

***“I didn’t have any
teachers that looked
like me”***

**Royal
Geographical
Society**
with IBG

Advancing geography
and geographical learning



**Sharing the experiences of Black, Asian,
and minority ethnic geography teachers**

October 2021

1 Context

Since 2010 there has been step change in the number of young people studying geography at GCSE, rising from 180,000 candidates in 2010 to 268,000 in 2021.

The changing nature of who is, and who is not, studying geography in English schools, colleges and universities was explored in our *Geography of geography* report¹.

The report showed that the increase in GCSE numbers has come predominately from groups who had been previously less likely to study GCSE geography – notably, Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME)² pupils, disadvantaged pupils, and pupils with lower prior attainment. With respect to BAME pupils, those of Chinese ethnicity now have the highest entry rate for geography of all groups (52%), and over the period 2010 to 2018 the proportion of GCSE entries by Black/Black British pupils doubled from 18.6% to 37.3%. Pupils of a (known) BAME background now represent about 23% of all geography GCSE entries³.

However, such progress is not reflected in the transition from GCSE to A Level where, apart from white pupils, fewer pupils of all other ethnicities chose geography than would be expected. The narrowing of geography's BAME intake continues at university. In 2018, 88% of undergraduate geographers were white.

The Society has started to address these issues through our own work and with the wider geographical community. Our commitment is embedded in our [strategic plan](#) which states that we will:

- *Work toward greater equality, diversity and inclusion within our own practices and activities as well as across the wider geographical community*
- *Support the teaching and learning of geography and its uptake in schools by providing high-quality resources, professional support to geography teachers, and demonstrating geography's value to further study and careers with additional support for underrepresented and underserved groups and schools*

¹ [Royal Geographical Society \(with IBG\) \(2020\). Geography of geography: the evidence base.](#)

² Overall Black and minority ethnic pupils currently make up over 30 per cent of pupils in primary and secondary schools in England. Runnymede Trust [CERD Submission](#) 2021

³ Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) (2020). Geography of geography: the evidence base.

2 Discussions with BAME geographers

Over the summer of 2021 we invited BAME geographers who had been supported through our Geography Initial Teacher Training Scholarships programme to discuss and share their experiences of studying and teaching geography.

The participants were either trainee, newly qualified or early career geography teachers. All had previously studied geography. Some had entered teacher training immediately after graduating, others had wider professional experience before becoming a teacher.

In total, eight participants took part in three focus groups. They explored a range of issues through semi-structured discussions spanning their motivations for choosing geography, their experiences of studying geography, and their training and professional practice as geography teachers.

The views expressed in this report, unless otherwise referenced, are those of the participants who contributed to the discussions.

We thank the participants, for their candid, thoughtful and open contributions which have been anonymised in the following report.

3 Summary

The participants identified longstanding interest in geography, how they had enjoyed studying the subject and had positive experiences of fieldwork.

“I grew up in council estates, for me it was all concrete, so when the teachers took us elsewhere it was fantastic”

They commented on how geography has the potential to represent everybody and engender an ongoing curiosity with the world. Many participants highlighted the positive influence of their own geography teacher in supporting their studies and, where appropriate, helping their parents better understand how geography could be a valid choice for their future studies and careers.

However, their feedback also presents challenges to the discipline and we have identified five key themes in their comments:

- Representation
- Identity and race
- Stereotyping
- Career pathways and employability
- Geography in education

These themes are explored in more detail in section 5.

Participants also identified the following:

- They have experienced racism, from pupils and colleagues, in their roles as geography teachers.
- There is ongoing underrepresentation of BAME perspectives and people within geography, in the school curriculum⁴ and among those who teach the subject.
- This serves to exclude BAME people from the subject and impacts negatively on the reality of, and informs wider perceptions about, who geography is for.
- There have been positive actions, including BAME led initiatives such as Black Geographers⁵, within geography, however, more work is needed.
- There can be the expectation from white colleagues that such issues are for BAME teachers to address.
- As trainees or early career teachers – and often the only non-white member of their geography department – they did not feel empowered or supported to challenge the current situation and that insufficient attention is not always given to these issues at a departmental or school-wide level.

4 For the purposes of these discussions ‘the curriculum’ was used to describe a pupil’s experience of learning geography at school including the National Curriculum, the examination courses and other relevant study.

5 Established in 2020 Black Geographers was founded to provide a space for Black geographers to network and connect. It is a community interest company working to tackle the erasure of black people in geography.

4 Participant recommendations

The participants made the following recommendations so that geography can better represent BAME perspectives, experiences, and aspirations:

- a. Recognise that geography, the discipline and its institutions including the Society, emerged from the structures of imperialism and colonialism and address this legacy within the practice of geography and its curriculum⁶.
- b. Consider equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) as subject-wide issues, and share responsibility for work in these areas among all geography teachers, as well as the wider subject community and its institutions – such as Initial Teacher Training providers and subject bodies including the Society.
- c. Empower and support BAME voices and initiative within geography teaching.
- d. Review resources and classroom practice to address issues of equality, diversity and inclusion and, where appropriate, promote a more accurate representation of people, places and environments
- e. Further address equality, diversity and inclusion in reviews of the geography National Curriculum and examination.
- f. That geography's institutions and community, undertake further work with BAME, and other underrepresented young people, to better understand their perspectives on geography.
- g. Develop more inclusive careers materials, digital engagement and other activities to better promote the positive benefits of studying geography. This should be embedded early in KS3 and highlight the enhanced career prospects, employability and earnings that geography provides, as well as the intellectual value of its scope of study. Particular attention should be paid to connecting this work with BAME pupils, and their parents and carers
- h. Identify and promote a more inclusive range of geography role models for young people.
- i. Recruit, support and retain more BAME geography teachers.

⁶ For example, [All Party Parliamentary Group Inquiry on Africa and its diaspora in the UK curriculum. RGS consultation response](#)

5 Themes emerging from discussion

a. Representation

Participants discussed perceptions of geography and how it is, or is not, represented as a subject for study. A common thought was the **need for ongoing dialogue concerning diversity within geography** - something which had been largely absent in their own experiences of being a geography pupil, undergraduate student or teacher.

"I had access to none of that personally, [geography] wasn't something that included my background and heritage personally. It would have been helpful if it was"

"What I was taught didn't include me"

"Representation was just lacking"

When drawing on their experiences as a pupil, student or teacher, participants highlighted that geography was **frequently represented by white role models**, and that there was a disconnect between 'who geographers are' and/or 'who studies geography' in relation to their own, and other BAME, perspectives.

Several participants commented on how in their own experience and from the perspective of pupils, parents and the public 'geography [is] viewed as posh'.

This led into conversations about role models within geography and participants highlighted the lack of representation, in terms of background, ethnicity, gender or sexuality, within the high-profile individuals who are seen to represent geography.

"We need role models that people can relate to, real life experiences to show the real potential of geography to the students"

"[There is] a need for real life experiences to be shared"

Participants discussed the changing way in which young people are accessing information relevant to their studies, careers and interests. Young people's use of social media provides an opportunity to showcase greater diversity within the subject, as well as enabling connections between individuals and groups within geography.

"The community of Black Geographers are doing a

great job at raising [online] awareness and showcasing the subject"

Participants identified the need for additional resources, interventions and materials that highlight diversity across the subject so that all students can feel represented, have role models that they can relate to, and see successful careers that can fulfil the aspirations held by young people and their parents or carers.

"Showing videos that are not just white [people] may [mean BAME students are] able to see themselves within the subject"

"[Students] like to be able to relate to someone, see a similar person"

"BAME leaders in their field need to show parents that [geography] is possible for their kids"

b. Identity and race

Participants commented on how their identity had been shaped by their experiences as an individual, their family, and the wider community, at every transition point. They highlighted how throughout school and university, and on returning to the classroom as a teacher, their ethnicity had not been reflected in either the teachers who had taught them or the cohorts with whom they had studied.

"Got to university, was surprised to see how white the course was...studying at a London university, didn't see that diverse community mix"

"My lecturers were white and taught me about Africa"

While participants did not always refer this as specifically negative experience, it was noted that such **underrepresentation within geography can lead to the isolation** of BAME geographers.

"It became more apparent over time, but I never felt like I didn't fit in or underrepresented. But there is space to feel like that"

A reoccurring theme was participants' **experiences of racism and discrimination** during their student experiences, or from pupils, parents or colleagues as a teacher. There was also the view that issues of equality, diversity and inclusion were often seen to be the (sole) responsibility of BAME teachers.

"I faced racism as a teacher and growing up in school"

"I got called a Paki by a student"

"You [must] know about the one child policy"

Participants also commented on **racism within teaching materials**.

"The resources were really racist – there was one describing children in slums "scurrying". [Another] approached Africa as a single country and not a continent"

Such experiences had negatively impacted on the career pathways of some participants who had subsequently chosen to teach outside the UK.

"One of the reasons I moved from a UK school to an international school was primarily that I wanted to be more understood by my peers [rather] than being judged by my peers"

Participants also recognised that **financial inequality** can negatively impact on young people's access to geography, particularly in relation to being suitably prepared for or being about to afford to participate in fieldwork.

"Luckily my parents could afford my trip to Iceland, but I knew a lot of people who couldn't"

"Students not wearing the right footwear. Some wearing waterproofs, some wearing trainers"

c. Stereotyping

Participants had experienced stereotyping both as students and as teachers and negative stereotypes about BAME perspectives had been expressed to them by students and colleagues.

"[Pupils] associate a stereotype with a 'geography teacher' – [but I'm] young, female, gel my hair & wear make-up"

"It's an uphill battle when teachers and peers are set in their ways"

"Work needs to be done approaching white teachers teaching minority students"

Discussions covered how to tackle discrimination and break down stereotypes and question young people about their assumptions and judgements from a young age.

"[We] need to break stereotyping lower down the school"

The participants recognised the need for further attention to be drawn to other aspects of representation in geography for example age, career stage, economic disadvantage, gender, race and sexuality.

d. Career pathways and employability

Participants reflected on the career paths open to geographers that they knew about during their own time as students, and what their current students would think in relation to geography and careers.

Across all focus groups, the idea that studying geography would lead to a career in teaching was the most prevalent.

"The only job I ever heard of doing was teaching"

Participants commented on the lack of guidance for geographical careers at the school and college level, and how career guidance was more focused around science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). There were also discussions about the views held by parents, from all backgrounds in relation to what constitutes a successful career role – and whether studying geography can lead to this. The theme of family pressures was discussed, in terms of expectations of educational routes and career pathways, which often excluded geography as an option.

"[It was] always careers focused for STEM subjects and never anything for humanities."

"Most [BAME] parents don't see outside of stereotypical jobs"

Studying geography provides above average graduate employability and earnings⁷, with geography graduates placed in the top 10 of graduate incomes. However, such positive benefits are often not reflected in how the subject is presented in schools and careers fairs, or understood by young people and their parents.

“Seen as an unserious subject”

“Didn’t think geography was employable at all.”

“There’s a big lack of representation, too much pressure on the core subjects. The kids concentrate on English, science and maths”

“Careers fairs never had anything to do with geography”

e. Geography in education

Participants highlighted that the geography curriculum is not fully representative of those to whom it is being taught. This issue has also been identified through wider research, e.g. Puttick and Murrey (2020)⁸.

Participants noted the need to involve and empower a wide range of stakeholders, especially those from BAME backgrounds, to engage with the curriculum and address areas of concern.

“Very much a colonial curriculum which made no sense to me as a child”

“Kids, especially BAME kids, don’t see themselves in the curriculum because why would they if their class teacher is spouting all of these reductionist racist stereotypes”

“What power do we have to confront racism in resources and teachers?”

Ofsted recently highlighted the need for the subject to consider such perspectives as one of the building blocks of high-quality geography, stating, *“It is important that teachers critically reflect on the imagery, data and attitudes they portray and the messages that are conveyed to pupils, even unwittingly. This is particularly pertinent in light of current thinking about matters such as ensuring that geography accurately represents the nature of the world’s people, their communities, economies, diversities and experiences.”*⁹

Participants reflected on the importance of the Society being involved in these conversations in a way which gives space to BAME teachers to share their perspectives and support them in taking forward their future action.

“[It would be good] if the RGS worked with BAME teachers to create principles for an anti-racist geography”

“Do not do the talking for us”

BAME pupils being able to see their own identities reflected in their teachers helps to change the views of young people - and their parents - about geography. In addition, greater use of more diverse examples, case studies and profiles can create a space for all to be represented through geography and help enthuse young people through the subject.

“Students get quite excited learning about their country”

“School was multi-cultural and geography [lessons] really supported that”

“Geography comes from somewhere new, where everyone was equal”

A key positive that the participants highlighted was geography’s strength in encouraging different perspectives. However, more work is needed to fully realise the benefit of this so that all students feel included.

Addressing EDI issues is the responsibility of all geography teachers. However, the specific role of the participants as BAME geography teachers, and their positive influence on young people, was explored.

Participants reflected on the lack of BAME geography teachers in the profession. It has been reported that 86% of all teachers are white¹⁰, and the Society’s experience indicates that BAME recruits to geography teacher training make up ~10% of new entrants to the workforce.

“I didn’t have any teachers that looked like me”

“[It would be] nice to have more Black teachers to teach geography”

“The way the kids now react to me, they like it...I wanted to be that person”

⁷ www.rgs.org/choosegeography

⁸ “Confronting the deafening silence on race in geography education in England: learning from anti-racist, decolonial and Black geographies” Steve Puttick and Amber Murrey. Geography Vol 105 2020

⁹ Research Review Geography Ofsted 2021

6 Next steps and further information

The quantitative data provided by the Geography of geography report illustrated the scale by which BAME individuals are under-represented within geography and are underserved by it.

The discussions outlined in this report offer personal insights from BAME geographers into their individual experiences of studying and teaching geography. Their perspectives illustrate the positive benefits of studying geography, alongside the widespread and significant challenges facing BAME individuals within the discipline.

These discussions and the participants' comments will inform the Society's work to support greater equality, diversity and inclusion within geography.

In addition, we and the participants hope this report will also be drawn on by others across the geographical community so that the benefits of this subject are made more available to all.

The Society supports equality, diversity and inclusion in geography. This includes work with schools, higher education institutions, professional geographers, our Collections, policymakers and the wider public.

W: www.rgs.org/EDI

W: www.rgs.org/schools

W: www.rgs.org/choosegeography

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