

# Like a fish in water?

## Experiences of Muslim families in the British education system

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### ABSTRACT

This article summarises the explorations of two Initial Teacher Education (ITE) lecturers looking particularly at Muslim families' sense of belonging as they encounter the British education system. The study draws on Garcia's (2009, Alstad, 2013) view of monoglossic and heteroglossic settings, and on Cremin's (2015) proposition of the super-diversity of inner-city experiences. Case studies of individual families are used to create a picture that reflects the complexity and shifting nature of cultures, languages and identities in present-day Britain. Video and tape interviews are used and data coded and analysed to identify prevailing themes. The families and schools taking part are active participants in the research process, giving informed and ongoing consent, and having control of the resulting findings. Parents' and children's perceptions and experience have evolved in complex ways across the generations, and in ways that challenge the stereotypes that dominate media portrayals. Early findings suggest that existing paradigms for discussing identity fail to capture the increasingly complex and super-diverse realities. In a world where xenophobia currently fuels rigid and stereotypical views of cultures in general and Muslim cultures in particular, it is important that the complexity of families' identities and relationships to the existing systems is seen, heard and appreciated.

### KEYWORDS

IDENTITY  
DIVERSITY  
CULTURE  
FAMILY  
MUSLIM

### INTRODUCTION

This research arose from a previous enquiry into the attitudes of young children to their home language (White & Paffard 2014). Our research led us to spend time with children, families and our student teachers who, because of our location in the heart of east London, were predominantly Muslim. Increasingly these participants articulated a concern for

their position in the British education system, and a sense of disquiet about whether they 'belonged' or not. Our original, rather neutral, investigation into children's home languages led to a more politically charged awareness that global events and media representations were directly impacting on children's experiences in school, and this became the focus for our study in 2015. Laevers (1997: 15

cited Moylett 2014) famously speaks of the child needing to feel included like a 'fish in water' and it is this sense of belonging this study seeks to examine.

This research seeks to shed light on the kaleidoscopic picture of family and children's multiple identities as they intersect with the school system. The tensions, dilemmas and opportunities of belonging to diverse communities are explored in this case through the

multilayered experience of British Muslim families as they encounter the education system and through exploring their sense of 'belonging'.

## THE UK CONTEXT

The premise of this study is that the high profile of extremist Islamic terrorism has created a negative climate in UK communities and schools and that this is impacting on our youngest children and on the communities that most need to feel included, as Bari (2015) argues:

'Post-7/7 counter-terrorism measures ... are perceived by many to be contributing to a social environment where Muslims are being treated as a "suspect community". Many feel that this is adding to an increased level of hostility towards Muslims, creating a climate of fear and suspicion in the process.' (Bari 2015)

We wanted to examine to what extent our interviewees found this perception to be true.

## 'MUSLIM SHARK ATTACKS MAN'

Current representations of Islam in the national and international press suffer from a variety of distortions (Bleich et al, 2105). There is an over-identification of any negative act or person as 'Muslim' regardless of the relevance to the issue at hand: for example, 'Muslim Plot to Kill Pope' (Daily Express, 2010); 'Muslim thugs aged just 12 in knife attack on Brit schoolboy' (Daily Star, 2012).

Our Muslim trainee teachers drew our attention to a joke headline circulating on social media, 'Muslim shark attacks man', using humour to subvert the prejudice surrounding them. Myths that are particularly apparent in popular representations include:

- Muslim population in UK. It is perceived that Muslims are 'swamping' the indigenous population. In fact, in the 2011 census, 4.8% of the population identified themselves as Muslim,

59.3% as Christian, 25.1% as having no religion and 7.2% as not stating a religion (Ali 2015).

- Segregation amongst Muslim communities. Research shows that the ethnic minority populations of England and Wales have grown, and live in more mixed areas in 2011 than before. This 'spreading out' has accelerated in the past ten years. The white British population is the only group that lives in relative isolation from others, on average living in districts with 85% of white British residents. All ethnic minority groups live in areas where on average they make up fewer than 10% of the residents (Simpson 2012). It is also the case that the majority of Muslims living in the UK positively identify as British Muslims.
- Religious extremism. There is a tendency in the popular press to characterize all Muslims as religious fanatics, whereas the reality is of course of a huge spectrum in terms of religious beliefs and observances. There has also been a tendency for commentators to assume a position that sees secular liberal Muslims as somehow 'good', and religiously conservative Muslims as 'bad' and allied to fundamentalists.
- Muslim ethnicity. There is also a perception that all Muslims are 'Asian', (meaning by this originating from the Indian subcontinent). However, the actual spectrum of British Muslims is ethnically diverse: 68% Asian (1.83 million of 2.71 million) and 32% non-Asian. One British Muslim in 12 is of white ethnicity (8% of the Muslim population) (Ali, 2015).

The reality of British society is one in which older definitions of a 'multicultural' society are inadequate for describing the complex identity of many individuals.

'Britain can now be characterised by "super-diversity", a notion intended to underline a level and kind of complexity

surpassing anything the country has previously experienced. Such a condition is distinguished by a dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants who have arrived over the last decade.' (Vertovec, 2007: 28)

As one of our interviewees exclaimed, 'We are made up of lots of different bits from lots of different places!' Our study draws on this proposition of Vertovec's of the UK as a super-diverse society in which the identity of children and families of British Muslims is seen as complex and not easily defined.

## RESEARCH METHODS

Our initial aim for this research was to provide a forum for British Muslim families to share their experiences and to reflect, in particular, on the ways in which the British education system has supported their and their child's sense of belonging. We hoped that by exploring case studies of individual families we could create a snapshot that reflects the complexity and shifting nature of cultures, languages and identities in present-day Britain and identifies effective educational practices.

We began the research by working with a nursery school in Tower Hamlets, interviewing parents about their experiences; however, through discussions with our trainees and colleagues we decided to broaden the scope of our interviewees to better capture the diversity of experience. Although all our interviewees identify as British Muslims, their origins are very varied including family links with Bangladesh, Algeria, Turkey, Cyprus, South Africa and Uganda. They also represent a range of ages and experiences of schooling, mirroring the 'super-diverse' nature of UK society.

Eight in-depth interviews were conducted in the summer of 2015. These were semi-structured, allowing the interviewees to listen and respond to the particular

interests and concerns of the participants. Participants were asked to discuss their experiences and, where appropriate, their children's experiences of school, and invited to reflect on their sense of 'belonging'. The interviews were recorded and then analysed for emerging themes, individually and collectively so that differences and commonalities were teased out. All the participants were introduced carefully to the aims and methods of the study and gave informed consent. Many participants have continued to take an active interest in the findings and this continues to inform our conclusions.

### FINDINGS

It was perhaps unsurprising that we found a huge variation in both experiences and attitudes among our diverse group of interviewees. Indeed our first finding is that there is no such thing as 'the British Muslim experience', as the answers we gathered differed vastly from each other in so many ways. Participants' encounters with schools' practice varied from reporting 'It's no problem to be a Muslim in the UK' to 'It was a fishbowl, [an] isolating experience'.

### UNDERSTANDING AND ACKNOWLEDGING FAITH

An awareness of changing attitudes and behaviours was a common thread for most interviewees. There was clearly a great variation between schools in terms of how they dealt with cultural issues, and many participants, who had been through the education system themselves were now seeing their own children encountering school and finding changes. Several talked about a reduction in acknowledgement of Islam. They mentioned schools in the past celebrating Eid, and discussing openly ways of being observant, for example, children being allowed to wear the hijab (headscarf) and to eat halal meat. Increasingly some schools appeared to have gone for a

monocultural approach in which all religions were ignored, the backgrounds of children were not acknowledged and a strict and narrow focus on curriculum achievement prevailed. 'It's about school, it's not about celebrating religions or cultures.' On the other hand, some schools seemed to have maintained the close relationship, with parents seeking to celebrate, explicitly, the diversity of religions and cultures of the children. 'The school values Muslims, they can wear the headscarf and they can fast.'

Fasting seemed to be a particular area of concern. Several interviewees discussed the Western perception that fasting was undesirable and something 'imposed' on children. They talked about the desire children had to fast as part of their religious observance and how schools did little to accommodate this. The discussion centred on older children generally, but a frustration emerged that there was so little understanding about the practice that children who did want to fast were ending up lying to their teachers to conceal what they were doing. '[It's] not respecting [their faith], not acknowledging [it] – it's got them to lie, I think it's a big problem – to get a child to lie because they want to fast.' Another interviewee reported with exasperation that schools seemed taken aback every year by Ramadan, expressing disbelief that schools could be so unprepared to deal with the needs of the children when it was such a regular and predictable event.

However, for another participant, a recent arrival in the UK, tolerance was a real strength of the education system. She was amazed and pleased that the school provided halal food, allowed the hijab and welcomed discussion about ways to share and celebrate different religions. Others too spoke of children being 'allowed' to observe, to wear the headscarf and to fast. A layered approach began to emerge of different school responses, from those that embraced diversity and engaged fully with Muslim parents in

respecting and celebrating Islam, to the schools that tolerated observances but did not engage, and those that aimed to be religion-free, avoided discussion and made no accommodation to children's faiths or observances.

Participants also mentioned the level of ignorance about Islam in schools. Many equated the rise in prejudice that they were experiencing with the lack of knowledge of the general public and there was a feeling that the current school culture had changed, with less public acknowledgement of diversity in school. Several felt that teachers in general were unclear about even the basics of Islam, and certainly unclear about the diversity among British Muslims.

'How much do schools do? [It would be better] if they could find out more and appreciate it more ... getting a scholar in ... not getting teachers to do it.'

Interviewees felt that teachers were nervous about 'saying the wrong thing' and therefore avoided discussion at all. A feature of this nervousness that students and staff particularly reported was the tendency of schools to ask any Muslim to pronounce authoritatively on all matters to do with Islam. One interviewee explained, 'There is a mass ignorance; as a Muslim there's a bizarre authority imposed on you.'

### BELONGING

In terms of belonging, there was again a huge disparity in experience. One parent reported, 'Belonging? Yes, 100%, when I leave my child at school I feel at peace. I wanted to show him different people, different colours, to learn and have friends.'

This parent felt very strongly, not only that the school supported her identity, but also that she as a Muslim wanted her children to grow up informed and positive about all religions.

On the other hand, various participants revealed some disquiet: '[There is] a cumulative experience of being more and more made to feel "other"', and 'I feel quite worried that they are safe.' One parent speaks of the experience of older children: 'Young people are getting confused when the media talk about extremists – they [young people] see it as an attack on them – but it's not Islam.'

Another participant articulated the fear that the lack of belonging was contributing to radicalisation: 'They don't belong so they have to do something else.'

## CHANGING PERCEPTIONS AND THE INFLUENCE OF THE MEDIA

Another common theme that emerged, however positively or negatively participants felt about their sense of belonging, was the public perceptions of Muslims.

'What they [the public] hear, and media doesn't help, [it] puts negative thoughts into people's minds – but it's because they have no knowledge.'

Many participants spoke spontaneously of the links being made between world events and their own religion, in particular the reporting of ISIS terrorist actions.

***'What they are doing is un-Islamic, they are not Muslim basically.'***

'Their religion [that of ISIS] doesn't resemble anything I know as Islam.'

Interviewees also talked about the difficulty of being a Muslim in the UK with such representations in the news:

'It's hard, it's kind of embarrassing.'

Some also reported that they felt this had contributed to a rise in prejudice. 'On the bus you get weird stares and you hear stories.'

Some also felt that levels of understanding and respect had changed as a result of negative media.

***'When I went to school there wasn't any issue – it's different now because of the wars going on.'***

## THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY

The importance of family emerged as another very strong narrative within the interviews. Participants spontaneously began to discuss the role of the school as opposed to that of the family. While opinions varied on the relative extents to which school or home should educate, or get involved in religion, there was a common thread of concern about the value of family. One participant felt that the wide spectrum of Islam meant that she would want to educate her children herself, to ensure that they absorbed a respectful view of all religions. Several participants acknowledged the tensions that existed between families who wished their children to be observant and the school ethos. Many noted that the competing pulls of Western culture and their home Muslim culture had created tension between the generations. Another spoke of current events, in particular teenagers who had run away to join ISIS and how this had shocked Muslims generally and was impacting on the stability of the family. She felt that the expected trust and security between

parents and children was being eroded by these events and by online influences.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Parents' and children's perceptions and experience have evolved in complex ways across the generations, and in ways that challenge the stereotypes prevailing in media portrayals. Early findings suggest that existing paradigms for discussing identity fail to capture the increasingly complex and super-diverse realities.

Our explorations uncovered some very different practices in schools that impacted on a sense of belonging. Below, we discuss below the implications of these practices not only for Muslim communities but for our whole community.

## MONOCULTURAL OR HETEROCULTURAL?

Our findings suggest that integration (Commission on Integration and Cohesion 2007) rather than assimilation is the important ideology here (and Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) data would suggest that for the Muslim population this is happening), but this should not mean a homogenisation of the population where we take a monocultural approach that ignores difference. Building on Garcia's (2009) analysis of school approaches to bilingualism as either monoglossic or heteroglossic, it would seem that a useful parallel can be drawn in looking at school approaches to cultural diversity. The response to diversity can be seen in the ethos of the different schools. Monocultural schools, by ignoring the vexed topic of religion altogether, avoid both the problems and confronting the inherent inequalities of such an approach. That approach seems a backward step if we reflect on educational reports of the past (Bullock 1975) and the importance of a child's wellbeing and sense of belonging. Conversely, heterocultural schools acknowledge the pluralist nature of society, embracing super-diversity (Vertovec 2007), and see

the school as a part of this. They engage with the diversity within their school community and see the differences as an opportunity for dialogue. There is an urgent need for this greater dialogue with the wide spectrum of communities in the UK and for a greater respect for children's choices, for example, fasting. In addition, the government's introduction of 'British values' and what this means, is in danger of alienating young British Muslims (and many other people) and contributing to radicalisation.

### ISLAM-LITE

Some schools appear to pay only lip service to the 'safer' aspects of all religions. We need to be careful that our knowledge of any religion is not just tokenistic, and does not just recognise the surface features. 'It is important to improve the quality of information about Islam available to students and staff, and to ensure that students have access to material on how the teachings of Islam

can be put into practice in a contemporary pluralist society' (Siddiqui 2007: 168 cited Tomlinson 2008). The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), for example, runs 'Visit my mosque' days to share information (Muslim Council of Britain website 2016). Celebration and acknowledgement of the daily observances of all religions should not be squeezed out by a focus on the 'basics' in schools.

### ANTI-ISLAMOPHOBIA

It's important that as educators we can openly address and counter prejudice and ignorance. In a world where xenophobia currently fuels rigid and stereotypical views of cultures in general and Muslim cultures in particular, it is important that the complexity of families' identities and relationships to the existing systems is seen, heard and appreciated. There is also a need to challenge stereotypes and share information so that perceptions about groups of people are not seen as absolute.

We need to have the confidence to discuss issues and to tackle the nervousness and over-reactions around children's curiosity and questions, as has been typified, for example, by the 'Trojan Horse' situation in the Midlands in 2014. We also need to have greater knowledge about Islam so as not to confuse the split between religious conservatism and secular liberalism as bad versus good, linking conservatism with fundamentalism.

With the current international preoccupation with migration, it seems vitally important to address these issues now. As Gilroy says, 'The raw materials from which identity is produced may be inherited from the past but they are also worked on creatively or positively, reluctantly or bitterly in the present' (Gilroy 1993: 304 cited by Kidd & Teagle, 2012). It is important we work creatively in the future so that London's and the UK's super-diversity remains a positive and not a negative. ■

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