



Centre for Research in  
Education Inclusion  
and Diversity



# Everyday school practices and home/school relationships

Elisabet Weedon, Sheila Riddell, Gillean  
McCluskey and Kristina Konstantoni



# Context and background

- Census data (2011) show that there is greater ethnic and religious diversity in the UK now than there was in 2001 (England and Wales)
- Muslims now form 5% of the population in England (cf 3%)
- Discrimination against a person on the grounds of race or religion is against the law – Equality Act 2010
- Increasing questioning (by some) of the role and nature of multiculturalism in British society (and in Europe)



# Key areas

---

- Views on schools and curriculum
- Religious education
- Dress codes and PE
- Sex education
- Understanding of 'acceptable' food
- School trips and social events



# Curriculum in general

In general parents were satisfied (but were prepared to move schools if not) – teachers were seen as crucial by several

*I think it all depends, well my experience of being, from both the schools ... if they've had a good year it's all down to the teachers, it's not the school a lot of the time it's just the individual teacher that your child is lucky to have that year, so some have got [good] styles ... so I don't really have any strong views on it other than the fact that I think it depends on who the teacher is. (Ruksha, mother, Sea City, Scotland)*

# Child/young person's perspective differed from parents at times ...



Juzar (son, 13): *I don't like French any more. It was fun but it's just getting boring now.*

Ruksha: *I thought you said to me last week you liked French.*

Juzar: *The week before that. I don't like it any more.*

Ruksha: *If he doesn't like the teaching, he doesn't enjoy [the subject].*

Juzar: *I don't like the Modern Studies teacher but I enjoy Modern Studies*

And probably no different from the many other children ...

# School – home relationship – mainly positive



In most cases relationships were good but depended on good contacts with the school and, in certain areas, on parents being proactive:

*So if you write in to the headteacher or your class teacher, it doesn't matter, they do get involved and they do respect that. ... So if we had phoned, if we had sent the letter, the Ramadan month, please could you make sure that they have a prayer room or at lunchtime if they can just sit inside. I've never had any problems. They have got that, they've done that. Even the high school, they always have a prayer room and they'll always arrange somewhere for the kids to come and sit. (Razia, mother, Sea City, Scotland)*

There was better contact with primary than with secondary schools

# School – home relationship – not always positive



Anam, River City, Scotland felt that sometimes the school was fantastic but there had been other less positive times:

*... it was PE ... when [my eldest daughter] had first started [High school] that was five, six years ago ... we were requested to write a letter about jogging bottoms which I found that's ridiculous they should know that Muslim girls will not wear shorts but I still had to put in a letter, so I put a letter in. That was fine forgot all about it, second daughter starts [same] school five years later ... again I'm requested to write a letter, so I phoned up at this point and said 'excuse me ... is it compulsory that I write in a letter here', I said 'should it not be understood that this girl is a Muslim girl, you've had five years of parents writing letters ... surely the school has moved on in five years ... why do I have to fill out a letter' [the response was] 'oh that's it's just school rules, it's Council policy'*



# Religious education

- Parents were generally positive about religion being part of the curriculum and did not want less religious education
- Virtually all felt that it was good for their children to learn about other religions (children's views on the subject varied)
- Very few had withdrawn their children from religious activities such as nativity plays or church attendance
- However, some parents and young people commented on the limited understanding of Islam among school staff:

*Well the thing is, because there are different sects, like we're Shi'a sect. But the only thing that ever gets talked about is Sunni ... Which is like different. So I find it pretty frustrating when they are like, 'this is what happened'. I'm just like, 'no' (Aamir, boy, 13, London)*



# Limited knowledge, 'procedural' teaching and blurring of boundaries



*... they are getting education, information rather, information about various religions so not actually teaching them religion ... just informing them OK what is available in the market for everyone, variety of religions, variety of things to go for (Nazar, father, Sea City, Scotland)*

*Well they go through the procedure of teaching all the religions ... and for some reason they'd tied that into a look at arranged marriages which are absolutely nothing to do with Islam ... it's a culture, it's nothing to do with religion but they're teaching them about Islam and then they said to them come up with a list of what you would look for in a potential husband or a wife which is a bit silly because that is nothing to do with religion. In lots of countries Muslims do have that practice but it isn't part of the religion, so I think there's confusion obviously about what they're teaching (Ruksha, mother, Sea City, Scotland)*



# Dress code and PE

- The majority of parents favoured school uniform but one that respected Islamic dress codes, especially for girls
- There was variation in attitude to girls wearing the hijab
- Most, but not all wanted PE and swimming to be single sex – this included many young people:

*nothing [that I can't take part in] except like swimming and PE for girls ... if it's mixed then you don't ... If it's all girls then you'd go usually, I went swimming when it was all girls but if it was boys I didn't go, joined in with the other class whatever they were doing (Shabeela, girl, 17, Sea City, Scotland)*



# Sex education

A large number of parents spoke of their concerns about sex education but few had withdrawn their child(ren):

*I haven't withdrawn him but I do tell him that, 'tell me everything that the teacher said so I can tell you the Islamic point of view. So I don't want you to like not know what's going on and not know what your friends know because then that's horrible'. Because then I think in, they talk about it in school as well so... (Sabrina, mother, London)*

A few disagreed:

*I mean even in terms of sex education and stuff like that ... we don't live in a bubble. She needs to learn what's around her. She needs to, I mean eventually she'll, you know, she's going to make her own decisions about things. And the only thing you can do is to provide them with the resources and the things to enable them to make the right decision. (Fadil, father, Sea City, Scotland)*



# Issues relating to food

Many felt that there was a limited understanding of what 'halal' meant and why Muslims avoided a range of foods:

*They could do more, especially with the food, because that's quite, like we've got to say we're vegetarian, then we bring a chicken sandwich or something, and they're like, 'I thought you didn't eat chicken'. I told all my friends at school how it worked, they all know. (Umar, boy, 17, Sea City, Scotland) And:*

*: And sometimes they are too shy to even say that we can't eat it because it's not halal or sometimes they say it's not just [what we can eat] ... there is not that much awareness in school ... because sometimes they serve ice-cream with some raspberry swirls in it but that contains gelatine and they cannot have it. (Fozia, mother, Sea City, Scotland)*

# School trips and social activities



- There were differences amongst parents in terms of attitudes to after school socialising
- A small number of children, mainly girls, had not been allowed to go on school trips
- Socialising, especially for older teenagers could be difficult because of drink and clubbing culture:

*Drink [I'm not allowed], like if they go to parties, like I went to a party last Saturday and then they texted me saying I don't have to drink because my parents are over-conscious so I went there and they had drink and it was just awkward because they were all having fun and that and I was like I don't know, it felt weird. (Shabeela, girl, 16, Sea City, Scotland)*



# Summary

- The majority of parents were satisfied with the general curriculum and the relationship they had with the school, especially primary schools
- Most parents expected their children to engage fully in all aspects of the school curriculum
- Teaching of religious education was valued but often seen as mechanistic and knowledge of Islam was limited; boundaries between culture and religion were blurred
- Modesty was stressed by most and this was particularly in relation to PE and swimming but also to school uniform; schools were often accommodating but it could cause tensions
- There was general feeling that knowledge about 'halal' food was limited and poorly understood by schools and the general public



# Final word

*Growing up – better to be a Muslim it is just like any other religion, you have opportunities to aspire to what you want to be. The drawbacks? People are always going to be discriminating against you, there's always going to be that, OK you're a Muslim, the reason why they call you a Muslim... As to growing up I feel like we live in a multi-cultural society, we're embraced, we have equal rights like anyone else, growing up there's never been an issue [that you have to] stick to your own caste, you are allowed to socialise with people, mixed genders. (Tariq, boy, aged 17, Sea City, Scotland)*