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### Influences on British South Asian women's choice of teaching as a career: "you're either a career person or a family person; teaching kind of fits in the middle"

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## **Influences on British South Asian women's choice of teaching as a career: "you're either a career person or a family person; teaching kind of fits in the middle"**

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This article reports the findings of the first year of a four year research project into the influences on British South Asian women's choice of teaching as a career. Trainees from minority ethnic groups on a secondary PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education) course in the English West Midlands were invited to discuss, both in focus groups and in response to semi-structured interview questions, the reasons why they chose to enter teacher training and the issues they faced during the training period. The results reported here highlight the strong, positive influences of family and culture on the trainees' choice of career, and their perceptions of why teaching offers them flexible and high status employment at the point of career entry. Subsequent research has tracked these trainees' at the culmination of their first year of teaching, and will also monitor their views at the end of their third year in schools. The study is located in the UK, referring to both policy and literature relevant to this context.

In contrast to the findings of much published research into the experiences of minority ethnic trainees in Initial Teacher Training (ITT) in the UK, which present negative perceptions of the training process, this study found that British South Asian women were broadly positive about the courses they took, their relationships with tutors, teachers and mentors, and the provision made for them by partnership schools. They were mainly optimistic about their prospects of career advancement and confident that they could combine a job in the teaching profession with other life demands relating to family, religious faith, culture and community.

**Keywords:** British South Asian women; career choice; family life; caste and class; initial teacher education

### **Introduction**

The under recruitment of trainees from minority ethnic groups onto many Initial Teacher Training (ITT) courses, their overall lack of representation in the teaching profession and fears of their restricted contribution to the education of children from similar minority groups, are clearly reported in research literature (Gordon 2000; Gillbourn and Mizra 2000; Carrington et al. 2001; Basit et al. 2006). Further issues, such as the higher withdrawal rates of minority ethnic trainees (Basit et al. 2006), their often negative experiences of training (Hoodless 2006), the particularity of problems they face compared to their white peers (Carrington et al. 2001), and their perceived limitations of career choices (Archer 2002), all paint a depressing picture of the modest

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opportunities for ethnic minorities entering the teaching profession. Additionally, fears of racism deter some potential trainees from even applying to train to teach (Siraj Blatchford 1993; Osler 1994, 1997; Carrington and Tomlin 2000). Such research links to the wider study of how young Asian women's lives intersect with the economic, political and ideological structures of British society, although more recent work (see, for example, Shain 2000; Ahmad 2001) seeks to question notions of passivity, victimisation by educational stereotyping and cultural conservatism.

Hoodless (2006) notes a growing concern about the under-representation of people from minority ethnic groups in all the professions, both in the UK and internationally, with a corresponding increase in political interest in the educational attainment of ethnic groups. Within teacher training this has resulted in central target setting for institutional recruitment of ethnic minorities, increased funding for research into recruitment and retention, as well as an expanding research literature about the experiences of ethnic minority trainees on ITT courses (see Clay, Gadhia, and Wilkins 1991; Osler 1997; Carrington et al. 2001). Governmental concern about the ethnic mix of the teaching workforce – alongside fears that this does not reflect the ethnic composition of local, regional and national populations – has also resulted in promotional funding for teacher training institutions. Apprehension that teaching is still, essentially, a white middle-class profession has prompted policy-makers to take action, particularly with respect to encouraging the recruitment, retention and support of male and ethnic minority trainees (DfEE 1998). Over the last 10 years the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA), the national agency responsible for the training and development of the school workforce, has funded various Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) initiatives designed to enhance the recruitment of minority ethnic teachers [although, see Skelton (2009) for a critique of such measures].

Aware of the prolonged, in-grained, persistence of these issues, we chose to explore the experiences of minority ethnic trainees on an ITT secondary PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education) course in the West Midlands which traditionally displayed high recruitment, retention and completion rates for such groups. Our intention was to discover why the majority of minority ethnic trainees succeeded on this course and whether research findings could provide helpful intelligence for further promoting careers in teaching within the ethnic minority community. A small group of British South Asian women ( $n = 12$ ), part of a research cohort of 18 trainees, volunteered to be a part of this longitudinal study which would follow them from the culmination of their ITT courses to the end of their third year in teaching.

### **Research methodology**

The aim of this research was to discover the extent to which trainees' membership of an ethnic minority group had an influence (i) on their choice of teaching as a career and (ii) on the quality of the training they experienced at a large metropolitan university in the West Midlands and within its partnership schools. The effects of ethnicity on trainees' perceptions and experiences of teaching were also considered. The one year PGCE course, studied by trainees involved in this research, is typical of the English model of initial teacher education being 36 weeks in length (a total of 24 weeks spent in two contrasting partnership schools and 12 weeks in university) and assessed against a set of national standards (DfES 2002).

To investigate the views of a sample of initial teacher education trainees a longitudinal research strategy was adopted which spanned four years, from their initial training to review points at the end of their first and third years of teaching. The study reported here employed predominantly qualitative research methods, selected to gather data from a self selected cohort of trainees. These trainees were involved in focus groups and one-to-one, semi-structured interviews. Each of the trainees involved in this study was a member of a recognised ethnic minority group. Quantitative data, in the form of numbers of trainees from ethnic minority groups attending the PGCE course, were also considered. The research was partly funded by a small grant from the TDA.

All ethnic minority trainees on the PGCE course were informed of the research, its broad aims and the procedures for involvement through their method (subject) tutors. Those trainees wishing to partake in the research were then invited to an orientation meeting where the purpose of the research, its methods of enquiry, timeframe and ethical procedures were explained. This was followed by a series of focus group meetings which enabled trainees to discuss their views about the issues facing beginning teachers from ethnic minorities.

A total of 18 ethnic minority trainees progressed to undertake a semi-structured interview with a member of the team of researchers ( $n = 4$ ). Given the size of this group any conclusions drawn from the data collected must be regarded as somewhat tentative. The interviews employed an agreed set of questions (see Appendix) which the trainees were provided with before their interview. Trainees were informed they could choose not to answer any of the questions on the schedule and that a full, typed transcript of their interview would be made available to them if they wished to review, or alter, what they had said. None chose to do so. Any materials that have subsequently been quoted in this article (or elsewhere) have been used with the agreement of the interviewee. Interviews lasted between 30–65 minutes, with trainees being informed beforehand that the process would take “around 45 minutes”. Trainees received a small payment for their involvement in the interviews. When conducting the interviews the researchers were aware that they did not share the same ethnic group as the respondents and that this might raise ethical and epistemological issues. A particular concern was whether members of a “dominant” ethnic group would be able to accurately represent the experiences of those from an ethnic minority (see Stanfield and Dennis 1993; Fearfull and Kamenou 2006; Hoodless 2006). Hoodless (2006) places considerable emphasis on the use of members from a minority ethnic group, or a teacher from a local school, or indeed employing no leader whatsoever, within her focus groups discussions – in the belief that the resulting trainees’ comments “have much greater authenticity and honesty than if the discussions had been held with white researchers, or tutors from the course” (34). Although our study did use white tutors and one administrator to conduct the focus groups and interviews, these individuals had no day-to-day personal or professional connections to the trainees – for example, a tutor would not interview a member of his or her own method group. Any nervousness about this influencing the honesty of the responses of the trainees’ was not reflected in any of their comments about the questions posed, the process of the research, or the use of the subsequent findings.

In 2006/2007 the secondary PGCE course at the study university, from which the trainee sample was taken, had a total of 289 trainees studying across eight main method subjects. All trainees self select their ethnicity from 15 ethnic groupings supplied by the TDA, who collect data nationally on the ethnicity of trainee teachers.

It is recognised that the use of such ethnic groupings, based on both geographical and racial divisions, may represent a degree of racial stereotyping, but such data are immediately comparable to other institutions and are therefore pragmatic. The secondary PGCE course in the first year of study consisted of 225 (77.9%) white and 57 (19.7%) minority ethnic trainees. Some seven (2.4%) trainees self selected their ethnicity as “other ethnic group” or did not choose to make a disclosure. The overall sample of 18 trainees was 89% female and 11% male, with ages ranging from 22 to 27 years. Social class and status data were not collected.

The initial focus groups were held in January 2007 and the interviews were recorded in May/June 2007. The second phase of the longitudinal study took place at the end of the trainees’ first year of teaching in June/July 2008, and will occur again in June/July 2010 (the results from these interviews are to be reported in a subsequent paper).

This research, being located in the West Midlands and drawing predominantly on trainees’ experiences gained in and around a large metropolitan city in the region, has a particular significance given the ethnic mix of the area. During the post-war era the study city has become home to significant numbers of ethnic minorities and is widely regarded as multicultural in nature. According to the 2001 Census almost one in three of the city’s population is from a non-white background, with Pakistanis accounting for 104,000, Indians 56,000, Bangladeshis 21,000, Other Asians 10,000 and Black or Black British 60,000 of the city’s 977,000 population (Office for National Statistics 2004). The Mixed, Chinese and Other ethnic groups accounted for 39,000 people. The proportion of young people (under 16) in the city from White ethnic groups is noticeably below the regional and national averages, for example one in four of the under 16 population is from an Asian ethnic group, compared to one in nine in the region and 1 in 15 nationally. Previous studies [for example, Carrington et al. (2001) and the TDA’s annual collection of national statistics] which have considered the ethnicity of trainees who undertake initial teacher education in England indicate that the close proximity of a training institution to an ethnic minority population is a critical factor in their attraction to PGCE courses. As such, the study university’s recruitment of 19.7% of its trainees to the secondary PGCE from ethnic minority groups in the year of study, compared to a figure of 14% nationally, is unsurprising. We must also remember that the experience of ethnic minority trainees in the West Midlands may be very different from those of trainees who attend training institutions, and who are placed in partnership schools, in predominantly White areas of England.

We acknowledge, as Carrington et al. (2001) do, that to date there has been rather limited research into the teaching career choice and training experiences of ethnic minority trainees. The research which has been completed reveals methodological issues, such as drawing on “localised and potentially unrepresentative samples ... to give undue credence to anecdotal evidence” (Carrington et al. 2001, 23). Our research might also be criticised for this. We recognise that British South Asian women do *not* form a single, homogenous group – reflecting as they do significant variances in religious observance, caste, social status and outlook – and we have taken care not to construe the significance of our findings too generally.

## Findings

The findings reported in this paper are based on the questions asked during the semi-structured interviews. Inevitably some of the questions have proved to be more

rewarding than others, particularly as the first two questions (which focussed on “the main factors which originally attracted you to a career in teaching” and whether any teachers or lecturers were “significant in influencing your decision to teach”) were posed largely as orientation and settling questions. The main analysis referred to in this paper is based on questions three and four (see Appendix), which highlight advantages and disadvantages of being from an ethnic minority group on entering teaching, as well as impressions of teaching as a career. The categories later, under a series of sub-headings, were suggested from the data collected, being the most frequently discussed themes by ethnic minority trainees. They reflect the nature of the questions posed by the researchers, as well as the main issues subsequently identified by the trainees.

### ***Teaching as a career choice: the positives for British South Asian women***

Almost all the respondents made some mention of how their ethnic group views the status of teaching as a career. This was particularly the case amongst British South Asian females, who made very clear links between the high professional status of teachers and the acceptability of such a career path for women within their family and community:

They're like, “be a doctor, or a lawyer or a teacher!”, I mean, my family are very proud of the fact that I'm a teacher ... (DM205)

the idea of being a teacher is always well respected ... teachers are seen as the top priority, if you can do that, or a doctor. (DM306)

the only thing that affected me, from my background, was just how much our families respect teachers and how much it makes them proud as well. (DM409)

These views contrast with some of the views of minority ethnic trainees recorded by Hoodless (2006), who comments that in her study “an Asian trainee pointed out that in a lot of Asian backgrounds education is not seen as a good career. Parents seem to be of the opinion that they will not be able to get a job” (40), and Carrington and Tomlin (2000) who report Asian families' concerns about the perceived low status, pay, conditions of service and stress within the teaching profession.

Interestingly, some of our respondents intimated that their perceived professional status as teachers varied according to the *subject* they taught:

Teaching is a high status job within my family and my community, but if I say I'm a teacher of history they all say “Oh, OK” – they don't really know what to say. If I said I was an IT teacher they'd say “Oh, that's really good!” But when I say I'm a teacher of history they say, “OK then!” ... there's definitely a hierarchy. (DM4011)

Our data reflects Ahmad's (2001) findings that young British Asian women are increasingly participating in higher education, motivated mainly by the prospects of achieving better career options – including obtaining a career in teaching.

### ***Teaching as a career choice: the positives for British South Asian women, but not necessarily for British South Asian men***

Some respondents pointed out that the status of teaching as a career varied according to their sex:



for Asian people who expect their sons to go into dentistry, or whatever, I think their kids are more likely to listen to their parents. They may not agree with what their parents are saying, but I think they'll feel obliged to please them. (DM408)

so many women are attracted to it [teaching] that it's actually putting the men off, because all they see is women. (DM204)

Others commented more generally, but negatively, on the status of teaching as a career in the wider community:

I don't think people rate it [teaching] as highly as they do other professions, they think that teaching's a doddle. They think you go in at eight in the morning, or half eight, and you finish at three o'clock and that's it. (DM203)

[some Asians think] if I've got a degree I can't really "use", go into teaching. (DM206)

These findings again concur with Ahmad (2001), who noted that parental encouragement for daughters to enter higher education was qualitatively different to that offered to sons – the latter being perceived as the future "breadwinners". Sons are therefore encouraged to study "law, medicine, dentistry, engineering and computer science" whilst daughters are "not *always* expected to participate in full time employment after university" (Ahmad 2001, 144, original emphasis). Nonetheless, Ahmad (2001) discovered that in Asian communities higher education is seen as extending a woman's value beyond that of a mere "homemaker", with implications for future employment, economic security and marriage prospects.

### ***Teaching as a career choice: the fit with family life for many British South Asian women***

One of the most frequent, and we believe significant, foci for respondents from the female British South Asian community was the perceived "fit" of a career in teaching with their current, and prospective, family and community lives:

you're either a career person or a family person; teaching kind of fits in the middle and my family see it as a good thing – as well as my extended family, so that's a good thing. (DM304)

teaching is seen as a flexible job, for females especially. There's a growing trend of Asian girls going into the teaching profession seeing it as an escape route, like. In the Asian culture teaching for females is a good thing and it's almost like giving back to the community, but not going too far "out" that you don't have the connection still with the family. It's like a community thing. (DM304)

it's already assumed that if you're a teacher then it won't interrupt you having a family. (DM306)

On being asked specifically about the attitude of British South Asian girls to learning and gaining a career, in teaching or any of the professions, one respondent said:

Asian women they just think that after they get married that's it; there's no career or any other life after that. Even if you think that's what's going to happen you should still go out there and get yourself academic status ... some [Asian] girls I see have a very poor

attitude and they're like "what's the point of learning?" They see what their mums have done, or they know what their mums expect of them. (DM 209)

One trainee who had considered a career in medicine, but finally opted for teaching, stated:

I wanted more of a family life as well; I wanted a balance with my career and my family life – I don't always want to stay on the career side of things. Which is why I thought that teaching was a better option to go for ... I had to consider the stressful influence of becoming a doctor and keeping the balance between the career side of things and the family side of things. (DM 207)

It was obvious from a number of comments made by British South Asian women that they already found juggling family life, initial teacher training and beginning a career in teaching a challenge; but they considered that the teaching profession was better suited to their work-life balance than other careers. This partly reflects comments by Hoodless (2006) that trainees from minority ethnic groups who enter teaching "were also trying to cope with shifting multiple identities as members of their own ethnic communities, university academic communities and professional school communities" (42). British Asian women are seen as having increasing agency in their career choices, although this still occurs within traditional, accepted parameters of family, lifestyle and social relationships. Thus, women may increasingly pursue their own educational and career aspirations, gaining social prestige and enhancing employment prospects in the process, but this must be (re)negotiated with reference to their personal, religious and cultural identities in "complex and sometimes contradictory ways" (Ahmad 2001, 137).

### ***Teaching as a career choice: the role of caste and class for British South Asian women***

Considerations of a career in teaching were also weighted, for some, by their membership of a particular caste. This raised comparisons with membership of class groupings:

You know the caste I am they [the community] do think that teaching is as good as medicine. Whereas other castes do prefer medicine to teaching. (DM206)

All my friends who have gone off to do medicine, or become lawyers and accountants and everything like that, they would be perceived as having more ... what would you say? ... upper class jobs. (DM 203)

One trainee teacher, when asked whether she thought her ethnicity would affect her prospects for advancement in teaching replied:

Not ethnicity – maybe class, but not ethnicity. (DM408)

Another commented:

One thing I've noticed – not a racist thing – but that the teaching profession is a very, sort of, middle class profession. (DM 305)

Many British South Asian families that encourage their daughters to enter higher education and subsequent professional employment realise that they are increasing



both their social status and prestige within the community. Such actions signal their liberalism, modernity and astuteness, helping to distance the family from labels of parochialism, paternalism and lack of education. In her study, Ahmad (2001) asserts that British Asian women were achieving “middle class aspirations” (145) by studying arts based subjects and rejecting pressures to study sciences and law at university. Bhopal (1997, 1998) also recognises that many women have recently experienced rapid change in their social status, partly as a consequence of entering higher education. Drawing on data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) she notes that although Asian women from Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds have less access to higher education and employment than those from White and Afro Caribbean origins, particularly if married, the resultant benefits are substantial. However, issues of identity and acceptance in the academy may still persist (see Li and Beckett 2006). Bhopal (1998) concludes that “South Asian women with high levels of education were in professional occupations, and as a result were choosing to reject ‘arranged marriages’” such that “for some South Asian women education acts as a catalyst for women’s access to the labour market and their route to independence”.

## Discussion

The majority of trainees we interviewed revealed intrinsic motivations to teach – such as perceived job satisfaction, sense of achievement, love of their subject, and enjoyment of working with children – rather than being narrowly driven by extrinsic factors such as pay, conditions of service, job security and holidays. Some had given up other careers (often because they had found their previous work uninteresting, or had experienced low job satisfaction) and had now chosen teaching because they saw it as a “social job” with a variety of different challenges from day-to-day. These are, of course, factors not solely limited to members of any particular ethnic group. Others felt that their presence in schools as role models for their ethnic group was important, although others were more qualified and felt this was an additional pressure. It was believed that one’s ethnic status would not guarantee respect from pupils of the same ethnic background, whilst two respondents disliked being cast as advocates, or cultural experts, within their ethnic groups. Shain (2000) acknowledges these tensions, noting that teachers from minority ethnic groups should not be expected to speak on behalf of their communities because “Asian Teachers, like others, may stand in contradictory or even oppositional positions within their communities” (163). The significance of the diversity of South Asian’s ethnic groupings, specifically in the context of their effects on schooling and educational achievement, is also noted by Abbas (2002) who highlights the different experiences of Muslims (Bangladeshis and Pakistanis) and Indians (Hindus and Sikhs). His analysis focuses on variations in social capital, economic potential and knowledge in ethnic groups, with particular reference to religious and cultural differences.

Rana et al. (1998) have considered the issue of British South Asian women attempting to balance family life with managerial and professional work, concentrating on five significant factors: cultural influences on domestic responsibilities; commitments to extended family and community members; the balancing of work and family priorities (and what they label as “superwoman syndrome”); stereotypes of work roles and responsibilities; and experience of discrimination. They conclude that despite the loosening of cultural ties, which have enabled increasing numbers of British South Asian women to enter the job market, professional women are still

subject to traditional family and community expectations with regard to domestic tasks. Such issues have been further explored in the context of accountancy, where Fearfull and Kamenou (2006) recognise the same ties which bind the career progress of British South Asian women as Rana et al. (1998), but also highlight their struggle for acceptance and progression in the professional workplace. In this context Ahmad (2001) notes the social and personal advantages of British South Asian women entering higher education, even though their goals are not always shared by their parents, where “the pursuit of higher education, status, social mobility and a career are not viewed as inimical to cultural or religious beliefs” (2001, 149).

In the Carrington et al. (2001) report one Asian trainee comments at length about parental and familial influence on her choice of career:

The profession may be regarded well by some Pakistani/Asian people but these same people would be highly against their own children joining the profession. The negative attitudes of older generations [to becoming a teacher] and views that they impose on the younger generations making career choices, have a deep impact on the low numbers of Asians joining the teaching profession. Parental influence/family pressure is generally high amongst a minority of Asian families. Attracting Asian men to the profession is more difficult than Asian women. (Carrington et al. 2001, 41, Female, “Pakistani”)

Such comments are partly reflected through this research: the impression given by Asian respondents is that teaching is a respected career within their community, but perhaps not as highly regarded as a career in medicine, dentistry, law, pharmacy or accountancy. The status of teaching certainly varies according to one’s sex – it being an acceptable, “safe”, “well respected” and “sought after” career for Asian women, but not so highly regarded as a career for Asian men. This perception may be linked to notions of job flexibility, suitability of a teaching job in conjunction with meeting family life and childcare responsibilities, and ideas that teaching offers “short hours” with “long holidays”. There was some evidence from our interviews that the trainees’ own teachers (when they had been children in school) had been influential in their career choices, but that some teachers had advised them *against* taking a career in education. Comments from the trainees’ teachers had indicated that teaching is a stressful career and that “better jobs” existed, with higher status and pay. In this context it is perhaps helpful to reflect on Lou Buchan’s (1980) feminist critique of teaching being “a good job for a girl (but an awful career for a woman!)”. Whilst acknowledging that teaching enables women to juggle family and home life, therefore making it an “ideal job” (1980, 82), Buchan rejects notions that teaching constitutes a “career”. Her historical account of one Australian woman’s struggle to be accepted in the male dominated education profession has resonance with Dolana Mogadime’s (2008) account of her own mother’s struggle for career advancement as a Black woman in Canada in the 1970s/1980s.

Dosanjh and Ghuman (1998) note that from an early age Asian girls are brought up to be obedient, honourable and respectful of their families – preparation for their future roles as conformist, faithful wives and devoted mothers. Even second or third generation girls in “Westernised” families report some pressure to at least pay lip service to such traditions. In a subsequent review of South Asian adolescents’ progress in British schools, Ghuman (2002) recognises the clash of values between home and school, exacerbated by incidents of racism in British society. Here the disparity between male and female roles, the better treatment of boys in the home, and

differences between class and castes all run counter to the emphasis given in British schools to individuality, equality and secularism.

The choices of Muslim girls post-16 within the British South Asian community is explored by Archer (2002), who throws light on the decisions made by British South Asian women to enter teacher training. Exploring the interactions of “race”, gender and ethnicity in Muslim pupils’ views about educational and career choices she has questioned the extent to which Muslim girls are restricted. Gendered views of culture and practice suggest that Muslim boys and girls view girls’ choice differently:

young Muslim men tended to construct young Muslim women in passive terms as they argued that girls’ post 16 educational participation is a matter of parental, not personal, choice. In comparison, the young women’s talk argued that societal changes have enabled them to experience a wider range of post 16 choices. Although their talk also pointed to social and cultural factors interacting with educational choices, Muslim girls asserted the centrality of their “personal choice” within educational decision-making. Both boys and girls drew on notions of “change”, “culture” and “tradition” when explaining Muslim girls’ opportunities, specifically in relation to white/British society, but they did so in very different ways. (Archer 2002, 371)

Here Asian boys draw on perceptions that parents have cultural and gendered expectations for their daughters, particularly regarding marriage and domestic responsibilities, which only “high achieving” Muslim girls can escape. Archer suggests that in this way Muslim boys position girls as lacking agency, asserting their masculine identities and defending their position of privilege – whilst also drawing on notions of protecting and guiding “their women” in today’s dangerous British society. Muslim girls have very different views, as witnessed in our research. Their “restricted choices” are viewed as an historical issue, with little relevance in modern society – previous parental fears about their daughters entering educational environments where there were few other Asian girls are no longer a major consideration, with parents realising the importance of education to achieving success in a modern, changing, British society. Indeed, many Asian girls in Archer’s (2002) research positioned themselves as having *more* choice than Asian boys “enjoying both support from their families and retaining ‘freedom’ of choice” (369). Basit (1997) notes that Asian parents’ protection of their daughters can be misinterpreted by the wider community as oppressive, whereas young Asian women see this as a reasonable cultural response to the restrictions placed on them by British society.

More recent research by Tyrer and Ahmad (2006) also challenges stereotypical views of British South Asian women prevalent in much research literature, demonstrating how Muslim women can act as role models for other women. Particularly relevant to our research is their finding that reasons for non-participation in higher education are complex and multi-causal, rather than being simply reduced to single cultural, family or religious factors [see also Dale et al. (2002) and Ahmad, Madood, and Lissenburgh (2003) for implications for employment]. As Tyrer and Ahmad state:

Muslim women reported a diverse range of career hopes and aspirations that disrupted the popular stereotypes of Muslim women as being relegated to the domestic sphere, and the stereotype of South Asians as generally preferring to work in particular fields such as medicine, accountancy and law. (2006, 28)

They conclude that Asian women also displayed:

a (similar) clarity around their personal hopes of marriage and parenthood and how this would impact upon their careers. Many stressed the importance of a work-life balance that also involved taking into account what they looked for in prospective partners and also the need to negotiate and compromise. (2006, 29)

As with the Carrington et al. (2001) study, trainees told us that they would resent any overt relaxation of entry conditions into teacher training, which would imply that they were not of the same standards as their colleagues. Many trainees reacted against any sense of favoured recruitment as token representatives of their ethnic group, wanting to be valued as individuals and subject experts rather than because of their representation of a community or religion. This point is made by Garewal (1999), who comments on trainees feeling uncomfortable because of expectations by tutors and teachers that they will be champions of their race, religion, community and multiculturalism.

Reporting on research into why policy initiatives have failed to attract more male teachers into primary schools, Skelton (2009) reports that primary teachers do not consider their gender to be particularly significant within their careers, but do see minority ethnic status and sexuality as having impact. Teachers from minority ethnic backgrounds felt that their ethnicity “could impact both positively and negatively on opportunities and experiences for a (primary) teaching career” (2009, 45), with some feeling uncomfortable about attention being drawn to ethnicity in teacher recruitment campaigns. Skelton (2009) surmises the importance, for some minority ethnic teachers, of government recruitment initiatives which attempt to move from a “traditional model” (i.e. White, female, heterosexual) of primary teacher recruitment, to a more “contemporary model” (i.e. Black, female, heterosexual and/or White, male, heterosexual) (2009, 46).

## Conclusions

Interviews with minority ethnic PGCE trainees proved to be illuminative with respect to their perceptions of teaching as a career and the reasons they offered for entering this profession. With particular reference to a group of British South Asian women studying on a PGCE secondary course, the impression gained is of the flexibility of teaching, its perceived “fit” with current or future family demands, and the acceptability of such a career with respect to its status within the community. However, despite the attractiveness of a career in teaching respondents were aware of the (here, crudely expressed) division between British society’s norm of individualism, secularism and gender equality and the tendency of British South Asian communities towards collectivism, religious observance and gender discrimination (see Carrington et al. 2001). On an optimistic note this sample of trainees did not express the issues highlighted and repeated in a number of previous studies and were certainly more upbeat than Hoodless’ (2006) comment that only “some positive experiences were reported” (42).

The increasing visibility of minority ethnic teachers in schools in the West Midlands had encouraged some of our respondents to apply to teach, whilst others had felt welcomed into a profession where their ethnic group was clearly represented. Nonetheless, the presence of others from the same ethnic grouping was not necessarily significant, with many trainees talking very positively about their experiences of training within “all white” schools. With regard to achieving even greater representation of ethnic groups within teaching many trainees mentioned that the presence of teachers from ethnic groups acted

positively as role models to youngsters who might be thinking of a future career in the profession.

Despite the very positive perceptions of teaching as a career for many minority ethnic trainees there are some major caveats for potential teachers. For many men the status of teaching is still not high, with significant pressure being reported from both families and communities for able ethnic minority males not to enter the profession as a first choice. Careers in medicine, accountancy, law and pharmacy were all regularly mentioned as having higher status, better pay and clearer prospects. Ghuman (2002) recognises that many young South Asians' career opportunities are "grounded partly in the unfulfilled aspirations of parents, especially women, who found jobs on the lower rung of the employment market" (51).

All trainees spoke about their desire to compete on a "level playing field" with regard to entrance to the profession. No one sought positive discrimination to enter teaching, with all trainees expecting to succeed on terms of merit rather than being given an unfair advancement. Interestingly, many trainees believed that universities either chose, or were obliged, to operate some form of quota system with regard to recruitment of minority ethnic trainees. This made some nervous that they had only been accepted to train to teach because their training institution was attempting to hit a numerical target for its minority ethnic recruitment. One trainee believed that minority ethnic applicants were "preferred" and that training institutions and schools were "paranoid about being racist, so they go overboard to help you" (DM307). Interestingly none of the trainees interviewed revealed any major dissatisfaction with the training they had received, either within the university or partnership schools. Similarly none reported facing any significant forms of racism. This contrasts with the experiences of trainees on ITT courses, as recorded by other researchers (see Osler 1997; Carrington et al. 2001; Hoodless 2006), although it should be noted that in this research only those trainees who were at the culmination of successfully completing the course were interviewed. Focus groups and interviews held with those who had withdrawn from, or failed, their courses might have revealed very different attitudes, particularly as the most common causes for withdrawal are stated as "personal" or "family" reasons (see Basit et al. 2006).

Some beginning teachers were concerned about their future promotion prospects in teaching, noting that they had seen only a few members of ethnic minority groups in the senior management teams of their partnership schools. This was apparently the case both in "all white" schools and schools that were ethnically mixed. Unfortunately, this strengthens the impression that teaching is not a high status career for ethnic minority males, but one more suited to women who wish to combine a flexible job with the demands of family life. Evidence from elsewhere (Rana et al. 1998; Fearfull and Kamenou 2006) tends to suggest that linear careers with hierarchical advancement are less achievable for ethnic minority women, as they have to deal with structural constraints related to social, cultural, racist and stereotyping factors. Interestingly, although the beginning teachers we interviewed had not yet experienced this, many ethnic minority women who have professional careers describe living two separate, stressful lives – one related to work and one to family – something which Thomas and Aldefer (1989) refer to as "bi-cultural stress" (189). Fearfull and Kamenou (2006) extend this framework further to consider aspects of gender, race, ethnicity and associated cultural, family and community expectations often inherent in their everyday lives. To advance in their careers women from ethnic minority groups may have to abandon commitments to their old cultures and adopt new identities and practices. At



the time of the first stage of this research there was little evidence of the stereotyping of British South Asian women's role in the (teaching) workforce – either because it does not exist, or because these women were at a stage when they were being mentored and nurtured by supportive colleagues. Subsequent research in this longitudinal study may reveal differently. Certainly Rana et al. (1998) have described cultural and religious stereotypes being applied to Asian women – particularly that they are “submissive” and “lack career ambition”. During their training none of our respondents mentioned suffering the indignity of having to “downplay, or even deny, their own cultural identity and abandon some of their cultural or religious values, or at least outward representations of them, as a strategy for fitting in” (Fearfull and Kamenou 2006, 897).

The particular circumstances of the institution within which the research was conducted may be significant. As an established “red brick” university, with possibly more stringent entry requirements than some new universities where ethnic minorities are better represented (see Smithers and Robinson 2008), the trainees interviewed were potentially more likely to succeed in ITT. These are clearly drawbacks of research which focus on a year cohort, from one institution, representing a single route into teaching on a secondary PGCE course. Have these trainees simply found the most appropriate routes into teaching, given their personal and family circumstances, and therefore perform well? Do they succeed due to early, prolonged and appropriate support from their tutors and mentors, or are other factors at play?

In conclusion, we concur with Tyrer and Ahmad's findings that:

many respondents highlighted familial support for them in relation to career aspirations. Even those that did not report strong familial support demonstrated themselves to be strong, clear-headed respondents with sufficient agency of their own to decide on their own employment outcomes, negotiating with spouses and parents to fulfil their own ambitions. (2006, 29)

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## **Appendix**

- (1) What are the main factors that originally attracted you to a career in teaching?
- (2) Were any teachers or lecturers significant in influencing your decision to teach? [and if so, how?]
- (3) Do you think that being from a minority ethnic group creates any advantages or disadvantages to you entering teaching?
- (4) (a) What, from your current perspective, creates a positive or negative impression of teaching/training?  
(b) Do you perceive that any of these factors relate to your membership of an ethnic minority group?
- (5) What strategies do you think would be effective in encouraging more members of minority ethnic groups to enter teaching?
- (6) What influenced your choice of the “study University” as the place to do your PGCE?