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Race and Education



When contacts and networks trump talent upskill and re-route – *my journey to Headship.*

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In Britain today, the most powerful elite is 97% white (Duncan 2017). According to Dawn Butler, Shadow Equalities Minister, black people are losing out because contacts and networks trump talent (Duncan 2017). Having progressed through the British education system from being classified as an unqualified teacher to my current position as Head-teacher, I'm also of the opinion that this is the case as I have often seen talented and experienced individuals treated unfairly because they didn't have the contacts. Regrettably this will continue to be the case which is part of a cyclical and unchanging process as contacts remain white and as a result only those with white privilege will be promoted and talent continues to be second rate. The talent vs contacts cycle becomes more apparent the higher ethnic minorities climb the ladder towards leadership positions in schools. Consequently, those of us who struggle to achieve more senior leadership positions should seek to upskill and reroute. If the system does not create opportunities for you create opportunities for yourself by investing in yourself and find another way to realise your ambitions.

My journey to Headship proved far more challenging at the final hurdles when I tried to break away from Assistant Headship to becoming the Head-teacher. Like many others from ethnic minority backgrounds it was somewhat easier to nail middle leadership roles and then it becomes far more challenging to achieve senior leadership roles and more so the role of a Head-teacher. More often than not middle leadership roles that are somewhat easily accessible to ethnic minorities are usually pastoral especially in communities with greater percentage of ethnic minority pupils.

When I arrived in the UK, I landed in a very challenging but extremely supportive school. I was never one to run away from a challenge and thence I covered 8 years there which went by very quickly – time

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flies when you are having fun. At this London comprehensive, staff supported each other and we all pulled the school from Special Measures, Ofsted's judgment two weeks after I started, to Good, the summer before I left. I progressed from an overseas trained teacher status to Head of Year with one of the most settled year groups in the school. During this time, I took on various roles which were not always paid as my long-term goal was to upskill and gain experience, remuneration was secondary. Over the years I embraced the opportunity to teach subjects out of my specialisms which I have loved and had my eyes glued to the weekly bulletin and staffroom noticeboards for opportunities to upskill myself. Within the second term I achieved Qualified Teacher Status and over the years I was Gifted and Talented Coordinator, Out of Hours Learning leader, leader of the Gifted and Talented Saturday School, School Council lead and I assisted the Exams Officer.

Having peaked at this great school I sought new challenges in another very difficult inner-city London school where a number of pupils were entitled to free school means who came from challenging homes and I was appointed Assistant Head-teacher for Inclusion and Pastoral Care. The experience I gained upskilling myself at my previous job gave me a story to recount. More than two thirds of the student population were from ethnic minority backgrounds and as a result I was able to identify with pupils and the context. My role as Head of Year prepared me well for this new challenge.

Up to this point in my career, I still had not knowingly experienced discrimination but I continued to widen my skills-bank and even though I was employed to lead pastoral care I challenged myself and learnt how to write the school timetable, designed the school curriculum and led on coaching within teaching and learning. I kept an open mind as I knew that in order to progress I needed to be able to outperform those I go against at interviews. If I didn't have the contacts or the network I needed to at least have the experience. Having spent 3 years at this school, I left not only with experience in inclusion and pastoral care but also in teaching and learning, timetabling and curriculum development. This school was a smaller than average London comprehensive so I decided that I needed to make a sideways move remaining as an Assistant Head-teacher and rerouted to a larger school in a different context in

order to be able to move on to a Deputy Headship role in the future. This attitude of 'needing to know more' allowed me to take on a teaching and learning and curriculum role in my next job. In this new role, I led the transition to the new national curriculum and developed an assessment without levels grading system among other roles linked to the line management of curriculum areas, pastoral teams, rewards, teaching and learning and Prevent Agenda.

With 7 years' experience under my belt as an Assistant Head-teacher in two London schools and having the skills to lead on Inclusion, Pastoral Care, Teaching and Learning and Curriculum development I thought it would have been easy to rise to the rank of Deputy Head-teacher. I ticked all the boxes, did all the courses and led on all possible areas that senior leadership teams normally manage. However, my ambitions were dashed very many times with feedback from interviews being all different on every occasion. There was no one thread, no two sets of feedback were the same. The reality of discrimination was rife. Even when I joined a prestigious organisation which focused on preparing me for headship I was still side-lined at interviews. I had some of the very best professional development one could ever have as a Head-teacher – yet I was not able to secure a job as a Deputy Head-teacher. The issues of feedback and being side-lined were baffling for me, my Coach and Executive Coach. I reflected on all interviews and realised that it was only on one occasion that I had been interviewed by a panel of individuals who were from ethnic minority backgrounds. The feedback from that panel was I should have spoken about my doctoral research – this was not relevant and the opportunities did not present itself. There were occasions when discrimination was so obvious it was startling. On one occasion, I was being observed by a member of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) who was on his mobile phone whilst I was teaching. The internal candidate got the job who also sits on the same SLT as my observer. This is why of the 1,049 individuals in some of the positions of most power in the UK, just 36 are BAME or 3.4% of the total, despite people of a non-white background making up 12.9% of the population (Duncan 2017). Despite the catalogue of feedback following interviews I

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continued to apply. I spoke to myself on many occasions and saw each attempt as my escape from a context which arguably wasn't fully opened to diversity.

After a while, my confidence was less robust and confirms London Mayor's Sadiq Khan's statement (25th September 2017) in a conversation with Katharine Viner the Guardian's editor in chief that *"Some white people feel confident about applying for jobs even if they are not fully qualified. But BAME people may not have the same confidence even though they are more qualified"*. On some of my applications I removed certain qualifications so as not to appear over qualified. This lack of confidence stems from the stories of discrimination often shared. The Mayor went on to say that, *"We need to ensure that every young person has a role model they can look up to, it is so important to promote the successful figures from Britain's BAME communities. We need to create a sense of optimism, aspiration and hope."* The only way we will be able to fulfil the Mayor's wish is to ensure that interview and selection panels reflect the workforce and context we live in. We need to educate governors on the dearth of representation of leaders from ethnic minority backgrounds in schools. Selection committees are the gate holders to our access to leadership roles. From personal observations attending interviews more often than not governors were middle class white males and on occasions females who arguably would not be able to identify with me as a black male.

I concur with Rebecca Hilsenrath (Duncan 2017), chief executive of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, that research shows that, *"inequality and unfairness are still entrenched in our society"*. How do we break these glass ceilings when we continue to be marginalised despite upskilling ourselves? She goes on to state that *"Without real diversity in leadership positions we will never be truly reflective of society, particularly when it comes to public services and bodies which serve our communities. There is absolutely no reason that BAME people should not be able to reach the top of their chosen profession"*.

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It is imperative that ethnic minority individuals become even more strategic on their pathway to leadership and success and if you are working in a context that isn't providing you opportunities to progress – reroute. Let us not look at rerouting as running away from the problem but it is folly to remain under a system that negates your progress. With this in mind I looked towards the Middle East where there was rapid migration of British trained teachers. I applied for two positions as Head-teacher in two countries and was successful. I am resolute that I would not have been successful at these interviews had I not upskilled myself and grabbed all the opportunities I could that were available. Having completed a variety of roles as a senior leader, I was able to recount a number of stories to my interviewers about the impact I have had over the years. Rerouting must be strategic and with an end goal. I am currently enjoying my time in the Middle East. This has been one of my very best decisions ever. I am currently working with a dynamic group of talented individuals from the UK and other parts of the world.

It is disappointing that ethnic minorities have to work much harder and take far longer time to reach senior leadership levels in their work places. Let us not think of these longer or rerouted journeys as pyrric victories but as an opportunity to represent who we are and become the contacts for others who have the talent.

Over the years I have tried a few approaches that have worked. I made sure that whilst I was aiming to upskill myself I critically examined my experiences and identify the areas I needed to develop as a professional and as an individual. I made sure I stayed abreast with the developments in education and identified the next trends or initiatives to be launched. I was the first to investigate and increases my knowledge about them and repositioned yourself to be part of that launch. I found that schools will always be looking for experts to advance their contexts especially those with existing knowledge about current initiatives. I stayed tuned to

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social media, in particular twitter. Twitter is one of the most resourced staffrooms where ideas are shared and discussions are had about education. I created an account, tweeted and followed the movers and thinkers in education. If you seek promotion apply for new positions created in your school. You may not get the first few jobs but at least you are showing the SLT that you are ambitious and are looking to progress. They will soon get the message, if they don't – reroute.

Rerouting is the process of finding another way to get to your destination. Rerouting is sometimes a longer journey, but can also be a quicker pathway eventually. You must be strategic when rerouting. Have an end goal, which route will you take and how long will it take you to get there? Try not to divert entirely but have a return pathway. Whilst rerouting stay abreast and connected with your context. In my case, I rerouted to the Middle East but have remained in a British curriculum school which offers IGCSE and IAL courses. I'm still staying abreast with the education system in the UK. This will help me upon my return.

Whilst we ponder on the effectiveness of the 2000 Race Relations Act and the rhetoric of the 2010 Equality Act which appear not to be very robust in creating opportunities for and monitoring ethnic minority access into positions of power we must do what is necessary for ourselves. We first must break the cycle of contacts and networks that arguably trump talent and promote equal access after we have gained access. According to Simon Woolley director and co-founder of Operation Black Vote *"Pathways to power are almost non-existent if you're black or Asian"* (*The Guardian 2017*) this is the due to gatekeepers who are not from ethnic minority backgrounds who may also prefer contacts to talent. Whilst the rhetoric continues from those charged to create equality and minimise discrimination – upskill and reroute.

Reference

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