Managing Muslim Identity in Schools: understanding the challenge.

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The changes taking place in the world around us are being reflected in the changing demographics in British schools (Shah 2006a). The emerging school communities tend to be multi-ethnic, multicultural, and multi-faith, adding to the complexity and sensitivity of educational contexts. A serious leadership challenge is to manage this multiply diverse school population. However, research on school leadership has tended to ignore the interplay between leadership practices and the fast-changing population structures, specifically with reference to ethnic and faith identities (Modood 2005).

This paper focuses on a group broadly categorized as ‘Muslim students’, debating the impact of faith/ethnicity on identity formulations, particularly in the backdrop of the events of 9/11 and 7/7, and the subsequent ‘war on terror’, exploring its implications for schooling and school leadership in British schools. There are 1.8 Million Muslims in Britain, and according to the British National Statistics (2001), 34% of the Muslims are under 16 years of age while 52% Muslims in Britain fall within the age category of under 24, thus presenting the youngest age profile of all the religious groups in Britain. Second, Muslim students are a uniquely diverse community, consisting of different ethnic, cultural, language and race groups. Third, recent political developments have added to the complexity of educational contexts with serious implications for Muslim students and their experiences of schooling.

The paper discusses the issue of Muslim identity with specific focus on secondary schools in England and the nature and sensitivity of the challenge. It argues that identity constructions - both ‘in-group’ and ‘out-group’ - impact on the learners’ educational and social engagement.

Identity Formulation: in-group and out-group

Identities construction is a political issue (Arendt 1959), dominated by multiple considerations and politics of representation. Giddens 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’ (1991:186). Creating of identities is conditioned by affiliations, associations and by what Hall calls ‘histories’:

‘… identities are the names we give to different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past’. (Hall 1993:394)

This ‘creating’ is also determined by ‘in opposition to what’ and ‘by whom’ at a particular time in history (Shah 2006c). Modood (2005) argues that in the case of minority ethnic groups:

It is 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.

Identity constructions can be broadly discussed at two levels - out-group constructions and in-group constructions. Regarding out-group constructions, literature and archives abounds with records of racist media constructions of Muslims in very derogatory and vilifying ways (Vertovec 2002; Parekh 2002). Generalizations from individual examples
in the media, or elsewhere, to wider populations lead to misunderstandings and ambiguities, and in the case of schools these may affect teachers/leaders’ perceptions of students’ needs and educational destinations.

British Muslims are identified by many governmental organisations as a threat, with demands from people like David Coleman of MigrationWatch that migration should be selective and ‘Muslim should be excluded on the grounds of their unassimilability’ (Rex in Abbas 2005:237 & 243). David Blunkett’s criticism of young British Muslims (2004), Peter Hain’s (2004) implied suggestion that second and third generation British Muslims are still foreigners if they maintain their religious identity, and the more recent uninformed debate about veil, initiated by Jack Straw, all appear to demand integration ‘at the price of becoming less Muslim’. The resulting atmosphere of mistrust and uncertainty, coupled with threats of exclusion, have negative impact on social cohesion both within and outside schools.

Abbas attributes increasing identification with Islam amongst some of the current generations of South Asian Muslims, ‘both as a reaction to racist hostility and as a deeper understanding of Islam’ (2005:13). Modood (2004) explains it as ‘political opposition to racism’, arising out of the feelings of not being respected or of lacking access to public space. In the schools it has become linked to poignant issues of safety/security of Muslim students in post 9/11 scenario, reflected in reports of parents fearing to send their children to schools because of concerns over their physical safety (EMLC 2004). This has implications not just for their performance and achievement but even for their accessing education in the first place.

A serious issue for these youngsters is ‘where do they belong’. The British Muslim students of different ‘ethnic’ origins have to cope with four major strands of identity:

- Country of abode identity
- Country of origin identity
- Racialised identity
- Religious identity

Any alienation experienced at one level might strengthen the sense of group belonging around an alternate concept of identity. When young British Muslims, born and brought up in Britain experience alienation in British society, it pushes them towards religious identity that provides a flexible discourse for accommodating other identities and at the same time denotes an agenda for resistance. The huge wave of projecting Muslim identity in the post-modern world has been fuelled by global political events which Muslims perceive as de-powering, or marginalising. This identification is not necessarily connected to personal participation in distinctive religious practices.

**From Ethnicity to Faith Identity**

Historically, identity formulations at group level have been categorised by different factors such as race, culture, language, ethnicity and religion. The early immigrants in Britain were defined by race and colour, and then by ethnicity and culture, but currently faith is emerging as a significant category in identity formulations (Allen 2005). Ethnicity has generally been used as a convenient construction to categorise different minority communities. It is increasing being seen as given representation for the convenience of policy formation and resource allocation. Limitations of the term become obvious when applying to Muslims in particular, who are a ‘group’ of diverse ethnicities,
cultures, languages, and nationalities. Religion emerges as a basis of social identity in the case of Muslims, and apparently the British Muslims’ ‘attachment to their religion is not progressively weakened or diluted as a result of the fact that they are living in non-Muslim society’ (Jacobson, 1998:126). On the contrary, global political developments have fuelled the drive towards a super-ordinate Muslim identity, which is international in dimensions including countries like China (Alles 2003), America (Afridi 2001), Britain (Hopkins and Hopkins 2004), France (Limage 2000), and many others.

The international religious resurgence in the post-modern world (Esposito 2002), and the heightened ‘political’ conflict in the wake of 9/11 and 7/7 with reference to Islam and ‘Muslim identity’ have intensified the interest in identifying with religious identity. Perceived Islamic dress-code, or symbols such as hijab or beard are gaining higher popularity among young Muslim students. Also, there is increased perception of global exploitation of Muslim community, countries and resources breeding resentment and anger against oppositional forces, entrenching the identity positions. In this background, schools become sites for contending discourses affecting educational and social engagement.

Implications for School Leadership

Current negative discourses of Islam and Muslims have complicated the educational context for the learners and the leaders. Research confirms that in the educational institutions, assumptions about Muslims and their socio-cultural practices tend to influence attitudes and practices towards the Muslim learners, affecting their engagement and performance (Abbas 2004; Shah 2005). The responsibility rests with the leaders to understand and to make appropriate responses.

The perception among the Muslims, particularly among the youth, of being ‘targeted’ (Ahmed 2003; Esposito 2002a; Hagopian 2004) in the wake of 9/11 and 7/7, and the processes such as special registration, police raids/interrogations, profiling of Muslims, and ‘stop & search’ practices targeting particular Muslim groups (MPA 2004) have left them feeling insecure and even paranoid. Shooting by police of a Brazilian who looked Asian in post 7/7 England, police activities to track terrorists, and increasing fears and insecurities among Muslim community in different parts of the country, all raise queries:

- Why these young people, born and educated within the British education system feeling alienated?
- What are their experiences in educational institutions, or in the wider society, and how these impact identity formulations and participation in the social?
- Is this engagement with religious identity projection and construction a new force of resistance - in the category of gender, race, ethnicity, and colour - fighting for legitimacy?
- Is this an expression of ‘political Islam’, in the ‘new world order’ scenario? And to what aims and purposes?

Engagement with these debates can contribute to enhanced understanding of some of the issues impacting on the young Muslim learners’ engagement with education, and the issues facing educational leaders in the emerging school context. Some major issues that Muslim students in English secondary schools are experiencing today include stereotyping, negative assumptions, social exclusion, racism, media hostility, association with terrorism, harassment, religious hatred, and discrimination, which apparently are
linked with their faith identity and have implications for their performance/achievement (Shah 2006d). How Muslim students experience ‘Muslimness’ on educational sites is an unexplored phenomenon, which makes it difficult to analyse and explain low educational achievement of certain Muslim groups. There is evidence from data to support that the ‘ethnicity of South Asian pupils played a major part in their experience of school’ (Gilborn 1990:200); however, investigating and theorising ethnic achievement is challenging, as research suggests diverse and even conflicting evidence with regard to gender, socio-economic background, school factor, population mix, region, and many others (Abbas 2004; Anwar and Buksh 2002; DES 2003; Haque and Bell 2001). It will be simplistic to assume that the learners’ performance/achievement is linked to any one factor:

A variety of explanations has been offered by researchers attempting to discover casual factors behind differential levels of achievement between majority and minority pupils, and between different groups of minority pupils. The explanations have often been guesswork, prejudice, or attempts to support particular theories. (Tomlinson 1991:121)

Is the association between under-achievement and certain Muslim groups, as highlighted by statistics and emphasised by literature, an attempt to support particular theories, or an expression of prejudice? Is this political marginalisation, or an attempt at exonerating state policies from responsibility towards certain groups? Is it negative identity formulations that obstruct access and engagement with schooling, or does the experience of schooling contribute to reactionary identities? Some of the questions that seek attention are:

- interplay between (faith-) identity and school experiences;
- impact of these experiences on learners’ educational engagement and performance;
- links between educational achievement, employability and socio-economic position;
- implications of educational, social and economic marginalisation for social cohesion;

Educational leadership has a professional and a moral dimension, which makes leaders’ task complex and challenging. They are expected to move beyond professional competence to respond to contextual demands. Admittedly, in a highly diverse society, the school leadership feels compelled to attempt to cultivate commonalities for all practical purposes and for social cohesion, but an understanding leadership is essentially ‘sensitive to ethnic difference, and incorporates a respect for persons as individuals, and for the collectivities, to which people have a sense of belonging’ (Modood et al 1997:359). Getting to know students and communities, and soliciting comprehensive involvement and collaboration is important to make any progress towards the learners’ educational enhancement, developing from where they are to where they can be. A pride and confidence in their heritage contributes to the learners’ enhanced performance, and it is the leaders’ task to facilitate that goal by respecting difference, by enhancing the students’ confidence in identity, by strengthening the notion of equality in relationships and by sending clear signals that they value diversity. Respect and tolerance for different identities, religions, cultures, languages and other ‘differences’ are essential for encouraging educational achievement and for community cohesion.
The assimilation approaches practised in schools as a reaction and response to increased immigration in the post-second-world-war scenario in Britain have complicated the leadership-management of ‘multi-ethnic’ schools by camouflaging the issues. Modood asserts that non-whites are perceived and treated as racially defined groups of inferiors, outsiders and competitors whose right to be in Britain and to be treated as equal citizens was not fully accepted (2005). These perceptions pose barriers to ‘the sense of belongingness’ towards ‘country of abode’ identity, fostering fragmented and conflicting rather than complementary identities. In addition to that, the educational processes often put in place for ethnic minority students include emphasis on, for example, inclusion, recognition of diversity of learning styles, language provisions, ethnic minority teachers, and community links, in the efforts to cater for deficiencies and barriers to achievement. What seems to be lacking here is a framework to engage them through positive self-constructions to facilitate social cohesion and enhanced engagement on educational sites, by developing institution-wide attitudes and processes such as:

- A respect for persons as individuals and for the collectivities that people have a sense of belonging to
- Rejection of stereotyping and negative assumptions
- Developing values and inclusive attitudes/practices, with attention to culture/faith appropriate behaviour/values
- An appreciation of the predicament of being caught ‘between cultures’.
- Knowing the community and developing community networks
- Tolerance and understanding for cultural concepts like family values, honour, relationships and faith-informed social practices (Shah 1999; 2006b)
- Suggesting career pathways to students, and providing support and guidance
- Ethnic minority teachers – recruitment, retention, development, progression
- Providing role models

Reference


