

Race, higher education and special educational needs and disabilities: a critical and intersectional approach

21st June 2023

Author: **Dr Denise A Miller**, University of Greenwich, Institute for Lifecourse Development.

Over 75 years ago, the arrival of HMS Windrush in Liverpool's docks marked the beginning of a new chapter for hundreds of Caribbean passengers dreaming of better lives in the United Kingdom. However, little did they know that their children, grandchildren and greatgrandchildren would face a deeply troubling reality. As the Windrush generation settled in the UK between the late 1940s and early 1970s, they held hopes for a brighter future for their children. However, these aspirations were met with an education system that perpetuated inequality and injustice. While the UK had ostensibly distanced itself from eugenic-informed perspectives, Black students became the targets of differential treatment and were more likely to be labelled as 'educationally subnormal' (Coard, 1971). Reports from the 1980s documented the persistent underachievement of Black students compared to their White peers (DfES, 1981). Undeniably, teachers, lacking an understanding of the unique needs and experiences of Black students, contributed to their marginalisation within the education system. Teachers' prejudicial attitudes not only affected Black students' academic performance, but it also eroded their sense of self-esteem and limited their future opportunities (Wallace and Joseph-Salisbury, 2022).

The enactment of the Equality Act 2010 was a pivotal moment in UK legislation, aiming to eliminate discrimination and promote equality, including for students with disabilities. However, its implementation in UK-based universities appears to have fallen short of expectations, resulting in the continuance of negative outcomes for some students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Research has shown that university students with SEND are less likely to complete their degrees and graduate with good outcomes (Office for Students, 2019). The absence of support and accommodations exacerbates their difficulties and hinders their academic progress (Hector, 2020). This disparity in educational outcomes extends beyond the academic environment, affecting future opportunities and career paths. Lower rates of degree completion and outcomes can impede access to highly skilled jobs and further education, perpetuating inequalities and limiting the potential contributions and talents of individuals with SEND to society (Drakeley, 2022). Interestingly, the experiences of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students with disabilities in higher education has garnered little attention in recent years. However, beneath this gap in the literature, lies a deeper issue: the intersectionality of race and disability, which

poses unique and significant barriers for BAME university students (Arday et al., 2022). Disturbingly, results from a recent study ([Miller, 2021](#)) uncover a stark reality. BAME students with SEND are often twice as likely to encounter prejudice, discrimination and racism when compared to their White peers with SEND. And what is more, interpersonal and microaggressive forms of discrimination, are invariably perpetuated by their peers and their teachers. While further research is required to extend the findings to a broader population, the existing evidence is unequivocal - SEND does not impact all students equally. Put differently, while standing on the shoulders of Windrush generations, BAME children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren, are now being subjugated to differential treatment that affects their academic performance, erodes their self-esteem and limits their future opportunities ([Bolton and Lewis, 2023](#)).

So, what has changed?

While the Equality Act 2010 was a significant milestone in promoting equal opportunities for students with SEND, there is still much work to be done in higher education. It is imperative for universities to recognise and address the intersectional nature of the barriers faced by BAME students with SEND. Clearly, a one-size-fits-all approach to disability and diversity is insufficient in addressing the complex challenges these students encounter.

Arguably, Universities must strive to adopt a comprehensive and intersectional approach to understanding the unique experiences of different student groups and actively working to dismantle barriers. This approach entails developing inclusive policies, practices, and curricula that cater to the needs of diverse student populations. It involves providing targeted support and resources to students from marginalised backgrounds and creating an inclusive and accessible campuses. Universities must also genuinely engage with students and staff from diverse backgrounds to ensure their voices are heard and their needs are considered in decision-making processes. And saliently, people sitting around the decision-making tables must, at the very least, come from diverse backgrounds. By recognising and addressing the intersectional nature of persistent barriers, universities can then claim they are striving towards creating equitable, diverse, inclusive and accessible teaching and learning environments that meet the needs of all students, regardless of their race or disability status. Alternatively, the possibility of achieving significant change remains an illusory pipe dream.

References

Arday, J., Branchu, C., & Boliver, V. (2022). What Do We Know About Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Participation in UK Higher Education? *Social Policy and Society*, 21(1), 12-25. doi:10.1017/S1474746421000579

Coard, B. (1971). *How the West Indian child is made educationally subnormal in the British school system*. New Beacon Books

[Drakeley, Y. \(2022\). WHAT HAPPENS NEXT? 2022 A report on the outcomes of 2019 disabled graduates. Lancaster University, the AGCAS Disability Task Group.](#)
[Department for Education and Science. \[DfES\]. \(1981\). The Rampton Report. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.](#)

Hector, M. (2020). Arriving at thriving: learning from disabled students to ensure access for all. Policy Connect.

[Miller, D.A. \(2022\). Race, higher education and special educational needs and disabilities. British Educational Research Association.](#)

Office for Students. (2019). Beyond the Bare Minimum: Are Universities and Colleges Doing Enough for Disabled Students?

Wallace, D., & Joseph-Salisbury, R. (2022). How, still, is the Black Caribbean child made educationally subnormal in the English school system? *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 45(8), 1426-1452.