Colour-evasiveness and higher education: Synthesis of literature on race and widening access

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Widening access policy and initiatives in English higher education (HE) have largely been colour evasive rather than colour-focused. The paper draws attention to the literature - empirical work on widening access specifically - to understand the silence on race matters. The systematic literature review repurposes a framework by Gillborn (2005) in analysing widening access policy and race matters. In getting a glimpse of how the issue of unequal access to higher education has been framed in the research field, the paper reveals a better grasp of the continued colour evasiveness of widening access policy. 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 colour-specific targeted interventions to remedy the continued race inequity in accessing elite universities based on the evidence gathered from the synthesis.

This paper builds upon Gillborn's (2005) seminal work on how English educational policy is an act of white supremacy. I specifically focus on English higher education policy and practice aimed at widening participation and fair access to students of colour. 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 English 'market' of higher education. But, for the purposes of this paper, I will refer to widening participation and fair access as one - widening access policy.

Even with the call of the Dearing Report (1997) that offers 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' universities in the same way as white students (Connor *et al.* 2004; Pilkington 2009; Stevenson *et al.* 2019). According to Connor *et al.* (2004, 44), minority ethnic students were more likely to study in less prestigious universities, particularly institutions that gained university status with the passage of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, than in 'elite institutions' such as Oxford and Cambridge. This unevenness, this unequal access, has been a constant observation in the sector since the Dearing Report (1997). The Office for Students, the English university sector regulator, in 2018 found that the proportion of Black Caribbean and Pakistani students entering an elite university were lower than white British students (Office for Students 2018, 3). Moreover, even if they were to gain access into higher education regardless of 'elite' 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. Afterwards, 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 attain a better grasp of the continued colour-evasiveness of widening access policy (Tuhiwai-Smith 2012). By repurposing Gillborn's (2005) framework in analysing the racial implications of English educational policy, I will conduct a systematic literature review on widening access policy and race matters.

Colour-evasiveness and widening access policy

Annamma *et al.* (2017) introduced the notion of colour evasiveness as a move beyond 'colour-blind' ideologies and to specifically highlight and trouble white supremacy in education. It is congruent with Gillborn's (2005) observations of English education policy being tacitly white supremacist. There is an active avoidance, an evasiveness, to not mark and recognise the role of structural racism that negatively impacts the lives of people of colour. This colour evasiveness is a tool of white supremacy (Annamma *et al.* 2017, 152), which is applicable to English widening access higher education 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 been carved out foregrounding 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 Dearing Report to the periphery such as African-Caribbean men and Bangladeshi women being underrepresented in the sector (at the time), that students of colour were concentrated in 'less prestigious post-1992 universities,' and that students of colour achieved a lower rate of return on their higher education qualifications than white students. Connor *et al.* (2004) confirmed these race inequalities in the sector such as students of colour not accessing higher education in a uniform way (such as not accessing 'elite universities' in a similar proportion to white students), achieving unequal outcomes in their first degrees, and gaining meaningful employment in comparison to white students. Unfortunately, fifteen years later, there

has been little, if any, improvements made for students of colour as evidenced in the work of Stevenson *et al.* (2019).

So, for the past two decades, students of colour have not been accessing and experiencing higher education in the same way as white students. It has become the norm and taken-for-granted, masked by the 'good news', the headline statistic that students of colour are more than proportionally represented than white students in higher education (Pilkington 2009, 17). This becomes the backbone of a colour-evasive, white supremacist narrative for widening access policy. As the latter narrative emboldens, the work invested in achieving a sense of race equality in education and getting a handle on an understanding of structural racism spurred by the MacPherson Report (1999) diminishes (Warmington *et al.* 2018): public sector bodies to promote race equality and address race discrimination, such as the Commission for Racial Equality gets subsumed into the Equality and Human Rights Commission in 2007[1]; the Race Relations Act gets superseded by the Equality Act 2010. The latter is legislation to ensure equality of opportunity and eliminate discrimination against those with protected characteristics specifically - age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation.

As the impact of the MacPherson Report (1993) lessens (Warmington *et al.* 2018), a narrative of the underachievement of white 'working-class' in education emerges into the public 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

[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/commission-for-racial-equality-annual-report-and-accounts-april-to-september-2007

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 (Gillborn 2015). Some of the questions spurred by Gillborn (2008; 2015) were: (1) why focus attention 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 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 address public concern and 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 shifted into widening access into higher education policy in 2016 with the Department for Business Innovation and Skills White Paper Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility, and Student Choice (DBIS 2016).

Citing an Institute for Fiscal Studies report (Crawford and Greaves 2015)[2], the White Paper (DBIS 2016, 55), stated:

> ...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 silencing of unequal access into higher education for students of colour by foregrounding *white British males*, and lack of rationale for the Government to support outreach initiatives for students of colour. So, subsequently, the Office for Students resourced efforts for outreach activities to white British males specifically (Atherton and Mazhari 2019). It was white-specific, as well as gendered, but promoted a colour evasive strategy, ignorant of structural racism, leaving white supremacy in English education policy unmarked and intact (Gillborn 2005).

Since the inception of widening participation outreach activities under Aimhigher and the establishment of the Office for Fair Access in 2004, the issue of

[2] 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 Mandy 2021; Harrison and McCaig 2015).

students of colour and white students not accessing higher education in a uniform way has been peripheral. It has always been colour-evasive, which has become 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, however, has not received the same attention by policymakers and the media. It is peripheral, like the issue of unequal, stratified access to higher education based on race.

Boliver and Powell (2021, 6) in a report in improving policy and practice for fair access to universities in England suggested to policymakers to 'ensure that individual-level indicators of socioeconomic disadvantage such as information from the National Pupil Database on individual students' [FSM] status is made available to universities' to factor into admissions decisions. This recommendation may be beneficial for people of colour in equally accessing higher education to white peers given the evidence that young people of colour are more than proportionately represented in eligibility for FSM (Crawford 2019). However, the recommendation still evades engagement and discussion of structural racism in education.

The work of Stevenson *et al.* (2019) - a joint effort of academic researchers, Advance HE (a member-led charity based in the UK that works with universities across the world to make them more inclusive), and the Runnymede Trust (the UK's leading independent race equality think tank) - presented evidence, detailing the systematic race inequalities including matters of access into higher education. They signalled the Office for Students' (2018) briefing which indicated that the proportion Black Caribbean students entering an 'elite' institution is lower than all other ethnic groups and lower than White British students (Stevenson *et al.* 2019, 10). Race was at the centre of their analysis. In making recommendations, they foregrounded targeted interventions and employing positive action as indicated in the Equality Act 2010 as race is a *protected characteristic* (Stevenson *et al.* 2019, 12-13):

> Targeting in the form of positive action are lawful interventions that are permitted under the Equality Act 2010 to 'alleviate disadvantage experienced by people who share a protected characteristic; or reduce under-representation in relation to particular activities; or meet particular needs.'
>
> The Equality Act 2010:
> Positive action: general[3]
> (1) This section applies if a person (P) reasonably thinks that—
> (a) persons who share a protected characteristic suffer a disadvantage connected to the characteristic,
> (b) persons who share a protected characteristic have needs that are different from the needs of persons who do not share it, or
> (c) participation in an activity by persons who share a protected characteristic is disproportionately low.

[3] See From Equality Act 2010 Part 11 Chapter 2 Section 158
https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/pdfs/ukpga_20100015_en.pdf

(2) This Act does not prohibit P from taking any action which is a proportionate means of achieving the aim of—

(a) enabling or encouraging persons who share the protected characteristic to overcome or minimise that disadvantage,

(b) meeting those needs, or

(c) enabling or encouraging persons who share the protected characteristic to participate in that activity

Such measures must be **proportionate** to achieving the aim. Targeting members of disadvantaged or under-represented ethnic groups is not legal unless the three conditions of proportionality, disadvantage, and need are met. Actions that do not conform to the legislation are at risk of being judged discriminatory.

This understanding of the Equality Act 2010 specifically with race, as a protected characteristic in mind, counters the colour evasiveness that has remained steadfast in widening access policy. Also, taking a step back and observing the sector, I see there may be evidence to suggest that the university regulator, the Office for Students, has taken on the recommendations of the Stevenson *et al.* (2019) report. Given the barriers students of colour currently encounter in pursuing in postgraduate study in the English higher education sector and lack of representation (Williams *et al.* 2019), targeted activity to address this inequity under the Equality Act 2010 meets the conditions of proportionality. The Office for Students already has poured in £8 million to improve access to postgraduate research opportunities specifically to students of colour in England.[4] It is very much colour-specific and targeted.

Given this sign of encouragement from the sector, why has there not been any discussion or action on addressing the unequal access into higher education based on

[4] 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/

race as mentioned by the likes of Pilkington (2009) and Stevenson *et al.* (2019)? In addressing this question, I turn 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. The research questions driving this study have been framed by Gillborn (2005) and repurposed and remixed 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 as a result of widening access policy priorities? (3) What are the racial outcomes and effects of widening access policy?

Methodology

To address these questions, a systematic literature review on race and widening participation was conducted. This was informed by the PRISMA checklist (Moher *et al.* 2009). To adequately address the research questions for this paper, I chosen to do a systematic literature review focusing specifically on articles from peer-reviewed academic journals as access to libraries to retrieve books, specific chapters, and grey literature proved challenging due to closures of university facilities and circumstances related to COVID during the time of study. There were no quality criteria other than publication in peer-reviewed journals. There was a point where I did reconsider the decision on the inclusion of grey literature midway after talking with colleagues in my research networks. Unfortunately, I still ran into similar challenges in seeking out this

type of literature, so the focus of the synthesis was drawn 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).

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

In 2003, a White Paper on higher education was published which proposed a tuition fee increase of £3k per year and the creation of the Office for Fair Access and Aimhigher 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 journal articles
- Published between 2004-2020
- 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:

- Published outside a peer-reviewed journal

- Published before 2004 or after 2020
- 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 316 records after trimming down duplicate records. After screening the records according to inclusion and exclusion criteria, I was able to narrow down 33 full-text articles to assess for eligibility. I assessed full-text articles within NVivo, which has been helpful in formulating thoughts and organising ideas when addressing the research questions. Full-text article eligibility for this study narrowed down records to 20 (see appendices for Figure 1: PRISMA flowchart and Table 1: listing of papers included and excluded).

Analysis

The use of NVivo software facilitated the organising of ideas in responding to the research questions. All nodes, or themes, generated collapsed into addressing the research questions. These research questions, as I have already stated, are repurposed from Gillborn's (2005) approach, his '3 tests', in analysing how education policy in the UK has been framed by a race neutral discourse that leaves white supremacy intact, which I refer to here as colour evasive (Annamma *et al.* 2017). In articulating the analysis of education policy in general, Gillborn (2005) leans 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? This was my framework in analysing and synthesising the collected texts regarding widening participation and

fair access policy and weighing-up the existing research evidence about race and ethnicity.

My position as a researcher of colour, son of Filipino immigrants, in metropole UK is also a factor in how I read and analyse the collected texts (Shahjahan *et al.* 2021). My view has also been informed by critical race theory as a research method in education (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). This meant foregrounding and centring on race (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008), which is consistent with the tenets of critical race theory in education (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Solórzano and Yosso 2002). Five tenets of critical race theory pertinent to education research were laid out by Solórzano and Yosso (2002, 25-27):

- The inter-centricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination – While race and racism are foregrounded, they must be viewed at their intersection with other forms of subordination, such as class and gender;
- The challenge to dominant ideology – White supremacy is to be challenged, and notions of "neutral" research or "objective" researchers rejected. Deficit-informed research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of colour is exposed;
- The commitment to social justice - This offers a transformative response to racial, gender, and class oppression, acknowledging that educational spaces are contradictory in that their potential to marginalise coexists with their potential to transform;
- The centrality of experiential knowledge – This exposes deficit-informed research and methods that silence and distort the experiences of people of colour and instead focuses on their racialised, gendered, and classed experiences as sources of strength;

- The transdisciplinary perspective – This challenges ahistoricism and the uni-disciplinary focus of most analyses and insists on analysing race and racism by placing them in both historical and contemporary contexts.

Rooted in US legal scholarship (Bell 1992; Delgado and Stefanic 2017), critical race theory 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; 2015), and Rollock (2012) have employed a critical race theory lens in English education. There is also specific critical race theory application in English higher education research, such as Doharty *et al.* (2021), Joseph-Salisbury (2019), Samatar *et al.* (2021), and Sian (2019).

In contributing to this rich body of work, I acknowledge that: (1) white supremacy is endemic in wider UK society and reflected in higher education; and (2) that higher education is not value neutral. Also, worthy of note, I have worked in widening participation, as a practitioner and researcher, for over fifteen years in English higher education. I have worked on Aimhigher projects, evaluated the National Network of Collaborative Outreach programme, and supported work on UniConnect (a successor programme previously known as the National Collaborative Outreach Programme).

Findings

Priority

It must be reiterated from the onset that all twenty articles focused on race and widening access into higher education and included race and ethnicity in their rationale of study. This, of course, is welcomed considering the marginality of race and ethnic matters

throughout education policy in England being *prioritised* (Gillborn 2005). Race equity has been peripheral in widening participation echoing Pilkington's (2009) assessment of policymaking in this area. This section is an attempt to consider how research in widening access may reflect this. The rationale for doing this is because how the study of race inequalities in accessing higher education is framed offers insight on how a solution will be pursued (Tuhiwai-Smith 2012). So, if the problem of widening participation and fair access is not about racism, then addressing it becomes a non-issue.

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 'elite' 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 and Gamsu 2018; Harrison 2013; Khambhaita and Bhopal 2015).

However, accounting for structural racism in researching widening access is not widespread. Much of the collected literature falls short, 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. The results from this particular study shown that there was no evidence of biases against Black and

minority ethnic applicants in university acceptances, which is surprising and contrary to findings of other studies (Boliver 2013; 2016; Connor *et al.* 2004; Fielding *et al.* 2018; Gallagher *et al.* 2009; Mathers *et al.* 2011; Mathers *et al.* 2016). However, an inference was made about 'Afro-Caribbean' students that they 'appear to be risk adverse' with a tendency to apply to 'new universities' due to their low UCAS points (Ivy 2010, 401). There is cause for uneasiness here as it gives credence to a dominant 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 usually in the realm of education studies becomes 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 and Cooke 2009), and confidence or 'other cultural variables' factored to explain why some students find it difficult to enter elite 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 elite universities and medical schools with notable exceptions (Boliver 2013; 2016; Fielding *et al.* 2018; Mathers *et al.* 2011; Mathers *et al.* 2016).

With the backdrop of the colour-evasiveness of widening participation policy and the dominance of the under representation of the white, working-class discourse (Crawford and Greaves 2015; DBIS 2016), marking structural racism 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 elite 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. The utility of this literature review is being able to convey the evidence of the beneficiaries and losers of widening access policy priorities.

Students of colour have not been benefitting from widening participation or fair access activities. 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), that students of colour are mostly concentrated in post-92 universities and are not accessing elite institutions. The evidence scanned for this literature review suggests this remains true. 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 pre-1992 universities (which will include a good proportion of elite universities) to choose from in comparison to students of colour. Boliver (2016) presented evidence that white applicants receive the highest offer rates to elite institutions than other racialised groups even controlling for variables of prior attainment, subject choice, and competitiveness (an institution's rejection rate). Those categorised/identify as Black Caribbean, Black African, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi are not accessing elite institutions equally as white applicants. This is congruent with the findings of medical schools, majority of them housed in elite 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).

Also, students of colour have not benefitted from widening access policy due to limitations of geographic mobility. The evidence suggests that this particularity impacts female students of colour from Bangladeshi and Pakistani backgrounds (Donnelly and Gamsu 2018; Khambhaita and Bhopal 2015; Niven *et al.* 2013). Explanations for this phenomenon has been varied. Khambhaita and Bhopal (2015, 595) indicated that Asian female students, particularly those who identify as being Muslim, tend to remain in the family parental home as a student due to anxiety of student and graduate debt and religious-cultural norms and values. Niven *et al.* (2013, 131) suggested that female students of colour, particularly British Bangladeshi women they interviewed, were

aware of structural forces that acts against them inclusive of ethnic and racial prejudices that constrains 'their capacity to transform their life chances'. What binds both explanations are that cultural, religious, and racial differences are at play, countering a race-neutral, colour evasive narrative of widening access policy.

It needs to be stated that there are differences of success between ethnic groups housed underneath the category of British Asian and minority ethnic (BAME), or what I have referred throughout this paper as 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 Asians, specifically 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. It is the latter in which the work of See *et al.* (2012) and its systematic review of widening access interventions to encourage and retain young people of colour in post-compulsory education may be beneficial. However, colour-specific interventions for students of colour are not part of the remit of the current sector university outreach programme, Uni Connect, which is sanctioned by the university government regulator. It has been colour-evasive reflecting widening access policy priorities.

Outcomes

Following Gillborn's (2005) line of query in marking race inequalities in education policy, I sought to examine the outcomes of widening access. Gillborn (2005, 496-7) concluded that educational reforms which are promoted as 'best practice for all' works

against race equity. This harks back to how a problem is framed (Tuhiwai-Smith 2012). So, if the problem of widening access is not framed as a matter of race inequity, then a conjuring of a solution will reflect this. Thus, race inequity will never be addressed, with students of colour not being able to *fully* access higher education equally as white students.

As indicated earlier, outreach, raising-awareness of higher education initiatives specifically those funded and emerging from the government university regulator are not colour-specific. 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). 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 elite 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; Mathers *et al.* 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. Both initiatives were race neutral, reflecting again widening policy priorities. So, the remark made by Mathers *et al.* (2011) about affirmative action being significant, as the authors hint at the need for colour-specific 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. 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 elite 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 elite universities has been constant. It was even mentioned in the Dearing Report (1997), which is a quarter of a century ago. Representatives of these elite universities have often directed 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). This explains my own hesitancy about work from the demand-side (McCaig 2018), as it detracts attention away from the gatekeepers. Moreover, widening access outreach activities reflects policy priorities so they have been colour-evasive and recently invested in the narrative of the education underachievement of the white working class (Atherton and Mazhari 2019).

Mathers *et al.* (2011, 6) expressed concern about a right-wing media backlash for race-specific targeted interventions in diversifying university access to medical schools. This concern is real considering the observations of Gillborn (2015) and Crawford (2019) and how policymakers and the media have nurtured the narrative of white working-class education underachievement based on *another* misleading statistic. However, as mentioned earlier, 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. Stevenson *et al.* (2019) laid out a rationale under the banner of the Equality Act 2010 to target interventions based on race. The sector has already engaged with specific support for students of colour to become postgraduate researchers on this premise. Now, it is a call for elite universities to follow suit if it truly desires to racially diversify English higher education.

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Figure 1. PRISMA Flowchart

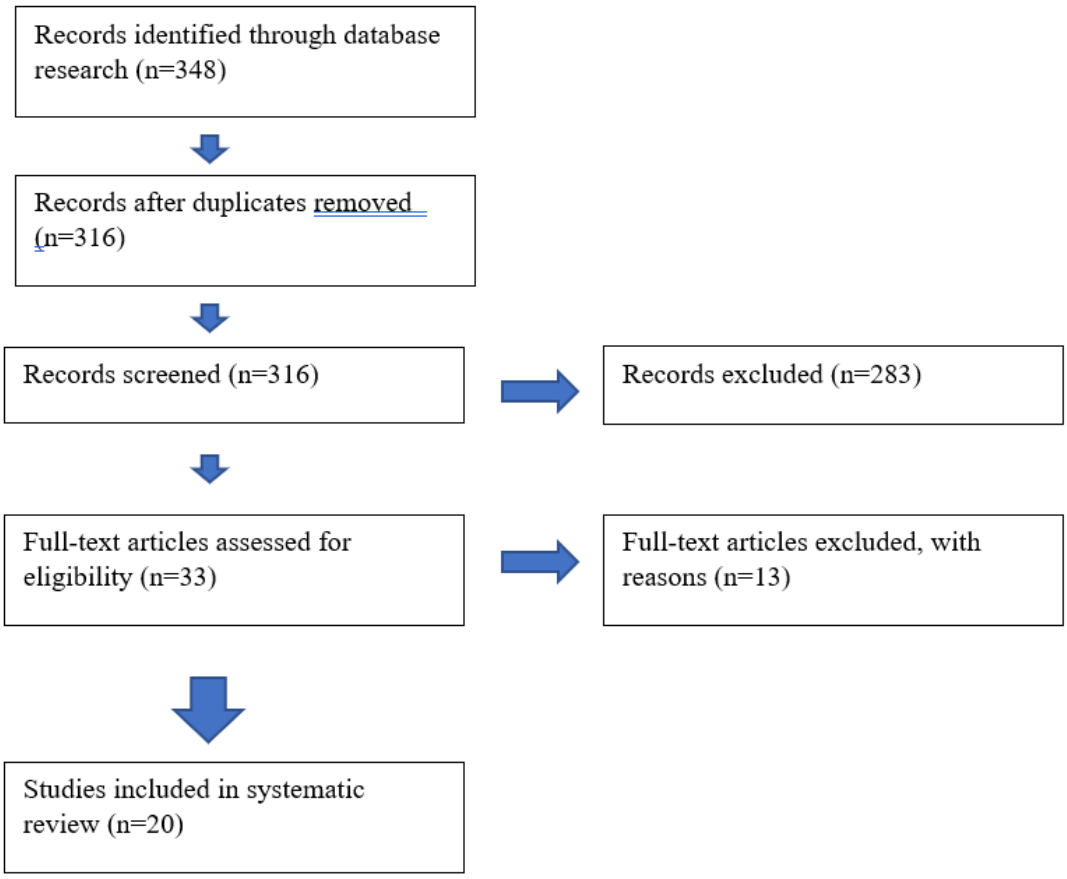

Table 1: Literature included / excluded with reasons

	Included		Excluded	Reasons for exclusion
1	Basit, T. N. 2013. Educational Capital as a Catalyst for Upward Social Mobility Amongst British Asians: A Three-Generational Analysis. *British Educational Research Journal* 39 (4): 714-732.	1	Avis, J., Orr, K. and Warmington, P. 2017. Race and Vocational Education and Training in England. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training* 69 (3): 292-310.	It did not focus on access into higher education.
2	Boliver, V. 2013. How Fair is Access to More Prestigious UK Universities? *The British Journal of Sociology* 64 (2): 344-364.	2	Beck, V., Fuller, A. and Unwin, L. 2006. Safety in Stereotypes? the Impact of Gender and 'Race' on Young People's Perceptions of their Post-Compulsory Education and Labour Market Opportunities. *British Educational Research Journal* 32 (5): 667-686.	It did not focus on access into higher education.
3	Boliver, V. 2016. Exploring Ethnic Inequalities in Admission to Russell Group Universities. *Sociology* 50 (2): 247-266.	3	Burke, P. J. 2011. Masculinity, Subjectivity and Neoliberalism in Men's Accounts of Migration and Higher Educational Participation. *Gender and Education* 23 (2): 169-184.	Did not include race and ethnicity (those racialised) in the rationale or research design
4	Davies, P., Mangan, J., Hughes, A., and Slack, K. 2013. Labour Market Motivation and Undergraduates' Choice of Degree Subject. *British Educational Research Journal* 39 (2): 361-382.	4	Burt-Perkins, R. and Mills, J. 2009. Pitching it Right? Selection and Learning at a Music Conservatoire. *British Educational Research Journal* 35 (6): 817-835.	Did not include race and ethnicity (those racialised) in the rationale or research design
5	Donnelly, M. and Gamsu, S. 2018. Regional Structures of Feeling? A Spatially and Socially Differentiated Analysis of UK Student Im/Mobility. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 39 (7): 961-981.	5	Casey, R., Smith, C. P. and Koshy, V. 2011. Opportunities and Challenges of Working with Gifted and Talented Students in an Urban Context: A University-Based Intervention Program. *Gifted Child Today Magazine* 34 (1): 35-43.	It did not focus on access into higher education.

6	Fielding, S., Alexander, P., Tiffin, Greatrix, R., Lee, A. J., Patterson, F., Nicholson, S. and Cleland, J. 2018. Do Changing Medical Admissions Practices in the UK Impact on Who is Admitted? an Interrupted Time Series Analysis. *British Medical Journal Open* 8 (10): e023274. doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2018-023274	6	Collins, M., Collins, G. and Butt, G. 2015. Social Mobility or Social Reproduction? A Case Study of the Attainment Patterns of Students According to their Social Background and Ethnicity. *Educational Review* 67 (2): 196-217.	It did not focus on access into higher education.
7	Gallagher, J. E., Niven, V., Donaldson. N., and Wilson, N. H. F. 2009. Widening Access? Characteristics of Applicants to Medical and Dental Schools, Compared with UCAS. *British Dental Journal* 207 (9): 433-445.	7	Crozier, G., Reay, D. and Clayton, J. 2019. Working the Borderlands: Working-Class Students Constructing Hybrid Identities and Asserting their Place in Higher Education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 40 (7): 922-937	It did not focus on access into higher education.
8	Harrison, N. 2013. Modelling the Demand for Higher Education by Local Authority Area in England using Academic, Economic and Social Data. *British Educational Research Journal* 39 (5): 793-816.	8	Francis, B., Mau, A. and Archer, L. 2017. The Construction of British Chinese Educational Success: Exploring the Shifting Discourses in Educational Debate, and their Effects. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 43 (14): 2331-2345.	It did not focus on access into higher education.
9	Hayton, A. R., Haste, P. and Jones, J. 2015. Promoting Diversity in Creative Art Education: The Case of Fine Art at Goldsmiths, University of London. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 36 (8): 1258-1276.	9	Gamsu, S. 2018. The 'other' London Effect: The Diversification of London's Suburban Grammar Schools and the Rise of Hyper-selective Elite State Schools. *The British Journal of Sociology* 69 (4): 1155-1174.	It did not focus on access into higher education.
10	Hemsley-Brown, J. 2015. Getting into a Russell Group University: High Scores and Private Schooling. *British Educational Research Journal* 41 (3): 398-422.	10	Kimura, M. 2014. Non-Performativity of University and Subjectification of Students: The Question of Equality and Diversity in UK Universities. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 35 (4): 523-540.	It did not focus on access into higher education.
11	Ivy, J. 2010. Choosing Futures: Influence of Ethnic Origin in University Choice. *International Journal of Educational Management* 24 (5): 391-403.	11	Mirza, H. S. 2006. 'Race', Gender and Educational Desire. *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 9 (2): 137-158.	It did not focus on access into higher education.

12	Khambhaita, P. 2014. Indian Mothers' Perceptions of their Roles in their Daughters' University Course Choices. *British Educational Research Journal* 40 (6): 1019-1035.	12	Pilkington, A. 2009. The Impact of Government Initiatives in Promoting Racial Equality in Higher Education: A Case Study. *Ethnicity and Race in a Changing World* 1 (2): 15-25.	Did not include any form of empirical data.
13	Khambhaita, P. and Bhopal, K. 2015. Home Or Away? the Significance of Ethnicity, Class and Attainment in the Housing Choices of Female University Students. *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 18 (4): 535-566.	13	Richardson, J. T. E., Mittelmeier, J. and Rienties, B. 2020. The Role of Gender, Social Class and Ethnicity in Participation and Academic Attainment in UK Higher Education: An Update. *Oxford Review of Education* 46 (3): 346-362.	Did not include any form of empirical data. (It was a literature review but not systematic.)
14	Law, I., Finney, S., and Swann, S. J. 2014. Searching for Autonomy: Young Black Men, Schooling and Aspirations. *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 17 (4): 569-590.			
15	Mathers, J., Sitch, A., Marsh, J. L., and Parry, J. 2011. Widening Access to Medical Education for Under-Represented Socioeconomic Groups: Population Based Cross Sectional Analysis of UK Data, 2002-6. *British Medical Journal* 342 (7796): 1143-539.			
16	Mathers, J., Sitch, A., and Parry, J. 2016. Population-Based Longitudinal Analyses of Offer Likelihood in UK Medical Schools: 1996-2012. *Medical Education* 50 (6): 612-623.			
17	Niven, J., Faggian, A. and Ruwanpura, K. N. 2013. Exploring "Underachievement" among Highly Educated Young British-Bangladeshi Women. *Feminist Economics* 19 (1): 111-136.			
18	See, B. H., Gorard, S. and Torgerson, C. 2012. Promoting Post-16 Participation of Ethnic Minority Students from Disadvantaged Backgrounds: A			

	Systematic Review of the most Promising Interventions. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 17 (4): 409-422.
19	See, B. H., Torgerson, C., Gorard, S., Ainsworth, H., Low, G. and Wright, K. 2011. Factors that Promote High post-16 Participation of some Minority Ethnic Groups in England: A Systematic Review of the UK-based Literature. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 16 (1): 85-100.
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