

# **Science Teaching and Asian Undergraduates: Are they Immiscible?**

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## **Introduction**

It is now established that many Asian young people prefer to study on after the compulsory age (Brennan and McGeevor, 1990; Tanna, 1990; Thronley and Siann, 1991; Modood, 1993; Taylor, 1993, Woodrow 1996; Basit, 1996; Bhopal, 1997; Singh-Raud, 1998). It is also known that few Asian graduates in Britain enter the teaching profession (Singh et al., 1988; Ranger, 1988; Searle and Stibbs, 1989; Moyo Robbins, 1995) where such role models are desperately needed. Practically no ethnic minority men enter the primary sector (TTA, 1998a). Recent reports from the TTA and previously from the Commission for Race Relations (CRE, 1989: 2) have expressed concern over the low number of ethnic minority students entering departments of education and colleges of higher education. More recently, figures released for ethnic minorities entering teacher training institutions have been quoted as 5% for primary and 7% for the secondary school teacher trainees with some institutions having 0% in the primary sector (TTA, 1998a).

The Commission For Racial Equality, as far back as 1989, in its submission to the Education, Science and Arts Committee of the House of Commons argued that ethnic minority teachers are significantly under-represented in British schools (CRE, 1989). The chief reason put forward for this was racism in schools. The submission (CRE, 1989:1) states "In effect the issue is circular - ethnic minority pupils may experience racial discrimination and harassment at school and often perceive their ethnic minority teachers to be similarly treated. They are reluctant to become teachers themselves..."

However the Community Relations Commission (DES, 1985: 603) strongly argued in favour of increasing the employment of ethnic minority teachers as have the TTA (1997 and 1998b), the CRE (1997) and organisations such the National Muslim Education Council of UK (1998). The TTA prepared an ethnic minority teacher statement (TTA, 1999) to reinforce this. These organisations suggested that it is desirable for the teaching profession to reflect the total population. People from the ethnic minority groups should have opportunity to become professional workers if they have the ability. Ethnic minority parents and children seem unable or unwilling to trust 'authority' to understand their needs are reassured by the presence of staff from their own ethnic group. The Swann report (DES, 1985: 604) reinforced these reasons and went further by stating that "Ethnic minority teachers may be 'role-models' in all white schools as well as in multi-racial schools". This has been reinforced by recent research (Singh-Raud, 1997; Basit, 1997; Wolverhampton RECC, 1999).

Ironically, on the Indian sub-Continent teaching at all levels has a relatively high status within the Asian community and therefore teachers on the sub-Continent command a level of respect due to their profession. In fact the

problem of acquiring an education post is such a burden, that often 'cash is exchanged' (Indian Female Observer, 1989). Yet in the UK teaching does not seem to hold the same level of respect by the ethnic minorities and the wider community.

There have been only a small number of studies on ethnic minority students and their attitudes and perceptions of teaching (Rakhit, 1989; Singh et al., 1988; Brar, 1991, Ghuman, 1995). However the present study, which is a pilot study for a larger enquiry, focuses on the undergraduates/graduates from science disciplines (in a 'new university') and in particular the Asian science students. The study investigates the processes that had influenced the students' present career choice and explores the views and concerns that leads them to disregard the teaching profession as a career choice. The study was approached from the angle of being illuminative and raise new points of interests from which it is hoped that after further research, models to improve recruitment into shortage subjects will be developed.

## **Methodology**

A questionnaire was designed to explore the following issues; the person or factor having the most influence in course choice, alternative careers held in high regards versus those not considered, future employment and status and financial consideration, relationship with peers and teachers while at school, issues of conflict, views about teaching, views on role of ethnic minority teachers in school and finally social and familial issues related to future employment consideration.

The questionnaire was to be distributed to course tutors, and the students asked to fill them in. The questionnaire outlined the nature of the research and emphasised the strictest of confidentiality and anonymity. The questionnaire involved a 1 to 5 scaled response to gauge the strength of response and aid analysis.

## **The nature and description of the sample**

The various tutors from the science departments in a 'new university' were asked to allow access to their students in all the years from their degree courses. Of these one departmental tutor responded outlining the fact that the course had a large sample of both ethnic minority and majority students. The tutor further aided with the administering of the questionnaire to the students. Thirty-three students took part in the study. To enable gender balance more white students were represented in this sample than the Hindu, Muslim or Sikh groups.

### **Table 1: The sample by religious and gender grouping**

| Ethnic -Religious group | Females | Males |
|-------------------------|---------|-------|
| Total                   |         |       |

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|                         |    |   |          |
|-------------------------|----|---|----------|
| Asian - Hindu<br>3      | 1  | 2 |          |
| Asian - Sikh            | 2  | 1 | 3        |
| Asian – Muslim<br>7     | 3  | 4 |          |
| White - Christian<br>17 | 13 | 4 |          |
| White - None            | 1  | 2 | 3        |
|                         |    |   | Total 33 |

\* The religious categories are relatively broad.

### **Analysis**

The response to the questionnaires were recorded and grouped according to ethnic background, although religion is noted in some cases. This is because studies in the past have shown that the different religious sub-groups can have differing attitudes to employment (Crishna, 1974; Ghuman, 1995; Singh-Raud, 1997). At this stage the various Asian religious group responses have been accumulated with any significant anomalies in answers outlined in the findings, as the size of the sample is relatively small for the Hindus and the Sikhs.

### **Findings**

#### **Influences on career choice**

Of the 33 students 10 students strongly or very strongly considered teaching as a profession, 11 would not and the remainder 12 did not feel one way or another.

When asked if they felt whether any one strong factor or person had influenced their choice of study, 29 responded that their grades were a strong factor, i.e. in some cases not achieving the required grades for the preferred course. When it came to actually using the course with the grades they had, 17 chose the course themselves and no person influenced their decision. Nevertheless for 13 of the respondents parents were a strong source of influence. Jones et al, (1996) found that 'family and social pressures can convince some ethnic minorities not to go into teaching. This factor has to be investigated in more depth in the larger study, since only two male students wanted to enter teaching out of the possible 13 Asian students.

The strong belief of izzat (family honour see Basit 1997 and Singh-Raud, 1997) has very much been the central cohesive force in keeping much of the Asian community from straying from the 'right' path. Often the social pressure even for the third generation today is one of conforming to group values and failure is often blamed on lack of parental concern for their children. When asked if their parents would be disappointed if they did not get a job in their field of study? Eight out of 33 said their parents would be disappointed (4 Asian, 4 white). Did they feel their parents would be worried about losing face in the community, 9 out of 33 replied they strongly or very strongly believed it would be so (6 white, 3 Asian).

Teachers, careers advisors, siblings and peers appeared to have a smaller degree of influence. The experience of teachers in the past recommending Asian student to lower status qualification that is CSE instead of 'O' levels, might suggest a legacy of mistrust again brought about by parents.

### **Alternate career choice, status and financial reward**

An interesting issue of concern here was to see if the students, in particular the Asian students, would choose careers of high status and high financial reward (Woodrow, 1996). A comprehensive category using some of the more 'stereotypic' employment outlined by (Modood et al 1998) and some menial jobs along with teaching, were used to gauge choice of alternate careers. Would this reveal a diversity of choice between the two groups?

Both the white and Asian groups dismissed any form of manual labour or jobs such as cleaning, catering, and even retail. Only 8 of the white students, and only 2 Asian students (both Muslim males) said they would consider teaching. It can be seen here that none of the Muslim women wanted to do teaching, a career deemed 'safe' by the Muslim community (Wilson, 1970; Basit, 1997; Singh-Raud, 1997; Bhatti, 1999).

However all of the groups claimed they would consider medicine, and any form of management work and business. The popular choice of banking amongst Asian once again proved to be the choice in this study but not amongst the white students.

It can be seen that higher status jobs are preferred amongst the science graduates, rather than menial jobs. But perhaps the nature of the course these students were on (Pharmacy) means many would be considering higher status jobs and also, branching out in their own business these are matters to be explored in the larger study. As to the question of avoiding taking up any job which may cause them to lose face in the community, the response was mixed. With 6 out of 17 white (Christian) students claiming they would lose face. The none religious white students, and the Asian students did not think this would not be the case with the exception of one Sikh male. When considering pay many considered their starting salary to be in the region of £16-20,000, in their present career choice. When one considers that the initial pay for teachers is in the region of £15,300-£17,000 there is little difference.

The question arises would they consider teaching if they knew a teachers starting salary?

### **Relationships with peers and teachers when at school**

One of the areas the questionnaire explored was the relationship between the various people at school, teachers peers and members of cultural ethnic groups. All none religious and 13 out of 17 white (Christian), all Hindus, 5 out of 7 Muslim students and 1 out of 3 Sikhs students said they did get on with their teachers. When asked if any faced conflicts with teachers 2 Asian male students (1 Muslim; 1 Sikh) claimed they did, while the rest of the 31 in the sample population did not. However the same Sikh student faced conflict with his peers. Many of those who replied negatively to the above questions also claimed that the difference in point of view was due to a clash of personality, but the nature of the clash and other factors remain to be explored.

The questions in this section were designed to elicit difficulties during schooling thus negating teaching as a viable option. Research has shown that more Asian minority children in schools are now being excluded relative to their white peers, a problem encountered previously by the African-Caribbean community. Many Asian students also experience low expectation from their teachers (Bhatti, 1999). These questions would start to explore these issues.

#### **4.4 Possible barriers to choosing teaching**

Setting and marking work was factor given by 12 of the white students (10 Christians; 2 none religious) and, 7 of the Asian students (3 Hindus; 5 Muslim students). Having to deal with parents, as a barrier, gave a response of half of the white students. This was similar to the Asian students' response (6/13).

Another issue was that of pay in their intended career. Again half the white students and a majority of Asian students (8/13) felt that their intended career starting salary was reputed to be higher and so dissuaded them from choosing teaching. Other factors were, Heavy workload and teaching large number of children at once a concern voiced by half of the total sample.

Ironically, 16 out of 20 white students and 10 out of 13 Asian students stated that they loved working with children, nevertheless this was not enough to attract them to the teaching profession. This raises the question of whether these people would like to work with children outside of schools i.e. youth clubs, sports centres etc.

#### **Ethnic minority teachers in the classrooms**

Finally what did they feel about the role of ethnic minority teachers in schools, should there be ? The response was high with 26 out of 33 responding with a strong agreement that there should be teachers from diverse cultural backgrounds in (11 Asian; 15 white students). This reinforces finding of many recent studies (Verma, 1993; Singh-Raud, 1997; Bhatti,1999). As to the question of ethnic minority teachers teaching all pupils about ethnic minority

cultures, 12 out of 20 white students and 9 out of thirteen Asian students felt this was a positive move. However when asked if *any* teacher could teach about the cultural backgrounds of the minorities in Britain the reply was about the same again in that ,10 out of 20 white students and 8 out of 13 Asian students felt this was the case . As many as 21 out of 33 students said that ethnic minority teachers were a positive role models for the ethnic minority children. This was a point mentioned by various studies (Singh-Raud 1997; Bhatti, 1999, Wolverhampton RECC, 1999)

## **Conclusion**

At this stage of the research it appears that there is a significant difference between the Asian students willing to enter teaching as compared to their white counterparts. It appears that there is little parental influence when they chose their present career. The factors of high status job and money seems to be significantly high on the list of many who believe that the pay in teaching would be lower, yet this has proved to be a mistake. Although the pay after 5 years does vary and with the ceiling of about £26,000 in teaching compares less favourably than if these students opened their own business or worked in industrial plants where the remuneration could be much higher.

Many felt that various aspects of teaching were barriers for them in choosing a career in the profession. There is the possibility that if small taster sessions were held in schools or short informative talks, optional units on sixth form courses, for would be interested individuals (or all), may alleviate misconceptions about the profession. Many of the issues raised here such as the fact that many in this sample had parents who were teachers or lecturers and some of these students did not want to enter teaching while equally others did. What was it that led to this division of response? Did their school environment and experiences lead to negating of teaching as a career. Do the Asian parents feel that the experience of first generation migrant teachers could be influencing their negation of teaching for their offspring? Can they be pacified to allow their children to enter teaching these and many more issues will need to be explored in more detail during the next phase of the research.

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