



Centre for Research in
Education Inclusion
and Diversity



Muslim families' negotiation of school choice and attitudes to faith schools

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Key question

How do Muslim parents negotiate the education system in England or Scotland, and how are their approaches related to a range of characteristics such as social class background, religion and nationality?

School systems differ

England – state of flux?

- State sector 93%

Schools:

- Community (LA controlled)
- 19% are faith schools – of those, 95% sec faith schools = Christian (1% are Muslim)
- Academies/CTC/Free schools - no LA control
- Growth in free schools & faith schools

Scotland- greater stability

- State sector: 95%

Schools:

- Virtually all LA controlled & co-educational
- 86% schools are non-denominational
- 14% denominational – most Roman Catholic
- No Muslim faith schools

How is choice structured in England and Scotland



- Diverse state sector in England allows more choices – schools vary by faith, selective/comprehensive, co-educational/single sex. Also different governance structures – local authority, academies, free schools etc. Larger private sector. But in London, may be difficult to realise choice because of competition for places.
- In Scotland, major dimension of choice is by catchment area and/or denomination (mainly Catholic). In rural areas, there is limited choice.

School choice: strong policy theme in England



Improving parental choice:

- For too long, too many parents have been denied the choice of a good local school, with an antiquated admissions system that has relegated the poorest children to a second-rate education.
- As well as improving standards in all schools, we will capitalise on the passion of parents, teachers and charities who want to make a difference by making it easier for them to set up and run their own schools. (Dept. for Education website, 13.09.2012)

School choice: the literature

... choice is not straightforwardly the enactment of individual or familial self-interest. 'Choices' are framed by norms, of community and religion and family; webs of social relationships continue to be of importance when seeking to do the 'right thing' for children, where doing 'the right thing' is located in concrete circumstances and social contexts (Vincent et al, 2010: 294)

AND

... while the policies of choice and diversity appear to champion and reinforce equal opportunities, in practice they are simultaneously and actively reducing the scope for forms of collective action most likely to address the structural predicament of class and educational opportunity. (Harris and Ranson, 2005: 572-3)

School choice: social class and ethnicity



- White British: distinct differences between middle-class and working-class parents (some overlap at margins) (e.g. Ball et al, 1995, Vincent et al, 2010)
- Evidence of Black middle class parents adopting 'tactics' of White middle class parents (e.g. Vincent et al, 2012)
- Barriers and constraints on school choice for migrant parents (Byrne and de Tona, 2012) but all have high aspirations for their children
- Little research specifically on the impact of religion on school choice and inter-section with social class

School choice among our participants



Reasons for choice:

- Academic excellence (and/or)
- School ethos (and/or)
- Multiculturalism (mainly referring to school population coming from a range of ethnic backgrounds) (and/or)
- Local: because 'good' enough or only option (and/or)
- Independent school (and/or)
- Islamic faith school or other faith schools (and/or)

Strategies when choosing non local school:

- Placing requests; moving house; moving to feeder primary school, independent school

Local: only option

Afiya moved from Bangladesh to the UK when she got married. She was separated from her husband, had 5 children. The family had limited economic resources and lived in social housing. She had high aspirations for her children but school choice focused on it being local and safe to walk to:

Yeah my mum chose it because if I would have went to Highbury, Rafique [went to Highbury] he's in sixth form he's going to be [leaving] in a couple of years. My mum said that she'd walk me to Highbury and it's quite difficult because it's very far away and there's lots of dangerous roads, but when I'm going to Castlefield there's only three roads I have to cross dangerously and there's normally traffic lights, so just go with a friend. (Mohammed, 11, Afiya's son)

Academic excellence and multicultural



Ruksha and her husband were 2nd generation immigrants from Pakistan. They had grown up in Sea City where they now lived in their own house in a suburb. Ruksha felt that the local school was good but 'mono-cultural' and had used placing requests to get her children into a city centre school with high academic reputation:

I went to private school myself and I couldn't afford private for my children so I wanted to get them the best education that I could without having to pay for private. I felt Hillside Secondary is a good school but one of the main reasons is because it is multi-cultural ... [I know it's good] because the league tables, always check school league tables and it's either one or two, it's always in the top three and I think in the past it's been quite a well-known school in [the city], it's probably the best known state school.



Private education

Fozia grew up in a Pakistan but her husband, of Pakistani origin, was born and brought up in Scotland and his own business. They lived on the outskirts of the city in their own home and had 3 children (youngest at nursery). Dissatisfaction with the local school (and probably lack of knowledge of the school system initially) led them to choose an independent school:

So when he (the eldest son) was five, we looked around the area and asked, but the schools were not very good ... So I said to my husband, 'I don't want to send him to a school where I am always getting worried' ... And so we decided to send him privately
(Fozia, mother)

Religion and academic achievement



Tumi was of Bangladeshi origin, middle-class and had 4 daughters. The family lived in Eastville, England. Her eldest daughter went to local state schools, 2nd and 3rd daughters were at Islamic private schools:

... first one [eldest daughter] ... those days we didn't even think about it, those days we didn't have Islamic schools that ... BUT

it's just because we are Muslim our children need to know some Muslim things, but going to English school 24/7 meeting children there, English friends and then they know they think about, not interested in anything else, but send to her there [the Islamic school] and see how it goes ...

They would have lost our religion ... *they (2nd and 3rd daughter) study the Qur'an now so they know what Muslim [is], what Mum's talking about. They always study the Qur'an (Tumi, mother)*

Faith school ... or not?

Nuzhat moved to Scotland from Pakistan when she married. Her husband had lived most of his life in Sea City, Scotland. They had 3 children and lived on the outskirts of the city. Whilst the family adhered strongly to the Muslim religion, Nuzhat felt that it was important for the children to integrate into mainstream schools:

I'd rather they mix up ... as they grow up ... You can't have separate workplaces later on so if they grow up having separate education then when it comes to working in business they have to learn, it would be difficult for them to communicate then later on.
(Nhuzat, mother)

Other issues: Single sex or mixed?



Mixed:

And I thought rather than putting her into a girls' only school, it's better to put her in the boys' school although the people coming from our community don't do that. They normally think, 'Oh girls should be only with girls'. They don't want to encourage interaction with the boys. But I thought [it was OK], because I've been studying with the boys, as well. And I asked my mum and everybody else. And they agreed with that as well. The sooner the better ... She needs to mix with the boys so why not from the start. (Fozia, mother)

Single sex:

Siddra, UK born but of Indian origin, from Sea City wanted single sex for her boys because:

... from P5, there's already a lot of, 'oh she fancies him' going on ... She's the blonde girl in the class. So everybody fancies her. And the whole emphasis was not on education. The whole emphasis was on who are you going to go out with tonight. (Siddra, mother)

Summary

- Muslim parents in our sample had high aspirations for their children but their ability to negotiate access to a 'better' school depended on social/cultural/economic resources. Education was seen as key to future life chances.
- There was diversity in choice affected by own background, economic resources, locality and availability of different types of schools
- Academic excellence was a strong feature in school choice but not the only one
- Islamic faith schools was only important for a small number of parents; however, a school with a religious ethos was favoured by some parents; some parents felt that it was important to integrate into mainstream schools.
- Primary school choice criteria differed from secondary school choice criteria – from more 'social' to more 'academic'.