

Every Child Matters: the challenge of gender, religion and multiculturalism

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ABSTRACT This article makes use of the findings of a small pilot study which investigated the management and nature of multiculturalism in three secondary schools in London. In the course of the investigation, two major themes emerged: the 'collapse' of anti-racism and multiculturalism into 'multi-faithism'; and the impact of the 'over-accommodation' of religious identity on the rights of minority ethnic girls.

This article is based on a small pilot study which looked at the management of multiculturalism in three secondary community schools in an ethnically diverse borough in London.[1] The study involved focus group discussions with teachers and interviews with the heads of the three schools. One school was a single-sex school for girls and the other two schools were mixed gender. In one school, the dominant group was South Asian (Indian), whilst there was no dominant group in the other two. Drawing on the findings, the article examines the implications of multiculturalism as currently practised for 'race' and gender equality in schools. The findings point to the need for further urgent work to assess the full impact of the resurgence of religious identity upon the practice of multiculturalism in state schools and, in particular, on the right to equal education for minority girls.

Introduction

Multiculturalism, with some variations, has been the dominant approach towards race relations in the United Kingdom since the 1970s. It emphasizes tolerance and respect for diversity, but its discourse and practice are hotly contested. Until the London bombings in July 2005, there was a general acceptance, in official thinking at least, that Britain is a multicultural society in which different cultures and religions co-exist peacefully.[2] That acceptance was considered to have been shattered – and multiculturalism as a concept and

practice came under intense scrutiny, leading many to question its viability in the maintenance of good race relations – in the wake of the London bombings and earlier civil unrest in the northern cities of England.[3]

At the outset, it needs to be stated that the problem is not the concept of multiculturalism per se, since its promotion of tolerance is still viable in the struggle against racism. But the need to examine the form and practice of multiculturalism in education today comes out of a long-standing concern based on grass-roots experiences [4] of flaws in the multicultural model – flaws which have undermined both the struggle for gender rights within minority communities and human rights in general. The increasing assertion of religion as the main badge of identity – a process encouraged by the state and religious and community leaders – has further implications for state-funded, progressive, anti-racist and secular education.

It is also important to state that in a climate where all three schools in the study were under immense pressures to deliver a target-driven curriculum, issues of multiculturalism were often addressed on an ad hoc basis. Heads and teachers alike had no time to encourage or even contemplate discussions of multiculturalism amongst staff. Most of the time they had to rely on their common sense and commitment to achieving the best for their pupils, often in the face of a lack of resources and contradictory policies imposed by the Government. Significantly, many teachers identified the need for more support through training and networking arrangements with other teachers in the locality, specifically to share information and good practice in relation to the tensions that emerged in addressing issues of 'race', religion and gender.

In the course of our study, two major underlying trends emerged: the collapse of anti-racism and multiculturalism into 'multi-faithism' and the impact of the 'over-accommodation' of religious identity on the rights of ethnic minority girls.

Multiculturalism or Multi-faithism?

In discussions on anti-racism and multiculturalism, the concepts were used interchangeably. This is not surprising: since the 1980s, anti-racist struggles have largely been reduced to matters to do with cultural accommodation, the emphasis having shifted from the need to address structural racial disadvantage to the need to respect different ethnic cultures. Minority communities were being defined solely by their culture and religion.[5] By the 1990s, the multicultural approach (which had by then become a tool of national policy across a range of issues at local and national levels) lost its radical edge and lapsed into a form of identity politics which drew upon and gave political life to very conservative and religious identities.

Nevertheless, despite popular vilification of the concept of multiculturalism from certain quarters, the heads and teachers alike viewed multiculturalism as an immensely useful concept. In all schools, the heads worked hard to create a harmonious environment which was achieved through

a conscious emphasis on the notion of 'inclusion' and a focus on the promotion of discussions about similarities across difference, for example, in religious assemblies.

The Rosh Hashanah assembly ... we brought it all together by talking about the similarities in the languages ... words like mother, father and mum and dad and so on, so there's a similarity of common languages ... that I think is what we work on very, very strongly and we do that so that people can realise that our commonalities are much stronger.

At their best, examples of religious assemblies involving pupils from all backgrounds show how only ethnically mixed environments can create conditions conducive to countering prejudice, racism and ignorance. This approach also allows for a real sense of community to emerge organically – a process which cannot be replicated in single ethnic and religious environments.

The heads and teachers at the schools rightly prided themselves on their positive multicultural environments and often saw their schools as havens against the uglier aspects of racism. The head of the single-sex school described how a group of Muslim girls in hijabs encountered overt racism whilst on a day trip to France, the intensity of which they had not experienced in the United Kingdom.

However, whilst all the heads and teachers professed a genuine commitment to maintaining their schools as multicultural spaces, there was little evidence of an understanding of anti-racism and multiculturalism as two distinct concepts. Moreover, discussions about multiculturalism, more often than not, automatically drifted into discussions about the need to respect faith diversity – multi-faithism rather than multiculturalism. Three issues emerged for particular attention: first, there was minimum insight into substantive issues of racial inequality; secondly, religious values tended to be attributed to South Asian communities, while secular and often political identities tended to be attributed to African-Caribbean communities; and thirdly, there was a failure to grapple with the tensions that arose when respect for religious identity clashed with gender equality.

The dominant view in all the schools was that racial equality was mainly about the need to promote respect for and value the inclusion of diverse backgrounds. The heads saw these objectives as an end in themselves. Only one school, which also happened to have the largest proportion of African-Caribbean pupils, showed any attempt to address the difference between racial inequality and multiculturalism. The head of that school attempted to address racism through the School Improvement Plan rather than merely through religious assemblies or religious education (RE) lessons. He was clear about separating out substantive issues of racial equality from celebrations of different religious festivals, and he expressed concern about the fact that equality in educational achievement was not given greater priority. He argued for schools to ensure that alternative perspectives on a range of subjects were represented at

every level within every subject within the school. He recognized that multiculturalism should involve a focus on the material differences between communities borne out of their historical relationships to each other. He advocated a vision of multiculturalism that was allied to the notion of freedom and social justice:

It's a very strong belief that education is the greatest form of emancipation for any group and so ... having had the histories of either enslavement or subjugation or imperialist forces ... I guess that I have a stronger sense of, in that sense, justice and opportunity.

By contrast, the other schools appeared to focus only upon recognition of religious identities.[6] A paramount concern was the need to guard against offending religious sensibilities. For instance, in one school there was considerable concern about a couple of boys, one of whom had placed a piece of pork in the bag of a Muslim student. The incident led to the boy being excluded for five days, which appeared to be an overreaction given that there was uncertainty as to whether he actually understood the implications of his actions.

In the context of discussions on anti-racism, all schools reaffirmed the usefulness of the concept of 'Black History Month', but it was clear from the way in which it had been institutionalized that much of the content referred only to the histories of African-Caribbean peoples. Again, African-Caribbean communities were constructed as largely political and secular. Black identities were seen through histories of political and cultural struggles against racism and for civil and political rights. On the other hand, South Asian histories were almost always absent (with the exception of Gandhi's struggle for Indian independence) from Black History Month. Instead, South Asian communities were constructed mainly in relation to their religious affiliations, with representations of themselves primarily in religious assemblies and RE lessons. This poses a number of problems, the most significant of which is the tendency to legitimate and prioritize religious identity above all others. It signals the view that South Asian communities are religious communities rather than heterogeneous or even secular. This is one reason why Asian religious leaders, including fundamentalists [7], appear to have gained ground and influence in respect of the environment and curriculum in secondary schools.

The study found little recognition of the fact that all minority communities are as heterogeneous as the wider society, with many varied believing and non-believing traditions. For instance, few respondents were aware that Asian parents had led struggles to prevent state schools in their locality from being taken over by Sikh fundamentalists in the 1990s.[8] One teaching union representative, who did recall the struggles, commented that the greatest threat to secularism in state schools came from the growing influence of Christianity:

I would say, for example, that some of the most serious challenges for secularism come from established Christianity and, if you like,

the dominant religious groups in Britain. A current example of that is there's a group of fundamentalist Christians who believe in creationism in opposition to the scientific theory of evolution. They've called themselves Truth in Science and last week they sent out 5000 DVDs to high school science departments around the country ... which, on the surface, are meant to contribute to a discussion about science, and in particular, evolution, but are, in fact, propaganda for a religious-based theory of humankind ... And those kind of developments I think are very serious.

He confirmed that heads preferred to either ignore or minimize the imposition of Christian assemblies in recognition of the diverse religious backgrounds of the pupils at their schools, and suggested that this attitude was more widespread than was acknowledged.

The injunction for schools to provide mainly Christian acts of worship is frankly a joke. Very few schools, certainly in this area, abide by that injunction.

However, when it came to minority religions, the same union representative was more circumspect, preferring instead to stay clear of the question of any limit to the accommodation of religious demands in state schools.

The study found that there were varying definitions and levels of commitment in relation to the term 'secularism' [9] ... Ironically, whilst all heads refused to privilege Christianity in religious assemblies – an imposition contained in the Education Act of 1988 as a result of Christian fundamentalist lobbying [10] – there was nevertheless an uncritical deference to minority religious identities in two of the three schools.

One head rejected the notion of secularism altogether on the grounds that it represented an anti-religious stance since it denied people's interest in and commitment to their religious beliefs. Secularism, she stated, was effectively a 'cloak for the imposition of non-belief'. In her view, avoiding recognition of religion and religious identity would be a mistake. She preferred instead to characterize her school as 'multi-faith'. Yet she recognized and strongly advocated schools as important sites for open debate on these matters. However, it was precisely this critical space in state schools that was being severely challenged by fundamentalists and conservative religionists.

The heads of the other two schools felt that the secular character of their schools presented the best opportunity to achieve their multicultural vision of education but even amongst them the practice of secularism diverged. One gave a robust definition of secularism as the 'absence of overt religious practice, not belief or faith'. This definition also affected the way in which he dealt with religious-based demands, including the demand for separate prayer rooms and the teaching of RE.[11]

The other head highlighted her commitment to secularism in her opposition to attempts by some (Muslim) parents to use her single-sex school to

control the educational environment of their girls. She was, therefore, extremely vigilant in ensuring that the school's admissions criteria were strictly followed. Her vision of her single-sex school as an empowering space which prepared young women for the outside world was in direct contrast to the parents who were using its single-sex nature to achieve exactly the opposite – that is, to contain and limit the participation of young women in the outside world. She described how some Muslim parents at the school had attempted to turn it into a Muslim school for girls. The fact that they did not succeed reflects the absence of any consensus within minority communities, either that religious schools are their priority, or that girls must be limited to certain types of educational environments, contrary to the picture portrayed by fundamentalists who claim to speak on their behalf.

The Re-invention of 'Pure' Religious Identities

Inclusion as a strategy was often utilized to address the divisive tendencies brought about by the accommodation of religious identities. Assemblies, for instance, were extended to other non-Christian religions, and pupils from all backgrounds were expected to participate in the preparation and presentation of a wide range of religious and cultural matters. But the accommodation of religion also brought to the fore issues of control over the representation of identities and questions about their 'authenticity'. This has impacted most upon the rights of minority women and girls, since the maintenance of the 'purity' of religion rests largely on the control of female sexuality.

In the single-sex school, for example, a dance performed by a group of Kurdish girls at an assembly celebrating Eid was considered to be 'un-Islamic' and offensive by a Muslim parent: it was wrong for the girls to be dancing in the presence of men, in defiance of their religious duty to be 'modest' in their dress and behaviour. The head, however, allowed the dancing to take place on the grounds that the school was a safe environment for Muslim girls and that dancing was a 'cultural' and not 'religious' expression. Whilst her response – to separate religion from culture – was a neat way of getting around the problem, what was brushed under the carpet was the right of the girls to define their own identities. Yet it is precisely this very personal notion of identity, arising from complex social, political and cultural processes, that is being wiped out in favour of singular so-called 'authentic' or 'pure' religious identity. In different circumstances, involving more political resistance from religious groups or parents, it is conceivable that the head may well have caved in to the demand for Muslim girls to behave in a way that is perceived to conform to their religion! The incident is also a disturbing illustration of the ways in which religion is impacting on the freedom of self-expression of those who have the least power to assert their own versions of culture and religion.

The position taken by the head was not supported by all members of her staff. A practising Muslim teacher from the same school had a different take on the incident. In her view, it was necessary to draw a distinction between

religion and culture. Dancing was not in her eyes a legitimate component of Eid celebrations, notwithstanding the fact that, throughout history, many Muslims in a number of cultures have celebrated Eid through music and dance as much as through prayer. Moreover, she was concerned not just about the sensibilities of the parents and the feelings of pupils, but also those of other Muslim staff members. It is difficult to ascertain whose sensibilities should carry most weight: those of the teaching staff, those of the students or those of their parents. In any event, there is immense difficulty in separating religion from cultural practice since religious practice is culturally determined and vice versa. Severing the one from the other denies the living, dynamic and interpretative process that is involved in the construction of identity.

The formation of a singular religious identity and the attempt to promote it in schools is not confined to Muslim fundamentalists alone. Hindu fundamentalists have also attempted to gain legitimacy by putting out religious education materials on 'Hindu' identity. A leaflet entitled *Explaining Hindu Dharma: a guide for teachers*, for example, was published without any reference to the varied traditions within Hinduism itself. Nor were the publishers or those who used the resource aware of the anti-Muslim and communalist or separatist politics that it was propagating. The text propounds the notion that India belongs to Hindus only. It also contains conservative notions of women and sexuality.[12]

Even in situations where multiple representations within a culture and religion were encouraged, as in the school that considered itself 'multi-faith' rather than 'secular', teachers found it difficult to overcome the classic multicultural view that all beliefs and values are valid and equal, irrespective of the political and historical context in which they have developed. The head of the 'multi-faith' school described how, following the London bombings, some Muslim girls felt compelled to perform an assembly to counter stereotypical notions of Muslim women. They showcased a range of identities, from the orthodox and traditional to the modern. However, in the course of their presentation, they stated that polygamy, whilst banned in the UK, was a legally and culturally accepted practice elsewhere, implying that the legitimacy of the practice was tied to the question of its legality in different places. Although uncomfortable with the assertion, the head did not question it. Had she encouraged the girls to question their views by encouraging debate and research, they would have discovered that in those countries where polygamy is permitted, there are many Muslim women who find the practice unacceptable and have struggled against that and other oppressive traditions.

Religion and the School Environment

Teachers from the various schools in the study told us that increasingly pupils were objecting to the study of certain subjects on religious grounds. One head described media studies and sociology lessons where pupils from mainly Muslim and Christian (Jehovah's Witness) backgrounds questioned the morality of

homosexuality and lesbianism. In science and geography lessons, some pupils rejected the theories of plate tectonics and evolution. The teachers dealt with such objections in a largely pragmatic way. One head told her pupils that they had no choice but to study all the subjects as they formed part of the curriculum. She also added that they needed to be informed citizens, even if they did not believe in the ideas.

Teachers also expressed frustration at parents who withdrew children from religious or sex education. They found it difficult to balance parental rights with the need to uphold children's rights to education.

Obviously what we want to do as teachers is introduce students to the world religions and different cultures and open their eyes; to foster tolerance and understanding. But we have this tension because some parents do not necessarily want their child in their eyes to be exposed to it. So you might have this tension that you are trying to balance between.

Anecdotal evidence from around the country shows that parents are withdrawing children from certain aspects of education deemed incompatible with their religious beliefs. One example concerned a group of non-Muslim parents in Croydon who refused to allow their children to visit a local mosque on the grounds that it was not necessary for their children to experience a religion that was not their own.

The right of withdrawal has therefore become the focus of wider political campaigns to ensure that parents exercise that right. The subtext clearly is that religious values should take priority over the child's best interests. For instance, a group calling itself Muslim 'educationalists' states the following:

Parents not only need to have rights, but also need to know what those rights are. Many parents will be unaware, for example, that they have the right to withdraw their children from sex education where it is not part of the National Curriculum and from RE lessons. We applaud the steps that have already been taken at both the national and local levels to inform and educate parents in essential matters of choice.[13]

The existence of prayer rooms in secondary schools is perhaps the most vivid reminder of the extent to which religion has shaped the educational environment in the state sector. It is not clear how and why prayer rooms came to be established in secondary schools, but they are now a common feature in many schools with large ethnic minority populations. Experience from higher and further education establishments has also shown that prayer rooms have often been used not for private contemplation but to politicize religious identities and to police women's dress and sexual conduct.[14]

One study showed that prayer rooms were instituted as a response to absenteeism amongst Muslim pupils or to requests from pupils or parents. Two of the three schools in the study regarded prayer rooms as an essential

component of their multicultural commitment, but problems associated with them were also acknowledged.

One problem is the potential of prayer rooms to become sites of intense struggles to control representation of identity. This was particularly highlighted in the single-sex school which had a permanent prayer room. The head from the school had to work hard to prevent it from becoming the exclusive preserve of any one group. This followed an incident involving an attempt by a group of Muslim girls to sequester the room for their own religious meetings. The head was compelled to implement a strict policy of inclusion, which meant that any pupil could use the room at any time. She stated that this was necessary to prevent an atmosphere of fear and intimidation from being created and to prevent segregation within the school community. Many Muslim girls had expressed fears of being divided into 'good' and 'bad' Muslim girls.

We had a situation where a group of girls wanted to celebrate Ramadan last year by having a prayer meeting, and it got slightly out of hand – these were sixth formers. And apparently there was a feeling that unless you did this, this and this, you weren't a good Muslim, and girls were going home and complaining to their parents and saying 'I've been told I'm not a good Muslim' ... There were obviously lots of girls who were Muslims where there was, you know, a wide range of what they wear and how they see things, but this one particular group, I think they were putting some kind of pressure on some of the other girls.

The head who had the strongest views about the need for schools to maintain their secular spaces also recognized the dangers of instituting prayer rooms. He refused to establish a specific prayer room, although this did not preclude the school from finding a quiet space for prayers when required. In his view, students had ample scope to practise their religion outside of school hours and, in any case, the school resources were too scarce to be devoted to increasing religious activities.

Gender Equality and Religious Identity

Perhaps the most contentious area in managing multiculturalism in schools was the issue of dress codes for girls.

Female dress has always been a difficult issue because it can and often does signify the socially subordinate position of women in all religions. In many, the underlying injunction for women is to be 'modest' in dress and behaviour, usually taken to mean that they should cover their bodies and hair. The demand for modesty is born out of the need to avoid attracting and therefore corrupting the male gaze. However, in different contexts, women's dress is also dictated by cultural traditions and varies in accordance with precise class and social positions of families. Debates about dress codes have become further complicated by the fact that they can signify political resistance.[15]

Religious fundamentalist movements, however, use religion to re-invent cultural practices around female dress codes as a way of controlling their sexuality. The imposition of strict dress codes has become a means by which women are allowed to enter public spaces whilst at the same time, paradoxically, they are reminded that the private sphere is their main, legitimate site of existence.

In the light of these complexities, it came as no surprise that many of the teachers viewed the demand for Muslim girls to dress in a particular way as an expression of the survival of the Muslim 'community' in the face of anti-Muslim racism. Little or no thought was given to the impact of this demand on the question of autonomy of Muslim or indeed other minority girls.

All schools in the study showed flexibility in meeting religious dress requirements. But some went to extraordinary lengths. For example, in the single-sex school, all the windows of the main hall where PE classes took place were blacked out, despite the fact that, by the head's own admission, the school was a 'safe environment'. All the schools accommodated the wearing of the hijab (head scarf) as part of their dress code or school uniform. However, this also led to some pupils demanding the right to wear the jilbaab [16] and the nikab.[17] One head argued that even though her school had a clear uniform policy, she preferred to accommodate the demand to wear the jilbaab, to avoid turning it into a 'political' issue. Ironically, she did not recognize that the demand for Muslim girls to wear the jilbaab or nikab was already politicized.

For instance, in the highly publicized case of Shabina Begum and the refusal by a secondary school to allow her to wear the jilbaab, the House of Lords noted that she was motivated by a 'shadowy political group'. Although aspects of their reasoning is problematic, for example, an acceptance of the entitlement of community and religious leaders to speak on behalf of their communities, the House of Lords rejected the argument that Ms Begum's right to manifest her religion and her right to education had been violated. The decision emphasized, in particular, the need to balance Ms Begum's right to wear a jilbaab against the interests of the rest of the school community, and, in particular, the interests of many other Muslim girls who feared that any concession on the issue would create pressure on them to also wear a jilbaab. However, this decision was also based on the reassurance given by Muslim 'experts' and 'theologians' that the school already conformed to Islamic dress requirements for girls. It is worth considering what might be the case if there was no such 'community' endorsement, or if women and girls were to challenge religious dress codes on feminist grounds.

The head from the single-sex school in our study recounted an incident involving a young Muslim pupil who demanded the right to wear the nikab, when previously she had had no difficulty in conforming to the school uniform policy. The pupil told the head that for religious reasons she needed to maintain her 'modesty', especially in the presence of the male tutors. She also demanded the right to have her examinations invigilated only by female invigilators. In response, the head asked her searching questions about the meaning of 'modesty' and whether it meant that she considered the head not deserving of

respect or other pupils or staff who did not cover their faces. The pupil could not answer the questions, leading the head to suspect that she had been coached by people outside the school. The head insisted that for safety reasons, she could not accede to her demand to wear the nikab, nor could she guarantee that her examinations would be invigilated only by female teachers. The student did not take the matter further.

In this light, it is both unfortunate and worrying that the guidelines issued by the National Union of Teachers (NUT) on Muslim dress codes are less than clear on how to balance the issue of religious dress codes with the need to safeguard the rights of minority girls.[18] Despite warning school governors to be aware of their obligations under the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975, the Human Rights Act of 1998 and the Race Relations Act of 1976, the guidelines focus only on the need for teachers to be 'sensitive to the needs of different cultural, racial and religious groups'. In particular, they draw specific attention to the need for Muslims to show 'modesty' as part of their religious requirement.

It should be recognized that for Muslims, in particular, the concepts of modesty and dignity in dress carry the status of religious obligation.

The guidelines fail to question the problematic discourse of 'modesty' and the clash between religion and gender equality for minority women. The guidelines warn against privileging any one religious interpretation of the requirement for modesty of dress and advise teachers to bear in mind whether or not a 'pupil's choice of dress hinders the process of teaching and learning'. However, there is no advice on how teachers should balance the conflicting interests that arise with the right to manifest religious beliefs. Indeed, the entire tone of the guidelines suggests that cultural sensitivity should trump other equality rights. Through case studies, the guidelines recommend that decisions be taken in consultation with the 'community', which is taken to mean 'community representatives' and/or 'religious leaders'. No attention is drawn to the fact that such leaders are not democratically elected and do not necessarily represent the views of anyone but themselves or the dominant groups to which they belong.

Disturbingly, the guidelines fail to recognize equal opportunities in terms of the human rights of minority women, since the entire guidance is framed within the need to be mindful of the Muslim faith as represented by community/religious leaders. This is also borne out by the list of recommended organizations for further advice, many of which are not known for their work on gender equality within Asian communities.

The problematic accommodation of religion in schools must therefore be viewed in conjunction with the equally problematic concept of 'parental choice', since some parents or the groups that represent them often exercise or advocate 'parental choice' as a way of closing down the options available for girls in respect of their freedom of thought and movement. It is no accident that many

of the examples of the negative impact of the rise in religious identities in schools relate specifically to girls and their participation in education.

All religions and cultures are built on patriarchal notions of womanhood and this can and does circumscribe the participation of women in civil society. Whilst many parents within minority communities wish to educate their girls to the highest standards, there are those who also want to control their participation in the wider society in order to ensure that cultural and religious values are transmitted from one generation to the next. Education in some Asian communities has become an important lever in terms of gaining marriage partners, but too much knowledge and independence of thought is still considered incompatible to marriage, which is still perceived to be the main goal for women. This is why single-sex schools are extremely popular with some parents. Religious single-sex schools are considered even better because they limit exposure to the opposite sex or other backgrounds and beliefs. This development is not unique to Muslim parents. Increasingly, Sikh and Hindu leaders are also demanding state funding for religious schools or more recognition based on religious identity.

Significantly, almost all the teachers in the study raised concerns about parents withdrawing girls (mainly) from the social parts of sex education.[19] They stated that they felt compromised by the parental right of choice and hampered by the fear of being perceived to be 'insensitive' and even 'racist' if they intervened.

Whilst the parental right to withdraw children from aspects of sex education is a right awarded by successive Conservative governments to demands made by fundamentalist Christians, the implementation of this right within the context of a resurgence of religious identity can have serious consequences for the rights of minority girls. They are denied the opportunity to learn how to manage emotions, conflict and relationships confidently and to learn how to avoid exploitation and abuse. The New Labour Government has recognized that attending such classes is an essential part of any preventative strategy on violence and abuse.[20] Yet, it would appear ready to hear and pander to the central demand made by many religionists, that the education system should not compromise issues of faith.[23]

Not all the teachers in the study questioned the exercise of parental choice where girls were concerned. Some ethnic minority teachers felt sympathy for parents who were not kept fully informed about their children's activities or who wanted to preserve their traditions. Whilst this is understandable, it has to be recognized that disclosure can lead to serious consequences for minority girls, especially if relationships with boys and issues concerning their sexuality are disclosed. The murder of young girls by their fathers and/or extended family members for transgressing religious or cultural norms in the United Kingdom and elsewhere is an example of the price that girls and young women pay. In a context where issues such as forced marriage, female genital mutilation and the high suicide rates of young Asian girls have been recognized [21], it is

disturbing to see that the withdrawal of minority girls from sex education or their absenteeism from school is not properly monitored across the country.

All the schools in the study reported that girls tended to be withdrawn from residential trips or other mixed-gender activities, even if these were essential to their studies. Innovative strategies were adopted by the schools or the girls themselves to get around cultural restrictions. However, such strategies cannot be a substitute for the need to address the denial of the full range of educational opportunities to which all children should be entitled. This is no doubt why the majority of teachers supported a recommendation to diminish or wholly remove parental rights of withdrawal from any part of sex education and other activities.

More generally, the study points to the need for more research on the withdrawal of minority girls from certain parts of the education system. Our fear is that the situation is probably much worse for girls from communities that are more conservative and invariably controlled by strong religious leadership.

Conclusion

Whilst the schools in our study were strongly committed to the idea of multiculturalism and made efforts to assert an inclusive ethos that promotes respect for diversity, their practice of multiculturalism indicated that issues of anti-racism and multiculturalism are being collapsed into recognition of religious identity only. There was a disproportionate preoccupation with accommodating religion and safeguarding against causing 'offence' at the expense of addressing substantive issues of racial inequality. The resulting drift from multiculturalism to 'multi-faithism' undermines the secular nature of state schools and also contributes to the construction of minority communities in very specific ways. For example, South Asian communities are generally ascribed 'religious' values whilst African-Caribbean communities are perceived to be more secular, with histories of struggles for civil and political rights.

The drive towards greater religious recognition has also brought with it the attendant problems of representation, validity and authenticity. Related to this is the use of the language of 'parental choice' by fundamentalists and authoritarian religious forces to limit the educational opportunities of minority girls. State schools struggle to ensure that they meet the needs of young minority girls when faced with parents or groups who use the schools to pursue another agenda – to control their minds and bodies. The practice of multiculturalism therefore contradicts human rights principles as well as the 'Every Child Matters' guidance, all of which should inform the delivery of education for all in all schools.[22]

The school context provides the most conducive environment in which to nurture individual minds. It also has the potential to contribute to the construction of a unifying identity based on notions of social justice, equality and human rights. But in the current climate, state schools appear to be contributing to an agenda which promotes a new settlement between religion

and the state in which religion is beginning to occupy a more prominent and privileged public role. At the very least, this development indicates the threat of further segregation, intolerance and inequality based around religious divisions.

Notes

- [1] The study was conducted by Pragna Patel of Southall Black Sisters and Sukhwant Dhaliwal of The Working Lives Institute based at the London Metropolitan University.
- [2] See, for example, extracts from a speech by Robin Cook (then Foreign Secretary) to the Social Market Foundation in London, reported in *The Guardian*, 19 April 2001.
- [3] Trevor Phillips, for example, has stated that multiculturalism is an 'outdated' concept, whilst David Goodhart asks whether 'diversity is compatible with solidarity' in 'What Now for Multiculturalism', published in *Connections*, Campaign for Racial Equality (CRE), Winter 2004/05.
- [4] For years, casework experience has led Southall Black Sisters to criticize the way in which both the understanding and the practice of multiculturalism have failed to take account of gender inequality within minority communities.
- [5] Reports such as the Swann Report in 1985 did attempt to refer to both minority and majority children participating in shaping society as a whole within commonly accepted values and argued for the need for ethnic minorities to be helped to maintain their distinct ethnic identities within this common framework. However, this was translated into the practice of helping minorities to preserve their cultural and religious identities. Attempts were also made by the Inner London Education Authority to push a more radical strategy which emphasized the discrimination and disadvantage of black people, but this approach was also flawed when it lapsed into a kind of moral anti-racism as described in the Burnage Report – see I. Macdonald, R. Bhavnani, L. Khan & G. John (1989) *Murder in the Playground*. (The Burnage Report). London: Longsight Press.
- [6] Ironically, however, when recommendations were sought from the focus groups, the main demands were for greater resources for teaching English as an additional language and better structures of support for parents, together with the need to tackle underachievement generally.
- [7] The term fundamentalism refers here to the definition articulated by Yuval-Davis as 'specifically modern movements which require strict adherence to their text and claim their version of religion to be the only true one and feel threatened by pluralist systems of thought, and so justify the use of political means to impose it on all members of their religion'. N. Yuval-Davis (1992) 'Fundamentalism, Multiculturalism and Women in Britain', in J. Donald & A. Rattansi (Eds) *Race, Culture and Difference*. London: Sage.
- [8] See, for example, Gita Sahgal (1992) 'Secular Spaces: the experience of Asian women organizing', in Gita Sahgal & Nira Yuval-Davis, *Refusing Holy Orders*. London: Virago Press.

- [9] The study's preferred definition is the separation of religion and the state in which religion is regarded as a personal matter, which should not be institutionalized within state structures.
- [10] The Education Reform Act of 1988 introduced the imposition of religious assemblies in all state schools. This was a last-minute amendment introduced by Baroness Blatch, who was responding to demands made by the Association of Christian Teachers.
- [11] The RE Unit was renamed as the Beliefs and Values Unit, which incorporated a range of belief systems including humanism and atheism.
- [12] See, for example, Parita Mukta (1997) *New Hinduism: teaching intolerance, practising aggression*, *Journal of PCIRE*, Autumn.
- [13] *Muslims on Education*: a position paper by the Association of Muslim Social Scientists and Forum Against Islamophobia.
- [14] See, for example, Sukhwant Dhaliwal (2003) *Orange is Not the Only Colour: young women, religious identity and the Southall community*, in Rahila Gupta (Ed.) *From Homebreakers to Jailbreakers*. London: Zed Books.
- [15] One example is the way in which the hijab (a head scarf which Muslim women around the world have worn in a variety of ways) was 'nationalized' during the Palestinian struggles in the 1980s and 1990s. Not wearing one was perceived as betrayal to the liberation cause. See Nahda Younis Shehada (2004) *The Rise of Fundamentalism and the Role of the 'State' in the Specific Political Context of Palestine*, in Ayesha Imam, Jenny Morgan & Nira Yuval-Davis (Eds) *Warning Signs of Fundamentalisms*. Nottingham: Women Living Under Muslim Laws Publications, The Russell Press.
- [16] An ankle length garment for women.
- [17] A face veil covering the entire face except the eyes.
- [18] 'The Muslim Faith and School Uniform', NUT Guidelines, March 2006. It should be noted that these guidelines were issued before the House of Lords decision in the Shabina Begum case and before the DfES guidelines on banning the veil were introduced in 2007.
- [19] That is the social (sexual relationship) aspects of sex education taught within the Personal, Social and Health Education sections of the curriculum.
- [20] See *Sex and Relationship Guidance*, DfES, 2000.
- [21] Studies show that the suicide rate of young Asian women is three times the national average. See, for example, V. Soni Raleigh (1996) *Suicide Patterns and Trends in People of Indian Subcontinent and Caribbean Origin in England and Wales*, *Ethnicity and Health*, 1(1), 55-63.
- [22] Children's rights are enshrined within the *Declaration of the Rights of the Child* (1959) and the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989). The Every Child Matters Agenda also defines a new approach to children, placing better outcomes for children at the centre of all policies and approaches involving children's services. These outcomes include: being healthy; achieving economic well-being; being safe; achieving; and making a positive contribution to society.

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