

Why we reject the report authored by the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities

As researchers dedicated to investigating education in the global North and South, we at the Centre for International Education have reflected carefully on the [report authored by the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities](#). We have written this piece because we have an intellectual responsibility to address the report's lack of empirical rigour, its internal contradictions, and its flawed conception of race and racism. But we also have an ethical responsibility to you, our students, to make clear that we reject the report's ethos of suspicion towards democratic protest. We want you to know that we value and support your intellectual and political agency, and that the right to protest is a key condition of substantive equality and freedom.

1. What does the report say about racial disparities in education?

School assessment outcomes: the report argues that substantially lower assessment outcomes for Black Caribbean children and youth are not primarily a result of systemic racism, but are instead a result of “lack of optimism”, “family structure”, and “low income”.

School exclusion rates: the report argues that substantially higher exclusion rates for Gypsy, Roma, Irish Traveller, Mixed White and Black Caribbean students, and Black Caribbean students “cannot be reduced to structural racism”, but are instead primarily a result of “school [climate], poverty, and childhood trauma” and stresses that “Poor behaviour and inadequate discipline [are] a serious problem in schools.”

Teacher profiles: the report briefly notes that the teacher workforce is overwhelmingly and disproportionately White, but does not consider the causes or consequences of this.

School governance: the report briefly notes that the overwhelming majority of governors and trustees who took part in the National Governance Association are White, but does not consider the causes or consequences of this.

Government funding: the report notes that “pupils from more affluent backgrounds are attracting larger increases to funding rates compared with those from more disadvantaged backgrounds.” The report does not consider the causes or consequences of this.

University entrance: the report notes that the largest proportion of White university students attend elite universities. In contrast, the smallest proportion of black university students attend elite universities. They are instead the most likely to attend “low tariff” universities, such as former polytechnics.

University outcomes: the report notes that, “Once at university, ethnic minority students – with the exception of Asian students – are more likely to drop out, have lower levels of attainment, and lower earnings after graduating.” It notes that White students have the highest percentage of first class degrees at 32%, and Black students with the lowest percentage at 15%.

Main take-away: the report states that it “found no evidence of systemic or institutional racism”. It claims that insufficient student motivation, single parent households and poverty are alternative explanations for racial disparities. And it further states that greater attention should be paid to geographic disparities and “White underachievement”.

2. How does the report aim to address racial disparities in education?

The report focuses primarily on whole-school interventions, arguing that “interventions [should not] single out ethnic minority groups from the White majority. It is about collectively raising standards for all children based on what works to boost opportunity. A rising tide really can raise all boats.” The report includes a set of formal recommendations, as well as informal recommendations in the preface, introduction and conclusion. We list some of the main ones here.

Lengthen the school day: the report claims that “many academies and free schools, which tend to outperform council-run schools, have used their autonomy to lengthen the school day” and recommends that similar programmes should be implemented in council-run schools. It further suggests the use of other practices in privately-run academies, such as increased disciplinary measures.

Research successes of some groups: the report recommends that the government conduct research to “understand what factors drive the success of high performing pupils’ communities including black African, Chinese, Bangladeshi and Indian ethnic groups, and how it can be replicated to support all pupils.”

Curriculum neutrality: the report states that “some schools [used] materials which reflected narrow political agendas or gave a biased picture of historical and current events.” The report would “welcome” the government setting “school leadership expectations around political neutrality and transparency on curriculum design”, and recommends the Department for Education commission research into “whether schools are teaching in an impartial way”.

Create alternatives to negative calls for decolonisation: the report puts forward the ‘Making of Modern Britain’ teaching resource as a “response to negative calls for ‘decolonising’ the curriculum. Neither the banning of White authors or token expressions of Black achievement will help to broaden young minds. We have argued against bringing down statues, instead, we want all children to reclaim their British heritage. We want to create a teaching resource that looks at the influence of the UK, particularly during the Empire period.” It states that “There is a new story about the Caribbean experience which speaks to the slave period not only being about profit and suffering but how culturally African people transformed themselves into a re-modelled African/Britain.”

Area-targeted school funding: the report does not recommend any changes to “the work of levelling-up funding for schools through the recently introduced national funding formula”, as the full benefits of this work “have not yet had a chance to materialise.” The report instead recommends that new funding should be used to target “area-based” disparities in education.

University outreach in schools: the report recommends that the Office for Students issue stronger guidance on “funding outreach programmes and placing university outreach staff in schools to help reduce disparities in applications at an earlier stage.”

Apprenticeships: the report recommends that the government find ways of incentivising ethnic minority students to take up apprenticeships as an alternative to pursuing university studies.

3. Why do we reject the report?

Shoddy use of evidence: a [number of experts and organisations quoted in the report have objected](#) to their inclusion on the grounds that the evidence base for the claims made in the report is very weak, and that their research findings have been intentionally misconstrued or falsely reported. We agree. For example, the report repeatedly claims that privately-run academies outperform government-run schools, without providing evidence for these claims. It further claims that academies should be used as the model for school-based interventions targeting racial disparities, without considering the evidence of [higher rates of exclusion](#) of black and impoverished students from these academies.

Similarly, the report claims that “minorities who have been long established in a country, particularly in a context of racial and socio-economic disadvantage, may be the least likely to be optimistic about the possibilities of social mobility and education to transform their lives.” As evidence it uses a [book published in 1978](#) on racial educational disparities in the United States and the role of differential rewards for equal effort in sustaining these disparities. It is unclear how this book provides evidence for this claim.

Exclusion of relevant statistics: as a [joint statement by education unions and student organisations](#) notes, the report excludes important education statistics. For example, they note

that “Fewer than 1% of the professors employed at UK universities are Black, and few British universities employ more than one or two Black professors. Only 140 academic staff at professorial level identified as black - equating to 0.7% out of a total of more than 21,000 professors (HESA 2018-19). Only 27 of these professors are women. More than nine in ten college Principals (93%) and University vice chancellors (94%) are White.” These statistics are reflected in low levels of institutional financial support for Black doctoral students. A [Freedom of Information request](#) to UKRI revealed that between 2016 and 2019, “of the total 19,868 PhD funded studentships awarded by UKRI research councils collectively, 245 (1.2%) were awarded to Black or Black Mixed students, with just 30 of those being from Black Caribbean backgrounds.” Experts have also found similar forms of [cherry-picking](#) in the chapter on health disparities.

Exclusion of racist policies: the report does not mention recent policy initiatives to increase police presence in schools in “high deprivation areas” which are disproportionately Black and Asian, and [its potential interaction with the school-to-prison pipeline](#). It does not mention the Prevent Strategy, or the Hostile Environment Policy, both of which overwhelmingly target racialised people and require school teachers and university staff to surveil and report on racialised children and youths. These government policies speak directly to the report’s claim that there is no institutional racism in the UK.

The [UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination](#) has expressed serious concern that Prevent has had a “negative impact on the rights to freedom of expression, education and freedom of religion, given the uncertainty as to what can legitimately be discussed and worn in academic settings”, and that the policy contravenes the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child regarding the “collection, retention and sharing of information on individuals, particularly children, without their consent or the consent of their parents or guardians.”

The [UN Special Rapporteur on racism](#) has further reported the use of this policy in a “context of anti-immigrant and xenophobic anxiety sets the stage for the excessive, disproportionate and discriminatory implementation of the ‘prevent duty’ by teachers, professors, nurses and doctors, whom the Government has made the front-line agents in the fight against extremism. Student organizations in particular have highlighted the racist and Islamophobic nature of the Prevent Strategy, noting that Muslim students are its disproportionate targets.”

As the UNESCO Chair in inclusive education [explains](#), “These acts of bias, absences and omissions are all examples of [institutional racism](#). They follow the definition widely accepted since [the 1999 inquiry](#) into the death of black teenager Stephen Lawrence. That is: ‘The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin.’”

Incoherent use of race: the report claims that institutional racism cannot be a contributing factor for racial disparities in student assessment outcomes, because family income plays a strong role in these disparities. This assumes that race and class are mutually exclusive, such that an explanation involving family income precludes racial discrimination from the account.

However, the report also notes the strong statistical relationship between race and class in terms of income levels, job type, unemployment prospects, social housing, and free school meals. As such, the report contradicts itself.

Related to this, insofar as the report disaggregates racial categories by income and gender, it appears to take an intersectional approach. But instead of considering how different vectors of inequality interact with each other, the report seems to assume that the presence of one set of vectors (class and geographical inequalities) precludes the explanatory role of others (race and ethnicity).

Discredited conceptualisation of race: related to this, the report seems to assume that race is an exogenous variable, which is wholly determined by people's phenotype and therefore immune to socio-economic factors. While phenotype often plays an important role in constructions of race, the well-documented malleability of race, and its expression of economic and social power has given rise to a consensus scholarly view that race is an [endogenous variable](#), and therefore subject to bidirectional causation with factors such as class and social status. In other words, racial disparities in education do not only stem from individual discrimination, by which an individual treats people with the same characteristics unequally (for example, when [employers reject](#) Black candidates with the same education qualifications at much higher rates than White candidates). Racial disparities also stem from social mechanisms, such as constraints on accessing services or assets, which are in turn informed by race (for example, [laws penalising nomadic cultures](#) make it difficult for Irish Travellers to access housing, education and employment). Both channels feed into each other, thereby hindering linear causal narratives. As [Prof Kalwant Bhopal has argued](#), the report's failure to recognise this has meant that the report misconstrues and misunderstands racism as a form of personal animus based purely on skin colour, rather than an interlocking system of discriminatory policies and practices.

Ex ante exclusion of racism as an explanatory factor: the report divides racial disparities into two categories:

"Explained racial disparities: this term should be used when there are persistent ethnic differential outcomes that can demonstrably be shown to be as a result of other factors such as geography, class or sex.

Unexplained racial disparities: persistent differential outcomes for ethnic groups with no conclusive evidence about the causes. This applies to situations where a disparate outcome is identified, but there is no evidence as to what is causing it."

As DWP's former chief economist, [Jonathan Portes observes](#), "disparities are either explained by factors other than racism – or there is no evidence so they are unexplained. Thus, ... there is no way, within its framework, to demonstrate, through the use of evidence or analysis, that racism or discrimination, indirect or direct, is actually causing the observed disparities in outcomes." Put simply, the report could not find any evidence that disparities are the result of race or racism, because it excluded the possibility ex ante.

Closing comments

The report singles out “the idealism of those well-intentioned young people [in the Black Lives Matter protests] who have held on to, and amplified, this inter-generational mistrust.” This mistrust, the report argues, contributes to Black people’s lack of optimism about their future, and is partially responsible for racial disparities. The implied suggestion then, is that opposition to racism, instead of racism itself, drives racial inequality. This argument is premised on demonstrably false claims, and its vilification of student protests is not only a failure to recognise the value of student activism; it is a failure to recognise the value of a democratic and egalitarian politics.

We therefore reject the report on empirical, conceptual and ethical grounds. It offers a distorted and harmful perspective of racism in the UK. Its mistrust of democratic protest is antithetical to the way we see the world and the way that we work. And its lack of belief in you, as students and as young people, is in direct opposition to the central hope of education - that students will one day overcome the failings of their teachers.