

Challenge Plus:

The Experience of Black and Minority Ethnic School Leaders



Summary of research undertaken with and
for the National College for School Leadership
by

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Introduction

The research summarised here is a small scale, appreciative enquiry into the experiences of school leaders from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds. It was designed to assist the National College for School Leadership in increasing the participation of those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds in senior leadership positions, by generating knowledge and understanding of the challenges faced by school leaders from BME backgrounds, including those who have recently completed mainstream headship training programmes.

A further aim of the research was to assess whether there were specific issues for school leaders from BME backgrounds that NCSL should take into account as part of its remit to support and promote effective school leadership. While the hypothesis that institutional racism and prejudice would be factors was inevitable, there was no presumption about how such factors might affect school leaders from BME backgrounds. Rather, there was a willingness on the part of the College to learn directly from school leaders of BME backgrounds, and to ensure that the College was taking sufficient account of the range of strategies adopted by school leaders to confront the negative stereotypes and low expectations that racism perpetuates.

Methodology

The research team comprised Jan McKenley, Principal Consultant for Austin Mayhead in association with Dr Gloria Gordon of South Bank University Business School. The research used semi-structured interviews within an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach. The approach is based on the principle that organisations change in the direction of what they study. Thus enquiry is fateful in planting the seeds of the future.

By assuming the best of people, organisations and relationships, the AI approach leaves deficit-oriented approaches behind. Instead the research focuses on what gives life to school leaders from BME backgrounds. The approach maximises opportunities for positive feedback on current effective practice and for practical solutions to any concerns or gaps in provision that might emerge.

The study was designed to give NCSL insights into the career histories and progression routes of a small sample (20) of school leaders from BME backgrounds. A convenient sample was derived from the professional networks of the researchers, recommendations from the College, HMI officers and serving headteachers. Over two thirds of the sample were drawn from urban settings, to reflect the distribution of the black and minority ethnic communities that school leaders from BME backgrounds typically, but not exclusively, serve.



Main findings

School leaders from BME backgrounds had a strong desire to capture the joys of their leadership. Many of the black and ethnic minority communities represented in this study were settled relatively recently. School leaders from BME backgrounds saw that they could add their rich cultural heritage to the common wealth of all schools and in the process could play a unique role in transforming educational opportunities in this country.

A sense of vocation to one's community, an understanding of economic disadvantage, a feeling of shared aspirations and the privilege of being a role model – these are typical features of successful school leaders from BME backgrounds, regardless of their ethnic origin. However common features should not be overstated; the differences are many too. This is not a homogenous group. The sample is too small to draw any distinctions between the experiences of those, for example, from Indian or Black Caribbean heritage, between women and men or phase or status of school. The report reveals a diversity of approaches and strategies in meeting the challenge of leadership. Clearly there is no one way to be a BME school leader.

One of the benefits of the AI approach was the opportunity to affirm the pioneering achievement of becoming a school leader from a BME background. The joys of leadership for headteachers from BME backgrounds were very evident as participants described what becoming a headteacher meant to them on a personal and professional basis. The route to headship for some has been straightforward and for others circuitous. One interesting feature is the positive benefits some of the school leaders attribute to early periods in Section 11 funded posts.

“Is my mother proud? Oh gosh she is absolutely over the moon. My own daughter was speechless, thrilled. It has meant so much to friends and neighbours.”

These BME school leaders commonly expressed a lack of recognition of their success by officers and colleagues in their own LEAs. This was in the face of clear evidence either in the league tables or in glowing OFSTED reports about the quality of their leadership and management of staff, their commitment to innovation and their ability to raise standards, often in very challenging schools.

“There is no system in place in my LEA to recognise the strengths of senior teachers from BME backgrounds. When I was a senior teacher, no one in the LEA acted as a mentor. Even now I feel I have so much to offer but I am an in-school person, so I don't push myself forward unless I am invited.”

Some of the school leaders in this sample felt a high level of personal pressure in being pioneers, including constant scrutiny and in some cases professional attack.

“Nothing can prepare you for how you are perceived by others as a black headteacher. Your every move is scrutinised in the local media so you also need to know how to manage the press and to change their focus.”

The research also explored the issue of the relevance of ethnicity to school leaders from BME backgrounds. The responses expressed a full continuum from positive identification as role models to ambivalence, to categorical denial.

“I distinguish between blackness as a political term and my ethnicity as an Indian. My ethnicity causes me to think in terms of ‘we’ rather than ‘I’ and this is reflected in my approach in school. It is one of inclusion, where we take on responsibilities rather than blaming individuals.”

Six of the 20 participants had spent time as the acting headteacher at their school, prior to being appointed to the substantive post. This was more often in schools in difficulties. However the most important leadership development experience cited was being managed by effective headteachers.

“My predecessor was one of the best headteachers in the country. In 25 years of headship, at least 20 of his deputies are now headteachers, including me. He believed in appointing young deputies and giving them opportunities to learn quickly and move on.”

The concept of a National College for School Leadership enjoys a high level of support from the BME school leaders in this study. Colleagues were keen to participate in this study and many of those who rang after the sample was complete expressed goodwill towards the College in its endeavours to be representative of all school leaders.



Issues for Consideration

Suggestions on how assistance might be given to aspiring school leaders from BME backgrounds included:

- Stress the importance of equality and diversity by involving as wide a range as possible of school leaders from BME backgrounds in all aspects of the work of the College.
- Provide early career opportunities to shadow school leaders (including those from BME backgrounds), and more opportunities for young teachers to spend time with heads who share their cultural and ethnic experience.
- Encourage the development of courses for young teachers that explore issues of race, gender and class in ways that lead to real talk about the complexities and issues of school leadership.
- Investigate further the access and barriers to deputy headship for BME teachers.
- Create more opportunities for people to spend time away from their schools to reflect and understand the multi-ethnic context of teaching and leadership in this country.
- Offer sessions within leadership programmes on how school leaders should tackle the unique challenges that BME teachers face which might differ in intensity to those experienced by their white peers – the concept of ‘Challenge Plus’.
- Use a wider range of sources than just LEA link advisers to identify potential school leaders from BME backgrounds earlier in their careers.
- Conduct a comparative study on the experiences of teachers and school leaders from BME backgrounds working in the independent school sector.

Endnote

Perhaps the most important lesson this small inquiry has demonstrated is what becoming a school leader from a BME background signifies – not just to an individual, their families and friends but as an indication of the progress, however uneven, we are making towards a more tolerant and dynamic multi-ethnic society.

“I drifted into teaching after a degree in politics. I never set out to be a head but I love being the Bengali head of a Bangladeshi school. I feel I’m part of what the future for Britain will be like.”

The study also highlights the difference BME school leaders can make for pupils.

“When I came to this country I was very grateful, but when I went to my first school, I was really badly treated and made to feel as if I was nobody and if you were foreign you were really thick. I was automatically put into the D stream at secondary school. Finally a teacher encouraged me to write down my experiences of the world, seemed to think I had something to offer, and from that point I didn’t look back. These are the experiences I apply in school in helping pupils to raise self-expectations. I have such an obligation to every child that walks into this school. I think back to myself, so frustrated because I knew I wasn’t a thick person.”

A Note on Terminology

The use of the term ‘black and minority ethnic’ is an attempt to reflect the shared experiences of school leaders whose ethnicity is neither white UK nor European. Terms such as ‘black’ and ‘Asian’ no longer capture the diverse range of communities that are now settled in the UK.

Increasingly the term ‘black’ has become associated with people of black Caribbean and African heritage and ‘Asian’ to people from the Indian sub-continent. Neither convey the recent experience of refugees and asylum seekers.

The ethnic breakdown of the sample highlights the diverse cultural heritage that enriches our education system: British Sikh, Turkish Cypriot, British Jamaican, Bangladeshi, Indian (three), British citizen of Indian heritage, Asian, Caribbean, Middle Eastern, Black British (three), Kenyan Indian, Jamaican, Antiguan, Black Afro-Caribbean, East African and East African of Indian descent.

As a consequence our use of the collective term ‘black and minority ethnic background or heritage’ is essentially pragmatic.

Full Report

To download the full report of this study, go to www.ncsl.org.uk/archive or call NCSL’s research team on 0115 84 67045.

