

'Teachers like me': Building Ethnic Diversity in the Staff Room

On Wednesday 17th November, a four-way partnership of independent and state schools came together to learn more about how to challenge stereotypes and inspire greater numbers of ethnically diverse teachers to apply for leadership roles.



18th November 2021 — We believe that people of all ethnicities should be encouraged and welcomed into the teaching profession and would like to build bridges and share expertise across the educational spectrum. Over 120 Heads and other powerful educational voices came together to discuss this fundamental issue. Headmaster of FHS, Regent's Park, Charles Fillingham, initiated the panel debate following his offer of four 100% transformational Sixth Form bursaries to students at All Saints Catholic College (one of the co-hosting schools) and two to Cumberland Community School (one of the panellists). "Schools have never been more important as powerful agents of change," said Charles Fillingham, and furthermore, "This event shows that schools are determined to play their part in building a more inclusive society without barriers."

One panel, chaired by David Cohen, Investigations Editor on both The Evening Standard and The Independent, was comprised of political, educational and social experts and decision makers who discussed the next steps for building an ethnically diverse schools' workforce. Amongst these were David Lammy MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Justice and leading campaigner for Oxbridge to improve access for students from minority backgrounds, and Kim Johnson MP, serving member of the Education Select and Women and Equalities Select Committee and MP for Liverpool Riverside. David Cohen shed light on this underrepresentation amongst headteachers, with only 3% of London headteachers being BAME although 40% of the London population is made up of people from minority ethnic origins. He also noted that this underrepresentation is not only a problem in the education industry but a much wider societal issue, with BAME people countrywide making up only 6% of journalists, for example.

David Lammy highlighted the difference between equality and equity, discussing the importance of positive action being needed to be taken in good faith and on merit rather than the use of arbitrary quotas which foster self-doubt and imposter syndrome. Kim Johnson described the frustrations she has faced as the first Black MP for Liverpool despite it being home to the largest black community in the UK, while another of the panellists, author Dr Chris Vieler-Porter, noted that this issue was first raised over 35 years ago in 1985 and it is disappointing that there has been so little progress over this time. All panellists agreed that the most effective way to tackle this problem is to tackle systemic blockages, spread awareness and encourage affirmative action so that ethnic diversity is not something that is purely campaigned for and truly believed in by minority ethnic people but by all British people, regardless of their ethnic origin.

In the other panel discussion, chaired by Ed Dorrell, Director at Public First and former Deputy Editor of the Times Educational Supplement, a panel of five headteachers considered paths into educational leadership. The panellists included Jaideep Barot, headmaster of Bristol Grammar School, a member of the Independent Schools Council's inclusion group and passionate advocate of diversification of staff bodies in independent schools having received financial assistance himself as a boy to attend Manchester Grammar School, Allana Gay, headteacher at Vita et Pax Preparatory School and co-founder of BAMEed Network and Omar Deria, Head of Cumberland Community School and a passionate believer in the transformational power of a good education having been told that he "wasn't good enough to go to university" whilst at school himself. Allana Gay discussed the importance of BAME representation in encouraging confidence amongst ethnic minority students and teachers wishing to advance into leadership positions, noting that "if you don't give people a sense of belonging, their aspirations become tempered". Zehra Jaffer, headteacher at Stoke Newington School, fervently agreed with this, having been told that "London isn't ready for a Head that looks like you" as she looked to advance her career only a couple of years ago.

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All parties agreed that a fundamental element of the problem is aspirational headteachers from minority ethnic backgrounds not being able to see themselves in leadership positions, and their allies not being able to see them in such positions, meaning that advancing to these levels seems like an overwhelmingly insurmountable goal. Therefore, sitting back and not taking action is not an option. A top-down approach is essential and changing the makeup of governing bodies, harnessing the power of current majority ethnic leaders and viewing job applicants in a more holistic and creative manner are the most effective agents for change.

The overarching conclusion drawn by both panels was that the real goal here is inclusivity. Industry research recognises that the most inclusive cultures drive significantly greater innovation so diversity is crucial and, as eloquently noted by Allana Gay, "difference is challenging to your emotions but it is necessary for your development". Educational leaders must commit to reduce barriers to recruitment and progression and accept that this is an area where we need to continue to listen, to broaden our understanding and to ensure that developments take place as appropriate, in order to provide an education which is as diverse as possible and fully prepares students for the wider world. We must all take action to continue to further this important cause which will exponentially benefit everybody involved, regardless of ethnicity.

If you would like to take part in the online conversation, please use #teacherslikeme in social media posts, and please tag @FHSRegentsPark

