Mend the Gap: A Tale of Two Public Services

WHEN Stan Gilmour and Evelyn Forde met in a Paddington coffee shop to discuss institutional reform, they might have been describing different countries, let alone different public services. Prof Gilmour, a veteran police leader, spoke of systematic change, measurable progress, and structured accountability. Ms Forde, a pioneering headteacher, described an education system seemingly frozen in time. Their contrasting experiences of recruitment illuminate a curious divergence in Britain's stumbling path toward institutional diversity.

The numbers tell part of the story. The police service has seen a modest increase in Black officer numbers from 1,586 in 2020 to 1,778 in 2022, though they remain significantly underrepresented at 1.3% of police officers compared to 4.0% of the general population according to the 2021 Census[i]. Meanwhile, in education, where in 2021, 85.1% of all teachers in state-funded schools in England were white British (out of those whose ethnicity was known) and white British people made up 92.5% of headteachers, 90.8% of deputy headteachers, 87.8% of assistant headteachers there has been no such progress. These statistics paint a very bleak picture in terms of the ethnic make-up of school leadership teams in our schools because they do not represent the diverse communities they serve.

Yet raw numbers obscure a more intriguing tale of institutional transformation. The Police Race Action Plan, launched in 2021, rightly represents perhaps the most ambitious attempt by any British public institution to reform itself. More than 307,000 officers, staff and volunteers have been vetted against new standards. Dismissals for discriminatory behaviour have doubled. A new code of ethics has been implemented. It is the sort of systematic change that would be familiar to any corporate restructuring specialist.

Education's approach, by contrast, resembles a collection of well-meaning but disconnected initiatives. Despite its natural advantages, schools interact daily with diverse communities in ways police officers can only dream of, the sector lacks comprehensive frameworks for recruitment and retention change. And whilst the systemic racism in the police force has been well documented, it would be misguided to think that teachers and leaders in our schools are also not subject to overt racism, discrimination and unconscious bias, it happened to Ms. Forde and it's happening in our schools, more often than people think it is.

Both institutions serve as vital anchors in British society - organisations whose scale and presence shape local communities far beyond their primary functions. Their approach to diversity thus carries outsized significance. When the police service partners with Black church networks or community organisations, it signals more than just recruitment strategy. It represents an understanding that institutional change requires sustained community engagement.

The contrast becomes sharper when examining accountability measures. The police service has established clear metrics, implemented regular performance reviews, and created specific pathways for advancement. Education administrators might well wonder why their sector lacks equivalent frameworks. The answer likely lies in the different pressures each institution faces. Police reform emerged from crisis; the Macpherson Report's damning verdict of institutional racism, the Stephen Lawrence case, the George Floyd protests. Education's challenges, while no less real, have simmered rather than boiled over and we would suggest that clear actions rather than reactions, after an event would serve education well.

Yet recent statistics suggest neither sector can rest easy. Only 60% of Black Britons express confidence in the police, dropping to 49% among those of Caribbean heritage[ii]. Meanwhile, recent data shows the education sector has a pipeline block from Initial Teacher Training (ITT) right through to Senior Leadership but the story that sits behind this is misleading. The sector receives more applications to teaching from minority ethnic colleagues than their white counterparts, but they are less likely to receive and accept an offer for ITT compared with their white peers. In addition to this, teacher retention is lower for minority ethnic teachers than for their white counterparts. Beyond high workload, key reasons for leaving include overt and covert racial discrimination, disillusionment with their ability to make a difference for pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds and lack of progression opportunities[iii].

Both institutions face a recruitment deficit with minority communities, which will require years to overcome.

The Police Race Action Plan's autumn update promises to embed anti-racism into the "DNA of policing" through systematic cultural change[iv]. A new maturity matrix will help forces measure their journey toward becoming anti-racist institutions. Evelyn and other sector Leaders have been calling for all schools to adopt an anti-racist approach in schools, for it to be mandatory for all staff in schools to undertake racial literacy training and for racism to be seen as a safeguarding concern. The Police's structured approach is something that education reformers might view with envy - or perhaps inspiration.

International comparisons suggest Britain's institutional diversity challenges are not inevitable. Countries like Canada and Australia have made significant progress through structured programmes that combine recruitment targets, mentorship initiatives, and cultural change strategies. Their success underlies a crucial point: systematic reform works.

The path forward requires recognition that anchor institutions cannot operate in isolation. The police service's emerging emphasis on multi-agency governance and partnerships offers a template for comprehensive reform and whilst the education sector is familiar with working in partnership the new 'Improving Education Together' agreement as part of the government's mission-oriented Plan for Change may bring a renewed focus on recruitment and retention and a much needed a step forward.

The conversation in Paddington between two reformers thus reveals more than just different rates of progress. It exposes fundamentally different approaches to institutional change. While the police service has embraced systematic reform, education's more fragmented approach appears increasingly inadequate to the scale of the challenge. As Britain grapples with questions of institutional reform, the lesson becomes clear: progress on diversity requires more than good intentions. It demands systematic approaches, clear metrics, and sustained commitment to change. The alternative - continuing with unstructured initiatives - risks perpetuating the very disparities that reformers like Prof Gilmour and Ms Forde have dedicated their careers to addressing.

Britain's public institutions would do well to heed this lesson. The stakes, after all, extend far beyond workforce statistics. They touch on fundamental questions of social cohesion, economic opportunity, and institutional legitimacy. In an increasingly diverse Britain, these are questions no public service can afford to ignore.

[i] Home Office. (2023, May 26). Police workforce: Ethnicity facts and figures. GOV.UK. Available at: https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/workforce-and-business/workforce-diversity/police-workforce/latest/

[ii] GOV.UK Confidence in the local police. (2024, October 17) and available at: https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/crime-justice-and-the-law/policing/confidence-in-the-local-police/latest/

[iii] Worth, J., McLean, D. and Sharp, C. (2022). Racial Equality in the Teacher Workforce: An Analysis of Representation and Progression Opportunities from Initial Teacher Training to Headship - Summary Report. Slough: NFER. Available at: https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/ytnjlaz4/racial_equality_in_the_teacher_workforce_summary_report.pdf

[iv] Available at: https://www.npcc.police.uk/SysSiteAssets/media/downloads/our-work/race-action-plan/police-race-action-plan-progress-report.pdf