

More ethnic minority teachers are needed in UK schools – but teaching can affect their mental health and wellbeing

There is a major shortage of new teachers in England, and this includes teachers from ethnic minority backgrounds. Research from 2020 found that 46% of schools in England had no Black or ethnic minority teaching staff at all.

But the treatment of ethnic minority staff in schools raises ethical concerns about recruiting them into a workplace which puts significant burdens on their mental health.

The 2022 Teacher Wellbeing Index found that 59% of teachers were considering leaving the profession as a result of its impact on their mental health and wellbeing. But ethnic minority teachers also experience additional pressures.

UK charity Education Support has published a recent report on the mental health and wellbeing of ethnic minority teachers, based on focus groups held with 26 teachers. The report finds that, while ethnic minority teachers experience many of the same pressures as their white colleagues, these are further compounded by racism.

Ethnic minority teachers face racist stereotyping. One senior member of staff quoted in the report recounts that “On my first day as an NQT [newly qualified teacher] I arrived at school in a suit and tie only to be directed to the kitchen by a member of staff rather than the main hall.”

A 2016 survey by teachers’ union NASUWT found that 31% of Black and ethnic minority teachers had experienced discrimination in their workplace.

‘White spaces’

The challenges that ethnic minority teachers experience are also broader than individual acts of racism. Schools can be “white spaces” – social environments where being white is the norm, and where people of colour are viewed as inferior or even threatening outsiders.

A 2019 report commissioned by the National Union of Teachers (now part of the National Education Union) found that teachers from ethnic minority backgrounds were given responsibility over areas such as behaviour rather than extra intellectual roles, and that some Black teachers in particular felt that they were viewed as “aggressive” if they challenged decisions.

But teachers from ethnic minority backgrounds are vital for UK schools. They provide both white and ethnic minority students with important role models. They improve students’ educational attainment. When many young Black students feel that the biggest barrier they face in school is their teachers’ perceptions of them, the importance of Black teachers is clear.

Lack of teachers

Under-representation of Black teachers in schools across the UK has been disproportionately low for decades. Recent government data shows that despite Black people making up 4.6% of the working age population, only 2.5% of teachers are Black. White people constitute 79.7% of the working age population, but 90.3% of teaching staff and 96% of headteachers.

The government has made commitments to diversify the education workforce. At the same time, though, it has been criticised for minimising the impact of institutional racism on the lives of people

in the UK. In the [Education Support report](#), most of the teachers said they would not recommend the profession to family or friends.

However, the Education Support report also found that feeling isolated was a major factor in ethnic minority teachers' wellbeing. So it is no surprise that these teachers are more likely to [stay in schools](#) which have more staff from ethnic minority backgrounds, who may provide a supportive network.

Supportive networks of Black ethnic minority and anti-racist teachers can develop [more inclusive practices in schools](#). Examples of this practice include the National Education Union's [Anti-Racist Charter](#), which offers staff help in tackling racism, as does the London Borough of Lambeth's [anti-racist framework](#).

The [Halo Code](#) provides schools with guidelines to stop the hair discrimination Black students [may experience](#). [Teacher-led efforts](#) to develop an anti-racist curriculum can help all teachers address racism in schools. There are also more localised efforts, such as the campaign led by teacher Aisha Thomas to increase the number of Black teachers [in Bristol](#).

Engaging in anti-racist work is necessary for improving spaces where ethnic minority teachers work – and where future teachers learn. But this work is often in addition to teachers' regular workload, and it can be arduous.

[School leaders must reflect](#) on their duty of care, so they are ready to respond when ethnic minority teachers experience racism in school. Active solidarity should not be the responsibility of Black and ethnic minority teachers only, but of all staff.