Leadership progression of Muslim male teachers: interplay of ethnicity, faith and visibility

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The paper focuses on perceived barriers to the career progression of Muslim male teachers to leadership positions in English secondary schools, exploring the impact of ethnicity, faith and Muslim visibility in the post 9/11 scenario. It draws on a small study of Muslim male teachers (MMTs) from five boroughs in London to explore their experiences and perceptions. The research evidenced that the participating MMTs faced multiple barriers and diverse expressions of discrimination in their career progression. Although much of the discrimination reported was covert in nature, a lack of understanding of issues relating to diversity, Islamophobia, visibility and religious/ethnic affiliations was identified as a major contributing factor to this discrimination. The paper draws attention to the issues of equal opportunities, social justice and inclusion linked to marginalisation of a particular group of the workforce and its impact on individuals’ career destinations as well as its long-term implications for societal cohesion.

Keywords: Muslim; religion; Islamophobia; leadership

Introduction

Organisational structures, institutional practices, societal assumptions and subscribed concepts impact significantly on individuals’ career aspirations and progression. Progression to educational leadership positions is no exception. In fact it emerges as a highly complex process with sensitive political underpinnings in diverse societies. Research confirms the effect of factors such as race, colour, ethnicity, gender and others in shaping career paths towards leadership positions; however, the level of significance for each factor is embedded in context and case.

Earlier feminist literature highlighted the traditional association of leadership with White males as a feudal patriarchal construction of male power over females which reproduced gender discrimination in the public domain, particularly at senior leadership level. More recent research unveils another strong equation which is between race/ethnicity and career progression, drawing attention to the under-representation of people from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds in educational leadership roles (Bush, Glover, and Sood 2006; Mackay and Etienne 2006; Lumby and Coleman 2007; Turner 2006). The interplay of race/ethnicity with career progression is also highlighted as a barrier to career destinations as reflected in the nominal presence of BME in senior positions in all sectors including education. In an investigation into BME leaders’ access to career progression through the NPQH (London Leadership Centre 2002), 70% of the BME school

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leaders participating in it reported that issues of ethnicity and racism have had a negative impact on their career and the majority of these were men. However, there is a visible gap in research on the issue of how religious affiliations (Home Office 2001) affect the career progressions of people from BME backgrounds. The current paper draws attention to this significant gap and its wider implications, with specific focus on Muslim male teachers’ career progression.

Religious affiliation has specific significance in the case of Muslims, first because, unlike some other faith groups, Muslims tend to highlight their religious identity (Brah 1996; Jacobson 1998; Modood et al. 1997; Nielsen 1987). Second, there are 1.6 million Muslims in Britain, forming the largest faith group in the country after the Christians, with the highest youth profile of 66% under-35-years (National Statistics 2001), while, for example, only 39% of Christians fall within this category. In spite of a high youth population, Muslims in the UK are lowest in education and employment (Abbas 2004). Third, the interface between the West and Muslims is underpinned by histories of conflict and competing claims. Multiple social, economic, strategic, historical and political factors have added to the complexities of this interface in the British context, made more sensitive since the Rushdie affair and in the post 9/11 and 7/7 scenario. Muslim males are particularly being targeted as terror suspects as indicated by profiling of Muslim males, ‘stop and search’ practice focusing on males from particular Muslim groups (MPA 2004), and the killing of a Brazilian by police because he had some resemblance to common media images of ‘a Muslim terrorist’. This targeting has grave implications for Muslims’ employment and career progression.

Although there is no research available on the experiences of Muslim male teachers in the British state school system and their professional journeys, barriers and challenges specific and unique to Muslims emerge from BME data when participants happen to be Muslim, unveiling a complex mix of racism and Islamophobia. In this context it becomes highly significant to explore career progression of Muslim males who are not only ‘maintainers and providers of the family’ (the Quran 4:34), but also potential role models for the growing Muslim youth population in the UK. This paper responds to a serious timely need by focussing specifically on career trajectories of Muslim male teachers (MMTs) in English secondary schools to investigate their career progression to senior leadership positions, including faith as a category for analysis. It contributes to the existing debates by drawing attention to a new sub-field in the BME literature, to develop insights into the additional complexities that religious affiliation brings, and thus opens up avenues for these complexities to be addressed. The underpinning argument is that an awareness of the issues can inform policies, procedures and strategies to manage the challenges.

The study
The paper draws upon a small study carried out to explore the career development and progression of a sample of Muslim male teachers (MMT) working in the state sector in London schools in order to establish their perceptions of what aids or hinders their progress to leadership positions within the state school system and the resulting impact on their career aspirations. London was selected as a relevant case for the study particularly because of its demographics. BME pupils made up 43.5%
of the number of pupils in London schools in 32 boroughs (DfES Survey 2002, cited in Mayor of London Report 2004), while this percentage is far higher in inner London schools. However, only 7.4% of teachers in London schools are BME (Mayor of London Report 2004), and the percentage of BME staff in leadership positions at any level is even smaller (see Coleman and Campbell-Stephens, this issue). This signals a lack of equal opportunities for BME, and has implications for the lack of role models for students (Osler 1997). It also exposes the lack of availability of the expertise of BME teachers and leaders who might better understand, empathise with and cater more closely to student needs (Campbell-Stephens 2006; Shah 2006).

The data for this study was generated using a semi-structured questionnaire and ‘follow-up’ interviews with Muslim male teachers who had at least five years’ teaching experience and are currently in middle management or senior management positions. The lack of information on the population to be sampled on national databases (Ofsted, NCSL and DfES), meant that a ‘snowball’ sampling strategy was attempted, and initial contacts/participants were used as informants to identify further participants who fulfilled these requirements. However, even this approach was unrewarding. Most participants did not know any such colleagues (or did not acknowledge they knew any). During interviewing it emerged that the potential sensitivity of the study caused some teachers to refrain from participating due to fear of unwanted ramifications at work. One of the research participants telephoned the researcher to apologise for not being available for the follow-up interview despite the fact that he had previously spoken to the researcher about being discriminated against at his school as a Muslim and an Asian Muslim.

Given the context of inhibitions and barriers to participation, only 10 questionnaires were returned, and six of the respondents expressed willingness to be interviewed. This paper draws upon interview data only. The interview participants came from five different boroughs in the East End of London (Tower Hamlets, Newham, Hackney, Redbridge and Haringey), each with significant numbers of Muslim students in their schools. Each interview lasted between 40 minutes and 1 hour 15 minutes. In view of the media images of Muslims with a beard and specific dress code, the appearance of these Muslim male interviewees was also noted in order to evaluate the impact of appearance on their reported experiences. Some previous research (Modood 1997; Bush, Glover, and Sood 2006; Lumby and Coleman 2007) has discussed the potential effects of visibility on the careers of BME teachers.

The interviews explored the professional experiences of the interviewees, their aspirations when becoming teachers and whether these aspirations had materialised. They provided an opportunity to investigate further which facilitators and barriers impacted on the interviewees’ professional development and career progression, and how some participants overcame any such obstacles to become senior/middle leaders. Some major issues raised by the participants are debated in the subsequent sections: BME teachers and career trajectories; Islamophobia; perceptions of visibility; and working through diversity.

BME teachers and career trajectories
Difficulties in recruiting and retaining teachers have been increasing (Ofsted 2002: 4) and the numbers of teachers entering the profession, especially from the BME
communities, remain low (Basit et al. 2007; Bush, Glover, and Sood 2006). Despite recognition of potential contributions of BME educational leaders and teachers in a multi-ethnic society like Britain (Siraj-Blatchford 1993; Tomlinson 1990; Gordon 2000), their representation is even lower as educational leaders. Various policy measures have been adopted by the government to address the issue, but there is scepticism with regard to the extent to which the Race Relations Act (2000 and 2003) has impacted at ground level, especially in state schools (Turner 2006). The DfES (2003) also recognised the shortcomings of the Race Relations Act (2002), recommending that: ‘all staff and governors are aware of legislative changes, particularly regarding equality of opportunities’ (Powney et al. 2003, 16). Although the Act was a positive start in tackling some of the important and deeply grounded issues regarding race and ethnicity, it seemed to lack essential details on matters connected to religious, and more specifically anti-Muslim discrimination or xenophobia (Conway 1997; Sajid 2005). These feelings were endorsed by all the research participants who strongly believed that Muslims faced discrimination because of their religious affiliations:

The SMT should represent the community we have here. From what we have seen, people may not be employed due to other (hidden) agendas. For this reason senior management would prefer to work with people similar to themselves – thus there is a reluctance to work with people more overtly religious. The head teacher has often commented this school is a secular school – not a Muslim school! (Muhammad)

Individuals’ wider life experiences impact on their professional choices and career trajectories. There is a developing recognition in research of the impact of teachers’ own biographies on their education, training and development (Osler 1997, 1). In the case of Muslims, the professional journey is riddled with complex challenges at all these phases. Increasingly, literature is unveiling social and educational experiences of Muslim learners from childhood to adulthood (Abbas 2004; Haque and Bell 2001), detailing negative experiences which could discourage aspirations (Gronn 1999). Those who do decide to join the teaching profession encounter further barriers at training level (Basit et al. 2006) and in teaching positions (Osler 2003; Bush, Glover, and Sood 2006). The head teacher of one of the interviewees, Bilal, refused to sign his application form for the ‘Investing in Diversity’ (IID) leadership course, which was funded by the London Challenge and was free to all BME teachers working in middle management positions in London state schools. This did not affect his application, but it did give Bilal the feeling that he was unwanted in the school because he was a Muslim:

I feel I was discouraged [from taking the IID course] because of my ethnicity – being Muslim and Black I think – there was no reason that I know with regards suitability. Also, it did not cost the school anything. I was turned down for no reason and told I was unsuitable. I felt it meant that they considered me incapable for these types of positions. It has discouraged me from applying [for leadership positions in the school] – I really feel unwanted.

Islamophobia

Islamophobia refers to ‘an irrational distrust, fear or rejection of the Muslim religion and those who are (perceived as) Muslims’ (van Driel 2004, 3). It is endorsed by an ‘unfounded hostility towards Islam and, therefore, fear or dislike of all or most
Muslims’ (Conway 1997, 1). It is manifest in vilification and demonisation of Muslims, endorsing negative attitudes, violence, harassment, discrimination and stereotyping. It suggests a form of cultural racism (Modood 2006) not necessarily originating from contempt towards other colours, but out of a dislike or hatred for Muslim culture. Islam is increasingly being portrayed as a threat to social cohesion and integration in British society and the ‘western way of life’ (Allen 2004) through emphasis on an inherent difference and incompatibility between Islam and British multiculturalism (Abbas 2004; Allen 2004).

The perception among the Muslims, particularly among the male youth, of being associated with terrorism (Ahmed 2003; Esposito 2002; Hagopian 2004) has further contributed to their marginalisation in many fields, including education, and more so in leadership positions. Unfortunately, Islamophobic ideas, although deeply ingrained in racist sentiment and religious intolerance, have become acceptable to many as Islam is now perceived as the new threat to civil society and democracy (Muir and Smith 2004). Muir and Smith (2004) claim that institutionalised Islamophobia has become widely practiced even in schools where Muslims make up the majority of the school population. The data presented in this paper supports the perception that MMT suffer different kinds of discrimination and obstacles in their career progression, particularly towards leadership positions:

When they look at you they only see what’s on the news, the Taliban or a terrorist and they often feel threatened by you, so you don’t get a chance. If you stick to your religion, they don’t like you and you won’t get promoted. (Karim)

The effect that Islamophobia exercises on the underachievement of Muslim pupils in UK schools has been widely recognised (Richardson 2004a, 2004b; AMS 2004). Islamophobic incidents show the extent to which Islamophobic discrimination or ignorance is prevalent amongst teaching staff, educational leaders and school governors (Sheridan 2004). However, it seems that no real attention has been given, especially in leadership and teacher training programmes, to educating the participants (Haque 2004). Muslim male teachers participating in this study generally felt very alienated in the current climate of mistrust of Muslims. Some of the teachers were afraid to join Muslim teachers’ networks due to constant media coverage of Muslims in connection to undesirable activities (Saeed 2007) and a fear they would be labelled ‘extremists’. An atmosphere of feeling constantly watched and scrutinised came up regularly in their responses. They even seemed reluctant to participate in the study:

I do feel that Muslims here are feeling alienated, with regards their status in the community. Therefore they are very reluctant to go to or get involved in various activities [where networking takes place] because of the media. In that sense I did feel when you approached me [to participate in the research] ‘What is this all about? What is it going to be used for?’ But Alhamdulillaah [all praises are for God], after talking to you I felt reassured. (Muhammed)

Some teachers did not want to bring any unnecessary attention to themselves and felt afraid to talk to other visible Muslims in public because of the fear of being found guilty by association, in the event that the person was being monitored by security services and they could become targets by proxy:

It’s a difficult one. I’m a Muslim but because of the media and the way things are being portrayed it is very difficult. For example sometimes when I’m talking to an Arab brother or someone, I think ‘Oh my God, are we being watched?’ (Karim)
The participating teachers felt that a discriminatory attitude towards Muslims in the wider community was a major factor regarding the lack of Muslims in senior management positions. Several teachers commented that they felt that many people involved in the recruitment processes did not see Muslims as leaders in mainstream schools. One participant who had been a head of year and was currently a head of department was told by his head teacher that he was too ambitious and wanting things too soon when he wished to apply for the professional development programme to become an associate assistant head teacher. Sharif also mentioned that he and other Asian Muslim males at his school were discouraged from applying for promotion and told they were not yet ready:

There are people being encouraged and some that are not, who happen to be Muslim. I think there are some people – not all of them – that don’t see Muslims in senior positions. They are told they are not ready for these positions. The feeling is that there is some kind of discrimination going on. Because in terms of competency and ability, we don’t see what they are talking about! (Sharif)

Muhammad, who had secured an assistant headship recently in another borough with fewer Muslim students, had applied on several occasions for an internal promotion but was unsuccessful. He was convinced that his school and borough were intentionally not employing Muslim males in senior management positions:

People are very subtle. However, when you see it affecting a lot of Muslims it makes you wonder. How can it happen to all of us who are capable? Are we all of less ability? For example, it also happened to a colleague who applied for promotion but was not given it – although he had served the school well and got tremendous results in his department. Why was he declined? I don’t know! You can see other White members of staff who got the promotion [who] don’t have the same track record or the same presence and haven’t achieved as much in the school. (Muhammad)

A shared perception was that for a Muslim candidate it was more difficult to get a job unless you were a great deal better than other candidates. Karim, describing his experiences at interviews, felt that he had always had to be disproportionately better to get the job. A common perception was that: ‘If you are equal, you have no chance’ (Bilal).

Islamophobic ideas and attitudes of some head teachers appear to have played a negative role in the career progression of Muslim teachers, in line with the generic findings of other research (Conway 1997; Allen 2004; Sheridan 2004; Sajid 2005). These ideas and attitudes are largely attributed to media presentation of specific happenings as generalisations, creating misconceptions, misunderstanding and mis-readings with negative impact on affected groups and communities. In the present day context of Islamophobia and a loudly propagated association between Muslim men and terrorist activities (Esposito 2002), the combination of gender and faith emerges as a factor for marginalisation.

Norm of visibility: what a leader should look like

There was a strong perception amongst MMT that they were not seen as potential school leaders in mainstream schools due to being seen as different from the norm by those in positions of power. DiTomaso and Hooiberj (1996) discuss that leaders ‘often exclude candidates from BME and other diverse backgrounds due to a: “perceived
incompetence’ (180). This study endorses ‘leader prototypes’ (Foti and Miner 2003), where people unconsciously have an inbuilt stereotype of what a leader should look like and thus, although believing they are acting equitably when appointing new leaders, tend to discriminate on the grounds of those inbuilt beliefs. Discrimination is more likely, the more visibly different the teacher is from what is considered the norm (Milliken and Martins 1996; Modood 1997) and is seen as an ‘outsider’ or part of an out-group. Lumby and Coleman (2007) show how this type of discrimination can be manifested both consciously and intentionally, whilst not being considered discriminatory. They describe how the appointment of a leader in one’s own likeness was made explicit in another case organisation by a senior leader of that organisation:

When you appoint, there is a tendency to appoint one of your own, to identify with someone, with their background or their demeanour … If you stood back and said what is it we need? … I need someone who is different to me that would bring a completely different viewpoint to the college, it’s much more challenging. It is more challenging to the team and more challenging to you individually to deal with someone who doesn’t see things the way you do. (Senior leader, individual interview in Lumby and Coleman 2007, 40)

Our research participants also emphasised a perceived bias among senior leaders towards employing people similar to themselves:

If you know the right people and your face fits then you got the job no matter who else applies. They just employed a White lady … She only had about two years of teaching experience at her old school. (Karim)

Five out of six interviewees also complained that they had been discriminated against at some time in their careers, especially when applying for jobs and promotion, and they associated it with being visibly Muslim. However, the types of discrimination experienced were often very subtle and difficult to prove. The sixth interviewee said that if his appearance had been more recognisably Islamic, he also might have experienced discrimination which he had heard other more visible Muslim teachers complaining about:

Maybe if I was sitting here looking a different way, then I would be saying something different about discrimination. I think it is because of the way I look and the way I sound I do not experience those things. (Faris)

Being visibly Muslim emerged as a barrier, particularly for promotion purposes. The more visible they were as Muslims, the more seriously they felt that discrimination was affecting their career prospects, although the interviewers/employers were often very subtle in the way they hid their hesitation. The media were often blamed for the way they were received at interviews, and in one case the respondent felt this impacted on the interview outcomes:

People don’t say what they feel about you, but I often get the feeling they are very reserved with me. I think it is the media link as it’s the main educator of the masses. They [due to what is represented in the media] have a picture of who I am and thus are scared to employ me, maybe; they are very good at hiding it however, but not enough – you can always tell. I think since 9/11 it has been very different. (Bilal)

Another participant stated that he knew before he had even answered any questions at an interview he had once attended for the post of the head of department, that he was not going to be offered the job because of his visible Islamic
When I walked in, I could see the hatred in their faces towards me. They were both White women and I could tell they were both disgusted with the way I looked' (Karim).

Interestingly, he did eventually get a head of department position in a neighbouring borough and explained that his new head teacher had commented at the interview that he had worked with other Muslim teachers at his previous school. This raises another important issue; that of preparing senior leaders, and appointing panels to manage diversity positively. Secondly, this quotation illustrates the perceived difficulty of becoming a senior manager in certain predominantly Muslim-populated boroughs:

I have found that although there may be many Muslim middle managers in certain areas [he mentioned the name of a borough] for example, they have no Muslim senior managers but lots of Muslim teachers and children. The same goes for [he mentioned three other connecting boroughs]. It does seem rather strange. (Rehan)

Although MMTs might prefer working in areas with a Muslim majority, which might mean that they were less likely to be considered ‘outsiders’, there seemed to be stronger resistance to their appointment to leadership positions in these areas. One participant explained how he had applied for several deputy positions in various heavily Muslim and BME populated boroughs, but had not even been shortlisted, despite having the NPQH. Due to Islam being more visible in these areas, the structural resistance to visible Muslim male teachers actually emerged as greater.

Another issue highlighted by the participants was that like other BME teachers, they were generally seen as suitable to handle BME students only, and not recognised as mainstream staff capable of senior leadership. They emphasised that they were rather expected to take unofficial lead roles in tackling problems relating to ‘Muslim’ issues and meeting Muslim parents or taking the lead in dealing with issues pertaining to Muslim children. These teachers definitely saw themselves as role models for Muslim students and were anxious to support them in a ‘hostile’ environment, but they also wanted to be recognised as mainstream staff capable of being mainstream leaders. They critiqued the school leaders who stereotyped Muslim teachers and failed to see them with the potential of ‘being a school leader in the true sense’ (Osler 1997).

The majority of MMTs in this study emphasised that they found it harder to find suitable employment appropriate to their experience and qualifications. Technologies used to discourage or discriminate against these teachers were often covert, and as such were difficult to identify conclusively and that, counter-intuitively, this might be particularly strong in areas with a high Muslim population.

**Working through diversity?**

The role of the head teacher and senior management teams, as the main agents in establishing harmonious relationships and equality of opportunity throughout the school community, appears to be critical. A lack of cultural and/or religious understanding on the part of the head teacher/leaders was often cited by respondents as a cause for teachers’ unhappiness in a school. The participating teachers commented that an effective head teacher was the one who understood the needs of all members of his/her staff and responded to them in a fair and unbiased way:
My first head teacher, in a Catholic school with strong discipline, was straight talking and fair. He would cover my class for Friday prayers. He had leadership qualities. [He] Would not tolerate [discriminatory] attitudes. He became an executive head that was seconded to other schools – but he was modest. (Rehan)

Conversely, many of the teachers commented that they had bad experiences with head teachers due to the head teacher’s approach and lack of sensitivity or understanding towards issues of religion and race. Muhammad had been asked by his line manager to design a new multi-racial curriculum for his specialist subject. Despite approval from his line manager, the content included from Islamic texts was felt by the head to be discriminatory towards women. Muhammad had used the Islamic material as one of a number of examples from different cultures that were relevant to the topic being studied, not as examples that he necessarily believed himself. The head teacher continued to have doubts regarding Muhammad’s potential for promotion and later, he was given a bad reference by the head, stating that he had a poor understanding of equal opportunities. Muhammad attributed this to lack of understanding on the part of the head teacher to recognise and work with diversity:

Some people can only work with certain other people. In that sense it can be discriminatory. For example, Pakistani with Pakistani and English with English. They only have their own set way of working with other people. Their comfort zone is with a certain type of person and therefore will have the effect of being discriminatory. (Rehan)

The role of a head teacher in supporting the achievement/s of individual staff members has been widely documented (London Leadership Centre 2002; McKenley, Mayhead, and Gordon 2002). Several participating teachers commented that they felt that their career paths in their current schools had been affected by discriminatory attitudes of their head teachers towards employing Muslim or BME staff in senior management teams:

Head teachers set the trend [in the school]. Some would employ a Muslim or a BME teacher on the SMT – even though they are not particularly comfortable. Some will try – others won’t. It all comes down to their honesty to you. Again I am thinking about my own head. Sometimes you have to question their integrity because of what they do, not just one thing but their general attitude. They must have a problem, an issue. (Sharif)

The role of head teachers as the main agents in establishing harmonious working relationships with staff and ensuring equality of opportunity throughout the school community is seen to be crucial (London Leadership Centre 2002; McKenley, Mayhead, and Gordon 2002), especially in issues relating to diversity. Some participating teachers complained that their head teachers had very little understanding of issues relating to Muslim culture and faith and, as a consequence, albeit unwittingly, created ‘in-groups’ and ‘out-groups’ (Shah 2006). Muslim teachers saw themselves as forced to be ‘out-group’. Rehan recalled how he had observed this attitude from a head teacher to a Muslim girl who had been talking in assembly. The head asked: ‘Was it that thing around your head that was stopping you listening?’ Rehan commented: ‘This shows you their mindset. Having said that, there are good head teachers around. I think it eventually boils down to leadership in the end.’

Alcohol emerged as another issue. It seemed that the head-teachers did not always appreciate the impact of associating alcohol with social occasions, which hindered MMTs from participating in various social-cum-professional activities
They not only missed out on opportunities but, due to this, many colleagues would assume they were unsociable, adding to the negative perception of ‘them and us’. All participants commented on this area:

I do not attend the end of year meals or other whole staff celebrations. Myself and other Muslim staff haven’t attended due to alcohol. (Muhammad)

A lot of the time socials are organised in pubs. I am reluctant to go there. (Rehan)

School functions are fine. I do not have a problem with places of alcohol, although a lot of brothers do. But I have not been able to go to functions in a pub, as it’s the environment. The pub has been specifically designed for the consumption of alcohol. So I don’t go to informal functions. (Faris)

Some of the teachers felt that their hesitation or unwillingness to attend such gatherings served indirectly to intensify Muslim/non-Muslim division amongst staff and impacted on their promotions/progression. They felt that more should be done to make it easier for Muslim staff to participate in such activities:

If their intention is to socialise to improve the school atmosphere and teacher performance, then they should accommodate [us]. But if it is just social, I guess they can do whatever they want. (Muhammad)

Due to barriers to after-school socialising with other staff, and especially with the senior leadership team, the Muslim teachers felt they had to work harder than other staff in similar positions, and their chances of being promoted internally at the school were seriously affected:

I was working harder because I couldn’t socialise with them. (Rehan)

I feel that I do have to prove myself in order to stand out positively, because I will not have the chance to socialise with senior staff because of alcohol etc. That will be my only chance, whereas other staff can do so [socialise] and build more positive relationships. (Sharif)

Bilal felt that his abstention from the pub was a major factor for his not being successful in attempts to be promoted internally:

I normally don’t fully attend Christmas and end of year farewells because of alcohol. I listen to the speeches but when the drinks are served I leave. The previous head teacher would meet staff in the pub, but I didn’t attend. If you are not behaving as they do, you are seen as a different person and are treated accordingly. (Bilal)

This feeling of being social ‘outsiders’ (Lumby and Coleman 2007; Osler 2006) emerged as a serious barrier. Participating teachers felt, as other teachers in BME studies (Lumby and Coleman 2007; Osler 2006; Rusch 2004; Sajid 2005), that being perceived as different from the norm has had a negative impact on their promotion opportunities in their respective schools. However, it would seem that Muslim teachers had a particularly strong feeling that they were ‘outsiders’, which was linked directly to their religious beliefs, the impact on their ability to network and a lack of understanding of them on the part of head teachers and other staff.

Where do we go from here?

The context created by interacting discourses is complex, sensitive and volatile, with indications of risk to future destinations of young Muslims in particular, and to
wider societal cohesion in general. A high level of sociological understanding and analysis is needed to foresee the potential dangers in the intentional or unintentional discrimination and marginalisation to which Muslims are being subjected. This particularly applies to male Muslim teachers who could be strong positive role models for Muslim boys. It is desirable that we engage with the barriers to progression of Muslim male teachers to leadership positions with explicit policies and well-defined strategies.

The increasing marginalisation of male Muslim teachers is an intensifying phenomenon as confirmed by the research participants. As in other studies (Osler 1997; Campbell-Stephens 2006), some teachers in this study were significantly overqualified for the jobs they were doing, but had been unsuccessful in gaining promotion. There was also a general feeling that they were not progressing as quickly in their careers as their White counterparts. The participants suggested actions for addressing the situation with particular emphasis on professional development programmes for Muslim teachers, provision of mentoring/coaching, monitoring for equal opportunities in selection/promotion of Muslim teachers, explicit policies, strategies for handling Islamophobia, training programmes for head teachers/senior leaders for managing diversity including faith, countering negative media campaigns, and developing supportive networks, among others.

The majority of the teachers in this study felt that more needed to be done by the government and various agencies, including the NCSL, to help Muslim teachers access senior leadership positions in mainstream state schools:

There is a need for encouragement from the NCSL and other establishments involved in preparing leaders – that they recognise having Muslim leaders in institutions with large Muslim populations is significantly a good thing. They should promote that. (Sharif)

The NCSL has, at the time of writing, 37 different programmes/courses running under their umbrella which are aimed at the promotion of leadership in education, but only two of these (Equal Access to Promotion and Investing in Diversity) are focused on BME, intending ‘to address the professional development needs of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) teachers in middle leadership and to provide support for them to move on to senior leadership roles’ (NCSL Online http://www.ncsl.org.uk/programmes-index/eap-index.htm). NCSL pledges to bring on ‘more school leaders from a wider range of backgrounds’, and plans to ‘support the development of more women and Black and Minority Ethnic leaders’ (Corporate Plan 2008/09), but these are also not specifically focused on Muslims. This fails to take into account the specific phenomenon of Muslimness in the current political scenario, and its impact on the lives and careers of Muslims, as well as its wide-ranging and far-reaching implications for societal cohesion.

The argument often put forward is that such programmes cannot attend to every ethnic/faith group’s needs in view of huge diversity in the UK’s schools. This argument refuses to acknowledge the complexity of the MMT issue. It also ignores the emerging scenario and the international political targeting of Muslims which might widen the divide between Muslim and non-Muslim, signalling risk for future societies.

Providing support and opportunities of professional development to marginalised groups would not only ensure equal opportunities, but would also contribute to societal cohesion. Mackay and Etienne (2006) argue for specific programmes that target individuals in order to ‘review the structural imbalances within organizations
that handicap black leaders’ experiences of work’ (26). This observation becomes more significant in the case of Muslim teachers with the backdrop of political developments and media coverage in the UK.

Despite the recognised benefits of networking (Campbell-Stephens 2006) only a small number of the teachers in this study were involved in any network. Not only that, they distanced themselves from many mainstream social and networking activities for multiple reasons, but many intentionally avoided being part of even Muslim groups or networks due to a fear of being connected to so-called Islamic extremism. Only two out of the 10 teachers who returned questionnaires used networks to aid their career progression and professional development. Upon probing during interviews it emerged that, although they understood and appreciated the benefits of networking, they did not participate. This was either due to a lack of knowledge of existing networks in their community or area or, as they admitted, that being Asian and Muslim, they often did not feel that they could confide in White (non-Muslim) colleagues at work because they would not understand their problems or points of view, or because they would be accused of being too sensitive or negative about certain issues:

They [White non-Muslim teachers] don’t really see things in the same way. I don’t feel comfortable addressing things with them. I’ve tried on several occasions to explain things, but they don’t understand and feel we have chips on our shoulders or we are too sensitive or – worse still – too extreme. (Karim)

The need to educate teachers and leaders in schools on issues of diversity was another ‘to do’ action greatly emphasised by the participants in order to help create harmonious relationships between all staff in these schools. They wanted school leaders to help foster a climate of trust and safety amongst all members of the school community. Lumby and Coleman argue that:

The training of Black and Minority Ethnic leaders may help to ensure that the imbalance in the ranks of educational leaders is improved, but all leaders, particularly those from the dominant White, male middle class ranks need to be aware of and understand issues of diversity and ethnicity. (Lumby and Coleman 2007, 66)

The participants affirmed this by providing examples of the failure on the part of head teachers and other senior leaders to fully understand and manage diversity in practice, in spite of their being desirous of doing so in some cases. The reasons included a lack of awareness on the part of the head teacher of the culture of the school (Lewis 1996) and the complexity of the issues of diversity (London Leadership Centre 2002). In the case of Muslims, the complexity of the issues of diversity is further enhanced because of the inner diversity of this faith group (Shah 2008). There is no doubt that variations in the level of adherence to different Islamic teachings and ‘values’ among Muslims add to the challenge of managing these issues. There is also the challenge of the range of diversity of MMTs, from different country and cultural heritages, with conflicting interpretations of Islam. This can understandably be frustrating for policy making and implementation. However, the important issues such as career progression of MMTs cannot be ignored as too complicated or un-resolvable – they need to be attended to for informed practice. The head teachers and senior leaders need to be trained in tackling these complex and sensitive issues. This is important for preparing a truly representative and effective leadership in education. Schools need to be developed into places that value,
promote and celebrate diversity in all its forms (Gilborn 2001; DfES 2003; Campbell-Stephens 2006).

The participating MMTs recognised the efforts being made by the government and the NCSL to promote diversity of teaching staff, but believed that more needed to be done to rectify the current imbalance. Some went further and argued that the NCSL also needed to be educated in issues pertaining to Muslim teachers, and to incorporate this knowledge in leadership and teacher training courses. Their responses clearly signpost the need for enhanced knowledge and understanding to introduce positive changes in attitudes leading towards improved practice and better policies.

Note
1. The pseudonyms given to the six interviewees are: Bilal, Faris, Karim, Muhammad, Rehan and Sharif.

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