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**EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION OF DRIVERS OF ATTAINMENT IN  
ETHNIC MINORITY ADULT LEARNERS**

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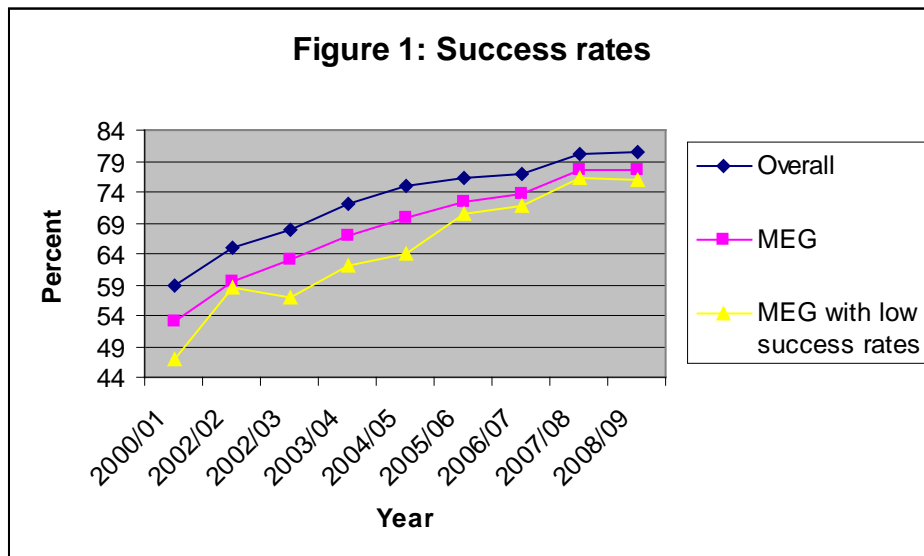
## **Abstract**

There is evidence that ethnic minority learners in Further Education in England either underachieve or are underrepresented because they face various inhibitors connected to their ethnicity. Motivators may be in place, however, which increase attainment specifically for some ethnic groups. This exploratory study intends to examine what works and what does not among South Asian (Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage) females and Black male adult learners in FE. A mixed method study was done using questionnaires and focus groups with 68 ethnic minority students in three Further Education colleges in England. The combination of the results showed that being a member of a minority culture and/or religion may increase feelings of isolation in academic settings; teaching staff who are knowledgeable about the student's culture increase feelings of inclusion; and role models are crucially important. Results are discussed in light of British data of school experiences of minority ethnic learners.

## Introduction

Although Further Education (FE) achievement rates are increasing overall, there is a gap between overall rates and rates of minority ethnic group (MEG) learners. There is an additional gap between all ethnic groups and those that have traditionally underachieved. It appears that the gap between the latter two may be lessening and it is worthwhile to investigate the factors contributing to higher rates for the traditionally underachieving groups. This may be seen graphically in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Success Rates**



Source: Learning and Skills Council (2010).

[http://www.thedataservice.org.uk/statistics/sfrmar10/sfrmar2010\\_supplementarytables.htm](http://www.thedataservice.org.uk/statistics/sfrmar10/sfrmar2010_supplementarytables.htm). Coventry: England.

Literature has indicated parameters that act as motivators of attainment and inhibitors for ethnic minority adult learners. The most prominent of those are: cultural parameters (Ahmad, et al. 2003; Bhavnani 2006; Shain 2003; Youdell 2003,4), statutory and/or previous education (Bhattacharyya et al. 2003; Foster & Willemstyn, 2005; Okon, 2005; Simm, et al, 2007), role models (Clancy, 2003; Ghuman, 1995) and teaching staff behaviour or attitudes about their students (Bhattacharyya et al. 2003; Gillborn, 2001).

This research investigates drivers of attainment amongst ethnic minority learners in FE in England and Wales. First a review of the literature is provided. Second we describe the method for the current research. This consists of two forms of data collection, quantitative questionnaires and focus groups. Finally, conclusions are drawn with suggestions on how to further increase success rates. We will briefly explore the literature on a number of relevant topics.

## **Culture**

Undoubtedly students experience a great deal of pressure in the school environment. They must cope with peer pressure, being academically successful, fitting in with friends and being a respected student. The further burden of co-existing identities of “learner” and “ethnicity” is an aspect of education that majority learners may not experience. For MEG this is something that needs to be negotiated. As an example, amongst the Black groups, it has been suggested that “black identity” is developed through authority opposition; it cannot exist in tandem with a pro-school identity (Youdell, 2003, 4). The Black sub-cultural identity is predominant for students when compared to the learner self. It is possible that Black students are unable to achieve a

successful “learner-self” due to their identification as a minority ethnic member overpowering their learner identity (Youdell, 2003, 4).

Family values and parental influence is another strong cultural influence on MEG attainment. It has been documented that family values and parent aspirations have a stronger influence on MEG than on their white counterparts. Divided by minority ethnic group, South Asians believe their parents significantly influence career path, especially when compared to their white and Black Caribbean counterparts (Bhavnani 2006). This was a particularly strong phenomenon for Pakistani women and men with 64% reporting family influences future career choice<sup>1</sup>. Bangladeshi heritage girls (54%) and boys (51%) reported their parents also strongly contribute to career choice. When this is compared to the white heritage group (20% of girls and 26% of boys) and Black Caribbean heritage girls (29%) and boys (42%) it is striking to see how significantly the South Asian family plays a role.

In some Asian families, the older generation did not fulfil what they wanted to academically in order to support their children. Successful Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage women not only have high internal motivations towards academic success, but also have parents who are exceptionally supportive of it (Ahmad, et al. 2003). According to Shain (2003), successful female learners report their fathers being strong motivators for academic success; nonetheless, the females believe their male counterparts were encouraged to succeed academically with higher frequency.

### **Statutory Education**

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Career’ is used as an indicator of success encompassing academic qualifications, and completion of academic goals.

Statutory education is crucial to FE learning, particularly because it provides the context within which various pathways of education and training are presented to learners. Students have different experiences in education; nonetheless, statutory education provides a common ground for all learners because they take the same subjects and attend comparable number of hours in similar schools. Thus, review of statutory education is paramount when looking at what drives some students to persist in their education and others to leave.

The somewhat recent gains in academic success amongst Black Caribbean heritage learners, faster than the national average, may be indicative of boys doing well in primary school but then not maintaining their academic advantage (Cassen & Kington, 2007). Many hypotheses have been proposed in an effort to understand why the success rate for Black Caribbean boys does not remain on the same trajectory throughout compulsory school, but there are insufficient findings for indicative answers at present.

Some MEG learners who have attended compulsory school in the UK claim greater levels of disadvantage than non-MEG learners. Still, MEG learners are more likely to remain in school beyond the age of 16 (Bhattacharyya et al. 2003; Foster & Willemstyn, 2005). Simm, et al (2007) find that motivation of the learner is a key factor. Focus might have to be given to studying Asian early school leavers as they more often reported “time spent on studying was too hard” when compared to their black and white counterparts (Simm et al., 2007). The need to keep students motivated and challenged simultaneously is difficult but crucial in retention of MEG learners.

Okon (2005) suggests that there is little evidence of minority ethnic students facing difficulties in accessing school guidance information to help them make informed choices

about institutions and courses. On the other hand, Bhavnani (2006) reports that minority ethnic students feel school guidance is impacted by cultural stereotypes such that students are not always aware of all options available to them. This was the case for approximately half of the Black Caribbean heritage and 30% of Bangladeshi heritage girls in a particular study. In total, 25% of the Black Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage girls did not receive useful advice from their compulsory school about continuing on in school (Bhavnani 2006). It is interesting to note this discrepancy and worthwhile to investigate access to guidance service more thoroughly.

### **Role Models**

Many in education point to role models and mentors as important contributors to academic success. (Barn 2001; Cabinet Office, 2003; Foster & Willemstyn, 2005; Okon, 2005). There are few ethnic minority teachers in schools when compared to the numbers of ethnic minority students. Only 7% of FE staff are MEG members and 7% of trainee teachers are from MEG meaning the rest are white British, although the student population is greater than 7% MEG and fewer than 93% white British. It might be helpful to have a great number of ethnic minority teachers visible as the low levels of MEG teachers who serve as ad hoc role models might not be enough of a motivator to adequately contribute to success among minority students (Clancy, 2003, 4).

Having role models may be particularly important to Asian female students. There is often a divide between home and school life in that Asian females are encouraged to do well in school but also uphold the traditional expectations from their



families. Having both standard role models as well as home-school links could be beneficial for this population (Ghuman, 1995).

### **Teaching Staff**

In addition to few role models, many MEG students do not feel their teachers hold high academic expectations of them. Black students perceived their teachers to have higher levels of racism towards them than did their classmates of other ethnic origin. Research has found that teachers draw conclusions with respect to criminality, motivation and low academic ability level (Gillborn, 2001, 105). Black Caribbean students amongst others had the highest rates of permanent school exclusion, between 37 to 42 students per 10,000. Compared to the relatively lower proportion of whites (14 students per 10,000) and this is concerning (National Statistics Online, 2004).

The way that learners perceive their education will in large part be a reflection of teaching staff. Low socio-economic status (SES) of the learners may be related to low teacher expectations and lack of academic confidence among MEGs (Bhattacharyya et al. 2003). Once low teacher expectations exacerbate low student confidence, the challenge to being a successful learner may be compounded.

In FE, 28% of the Black and 21% of the Asian heritage groups were generally satisfied with teaching staff (LSC, 2006). This is lower than it is for white heritage learners. Whites also more readily indicated that teachers were knowledgeable in their subject matter and were satisfied with how teachers and students relate when compared with Black heritage learners. Whites felt more so than Asians that teachers made the subject interesting and were able to manage a group of learners. Perhaps the Asians and

whites have different expectations in the classroom. Since the majority of teachers are also white it is possible that cultural alignment contributed to higher ratings from the white students.

The current study explored what parameters act as motivators to MEG adult learners in England. Previous research has highlighted specific areas (e.g., teachers, role models, culture) as being relevant contributors to success in education. It was anticipated that reviewing the literature alone would not be sufficient for enhancing understanding as to why particular MEGs achieve at higher levels than others. Data collection could have taken multiple forms for this exploratory study and it was thought that using a mixed method approach, described below, would yield the greatest deal of information.

### **Method**

The study used a mixed method approach and data were collected in two ways. A quantitative questionnaire was used as well as six moderated focus groups of approximately 10 learners each. In total, 68 learners took part in the study in three metropolitan locations in England. Almost all learners who participated in the focus group meetings were taking advantage of adult education delivered from community-based centres. They anticipated moving to mainstream colleges to complete their training.

FE in the UK incorporates work-based learning, community-based learning, offender learning, sixth-form and specialist colleges. Community-based learning (CBL) is often done at community-based centres, from where participants for the current research were selected. CBL overlaps with FE goals and activities however it can take

place in a wider range of settings than FE (e.g. from specialist colleges to small community groups, non-governmental organizations, local councils, to name just a few).

The lead moderator was responsible for one focus group in each of the three locations, disseminating and collecting the questionnaires. The moderator selected another individual at the colleges with whom he was familiar to moderate the other focus group. The second moderator (the one based at the college) recruited MEG participants representative of the college for the focus groups.

The focus groups were held in the college centre. Main themes around learning were discussed so that focus group members were able to share their opinions. Themes were based on those reviewed above and included culture, religion, statutory education, role models, teaching staff, inhibitors and challenges to education.

Following the focus groups participants were asked to complete the questionnaire. The goal of the questionnaire was twofold. First, it was designed to obtain demographic information about the participants. Second, the questionnaire was used to quantify some aspects of learning (e.g., motivation, inhibitors to learning).

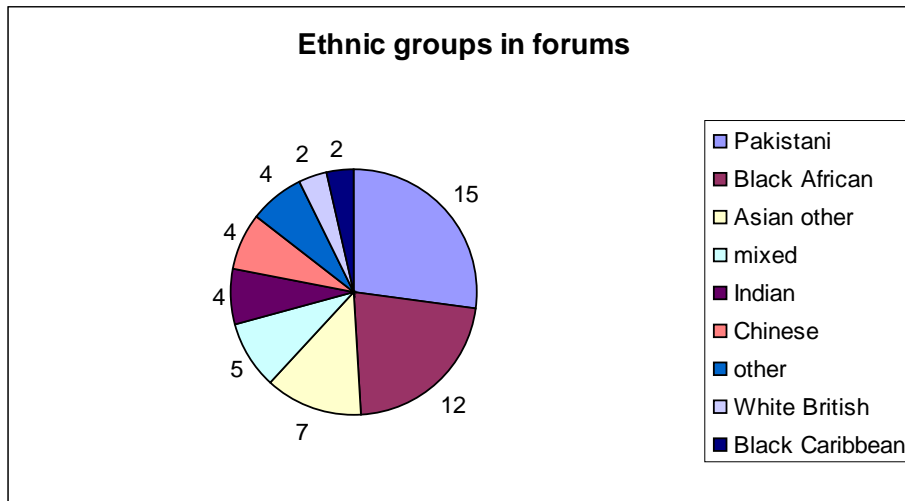
The goal in using the two methods was to triangulate the data. By collecting questionnaire data, the research was comparable across the different cultural groups. The focus group data allowed for more in depth understanding of trends and commonalities within each cultural group and the opportunity to explore the motivators to learning.

## **Results**

## Quantitative Results

The demographic data is presented first. A chart with the ethnic breakdown of the learners may be found in Figure 2. This information is gleaned from the quantitative survey. Not every participant answered every question so the totals will not always add up to 68. Nearly half of the participants were either of Pakistani or Black African heritage. As none of the other ethnic groups had sufficient numbers, the analysis focused on Black African and South Asian heritage individuals.

**Figure 2: Ethnic Groups in Forums**



Nineteen of the participants were between 19-30 years old and a further 19 were 31-40 years old. One was under 19 and the rest were 41-65+. Fifty-six participants completed a question giving their gender. Forty-six were female and ten were male, virtually all of the males were in College 2.

Some of the sample have academic degrees. Seven of the participants had obtained a GCSE, seven an A level, six an NVQ and five had postgraduate degrees. It is likely that the five with the postgraduate degrees had obtained them in other countries and they were not recognized in the UK. Of the 50 people who responded to an employment question, 36 were employed at the time of the focus groups. Only seven (of 54) stated that they had special requirements due to their cultural background and 33 (out of 47) claimed that staff were aware of how personal factors relating to culture may impact success on the course. Thirty-three people out of 36 stated that if there were few learners of the same ethnic background as the participant, this would affect his/her willingness to continue on a course. Positively, 42 out of 52 felt that learners from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds are not treated differently in the classroom.

### **Focus Groups**

The three colleges where the focus groups took place had learners from different ethnic categories. One college was primarily South Asian female (College 1), another was Black male (College 2) and the third was Somali, South Asian, Caribbean and Chinese heritage learners (College 3). For the most part, the MEG members felt similarly about the learning process. There were some differences based on religion with Muslim immigrants feeling more strongly about the impact of religion on learning. Although there was a discussion guide to steer the group on the topics of interest, the group discussed the issues of greater interest to them. The topics that arose as well as the issues around these topics follow.

**Culture.** Participants were asked what tutors and teachers should know about culture, language and religion of their learners. Virtually all of the learners felt culture, language and religion did impact on learning experience, and that it is important for teachers to acknowledge this. Some students felt their language difficulties made it harder to communicate with tutors which impeded the learning process. Others claimed that cultural issues were not a problem for them, but could appreciate that they were issues for others.

My religion does not impact on me. But if we do massage with Muslim women we have to make sure that the doors are closed. The college also has a lot of fire drills, this can be a problem, especially for those women who were the full hijab...they have to put their veils on quickly and make their way out of the building (College 1)

Lack of general cultural understanding of the UK education system was a hurdle to the learning process. Learners pointed to three distinct areas in which they faced such difficulties. First, being unfamiliar with the paperwork and process of enrolling in education; second, learning how to engage in self-assessment; and third, not knowing how to obtain the prospectus and information about the curriculum. Learners felt these cause cultural barriers in that had they been more familiar with UK cultures, specifically those related to education and pedagogy, they would have not had practical problems with their course.

Some of the learners stated that not having other students and/or staff who were familiar with the person's own cultural group compounded learning obstacles. They felt isolated. In some cases they even felt that there was institutionalised racism. For

example, some participants felt that their principles can be misinterpreted and this led to problems in the classroom. In other cases, encountering social barriers based on cultural background were difficulties.

An example of this surfaced at College 3 where a number of the learners felt vulnerable in the aftermath of 21/7/2005 averted bombings in London and the forthcoming trials for the accused bombers. The focus group was held two years after the bombings but its impact was far reaching for this group of students. Although there was more variation in this group than in others, the majority of the focus group were still Black males. Participants felt that each time there is an attack by someone who is a member of an MEG it becomes more difficult for MEG students to focus on their education since they feel more susceptible to backlash from the crimes.

Even though culture is not directly related to learning success, it is important in terms of putting into perspective some of the academic material. Learner culture is important for the tutors to be aware of since there are learning activities that might make particular groups uncomfortable. Learners were satisfied with the levels of respect and understanding they received from their tutors but came across difficulties with respect to administration in education and impressions of MEG in general.

It should be noted that the centres where the focus groups were held were small satellite ones and not on the campus of the colleges. Participants were concerned whether the respect for cultural differences that they had in their small centres will be mirrored in mainstream college services. There was some apprehension with what the learners will face once they go to the large campus.

**Religion.** Learners pointed to religion as a factor that impacted on their education. For example, women from some MEG felt they should not be leaving their children in another's care while attending school based on religious norms. Many female students with children likely feel this way but coupled with religious norms and family pressure, this might be an additional burden on ethnic minority women. Women reported intimidating undertones of condescension in their families often based on religion. While they did not quit the training, they still felt that they were being targeted based on religion. When classes were held over a time period in which the student should have been praying, the student felt torn about being in class or attending prayers. Religious-based dress was of concern for some of the learners:

My dress code disadvantages me [...] I have had to let go of the face veil, which I wore of my own personal choice. I did not want to stand out. I wasn't being singled out in any way in the centre but I stood out. I do wear my veil when I am in my community, but there is still a lot of stigma attached to it. (College 1)

The strongest connection between religion and learning came from a male participant. One Black male learner felt that judgements were made in the academic setting based on his religion. It impacted on his learning experience in the UK:

I feel that this [religion] does impact on me, even my name has an impact. People can tell where I am from just by looking at my application form...I am a Muslim. (College 2)

**Statutory Education.** Most of the learners in the current study had not been in statutory education in the UK and, when queried, reported positive educational experiences in their country of origin. They entered FE via community-based centres in the UK with a mind to acquire better English language skills and/or to learn skills that are conventionally taught in UK compulsory education but not in their home country.



In at least three cases, learners had post graduate qualifications from other countries which were not recognized in the UK. All three were medical doctors (from China, Sudan and Iraq). They felt as though all of the skills were not being put to good use. This undoubtedly impacted their self-confidence as learners. As one learner said:

I want a professional job, not a manual one! I did catering for a while and this took away my self esteem...I then looked for office jobs, computers etc....but there were none...I was a doctor for one month in my country (College 2)

There was concern that the government was primarily concerned about statutory education and in turn was not doing enough to support adult learners<sup>2</sup>. As one learner stated,

...I have not had good support. People have not been able to give me advice on courses and I have started to get behind. The Job Centre did not know about IELTS and the opportunities available to me. I asked many times in the job centre information for someone with my qualifications and they were not able to help.... (College 2)

There were also concern that the government would shortly stop funding English language courses. The students felt that it would be difficult to pay for their own courses and were unsure what they would do to gain the skills they needed.

**Role Models/Mentors<sup>3</sup>.** Minority ethnic learners were positive about the idea of role models and felt that they were effective in promoting learning and increasing academic success. At one college which served primarily Muslim female students, some senior learners were simultaneously serving as mentors to the junior students and engaging in learning on their own course. All those interviewed reported that the close support they received from other learners who were mentors, had a hugely important role in providing learning support. In return, the role models themselves felt that it was a

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the focus groups were held in 2007 when there was not a recession.

<sup>3</sup> Role models were more senior learners, others in the education setting (i.e., teachers, staff), or those outside the academic realm.

rewarding experience to encourage individuals from the same cultural and ethnic background to persevere in education.

I am also a mentor; I work to support Community Learning Ambassadors [name of mentoring programme]. I don't believe that just anyone could do this. It has to be someone who has a knowledge, an understanding of Muslim communities. (College 1)

Mentors were good at providing guidance but not all students had mentors, leading to an environment of inequality. Amongst those who did not have mentors, the sentiment was that the learning environment was negative and non-engaging. Mentors did not have to come from the same cultural background as the learner. Even though the quote above indicates that someone should come from the same background, others felt that

Having a mentor enabled me to go into learning and stay there and progress. If I did not have this, I would not be where I am today. I would not have gone into teacher training. My mentor is white; she has a deep knowledge of community issues and has worked within various Muslim communities in-depth over a long period of time. She is supportive and understanding. (College 1)

**Teaching staff<sup>4</sup>.** The tutors are likely to be in their profession because of an interest in helping adults learn. Their specialised body of knowledge comes primarily in the form of on the job training. By spending time with the students and being amenable to catering to individual needs (e.g., extra learning support, sympathy with cultural obligations, etc) the tutors are able to gain the respect of their students. Fostering strong relationships and having interest in supporting and learning about their students appears to be the key for the successful tutor-learner partnership. Lecturers may not have the time the tutors do to foster meaningful interactions with the students. When asked about

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<sup>4</sup> Lecturers are responsible for the overall module (topics taught, administration) with a large number of students while tutors take small groups of students to teach on specific aspects of coursework focusing on the students and learning exclusively.

teaching staff, it was the tutors who received the highest praise even though some lecturers had been on trainings for cultural and ethnic diversity awareness.

A minority of the participants believed the teacher, both tutor and lecturer, had low expectations for them. Even though the students believe the tutors had positive opinions of minority ethnic learners in general, they still claimed that they did not have high academic expectations. The participants felt that the tutors had significant amounts of cultural knowledge, were committed, honest, trusting of their students and fostered positive relationships. Nonetheless, they still felt the tutors had an overall lack of interest in promoting the learner's academic qualifications.

**Inhibitors.** Some learners felt that there was a lack of cultural knowledge on the part of teaching staff. Institutionalised racism (e.g., poor timetabling) was also raised as a potential problem for the learners. This problem might be compounded when there is less flexibility (e.g., large FE college as opposed to smaller FE community-based centre).

We are fully aware of the importance of programming and make sure that lessons fall outside of important holy days, fasting periods etc. I am not sure that this is the case in the main college [satellite campus was able to accommodate timetabling]. All the staff there are white. (College 1)

Inhibitors and motivators seem to be one and the same for adult groups. When these issues are catered for, they are motivators because learners feel they are being treated kindly and when they are not, learners feeling their needs are ignored. They are issues of access (accessibility of college, convenient times, child-care facilities, finance) and personal circumstances (family commitments, children, workload, equality and diversity support) which were most often raised as inhibitors to learning. Logistical issues surrounding the learning process were more concerning to the learner than

regularly feeling isolated due to being a minority. Some learners felt that not having friends who were positive about learning also proved to be an inhibitor to learning.

There are some instances where inhibitors are immigrant specific (language barriers, not being familiar with the English education system, not being accustomed to specific assessment methods, not having a standardised qualification within the English system) but these issues were able to be addressed by having a learning mentor.

The effect of current politics in the home country and the local community image towards of the learner was much less problematic than anticipated by the researchers. This did not serve as a significant barrier to learning.

Those from mixed heritage claim an additional difficulty to those who are of one ethnic minority group. The mixed heritage individuals find it difficult to fit into any category. When in an education setting, they feel as though they cannot connect with any group sufficiently thus feel isolated. Claims were made that some individuals did not want to mix with others and this was particularly problematic for the ethnically mixed group. This was an inhibitor to learning as many felt that communication and sharing of knowledge was being broken down in the classroom.

Additionally, there were questions about the usefulness of their degree. Some of the learners were concerned that even once they completed a course and obtained their qualification, there would be no opportunities to work.

**Motivators.** Several of the interviewees were interested in becoming more self-reliant. It was for this reason that they chose to engage in learning. This was seen more with the younger as well as second and third generation migrants. Historically, women tended to sacrifice their own training for the training of their husbands although this has

changed in the recent past. Women felt that when their husbands were motivated the women were also inspired to be academically motivated. Attending courses at a satellite centre provided an education that was accessible and supportive. Having the community centres helped to build self-confidence which helped encourage women into education. Amongst the male learners, high levels of self-motivation proved positive for their education.

Those learners who enjoyed what they were learning and felt that there was a positive atmosphere were more motivated to succeed. Having a supportive environment, with small classes, a good relationship with the tutor, and class members being receptive to individuals from various cultures all helped to motivate learners.

Although the sentiment was different at the three colleges, the conclusions seem to be that what works is having a good knowledge of learners' culture, providing support outside of the classroom, responding to local culture and being sensitive about cultural issues. These factors transcend race and MEG category.

### **Discussion**

Taken together, culture and religion are significant factors. It appears that the more aware teaching staff is with the particular culture of his/her students, the better the students feel about their learning experience. The feeling of the learning experience and perception of it are crucial to the learning process. Students can succeed without, but student satisfaction is a significant component of learning (LSC, 2006).

**Culture.** The FE learners were on their courses because they wanted to learn. Even with that motivation, some felt isolated due to culture. This is different than the isolation from academia that some may feel in compulsory school (e.g., Youdell, 2003, 4). At the compulsory level, identity impedes high achievement whereas in the FE setting, even in community-based centres, it is the lack of those from similar backgrounds which yields discomfort.

Previous research points to a relationship between lower teacher expectations, academic confidence and socioeconomic status (Bhattacharyya et al. 2003). The learners in the focus groups appeared confident in their abilities. The majority felt that teaching staff respected them so it is unlikely that the teachers held low expectations, or if they did it was not obvious to the learners. Those who did not feel their tutors held high academic expectations still seemed able to progress, they were less positive about the learning environment though.

Participants from the focus groups struggled with understanding the UK education system, especially if their English was poor. This was compounded if parents were unable to offer tangible assistance. Completion of paperwork and other routine tasks are made more difficult if the FE learner does not feel confident and as an MEG, where family is particularly important, cannot necessarily turn to them for advice and guidance (Bhavnani 2006: Simm, et al, 2007).

Ethnic minority women, as opposed to men, face what appears to be an additional burden of managing schooling and family responsibilities. A number of women sidelined their academic goals to support their children (Ahmad, et al. 2003) and are now returning

to education. The enthusiasm for education and the support network provided through mentoring is indicative of how these women, and perhaps other women in further education, are academically successful.

**Statutory Education.** Since the majority of the focus group learners were not educated to compulsory level in the UK, it is difficult to address some of the issues raised in previous research on statutory education. One finding which can be corroborated is that motivation is a significant ingredient for success (Simm, et al, 2007). Learners entered the FE system of their own accord indicating that they had high levels of motivation. They also reported positively about their compulsory education. Guidance for learners at the compulsory levels was not something to which the focus group learners could relate. They were concerned about funding for education.

**Role Models.** There was an interesting discrepancy between the colleges. At one of the colleges with primarily South Asian women, the reports were that the teaching staff was quite good, supportive, and seemed to truly care about the students. At another college with mainly Black males, the teaching staff had cultural knowledge but did not appear to care sufficiently about the student. The learners at the college perceived that the staff had low expectations for student success.

LSC (2006) data show that Black heritage learners have greater levels of satisfaction with their teachers when compared to Asians (28% and 21%, respectively). But, in the current data this appears not to be the case. Role models played a crucial role in the academic lives of the South Asian women. This was not the case for the Black heritage men. Perhaps the men would have had higher levels of satisfaction with teaching staff if role models were available. Perhaps the school ethos of providing the

pastoral support via role models makes a difference in perceptions of satisfaction. What was missing at the primarily Black male college was the ability for senior students and staff to provide a safe environment for the newer students. Once that foundation of comfort was provided, learners were able to get on with the task of learning and feel confident. In College 2, the learners were never truly at ease so although learning took place, there was an underlying feeling of awkwardness.

### **Conclusions**

Achievement rates are increasing overall, for MEG and for those MEG who traditionally have not succeeded. Nonetheless, barriers and challenges are still prominent for MEG learners although community-based learning centres help with this. Learners stated that it is important for the tutors to be aware of the cultural background of the students; they believe it enhances learning. Logistics and arrangements proved to be a problem and perhaps more can be done at the college or local authority level to alleviate this. As with all adults with families returning to education, providing adequate child care is crucial. Transportation links and community centre study spaces if possible are advisable as well.

Several aspects of learning motivated students. Undoubtedly, they need to self-initiate and be interested in gaining skills. Once that is in place, tutors and staff having good knowledge of learners' culture, providing pastoral support outside the classroom and a positive environment in the classroom all aid in learner motivation.

There are at least two limitations to this study. First, the sample size was small. Only three colleges were included. In order to get a better sense of the opinions of MEG



learners, it might be worthwhile to conduct a quantitative study which more broadly assesses the sentiment of FE minority learners. Second, it is worthwhile to conduct focus groups with learners at a greater number of colleges. This should include colleges across the country.

The second limitation is that only Black heritage males and South Asian females were included. Whilst these are groups that have traditionally not achieved and are now showing gains which is what the study set out to assess, it is worthwhile to look at other typical underachieving groups who have made gains in recent years. Understanding factors that contribute to success among MEG is an important goal and one for which more research must be conducted to comprehend what policies should be implemented to increase success.

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