Changing attitudes to cultural difference: perceptions of Muslim families in English schools

Abstract

This article argues that neoliberal and neo conservative schooling policies in England legitimise a long-standing neglect of cultural difference in schools, and are having a particularly damaging effect on Muslim children's experience of schooling. It offers evidence that relationships between teachers and Muslim families in particular may be becoming more distant, and argues that this is largely a result of a complex series of pressures on teachers' working lives. Interview data from a small-scale interpretive, empirical study of eight primary teachers suggests that in some schools the most frequent response to issues involving Muslim families is avoidance. We suggest this is because teachers did not see Muslims as individuals, but as representatives of an essentially different group. However, a major finding of our study is that when teachers were able to make connections with families, they gained a more complex understanding of the realities of the Muslim children in their classes.

Introduction

This article explores the effect that neoliberal and neo-conservative policy has had on teachers' capacities to create partnerships with families, one of the most relevant, yet difficult, challenges for schools in urban and diverse areas (Muijs et al., 2004). Based on interviews with eight primary teachers in eight different London schools, we argue that it is partnerships with Muslim families that are currently perceived as particularly problematic.

In order to explore the link between these broad ideological and institutional changes and individual interactions at school level we draw on Michael Apple's (2017, p. 149) delineation of three key factions[1] which have 'increasing influence in education and all things social'. He

---

[1] Apple identified religious conservatives as a fourth faction in this power bloc, but as religious conservatism has a limited impact in England, we have omitted it from our analysis.

1

identifies a neo-liberal faction, which advocates marketised solutions to all social problems; neo-conservatives who seek to defend their view of nation and tradition, and champions of 'techniques of accountability' as the pre-eminent tool for school improvement.

We were drawn to this framework as it explains the apparent contradiction in government policy, which in some contexts advocates freedom and in others exerts unprecedented control. Whilst freedom is expressed in terms of neoliberal education as a market place, control is exerted through a neoconservative cultural restoration project 'which is largely based on a fear of "pollution" from the culture and the body of those whom they consider the "Others" (Apple 2017, p.149). Accountability measures are used by both groups to ensure compliance. We argue that though they derive from very different ideologies, neoliberal and neoconservative policies have the same effect of disadvantaging some groups in the education system. The essentialised views of Muslims that predominate in a neo-conservative era are justified by neoliberal imperatives; thus we agree with Leonardo (2009) that neoliberalism is simply another way in which inequality is reproduced.

Schools, neoliberalism and accountability

In England, schools have been subject to neoliberal market forces since the 1980s (Pratt, 2016; Troman and Jeffrey, 2012). This has a number of consequences. First, because parents are now, in theory, consumers of education, schools are forced into competition with each other (Angus 2013). In a market led economy, the 'rational consumer…must be aided by information on the relative quality of the products available' (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000, p.21). Parents are encouraged to see the published test results as the final word on the quality of any school. This has created a culture of performativity (Ball, 2003) which forces schools to focus all their energy on producing positive data. Following the nature of the market, schools that fail to do so face closure or amalgamation.

Second, there is evidence that the neoliberal agenda is reproducing inequality within English schools. As Hall et al (2004, p. 814) argue, when a school's continued existence depends on good test results, the focus on a narrow range of skills, 'render[s] invisible the diversity of

pupils' home and community lives', and teachers' freedom to draw on children's experiences and interests, in partnership with their parents is limited (Wood, 2007). As a result teachers do not know enough about the interests, experiences and families of the children in their classes. A similar lack of commitment to cultural difference in schools has been noted in Belgium (Merry, 2005), Sweden (Osman and Mansson, 2015) the USA (Picower and Mayorga, 2015) and Canada (Sensoy and Darius-Stonebanks, 2009).

Twenty years ago Basit (1997) argued that teachers struggled to make sense of the social worlds of their minority ethnic pupils, and that misinterpretation of their religious- cultural values was common. We argue that since then this situation has worsened because of the demands of accountability, which force teachers to act as technicians, focused on the immediate concerns of day to day teaching rather than a larger moral purpose (Sevrage, 2009). Moore and Clarke (2016) contend that over time teachers have, often reluctantly, accepted the new focus on managerial priorities, rather than engaging with broader educational issues. Roberts-Homes (2015, p. 1) suggests that early years' settings are also now being pulled away from their traditional focus of placing children at the heart of the educational process, in order to compile 'appropriate data'.

Schools, Muslims and Neo-conservatism

Alongside these market-driven initiatives, a somewhat contradictory, culturally conservative, approach is at play. Successive recent governments have portrayed multiculturalism as a failure, and suggested that divisions in society are caused by some ethnic minority groups' refusal to integrate (Worley, 2005). In schools, the long-standing neglect of cultural difference is now given additional legitimacy because it is an integral part of a neo-conservative agenda. Since the 1990s, this has become the dominant approach to race and education policy in England (Tomlinson, 2008). Since the Conservative Government came to power in 2015, the erasure of race in schools has been pursued with even more energy. There is now no reference to ethnicity or race in the Standards for Qualified Teacher status, (Department for Education, 2011). The requirement that schools report racist incidents to their local authority for monitoring has been abolished (Talwar, 2012). Race equality has been removed from the list of areas Ofsted, the powerful English inspection body, is to monitor. Over time, both the institutional procedures with which to identify and challenge

3

racism, and the language needed for teachers to identify and talk about these issues has been removed (Kulz, 2017). Thus, while racial stereotypes and hierarchies remain stubbornly in place, the means of challenging them is rapidly disappearing. This agenda is also evident in the USA (Modica, 2015) Australia (Srinivasan and Cruz, 2015) and Canada (Fleras, 2014).

In the UK, as elsewhere, it is Muslims who are often singled out as the most problematic ethnic minority group. The London bombings in 2005 exacerbated a long-standing perception of Muslims as essentially different (Gillborn, 2008). The attacks led to the Prevent strategy, part of the government's counter terrorism policy. Although the stated aim of the policy was to deter people from any form of extremism, in practice the focus has been almost exclusively on Muslims. This perception of a 'suspect community' (Pantazis and Pemberton, 2011) led to a doubling of anti - Muslim hate crime in 2015 (https://tellmamauk.org/).

The idea that Muslims are essentially different is at the root of the 'clash of civilisations' thesis, which suggests that 'Islam is incompatible with modernity, with civilisation and, more important, with Euro-Americanness.' (Semati, 2010, p.267). There is a widespread assumption that there is such a thing as 'the Muslim community', i.e. that all Muslims share more or less the same characteristics, and are essentially different from their host communities. Differences deriving from gender, generation, national heritage, education or socio-economic status are seen as unimportant. Popular media depictions draw from the same repertoire of stereotypes of Muslims as self-segregating, misogynistic and fundamentalist (Baguely and Hussain, 2008) and thus define the parameters of public discourse about Muslims.

As the intense media interest in its wearers testifies, the hijab[2] is the symbol of Islamic identity that is most freighted with misunderstanding in Western society (Siraj, 2011). Scott (2007 p. 4) argues that the hijab carries two meanings. It has become 'an emblem of radical Islamist politics', symbolic of the clash of civilisations thesis, and it is simultaneously symbolic of Muslim women's oppression, because of the perception that women are being forced to wear it by male family members as a way to protect them from unwelcome sexual

---

[2] The term hijab can be used to mean the practice of covering the body in general, and more specifically the short scarf covering the head and shoulders

attention. Such a reading sees the wearing of the hijab as a deeply traditional and conservative practice. However, many studies suggest it is a modern phenomenon, noting that that there are many more young women actively choosing to wear the hijab now than a generation ago. These studies suggest that the hijab means different things to different women. While the sense of the hijab as a protection against male attention is a factor for some, others say that they adopt it to signal resistance to western hegemony (Scott, 2007); as a sign of belonging (Hoque, 2015); or because among fellow Muslims it confers status and dignity upon the wearer (Ruby, 2006).

Deficit discourses around parents in schools

Whilst schools officially acknowledge the importance of working with parents, the rhetoric surrounding parental involvement can sometimes mask uncomfortable dilemmas. Crozier (2001) claims that the pressure of performativity has led schools to make greater demands on parents to comply with a singular notion of the 'good parent', often tailored to the normative values of the white middle class (Crozier 2001; Merry 2005; Osman and Mansson 2015).

Muslim parents have been described as 'hard to reach,' 'indifferent' and even 'impenetrable' by schools, both in England and elsewhere, because their involvement with their child's school does not always fit schools' understandings of parental involvement (Crozier and Davies, 2007; Ghaffar- Kucher, 2015). Crozier and Davies (2007) report that teacher perceptions of Muslim parents as disinterested in their children's education have often been used as an excuse for schools to be less proactive in reaching out to Muslim families. Watkins and Noble (2016) found that many teachers in their study demonstrated an unwillingness to shift their thinking, and a settled complacency which governed the way that they dealt with issues relating to culture in their schools. This prevented teachers from engaging with, and developing their understanding of, the ethnic minority families in their schools. Maguire et al. (2006) however suggest that teachers might adopt deficit discourses around parenting as a form of self-maintenance in a climate of accountability where they may be experiencing high levels of stress. Blair (2001) notes that the most effective ways of gaining parents' support and co-operation is to listen to their concerns, consult them about and give them a voice on important issues. In the project cited above, when teachers did make connections with ethnic minority parents this dismantled their assumptions about

particular parents, based on their ethnicity, and they were able to find found common ground (Watkins and Noble, 2016).

Methods

The data presented here are drawn from a small scale interpretive, empirical study which followed a group of eight early years and primary school teachers from the final year of a three year undergraduate teaching qualification until their sixth year in teaching (2007-2013). The aim of the wider study was to explore what factors enabled or inhibited new teachers in developing an approach to teaching that addressed race equity and ethnic diversity. Volunteers were sought from a one year Humanities module led by one of the authors as part of their BAEd programme. From a class of twenty, nine participants initially came forward, though only eight completed the second interview. Because the participants were all volunteers, there is no claim that the group was in any way representative. Indeed, it is likely that participants with positive attitudes to cultural difference are over-represented in the group. The project followed ethical guidelines set out by the British Educational Research Association (2011) and was granted ethical approval by the authors' institution. All participants were fully informed of the nature of the project, their right to anonymity, and to withdraw from the project at any time. The first two rounds of interviews were sent for member checking, but following a request from participants this practice was discontinued thereafter. All of the participants were women, aged between their early twenties and early forties, and all were teaching in London schools. Their pseudonyms, self-identified ethnicities, and the age phase they taught are outlined in Table 1.

The data were collected through annual in-depth semi-structured interviews which lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, and were usually held in the office of one of the authors. They were digitally recorded and transcribed. The wider project adopted a narrative approach to understanding the teachers' perspectives, looking at how the stories they chose to tell – and *how* they told those stories- helps us to understand their own perceptions of their experiences (Riessman, 1993). Thus each year, the focus of the interviews was on incidents which illustrated their involvement in issues to do with race, ethnicity and culture, and their own reflections on these, rather than on eliciting their opinions on these subjects.

For the purposes of this article, where the emphasis is less on the individual teachers' identities than on the issues they face in the neo-liberal classroom, we adopted a thematic approach to data analysis. This involved a six-phase process developed by Braun and Clarke (2006): a familiarisation process with the data; generating initial codes; searching for, reviewing and then defining and naming themes. Initially, all units of data which included the terms 'Islam' or 'Muslim' were extracted from the database. Working separately, both authors then coded all individual units of data. We then worked together to assign the codes to themes to reflect the participants' perceptions of their experiences. Four main themes emerged. One related to the curriculum as a site for discussion of difference, and this issue will be addressed elsewhere. The other themes were: schools' avoiding conflict with Muslim parents, school routines being prioritised over partnerships with parents, and the perception of an unbridgeable gulf between teachers and Muslim parents.

Because the data discussed here are taken from a longitudinal study on the broad theme of teachers and ethnic diversity, and focused on the teachers' own perspectives, participants were not asked direct questions about their relationships with families. Only two of the teachers, both working in the Early Years, and both working mainly with Muslim families, talked at length about this. One teacher dropped out of the study after her first year in teaching, in 2008. The other five teachers worked with older primary children, when partnerships with parents are seen as a less significant part of teachers' work. Nevertheless, while these teachers offered only occasional examples of their own individual involvement with parents, they all offered important observations of how their schools as institutions viewed parents and responded to them. One of the teachers, Farida, was herself a Muslim, and her experience offers an important insight into parent-teacher relations from a teacher's perspective.

Table 1. The participants

Pseudonym	Self-identified ethnic background	Age phase
Becky	White British	3-5 year olds

Debbie	White British	6-7 year olds
Farida	British Muslim	9-10 year olds
Maria	White British	4-5 year olds
Natalie	British Caribbean	9-10 year olds
Leah	White British	9-10 year olds
Susan	White British	7-8 year olds
Holly	White British	6-7 year olds

Findings

Avoiding conflict with Muslim parents

Five of the teachers reported incidents in which they felt the school failed to act appropriately because the issue involved having to confront Muslim parents. In her second year of teaching, Maria, who was working in a school with a mainly Muslim intake, was particularly frustrated by the stance her school took:

> *I think the head is scared of causing anything... she doesn't want to get involved in anything religious… There's always that feeling of, 'our parents are very sensitive'…Why should they be more sensitive than any other group of parents?...*

> *But let's keep it all happy, you know, don't rock the boat. It's not happening, it doesn't matter.*

Maria describes the Headteacher's strategy for avoiding controversy as removing the subject of religious and cultural difference from school life altogether. This stance was taken to an

extreme in that, very unusually for a primary school, no religious or cultural festivals were officially celebrated. As Maria points out, the phrase 'our parents are very sensitive' suggests that the Head feels that the mainly Muslim parents at the school are essentially different from other parents. Her response to this perceived difference is to avoid confrontation, in order to protect the school, in an era when addressing racism is not a priority (Kapoor, 2103)

Despite the official erasure of race and difference in the school, the very young children in Maria's class continued to discuss their ideas openly. Because she was so struck by the number and nature of comments children were making Maria produced a list of them at one of the interviews. Although most related to the children's uncertainty about their own and others' religious and cultural identities, some were derogatory. The one that worried her most was recorded as '*A Muslim boy said his mummy had told him Jews were 'bad people''*. Maria took that incident to the Deputy Head. She recounted what happened:

> *She just said, 'oh it's something he just…we don't need to worry'. 'Cause I really wanted to, you know, not make a big deal out of it but I thought it warranted maybe a discussion with Mum and Dad, just to kind of see. [She said,] 'We don't have any Jewish people in the school'. And I was like, 'well that's not the point. It's still his way of thinking and what's, what's developing', you know. I mean you can't get more direct than that can you? It doesn't matter how old the child is. And just because he's repeating what he's heard.*

The way the Deputy Head interpreted the boy's comment may be an example of the liberal view of racism as an individual character defect, rather than a societal problem (Yancy, 2014). According to this logic, accusing the boy, and by extension his family, of being racist is perceived as a forbidding task, but because there is no victim, it is not necessary. By contrast, Maria's understanding of racism as a social rather than an individual issue- 'he's repeating what he's heard'- makes such a discussion a somewhat less emotive prospect. There is evidence that many schools have not been complying with the law in dealing with racist incidents of all kinds (Parsons, 2008). But it is possible, in view of the head's stance described above, that the question of Muslim-Jewish relations also played a part in the decision not to address the issue. The Deputy Head, working with the stereotype that all Muslims are anti-Semitic, may have taken the view that this was a point on which parents

were likely to be very sensitive. Therefore, any response would be likely to make both the individuals involved and the school too vulnerable: the Deputy Head did not allow Maria to address the issue with the parents.

Becky also worked with very young Muslim children from the beginning of her career. She spoke of the way in which the children used play to explore their developing understanding of themselves as Muslims, Bangladeshis and Londoners, and unlike Maria, did not feel that there were any institutional barriers to responding to this play. However, she shared Maria's frustration that the school went too far in avoiding confrontations with parents. Asked for an example, Becky said:

> *Like not using any food, like you know when you play, using pasta or rice, or*
> *playdough, because some people in the community saw that as being wasteful*
> *and I think that that used to frustrate me, because I'd think, 'oh I could do a*
> *really good activity...' There wasn't any policy about it. Just the coordinator*
> *said, 'no, the community doesn't like this so don't do it.' I mean I didn't do it*
> *but I used to get frustrated... because I'd think why isn't the school saying,*
> *'well actually...' .That's what used to frustrate me because they'd say 'oh, ok*
> *then the community doesn't like it so we won't do it'...'we don't want to cause*
> *any problems or come across as being racist'...I even sometimes feel that*
> *some people in the community would use that for getting what they wanted?*
> *Even if it wasn't educationally good. That frustrated me a bit.*

Trained in Early Years practice, Becky is accustomed to using everyday objects like flour in the classroom. She wants the school to make the argument in favour of this kind of play, but feels the senior management team does not want to raise the issue with parents, because they fear it challenges their religious beliefs. Whilst in some schools the use of foodstuffs for play might be seen as an ethical dilemma, in Becky's school this was seen very much as a religious issue. It may be significant that the senior manager uses the phrase, 'the community doesn't like it'. This use of the singular *community* tends to suggest a view of Muslims as a homogeneous, monolithic entity: all Muslims have the same beliefs (Runnymede Trust, 1997). But Becky also shows a degree of resentment that some individuals used the school's acquiescence to their advantage. When Becky talks about parents, she uses the phrase, 'some people in the community' which suggests she feels it is only a minority of parents who are

leading on the issue. Over time she develops strong relationships with the parents she works with, and is aware that they have as diverse a range of opinions and values as any other group.

Our reading of these incidents is that in each case the senior teachers are reluctant to be seen to challenge what they perceive to be fundamental Muslim values. It may be that this fear stems from a belief that unlike Christianity and western culture, which are seen as constantly evolving and having multiple variants, Islam is both monolithic and unchanging (Runnymede Trust, 1997).

Prioritising the convenience of school routines over partnerships with parents

As well as reacting to specific incidents with avoidance strategies, the teachers in our study also spoke of ways in which school routines kept parents at a distance on a day to day basis. Over the course of the project, seven of the teachers commented on their school's negative attitude to parental involvement in general. Susan and Maria reported that their schools did not have a parent association, and did not encourage parents to come into the school in other ways, for example to help with reading. Leah and Natalie felt their schools avoided contact with parents because they were reluctant to deal with inter-ethnic tensions in the school playground (author, 20xx). Debbie, working with mainly white British children, also felt her school's attitude to parents was only superficially welcoming:

One of the children who was in Y2 [6-7 years old] last year, and he's a Muslim... But they like to come in and they like to have a say in the school: really, really nice people. But they are sometimes seen as a bit of a pain, interfering.

This illustrates Crozier and Davies' (2007) suggestion that whilst schools acknowledge in theory the importance of working with parents, in practice they perceive some parents to be a threat, and as Debbie suggests above, 'a bit of a pain', as they bring with them different values and visions which do not fit schools' narrow understandings of appropriate parental involvement (Crozier, 2001).

Becky and Farida both told stories of being prevented from building relationships with parents because administrative or management issues were given a higher priority. Becky

spoke of how as a newly qualified teacher she had developed good relationships with parents of her children in her nursery class:

> *Last year I did this thing where I had all the parents in every morning. And I did the register by just looking and ticking them off.... So obviously I would speak to them in the morning and they would tell me all the problems they were having and this, that and the other, and so I had a really close kind of partnership with them. But then the register people didn't like it that they got their register at, like, half nine instead of ten past nine. So then I got told that I had to make all the children sit down and do the register.*

Becky noted that at the end of that first year, three of the parents in her class had become school governors, which she felt was partly because her practice had made them feel so involved. In her second year she reflected that, 'it's changed and I don't know them that well' because she had not been allowed to continue with her strategy. Her story suggests that keeping parents at a distance may not have been the explicit intention, but it certainly was the effect of this decision. The demands of accountability, in the shape of administrative convenience, and the business of meeting children's performance targets, are prioritised over developing relationships with parents. As Hall et al (2004) have argued, the focus on a narrow range of skills restricts teachers' freedom to draw on children's family experiences and interests in partnership with parents, limiting opportunities for teachers to learn about the social worlds of their minority ethnic pupils and their religious and cultural values (Basit, 1997).

Farida was a British Muslim teacher, with a Somali heritage, who worked with nine and ten year olds. She wore the hijab for most of the period of the research, but on moving to a new school in her third year of teaching, she began to wear the abaya, a long loose garment that covers the whole body, except the face. The school had a multi-ethnic intake. She told a story about a confrontation with a non- Muslim parent in her first term. Concerned that one of the girls in her class was not making much effort with her work, she spoke to her mother about it in the playground at the end of the day. The mother had been angry at being approached in this way, had shouted at Farida, and had then complained to the Deputy Head, who came to see Farida about the incident:

Farida: And she said, 'well to be honest with you, you've got a naturally loud voice and you come across as quite intimidating'. [Eyes are wide, showing disbelief] ...Yeah, I might be loud, but I would say, especially when I'm dealing with parents, I am an extremely polite person, because of how aware I am of the situation. Now you are telling me that that makes me intimidating. She says 'yes, you can come across as pretty aggressive. Could you not in future speak to parents out in the playground?' I said, 'well, I'm really sorry but I've already established a relationship... My classroom's on the top floor. They are not going to see me... She was like, 'yeah, ok I understand, but just don't do it, just don't talk to parents.

SP: And again is this related to you wearing the abaya?

Farida: I think it was to be honest with you. Because…you can sense it. When I'm not wearing it you can sense the change, the shift in people's attitudes towards me… People automatically… it's very quick. And I know for a fact she was nervous about me being a Muslim teacher, dressed the way I was, and teaching her daughter.

Here, Farida articulates what DuBois (1989) termed 'double consciousness' an awareness of how, as a member of a minority group, one is perceived by others in a society structured by race. She reflects that in an era when negative attitudes to Muslims are common, some parents are likely to be mistrustful because she is wearing the abaya, and that she has to be vigilant to ensure that nothing she does fuels their prejudice. She believes that the parent was already prejudiced against her, and was therefore more inclined to react negatively when she raised the issue of her daughter's lack of effort. For Farida, racism is at the heart of the incident. During their conversation immediately afterwards, however, neither Farida nor the Deputy Head raise the possibility that race was an issue. We suggest that the Deputy Head, like the senior management in Maria's school above, seeks to shut down interactions between Farida and the parents because of a pressure to minimise conflict and controversy in order to protect the school's reputation in a marketised, performative culture (Ball, 2003). But she also shuts down the subsequent conversation with Farida. She appears to interpret the conflict as a problem between two individuals: a personality clash. The ramifications of accepting that racism was involved are too complex and dangerous for the school, and she has the power to reinterpret the incident as something less threatening. Farida had experienced both overt and covert racism in other schools, and may therefore have felt that the Deputy Head would not take her seriously if she raised the issue.

The sense of an unbridgeable gulf

A third theme which emerged from the data concerned just three of the teachers, though notably the three who worked in mainly Muslim communities. Becky and Maria, who both worked with the youngest children, were both white British women in their early to mid-twenties, working with mainly Bangladeshi families. Both women admitted to feeling self-conscious in front of parents. In her second year, Becky reflected on how she had felt when she first joined the school:

> *Sometimes I felt like, how do I appear to the parents and to the people that I work with? Because my TAs [teaching assistants] wear the hijab and I was thinking do they look at me and think I'm not being respectful. Do they think- only my thoughts- it might not even cross their mind. But I'm thinking, how do I appear to them? Do they have a stereotypical idea of me as a Western woman? I'm unmarried. I live with my boyfriend. These are all things that in another culture would be considered a sin.*

Maria also spoke of her self-consciousness in her second year, but did not reflect that such things had improved over time:

> *I find myself having to think about what I'm going to say, and how I'm going to present myself. Being a young English girl, and even the way I dress as well, because I've got some parents that are completely covered, and that is a new experience for me, having to speak to someone that you can't actually see, so…yeah, so it's just getting used to that really.*

In both cases, their perspective suggests that sometimes the distance between parents and teachers is less to do with management priorities and more to do with individual preconceptions. Here, it is not so much a *physical* distance as a social one (Basit, 1997). Perceptions of an unbridgeable gulf between themselves and the Muslim families they worked with may have affected the capacity of all three teachers to address difficult issues. Leah, a young white British teacher working with nine and ten year olds in a school with a large Bangladeshi intake, reflected on the negative impact she felt her own identity had on her relationships with the children she taught:

> *Being white, being female, not being Muslim all combined together to create an ethos where I didn't feel respected and I felt I had to try and earn that from the children.*

Maria felt unable to address an issue with a boy in her class, because of her perception of the root cause of the issue:

Maria: I don't know if this is me being a bit sensitive but I wonder if some children culturally maybe at first find it difficult that I'm a woman and that they have to listen to me? Particularly with the boys. I know with [names boy] last year, he found it quite difficult to listen to me, and then because it was his dad that would never talk to me…
But I don't know if it was a cultural thing. I mean they were Muslim. But I sort of had this image that…because Mum didn't work, Mum was at home. And I don't know: maybe some children seeing a woman in a position of authority find it a bit difficult at first. Because I know this boy I've got at the moment, he just doesn't listen. He just doesn't think he has to listen. To me. It's, 'why?' 'Why do I have to listen?' And I don't know if maybe at home Mum…if Dad is the one that…Is it culturally that men are the sort of more important role and the women…

Becky told several stories of the very young children in her class using talk to explore their developing understanding of what it meant to be a Muslim, and her difficulties in managing some of their questions:

> *They sometimes say things to each other like, 'if you lie Allah's going to kill you, and various things like this, and they start crying and I have to explain that nobody's going to get killed and then we'll have a discussion … I find those situations quite difficult because that's something their parent has said to them, and you kind of have to respect that.*

Here, each of the three teachers reflects on a difficulty in the classroom, and appears to assign the cause of the difficulty to essential differences between themselves and their Muslim pupils and their parents. In doing so, they may perceive these genuinely difficult situations as more fraught and intractable than they need be. Maria articulates the common Western stereotype of Muslim women as subservient to male family members, and this stereotype informs her approach to the difficulty she faces with the behaviour of a boy in her class.

Rather than looking for a range of possible explanations, she attributes the problem to his Muslim identity. Leah also appears to suggest a link between Islam and misogyny. Author (20xx) also found that some teachers made this link, and were therefore unwilling to address the problem, because doing so risked being perceived as challenging religious convictions. Abbas (2002) suggests a way out of this difficulty. Teachers in his study also perceived a degree of sexism among some Muslim boys, but because they rejected the notion of cultures as uniform and unchanging, they were able to find ways to work with parents to challenge misogynistic attitudes.

Developing a mutual understanding between teachers and parents

Despite these barriers, real or imagined, both Becky and Maria talked about small exchanges with parents which demonstrate the potential for teachers to develop a more complex understanding of the Muslim families they work with when genuine dialogue occurs. At the end of her first year as a teacher, Becky offered a story which showed how even a short exchange can lead to greater mutual understanding. Again, it concerns teacher perceptions of Muslim attitudes to the sexes:

> *In my class there's a really big divide between boys and girls… they come and sit on the carpet and it's all the girls are on this side and all the boys are on that side… And I just think, 'is this cultural?' Because in the Muslim religion there's a lot of segregation between men and women, is this coming into my classroom now?.... I had one little girl in my class who just would not go near any boys and I spoke to her Mum about it and I said, 'look, you know, sometimes she's going to have to sit next to a boy and play with a boy', and her Mum was telling her that it was OK for her to um, be with boys, and the way she put it was, she said 'it's ok, they're your brothers'.*

> *SP: Right, that's quite a useful tip for you, isn't it? That's a way of talking with the children, presenting it to the children, isn't it? That you're like brothers and sisters in this class.*

> *Becky: Oh yeah, that is a good way. I hadn't thought about that… Yeah it is a different way of putting it in a way that the children would understand. Oh, I hadn't thought of that, actually.*

Here, Becky is aware of the complexities of culture and asks herself whether the children are conforming to a cultural norm or not. She does not assume that this is the source of the behaviour. She also demonstrates good practice by immediately taking her concerns to the parent, and making the practice of the nursery clear to her. As Blair (2001) suggests this type of dialogue is one of the most effective ways of gaining parents' support and co-operation, and in this case the parent's response is supportive of nursery practice, but also allows Becky to see a way of presenting this practice to children. Perhaps significantly, it is not until she recounts this story to the interviewer that Becky is able to see the value of this exchange for her own practice.

The list of incidents made by Maria in her second year of teaching also revealed a small but significant exchange with a parent:

> *R's mum asked me if R can wear the hijab at school. R keeps taking it off and putting it on coat peg. I did not feel comfortable making her wear it and spoke to Mum. Mum said it is her choice so she doesn't mind. I am surprised as R's sister in Y2 wears it every day. (Mum wears niqab) [a garment which covers the whole body, including the face].*

While it is not possible to offer more than a tentative analysis of such a short note, there is here a sense that Maria assumes that R is being forced to wear the hijab, and that Maria does not wish to collude with this. As discussed above, the wearing of the hijab is often misunderstood, and in view of Maria's earlier comments it is possible that she shares a common misconception that the girl will have no say in the matter. In addressing the issue, however, like Becky, Maria puts her training into practice and speaks to the girl's mother. Maria appears to anticipate that this will be problematic, and is surprised that in fact the mother is quite relaxed about it. Here again, the teacher's preconceptions are challenged and she is able to see the practice of young girls adopting the hijab in a different, less fraught, way. These incidents both demonstrate that when teachers do reach out to ethnic minority parents the relationships that develop dismantle their assumptions, and they are able to find common ground and work in partnership (Watkins and Noble 2016).

17

Conclusion

We suggest that schools are ideal places for breaking down stereotypes, because they are one of the few places in society which bring together children and families from a range of different backgrounds, and with different values and perspectives. Our study found that it was often senior managers who discouraged class teachers from talking to parents, which suggests that it is neo-liberal and neo-conservative imperatives that are shutting down the opportunities for dialogue which would help teachers, children and parents to develop a common understanding. However, our findings also suggest that when teachers do make connections with parents, a level of trust begins to develop, which is essential to mutually respectful parent-teacher relationships. These connections can enable teachers to move beyond stereotypes, and better understand the reality of children's lives. We are aware that these stereotypes are held about many marginalised social and cultural groups. Writing in a different context, Watkins and Noble (2016, p.16) describe the changing perceptions of one teacher working closely for the first time with parents, in this case, from Indian backgrounds. Her words seem to us to sum up the change in attitude that is required to bridge the perceived gap between teachers and Muslim parents in English schools:

> I think I just feel a lot more relaxed about the whole thing… you know I don't really see Indian parents, and the baggage that might have come with them beforehand. I just see – there is a parent that I am going to communicate with to the best of my ability about their child.

While we do not advocate that teachers ignore the cultural backgrounds of parents they work with, we do suggest that seeing them first and foremost *as parents* is a first step in alleviating the anxiety that is currently acting as a barrier to mutually beneficial teacher-parent relationships. In order for this to happen, teachers need to resist the depersonalizing effects of neoliberalism and find time to make connections with families. In doing so, teachers can move beyond the stereotypes which create a distance between themselves and Muslim children and their families.

References

18

Abbas, T. (2002) Teacher Perceptions of South Asians in Birmingham Schools and Colleges, *Oxford Review of Education,* 28 (4) 447-471

Angus, (2013)

Apple, M. (2017) What is Present and Absent in Critical Analyses of Neoliberalism in Education? *Peabody Journal of Education*, 92, 148-153

Baguely, P. and Hussain, Y. (2008) *Riotous citizens- ethnic conflict in multicultural Britain*. Farnham: Ashgate

Ball, S.J. (2003) The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity, *Journal of Education Policy*, 18 (2) 215-228

Basit, T. N. (1997) I Want More freedom, but Not Too much. British Muslim girls and the dynamism of family values, *Gender and Education*. 9 (4) 425-440

Blair, M. (2001) The education of black children: Why do some schools do better than others? In R. Majors (Ed.), *Educating our Black Children. New Directions and Radical Approaches* 28-44. London: Routledge/ Falmer

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2) 77-101

British Educational Research Association (2011) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* [online] Retrieved from https//www.bera.ac.uk

Crozier, G (2001) Excluded parents. The deracialisation of parental involvement. *Race Ethnicity and Education*. 4 (4) 329-341

Crozier, G. and Davies, J. (2007) Hard to reach parents or hard to reach schools? A discussion of home-school relations, with particular reference to Bangladeshi and Pakistani parents, *British Educational Research Journal*, 33 (3) 295-313

Department for Education (2011) Teachers' Standards [online] Retrieved from
https://www.gov.uk

DuBois, W.E.B. (1989) *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Bantam

Fleras, A. (2014) *Racisms in a Multicultural Canada: Paradoxes, Politics, and Resistance*. Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press

Ghaffar- Kucher, A. (2015) 'Narrow- minded and oppressive' or a 'Superior Culture'? Implications of Divergent representations of Islam for Pakistani American Youth. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*. 18 (2) 202-224

Gillborn, D. (2008) Racism and Education: Coincidence or Conspiracy? London: Routledge.

Hall, K. Collins, J., Benjamin, S., Nind, M. & Sheehy, K. (2004): SATurated models of pupildom: Assessment and inclusion/exclusion, *British Educational Research Journal*, 30 (6) 801-817

Hoque, A. (2015) *British-Islamic Identity Third-generation Bangladeshis from East London*. Stoke on Trent: IoE/Trentham

Kapoor, N. (2013) The Advancement of Racial Neoliberalism in Britain, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 36 (6) 1028-1046

Kulz, C. (2017) *Factories for Learning: making race, class and inequality in the neoliberal academy.* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Leonardo, Z. (2009) *Race, Whiteness and Education*. New York and London: Routledge

Maguire, M., Wooldridge, M. and Pratt-Adams, S. (2006) *The Urban Primary School.* Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Merry, M.S. (2005) Social Exclusion of Muslim Youth in Flemish and French speaking Belgian schools, *Comparative Education Review*, 45 (1) 1-23

Modica, M. (2015) Unpacking the colorblind approach: accusations of racism at a friendly, mixed-race school. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 18 (3) 396-418

Moore, A. & Clarke, M. (2016) 'Cruel Optimism': teacher attachment to professionalism in an era of performativity, *Journal of Education Policy*, 31 (5) 666-677

Muijs, D., Harris, A., Chapman, C., Stoll, L. and Russ, J. (2004) Improving Schools in Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Areas- A review of the Research Evidence, *School Effectiveness and School Improvement,* 15 (2) 149-175

Osman, A., Mansson, N. (2015) I go to Teacher Conferences, but I do not understand what the teacher is saying. Somali parents' perceptions of the Swedish school, *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 17 (2) 35-52.

Pantazis, C. and Pemberton, S. (2011) *Restating the case for the 'suspect community' British Journal of Criminology.* 51 (6) 1054-1062

Parsons, C. (2008) Race Relations, Ethnicity and Disproportionality in School Exclusions in England, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 38 (3) 401-409

Picower, B. and Mayorga, E. (Eds.) (2015) *What's Race Got to Do With It? How current school reform policy maintains racial and economic inequality.* New York: Peter Lang

Pratt, N. (2016) Neoliberalism and the (internal) marketization of primary school assessment in England, *British Educational Research Journal*, 42 (5) 890-905

Riessman, C.K. (2013) *Narrative Analysis* (Newbury Park: Sage)

Roberts-Holmes, G. (2015) The 'datafication' of early years pedagogy: 'if the teaching is good, the data should be good and if there's bad teaching, there is bad data', *Journal of Education Policy,* 30 (3) 302-315

Ruby, T. (2006) Listening to the Voices of Hijab. *Women's Studies International Forum* 29 (1) 54–66

Runnymede Trust (1997) *Islamophobia a challenge for us all : report of the Runnymede Trust Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia.* London: Runnymede Trust

Scott, J.W. (2002) The Politics of the Veil. Princeton, N.J. ; Woodstock : Princeton University Press

Semati, M. (2010) Islamophobia, Culture and Race in the Age Of Empire, *Cultural Studies*, 24 (2) 256-275

Sensoy, O. and Darius-Stonebanks, C. (Eds.) (2009) *Muslim Voices in School: narratives of identity and pluralism*. Rotterdam: Sense

Sevrage, L. (2009) Who is the ''Professional'' in a professional learning community? An exploration of teacher professionalism in a Collaborative Professional Development settings. *Canadian Journal of Education*. 32 (1) 149-171

Siraj, A. (2011) Meanings of modesty and the *hijab* amongst Muslim women in Glasgow, Scotland, *Gender, Place and Culture*, 18 (6) 716-731

Srinivasan, P. and Cruz, M. (2015) Children colouring: speaking 'colour difference' with Diversity dolls, *Pedagogy Culture and Society*, 23 (1) 21-43

Talwar, D. (2012, May). *More than 87,000 racist incidents recorded in schools.* Retrieved from http://www.bbc.co.uk/news

Tomlinson, S. (2008) *Race and Education: policy and politics in Britain*. Maidenhead: McGraw Hill

Troman, G. and Jeffrey, B. (eds) (2012) *Performativity in UK Education: ethnographic cases of its effects, agency and reconstructions*. Stroud: E & E

Watkins, M. and Noble, G. (2016) Thinking Beyond Recognition: Multiculturalism, Cultural Intelligence and the Professional Capacities of Teachers. *Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies*, 38 (1) 42-57

Wood, E. (2007) Reconceptualising Child Centred Education. Contemporary Directions in Policy, Theory and Practice in Early Childhood. *Forum: for Promoting Comprehensive Education 3-19*. 49 (1) 119-134

Worley, C. (2005) It's not about race. It's about the community. New Labour and community and cohesion. *Critical Social Policy*. 25 (4) 483-496.

Yancy, G. (2014) White Crisis and the Value of Losing One's Way in: G. Yancy and del Guadalupe Davidson, M. (Eds.) *Exploring Race in Predominantly White Classrooms-scholars of color reflect* (Pp 1-16). New York, London: Routledge