

How breaking the silence about race could smash the 'glass ceiling'

Although racism in schools may be less blatant than decades ago, subtle discrimination still hampers the careers of black and minority ethnic teachers, finds **Chris Parr**. But academics have highlighted how leaders can tackle the problem – and the first step is to talk about the subject of race openly

There was a time when people were not judged on their colour. It is remarkable to think about this, but there was a time," says business psychologist Binna Kandola, author of *Racism at Work:*

the danger of indifference.

Sadly, he says this time has long since passed – something that is perhaps reflected in school leadership teams across the country. According to Department for Education figures, nearly 87 per cent of all teachers in England are white British (see bit.ly/TeachWork). Among headteachers, this proportion rises to more than 93 per cent – and that does not include non-British white heads. It is estimated that just 3 per cent of heads are black and minority ethnic (BME), and it is not uncommon for a school to have no BME representation on its leadership team.

According to Kandola, there tends to be an overwhelming silence about facts such as these in organisations.

"Part of the problem is that, when it comes to employment, we don't talk about race enough – and part of the reason we don't talk about it enough is because we tend to think racism is a thing of the past," he explains. "There is this mindset that believes racism

is all about incidents where individuals will say the most horrible things or be physically abusive, that sort of thing. That is what we are on the lookout for, and because we see less of that than we did 30 years ago, we feel that racism is on the way out."

"This, he argues, is not what "modern" racism looks like at all.

"We need to recognise that racism itself has mutated. It is like a virus," he says. "It has become quite different, and it acts in far more subtle ways. Old-fashioned racism is direct, blunt, it is obvious and blatant; modern racism is indirect, it is oblique, it is ambiguous – and we are not looking out for that as much."

Low expectations

Certainly BME teachers seem to believe that this is a real issue in education. In a 2017 NUT teaching union survey of more than 1,000 BME teachers, carried out by the race equality thinktank the Runnymede Trust, 32 per cent of male and 27 per cent of female teachers reported that they did not feel staff were comfortable talking about racism. Respondents also spoke about an "invisible glass ceiling" that stemmed from a perception among senior leadership teams that BME teachers "have a certain level and don't go beyond it".

Acknowledging that the less flagrant forms of racism Kandola describes are present is



something that leadership teams, and governing bodies, must do if they are to address the race imbalance among school leadership teams, says Nick Dennis, director of studies at St Francis' College in Hertfordshire and a steering group member for the BAMEed Network, which aims to develop and raise the profile of minority ethnic teachers in the UK.

"Schools are pretty conservative places in terms of approaches to HR, organisational theory and hierarchy," he says. "Where diversity usually enters the conversation, it is normally centred on students."

Broadening this discussion to include staff would, he says, have a "massive cultural effect". He explains: "There is a misplaced view that the head has all the power in the school, but in reality it is the governing body that delegates power to the head and the leadership team. If the governing body focuses on diversity in staff and also analyses



pay as a key performance indicator for the school, this means that the head will also have to focus on diversity, which will mean changes in hiring, internal promotions and performance reviews.”

Leaders 'fit a mould'

Both Kandola and Dennis say that a stereotype of “what a good leader looks like” has developed. “Even without realising it, we expect our leaders to fit a mould: the white male,” says Kandola. “When we come across people who don't fit that white male prototype, we assume they can't be a leader.”

Dennis agrees: “The vision of what a good leader looks like still persists in schools and within governing bodies because they are usually drawn from professions that reflect a largely homogenous workforce. If success in their own profession looks a certain way, then why change that? Especially when there is so much pressure

on schools and governing bodies to 'get things right'.”

Could one way of addressing this problem be to have targets for the number of BME staff that are recruited to senior positions within school leadership teams?

“It would be quite difficult to have anything other than overarching, national targets,” says Malcolm Trobe, deputy general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders. “Some schools only have a headteacher and two deputies, so it is difficult to see how hard targets would work for all. But the profession should certainly be looking at how it is addressing this issue, and perhaps country-level targets would make it clear this is a problem that is being taken seriously.”

Kandola agrees that school-level targets are not the way forwards. “I am actually against targets. A lot of psychology work suggests targets don't work – they don't help the intended beneficiaries because, if a BME

candidate is selected, people say you were only selected because of the target that was in place.”

This is known, he says, as “the stigma of incompetence”, which can then impact on people's self-esteem and self-confidence.

However, Zubaida Haque, deputy director of the Runnymede Trust, believes that targets of some description could be beneficial. “I bet that most schools have some sort of informal target for female representation in senior roles, so why not be a bit more conscious about the ethnicity balance?” she asks.

Barriers to progression

Being more conscious about diversity should lead to the removal of obstacles that are stopping BME teachers being promoted, Haque argues. “Progression is a major barrier,” she says. “Black and ethnic minority teachers tell us that they do not get told about senior jobs, and they are certainly not invited to apply.” In addition, Haque says that leadership teams are often not giving BME teachers the type of additional responsibilities that would help them to move up the leadership ladder.

“Instead of being given roles in charge of intellectual development like teaching higher key stage maths, which affects performance-related pay and would benefit an application to a leadership role, black teachers told us they were stereotyped and put in charge of behavioural management classes,” she says.

Such roles, Haque adds, do not benefit them when applying for senior positions.

In terms of practical steps that schools can take to try to improve BME representation, there are a number of options for schools – including the implementation of a “blind” application process to prevent any unconscious bias from coming into play before the interviews begin.

The NHS has directives for recruitment that mean panels must report to governors with written reasons for non-selection in each phase of promotion recruitment – something that schools could consider.

“But, ultimately, you need to take opportunities to discuss race with staff,” Kandola stresses. “Rather than wait for an issue to arise that demands a conversation about racism, have a more general discussion in staff meetings. Allow the topic of race to be surfaced without anyone feeling judged or penalised. We do that sort of thing in schools with pupils, so why not do it with staff?”



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