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Covid, schooling and race in England: a case of necropolitics
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Abstract

In this paper I focus on the UK government's Covid-19 pandemic response to schooling in England with regards to the impact on race inequality, an area which has received comparatively little attention. I review the existing research, drawing on work by academics, think tanks, lobbying organisations and media reports, conducted between spring 2020 and autumn 2021, and argue that this evidence suggests that the UK government's pandemic response firstly, has increased existing racial disadvantage for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) pupils in education, and secondly, it has potentially increased the exposure of BAME households to illness and death. I further argue that not only can education policy in response to Covid be considered to be an example of white supremacy, but it is an example of necropolitics, defined as 'the power and the capacity [of the state] to dictate who may live and who must die' (Mbembe 2013,161). I conclude by making some recommendations for wide-reaching social and educational change.

Introduction

In this paper I focus on the UK government's pandemic response to schooling in England with regards to the impact on race inequality, a topic which has received relatively little attention. I review the existing research, drawing on work by academics, think tanks, lobbying organisations and media reports, and consider the impact of schools policy for race inequality. The research under consideration was conducted between spring 2020 and autumn 2021. It is therefore somewhat early to be able to assess the full extent of the impact of the policies. However, drawing on what is currently available, I nevertheless argue that this evidence suggests that the UK government's pandemic response for English schools firstly, has increased existing racial disadvantage for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic[1] (BAME) pupils in education, and secondly, it has potentially increased the exposure of BAME households to illness and death. I further argue that not only can education policy in response to Covid be considered to be an example of white supremacy, but perhaps controversially, particularly in reference to education policy, it is an example of necropolitics defined as 'the power and the capacity [the state] to dictate who may live and who must die' (Mbembe 2013, 161). Necropolitics is a topic rarely covered in relation to education, however, viewing the data through the lens of necropolitics enables us to connect the well-documented routine discrimination against BAME individuals in UK schools with the UK government's wider structural and political project of the production of racial disadvantage as a form of

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[1] BAME, (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) is a commonly used term to describe racialised minorities in the UK. Although used by those advocating for this population, it is however widely contested for many reasons, not least because it seems to suggest a homogeneity within the population, which may to a certain extent mask the social constructed nature of the term, the heterogeneity of the population, and of the various different structures which shape the lives of individuals. I use this term for the purposes of identifying broad, structural inequalities, while also recognising its fundamental inadequacy, and the fact that the term incorporates an enormously diverse group of people, with different cultural and class backgrounds, but also recognising the lack of satisfactory alternatives.

governance. It also enables a 'broadening of understandings of death as a form of power against subjugated […] lives' (Zemblyas 2021).

I begin by considering the UK government's policy for schooling in England during the pandemic, and look at research demonstrating the policy's impact on disadvantaged pupils in general, as well as the impact of the pandemic on race inequality with regards to health. I then move on to discuss the theoretical approaches which my analysis takes, white supremacy and necropolitics. The following section reviews the existing research on the impact of pandemic schooling policy on BAME pupils and families, and argues that overall, it shows that educational disadvantage has increased for BAME pupils and, when considered in the context of the impact of the pandemic on race inequality with regards to health, education policy has exposed BAME pupils and families disproportionately to illness and death. I go on to discuss the research in relation to theories of white supremacy and necropolitics, and argue that existing structures of white supremacy in education have been fuelled as a result of pandemic policies, and that education policy for schools can be viewed as an example of necropolitics. In the final section I conclude by making some recommendations for wide-reaching social and educational change.

The UK government's pandemic schooling policy

At the time of writing (November 2021) deaths from the coronavirus in the UK stand at 145,000 individuals. Government responses to pandemics always need to balance the impact on the populations' health as a result of the disease, versus other impacts such as that upon the economy, society and education. Although no one would argue that dealing with the pandemic is straightforward, these high death rates in the UK can certainly be at least partially attributed to decisions made by central government. Indeed, epidemiologist and government adviser Professor Neil Ferguson says 'had we introduced lockdown a week earlier, we would have reduced final death toll by at least half' (cited in Timmons 2021,30).

Across the world, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, governments have closed educational institutions to try and prevent the spread of the disease (Stage et al 2021). Schools were closed in England in March 2020 by central government, which had given itself the mandate to do this under the emergency Coronavirus Act 2020 which came into force on March 25th.

'what is in the best interests of those in the education arena will vary according to the level of risk which presents itself in a particular place at a particular time. Accordingly, the Act seeks to take a suite of powers to enable Government to react flexibly to manage differing levels of risk.' (UK Government, Coronavirus Act 2020)

Others have argued that government response to the pandemic has been characterised by inconsistent, slow and often laissez-faire approaches which has often left decisions to the individual (Holt and Murray 2021). Schools were first closed on 20th March 2020, somewhat slower than many of the UK's European neighbours and with only two days' notice. They remained closed until the following academic year, which began in September 2020. Schools then remained open in the autumn when the rest of society went into a second lockdown, with ministers emphasising that this was not a risk (see e.g. Weale 2020; Timmins 2021). When some London boroughs closed schools in December 2020 as a result of extremely high Covid case levels locally, Education Minister Williamson forced them to reopen, threatening legal

action, only to then close all schools once again at the last minute in January 2021. They reopened once again in March 2021 with ministers insisting that they would be the last thing to close again. The risks of this strategy have since been demonstrated by research which shows that Covid rates for school teachers are up to 333% higher than average, despite Health Minister Hancock's insistence that '[s]chools are safe' (Gibbons 2021). In the first lockdown, schools remained open for the children of keyworkers (including health and social care workers who were needed to fight the pandemic), and for vulnerable children (those in touch with a social worker or who had education, health and care plans for their special educational needs). In the event, fewer than 2% of pupils attended school on average (Timmins 2021). During the second closure of schools, again schools remained open for the children of those classified as 'critical workers' and vulnerable children, although higher numbers of pupils attended this time than in 2020.

Public exams (GCSEs [taken by pupils aged 15-16], A-Levels [academic exams taken by pupils aged 17-18]and BTECs [vocational exams taken by pupils aged 17-18]), normally centrally marked, were cancelled in 2020 and initially replaced with a system of grades calculated by an algorithm which gave each child a grade based on teacher assessment and a process of standardisation based on their school's recent past results. However, once grades had been awarded, an outcry ensued over the use of the algorithm, since disadvantaged pupils and those in poorly performing schools were more likely to have their results downgraded by the algorithm, and private schools increased their proportion of higher grades. The government, after saying it would not change the results, then performed a U-turn in response to public and media pressure, and the algorithm was replaced with just the 'Centre Assessed Grades'- grades submitted by the teachers for individual pupils- unless these grades were lower. In 2021 public exams were cancelled for a second time, and replaced again with centre assessed grades, remaining unstandardised (Kippin and Cairney 2021).

Others have argued that lessons were not learnt after the first lockdown and further contingency plans were not made for further lockdowns, despite teachers' unions requesting them (Timmins 2021).

School-aged children have been severely impacted by the pandemic and lockdowns in England, meaning they have had many months of interrupted schooling. Lessons moved online where possible, but provision varied by school (Holt and Murray 2021). Most of the media and policy debates and reporting around schooling and Covid has seemed to be race-neutral. There has been a focus on the impact of the disruption on 'disadvantaged' pupils. This has tended to employ an undefined notion of 'disadvantage' which is normally understood as socio-economic disadvantage.

Research has shown that less socio-economically privileged pupils have been impacted harshly by the disruption and school closures: Studies have argued that children on free school meals, and from households with lower-educated families, devoted less time to schoolwork at home while schools were closed (Bayrakdar and Guveli 2020). Elliott Major, Eyles and Machin (2020) argue that disadvantaged pupils have fallen behind those from more privileged families in their formal learning due to a lack of quiet study space, internet connectivity, access to devices and access to private tutoring. Research has also suggested that home schooling has been especially difficult for those in overcrowded situations, in temporary accommodation or with families with mental ill-health or drug and alcohol addictions (Holt and Murray 2021). Previous research had also shown that disadvantaged children, already behind in terms of attainment, slip further behind during long breaks such as

school holidays, and therefore it has been argued that the longer schools are closed, the wider the existing attainment gap becomes (Longfield, Children's Commissioner for England 2020, cited in Holt and Murray 2021, 5).

At the other end of the spectrum, the most privileged children: those from higher income families, whose parents worked regularly from home and/or were in a managerial or professional occupation, and who had their own computer, were spending significantly more hours per day on school work than those without these privileges during lockdowns (Pensiero, Kelly and Bokhove 2020). Further, research has found that 74 % of private school pupils benefitted from full school-length days during the first lockdown, which was nearly twice the proportion of state school pupils (38 percent) (Elliott Major, Eyles and Machin (2020, 0)

The impact of pandemic schooling policy on race in/equality however, has received considerably less attention.

Covid and race inequality

There has been a significant amount of research focussing on the impact of the pandemic on race inequality which has largely focussed on health, including widespread reporting of, and discussion around the fact that BAME individuals have been more likely to die of Covid across the UK than white people. Reasons given for this high death rate include high infection rates due to high numbers of BAME population groups working in healthcare settings and other frontline work, a high likelihood of individuals working in low paid, precarious roles and therefore perhaps being less able to isolate, a higher likelihood of working in frontline roles and being unable to socially distance, and a raised likelihood of living in overcrowded housing (e.g. Aldridge et al 2020). In fact, recent research shows that workers in insecure jobs are more than twice as likely than average to die of Covid, and BAME individuals are more likely to occupy such roles (Partington 2021). Research also suggests higher rates of death once infected, due to a high incidence of existing health issues such as diabetes, hypertension and heart disease, and evidence that some BAME groups face a range of barriers in accessing healthcare (see e.g. Aldridge et al 2020). This is not unique to the UK, as research has shown minority groups are disproportionately affected by racial disparities in the prevalence of COVID-19 in other national settings as well (Elias et al 2021). This unequal impact is systemic and due to deeply entrenched racial inequality across many areas of life (Anand and Hsu 2020). It is worth pointing out that often, pandemics 'follow the fault lines of society – exposing and often magnifying power inequities' (Gravlee 2020, 1).

Equally, there have been racial disparities in the way in which different groups have been impacted by the lockdowns and related social restrictions and the way these have been imposed in the UK. For example, individuals from racialised minorities are more likely to have been fined for breaking lockdown rules and were more likely to live in areas where the parks were closed to the local population for daily exercise, such as the some of the more densely populated parts of London (Holt and Murray 2021).

These wider racial inequalities also form some of the context for a consideration of the impact of pandemic policy on race inequalities in schooling.

From white supremacy to necropolitics in education

A wealth of previous research has demonstrated that there are long-standing racial inequalities in the schooling system in England, including disparities in attainment between different groups, eurocentrism in the curriculum, racial stereotyping of BAME students and staff, higher levels of school exclusions for certain groups (e.g. Rollock et al. 2014; Lander 2015; Bhopal 2018; Joseph-Salisbury 2020; Moncreiffe 2020; Demie 2021). The notion of white supremacy has been employed to better understand the reproduction and maintaining of racial disadvantage in the education system, a system which disadvantages BAME people and confers privilege, even dominance, on those considered white (Gillborn 2005).

'This is an exercise of power that goes beyond notions of 'white privilege' and can only be adequately understood through a language of power and domination: the issue goes beyond privilege, it is about supremacy' (Gillborn 2006, 3019)

White supremacy is understood as a deeply engrained system which has become normalised and therefore often goes unremarked or unnoticed (Gillborn 2006), especially by those privileged by it (those who are disadvantaged are more likely to be aware of it.) Scholars have argued that it is in fact structural, deeply embedded in our social institutions, policies and attitudes. The notion of white supremacy challenges more common understandings of racism as 'just' individual, overt, or deliberate acts. It describes a structural and systemic white privilege and dominance and BAME disadvantage, which includes both witting and unwitting, both covert and overt racial privilege and disadvantage. It is sometimes misunderstood as socio-economic privilege and disadvantage, however white supremacy refers to racial privilege and disadvantage, while recognising that this does sometimes involve socio-economic effects, but of course not all those classified as white are economically advantaged. White supremacy is also embedded in, and reproduced by, our state institutions and policies, including institutions which claim to be meritocratic and strive for equality such as education (e.g. Warmington 2014).

In education, it has been argued that 'education policy [itself is] an act of white supremacy' (Gillborn 2006), in that policy is continually adjusted to re-embed racial disadvantage, and ensure white supremacy and dominance. This challenges views of policy which remain common in government, that policy is either neutral, or if it increases existing inequalities, it must be flawed in some way. As Gillborn argues though, policy is often designed to produce inequality, either because of tacit intentionality on the part of policy makers, or policy makers ensuring that existing privilege is protected.

Equally, elsewhere I have argued that the national curriculum for England and Wales can be viewed as an example of white supremacy 'legitimating the racist structures in society, excluding counter discourses to dominant white supremacist ones, and creating a notion of nationhood that excludes minority ethnic groups' (Chadderton 2013, 7). This is not an aberration; this is the normal workings of the system (Gillborn 2006). It has also been employed to theorise the social control of black bodies in schools: For example, it has been argued that new surveillance technologies such as CCTV in schools frame certain bodies as a threat, particularly black and Asian, rendering them a legitimate target and reproducing structures of white supremacy (Chadderton 2012). Equally, research has suggested that school policies on black hair- disciplining black children for certain styles because they do not conform to white norms of appearance, reproduces white supremacy (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2018). Although perhaps thought of as race-neutral, these policies do not 'just' affect BAME pupils disproportionately, they actually function as a form of social control to pathologise blackness.

Discussions of white supremacy in education tend to focus on the routine reproduction of racial privilege and disadvantage in the system. However, they rarely focus explicitly on matters of actual life and death. In order to analyse the impact of pandemic schooling policy on BAME pupils' families' exposure to illness and death, therefore, in this paper I also draw on the concept of necropolitics, developed by postcolonial theorist Mbembe, a concept seldom employed in field of education (Bui 2021) (although see below for some rare examples). Mbembe defines necropolitics (or necropower) as 'the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*.' (Mbembe (2013, 186, original italics). In a state in which necropower operates, the state has 'the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not' (Mbembe 2013, 174).

Mbembe's concept of necropolitics builds on the work of Foucault (2013) on biopolitics (or biopower), which is a form of governance, a 'technology of power' (p.67), understood as 'state control of the biological […] control over bodies' (p.63) and 'the politics of life and death' (p.67). Foucault was referring to the shift from a medieval system of sovereign power to a more system concerned with coercion and regularisation which 'consists in making live and letting die' (p.67). This state concern with life and death might involve, for example, the state providing healthcare to deal with illness and disease in order to maintain levels of production (although not out of concern for suffering) (p.65). Mbembe argues that although biopower has particular relevance concerning the exercise of power over life, it is insufficient to describe the reality of the inhumanity of the colonial and postcolonial world, in which the focus is upon killing, destruction and death, rather than life, which he names instead necropolitics. It includes Foucault's (2013) 'indirect murder: the form of exposing someone to death' (p.75) but, Mbembe argues, it is not 'just' about exposing to death and allowing to live, necropolitics is the state's right to kill: 'the ultimate power of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die' (Mbembe 2013, 161). As Rouse (2021) argues, biopower is about the state fostering life, and necropolitics is about the disallowance of life. 'Necropolitics explains how life in a biopolitical frame is always subjugated to and determined by the power of death, namely, the power to dictate who gets to live and who must die, or who must live and who is let die' (Zemblyas 2021).

Both biopolitics and necropolitics refer to a form of governance. A key function of governance is the protection of a given state from threats, both real and perceived. Foucault (2013) argued that biopolitics upholds state racism, in its defining and addressing of perceived threats to the imagined community of the nation. 'This is technology which aims to establish a sort of homeostasis, not by training individuals, but by achieving an overall equilibrium that protects the security of the whole from internal dangers […] the death of the other, the death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal) is something that will make life in general healthier: healthier and purer' (p.75). Biopolitics then, functions not only to divide up the population (Macey 2009) along racial lines, it therefore also involves the actual racial constitution of the population: the constitution of whiteness as dominant. Equally necropolitics can be understood as the right to kill exercised by the state in order to address a perceived racial threat to the imagined community of the state (Mbembe 2019), the splitting into racial groups of those who must live, and those who must die, by a given state. Those who are regarded as disposable, 'those whose very existence does not seem to be necessary for our reproduction, those whose mere existence or proximity is deemed to represent a physical or biological threat to our own life' (Mbembe

2019, 97), are those who the state allows to be exposed to death. Disposability is decided by race. The focus of necropolitics is the constitution of the condition of disposability, living under the threat of death, for racial minorities. Mbembe (2013) clarifies that when referring to killing and death, he is not only necessarily referring to outright executions (p.177), and other acts and practices which can lead to suffering and even death, such as deprivation of income, function as necropolitics too. Mbembe's focus is mainly upon the actions of western states which call themselves democratic, however, create wars and struggle elsewhere on the planet in the name of their democratic ideals, ensuring that the populations of these states live under the threat of death.

Scholars in a range of disciplines have employed the concepts of biopolitics and necropolitics in recent years to theorise the processes of governing of life and death. In the field of education, while attention has been paid to biopower (e.g. in the areas of children's care, learning, wellbeing and development), necropolitical analyses are rare, 'probably because contemporary education discourses are more attuned to the issue of life/living rather than death/dying (Staunæs and Conrad 2020)' (cited in Zemblyas 2021). However, there are a few very recent examples of the use of necropolitics in the study of education. For example, Bui (2021) conducted a study of what he refers to as the 'Military-Academic-Industrial Complex' of Higher Education in the US, referring to the university as 'a productive site for the war machine' (p. 169) due to the focus of its research on military arsenals under the guise of national security. He argues that HE can be viewed as necropolitical because 'the university is a conduit for life-restricting forces and projects' (p.169). Equally Niknafs (2021) employs the concept of necropolitics to critique a current focus on democratic participation in music education in schools in Canada, arguing that this unproblematised focus on emancipation, freedom, liberation, and autonomy as features of democracy masks the actual necropolitical nature of the actions of democratic states beyond their borders in the name of democracy, which result in death, destruction and inhumanity. While these recent studies have focussed in general on necropolitical acts and practices in education which result in the deaths of people beyond their own borders, there has been little focus on education policy as necropolitics within the local population, as a means to divide up the population along racial lines. Necropolitics therefore makes the violence of a regime based on the logic of white supremacy explicit, revealing the full potential implications of the normalisation of racial discrimination within society: the production of a racialised group whose lives are more likely to be exposed to death.

I will now move on to consider the findings of the research on the impact of the UK government's schooling policies for England during the pandemic, and connect it with previous research in order to enable a better understanding of its implications.

The impact of pandemic schooling policy on BAME pupils and families

In the first half of this section, I suggest that emerging research shows the UK government's Covid policy for English schools has increased educational disadvantage among BAME pupils.

Firstly, it has been reported that BAME pupils were one of the groups with the lowest levels of attendance when schools reopened in England in autumn 2020. The main reason given for this was parent's safety concerns, likely to be linked to medical evidence suggesting that individuals from BAME backgrounds are at higher risk from Covid-19 (Sharp et al 2020).

Pupils from a BAME background (defined as those with at least one BAME parent) are significantly more likely to live with an adult at risk of Covid-19 (Eivers et al. 2020).

Secondly, the pandemic and closure of schools seems to have had a higher impact on BAME children's formal learning than their white counterparts. According to teacher estimates there is a significantly higher (by 18 percentage points) need of intensive catch-up support for pupils in schools serving the highest proportion of pupils from BAME backgrounds, and this relationship persists after controlling for the effects of deprivation (i.e. the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals[2] (FSM)) (Sharp et al. 2020). Indeed, Bayrakdar and Guveli (2020) found that children from Pakistani or Bangladeshi backgrounds spent the least time on schoolwork at home during the school closures. Although the authors of the studies do not speculate on the reasons for this, it is likely to be at least partially linked to the fact that BAME children are more likely to live in socio-economically disadvantaged families. Child poverty rates stand for example at 60% for Bangladeshi children, 54% for Pakistani children and 47% for Black children, compared to 31% overall (Runnymede Trust 2021). It may also be at least partially due to the fact that BAME adults are more likely to work in frontline roles or low-paid, precarious work, and therefore perhaps less likely to have been at home during the pandemic, supporting their children with schoolwork. It may also be linked to the above-mentioned point, that some BAME families' safety concerns meant that they kept their children away from school.

Thirdly, the public examination arrangements are likely to have reproduced educational disadvantage for BAME students. Public exams, in England, are normally anonymously marked, but have been replaced with a system of grades predicted by teachers, as explained above. However, previous research suggests that students from poorer backgrounds are more likely to be under-predicted at A-Level (Wyness 2020). Since, as stated above, BAME children are likely to be among the poorest in the country, they are likely to be disproportionately impacted by the cancellation of exams. Equally, previous research has shown that Black applicants had the lowest predicted A-Level grade accuracy compared to white students who had the highest (Everett and Papageourgiou 2011, in Bhopal and Myers 2020). This has significant implications, as Bhopal and Myers (2020) argue, 'Students who are under-predicted are likely to apply for less prestigious institutions; whilst, those who are over-predicted are more likely to apply for more prestigious institutions but then not secure their preferred choice.' In addition, a study of applicants to UK medical schools this year equally argued that 'Black Asian and Minority Ethnic applicants felt teachers would find it difficult to grade and rank students accurately' (Woolf et al. 2021, 1).

Fourthly, research has shown that fixed-term exclusions from school have risen during the pandemic. Whereas previously pupils could be placed in another space if they were 'disruptive', including isolation, during Covid this has been less of a possibility as social distancing and bubbling has meant that there are fewer spaces available for keeping such pupils on-site (Harris 2021; Carr 2021). This rise in exclusions occurs in a context of already increased exclusions in recent years. While the potential implications and solutions have been pointed out (Daniels et al. 2020; Ferguson 2021), there have been no moves by the government to address this, e.g. focus on reintegration rather than exclusion, for example. While this raises a whole host of issues which it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore, and most of the research on the topic of exclusion focuses on pupils with special educational

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[2] An indicator of deprivation commonly used in education in the UK, although a contested one, which does not cover all types of deprivation, not all those actually living in poverty, for example.

needs and disabilities (e.g. Ferguson 2021), increased exclusions are also likely to have racial implications, since Black students are far more likely to be excluded from school than their peers (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2018; Demie 2021). Black exclusion rates should not necessarily be understood as a greater propensity to break rules, rather they 'are indicative of pervasive ideologies that impose stereotypes of deviance upon Black bodies' (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2018, 3). As others have argued, black students are more likely to be regarded as 'challenging' and their behaviour treated more punitively than that of their white counterparts, for similar offences (Graham 2016). Equally, previous research has suggested that black students may be more likely to be excluded because of the pressure on schools to 'raise attainment', and the perception that black students will do badly in standardised exams (Gillborn 2005). Considered alongside the evidence above that some BAME groups are more likely to have missed out on formal learning during the pandemic, this may have further implications for increased exclusion.

Initial research, when considered alongside previous related research, suggests then, that schooling policy in the pandemic has had a disproportionately harsh impact on the educational experiences and outcomes of BAME students in general. However, not only does the available evidence suggest that BAME pupils have been disadvantaged in their learning and wider educational progress through the pandemic, but as I now move on to show, the pandemic and government response with regards to schooling has potentially increased the risk to their lives and the lives of their families.

Firstly, keeping schools open when cases are very high, as for example the UK government did in autumn 2020, presents a risk to the lives of BAME families. Despite ministers' denials, opening schools has been shown to increase transmission of the virus and lead to higher cases overall (Stage et al. 2021). As Anand and Hsu (2020) have argued with regards to the situation in the US, opening schools while cases are high 'places the highest risk of loss on constituents of color […including…] loss of life' (p.195). This means that the slow closure of English schools in March 2020 and the government's refusal to close schools in autumn 2020 put BAME pupils and their families at increased risk, and probably led to higher loss of life in these groups.

Secondly, as I've already stated, the closure of schools has meant that children have had to access learning online from home which has been easier, and more possible, for children in better-off families. Many children from less wealthy homes, including a significant proportion of BAME children, have little or no access to a device to access their schooling (Maugham 2021; Montacute and Cullinane 2021). The government, while initially planning to provide laptops for these children, has been slow to do so, and by early 2021, ten months after the start of the lockdowns, only 560,000 of the million which the educations secretary says he had ordered had arrived, and even if these did arrive, there would still be a shortfall as Ofcom estimated there are 1.7m children without devices. The government issued new guidance saying children who cannot learn remotely 'due to a lack of devices…should attend school or college' (Secretary of State for Education Williamson 2021 quoted in Maugham 2021). This forces BAME families to choose between risking their health and their lives, or their children's schooling, and potentially pushes them towards sending their children to school to prevent them missing out on learning. Again, for those who did send their children to school in the absence of government-supplied technology, this will have increased the risk of ill-health or even death.

Thirdly, on the return to school after the second lockdown in England, the government did not make masks and twice weekly covid tests compulsory, making them voluntary instead (Pidd 2021). Schools Minister Nick Gibb said it is simply 'highly recommended' (cited in Pidd 2021). This advice came as the scientific evidence increased that mask-wearing reduces the risk of infection (e.g. Brooks and Butler 2021). This approach increases the risk of infection for pupils and staff, and may disproportionately put BAME families at risk, many of whom are at higher risk anyway.

While the risk of ill-health and death was, and still is, very real for the whole population, it is higher for BAME families, whose risks of ill-health and death were higher than the overall population. This was a situation which was fuelled by the government's own policies and in-action.

Necropolitics: disposability, death and the racial state

The available research suggests that government education policy during the pandemic is therefore likely to be (re)producing educational low-attainment and disadvantage for BAME people, which fuels the existing structures of white supremacy described above. BAME students have had low attendance at school when schools have been open, they have been more likely to miss out on formal learning in general than white pupils, public examination arrangements are likely to disadvantage them, and they may have been excluded at a higher rate. It is important to note that exclusion from school has significant further implications for an individual's future life chances: it increases the likelihood of unemployment, and of involvement in criminal activity, both as a perpetrator and as a victim (Briggs 2010; Graham 2014, 2015, 2016). It is also important to consider once again that while BAME children are discriminated against and experience systematic disadvantage in school, missing out completely on a significant amount of formal learning equally leads to disadvantage in later years (Ladson-Billings 2021). In this case then, pandemic 'education policy [is] an act of white supremacy' (Gillborn 2006).

Further, measures such as keeping schools open when cases are high, the failure to properly support online learning, and the lack of compulsory masks and testing, may have resulted in potential increased exposure to ill-health and even death for BAME families, and, I argue, should perhaps be regarded as even more sinister. Not only can this be viewed as an extreme form of state-sponsored white supremacy, it could even be argued that it is an example of necropolitics (Mbembe 2013). The UK government failed to put in place policies and practices which recognise that existing structural inequalities mean that different groups are differentially affected by the same policies- indeed in this case, BAME groups have been disproportionately exposed to illness and death, which is the very definition of necropolitics. In practice, this has resulted in the legalisation of different kinds of protection for different populations- protection for some and not for others, and race has been one of the dividing lines along which disposability was decided.

This exposure to death has occurred under the guise of narratives of concern for all children to be educated and not allowing children to fall behind in their learning, with which it would be difficult to argue, such as,

'We know that children have missed out on so much by not being in school.' (Gavin Williamson, Secretary of State for Education, cited in Langford 2020)

'Nothing will have a greater effect on the life chances of our children than returning to school'
(Boris Johnson, Prime Minister, cited in Langford 2020)

However, not only have disadvantaged groups indeed fallen behind in their learning, including disproportionately BAME pupils, viewing the available data through the lens of necropolitics enables us to uncover how in fact, via policies regarding schooling, certain bodies are being marked for life, while others are subjected to living conditions that make them 'living dead' (Mbembe 2003, 40). Rather than being guided by a real concern for the education of under-privileged children, death itself is being deployed as a political tool by the state. Actual opportunities for addressing educational inequalities, or preventing households from increased exposure to illness and death via schooling practices, such as the provision of devices for online learning, or mask-wearing in schools, have not been (adequately) deployed, despite calls for action from scientific experts and teachers' unions. Instead, politicians have continued to pursue the 'production of differential vulnerability' (Laurenzini 2020, 44), by the creation of differential exposure to death, but also the establishing of boundaries between 'legitimate' subjects, sanctioned for life, and 'illegitimate' subjects, sanctioned for death (Zemblyas 2021).

That the British state practises racial necropolitics should probably come as no surprise, as government policy, state institutions and state actors have for hundreds of years pursued such politics, from slavery and colonialism, to the more recent Windrush scandal, in which hundreds of Commonwealth citizens have been wrongly detained, deported or denied legal rights because the Home office had destroyed records which showed they had the right to remain in the UK, and killing of black people at the hands of the police, shaped not only by notions of white British superiority, but of Britishness itself as white (Bhattacharyya et al 2021). This politics involves the exclusion of racial minorities from cultural notions of Britishness, and both an actual (for some) and potential removal of the protection of the law (for others). Indeed, education policy during Covid should be understood in this wider context, as part of the wider project of state white supremacy, of the constitution of whiteness as dominant, in this case involving the protection of the education of white pupils, at the expense of the health, and lives, of BAME families. This form of state racism is not an aberration and should not be misunderstood as individual incidents of discrimination or prejudice, rather as the example of Covid policies has shown, it is embedded in the workings and structures of the state and its institutions, including education, and can also be understood as necropolitics: the constitution of racial minorities as disposable, living their lives under the threat of death. Indeed, Goldberg (2002) refers to the modern democratic state (in his case the US, but it can equally be applied to the UK) as a racial state, a state in which racism is so common and deeply embedded in the working so of the state, it is normal: 'Modernity is defined by racial conditions even as it characterises those conditions as abnormal or exceptional. So while *racist* states may seem exceptional, their very possibility is underpinned by the normalcy of the *racial* state.' (p.114, Goldberg's italics). Necropolitics is therefore part of the normal operations of the state, a wider process through which racial minorities are made vulnerable to death by the legal actions of the state, and the supremacy of whiteness is actually constituted. Viewing the data through the lens of necropolitics enables us to connect the routine discrimination against BAME individuals in English schools with the UK government's wider structural and political project of the production of racial disadvantage as a form of governance.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the available evidence suggests that the UK government's schools policy for England during the pandemic can be regarded as an example of white supremacy and necropolitics. Rather than an anomaly in a basically fair and equal system, this kind of politics is in fact normal, where the whole political system is built on not only on the maintenance of racial disadvantage and privilege, but on the exposure to death of, and even the right to kill, the BAME population, which the British state claims for itself, and which also operates in education. Employing the lens of necropolitics renders explicit the full potential implications of the normalisation of racial discrimination within society and specifically in education: the production of a racialised group whose lives are more likely to be exposed to death.

It is not unusual that structurally disadvantaged groups such as racial minorities suffer more deaths in a disaster. A recent comparison might be Hurricane Katrina in the US, where people of color were disproportionately exposed to suffering and death due to policies which had differential effects because they ignored exiting racial disparities (Giroux 2006). As others have argued, Covid-19 is not an exception- disasters such as pandemics should be seen as the rule. There will be further pandemics and we should prepare for them (Salzani 2021).

Although I do not wish to suggest that fighting against deep-rooted white supremacy and necropolitics in education is in any way straightforward, not least because arguments informed by such theories tend to be regarded as extreme and controversial, it is still worth drawing out some recommendations in the hopes that analyses such as the one presented in this paper can somehow make a difference. Recommendations in preparation for future pandemics might therefore include:

- Further research which explicitly connects race inequality and discrimination in education with the UK government's wider necropolitical project, currently an under-researched area;
- Further research on how different social vulnerabilities are compounded during a pandemic and the implications this has for education;
- Further research on the impact of the government's pandemic policy for schooling on race inequality, drawing on the lived experiences of parents, students and teachers themselves;
- Training for teachers to increase their racial literacy[3], so that they better understand how schooling structures reproduce race inequality and their own role in fuelling or mitigating this;
- Government support to address the digital divide for disadvantaged families, including adequate provision for online learning for all children (see also Montacute and Cullinane 2021);
- Government support for alternatives to school exclusion, including prioritising re-integration (Daniels et al 2020);
- The timely introduction of measures in schools which have been proven to reduce the risk of infection, such mask-wearing and improved ventilation;
- Additional support for parents most impacted by the pandemic, such as frontline workers and those with existing health conditions.

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[3] "'Racial literacy' refers to the capacity of teachers to understand the ways in which race and racisms work in society, and to have the skills, knowledge and confidence to implement that understanding in teaching practice." (Joseph-Salisbury 2020,1)

These suggestions are wide-ranging in that they touch on both arrangements specifically in preparation for disasters such as a pandemic, but also long-standing issues such as the inclusion of racial literacy in teacher education. I add my voice to existing research in the hopes that these recommendations can contribute to change.

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