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International Research Associate Summary Report

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Comparing the Experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic Leaders in English schools and Cross-boundary Leaders in South Africa

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Introduction

This paper summarises a number of key research findings that have emerged from a broader study of the experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic leaders (BMEL) in English schools.

It compares and contrasts these findings with those from a related study of cross-boundary leaders in South Africa. Such leaders have moved to schools in communities that are racially different from their own, according to South Africa's previous system of institutionalised racism.

These findings are based on interviews with:

- 18 English school leaders
- 27 South African school leaders

Publication dates for the full findings of these studies are autumn 2005 and spring 2006. Both studies were led by Professor Tony Bush at the University of Lincoln.

Classifications used to describe the ethnicity of leaders in South Africa (Black, White, Coloured, Indian) are those used during the period of Apartheid, and introduced in the Population Registration Act (No. 30) of 1950 and subsequent related legislation.

Main findings

Personal experiences

There are serious dangers in considering the complex needs and experiences of leaders from different ethnic backgrounds as a homogenous group.

Nevertheless, many of the English heads reported experiencing some level of discrimination which had an inhibiting effect on their career progression. These experiences centred on a number of common themes, including:

- being marginalised and suffering from indirect racism
- being excluded from informal networks
- experiencing isolation from being perceived as a token or Minority Ethnic presence

- facing a lack of acceptance by professional colleagues
- negative attitudes of other headteachers

In South Africa, the degree to which discrimination was experienced varied according to the specific nature of the boundary being crossed. For instance, White teachers leading Black or multi-cultural schools were most likely to be accepted by its pupils, parents, teachers and the broader community that it served. In contrast, Black leaders in White schools frequently reported a lack of respect for Black leaders from Whites and Indians within the school. Issues of language and culture often represented further obstacles for cross-boundary leaders in South Africa.

Both the English and South African heads interviewed identified racism as a barrier to their leadership progression, therefore. In England, this was viewed as primarily covert and indirect racism. In contrast, the racism experienced by cross-boundary leaders was more likely to be overt and direct, stemming from the institutionalised racism of South Africa's past. It was felt likely that this would take a considerable time to eradicate, primarily because of a resistance by many White people to accept Black leaders, and a broader lack of respect for Black leaders by both White and Indian sections of society.

Context

Considerable differences existed in relation to the infrastructure and resource provision available to the English and South African headteachers.

For example, in South Africa, many of the White, Coloured and Indian cross-boundary leaders spoke of having to restore a culture of teaching and learning, establish effective teaching and learning systems and improve the work ethic. They also frequently faced a lack of sporting facilities.

In contrast, many of the BME heads in England discussed institutionalised barriers relating to nationality, which meant that those who are British born were likely to progress through the system more quickly than their non-English born colleagues.

Facilitating factors and support

There were marked differences in the amount of support available to the two sets of leaders.

Many English BMEL highlighted the benefits of participating in training provided by their local education authority, NCSL and others. There appeared to be approval in the English system for the idea of additional support for BMEL, in terms of supplementary elements to existing leadership provision. Arguably this was viewed as most critical for individuals entering teaching, although there was considerable support for the idea of increased provision for middle leaders. Support also existed for the notion that formal development programmes should be fronted by existing BMEL. Mentoring support was also viewed as beneficial. Coping with prejudice was viewed as a key area for attention.

In contrast, no South African leaders spoke of benefiting from similar support. Instead, these leaders were more likely to highlight the significance of the broader focus on democracy, which is a key feature of post-apartheid South Africa.

Black cross-boundary leaders alluded to the need to build capacity amongst such leaders to help them deal with the challenges they faced on their own. In contrast, Coloured, Indian and White cross-boundary leaders frequently mentioned a desire for customised management development to help improve the general work ethic of individuals in the schools they worked in, to manage diversity and help address the negative attitudes they encountered.

A large proportion of English BMEL also ascribed their success to their own personal characteristics. A strong desire to achieve success as a means of proving oneself was a trait that was particularly common amongst this group.

Coping strategies

Both the South African and English leaders interviewed in the study frequently mentioned that they dealt with the negative issues they encountered in private.

"I used to come home and cry and moan."
(cross-boundary White female)

"I often become angry and sink into acceptance that the world is against me."

(Indian male leader)

Many BMEL highlighted the support they received from family, friends and professional colleagues. They also frequently highlighted their determination to persevere and overcome the challenges they faced.

Many cross-boundary leaders spoke of the need to develop tolerance, acceptance and a respect for other cultures in tackling the difficulties they faced.

Conclusion

Both BMEL and the cross-boundary leaders emphasised a belief in the need for them to be exceptionally good, in order for them to progress and prove themselves. Similarly, both groups may be considered as pioneering agents of change, because of the bold steps they have taken to lead under challenging circumstances.

Many BMEL believed that they were exceptional because they were able to understand the black and ethnic minority children and parents in their schools, and their culture and difficulties. Some stated that BME parents saw them as their voice.

Meanwhile, Black cross-boundary leaders noted that they were not often accepted by educators in previously White schools. In contrast, all of the White, Coloured and Indian cross-boundary leaders have alluded to their warm acceptance by Black pupils, educators and the local community. Nevertheless, all such leaders remain exceptional and are seen as pioneering agents of change.

Further findings from this work will be published in spring 2006.

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