

Confronting Islamophobia in the education system

Summary

This paper from the Insted consultancy, London, was first published as a chapter in *Confronting Islamophobia in Educational Practice*, edited by Barry van Driel, Trentham Books 2004. It draws extensively on the report of the RAISE project, *The Achievement of British Pakistani Learners*, and on the 2004 report of the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia. The paper starts by recollecting complexities and tensions in the everyday life of schools. It then focuses on five main sets of issues: cross-curricular review and development; teaching about Islamophobia; support for British Muslim identity; explicit school policy; and school leadership.

Complexities and tensions

During the war in Iraq in 2003 a student at a secondary school in central England approached one of the staff. She was of Pakistani heritage, as was the member of staff. She was being teased, she told the teacher, by other students in the playground and on journeys to and from school. 'We killed hundreds of your lot yesterday ... Saddam's your dad, you love him, don't you ... we're getting our revenge for what you Pakis did to us on 11 September...' The teacher asked if she had told her form tutor. Yes, she had told her tutor, and her tutor had said: 'Never mind, it's not serious. It'll soon pass. You'll have to expect a bit of teasing at a time like this.'

The story illustrates several different facets of the task of confronting Islamophobia within the education system. There is the need, most obviously and immediately, to give support and assistance to young people who are being targeted and attacked. Almost as immediately, students who engage in verbal abuse and banter, or in even worse and more hurtful behaviour, have to be challenged and stopped. Third, there is a range of skills, understandings and qualities required by teachers, and issues around the kinds of inservice training and professional development that should be provided. Fourth, there are issues to do with school ethos; the content of the curriculum; the procedures for dealing with unacceptable behaviour; and school leadership. This chapter considers principally the fourth of these clusters of topics. At the risk of over-simplification and of sloganising, the fourth cluster can be said to be about confronting institutional Islamophobia, as distinct from confronting the attitudes and behaviour of individual students and teachers.¹

The story cited above evokes the complexities of everyday life in a school – the tensions between students, and between students and teachers, and within the teaching body. It evokes too the inexorable impact on such tensions of events in the wider world, both in the present and in the past. Often, teachers do not have sufficient knowledge and understanding to be totally confident that they are doing the right thing. Even when they can be reasonably confident, they are painfully aware of competing pressures on their energy, attentiveness and sense of priorities, and it's as if they seldom or never have sufficient time and space to think and reflect.

¹ The stories at the start of this paper are all based on real events. In the form they appear here, they were written for use in inservice training events. They are quoted from the 2004 report of the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, *Islamophobia: issues, challenges and action*, published by Trentham Books.

Before this paper gets under way, therefore, it is fitting to evoke the complexities of school life with a handful of further stories similar to the one above – stories that are not only about the need for immediate and mid-term action but also about the need for thought and reflection in ambiguous and conflictual contexts.

Here, for example, is a story which presents the point of view of a young perpetrator. The perspective sketched in the story may or may not be typical. Its portrayal does, however, underscore the need for sensitivity amongst staff, and the need for staff to be clear, both in their minds and in their actions, about what it is exactly they need and wish to confront:

A Year 9 pupil was complaining to me bitterly earlier today. 'All right, I'm overweight and I'm not proud of it. But it really gets to me when other kids go on about it. Last week I lost it. I was out of order, right, but when these two kids said I was fatter than a Teletubby and twice as stupid I swore at them and used the word Paki, and mini Bin Laden. I got done for racism and was excluded for a day and my parents were informed and all, and I'm really pissed off, and nothing at all has happened to the kids who wound me up. It's not fair.'

It is not only to behaviour amongst children and young people that staff have to respond, and in relation to which they have to display leadership. There is also the behaviour and outlook of adults, as illustrated in the next two stories:

As a secondary school governor I proposed, following discussions with pupils and parents, that there should be some Islamic Awareness classes at the school on a voluntary basis. 'We'd just be letting Al Qaida in by the back door,' said the chair. The other governors all seemed to agree, or anyway not to bother.

I'm the parent of children aged 4 and 6. They have been desperately distressed by TV footage from Iraq. I spoke to their class teachers. Both said much the same: 'Yes, a lot of the children seem quite upset. But they'll soon get over it. They don't really understand, you know. Don't worry.'

Last, a story from an all-white primary school in rural England. It poignantly illustrates ignorance but also human distress and raises questions about the sources of young children's assumptions and understandings, and the responsibilities of adults, including the media and parents as well as staff, in helping to shape them:

The other day during morning break a boy came running into my office, crying his eyes out. 'The Pakis are coming, the Pakis are coming' he sobbed. I sat him down and calmed him and got him to explain. Apparently, two aeroplanes had flown low over the playground and he had believed they were piloted by terrorists on their way to attack the school.

It is appropriate now to step back from the immediacies of everyday life and to consider wider policy issues. 'There is nothing so practical,' says an old adage, 'as a good theory.' The purpose of the discussion that now follows is to clarify theoretical issues such that real, practical life – of the kind evoked in the stories above – is easier to handle. The discussion focuses on cross-curricular review and development; teaching about Islamophobia; support for British Muslim identity; explicit policy; and school leadership.

Cross-curricular review and development

The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry report recommended that curricula throughout the UK should be amended with a view to their being 'aimed at valuing cultural diversity and preventing racism'.² The respective governmental authorities accepted the recommendation in broad principle but did not tackle it with vigour or with rigour. The three greatest needs in the present context are for:

- an overall framework of concepts and big ideas that should be taught, as appropriate, across all subjects and at all age levels
- guidance on teaching about racism and Islamophobia
- guidance on teaching about Islam

With regard to the first of these needs, one interesting and potentially valuable approach involves identifying themes that should permeate all teaching. One such list is summarised below.³

Shared humanity: issues of similarity, sameness and universality

All human beings, at all times in history and in all places in the world, have in common certain basic values, aspirations and needs – there is a shared humanity. Appreciating this is a crucial aspect of valuing diversity and is a necessary foundation for teaching about Islam and Islamophobia, as indeed about many other topics.

Difference and diversity: contrasting stories and ways of doing things

Through history and across the world, there are many different ways of pursuing the same values and needs, and there are different points of view of the same event, based on different experiences and stories. Comparing and contrasting different ways of doing things, and different ways of seeing, viewing and interpreting, is a fundamental human activity. It's important to help pupils see diversity and difference as interesting and exciting, and indeed as valuable, rather than merely confusing and depressing.

Interdependence: borrowing, mingling and mutual influence

Countries, cultures and communities are not cut off from each other. On the contrary, there has been much borrowing, mingling and mutual influence over the centuries between different countries and cultural traditions. Events and trends in one place in the modern world are frequently affected by events and trends elsewhere. A recurring danger in teaching and learning about cultures is that pupils will get the idea that each culture is distinct from all others. The reality is that boundaries between cultures are porous and frequently unclear. Islam and 'the West' are not separate from each other but have developed, and continue to develop, in relation to each other.

Excellence everywhere

² The report of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, also known as the Macpherson report (1999), contained 70 recommendations altogether. Of these, four were addressed to the education system.

³ The list was developed in Derbyshire LEA and published in abbreviated form in a government guidance document issued in May 2004, *Aiming High: understanding the needs of minority ethnic pupils in mainly white schools*. A slightly different version appears in *Here, There and Everywhere: belonging, identity and equality in schools* by Robin Richardson, Trentham Books 2004.

Excellence is to be found in all cultures, societies and traditions, not in 'the west' only. The 'default position' in the curriculum, however, can all too often be the assumption that all significant human achievements arose in the so-called West – this is what is communicated, even though teachers do not consciously intend it. The default position has the consequence of marginalising pupils who identify through their families with cultures and communities outside the West, and of miseducating everyone else.

In 2004 an influential UK journalist caused an uproar in British Muslim communities when he polemically illustrated the default position with these words: 'Indeed, apart from oil – which was discovered, is produced and is paid for by the West – what do they [i.e. Arab countries] contribute? Can you think of anything? Anything really useful? Anything really valuable? Something we really need, could not do without? No, nor can I... We're told that the Arabs loathe us. Really? For liberating the Iraqis? For providing them with science, medicine, technology and all the other benefits of the West? ... They should go down on their knees and thank God for the munificence of the United States.'⁴

Personal and cultural identity

Every individual belongs to a range of different groups, and therefore has a range of different loyalties. Also, and partly in consequence, all individuals change and develop. Pupils need to know and feel confident in their own identity but also to be open to change and development, and to be able to engage positively with other identities.

Virtually all pupils currently in British schools will spend the rest of their lives in Britain. It is important that they should feel that they belong here and that Britain belongs to them. In this sense Britishness should be an important part, though not the only part, of their identity. All pupils need to be comfortable with hyphenated terms such as Black-British, British-Muslim, English-British, and so on.

Concepts of race, racism and racial justice

Already at Key Stage 1 pupils need to appreciate that there is a single race, the human race, but that the world is full of ignorance, prejudice, discrimination and injustice. In the course of their time at school they should become familiar with theories about the sources and forms of racism; strategies, actions and campaigns to prevent and address racism, locally, nationally and internationally; equal opportunities in employment and the provision of services; the role of legislation; conflict, and the management and resolution of conflict; intercultural communication and relationships; and justice and fairness.

The framework of key themes sketched above needs to be presented to pupils and students not only directly, as part of the explicit content of the curriculum, but also implicitly and incidentally in the exemplars, materials and cultural reference points that are used to illustrate abstract ideas; the texts, activities, materials and assignments that appear in skill-based subjects, for example ICT, design and technology, literacy and numeracy; the stories, subjects and situations explored in art, dance, drama and music; displays, exhibitions, signs and visual materials in classrooms and public areas; the use of visiting speakers, artists, musicians and storytellers; assemblies and collective worship; journeys and visits to places of interest; involvement in national projects; links with schools in other countries or other parts of Britain; and – not least – casual comments and conversations.

⁴ Robert Kilroy Silk, *Sunday Express*, 4 January 2004

Within the framework outlined above teachers need to be clear about the nature of Islamophobia and how to distinguish between 'phobic' views of Islam and legitimate criticism. To this topic the chapter now turns.⁵

Teaching about Islamophobia

'Can we no longer even argue with a Muslim?' asked a headline in a British newspaper in 2003.⁶ The article beneath the headline was about someone who had been charged with 'religiously aggravated threatening behaviour' following an altercation with his Muslim neighbour. The columnist robustly criticised the police and political correctness – 'the constabulary is terrified of being accused of institutional racism and would probably charge a brick wall with harassment if a Muslim drove into it' – and also the new legislation under which the man was charged.

Further, the journalist criticised the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), the Human Rights Act and the prime minister's wife and complained about the alleged policing of people's minds and thoughts 'This is a new crime invented in the mad, hysterical weeks after the Twin Towers outrage... During this period most politicians simply took leave of their senses, which is presumably why the enemies of free speech in the Home Office chose this opportunity to slip it past them. As for the CPS, this incident proves that it's not just dim and useless but nasty as well ... The CPS, which cannot defend the public against crime, is fully signed up to the anti-British, intolerant speech codes of Comrade Cherie Blair and her friends ...The authorities are far more effective at policing ideas than at suppressing crime. Perhaps the CPS should in future have a new name. How about Thought Police?'

The headline – 'can we no longer argue with a Muslim?' – was rather lost sight of as the article proceeded. It was a useful way, however, of posing an extremely important set of issues. Is it really the case that criticising Islam is not acceptable and may even be unlawful? Does action against Islamophobia involve being uncritical towards Islam? How can criticisms of certain aspects of Islam avoid feeding Islamophobia? Is the only alternative to Islamophobia a kind of uncritical admiration?

Shortly after 9/11 another journalist in Britain drew an interesting and potentially valuable distinction between what she called 'mindless Islamophobia' and 'mindless Islamophilia'.⁷ She appeared, however, to opine that the latter is considerably more prevalent and serious than the former and directed virtually all her polemic at fellow journalists who try to counter Islamophobia by presenting positive images of Islam in their work. She mocked the BBC for giving airspace to what she called a strong Muslim woman (SMW for short), and for systematically implying that 'British Empire = bad' whereas 'Islamic Empire = good'. There was no mention during the BBC's recent Islam Week, she complained, of 'the women tortured, the Christian converts executed, the apostates hounded, the slaves in Sudan being sold into torment right now.' She continued: 'Call me a filthy racist – go on, you know you want to – but we have reason to be suspicious of Islam and treat it differently from the other major religions ... While the history of the other religions is one of moving forward out of oppressive darkness and into tolerance, Islam is doing it the other way round.'

The journalist's emotive generalisations and imagery ('oppressive darkness') were deeply offensive to most or all British Muslims. Her claim that she was being rational, however, ('we have reason...') was interesting and definitely worth attending to. For clearly there is such a thing as legitimate criticism and suspicion of religious beliefs and

⁵ The discussion that now follows is drawn from *Islamophobia: issues, challenges and action*, Trentham Books 2004.

⁶⁶ Peter Hitchens, *Mail on Sunday*, 27 October 2002.

⁷ Julie Burchill, *The Guardian*, 18 September 2001

practices. In castigating both mindless Islamophobia and mindless Islamophilia she was commending a stance that is mindful. Such a stance is suspicious when suspicion is warranted. But also it is ready, as appropriate, to respect and appreciate.

In a report published in 1997, the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia grappled with the problems of debate, dialogue and disagreement. When and how is it legitimate for non-Muslims to disagree with Muslims? How can you tell the difference between legitimate disagreement on the one hand and phobic dread and hatred on the other? The commission suggested, in answer to such questions, that an essential distinction needs to be made between what it called closed views of Islam on the one hand and open views on the other. 'Phobic' hostility towards Islam is the recurring characteristic of closed views. Legitimate disagreement and criticism, as also appreciation and respect, are aspects of open views. In summary form, the distinctions between closed and open views are to do with:

- whether Islam is seen as monolithic, static and authoritarian, or as diverse and dynamic with substantial internal debates
- whether Islam is seen as totally 'other', separate from the so-called West, or as both similar and interdependent, sharing a common humanity and a common space
- whether Islam is seen as inferior, backward and primitive compared with the so-called West, or as different but equal
- whether Islam is seen as an aggressive enemy to be feared, opposed and defeated, or as a cooperative partner with whom to work on shared problems, locally, nationally and internationally
- whether Muslims are seen as manipulative, devious and self-righteous in their religious beliefs, or as sincere and genuine
- whether Muslim criticisms of the so-called West are rejected out of hand or whether they are considered and debated
- whether double standards are applied in descriptions and criticisms of Islam and the so-called West, or whether criticisms are even-handed
- whether no account is made of the fact that Muslims have far less access to the media than non-Muslims, and are therefore at a competitive disadvantage on an uneven playing-field, or whether unequal freedom of expression is recognised
- whether anti-Muslim comments, stereotypes and discourse are seen as natural and 'common sense', or as problematic and to be challenged.

The words *open* and *closed* were derived from the title of a classic work on the psychology of dogmatism by Milton Rokeach, first published in 1960. Rokeach was interested not primarily in the content of bigoted people's minds but in how their minds worked. Open-minded people are ready to change their views both of others and of themselves in the light of new facts and evidence; and are fair-minded in the sense that they do not caricature or over-generalise, and do not claim greater certainty than is warranted. Open-mindedness and fair-mindedness are components of what is sometimes termed civility, or moderation, or the middle way. 'At the heart of the concept of the middle way,' writes a Muslim scholar, 'is the principle of fairness, the "fair play" so integral to the English conception of good character.' He continues:

Let us be clear about the origin of the English word 'fair', because it shows ... how closely this idea is connected to Islamic principles. The English word 'fair' has two meanings: the first is 'just, equitable, reasonable', and the second is 'beautiful'. But the meaning of the original Germanic root is 'fitting', that which is the right size, in the correct ratio or proportion. The range of meanings of this word 'fair' reflects a truly Islamic concept, the idea that to be just is to 'do what is beautiful' (*ihsan*), to act in accordance with our original nature (*fitra*), which God has

shaped in just proportions (Qur'an 82:7) as a fitting reflection of divine order and harmony.⁸

'The core issue,' writes someone whose principal area of academic concern is sectarianism in Scotland, 'is whether minds are closed – viewing other religions (or all religions) as being alien harmful monoliths, or whether they are open – to the facts of diversity, in which religious communities are given respect as people who are sincere in belief, morality and desire to become full partners in political and civic enterprise.' She goes on to stress that it is not only individuals who have closed or open minds but also groups and communities:

Within every world religious community, whether Christian, Jewish or Muslim, the open and the closed views are in contention. The open communities seek alliance and partnership; extremists of the closed tendency form cliques, factions and sects that can resort to militant action. The "closed" extremists terrorise their co-religionists along with all the others who stand in their way.⁹

The distinction between open and closed minds corresponds to the distinction which a Muslim anthropologist draws between inclusivism and exclusivism. In the first instance he is referring to two different ways in which Muslims themselves understand and practise their religion, and relate to others. But his distinctions also apply to 'the West'. He writes:

Exclusivists create boundaries and believe in hierarchies; inclusivists are those who are prepared to accommodate, to interact with others, and even listen to them and be influenced by them. Inclusivists are those who believe that human civilisation is essentially one, however much we are separated by religion, culture or language.

...I believe the real battle in the 21st century will be between the inclusivists and the exclusivists.¹⁰

These admittedly abstract distinctions between closed and open, or between exclusive and inclusive, are of fundamental importance in curriculum planning for all pupils, both Muslim and non-Muslim. With regard to the formation of Muslim identity, and of the views of themselves and others that young British people develop, there is further discussion below.

Young British Muslims

'...There are platoons of young Muslims roaming the streets,' remarked a Muslim journalist in September 2001. 'They saw the TV images of the intifada and copied them during the Oldham riots. Now they are seeing bin Laden turned by the BBC and others into a glamorous. Rambo figure. Next time, will they be copying the bombers? We have to invest in forging a positive identity for them so we create the right kind of Muslim.'¹¹ This is a succinct summary of a key educational task – the forging of 'the right kind of Muslim' – and also of the broad international context, interpreted through and by images on television, in which the formation of identity now takes place. Elsewhere the same

⁸ Jeremy Henzell-Thomas, *The Challenge of Pluralism and the Middle Way of Islam*, Association of Muslim Social Scientists, 2002

⁹ Elinor Kelly, Integration, Assimilation and Social Inclusion: questions of faith, *Policy Futures in Education*, vol 2 no 1, March 2004

¹⁰ Akbar Ahmed, *Islam under Siege: living dangerously in a post-honor world*, Polity Press 2003, pp 18-19

¹¹ Fuad Nahdi, quoted in *The Guardian*, 24 September 2001

journalist has warned that a key factor producing wrong kind of Muslim, as the term might be, is Islamophobia in society, schools and the media:

The war is reshaping our society, and particularly British Islam. For most Muslims it has dramatically exposed how partisan the western media is - and, for many, how crass western politicians are and how gullible the western public is. However, it is the despair, the frustration and the anger that should be noted. Today, Britain's 1.6 million Muslims are living on a diet of death, hypocrisy and neglect that is traumatising and radicalising an entire generation.¹²

He writes also:

The combined forces of racial discrimination and Islamophobia have been awesome in the marginalisation and alienation of the community. As a result few, particularly young people, feel they have any viable stake in society ... Our scriptures counsel endless patience. Were it not for Islam, the anti-western rhetoric and violence would be out of control. Yet, some of us have been tipped over the edge ...¹³

British Muslim observers do not, it is important to stress, blame Islamophobia alone for the emergence in Britain of 'the wrong kind of Muslim'. They point also to failures of leadership within British Islam, both intellectual and political. An implication is that the mainstream education system needs to be proactive in making and maintaining contact with mosques and madrasahs, and with the influences within them to save and turn round young Muslims before, at the age of 14 or so, it is too late.¹⁴

In so far as both the mainstream education system and mosque-centred education fail to reduce alienation and disaffection amongst young British Muslims there will be a vicious spiral of increasing hostility to Islam amongst non-Muslims and increasing rage and resistance towards mainstream society on the part of young Muslims. The time to act is now, not some stage in the future. A key role will be played by headteachers and other school leaders.

Leadership

It is mandatory in the UK that all public institutions, including schools and local education authorities, should have a formal, explicit policy on race equality. Also all schools and local authorities have by law to maintain records of racist incidents. Unfortunately, however, there is no legal requirement that these policies and records should refer to religion. Individual schools and local authorities may use their initiative to make good these omissions: one of the first tasks of leadership, therefore, is to go beyond the letter of the law and to implement also the spirit.

A distinction is sometimes made between 'transactional' leadership and 'transformational'. The Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain pointed out that the distinction is particularly relevant to issues of equality and diversity:

There must be efficient management ('transactional leadership') concerned with the setting of goals and objectives, and holding staff accountable for achieving them. Such management can be summarised

¹² Fuad Nahdi, Young, British and Ready to Fight, *The Guardian*, 1 April 2003

¹³ Fuad Nahdi, Tel Aviv First, Then Manchester?, *The Guardian*, 2 May 2003

¹⁴ For fuller discussion see the paper contributed by Maurice Coles to the RAISE project, downloadable at www.insted.co.uk/raise.html.

in terms of abilities that can be imparted through training courses and assessed with reasonable accuracy.

'Transformational leadership' is concerned with personal qualities rather than abilities. These include empathy, openness to criticism, a degree of judicious risk-taking, enthusiasm, an aptitude for articulating a vision of how the organisation could be different and better, and a readiness to challenge and shape the opinions of others rather than pander to them.¹⁵

In a context of overload and uncertainty, of competing proposals, demands and expectations, and of vast geopolitical anxiety, transformational leadership keeps its head and its heart. One of the tasks is to encourage and enable colleagues to wrestle with issues of moment and meaning – not by providing answers but by enabling them to cope with controversy and complexity; not by a finished product but by a focused process. It involves knowing, amongst other things, what's worth fighting for.¹⁶

This paper draws now to an end with a list of the qualities required of all teachers and school leaders in the context of confronting Islamophobia at the present time. With these qualities, understandings and commitments staff will instinctively know what to say and to do in the kinds of problematic situation with which the chapter began:

Empathy

Empathy with young British Muslim people, the pressures on them from a range of different directions, their determination, their spirit; and empathy with their parents and communities

Listening

Listening to British Muslim children and young people, and being alert to their wishes, aspirations and anxieties, and to how they and their communities are changing

Fairness

Holding the line and the balance between competing demands and pressures; taking a principled stand on the importance of fair play and process

Procedural neutrality

Ensuring that different points of view get a fair hearing, but also that all are questioned, reviewed and discussed

Teachers as researchers

Teachers need time and space to reflect on their own practice, as individuals, teams and whole staffs, and to devise their own ways of improving it

Critical understanding

Critical understanding of religion and religions, and of religion as part both of the problem and of the solution

¹⁵ *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*, Profile Books 2000, drawing on work by Beverley Alimo-Metcalfe, p.281

¹⁶ The phrase is from the title and the content of a seminal text on school leadership by Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves, *What's Worth Fighting For in Your School*, 1996.

Muddling through

Accepting that the best can be the enemy of the good, that there is seldom enough knowledge or evidence before action has to be taken, that uncertainty is frequently the name of the game, or much of the game

The culture of the school

Giving focused thought and attention to how your whole school, and also individual parts of it, can embody in daily routine and culture the qualities and values listed above

Hope

Carrying on, despite setbacks and opposition, self-critically but with resolution and determination.¹⁷

¹⁷¹⁷ This list of qualities is adapted slightly from *The Achievement of British Pakistani Learners: work in progress* by Robin Richardson and Angela Wood, Trentham Books 2004