

# What makes minority ethnic teachers stay in teaching, or leave?



## Introduction

This briefing note considers the findings of the BA/Leverhulme-funded research project '[Retention of teachers from minority ethnic groups in disadvantaged schools](#)' on the retention factors for teachers from minority ethnic groups and outlines some implications for schools.

There is a gap between the proportion of teachers and students from ethnic minority backgrounds in England. In 2019, 86% of all teachers were from a White British background, compared to 65% of pupils (UK Government, 2020).

While efforts to recruit new teachers from minority ethnic backgrounds are important, these alone will not resolve the shortage. Nationally, retention is lower for minority ethnic teachers than for White British teachers (DfE, 2018). Understanding the retention of minority ethnic teachers is vital in addressing the imbalance between the proportion of teachers and pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds in teaching.

The findings are based on interviews with 24 teachers, including 14 Black teachers, two mixed White and Black heritage teachers and eight teachers from different Asian backgrounds. Thirteen of these teachers were in the profession for over five years and nine for five or less years. Nine participants worked in primary and 15 in secondary schools (*for details see Tereshchenko et al., 2020*).

Some of the factors affecting minority ethnic teacher retention are the same as those affecting teachers of majority background. Unsurprisingly, teachers are happiest in those schools where they feel valued, respected, have autonomy, connection with, and support from, colleagues and senior leaders, and clear paths for career progression. Our research has shown that some experiences affecting retention apply specifically to minority ethnic teachers.

# Key Findings

**1. Racism in the form of microaggressions targeted at teachers' ethnic identity and non-dominant cultural perspective, as well as at minority ethnic pupils, takes a toll on teachers' wellbeing, progression and job satisfaction, more so than high workload.**

***“It has nothing to do with workload. It has everything to do with me being a person of colour and the issues that mattered to me, and the voice that I wanted to have as a leader made people uncomfortable.”***

*(Primary female teacher, Pakistani)*

**2. Minority ethnic teachers are motivated to teach in ethnically diverse urban schools, often with disadvantaged intakes, because they relate to pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds and value diversity in the workplace.** This teacher referred to unique and satisfying relationships with minority ethnic students as a reason for staying in an otherwise unsupportive school:

***“I do feel like I owe it to kids to be in the room and have my perspective.”***

*(Secondary female teacher, Black African)*



**3. The ethnic diversity of senior leadership teams (SLT) in urban schools with high-minority pupil intakes is important for the overall retention of minority ethnic teachers.** Non-diverse SLTs in otherwise diverse schools play a role in minority ethnic teachers' decisions to move schools because of a perceived negative impact on the organisational culture. This status quo also highlights lack of opportunities for progression into leadership, with implications for retention.

**4. Stalled opportunities for career progression are the key retention factor for experienced minority ethnic teachers who felt unfairly passed over for senior posts, leaving many in pursuit of alternative roles outside of the state school sector.** Most interviewees said that this 'glass ceiling' was not obvious to them in the early stages of their career.

***“I look at the people at my school that have been promoted above me or given opportunities to learn, and they're all White British which I find interesting.”***

*(Primary male teacher, Black African)*



**5. The SLT plays the key role in creating a supportive organisational culture within ethnically diverse schools.** This includes making a conscious effort to develop the racial literacy of SLT to enable a dialogue about 'race'/ethnicity and equity in school, to support culturally relevant teaching, and to end stereotypical approaches to minority ethnic staff development (such as direction into pastoral roles).

As one teacher argued, the SLT cannot address race-related complaints unless they ***“know the difference between new racism and old racism”*** and have an understanding that:

***“if you are from [...] a minority background, you have certain limitations and certain things that have happened. When we level the playing field, then everyone has equal access then we can talk about merit.”***

*(Primary female teacher, Pakistani)*

## Recommendations

- School leaders in diverse schools should be asked by stakeholders to demonstrate the experience, training and skills that allow them to develop equitable learning environments that support minority ethnic teachers.
- The ongoing development of minority ethnic teachers should be supported through high-quality mentoring, improved working conditions, and opportunities for career development, especially beyond middle leadership roles.
- Senior leaders should be open and proactive in having conversations with minority ethnic teachers about their career aspirations and progression and be mindful of mentoring teachers towards taking on roles based on stereotypes, such as pastoral roles for Black teachers.
- School leadership, governors and administrators need to acknowledge how wider social inequalities are mirrored and reproduced in the school power hierarchies and underpin the unequal career progression of minority ethnic teachers.
- Efforts to increase representation among senior leaders should be supported, due to the evidence that racial congruence between school leaders and staff improves minority ethnic teacher retention.
- All staff claims of racism (both overt and covert) should be investigated and reported, and all leaders should be encouraged to identify practices that have negative effects (unintended or otherwise) on minority ethnic teachers and pupils.





## References:

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## Project Details

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**Base:** Centre for Teachers & Teaching Research, UCL Institute of Education.

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