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Editorial

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Editorial

Reconfiguring religious identities

The education of British Muslims has evolved in the context of the policies of post-war immigration, integration and diversity policy. In reality, in situating these groups, popular systems of multiculturalism endorse notions of tolerance and secularity through the popularisation of a form of multi-culture that racialises the civilised, modern or backward in the construction of national identities (Haque 2010). By centring on cultural boundaries while de-emphasising structural disadvantage or racism (Joppke 2009), the phenomenon of Islamophobia (Sayyid and Vakil 2011) sets limits on how differences within societies merit recognition. As Haw (2010, 360) states, there is 'significant question for debates around issues of multiculturalism: when did diversity and difference become conflated with the difficult and dangerous?' The retreat of multiculturalism coincides with the increasing dominance of neoliberalism in education, with the individual not merely a learner but also a customer, where satisfaction is the measure of success rather than explicit learning outcomes. In a post-9/11 'war of terror' culture, this performance-orientated approach is problematical as it views Muslims through the lens of surveillance and suspicion; as 'suspect communities', reflecting the harsh end of neoliberalisation based on the marketisation of education.

The idea of integration today centres on the expectations of minority communities to assimilate into wider society whilst ignoring the impact of changing socio-economic and socio-cultural dynamics for visible Muslim and ethnic minority groups in various British towns and cities – no longer a two-way street between the state and Muslims but a cul-de-sac. In reality, adaptation to and incorporation into society is restricted. This is not to argue that social and cultural integration is the main driver of educational achievement, but rather that both internal and external factors force communities apart rather than together. As racism persists, ethnic minority groups respond to marginalisation and exclusion with actions that might disconnect them further from the mainstream. However, this is far too simplistic a picture to paint. Some indications suggest that Muslims in education in Britain aspire to a situation that emphasises coherence and interdependency between 'Muslimness' and Britishness (Meer 2009; Miller 2013), although it would be one-dimensional to essentialise Muslims into a single category as myriad differences persist between and within these groups in Britain (Tinker and Smart 2012), between and within generations (Kashyap and Lewis 2013) and elsewhere among other global Muslim diasporas (Abbas 2017a). As for whether there are opportunities to mobilise 'Muslimness' as an organically determined political identity that contests the dominant negative paradigms – and in the process expands the reach of the concept of 'Muslim' among both empowered as well as marginalised groups – remains an empirical question (Adamson 2011).

Leadership among Muslims in education is also a critical area of discussion. A genuine case emerges for recognising the role of the interaction between teacher and learner as much as the process of education itself (Shah 2006). The situation is further problematised given the

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hindrances to career progression experienced by some Muslim teachers in certain minority contexts (Shah and Shaikh 2010), and especially among young Muslim men in education struggling to reconcile their faith-based identities with their national, ethnic or cultural allegiances (Bhatti 2011; Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2015). In 1997, New Labour enshrined state funding of Muslim schools into law in response to an increasingly diverse society and government rhetoric regarding multiculturalism. These matters are also of huge interest in the current climate, particularly in light of the 'Trojan Horse plot'. This episode affected a number of schools in the city of Birmingham – with all the implications that emerged for young Muslims in education, Muslim teachers and the Muslim local communities (Abbas 2017c). For migrant, diasporic and transnational communities, problematising Muslim minorities in education evokes complexities beyond the simple dividing rhetoric of Muslim or non-Muslim. Persistent negative societal, attitudinal and behavioural attention challenges a diverse minority community of communities who are persistently on the receiving end of sustained and disparaging political, media and policy-making attention (Salih 2004).

Fears over resource investment in educational infrastructure, curricula and pedagogy anxieties affecting British Muslims in education conjure up more uncertainties than positives. These tribulations affect not only young children, who are at the nucleus of attention, but also parents, teachers and education managers. In rationalising the political and sociological milieu in these contexts, the themes of religion, ethnicity and gender are as significant as ideology, culture and policy. However, they are set within the frameworks of secularisation, desecularisation, sacralisation and the re-sacralisation of Islam in the public sphere. To generate a philosophical, spiritual and intellectual evaluation of British Muslims in education, the need emerges for a suitable approach that synthesises the sociological, educational, political and cultural apprehensions that are internal and external, local and global (Abbas 2017b). The supposed secular neutrality of British society belies a disproportionality in relation to approaches to non-Protestant faiths. Throughout a history of orientalism and Islamophobia, Islam is seen as requiring the most moderation. In this context, neoliberalism as the hegemonic hyper-capitalistic world order is the setting, leading to rampant globalisation that rips apart both nations and neighbourhoods. In this regard, there is appreciation of the value of Islam for Muslims as a form of resistance through re-reading and re-application. Education is merely one stream of activity in these changing dynamics over approximately four decades of social and economic policy. The neoliberalisation of educational markets, the importance of globalisation and localisation in shaping identity politics, and the significance of the counterterrorism and securitisation agenda raise new concerns, challenges and deliberations. However, it would be wrong to suggest that no room for progress exists.

Muslim challenges to the neoliberalisation of education

While the neoliberal securitisation framework in relation to education of Muslim young men has created an emphasis on Muslims as the 'suspect community', it is important to note that educational settings can also be a space in which youth masculinity can be redefined and reshaped. This includes challenging the status quo in a way that results in progressive and integrative forms of national belonging. Muslim identity subjectivities are an opportunity for positive change in curricula, pedagogy and assessment – specifically in critical opposition to the UK government's 'Prevent' agenda that marks young Muslim men out by the language of religion alone (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, this issue). The notion of a culturally responsive pedagogy is important in the light of the general removal of discussions of diversity or multiculturalism in educational settings. Here, it is incumbent upon teachers to move beyond the simple notion of schoolchildren as consumers or potential customers, emphasising the importance of cultural

inclusiveness, thereby re-introducing notions of self-esteem and confidence vigorously taken away by a concentration on religious identity. For example, the importance of the mother tongue as an opportunity for enhanced teacher–pupil interaction as well as a refocusing on the hijab as a form of female self-empowerment are valuable considerations. An engaged, inclusive curriculum can help to bridge the divisions created by the hyper-marketisation of education where individual performance defines the measure of successful learning. The role of the teacher in this regard is crucial (Hoque, this issue).

Undeniably, one of the most significant issues affecting the British Muslim profile in educational settings in recent years has been the calamitous 'Trojan Horse plot'. This resulted in significant damage to the representation of British Muslims in the popular imagination, and in particular in educational settings, underscoring the move to enhance the 'Prevent' duty, now encompassing all public institutions in society (Miah 2017). It further undermined already weakened confidence in the education system among British Muslim parents. It perpetuated the notion that Muslims are an existential threat to every aspect of 'our' way of life (Awan, this issue). The securitisation of Muslims because of the 'Trojan Horse plot' inexorably shook many parents. For some, it created a particular need to converge on homeschooling as a solution. Choice is emphasised in education, but if Muslim parents take the decision to educate their children in their own homes, this choice is seen as a 'risk' for others. There is no hiding from the omnipotence of the securitisation agenda, but parents, with limited or advanced forms of social and cultural capital, are adamant that agency can return to the pupil-learner in the home despite the deleterious climate facing British Muslims in education (Bhopal and Myers, this issue).

The dominant hegemonic policy framework in education regards Muslim women, in particular, as susceptible to the so-called benightedness of groups and the cultures from which they hail, all the while ignoring the nuanced and multifaceted nature of identities as being in a constant state of flux. The consequence of this view is to reinforce racial, gender, cultural and sexual inequalities that are rife in a social context in which Islamophobia is hyper-normalised. The idea of empowerment through individuality to release these young women from the bondage of cultural repression is to revert to existing dominant stereotypes concerning the frantic need to protect these minorities from themselves. The net result is reinforced neoliberal individualisation, seen as a route to success for disaffected working-class communities but also Muslim minority women, considered especially susceptible to the risk of regressive cultural practices, inexorably presented to be at the hands of Muslim men. It is somewhat dispiriting that these powerful notions remain undeterred in the light of years of thinking and practice but, at the same time, it is unsurprising given the context in which these dominant themes materialise; that is, in the light of the securitisation agenda that signals a wholesale retreat from multiculturalism, interculturalism and respect for diversity. A radical black feminism, in response to the masculine dominance of policy-making and the post-feminist discourse of the white female liberal standpoint, allows young Muslim women to come to terms with this subjugation and, crucially, find ways to challenge it holistically and systematically through individual agency that both re-engages and empowers the 'self' (Mirza and Meetoo, this issue).

What is striking is that in spite of the significant challenges facing British Muslims, especially in localities and spaces that suggest disadvantage and marginalisation, the role of parents in determining and validating aspirations, in particular in relation to higher education, combined with instrumentalisation of cultural and social capital, is yielding results. Young Muslim women are progressing and achieving well in education, especially in relation to young Muslim men. In particular, their entry into the Russell Group universities is above expectations (Khattab and Modood, this issue). These findings suggest that there is a form of reflexivity, particularly after secondary school education, which encourages and motivates young Muslim women, with the support of their parents, but not exclusively, to enable optimal individual educational outcomes. Therefore, it seems that the crucial step, for both men and women, is meta-reflexivity.

The way ahead

While useful insights from social research provide an approach on educational process, including dynamics relating to home–school links, curricula and the values placed on inherent differences among different South Asians, a host of new challenges affect young Muslims in British schools today. In exploring ethnic and religious identities in Britain, the sphere of educational resources, including curricula, pedagogy and local social problems, and the nature of social relations and the perceptions of the 'other' held by the dominant 'self', persist as significant sources of anxiety. After the many years of post-war immigration, settlement and adaptation, many British Muslims continue to face racism, prejudice, intolerance, bigotry and discrimination in wider society (Casey 2016; Citizens UK 2017). These outcomes shape concerns over identity politics, where dominant notions of race and nation thrust Muslims into the limelight as the most racialised, objectified and 'othered' group in education in the current climate (Shain 2013). Young Muslims face endless securitisation while teachers and educational professionals, without adequate training, are identifying, isolating and processing those seen as 'at risk', ultimately reproducing deeper inequality, social divisions and additional disaffection (Sian 2015).

Since the end of the Cold War, counterterrorism and securitisation agendas have seeped into dominant multicultural and educational policy that affect British Muslims in educational settings with growing sociological and political implications. A whole host of sensitivities over the importance of identity, intergenerational change, gender and policy maintain a concentration on the importance of specific group practices and choices, raising numerous tensions and ambiguities for all in society. This special issue of the *British Journal of Sociology of Education* addresses some of the current existential, sociological and political questions facing British Muslims in education. Contributing authors provide state-of-the-art social science, educational and policy-orientated original research contributions on the study of British Muslims in education. This body of work not only helps to challenge the dominant hegemonic discourse, but also expresses the ways in which positive change can be realised.

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