Muslim learners in English schools: a challenge for school leaders

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Faith identity is emerging as significant for Muslim students in the post 9/11 scenario, with implications for their education and wider social cohesion. This poses challenges to school leaders, raising issues not only linked to student achievement and performance, but also with regard to students’ identity constructions and their educational engagement. The paper draws on data collected from a small number of teachers and Muslim students from two secondary schools in England, looking at how Muslim students experience their identity in the school context and with what implications for their educational engagement. It also discusses the challenges for educational leaders/teachers in managing ‘Muslimness’ on educational sites. The data indicate that the increasing engagement with faith identity can be a response to experiences of discrimination, marginalisation and negative media. The paper highlights the need for communication and understanding across differences, underpinned by an equally pressing need for the recognition of religious and cultural diversity.

Introduction

Institutional demographics have great significance for school leaders and teachers because these impact on daily practices in schools, as well as on the relevant policy. The management contexts of schools in England, particularly in the urban areas, have been undergoing deep and sensitive changes in the wake of emigration, international mobility and globalisation. These emerging multi-ethnic (multi-cultural/multi-faith) schools have population structures which pose challenges to school leaders, demanding wider knowledge, understanding and sensitivity.

This paper focuses on Muslim learners in English schools, and debates the challenges of managing ‘Muslimness’, particularly in the post 9/11, 7/7 scenario. There are 1.6 million Muslims in Britain and 33.8% are aged 0–15 years (National Statistics, 2001), who fall within the compulsory education age. Muslim students in British schools number more than half a million (Anwar & Bakhsh, 2002, pp. 2, 3) and, unlike some other faith groups, Muslims tend to highlight their religious identity

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(Brah, 1996; Jacobson, 1998; Modood, 2005; Shah, 2006b), which can be problematic in a proclaimed secular context. In addition to that, in the British context, multiple social, economic, strategic, historical and political factors further add to the complexities of interface.

The paper draws on a wide range of international literature to engage with relevant debates. It avails direct data collected from a small study to discuss the perceptions of British minority ethnic Muslim students and their teachers/leaders with regard to ‘Muslimness’, and its implications for schooling. Muslims in Britain have emerged as a politically visible community specifically in the post-Satanic Verses context. The Muslim/non-Muslim divide is traditionally underpinned by numerous factors including historical and political legacies such as the Muslims in Spain/Jerusalem, the crusades, Western Imperialism (Ahmed, 1992). More recently the plight of Muslims in Palestine, Kashmir and other parts of the world, the role of the West (particularly of America) in the Gulf war, the Iran/Iraq war and the Afghan Jihad against Russia, as well as a wider religious resurgence, the perceived clash of civilisations, the economic war, Middle-East oil and the struggle for control over international resources have added to the tension (Ahmed, 1992; Esposito, 1999; 2002). Against this backdrop, the stand taken by the West over the Satanic Verses issue flared emotions to a higher pitch. The Muslims perceived Salman Rushdie’s novel as an attack against their core belief that no one should be free to insult and malign Muslims by disparaging the honour of the Prophet. The protests against Rushdie and the burning of the book fuelled the drive to be recognised and respected as Muslims (Ahmed, A.S., 2003; Kepel, 2003). Later international events such as the Al-Qaeda factor, 9/11, invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and, more recently, the stand taken by the West on the publication of the Prophet’s cartoons and the knighthood of Rushdie have further left their marks both on in-group and out-group identity formations of young Muslims, posing challenges to school leaders and teachers.

The political, social, economic and education zones are not discrete. Wider global developments influence educational sites, posing new challenges to educational leaders and teachers, as well as to the policy makers. Muslim students have become the focus of policy attention due to political opinions suggesting that pockets of Muslim youth are harbouring extreme Islamic views which are partly manifested in their resentment towards the British way of life. Muslims’ insistence on dress code, halal food, and prayer space were some of the early demands (Parker-Jenkins, 1995) sending signals that they wished to be acknowledged and respected as Muslim. Certain policy responses conceded to these demands in a very limited way, subject to context and resources. However, these measures are now perceived as insufficient, and complaints of the British education system’s failure to attend to the needs of Muslims have continued (MCB, 2007).

These concerns are exacerbated by the issue of the educational achievement of Muslim students. Studies and surveys have highlighted that Muslims educated through the British state system are suffering academically, culturally and linguistically as a high proportion of Muslim learners are leaving British schools with low
grades or no qualification (Haque, 2000; Ahmad, 2002; Archer, 2003; Coles, 2004; DFES, 2004; Abbas, 2006). Furthermore, they are exposed to the expressions of racism, Islamophobia and bullying (Richardson & Wood, 2004; Tyrer & Ahmad, 2006; Bagguley & Hussain, 2007). Many schools are either not fully aware or not doing enough to combat racist attitudes amongst pupils to tackle racism and promote race relations, either for lack of resources or other pressures. In this context of discrimination (Parekh, 2000a), policy directives such as the equal opportunities agenda, Race Relations (Amendment) Act, Widening Participation, Every Child Matters Agenda, or Building Schools for the Future cannot fully respond to the specific needs of Muslims. An important question here is how do Muslim learners experience their identity in schools and with what implications for their schooling? Secondly, are there any challenges for school leaders/teachers in managing ‘Muslimness’ particularly with regard to achievement and inclusion?

The data on achievement/underachievement are collected by ethnicity and not by faith which makes it hard to explore link between achievement and faith identity. However, as certain ethnic groups in Britain such as Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Somalis and others are predominantly of Muslim faith, relevant ethnic data are often availed as reflective of faith group, which has limitations. This paper draws on data collected from two Local Authority controlled comprehensive schools with explicit reference to faith, to debate the issues raised above. The study was carried out in 2006 as a pilot to generate views and discussions underpinning a proposed research project.

The two schools selected for this study represented two large Muslim communities in Britain: Pakistanis/Kashmiris and Bangladeshis (National Statistics, 2001). Many research studies emphasise underachievement of students from these two communities, voicing concern and apprehension (Anwar & Bakhsh, 2002; Modood, 2003; Abbas, 2004, 2006), which justified choosing these schools purposively to explore the issues. The participating students were from different year groups, both males and females, and were all Muslims, while teachers were Muslims and non-Muslims, males and females. The sample included twelve students and five teachers (three Muslim and two non-Muslim) in school A, and ten students and six teachers (two Muslim and four non-Muslim) in school B. The focus was to investigate how ‘Muslimness’ was conceptualised and practised, and with what implications for the school leaders and for the learners and their schooling.

The data were collected through interviewing, which was more like focused interaction structured around issues of Muslim identity, how it is experienced (by students) or managed (by leaders/teachers), and associated challenges for leaders/teachers. The intention was to offer the participants a flexibility to ‘pursue a more conversational style of interview that may see questions answered in an order natural to the flow of conversation. ... start with a few defined questions but be ready to pursue any interesting tangents that may develop’ (O’Leary, 2005, p. 164). The participating students and teachers talked about their experiences of ‘Muslimness’, and its implications for inclusion/achievement, making suggestions for policy and practice.
Muslim students and identity

The drive towards an overarching Muslim identity is international in dimension and includes countries like China (Chiang, 2001; Alles, 2003; Djao, 2004), America (Afridi, 2001), Britain (Basit, 1997; Jacobson, 1998; Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2004), France (Tlemçani, 1997; Le Breton, 1999; Limage, 2000), and many others (Kepel, 1997; Haddad, 2002, 2003; Modood, 2004). The concept of Islamic Ummah (community) provides the basis for this super-ordinate identity to an otherwise hugely diverse community (Shah, 2006b; see also Lewis, 1994; Mandaville, 2001; Modood, 2004). The concept of Ummah has gained further prominence in the recent times due to diverse global developments mentioned above, leading to stronger affiliations with faith identity (Kepel, 1997, 2003; Esposito, 1999, 2002; Ahmed, A.S., 2003; Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2004). This heightened awareness of religious identity among Muslims is emerging as a new ‘force of resistance’ (Hall, 1992). Modood (2005) explains it as:

> a politics of projecting identities in order to challenge racism and existing power relations;  
> of seeking not just toleration for ethnic difference, but also public acknowledgement,  
> resources and representation. (p. 286)

Projection of faith identity among Muslim youth signals a challenge to racism and a struggle to establish personal identities. Explorations into Muslim students’ perceptions of their identity in educational contexts affirm that their primary descriptor of identity is ‘Muslimness’ (Jacobson, 1998). Admittedly, there is considerable fragmentation within the Muslim community. However,

> A strong sense of identity that has established roots and finds support in a much broader community ... can be a wonderful resource for combating prejudice, stereotyping and maltreatment. (Merry, 2007, p. 97)

Giddens (1993) posits that a self-identity has to be created and more or less continually reordered against the backdrop of shifting experiences of day-to-day life. The perceived targeting of Islam and Muslims in recent history has encouraged in-group cohesion at a political level, driving them towards a concept of ‘Muslimness’ which appeared to offer a sense of security and belonging, in opposition to the feelings of insecurity and otherness. The dynamics involved in the construction of ‘Muslimness’ are generated by internal images and discourses, and perceived external threats (Brasted, 2005; Shah, 2006b). There is a huge amount of literature on identity in sociology, social psychology and feminist theory (Giddens, 1993; Bhabha, 1994; Brah, 1996; Hall, 1996), but recognition of religion as a category of influence for identity construction is not a fully explored phenomenon. The recent religious resurgence invites an engagement with identity constructions and projections with higher understanding and sensitivity to work towards societal cohesion and ‘cultural coherence’ at all levels.

‘Muslimness’ is one of the hybradic identities, reinforcing the argument that identities are multiple and fluid (Vincent, 2003) and keep changing as the nature of political and economic relationships changes between groups, communities and countries. The contending perceptions of ‘Muslimness’—a valued self-definition for the
Muslims and a perceived threat by wider society—not only pose a challenge to practices in schools but also, according to Werbner (2000), ‘British Muslim transnational loyalties have challenged the national polity’ (p. 309). It is highly important in a multiethnic society to investigate the forces driving towards such identity formations, and their impact on individuals and on society as a whole (Griffiths & Troyna, 1995). The ways in which Muslim students understand and interpret their identity and their experiences of school, and how these are interpreted and managed by educational leaders/teachers are significant for the debates on achievement, integration and cohesion. Responding to how they define their identity or see themselves, the participating students and Muslim members of staff invariably defined themselves as ‘Muslim first’. Nonetheless, they generally explicated the response by mentioning their ethnic and/or British identity, often in that order:

I’m Muslim before anything else. I would say I am a British, I would also say I am a Pakistani but it’s less important than Muslim.

Although in each of the case schools the majority of Muslim participants belonged to one ethnic group (either Bangladeshi or Pakistani), there were some variations. In one school there was one participant originally from Iran and another from Algeria. In the second school three Muslim participants originated respectively from Bosnia, Iraq and Tunisia. They had different parent languages, belonged to diverse sub-cultures, and dressed differently. Dress variation was more obvious among Muslim girls whose dresses ranged from short, sleeveless skirts to loose full body dress along with a scarf tied round the head. However, they all associated themselves primarily with Muslim identity:

I’m not that religious but I’m Muslim.

Another participant argued:

Muslims are one body … religious element binds us all.

This seems to be a level where heterogeneity of the faith group is transcended by the concept of Muslim *Ummah* (Al-Ahsan, 1992). The perceived Muslim/non-Muslim conflict appears to drive them or lure them to identify with ‘Muslimness’, as reflected in many responses. One Muslim teacher commented while mentioning the Iraq war:

We are all Muslims and we are like one body—one part hurts, we all suffer. Then it comes down to a human level.

Is this identification with ‘Muslimness’ in opposition to what is perceived as a global anti-Islam or anti-Muslim phenomenon? The indications are that identity formation is an immensely sensitive and complex arena, which may lend to political exploitation. Masses get caught in the tug of war and are forced to take sides. Kabbani comments on the post-*Satanic Verses* situation:

We were caught between two tyrannies: Khomeini’s impossible death sentence against a writer (fallible or foolish though he may have been) and the harsh ‘liberal’ fatwa against our religious identity, with its blanket dismissal of us as alien, barbaric. Such was the polarisation, that even those who had hardly perceived of themselves as ‘Muslim’ before,
except in family ritual or personal reference, were suddenly forced to stand up and be counted as ‘warriors’ for subtlety in either side’s position. (2002, p. 1)

In the present scenario, the perception among Muslims, particularly among the youth, of being ‘targeted’ (Esposito, 2002; Ahmed, A.S., 2003; Ahmed, S.T., 2003a; Hagopian, 2004), special registration, police raids/interrogations, profiling of Muslims, the shooting by police of a Brazilian who looked Asian (BBC, 2005) and ‘stop and search’ practices targeting particular Muslim groups (MPA, 2004) have left them feeling insecure and even paranoid. The Muslim participants in the London school also referred to a police raid of 2 June 2006 in Forest Gate (East London), pointing out that although the charges were dropped later (BBC, 2006), the effects on race relations and social cohesion might not be short-lived:

After the police raid lots of people in East London do hate them. Police wouldn’t go after white people like this if allegations of bomb-making were made.

Werbner argues that ‘exclusion, silencing, any act of discrimination is an act of violence’, emphasising that ‘violence begets violence, and violence need not be physical’ (1997, p. 228). Being imagined and created by media and masses as ‘potential terror suspects’ (Ahmed, S.T., 2003b, Hagopian, 2004, Hardy, 2005) and being at the receiving end of ‘institutional racism’ (Macpherson, 1999; Ahmad, 2006) has generated significant insecurity among Muslim students, with uncharted consequences for their learning, inclusion and commitment to the wider society. These processes and practices are dividing society and undermining Muslims’ sense of belongingness, driving them in search of personal identities. Sen (2006) argues that most of the conflicts in the contemporary world arise from individuals’ notions of who they are, and which group/s they belong to in opposition to others. Equally significant are the factors and forces that drive individuals towards these group identities. A study commissioned by CRE (2005) found that:

Religion was a dominant source of identification for Muslim participants. It would seem that the emotional significance attached to Islam has grown in strength over the recent past, as issues in the public domain (such as the conflict in Afghanistan, the war in Iraq, and the terrorist attacks in New York, Washington and London) have been construed as antagonistic relations specifically between Muslims and Christians. (p. 38)

The enhanced desire among Muslim youth to emphasise their faith identity signifies their dissatisfaction with the discrimination and marginalisation experienced as minority ethnic Muslims in a politicised anti-Muslim climate. There is no doubt that the religious identity is subject to harsh political opposition, but it also provides a power discourse to operate in. To a young teenager’s self-esteem, an association with a ‘powerful’ cosmic identity could be more appealing as compared to a targeted BME identity. The need is to analyse the issues and to search for answers.

**Experiencing ‘Muslimness’ in schools**

It is important to explore how students experience ‘Muslimness’ at a time of potential polarisation, and how these experiences contribute to their identity formations and
schooling. Many studies (Richardson & Wood, 2004, Tyrer & Ahmad, 2006; Bagguley & Hussain, 2007) highlight religious discrimination and racism experienced by Muslim students in educational institutions, with specific references to experiences of Islamophobia (Driel, 2004; Richardson, 2004). Literature and archives abound with records of racist media constructions of Muslims ‘in very derogatory and vilifying ways’ (Vertovec, 2002). These images and constructions influence Muslims’ participation in all fields of mainstream activities including education:

There was a newspaper article about racism. It asked a hundred white people about it—and most hated was Asians, Muslims. That makes me realise I’m walking around now and people are looking at me in a different way. (Parekh, 2000a quoted in Richardson & Miles, 2003, p. 13)

Hall argues that racism ‘operates by constructing impassable symbolic boundaries between racially constructed categories’ (1992, p. 255). The media, in its own interests and traditions, plays a strong role in spreading and perpetuating these divides, creating an atmosphere of mistrust and resentment among the masses (Said, 1981; Ahmed, 1992; Hall, 1997; Ahmed, 2007). Generalisations from individual examples in the media, or elsewhere, to wider populations lead to misunderstandings and misleading assumptions (Bhatti, 1999; Shah, 2006b), and impact negatively on the engagement of young learners who are already burdened by the demands of an intricate balancing act in a ‘between cultures’ context (Anwar, 1998). Across ambiguities and misconceptions, images are constructed by media and masses, which highlight the differences and increase the distances. These images convey messages of rejection and exclusion. As a reaction to ‘media portrayals of Islam as barbaric, irrational, primitive and sexist’ (Osler, 2003), an equally strong tendency develops to gravitate towards a concept of identity and Ummah, that are ‘asserted with pride and are capable of political mobilization’ (Modood, 2005). Experiences of exclusion and discrimination play a strong role in smoothing over internal differentiation leading to struggle for empowerment through a reverse discourse (Foucault, 1980), as reflected in this quotation from a very young research participant:

When others make fun of you or pass comments—you know—it makes you feel an outsider. I have been born and brought up here. I have been to Pakistan only once in my life and I don’t fit there. I am walaiti [from West] there. So who do you hang around with? I used to have White friends but now all my friends are boys from our community—Muslims. We share so many things—and a lot to talk about.

Globalisation has fragmented many communities but new communities and associations are emerging in the new world order. In spite of being target of hatred and ridicule (Parekh, 2000b; Richardson & Miles, 2003), ‘Muslimness’ is becoming more visible in educational institutions. For many Muslims a hijab/scarf, beards, or a dress code that can vaguely be associated with Islam has led to overt hostility (Coles, 2004, p. 41), but the number of students wearing these symbols of ‘Muslimness’ is increasing. This quotation from a student indicates the complexity of reasons for these choices:
Sometimes people make jokes about my scarf. I’ve worn it since joining secondary school—my own choice encouraged by parents. I decided to wear it—Quran says that scarf should be worn. ... Most of all, it is to please my parents. I’m proud to be Muslim.

Whether these symbolic gestures are Islam or not is not the point. The signals are loud and clear—‘we are Muslims!’ In spite of difficult experiences, these young people persist in projecting their Muslim identity:

Comments are made about ‘terrorist’, ‘Bin Laden’—made by Whites about Muslim children; particularly after July. I’ve not experienced abuse, though I know people who have; almost every Muslim had something taken out on them; a friend with scarf at a bus stop got comments from people driving past; you feel you are being picked on. Didn’t affect my connection with the school but some people did seem to look at me differently. People comment on fundamentalists, you feel they mean you because you are a Muslim.

Another small boy complained that White boys often laughingly called him Bin Laden. ‘I don’t like it. ... I don’t look like him, and I have no beard!’ he protested. This is reminiscent of another event quoted in Richardson and Wood:

I’m the only Asian teacher at my school. During the war in Iraq a pupil who’s also Asian told me that she was being teased by other pupils. ‘We killed hundreds of your lot yesterday ... Saddam’s your dad, innit ... we’re getting our revenge for what you Pakis did to us on 11 September ...’ I asked her if she had told her class teacher. Yes, she had told her teacher, and her teacher had said: ‘Never mind, it’s not serious. It’ll soon pass. You’ll have to expect a bit of teasing at a time like this.’ (2004, p. 64)

What can be the educational implications of this bit of ‘teasing’ or ‘fun’? Can this phenomenon be expected to contribute to a cohesive multi-faith, multi-cultural society? Policies are implemented in a real life context and the real life context does not appear to be very encouraging for accommodating ‘Muslimness’. This issue of Muslim identity, and its projections and perceptions impact on inclusion and educational engagement of young Muslim students in schools.

‘Muslimness’: implications for inclusion, and engagement

The education of diverse groups of students from different cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds has become an increasingly complex, controversial and problematic challenge across the world (Banks & McGee Banks, 2003; Griffiths et al., 2003; Shah, 2006c; Griffin, 2007; Meer, 2007; Parker-Jenkins, 2007). An increasing number of schools in the UK are emerging as multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-faith (Shah, 2006b), posing challenges of developing and sustaining inclusive policies that are sensitive and responsive to issues of ethnicity and identity (Brah, 1996; Feagin et al., 1996; Anwar, 1998; Vincent, 2003; Abbas, 2005; Shah, 2006a). Although schools, especially in urban areas, are often experienced and successful in providing for diverse needs, there are long-standing concerns about the extent to which equal opportunities policy has been translated into effective practice (Macpherson, 1999). These concerns apply in particular to Muslim students.

Haque and Bell (2001, p. 366) proclaim that Muslim students in British schools, mostly comprising of poorer communities such as Bangladeshi and Pakistani groups,
perform below average on public tests, and for these reasons constitute a cause for concern. Secondly, the apparent alienation of a significant number of second generation Muslims (Hardy, 2005) suggests that their sense of inclusion in British society, or lack of it, has become problematic. Under-achievement and absence of a ‘sense of belonging’ among the Muslims are damaging for both inclusion and engagement.

Before the setting up of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion (Woodward, 2006), policies for managing diversity and inclusion encouraged schools ‘to offer a range of extended services that help pupils engage and achieve’ (DFES, 2004, pp. 1–2). The assumption was that a diverse society should agree on a set of ‘shared values’ that transcend ‘deep-seated conflicts between cultures embodying different values’ (Malik, 2002). The failure of multiculturalism and the search for ‘practical solutions, based on local ideas that have potential’ (Singh, 2006) has shifted the focus. Now it is doubly important to understand the experiences and perspectives of Muslim students and how these may in future contribute to new forms of inclusive education.

The initiatives and strategies adopted over the last few decades to achieve inclusion in educational institutions (Doyle, 2006) have lacked full cognisance of the ethnic cultures and their value systems. This has often resulted in confusion and tensions at the implementation stage, adversely affecting the outcomes of the plans conceived with the best of intentions. The research participants in both schools acknowledged and appreciated the efforts by the schools, and school-heads in particular, to ensure inclusion and achievement. This included relevant policies, monitoring of processes and practices, appropriate use of curriculum, engaging staff from minority ethnic backgrounds, involving parents and listening to them, developing channels for communication in spite of barriers like language/culture etc, and having ‘systems in place to fight racism’. These schools made positive efforts to celebrate ethnicity. One school was going to celebrate ‘Black Day’ in October and the students were quite excited about it. They seemed comfortable working together but a participating teacher’s comment, ‘we can’t enforce social mixing out in the playground’, signals the limitations of the efforts.

One major complaint was that the efforts by schools at inclusion and cohesion were negatively affected by media images. The desire to ‘belong to UK’ is frustrated by experiences of rejection. A participating Muslim teacher who has had his schooling in the same school commented:

It seems harder to be a Muslim. I’m a Muslim, just a Muslim, not anything else. Don’t know why media, TV lead me to think I’m Bangladeshi, not English. I feel rejected—generally, everything the way it’s done, media, government, and policies.

Inclusionary approaches need to be positioned within a framework of equality and shared values. Media hypes and uninformed comments from responsible people can trigger off unanticipated reactions. For example, David Blunkett’s (2003) criticism of young British Muslims as ‘feeling part of their faith’, and suggesting they speak English in their homes (2004), or Peter Hain’s (2004) implied suggestion that second and third generation British Muslims are still foreigners if they maintain their religious
identity raised concerns about parent culture, language and faith instead of promoting social cohesion. The message seemed to be that integration is ‘at the price of … becoming less Muslim’ (Smith, 2002, p. 14) which was exclusionary, and negated the policy that ‘No one should be forced to choose between being British and being Muslim’ (House of Commons, 2005). A Year 8 participating girl, born and brought up in UK stated:

I don’t have a sense of belonging to England—being a Muslim is the most important identity for me. I feel I belong in Bangladesh—because I’m a Bengali. I do want to belong to UK and to mix in with others, but …

And this ‘but’ is the challenge in working towards inclusion. It points to a gap in mutual understanding, asking for a change in approach and attitudes. The suggestion is that for inclusion policies to be effective there also needs to be a conducive environment.

**Managing ‘Muslimness’**

Management of ‘Muslim identity’ in educational institutions has become a sensitive issue because of its implications for educational engagement and inclusion. According to Merry (2007), identity formation is a ‘coherent sense of self within a particular cultural matrix’ (p. 75), in spite of the fact that formulations of identity are fraught with many tensions. He argues that ‘a learning environment culturally (or religiously) consonant with the parents is more likely to produce healthy learning outcomes for young children and is more likely to foster a firmer sense of self’ (2007, p. 78). The Muslim community has been voicing concerns on diverse forums that the learning environment provided to Muslim children is not ‘culturally (or religiously) consonant with the parents’. Instead of brushing their grave concerns under the carpet, it is time to reflect and to engage with them to devise policies and practices for a better future. Educational leaders have a responsibility to create an environment where learners feel valued and respected.

Placing value and respect on individuals and groups can be more effective in encouraging inclusion and engagement than all the glossy terms and projects. Creating a coherent and cohesive environment requires positive approaches and liberal attitudes, promoting criticality and understanding. Educational leaders have a responsibility to put systems and processes in place that practically discourage marginalisation. Even a term like multiculturalism is increasingly being perceived as a buzzword, reinforcing division and marginalisation. Parekh hints at the dissatisfaction with the associated discourse when he highlights the need to separate dialogical multiculturalism ‘from segregationist multiculturalism, which leads to ghettoisation, and also from hegemonic multiculturalism, which assigns minorities a fixed space’ (2004).

Today’s school context has moved much further from the early 1990s, when measures like language, dress, food, prayer-rooms, etc. were top priority in facilitating schooling for Muslim children (Parker-Jenkins, 1995). Needs now extend to demands for recognising faith as a category of difference and for making appropriate provisions—with signals that if the schools fail to recognise their needs these learners
would ‘go to private schools or mosques’ (Smith, 2002, p. 10). The role of mosques and imams in Britain (Lewis, 1994) and Muslim faith schools with reference to the education of Muslim youth is gaining significance (Cush, 2005; Gardner et al., 2005; Meer, 2007; Merry, 2007). This has led to the emergence of Independent Islamic schools that are managed by religious and educational leaders in the local community to address the serious issues of inclusion, achievement and learners’ identity. The perceived vacuum left by mainstream education has provided them a space for functioning. And their performance with reference to students’ achievement at GCSEs level is justifying their existence. The state schools appear to be not doing enough to tackle racism, to promote race relations (Parker-Jenkins, 2005) and to improve achievement as compared to Independent Islamic schools (Gardner et al., 2005; Lawson, 2005; Meer, 2007).

According to 2006 National League Tables for England and Wales, independent Islamic schools, in spite of meagre resources, have excelled as compared to multicultural state schools located in the same social and economic areas. Two Independent Islamic schools in Birmingham and Hackney achieved 100% A–C grades in five or more GCSEs (Ahmad, 2002). Many Independent Islamic schools, commonly known as faith schools, seem to have addressed the Muslim learner’s needs for academic achievement in recent times, with seven independent schools becoming state maintained (Special Report, 2006). Several studies acknowledge that Muslim learners achieve much higher scores in Independent Islamic schools (Lawson, 2005; Meer, 2007). Furthermore, these schools seem to prepare students better for integration through developing a confidence in personal identity (Hewer, 2001; Lawson, 2005; Parker-Jenkins, 2005; Merry, 2007).

Islamic schools do face the challenges of integrating Muslim learners into the mainstream social and economic system of British culture by managing the balance between requirements for Muslim learners’ socio-cultural values and state pressures for social inclusion and achievement. However, they seem to be doing well in meeting these challenges (Lawson, 2005; Merry, 2007). Against this backdrop, the underachievement of Muslim students in mainstream state schools raises questions regarding the causal factors. This emphasises the need to investigate the barriers to Muslim students’ achievement, and to explore the areas in which mainstream schools are unsuccessful in providing appropriate support to Muslim learners.

An understanding of these issues has profound implications for educational leaders working towards a common agenda for inclusion and achievement in a multicultural state system, particularly with regard to the identity of Muslim learners, who may feel marginalised or misunderstood. This requires informed awareness of an improved leadership role when working with Muslim learners to understand their cultural values to further support social inclusion, achievement and learners’ identity (Merry, 2007). Perhaps working closely with independent or/and Local Authority maintained Islamic schools can be another way forward in enhancing understanding of issues, and knowledge of how to manage these issues.

Another important role of leaders is to prepare teachers to be sensitive to religious and religion-related cultural differences. Many teachers working in the British state
system are unaware of racist attitudes amongst pupils (Richardson & Wood, 2004). They have a responsibility not only to deal with racist incidents but also to prepare pupils for life in a multicultural and multiracial society and to improve their own knowledge and understanding of the communities of students they are responsible for (Coles, 2004; Parker-Jenkins et al., 2005). As the majority of Muslims continue to be educated in non-Muslim Local Authority schools, it is important that the government and the schools make practical decisions to ensure the accommodation of religious needs. An improved understanding of Islam and Muslim values among staff, governors and school communities in general can enhance mutual accommodation of needs and tolerance. Ameli et al. (2005) recommend better teacher training on diversity, and a greater balance of perspectives within the curriculum, aiming at generating dialogue through the national curriculum.

Educational leaders, including both policy makers and practitioners, might deprive future society of its huge potential if they fail to fulfil their responsibilities to ensure inclusion and engagement of Muslim students or any other group. Lee Jasper, senior advisor to the London Mayor on Race Relations, pointed to this phenomenon many years back, and it invites serious thought even today:

Islands of exclusion imprison within them boundless talent and creativity, confined by sheer walls of discrimination and lack of opportunity. People will inevitably cleave tightly to the central tenets of their culture and faith. Occasionally when provoked they will react like a cornered tiger. (2001)

The new generation of British-born Muslims, in particular, sees itself as equal partners in national membership—not marginalised immigrants. Self-identity, as Giddens argues, is ‘the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography’ (original italics) (1993, p. 53). ‘We are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves’ (Giddens, 1993, p. 75). The issue is no longer to which group these students have been born but the right to equality as British citizens with multiple identities. The resistance to the dominant educational discourse is not a rejection of education—this would not align with the Islamic philosophy (Shah, 2006c)—but a challenge to existing power relations, seeking not just toleration for ethnic difference but ‘expecting others to respect them and adapt public attitudes and arrangements so that the heritage they represent is encouraged rather than contemptuously expected to whither away’ (Modood et al., 1997, p. 358). It is time to consider the thought provoking question put forward by Esposito:

Can the majority of Muslims retain both their faith and their identities and do so in a manner that enables them to also accept and function within the secular, pluralistic traditions of Europe and America? (2002, p. viii)

Managing diversity is a great challenge posed by changing societal demographics. Bauman (2002) suggests in finding new ways to reforge human diversity into human solidarity. In the case of Muslims, this requires a change in attitudes towards the new sociological ‘other’—‘Muslimness’. Literature emphasises that Muslims are not withdrawing but are being driven into ‘Muslimness’ as an alternate identity because of experiences of alienation and marginalisation in the wider
Muslim learners in English schools

society (Kepel, 2003; Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2004; Modood, 2004). Some major complaints from Muslims as highlighted by literature (Parekh, 2000a; Richardson, 2004) and confirmed by this study include lack of respect for their faith, prophet, rituals and way of life, religious discrimination in all fields of life, experiences of Islamophobia, and hostility from media and masses. These experiences affect young students in and outside school, as well as their families and communities. Within the collective Muslim community, issues from ‘out-group’ are experienced and responded to collectively, contributing to ‘in-group’ identity formations. In spite of huge inner diversity of Muslim Ummah (Shah, 2006c) and vast variations in personal levels of adherement to Islamic practices, faith retains a unique status for Muslims:

For many Muslims, Islam is the key determinant in their lives. Yet schools are not always sensitive to this. Pupils, as they enter through the school portals, are required to leave their religion at home, not through design but because so often the school as a secular institution, is simply unaware of the centrality of Islam in the life of its Muslim pupils. (Coles, 2004, p. 43)

It is only when individuals from all religious, ethnic and other orientations are acknowledged as equally valued ‘fellow citizens’ that the issue of students’ achievement can be considered in proper perspective. It would be too simplistic to expect ‘others’ not to realise the difference between being manipulated for reasons, or being the focus of genuine care as equal citizens—being a window dressing or valued partners (Rubin, 2002). An inclusive school should make schooling a positive experience for all the students. Admittedly, every school context is a unique context, but a wider knowledge base of those responsible for schooling can nevertheless enhance understanding.

School leaders in multiethnic societies certainly need to cultivate commonalities for all practical purposes and for social cohesion, but the need is also to be sensitive to ethnic and faith difference, developing ‘a respect for persons as individuals and for the collectivities, to which people have a sense of belonging’ (Modood et al., 1997, p. 359). A pride and confidence in their heritage contributes to the learners’ enhanced performance, and it is the teachers’ and leaders’ task to facilitate that goal by respecting diversity, by enhancing the students’ confidence in identity and by strengthening the notion of equality in relationships.

In addition to that, getting to know students and communities, and soliciting comprehensive involvement and collaboration is another important factor contributing towards the learners’ educational engagement and achievement. The schools need to aim for ‘culturally coherent education’ (Michael, 2005) which should encourage and value hybrid identities, which may not necessarily be conflictual. An appreciation of students’ self-perceptions ‘may assist minority children in countering the negative stereotypes and discrimination they face in the larger society’ (Michael, 2005, p. 1). In the case of Muslim students, faith emerges as a significant factor in their identity formations, and therefore recognising its role and significance should underpin future policies regarding education and inclusion.
Notes

1. Undoubtedly, this approach has serious limitations as for example, Indians are a high achieving group and about 20% of Indians are Muslims (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_India#Demographics). In the absence of data being collected by faith, Muslims of Indian origin become excluded from generalisation regarding achievement of Muslim learners.

2. There are sixty-four occurrences of the term in the Quran (Al-Ahsan, 1992), where it is used as an overarching concept for wider Muslim community operative beyond geo-political bounds. Commonly, this term is used among Muslims to convey the fact that Muslims the world over constitute one Ummah or community.

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