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Black leaders matter: agency, progression and the sustainability of BME school leadership in England

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Abstract

This article examines the career progression of four Black male headteachers in England. In analysing the narratives of school leaders it sheds light on the agentic and contextual factors which have limited or facilitated a successful transition to school leadership and which sustain success. The headteachers' professional lives are explored through the lenses of Critical Race Theory and interpretivism. In doing so, it illuminates the journey towards and the realities of a group whose views are currently unrepresented in research on school leadership or that of the experiences of male BME teachers in England.The findings revealed that participants experience both limiting and facilitating structures as they negotiated their roles into headship and as headteachers. Limiting structures are those which constrain or hinder progression into leadership whilst facilitating structures enabled participants to navigate and negotiate gendered racism, make progress in their careers and achieve success in their respective roles. Both limiting and facilitating structures include personal agency as well as contextual factors. Theoretically, this study adds to the small number of studies on race and school leadership in England. More research is needed on the limiting and facilitating structures identified in this study and on the potential generational differences that may exist between more established and newly appointed male BME school leaders. Studying generationally different school leaders may help to illuminate the salience of race and racism across an increasingly diverse population.

Keywords: ethnicity, race, progression, agency, leadership

Introduction

The participation of and status of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) teachers in the education system in Britain has been a matter of research and public debate for decades. Additionally, the career progression of BME teachers to senior roles has been a matter of research and policy interventions. In terms of policy, the specific and general duties of the Race Relations Amendment Act (2000) which required schools to pay due attention to Race Equality were superseded by the Equalities Act (2010) which does not place the same levels of emphasis on issues of race. As a consequence, race and racism has been eclipsed by discussions of poverty and the problems of the white working class. Professional associations nonetheless, have continued to highlight the career obstacles that BME teachers face (McNamara et al, 2009; National Union of Teachers (NUT), 2017).However, despite research, debates and policy interventions, "the progression of BME teachers remains a deep rooted and continuing struggle at the individual and group levels" (Miller 2016, p.1), founded on histories of racial inequality and sustained by recent episodes of BME migration to England which have fueled suspicions and anxiety about individuals from BME backgrounds. As a result, and despite the ethnically diverse nature of England's student population, BME teachers tend to occupy mostly entry level and junior roles in schools (Earley et al, 2012). Put differently, although many BME teachers, whether they view teaching through a diverse lens or not, work within institutions that serve very diverse and in some cases majority BME students these institutions operate as sites of whiteness (Matias & Liou, 2015) – where White teachers and White school leaders are in the

majority (Feistritzer, 2011)thus, reifying Eurocentric frames (Calderon, 2014) and White middle-class cultures and values (Olivos, 2006).

In terms of race relations, progress has been somewhat stymied in England and, recent histories of racial inequality appear very present in contemporary British society. Phillips (2016: 1) argues "Britain is not a racist nation. But it is a society with a deep sensitivity to the dangers posed by ethnic and cultural difference".The combined effects of recent histories of racial inequality and the deep sensitivity towards ethnic and cultural differences thus underpins an ongoing struggle among BME teachers and school leaders for mutual recognition and equality with the English educational system. Miller (2016: 1) describes this ongoing struggle for promotion, progression among BME teachers and school leaders as "…not merely for their success but also for mutual recognition at individual and group levels, and for equality". Furthermore, the ongoing struggle for mutual recognition and equality among BME teachers and school leaders continue to feature in recent research (Lumby & Coleman, 2016)-highlighting the importance of the subject of race inequality in English education.

Although research continues to show the necessity and value of having BME teachers and school leaders (McNamara et al, 2009; Wei, 2007; SecEd, 2015), there is also research evidence that those who aspire to leadership roles are consistently marginalised (Lumby & Coleman, 2016) - underlining Kohli's (2016) view that "…through the lens of Whiteness as property, we must recognize that schools historically and currently have not been structured to serve communities of color" (p.4). Of race inequality in Britain, Phillips (2016:2) notes, "By and large, our nation is complacent about its ability to manage its own diversity….".

BME teacher progression in England

There is well developed body of research evidence in the UK regarding teacher progression in general and BME teacher progression in particular. Research by Morgan et al (1983) found the selection of headteachers was arbitrary and problematic and that panels did not always base selection decision on clear criteria. Just under two decades later, Earley et al (2002), concluded that race/ ethnicity was a problem in the progression of BME teachers to senior roles. A decade later, in 2012, Earley et al, re-confirmed that BME race/ ethnicity was still an inhibitor in the progression/ promotion of BME teachers. Bush et al (2006), and Lumby & Coleman (2007) also reported that race/ethnicity is a factor in the career progression of some Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) teachers. Furthermore, research by Coleman (2007); Moreau et al (2007) and by Bullock (2009) provides that the progression of women to senior leadership roles had been affected by prejudice from governors and others in the wider community.

Research by Shah & Shaikh (2010) found that religious background and ethnicity can have a negative role in teacher progression. In particular, they reported that being male and Muslim may inhibit one's chances of gaining an appointment as a headteacher. Moreover, research has also found that marginalisation and indirect racism (Powney, 2003); the subtle influence of informal networks that excludes some groups (Harris, 2003) to be factors influencing teacher progression. McNamara et al (2009, for example, found discrimination at work was a major barrier to progression. Deciding to focus instead on factors influencing progression decisions, Miller (2014) found government policy, social connections, and school level jockeying/interference were significant. In addition, research by Miller (2016: 11) also found that promotion, progression of BME teachers is in some ways reliant upon "White sanction"; a process in which "the skills and capabilities of a BME individual are, first, acknowledged and,

second, endorsed/ promoted by a white individual, who is positioned as a broker and/or mediator acting on behalf of or in the interests of the BME individual".

BME Headteachers

As at January 2015, there were 8.4 million pupils enrolled in state-funded and independent schools in England - of which 30.4% of primary school pupils are from minority ethnic origins; and 26.6% of secondary school pupils are from minority ethnic origins (Department for Education, 2015b). Various patterns of variation exist within the overall data, with some schools in London, for example, having as many as 70% of BME students enrolled, although staffing profiles do not always reflect the student body. In November 2014, there were 454.9 thousand full-time equivalent (FTE) teachers in state-funded schools in England - of which 87.5 per cent of teachers are White-British. Teachers from 'Other White Background' (3.6%), White-Irish (1.7%), Indian (1.7%) and Black Caribbean (1.0%) backgrounds make up the next largest groups of teachers (DfE, 2014). Of the approximately 18,000 qualified BME teachers, approximately 1,000 are in leadership roles and only 104 (or 3%) are headteachers. That is, in 2014, 93.7% of headteachers were recorded as White-British, a slight of reduction 93.9% the previous year. Arguably, the government's own recognition of the issue of race inequality in school leadership, led it, in 2014, to introduce the Leadership, Equality and Diversity Fund (LEDF) which is aimed at supporting BME teachers into applying for senior leadership (DfE, 2015a). It should be noted that school's access to this fund is via a voluntary bidding process, which as yet has had no independent evaluation of uptake and/or impact. That schools however, bid to access this fund to support the development and progression of BME aspirant school leaders.

Atewologun & Singh (2010: 345) assert that 'UK black professionals encounter a number of structures (bureaucratic classifications of 'race', social stereotyping and organizational diversity climates) that influence their identities, and they use a variety of agentic actions to navigate through these'. In terms of teaching and school leadership research has shown that structural barriers such as racism, including assumptions about capabilities based on racial/ethnic stereotypes, are daily experiences for BME teachers. In a recent study, BME teachers spoke about an invisible glass-ceiling and widespread perception among senior leadership teams (SLTs) that BME teachers "have a certain level and don't go beyond it" (NUT, 2017). This study explores how such structures intersect and are experienced by male BME school leaders who, by dint of their occupational status, inhabit a predominately classed, raced and gendered education space. Through examining the personal agency of the participants a clearer insight to the intersections of race, racism, ethnicity and class in the educational literature of BME teachers and race and leadership in England is provided.

The study

An interpretative design which utilises Critical Race Theory (CRT) is used in this study. Interpretivism is associated with the search for truth through the eyes of the actors involved. Each headteacher in this study reflected on his personal circumstances (Henning 2004) vis-à-vis their entry into teaching, their journey to headship and their experience of leadership. Accounts provided by participants were taken at face value – as reality, for them – and what is presented in this article is a critical interpretation of those accounts. It should be noted that this study did not attempt to measure the experiences of participants, rather the aim of this study

was first to understand and second, provide a description of those experiences (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004).

CRT developed from Critical Legal Studies (CLS) in the US and has been applied to the examination of racial inequality in education. CRT privileges the centrality of experiential knowledge and uses storytelling as a powerful means for creating meaning as well as challenging myths (Delgado 1989). In doing so, counter-storytelling is deployed as - "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told" (i.e. those on the margins of society) (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).CRT is used here to disrupt 'monovocal', majoritarian accounts of BME school leadership in England and to illuminate experiences and aspirations that can potentially lead to intersectional invisibility (Ahmed, 2012; Howard, 2014) in doing so the actual, lived experience of individuals are examined (Cohen, at al, 2011) - in this case the four headteachers. Whilst interpretivism is associated with the search for truth through the eyes of the actors involved, whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) provides a lens through which to consider the processes of exclusion which are evidenced in low numbers of BME school leaders, particularly BME men in England. According to Harris, 'whiteness and property share a common premise – a conceptual nucleus – of a right to exclude' (pg. 1714). In England the effects of long term exclusionary practices are observed in continued decreases in numbers of BME teachers entering the profession, in the low numbers of BME teachers relative to the size of BME communities in England and in the paucity of BME school leaders. Recent research indicates that 'BME males are less likely to enter into teaching and when they do they are less likely to progress into senior leadership roles compared to their white peers' (NUT, 2017). It is noteworthy that BME females share a similar fate and 'despite the higher proportion of BME females than males in teaching, they are still less likely to progress to senior leadership roles compared to all male teachers (BME and white)'.

In contemporary England, whiteness as property - as it pertains to race and school leadership is more covert and inscribed in selection procedures at all points of the teacher to leadership pipeline. Recent changes to teacher education policy have promoted school-led teacher training at the expense of traditional university-based programs. This policy shift has resulted in even lower numbers of BME applicants being accepted on employment-based routes to teaching (an area of continued growth in England). The main recruiters, Teach First and Schools Direct have grown exponentially in the past five years. For example, Teach First (analogous to Teach for America) has become one of the largest recruiters of teachers in England, advertised as a Leadership Development programme it only considers candidates who possess a first or upper second class degree as an entry requirement. This is despite that fact that most BME students attend lower ranking institutions, enter higher education in greater numbers but do not graduate with higher class degrees (Boliver, 2015, 2016). Similarly, Schools Direct, has seen a similar decline in the number of BME teachers being offered places as teachers. Interestingly one of the arguments proffered for the decrease in numbers is that BME applicants are in competition with each other for a smaller number of places in areas which serve BME communities. Drawing on the work of Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995: 55) who examine whiteness as property and schooling in the US, how whiteness as property may be applied to BME school leadership in England is set out below. According to Ladson-Billings and Tate whiteness as property functions to create inequalities in four main ways:

1. Rights to disposition. This refers to the transferability of property, in the context of this study this relates to appointment to the post of a school leader. In this sense, BME leaders are rewarded for demonstrating the qualities attributed to white norms of school leadership and, as such property is considered transferable.

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2. Rights to use and enjoyment. In England, resource and other inequities exist in schools that serve predominantly BME communities. These relate, amongst other things, to the recruitment and retention of well qualified staff and difficulties of high staff turnover. In England, this is also closely inter-connected to reputation and status.

3. Reputation and status property. To obtain school leadership positions BME school leaders are often located in schools which may be considered 'at risk'. Such schools are either graded as inadequate or as requiring improvement by the external accountability process of OFSTED inspection. The damage caused to one's professional reputation by leading a school that falls within these categories, considered personal property in this instance, serves to erode one's reputation and status as a school leader.

4. The absolute right to exclude. In order to become a Headteacher in England one has to obtain the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH). Integral to the application process is the support of one's headteacher or line manager and, as indicated earlier, recent research shows that aspirant BME leaders face challenges in having their leadership skills and capabilities acknowledged and recognised. Even though bespoke Leadership Development programmes for BME staff exist in England the conversion rate into leadership positions remains low (Coleman & Campbell Stephens, 2010; Ogunbawo, 2012).

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were used to capture the complex and multiple ways in which black male headteachers experience and interpret their career experiences. This was believed to be particularly important in the context of ongoing debates at national level about the participation and status individuals from BME backgrounds in education at all levels. Individual interviews were conducted with all four black male headteachers. Both researchers participated in the interviews. Initially open coding was employed as a means of breaking down the data into "initial categories of information about the phenomenon" (Robson 2010: 149). This open coding took the form of "incident to incident" coding in which "you compare incident with incident, then as your ideas take hold, compare incidents with your conceptualization of incidents coded earlier" (Charmaz 2006: 54), rather than line-by-line coding. This use of open coding allowed the research to "crystallize participants' experience" (ibid.: 55), thereby ensuring a sound understanding of their perspectives. This was followed by a second coding process described by Charmaz (2006: 57) as "focused coding":

> *"Focused coding means using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data. Focused coding requires decisions about which initial [open] codes make the most analytic sense to categorize your data incisively and completely."*

As a result of this process, the data were analysed to identify themes (e.g.:entry into teaching) which were later refined to sub-themes (e.g.: support systems). Due to the small number of BME males in leadership positions participants were assured they would not be identified in any publication and/or presentation arising from the data, and were sent transcripts of their interviews to check as a form of "respondent-validation" (Miller, 2012, p.143). Table 1 below, provides an overview of each participant.

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Table 1 Participants

Participant no.	Leadership experience (in years)	Current position	Age phase	Demography and Location
1	14	CEO and Academy Trust Lead	Secondary (11–18years)	The school is majority white and located in North West England
2	19	Executive Headteacher	Primary (5- 11 years)	A Federation of schools which serve a multi-ethnic community in North West England
3	12	Principal	Secondary (11 – 18 years)	A secondary Academy which serves a majority of BME pupils in South East England
4	10	Headteacher	Primary (5–11 years)	A primary faith-based school which serves a multi ethnic community in South East England

The interview schedule which guided the semi-structured interview consisted of ten questions that explored participants' understanding of their career their trajectory and their experience of headship and lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour. Questions were shared with participants prior to the interviews which took place either face to face or by telephone. Examples of questions include:

1. How long have you been a school leader? How many schools have you led? Where have the schools been located?
2. Why did you decide to become a school leader and what contributed to that decision? What would you say were the motivating factors for this decision?
3. Would you say that the school leader's role presents challenges that affect your daily life?
4. What are some of the challenges that you face as a male BME school leader? Why do you think this is the case? What support structures/coping mechanisms are available to you?
5. As a male BME school leader what grounds your professional identity?

By analysing the literature and data through a critical race lens, a logical hypothesis is that if Black headteachers excel in their leadership roles, despite severe racial inequality in their trajectory and within their leadership roles, then racial inequality in promotion and progression decisions need to be given far greater scrutiny at both policy and practice levels.

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Findings

The findings revealed that participants experience both limiting and facilitating structures as they negotiated their roles into headship and as headteachers. Limiting structures are those which constrain or hinder progression into leadership whilst facilitating structures enabled participants to navigate and negotiate gendered racism, make progress in their careers and achieve success in their respective roles. Both limiting and facilitating structures include personal agency as well as contextual factors. The limiting structures include (1) stereotyping and judgements about capability, (2) experience as headteachers and (3) unfair treatment. Facilitating structures comprised (1) the decision to go into school leadership (this was also considered a limiting structure in one instance), (2) support and mentoring for aspirant BME leaders and (3) sustaining black leadership.

One of the most salient limiting structures was stereotyping and judgements about capability. In the interviews participants were probed on their experiences of headship. All commented on the dearth of male BME leaders describing headship as "a very lonely" and "isolating experience" made "*worse because black headteachers are so few*" (P4). There were also other challenges associated with judgements and about abilities and racial stereotyping:

I often get people commenting on my age... I became a headteacher when 38, so for many people the first thing that struck them was my age so that's often been a talking point (P1).

People assume you are always the caretaker. I attended a conference in York and one White headteacher said to me, "You must have a proper steel band in your school". I said to her, "Why can't we have an orchestra? Why must we have a steel band?" (P1)

After I had been appointed, the Director of Education came to see me. He asked, "Are you sure you are cut out for the job. It's a tough school; tough working environment" (P2).

Participants commented that being black, male and in a leadership role resulted in them being exposed yet un-recognised and under-valued. It was not uncommon to be the only person of colour at headship events, which of itself is often a source of scepticism. At the same time, one's status as a headteacher was relegated to that of curio as evidenced in the statement "You must have a proper steel band in your school". In recalling a meeting with a parent P1 commented that:

In my first year of teaching a parent came to me at Parent's Evening, and after a conversation about how her child was getting on she said, "I asked my daughter to describe her Physics teacher to me and she said you were tall… and it didn't occur to her to tell me that you were black". This is what the parent said. It was the first thing the parent saw but it wasn't necessarily the first thing the child saw. I've worked in schools when I was in Nottingham where more than 50% of our children were from global majority backgrounds and I was a black leader in that context. I've always seen it as my duty to do the job that I've been given… I have not allowed my colour to stop me from doing my job (P1).

It is interesting to note the assertion that 'I have not allowed my colour to stop me from doing my job'. P1 was the only participant working in a mainly white locality and leading a majority white school. In the interview P1 was clear that his racialized identity was not a feature of his role as a headteacher:

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I don't see the fact that I am a black male as being the main thing that determines who I am. I'm a leader I've got work to do. I've got people to lead. I've got decisions to make on behalf of others and so in seeing myself I don't see colour as being the first thing. But often that's what people see when they see me (P1).

For P1 success as a school leader is inextricably linked to merit, a characteristic that is encapsulated in the following statement:

Going back to my football analogy if someone is actually not performing that well regardless of your race, they are not going to keep them on the team. We need to get to a place, I believe in which education system where the colour of one's skin does is not what determines your progress as teacher, but what determines your progress is your own merit. If it is done on you own merit, we might see people from global majority backgrounds doing well.

Speaking of their experiences as headteachers participants explained how they had developed a range of coping mechanisms to navigate their way through to leadership. Feelings of being unfairly treated and unfairly targeted, led participants to develop self-reliant strategies for coping that enabled them to simultaneously create space to do their jobs, whilst affirming their own capabilities. The subjective nature of their experience resulted in responsive and reactive actions. One participant who had attended a bespoke leadership development programme for aspirant BME leaders and who had several interviews before gaining headship commented:

I am confident in who I am. I cannot think of a challenge to my identity. As a black leader, you have to be grounded. I had 7 interviews before my first headship appointment. And each interview lasted 2 hours. And after the 3rd interview, I was at X station reading the jargon. I threw the article down and said bollocks. I am going to be myself. Interviews 4,5,6 and 7 I went in and told them- I am what you see. I got a job after interview 7, but for years it was a matter of one year contracts year on year (P3).

What is interesting to note is that despite being head hunted for his first leadership position P3 was not offered a full time permanent contract of employment. Instead, for the first four years as a school leader his terms and conditions of employment were somewhat insecure. He reflects:

There is a time for battle. I pick my battles carefully. You have to know when and what battles to fight. Be sturdy in front of them. Find an outlet but don't let them know…. Pre-empt them. Be ahead of the game. Be beyond their strategy. I call this stragum (P3).

'Stragum' was an important aspect of P3's survival and success as a school leader. He is acutely aware of his role as a male BME leader and of the fact that it is necessary to prove oneself on the way to becoming a leader and whilst one is in post. For P3 this meant being aware of and able to react to the context and knowing what was needed to 'stay ahead of the game':

I don't look for a balance. I think if you are going to take on a job, you don't look for a balance. You create spaces and find your way. But you don't go in looking for a balance. If you have to work weekends, then work weekends. If you are to stay ahead of the game then you have to do what you have to do to stay ahead. There will be a double take when you are being judged so once you know that- you have to do what you have to do (P3).

Similar comments were made by other participants, reinforcing the notion that to be a successful school leader, personal agency was a contingent factor:

I've accessed a number of things myself. I put myself through a Master's degree in Educational Management which I funded myself. That's pretty much me taking some responsibility for myself (P1)

I need stamina and determination. Otherwise I will not succeed…. [especially when] people are against you…. the demands are so many (P2)

Participants' stories about stereotypes and judgements of their capability reflect their conscious realization of their positionality as Black male school leaders in England, the responsibility they have to represent other BME groups, particularly African Caribbean men, and the sense of isolation they feel often being the only one in the room.

Facilitating structures on the other hand, incorporated the ability to build relationships, broker and leverage resources. The relationships mentioned were often mentors/sponsors, other successful school leaders or established educationalists working strategically in local government:

I became a HT in 1998. I started off in X then moved to X. I worked for Mr X, the former Chief Education Officer in X. He nurtured me. He spotted my raw talent. He has had a pivotal impact on my life (P2). X also affirmed me and told me I could do it. He had a high national profile but he made time for me (P2).

Enabling structures often involved the support of others and in P2's case talent spotting and a continued interest in his development were crucial in recognising and developing leadership capacity. Similarly, another participant reported:

My headteacher was quite happy for me to do the NPQH so from that point on I've never been in that position where people feel they are ready to go on to their next step and their headteacher is holding them back (P1).

Through these relationships participants established their school leader identities, strengthened their agency and learned about school leadership in the white educational space. In doing so they gathered support and advice on how to navigate their careers, as illustrated below:

It was another headteacher, a white American who influenced my decision consider applying for headteacher roles. He came to see me. I loved his manner. He believed in upskilling and creating opportunities. He spent a day with me and things moved from there. He was revolutionary (P3)

Participants mentioned that it was increasingly difficult to find male BME school leaders and none of them had ever had a male BME leader as a direct line manager. All, nonetheless were keen to act as mentors to aspirant BME leaders and believed that they should have a mentor who can relate to their experiences as school leaders.All four were prepared to offer up their time and experience through mentoring. Not only did they feel that this was a way to share insights and provide guidance, they also felt more experienced BME headteachers mentoring new or less experienced BME headteachers can help tackle loneliness and ethnic isolation among BME headteachers.

I am interested in mentoring new BME headteachers. It's a tough environment. It is also a lonely environment. I want to share with them the challenges of the role and strategies for overcoming and for dealing with some of these challenges (P2).

All participants considered the lack of BME headteachers in school a major issue of concern for students and for race equality within the teaching profession as a whole. They pointed to a range of benefits to be derived by teachers, pupils and parents in having BME leaders and teachers in place, in particular, schools that have mainly BME pupils although being led and staffed by mainly White staff. They recognised that part of the problem of progression among BME teachers was linked to the numbers of BME trainees entering the teaching profession, and offered several suggestions about what they could do or others elsewhere in the education system could do to encourage and promote black school leader/ship.Participants alsofelt it was important for others to know what impact they have had in turning schools around and/or in contributing to their (re)shaping as not enough attention was given to their work, in particular those who had remained in post for years and had made an impact:

Of the 29 Black Headteachers in England, I don't know how many of us have been the same 29 from the time the Department for Education started counting. It that might be quite an interesting thing to find out but obviously I've been in these statistics now for about the last 11 years… I don't whether it is possible to identify through research, those Black Headteachers like myself who have stayed in one place for a long time and those who have perhaps moved on, or those people who are perhaps very new to it (P1).

Although research into the working lives of existing Black Headteachers can help establish patterns of stability and continuity, participants also recognised that sustainability in BME teacher participation and representation cannot be achieved simply through research:

In the NHS, if you are doctor and you are performing well and you are an expert surgeon does anyone really care what colour you are? But within teaching because of the way in which performance is measured, this is important. It can be very difficult for those who are talented from BME backgrounds to be really be able to make progress and to shine. We need to get to a place, in our education system, where the colour of one's skin does is not what determines your progress as teacher, but what determines your progress is your own merit. If progression is done on own merit, we might see BME staff doing well(P1).

P1 alludes here to the double- consciousness of being a black male school leader. With the exception of one participant the school leaders in the study were aware that their racialized identities were in contrast to the contexts within which they worked and to a greater or lesser degree one's personal identity was potentially replaced with that sanctioned by the schooling context within which they worked. Participant P2 captures this succinctly when discussing how schools and governing bodies make decisions about appointing BME leaders:

People often talk about the extent to which they're going to trust someone who is from my [ethnic] background to lead. That's always been an issue. I think, at interviews governing bodies and others when they are interviewing candidates for senior positions there is he chance that some sort of unconscious bias around whether this leader going to be accepted by the people that they're going to be leading. I think this has always been an issue; and I think this has affected the progress of some of the people from BME backgrounds (P2).

All of the school leaders entered teaching for altruistic reasons and commented on the desire to "give back", to raise the attainments of BME communities and to make a positive difference to children's lives. The role of the church, spirituality or faith also appeared in the interviews:

I've got strong faith and I think that it affects the way in which I approach different situations and different people and so on and I've often found that people like myself, I was head of a church

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school. I was taken on as the head of just a regular school. People from my background often are able to turn to our faith as being a way in which we can see the world and cope with some of the pressures that come (P4).

This final aspect served to provide a way of making meaning of one's professional identityas well as grounding one's sense of self. In addition to comments about paving the way for more BME school leaders the participants also viewed their roles as providing a legacy for others to follow.

Discussion

Teacher progression is a fraught activity due to the complex nature of organisations and human interactions within them. Progression to school leadership in England is no less fraught. Participants described their entry to the teaching profession as "accidental" and unplanned. This is not entirely surprising although somewhat problematic. Evidence from the Department for Education (DfE, 2014) shows that individuals from BME backgrounds are less likely to enter teaching, since, they are least likely to pass their degrees or are least likely to pass their degrees with good grades. This reality points to a range of challenges. First, do schools benefit from having BME teachers or BME leaders? Should schools reflect the diversity of individuals found within local communities/ society? In each case, the answer is a clear yes, although the reality on the ground is different.

Participants described being given opportunities by White colleagues to enter teaching. Given the age profiles of participants, this is understandable - as in the 1950s and 1960s, it was unlikely that there were headteachers from BME backgrounds in mainstream schools in England. Participants, also revealed being encouraged and supported by White colleagues to enter leadership- once more highlighting that individuals from BME backgrounds did not play any major role, perhaps beyond their family, in their career progression. This important recognition of "White sanction" (Miller, 2016) is as important as it is problematic. First, it reveals the reality of the educational leadership landscape in England as primarily a White endeavor, both at the levels of policy and practice. Second, with just over 104 headteachers from BME backgrounds in the UK, of whom just over 35 are Black (SecEd, DfE, 2015), how likely is it that, within the next decade, BME teacher progression in England will be based upon their own merit and worth and less so upon 'White sanction'?

In addition to racial stereotyping, participants also confronted gender and age bias. Nevertheless, in addition to support and encouragement received from primarily White colleagues to enter the teaching progression, headteachers pointed to a strong sense of personal agency which helped them navigate complex interactions and decision-making in order to succeed in their roles. For example, they spoke of "picking" their "battles carefully"; of using "stragum"; of being "grounded" in their "own identity" and in getting on with the demands of their jobs in order to "stay ahead". These accounts point to a strong sense of resilience underpinned by developed sense of personal efficacy and agency. First, as BME headteachers, participants recognised there are several factors present within the education system and within each institution that have the potential to distract them. Second, having recognised these challenges and their potential to side-track, if not undermine them, they have

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dug deep within themselves, bringing to bear their capabilities, skills and experience, since they acknowledge failure cannot be an option- neither at the personal nor professional levels. Furthermore, in being resilient, and in drawing upon personal efficacy and agency headteachers demonstrated that [a strong sense of] personal agency helps an individual navigate "…political, economic, cultural and other systemic forces" (Watts & Guessous, 2006, p.3). From the accounts presented, it was the strong sense of self, of who they are, of where they have come from, of what they are good at, of where they would like to take their schools, and of what they are trying to achieve for their pupils and staff, and by extension for society, kept these headteachers grounded and focused despite questions about their competence, age and racial/ ethnic fit for their job.

Black school leaders matter- fixing the pipeline

To fix the pipeline however requires two things. First, government needs to create an environment in which existing policies are implemented and monitored and where failure to comply cannot mean business as usual. That is, initiatives aimed at increasing the overall stock of available trainee teachers must specifically target BME recruitment and retention. Second, educational organisations need to move beyond "pretend pluralism" as far as BME progression is concerned. For example, universities should, rather than simply publishing annual data of the numbers of BME students failing, should be return to the requirements laid down by the Race Relations Amendment Act where schools were held to account for meeting specific targets around race equality and student progression. Furthermore, at the level of school organisation, a continuing push towards getting schools to actively seek out and deploy talent from suitably qualified and experienced BME individuals in an attempt to change the face of school leadership in England is required. This is the precisely the contention of Miller (2016) that the implementation of existing government policies on race equality in England, at organisational level, is inconsistent; and made worse due to lack of monitoring. Furthermore, where policy implementation and/or monitoring lacks transparency, an organisation's interaction with and delivery of said policy, for example, around race equality, is likely to be inconsistent.

Conclusion

Progression to leadership among BME teachers in in England is complicated and fraught. As Miller(2016) points out, "…. the struggle for promotion, progression among BME staff is a struggle not only for their success but also for mutual recognition at individual and group levels, and for equality" (p.1). Race inequality continues to restrict the potential pool of prospective BME school leaders in England. Despite feelings of ethnic isolation; and despite feeling they have to work harder to provide themselves, this study found no evidence however that black headteachers lacked any critical skill and/or competence required to lead successful schools. Furthermore, through their negative experiences of racial and other forms of stereotyping, the headteachers appeared far more determined to succeed at their jobs.

Whereas the accounts of headteachers confirm that personal agency is an important ingredient that keeps them in post and make them succeed against tremendous pressures and odds; 'White sanction' (Miller, 2016) is arguably the single most important element responsible for getting them 'through the door' in the first place. This indictment is consistent with Phillips' construction that Britain is "…. complacent about its ability to manage its own diversity…." (Phillips, 2016, p.2). Greater research is needed on the impact of BME headteachers and the government and educational institutions alike will need to re-double their efforts towards making race equality policy implementation and monitoring an area of priority, from nursery to

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university, such that personal agency and merit will, in the not too distant future stand on their own, aloft of 'White sanction' in progression decisions, thus adding new insights and directions to the practice of Black school/ educational leadership and it's sustainability in England. It will be important also to examine the extent to which some BME school leaders are complicit in promoting whiteness as property through the practice and enactment of their professional roles.

Theoretically, this study adds to the small number of studies on race and school leadership in England. More research is needed on the limiting and facilitating structures identified in this study and on the potential generational differences that may exist between more established and newly appointed male BME school leaders. Studying generationally different school leaders may help to illuminate the salience of race and racism across an increasingly diverse population.

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