

The particular challenges for minority ethnic teachers working in rural and regional contexts: a local case study from England with international significance.

Research overview

This paper presents the particular challenges faced by ethnic minority teachers working in rural and regional contexts, how they cope with and overcome prejudice and how they have ambitions for the future benefits of their struggle for similar teachers and their students.

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Around the world ethnic minority teachers face the twin challenges of hostile prejudice and the demand to be role models for the minority they represent. In certain typically urban populations, there can be significant numbers of minority teachers and students and this substantial presence can – at least – diminish some of these challenges. However, in rural and regional areas these challenges can be extremely exacerbated. This paper offers a microscopic and local view of a problem that actually has a universal significance and is a phenomenon in many countries.

This paper reports on a case study from England, using a regional research project, with a number of interrelated strands, which investigated and analysed the motivations and career trajectories of educational professionals who are members of ethnic minority communities in the Eastern region and the South East Midlands. This paper reports on two groups of interviews. Group [1] are teachers and teacher leaders {10 interviews}. Group [2] academics working in Higher Education in the discipline of Education {10 interviews}, all of whom were former school teachers, six now working in Teacher Education. The research was qualitative and the findings confirm many national issues but provide some original insights into the particular significance of regionality.

England is an ethnically diverse country (ONS, 2022) with 34.5% of pupils from minority ethnic groups (GOV.UK, 2022). However, in 2021 only 13.94% of teachers in England were from a minority ethnic group, and these teachers are unevenly distributed across the country such that 46% of schools have no minority ethnic teachers (Tereshchenko, Mills, & Bradbury, 2020), whilst in London there is an over-representation compared with an under-representation in the East of England, where over 20% of pupils are from minority ethnic communities (Haque, 2017; GOV.UK.2022). Further, less than 10% of school leadership positions are held by minority ethnic teachers, who like teachers are clustered in London (Department for Education, 2022), these figures are echoed in the UUK Report into ethnic minority staff and students in HE, [UUK/NUS 2019]

Minority ethnic teachers not only contribute to improving the educational experiences and future aspirations of minority ethnic students (Lindsay & Hart, 2017), but are essential in meeting the needs of all students (Worth et al., 2022). Yet, minority ethnic teacher recruitment and retention remains challenging (DfE, 2018; Worth et al., 2022).

The interviews for both groups were semi-structured and supported the participants to reflect on their motivations. Group [1] were asked why they became teachers, about their early career experiences and their later success in the profession and views about how to improve BAME interest in becoming a teacher and then developing a successful career. Group [2] covered the same questions but also reflected on their motivations for entering HE and their experiences since becoming BAME academics.

For Group [1] the themes that emerge resonate with existing research into ethnic minority teacher experiences about frequent feelings of isolation, critical incidents of prejudice and injustice and a strong sense of a desperate need for more representative leaders in schools. Only one Head

Teacher came forward for interview and she echoed the views of all the group that there is almost no relevant representation in Senior Leadership teams, even in schools in the region with diverse populations. Important regional issues emerge about the need for mentorship and support, the role of ethnic minority networks in fostering career development and the complicated nature of learning from role models and then becoming a role model.

For Group [2] their experiences of working in schools exactly mirrored those of Group [1], they had expected the HE environment to be more supportive. They expressed some examples of support but much more often that they were extremely disappointed that their optimistic expectations were not met. A frequent comment was that the espoused rhetoric of HE institutions and some of the apparent initiatives look and sound impressive but have little impact on the environment. They explained that the level of BAME representation was even less in their departments than in their former schools and even less again amongst Professors and senior leaders. The 2019 UUK Report provides very clear statistical evidence of underrepresentation at all levels and of student under achievement. The participants were particularly concerned about the constant expectation that they would devote time to being on relevant committees and working groups but without real work load recognition. A number also felt passed over for promotion and that the additional antiracist work they did actually hampered their careers. They reported that similar colleagues in more urban environments had similar problems but certainly had better promotion prospects.

This study provides original and important insights into what is certainly a global issue and where researchers can share and co-create knowledge to help improve the lives of ethnic minority teachers and students.

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