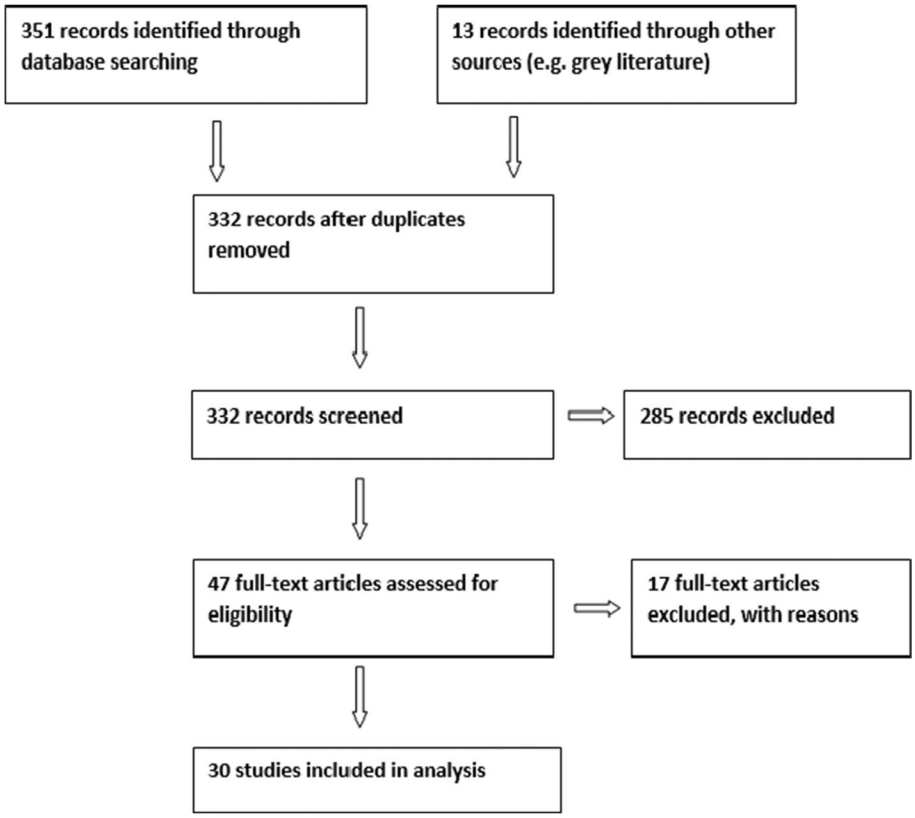

Fig. 1 PRISMA flowchart

Analysis

The use of NVivo 12 software facilitated the organising of ideas in responding to the research questions. All NVivo 12 nodes were initially organised for a thematic analysis (Clarke et al., 2015), to facilitate a more grounded, inductive approach to the work. For instance, I developed nodes according to ethnic and racial groups as they were categories of study in much of the texts. I subsequently collapsed a total of eighteen NVivo nodes to address the three research questions at hand. These research questions were repurposed from Gillborn's (2005) '3 tests', in analysing how education policy in the UK has been framed by a colour-evasive discourse. Gillborn (2005) leaned on three testing questions: (1) who or what is being prioritised in policy? (2) who is winning and who is losing because of policy? (3) and what are the effects of the policy? So, the nodes I marked for racial and ethnic groups, for instance, were collapsed into a node marked as 'beneficiaries' initially to signify any gains from widening access policy then analysed for overlaps with the other two testing nodes: 'priorities' and 'outcomes'. This was my framework in analysing and synthesising the collected texts regarding widening access policy and weighing-up the existing research.

Table 1 Literature included/excluded with reasons

Included	Excluded	Reasons for exclusion
Basit (2013); Boliver (2013); Boliver (2016); Davies et al. (2013); Donnelly and Gamsu (2018); Fielding, Alexander, Tiffin, Greatrix, Lee, Patterson, Nicholson, and Cleland (2018); Gallagher et al. (2009); Harrison (2013); Hayton et al. (2015); Hemsley-Brown (2015); Ivy (2010); Khambhaita (2014); Khambhaita and Bhopal (2015); Law et al. (2014); Mathers et al. (2011); Mathers et al. (2016); Niven et al. (2013); See et al. (2012); See et al. (2011); Simpson and Cooke (2009) *Grey literature:* Alexander and Arday (2015); Atherton and Mazhari (2019) Commission for Race and Ethnic Disparities (2021); Connor et al. (2004); Crawford and Greaves (2015); NUS (2011); OfS (2020a; 2020b); Stevenson et al. (2019);	Avis et al. (2017); Beck et al. (2006); Casey et al. (2011); Collins et al. (2015); Crozier et al. (2019); Francis et al. (2017); Gamsu (2018); Kimura (2014); Mirza (2006)	It did not focus on access into higher education
	Boliver and Powell (2021); Burke (2011); Burt-Perkins and Mills (2009); Coyle et al. (2021); Duenas et al. (2021)	Did not include race and ethnicity (those racialised) in the rationale or research design
	Pilkington (2009)	Did not include any form of empirical data
	Miller (2016); Richardson et al. (2020)	Did not include any form of empirical data. (It was a literature review but not systematic.)

Findings

Priorities

There is a spectrum on how research has examined the issue of inequitable access to higher education based on race and ethnicity with focus on institutional gatekeeping on one end and the focus on student aspirations and university applications on the other end. The work of Boliver (2013, 2016), Fielding et al. (2018); Mathers et al. (2011); and Mathers et al. (2016) sways towards the focus on the institutions themselves. These works highlight the difficulties of applicants of colour accessing highly rejective universities and medical schools. It pins the deficits on gatekeeping mechanisms rather than perceived 'deficits' of one's application to such institutions. In doing so, these works implicitly suggest, or even hint, at institutional racism. Of course, there may be other structural factors intersecting with racism, like geography, mobility, social class, and gender which adds other layers of complexity in unequal access (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018; Harrison, 2013; Khambhaita & Bhopal, 2015).

However, accounting for structural racism in researching widening access is not widespread. The victimhood narrative of the 'white working class' not accessing higher education has taken hold not only in policy (DBIS 2016; HC142 2014), but in government commissioned reports (Commission on Race & Ethnic Disparities, 2021) and research by widening access policy experts (Atherton & Mazhari, 2019). In their report, Atherton and Mazhari (2019, 6) affirmed policy priorities recommending that the sector should 'set specific targets for white students from lower [socioeconomic] groups entering HE'. The distorting use of social class proxies that Gillborn (2008) and Crawford (2019) have highlighted demonstrates the extent of colour-evasiveness that politically positions white victimhood in widening access policy and research.

Much of the collected literature falls short in shedding light on structural and historical racism in university access, particularly those studies focused on surveying young people's aspirations and gauging the extent of their agency. For instance, Ivy (2010) conducted a survey of college students in Leicester with premise of exploring their choices of university and their motivation. An inference was made about 'Afro-Caribbean' students in that they 'appear to be risk adverse' with a tendency to apply to less prestigious universities due to their low UCAS points (Ivy, 2010, 401). There is cause for uneasiness here as it gives credence to a narrative of individual choice in the university application process. Discussion of racism structuring one's options are absent, thus colour-evasive. Placing emphasis on one's aspirations, motivations, cultural and social capital to explain race inequality in university access requires caution as it shifts attention away from the gatekeeping processes of universities. The work of Basit (2013), Hayton et al. (2015), and Khambhaita (2014), for instance, invest in notions of social and cultural capital as explanatory variables without accounting for racism. Then, it becomes a question of the value of certain kinds of capital, say cultural capital, which is usually equated to whiteness (Wallace, 2017). This is reflected in the logic of research designs of some studies, unfortunately, like that of Davies et al., (2013, 367), in which being white becomes 'a reference group' to gauge correlations between motivation, choice, and 'background characteristics' like ethnicity. It reproduces deficit narratives of university applicants of colour, with variables like English as a second language (Helmsey-Brown 2015; Simpson & Cooke, 2009), and confidence or 'other cultural variables' factored to explain why some students find it difficult to enter highly rejective universities (Helmsey-Brown 2015, 418). Matters of race are not

accounted for. Unfortunately, much of the literature in widening access reflect this. Thus, it is not surprising in the systematic literature review conducted by See et al., (2011, 94) that 'ethnicity was not a significant factor in determining post-16 participation in education'. It confirms the 'good news' of the Dearing inquiry (1997), congruent with a policy priority narrative of casting matters of race inequity to the periphery. As a result, little is said about the possibility of racism in university gatekeeping processes particularly the inequality in accessing highly rejective universities and medical schools with notable exceptions (Boliver, 2013, 2016; Fielding et al., 2018; Mathers et al., 2011, 2016).

With the backdrop of the colour-evasiveness of widening participation policy and the added narrative of the under representation of the white, working-class discourse (Atherton & Mazhari, 2019; Commission of Race and Ethnic Disparities 2021; Crawford & Greaves, 2015; DBIS 2016), marking white supremacy as a barrier to university access in much of the work has been mostly mute. There were only a handful of articles that offered a counternarrative to widening participation and fair access policy priorities focusing attention on the highly rejective institutions and its admissions processes.

Beneficiaries

In assessing a tacit intentionality of white supremacy in English education policy, Gillborn (2005) sought to identify the winners and losers. Students of colour have not been benefitting from widening participation or fair access activities (OfS 2020a; OfS 2020b). For students of colour, nothing really has improved since the creation of the Office of Fair Access and Aimhigher in 2004. As Connor et al. (2004) identified, as well as the Dearing Report (1997, 7.18), students of colour are mostly concentrated in less prestigious universities and are not accessing highly rejective institutions. The evidence suggests this remains true (see Alexander & Arday, 2015; NUS 2011; OfS 2020a; OfS 2020b; Stevenson et al., 2019). White applicants, for the most part, have been the beneficiaries since the rollout of widening access policy. Ivy (2010, 400) found that white college students in Leicester had the highest proportion of more prestigious universities to choose from in comparison to students of colour. Boliver (2016) presented evidence that white applicants receive the highest offer rates to highly rejective institutions than other racialised groups even controlling for variables of prior attainment, subject choice, and competitiveness (i.e. an institution's rejection rate). Those categorised/identify as Black Caribbean, Black African, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi are not accessing highly rejective institutions equally as white applicants. This is congruent with the findings of medical schools, majority of them housed in highly rejective universities, where the reliance of pre-entry qualifications, exams results, and cognitive ability tests favour those who are 'traditional applicants to medicine, that is, white and high social class individuals' (Fielding et al., 2018, 8). Mathers et al. (2016) calculated the likelihood of receiving an offer among applicants to UK medical schools during 1996–2012. Although they have observed the odds have reduced slightly between white and 'non-white' applicants during the study period, the overall advantage for white applicants persisted (Mathers et al., 2016, 618–619).

It needs to be stated that there are differences of success between ethnic groups housed underneath the category of 'students of colour'. Some groups more than others have been able to access specialised courses such as medicine and dentistry. The work of Gallagher et al., (2009, 442) presented evidence that those with an Indian background found success in gaining access to dentistry. This may be possibly linked to the findings of Khambhaita's

(2014) study exploring British Asian university student choices with Indian mothers in which extended family networks were relied upon to support the aspirations of their children. However, Gallagher et al., (2009, 442) also found that dentistry remains unattractive to Black students. See et al. (2012) suggested that widening access interventions that encourage and retain young people of colour in post-compulsory education may be beneficial to address this issue. However, race conscious interventions for students of colour in accessing higher education is not education policy (Stevenson et al., 2019), or even in policy discourse (Commission on Race & Ethnic Disparities, 2021). Thus, colour-evasiveness reflecting widening access policy priorities.

Outcomes

There is not an issue of students of colour accessing higher education in general as evidenced in the work of Harrison (2013) and Ivy (2010), confirming findings from the Dearing Report (1997) and Connor et al. (1994). Law et al., (2014, 586) even found that young Black respondents in their study did not see racism to be a problem to achieving their aspirations in education. Although encouraging, there has been an issue for students of colour in accessing highly rejective universities and specialist courses found within them, such as medicine and dentistry (Boliver, 2013, 2016; Fielding et al., 2018; Gallagher et al., 2009; Mathers et al., 2011, 2016).

Recognising the need to diversify the medical profession, medical schools sought to rethink their admission selection processes. Mathers et al. (2011) and Fielding et al. (2018) sought to examine the impact of widening access initiatives and programmes to access medical schools. Mathers et al., (2011, 2) focused attention on the graduate entry course programme which was designed to offer students who did not enter medicine as a school leaver to do so once they had completed a non-medical first degree. According to Mathers et al. (ibid), the programme was introduced to redress dwindling workforce numbers more rapidly, and target more mature students who tend to be more motivated and university graduates who were unable to enter medical school because of poor exam results leaving school. In reporting their results, Mathers et al., (2011, 6) witnessed no significant change as there was a greater proportion of white students on the graduate entry courses. They conclude their study by drawing comparisons to the USA route to the profession and making a remark about increasing student diversification through explicit affirmative action. Fielding et al. (2018) looked at the impact of the UK clinical aptitude test, which has been perceived as a tool to diversify medical school intakes as it accounted for inherent aptitude rather the aspects of ability influenced by prior schooling (Mathers et al., 2011, 6–7). In reporting their findings, Fielding et al., (2018, 7–8) indicated there was no significant changes 'in proportions of students accepting a place who were from lower socioeconomic groups, non-selective schools, were non-white and/or male'. Fielding et al., (2018, 10) concluded with a suggestion that medical schools need to 'take a more radical approach' to selection. Neither the graduate entry course programme nor the introduction of the UK clinical aptitude test made a difference to widening access for people of colour on to medical courses. So, the remark made by Mathers et al. (2011) about affirmative action is significant, as the authors hint at the need for race conscious initiatives to enhance diversity of medical schools. At the same time, the authors were aware that there will not be a public or professional appetite for affirmative action due to potential backlash by 'right-wing media' and 'society's middle-classes' in England (Mathers et al., 2011, 6).

Discussion and concluding thought

These remarks made by Mathers et al. (2011) returns to the premise of this paper and the challenge of having a desire to racially diversify the English higher education sector. Widening access policy since its evolution in 2004 has worked against this desire. In public discourse, it has been constructed to be colour-evasive, thus white supremacist (Annamma et al., 2017; Gillborn, 2005). It was based on that 'good news' statistic that Pilkington (2009) and others (Connor et al., 2004; Stevenson et al., 2019) have highlighted in which students of colour are more than proportionately represented in higher education than white students. However, this statistic is misleading as it masks, for example, the unequal access into highly rejective universities in the sector (Boliver, 2016), where such specialist courses such as medicine are found. Yet, this issue has never been rectified even with the efforts made by medical schools to diversify its intake (Fielding et al., 2018; Mathers et al., 2011). It must be highlighted that their efforts were colour-evasive. The evidence of unequal access into highly rejective universities has been constant. Representatives of these highly rejective universities have often redirected attention to the applicants' pre-entry qualifications and their subject choices to explain the lack of success of students of colour rather than their own gatekeeping processes (Russell Group, 2015). Moreover, widening access outreach activities reflects policy priorities which have been colour-evasive, invested in the victimhood narrative of the education underachievement of the white working class (Atherton & Mazhari, 2019; Commission of Race and Ethnic Disparities 2021).

Mathers et al., (2011, 6) expressed concern about a right-wing media backlash for race conscious, targeted interventions in diversifying university access to medical schools. This is a real concern considering the observations of Gillborn (2008; 2015; 2020) and Crawford (2019), and how policymakers and the media have nurtured the narrative of white working-class education underachievement. However, there is reason to be optimistic given the university regulator's investment and racially targeted approach to enhance and support postgraduate research study opportunities for students of colour.[4] Stevenson et al. (2019) laid out a rationale under the banner of the Equality Act 2010 to target interventions for people of colour. The sector has already engaged with specific support for students of colour to become postgraduate researchers on this premise. Now, it is a call to the sector to build on this initiative to racially diversify English higher education.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declare no competing interests.

[4] At the time of writing, the OfS has agreed to fund thirteen projects to improve access for students of colour to pursue postgraduate research: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/projects-to-improve-black-asian-and-minority-ethnic-students-access-to-postgraduate-research/

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