

Incompatible? Compulsory mixed-sex Physical Education Initial Teacher Training (PEITT) and the inclusion of Muslim Women: A Case Study on Seeking Solutions.

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ABSTRACT

The paper addresses the tensions between Islamic requirements and state provision in physical education initial teacher training (PEITT). Physical education has a firm place in teacher training in England because of its status as a National Curriculum foundation subject which guarantees entitlement for all children. The recruitment and retention of ethnic minority teachers has been a National concern for many years and yet it remains an under-researched area. Rising numbers of young Muslims, the majority of whom are of South Asian heritage, led to initiatives for attracting more trainees from this group into higher education.

In England, the century old provision of single-sex specialist physical education secondary training (for 11 – 18 year- olds) finally disappeared by the mid 1980s. Primary PEITT (for 5 – 11 year-olds) has traditionally been organised in mixed-sex groups. Therefore the current higher education training system for intending teachers provides only compulsory mixed-sex provision in PEITT at every level. The authors argue that the current situation excludes Muslim women who wish to enter the teaching profession and adhere to Islamic requirements. They recount a case study in one University that tracks policy development to make single-sex physical education available to Muslim women on a traditionally mixed-sex primary course.

Keywords:

Initial Teacher Training (ITT), Physical Education (PE), Muslim Women, Exclusion, Islamophobia.

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INTRODUCTION

There is evidence of growing tensions for Muslims living in Europe post September 11th 2001 (Allen and Nielsen 2002). Education is one domain in which issues arise which often hit media headlines, for example with the banning of the *hijab* in French state schools in 2004. In Britain, Muslim communities were upset in January 2005 when the Chief Inspector for Schools, David Bell claimed that Islamic education did not equip Muslim children well for living in modern Britain (Education Guardian January 18th). On March 2nd 2005 a sixteen year old Muslim student Shebana Begum, won a two year battle in a legal appeal to be allowed to wear traditional jilbab (Islamic long clothing) to school following earlier exclusion (The Guardian March 3rd, 2005). These are not isolated cases in a country where the number of Muslim people is growing and controversy continues to test the ground between state and religion in a predominantly secular society and an education system rooted in Christianity.

Whereas schools are trying to contribute to solving issues that arise from an increasingly diverse society, higher education (HE) lags behind. This paper outlines a case study in a university initial teacher training (ITT) programme that is trying to meet the needs of Muslim women in the subject of Physical Education (PE).

PE is a subject in which tensions sometimes arise because of mismatches between subject provision and what is acceptable for Muslim students. The need for debate is real, for example, recently a colleague in another HE institution made contact for advice when a Muslim trainee refused to participate in PE because it was in mixed-sex groups with male tutors. Should she fail her course or is this a case of institutional

religious discrimination? There needs to be a discussion within the profession that is honest and open. If we are serious about inclusion and wanting to attract more culturally diverse teachers into the profession, those responsible for teacher training in higher education need to recognise the challenge that current systems and structures present.

Until the 1990s the cultural diversity discourse in PE focused predominantly on a 'problems-based' approach that located issues with individuals and their cultures, not with racism in society or ways in which structural barriers disadvantaged particular groups (Bayliss 1989). Carrington, Chivers and Williams (1987), Carrington and Williams (1988) revealed some of the complexities of researching the experiences of South Asian boys and girls, recognising that stereotyping and bullying disadvantaged pupils in the PE arena and the differentiated responses that were linked to issues of class, religion and linguistics. Recognition of such complexities continued in the work of Fleming (1994, 1995) illuminating sport and South Asian youth, particularly male issues. The work of Carroll and Hollinshead (1993) contributed much to understanding the problems faced by Muslim girls in physical education but needed to engage in more critical debate about the structural barriers inherent in school traditions and systems which needed addressing to facilitate greater inclusion (Siraj-Blatchford 1993). Chappell (2002) and McDonald and Hayes (2003) continued to reflect on 'race' and racism in PE, recognising the paucity of research on experiences of Muslim girls and women. Benn's work continues to focus on this area and warns of the problems with defining groups. The term South Asian is often used as an umbrella term to include people of different religions who will be differentially influenced in their approach to participation in PE, for example, dance is viewed very differently by

many Muslim and Hindu people because of the religious traditions surrounding the activity in Hinduism and perceptions of dance as a sexually provocative activity amongst some people from the Muslim community (Benn 2005, 211).

Whilst there is more awareness of religious and cultural needs and strategies for inclusion in schools, for example through explicit PE guidance in the National Curriculum (DfEE / QCA 1999), practice and provision in higher education appears some way behind the advances in schools.

The following case study tracks policy development in one university to enable Muslim women to participate in primary PEITT. The intention of sharing the experience is that learning from this case study will inform other institutions addressing similar issues.

BACKGROUND TO THE CASE STUDY

Concerns about the small number of ethnic minority students entering and staying in the teaching profession in England have been a major government concern since the 1980s (DES 1989, EOC 1989). One response to improve the situation was taken by the in this case study in 1991. An 'Islamic Studies' strand to the religious education main subject area was developed in the four year Bachelor of Education Degree primary teacher training course. The development was a deliberate attempt to attract more Muslims into the primary (5 – 11 years) teaching profession and more women than men registered, perhaps predictable in primary teacher training. The story of the struggles and tensions that arose during the 1990s has been recounted elsewhere

(Benn 1996). It is necessary to say that many cultural changes had to follow to meet the needs of the Muslim students. Over several years, in reactive mode, the institution responded to increasingly vociferous student requests to provide special dietary requirements, single-sex accommodation, honouring of festivals, a prayer room and understanding of Islamic requirements in subjects such as PE. By the end of the nineties the four year course had been phased out in favour of a one year Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) training route. It became clear that the institution's reputation amongst the Muslim community was strong and Muslim women continued to apply to enter teacher training. Sustaining a commitment to meeting the needs of Muslim women in the subject of PE has been problematic, yet National Curriculum status ensures this subject is a compulsory entitlement for all children in English primary schools and therefore an essential part of ITT. Safety issues increase training responsibilities in this area to ensure all student teachers develop confidence and skills to deliver the National Curriculum requirements across a range of activity areas including games, dance and gymnastics.

FORESHADOWED ISSUES

Research sensitivities

Research into the specific needs and experiences of Muslim girls and women is rare (Haw 1998, Osler 2003, Parker-Jenkins 1995). The challenges are many and apply to several overlapping complexities such as cross gender, cross religious and cross 'colour' studies. Issues of power, representation and 'giving voice' to others are also acknowledged but the intention was always to 'travel sensitively' with the aspiration

of increasing understanding (Haw 1996). Diversity within and between Muslim communities is the reality and any suggestion that Muslims are homogeneous is not intended. The location and history of Muslim communities and other factors such as gender, class, linguistics and religiosity (degree to which person regards him / herself as religious) lead to differentiated experiences. For example, some women choose to adopt the *hijab* (head-scarf) and Islamic dress, becoming 'visibly Muslim', others do not see this as necessary for retaining their religious identity (Dagkas & Benn, 2006).

The level of prejudice and discrimination towards 'visibly Muslim' women in the West gives urgency to the need for research and dialogue (Jawad and Benn 2003, Richardson 2004). There is a need for more knowledge and understanding of the experiences of diaspora. The legacy of migration of communities from their homeland has led to struggles for retaining cultural distinctiveness and seeking both connection with heritage and a sense of belonging to the host country. The Muslim population in the West is growing and the city in this study is one of two in England predicted to have England's first 'black majority' population by 2010. The majority of the increasing black population is Asian of Islamic heritage with their origins in Pakistan or Bangladesh (BRAP 2003). In many Western countries Muslim women are facing similar experiences of prejudice and discrimination as illustrated by Jawad and Benn's (2003) edited collection of research from England, Australia, USA and other parts of Europe. Other European research notes growing Islamophobia (fear or hatred of Islam), which has resulted in increasing polarisation of Muslims and non-Muslims, Islam and the West, and of incidents of violence and vilification of Muslims (Allen and Nielsen 2002, Richardson 2004). Education is one sphere in which negative

images and stereotypes can be challenged, knowledge and respect for difference enhanced.

Physical Education and Islam

Muslim girls and women can meet difficulties in the areas of PE and sport. (Benn 1996, 2000, 2002, Carrington and Williams 1988, Carroll and Hollinshead 1993, Dagkas & Benn 2006, Daiman 1995, De Knopp et al 1996, Hargreaves 2000). The growing recognition of complex 'intersectionality' of social identities and 'interlocking multiple axes of oppression' (Scruton 2001) highlight the dynamic tensions for Muslim women where axes of gender, ethnicity, culture and religion meet (Benn 2005, Parekh 2002). The position underpinning this research is that participation in PE and sport is supported in Islam where religious requirements can be met for Muslim girls and women (Daiman 1995, Sawar 1994).

Traditional practices, in the secondary PE sector in particular, sometimes create tensions because they clash with Islamic requirements, for example the need for modesty of dress. The religious requirement that arms and legs be covered has clashed with traditions of PE kit such as the short games skirt and tee shirt. Similarly, Islam requires privacy of changing and separate-sex provision but schools were traditionally built with public changing rooms and communal showering facilities. Some difficulties have been encountered in swimming because of the gender and communal organisation and management of public pools. During Ramadan demands for physical activity levels have sometimes surpassed capability because fasting from sunrise to sunset meant some pupils would not eat or drink to replenish body needs. After school

extra curricular activities were sometimes problematic because of timing and different cultural priorities. For teachers of PE 'subject standards' and 'values' have also been linked with discipline and control of the body, but through different cultural practices. In addition to when and how the body moves, adherence to traditions of a 'uniform look' and the importance of regular showering for hygiene reasons were embedded deeply in the subject. Increased awareness has led to positive changes in practice with optional showering, more private changing spaces, organisation for single-sex physical activity environments and accommodation to religious requirements such as dress code and activity levels during Ramadan. Guidance in the National Curriculum for PE to teachers to accommodate religious and cultural requirements strengthened the possibility for more conducive inclusion of Muslim pupils who wanted to adhere to Islamic requirements (DfEE / QCA 1999, 36).

In addition to the interface of Islamic requirements and PE there are cultural and patriarchal restrictions on participation for Muslim girls and women in PE and sport. Fleming's (1994) study of Asian Muslim youth mentions the low value placed on sports and PE and the lack of role models in many popular activities such as football, especially for females. Cultural perceptions of the importance of academic success and marginalisation of activities deemed less useful, such as sport, increases the significance of compulsory schooling in PE because it might be the only arena where young people can participate in physical activity (De Knopp et al, 1996). In such a context the training of teachers to provide high quality, inclusive PE is vital yet there appears to be a failure to address these issues in a systematic and committed manner in higher education (Siraj- Blatchford 1993, Benn 2002).

There are no easy answers to gender equity issues but the debate has moved a long-way from early policies epitomised by the ‘treating everybody the same’ principle. Although influenced by many factors including expediency during the expansionist 1960s and 1970s, the move to amalgamate formerly separate-sex educational institutions at all levels also aimed to remove gender barriers and bring new opportunities. In higher education no single-sex PEITT training institutions were left after the mid 1980s. What might have been seen as a strategy to remove sex discrimination has created an arena which is discriminatory on racial grounds, using that term in the widest sense to include cultural and religious factors as well as skin colour. Islamic requirements for women’s participation in physical activity cannot be met in any secondary higher education PEITT in England. There is a double-bind situation where dominant co-educational principles meet culturally separatist requirements. UK Employment Equality legislation (December 2003) introduced the protection of people on the grounds of religion or belief in vocational training as well as employment. Where does this leave PEITT if a Muslim woman chooses to challenge the system? The authors argue that higher education PEITT in England fails to recognise and accommodate the needs of Muslim students, creating barriers to the profession and perpetuating the cycle of exclusion from the teaching profession.

Incompatible? Compulsory mixed-sex PEITT and Muslim Women, a primary case study towards inclusion.

The case study in the following research is located in primary PEITT, which struggles for many reasons related to status, time, identity and quality (National Conference 2000, Gilliver 2003, Hopper 2005). Higher education ITT for this sector has never

been sex-segregated, in part attributable to school practice and the reality of the primary school environment where there is no segregation of children by sex in the State sector for the 5 – 11 year-olds age range. The issue of accommodating the PE needs of Muslim women trainees for the primary sector then is equally pertinent since all primary teachers in England have responsibility to deliver PE making subject training obligatory.

Muslim women wanting to enter the teaching profession may have been through the English education system without recognising any tension between religious requirements and participation in PE. For example, they may have been through a single-sex secondary school or large mixed-sex school with separate-sex PE departments and provision. What are their expectations and experiences when they engage with PE as part of their ITT on entering university? Some Muslim women, who had been encouraged to enter initial teacher training because of their Muslim identity (in an attempt to redress current under-representation in the profession), found it very difficult to participate in mixed-sex PE (Benn 1996). Benn found that some Muslim women were ‘shocked’ to find totally mixed provision in PEITT. In addition they were sometimes taught by male staff and asked to remove the *hijab* on ‘safety grounds’, all of which were contrary to Islamic requirements. Three possible solutions emerge in such situations: make no changes and exclude Muslim women from the practical experience; shift to theoretical provision for all; find a way to change the system to enable Muslim women to participate in single-sex groups with female tutors. The first perpetuates what might be called ‘institutional religious discrimination’, the second counters staff and students’ commitment to the importance of acquiring PE pedagogical skills through experiential learning and the

integration of theory and practice, the third was the route that eventually led to the policy emergence discussed in this case study.

The national picture in primary PEITT (Benn 2002) showed that the needs of Muslim women trainees were virtually 'invisible' because small numbers, and their preference for non-confrontation, led to tutor responses such as: 'there are none here anyway...', 'it's not an issue for us...' or 'they are here but have never said anything...' Where issues were recognised pressures in higher education militated against action. For example, increasing diversity of provision, student numbers, cutting staff and improving 'efficiency', contributed to the tendency to ignore the needs of minority groups. Same-sex staffing would have been problematic where providers had only one male tutor for the subject. One attempt to take positive action in England for separatist Muslim women in teacher training failed (Scott-Baumann 2003). If under-representation in the teaching profession and challenges of equity are to be addressed the following case study in mainstream provision might be useful. It is built on lessons learned over nine years of variable success at providing a learning environment in which Muslim students can find a comfortable path alongside non-Muslim students in primary PEITT.

CASE STUDY POLICY

In the interests of equity and a mission to widen access to teacher training particularly for ethnic minorities, the following policy was implemented in the case study institution 2003 – 2004 in an attempt to formalise positive action for Muslim women

in PE. This followed several years of ad hoc strategies by the PE staff that had variable success. One hundred students go through the PGCE primary teacher training course at the case study institution each year, whilst numbers of Muslim women vary, it is on average 10% of the total.

The policy set out to address improved clarity of course expectations and opportunities prior to entry and ways to enable separate-sex PE to be integrated into the course. At interview for primary teacher training all students were to be informed that they would be expected, as intending generalist primary teachers, to participate in training provision and teaching practice for all subjects including physical education. They would be informed that provision was available for any Muslim women who preferred separate-sex groups for this subject. To follow-up, before entry all students were to be sent a letter asking them to declare if "... for Islamic religious reasons, they require to be taught PE in an all-female group." One hundred students were divided into four groups, one group would be all-female but if numbers of Muslim women were large they would be split over more groups to avoid complete separation from non-Muslim students. In the pilot year ten students joined one all-female group with fifteen non-Muslim women, another chose to stay in a mixed-sex group. Students stayed in their 'professional groups' for all university based learning during the year.

EVALUATION METHOD

At the end of the year questionnaires asking for students' views on the policy and any impact it had on them were gathered from sixty non-Muslim and ten Muslim students. A follow-up group interview was held with seven of the Muslim women. The seven

core primary staff team were interviewed individually and were able to reflect on observations made during the year. Data were analysed and cross-referenced for emergent patterns of consensus or contradiction to gain a fuller picture of perspectives on the policy. Four emergent themes will be used as a framework for discussion of results: 'Consensus on principle', 'Freedom to participate', 'Group versus individual needs', 'Aspiring to make a difference'.

The institutional history in relation to meeting the needs of Muslim students was important. One outcome of taking this issue to course committee and policy level was the raising of levels of consciousness amongst staff about specific needs of Muslim women. As early research in the institution showed, having good intentions to widen access and develop unique courses were insufficient (Benn 1996). Despite increased understanding of the cultural and religious needs of Muslim women, systems to offer single-sex provision in PE had remained ad hoc, leading to an unfortunate deputation at the start of 2002 – 3. Nothing definite had been planned prior to entry, which resulted in the unsatisfactory compromise of PE staff teaching a very small group separately for the year. Consequently the issue was discussed with the primary team and the PGCE committee, and the agreed school policy put in place for the 2003 – 4 entry. Hence, when it came to individual staff interviews for this research all were aware of the issues. Some had lived through the period of cultural changes in the institution following the growth of interest from Muslim students since 1993, and all were aware of the long history of work by PE staff to address the subject needs. None of the core team delivered the PE element of the course but they took major responsibility for the pastoral and professional care of the students, professional

studies and school-based supervision. (Tutors will be numbered to distinguish between respondents - Staff-interview 1 – 7).

Nine of the ten Muslim women who completed questionnaires identified themselves as British Asian Pakistani, one as Indian. Nine had been in single-sex secondary PE (during their own schooling) and the majority had positive memories of their school experiences. Of the sixty non-Muslim students who completed questionnaires, fifty-four were female and six male.

DISCUSSION

Consensus on principle

All data sources indicated support for continuation of special provision in PE to support the inclusion of Muslim women in teacher training. Staff interviews indicated consensus on the underpinning principle that Muslim women should have the option to take single-sex PE as part of their ITT. The longest serving staff were strongly aware of the history of commitment to improving recruitment in this area, to building a reputation as a supportive campus for Muslim students and in respecting the needs of students: “ ... (it is) a commitment we have felt as an institution for a long time ... I am glad we have that provision for them.” (Staff-interview – 2)

One staff member emphasised that supporting Muslim women was now a key part of the institution’s identity and reputation that is recognised in many ways. For example there are city links with schemes to increase the number of ethnic minority teachers in

their schools indicating staff commitment to improving the situation: “I do think it is really important that provision is made for Muslim women ... (so that) there are more Muslim teachers in (our city) schools.” (Staff-interview – 7)

At a recent OFSTED inspection (2004) work on the PE policy was part of the evidence base which resulted in a commendation for work in equal opportunities. Respondents agreed that the increased public profile and confidence of the Muslim community needed to be sustained and the PE provision was an important element of that. One member of staff suggested a more proactive approach would strengthen commitment and future recruitment and retention. She felt that the success we have in this area should be celebrated and developed and that the institution should be more engaged with supporting publicity, further research and resourcing, recognising that specialist provision always comes ‘at a cost’.

Consensus in support of retaining the principles of the policy was also evident in fifty-eight of the sixty non-Muslim student questionnaire responses, with the majority focusing on the grounds of equity and inclusion:

“As part of the increasing awareness of other cultures and beliefs I feel it is an essential part of inclusion ... practising what you preach...”

(Questionnaire non-Muslim student)

There was evidence of awareness of the need to respect difference and take action to demonstrate this:

“It is good to respect wishes, especially in a multicultural city ...”

(Questionnaire non-Muslim student)

The factor of ‘giving choice’ to the Muslim women was considered positive:

“... it is about enabling choice, being more comfortable in a situation, more relaxed...”

(Questionnaire non-Muslim student)

The gesture of course provision, offering the option for single-sex physical education, was much appreciated by the Muslim students and contributed much to establishing good relations between all staff and students from the beginning of the training year:

“The optional single-sex classes were a good idea. They take into account the needs of Muslims in general and this sensitivity goes a long way to building bridges between staff and students.”

(Questionnaire Muslim woman)

The element of choice proved to be important and necessary so each Muslim woman could make her own decision. There were positive views about the issue being raised during their interviews for a place on the course. The consensus was that it had been approached well, that the Muslim women were clear it was a choice and they were reassured that their decision would not affect their chances of gaining a place in any way. (Interview Muslim woman)

There were two non-Muslim student respondents who were not sure about the policy on the grounds of sex-segregation being disadvantageous in terms of the reality of the primary teaching profession:

“I think it is good to encourage them to teach but then they have no interaction with males ... what about other requests? Where does the line come?”

(Questionnaire non-Muslim student)

“I agree with encouragement but to teach boys I think they need experience of being in mixed PE classes ... it is a disadvantage to them not having interaction with boys ... not all schools in the outside ‘real’ world offer the same opportunity.”

(Questionnaire non-Muslim student)

Consensus on the principle of treating groups differently in pursuit of equity is now common in schools but less evident in HE in England. The level of support in this case study amongst staff was attributable to the historical context of positive action for Muslim women since the early 1990s with the introduction of Islamic studies as an option within the former four-year ITT route. Student consensus could also have been attributable to context since the campus ambience remains currently one of diversity in many forms including age and ethnicity. The level of student support and ‘practice what you preach’ statement, suggested the equity awareness training essential in ITT was impacting positively on the next generation of teachers.

Freedom to participate

The Muslim women expressed what it meant to them to be given the choice of single-sex provision in PE. Their responses can be grouped in terms of: overcoming initial concerns about ITT; feeling ‘allowed’ to take part; being ‘comfortable’, able to participate and contribute in sessions; enjoyment and personal confidence to teach the subject. In summary all expressions were about ‘freedom to participate’.

Initial concerns about the course and elements such as participation in PE were evidently widely shared. Comments such as:

“(The policy) ... has given me the confidence to attend the PE sessions and take part ... it helped me to overcome some of my initial worries.”

(Questionnaire Muslim woman)

were supported in the group interview when a similar comment brought group affirmation:

“That was my concern at the start of the course – about doing PE – how it would be – but when we had the option that helped put my mind at rest”

(Interview Muslim woman)

Feeling 'allowed' to participate suggests these women really did not want to transgress Islamic requirements by participating in physical activity sessions in the presence of men:

“... it allowed me to participate and therefore learn more.”

(Questionnaire Muslim women)

“... allowed me to have the confidence to give the sessions my full attention and most importantly I have enjoyed it!”

(Questionnaire Muslim women)

There were many comments about 'enjoyment' and 'confidence' in participating which is important in terms of motivating any student-teachers to deliver the subject in the primary school. These aspects are not always shared amongst all primary generalist teachers. There is evidence of insufficient training and poor teacher confidence in PE which makes this outcome significant (Warburton 2000). Experiential learning through combining practical and theory contributed much to the positive responses to the PE provision:

“I enjoyed the PE sessions because I participated in the practical aspects of it.”

(Questionnaire Muslim woman)

“(The policy) allows Muslim women to take part in lessons confidently – they are then able to take this confidence into the classroom.”

(Questionnaire Muslim woman)

and perhaps the most significant comment from the group interview:

“... if (PE) was mixed we would be sat in a corner somewhere.”

(Interview Muslim woman)

Skilling trainees to manage all facets of the subject, for example the management of large apparatus, is a challenge so the following comment is important:

“It has made me more confident to teach PE in general – I am able to use the gym equipment properly.”

(Questionnaire Muslim woman)

Feeling ‘comfortable’ in the single-sex PE environment was important to the women’s ability to both participate and contribute to sessions, maximising learning and confidence in developing pedagogical skills:

“(The policy) allows Muslim women to contribute with ease and comfort.”

(Questionnaire Muslim woman)

“The sessions allow Muslim women to participate fully without feeling uncomfortable.”

(Questionnaire Muslim woman)

It was interesting that two non-Muslim women who had found themselves in an all-female group because of the policy, responded differently to that position whilst supporting the prioritising of religious needs. One suggested that she ‘did not mind’ because single-sex PE was her preference too:

“I didn’t mind participating in an all-female group and having female tutors, it was a lot less embarrassing ...”

(Questionnaire non-Muslim student)

The other would have preferred a mixed-sex group but respected the principle of the policy:

“I would prefer to be in a mixed-sex group because I think this provides a broader range of views and ideas. However, I fully support the policy and am happy to be in a single-sex group if that means the policy continues.”

(Questionnaire non-Muslim student)

With the evidence of problems in primary PEITT faced by all primary trainees the positive confidence and enjoyment of the Muslim women was important (National Conference 2000, Gilliver 2003, Hopper 2005). Data indicated that meeting religious requirements in terms of creating a ‘safe space’ in which to participate made a difference to the experiences of the Muslim women. The power of experiential engagement in physical education was clear, with students gaining knowledge, understanding and positive perceptions of the subject, so important to future teachers. It is also clear that the Muslim women would have been excluded in a mixed-sex

environment. Other issues raised in the secondary school environment for Muslim girls such as Ramadan, swimming, dress code and changing (Carroll and Hollinshead 1993) did not arise in this study because time allocated to the subject was very short (eighteen hours in the year, taught in three two-hour blocks), swimming was not included because of limited time available, and dress code was simply practical but comfortable.

Group versus individual needs

The strongest tensions in the experience of policy implementation for staff were related to the resultant grouping strategy. This placed the Muslim women in one all-female group instead of spreading representation of this ethnic group across the four professional groups. The PE needs 'fixed' the groups for their university based professional course time and most staff felt this was disadvantageous in some ways. All recognised the double-edged nature of the argument, between prioritising the needs of the individual or the needs of the group.

Disadvantages of what might be called a 'separatist' strategy of making one all-female group, which might have ten Muslim women and fifteen non-Muslim women, were predominantly for the cohort as a whole. Arguments included the loss of benefits of the 'ambassadorial' role of the Muslim women as bi-lingual representatives of the religion and culture from which other students could learn. Reciprocally one colleague suggested that the Muslim women could be disadvantaged by not mixing so freely with non-Muslim and male students as they would be entering a mixed school environment.

All recognised the advantages to the Muslim women of placing them in a group together. These included:

“... some sense of solidarity and togetherness and being with people they feel at ease with – comfortable with – and lots of support – a good network gets set up – and there’s less chance of them being isolated than in other more secular groups ... I am aware that a lot of trainees socialise in situations where alcohol is present ... they go out and meet in pubs – and that’s how they support each other. If there were only one or two Muslims in a group they could feel very isolated, whereas if they were in the majority in a group that would change the culture of the group and the pattern of socialising would change. I can see the advantages for them personally, and in their development and survival on the course in that way.”

(Staff interview - 2)

The member of staff who had the main responsibility for the all-female group during the year, the most contact and knowledge of the women their progress and experiences, did not see the all-female group to accommodate Muslim women’s needs as a problem. She was strongly in favour of recognising the individual and did not think it was the responsibility or the priority of Muslim women to share their cultural identity with others:

“In my group the Muslim women mix with the Sikh group which some would see as an Asian group ... then there are some mature women of English

background who choose to stick together like glue ... they are all very different women ... a Muslim who is veiled and another is very Westernised , there is a Sikh lady who is not traditional ... they are very supportive of each other and very different people ... what I am trying to say is there is not a group of Muslim women it is much more complex than that ... ”

(Staff interview - 6)

For her, supporting the individuals through the course was the priority and she was one of two colleagues who acknowledged how difficult it was for Muslims generally in society at present. She was not against the ambassadorial role and did recognise it was important and had been positively influential in her experience. She believed a better balance could be gained by shifting timetables to suit different subjects and situations and by developing work started on, for example, whole day inputs for the cohort. Similar suggestions came from another respondent who wanted to encourage variety of groupings to facilitate greater mixing of students whilst recognising the importance of support networks which usually happen very early in the year with others ‘of like minds’. The continued search for more creative grouping strategies was a common view amongst staff. Other than the comments quoted above from two female non-Muslim students about ‘not minding’ being in a single-sex group, there were no comments about grouping strategies from the students.

Same-sex staffing of the all-female PE group was possible because the department had a balance of male and female tutors and a range of programmes to deliver. But careful negotiation continues to be required to maintain workload balance and individual specialisms.

Where differences in approaches to the notion of equity in terms of gender and religious identity clash, as they do between institutional practice and group need in this case study, solutions require compromise. Positive action for the Muslim women impacted on other students in terms of gendered grouping, and on PE staff whose workload changed according to their sex. Since no action meant exclusion for some Muslim women it became the priority in decision-making.

Aspiring to 'make a difference'

The position of Muslim women in society cannot be ignored in debates about positive action to improve equity and opportunity. Whilst there was consensus of support for more inclusive action, the reality of their encounters in school and university based training, and later in the profession, sometimes bring them in contact with religious prejudice and discrimination. From the staff perspective there was knowledge of two potential incidents of 'religious prejudice' encountered by the Muslim student trainees during their year. Both involved placements in schools that caused anxieties related to religious / racial identity. One student was concerned about travelling on public transport in Muslim dress through a known National Front area and the other was concerned about a previous incident in a proposed school. Both were dealt with by changing the school.

The Muslim students were proud of their identity and optimistic about their training and careers recognising the under-representation of Muslim women in the profession and aspiring to 'make a difference':

“It was my main reason for starting out – we are under-represented and it’s about time we did something about it.”

(Interview Muslim woman)

The women had enjoyed their year of teacher training and had positive experiences in schools. Issues that did emerge supported earlier research into the experiences of Muslim women, for example in coping with the effects of over-representation of Muslim women in support roles in schools as they tried for ‘acceptance’ in their role as teacher:

“In my school most of the support staff were Muslim and the children found it hard to treat me as a teacher rather than someone in a support role to begin with. It did improve as they came to understand I was a teacher – I had to establish myself in a different way.”

(Interview Muslim woman)

Positive responses from Muslim pupils with shared identity supported earlier research:

“... on school experience a child came up to me and said ‘Oh Miss you are a Muslim – I’m a Muslim too’ and you could see that just being Muslim had an effect on that child ...”

(Interview Muslim woman)

Their contribution to increase understanding amongst colleagues was recognised:

“An advantage of being Muslim was when I was in a school which was all Muslim pupils with teaching staff who were all white. The teachers often did not have an idea of what the needs of the Muslim children were – they did not know the basics ... after one incident in which I could help they came to me all the time.”

(Interview Muslim woman)

as was their contribution in diverse school contexts:

“On my first placement the pupils were white with only three Muslims and the teacher said how good it was to have a Muslim there as a student-teacher to portray a positive role model for everyone, and also that the Muslim children would have someone ‘like them’ to relate to. We have to get rid of stereotypes like Muslim women being confined to the home”

(Interview Muslim woman)

The Muslim women were very appreciative of the special provision during their PGCE training year. They had benefited from the increased awareness and sensitivity that now exists at the case study institution because of mistakes learned over the years since deliberate steps had first been taken to attract more Muslim women to teacher training.

CONCLUSION

There was consensus between questionnaire and interview data, and between students and staff, that the policy on providing single-sex PE as an option for Muslim women on a primary PGCE year was positive and should be sustained. The overwhelming support of the non-Muslim students was particularly encouraging as they have since joined and started influencing the teaching profession. The policy was part of an institutional commitment to increasing the numbers of ethnic minorities in higher education and ITT. Ad hoc strategies tried over previous years had achieved varying degrees of success but working with colleagues in agreeing a policy for this case study year has increased consciousness and support. The main point of contention in the case study surrounded differences of opinion on prioritising individual or group needs. Staff intend to persist with ideas for more creative grouping solutions.

It appears that addressing the needs of Muslim girls and women is more successful in schools than in higher education at present (Benn 2002). The constant process of change and demands in higher education are distracting, as staff meet ever increasing targets to meet, student numbers, teaching, research and administrative duties. The increasing audit, inspection and accountability procedures provide further distraction as agencies such as QAA and OFSTED constantly bring new pressures. The needs of minority groups and issues of widening participation are high in current rhetoric but are difficult to focus on in the real world. Resource implications for meeting minority group needs are rarely addressed, for example the female PE staff in the case study university sometimes took on additional workload to ensure same-sex staffing for the Muslim groups. Relationally, male colleagues had to be removed from specialist

inputs because of the strategy, which can create tension. The relatively small allocation of male tutors' time to this activity meant there was no threat to their jobs in this case study situation but the necessity to target gendered staffing in PEITT is potentially an issue.

In terms of adding to the current debate this research challenges gendered structures in higher education PEITT that are excluding an under-represented group in the teaching profession. Lack of role models and such barriers do not encourage aspiration or opportunity to challenge or change the relative invisibility of Muslim women teachers entering or staying in the profession. The research also illustrates the complexity of managing strategies for positive action where there are clashes between anti-sexist and anti-racist policies and inevitably 'winners and losers' in the process of change. The importance of a supportive context and team negotiation are essential where deep-rooted traditional systems of organisation are changed.

Evidence of the particular vulnerability of Muslim women in the West indicates the need for further research into their experiences. There is scope to open the research agenda in Europe and indeed beyond, as global migration ensures diverse social, political, economic and educational contexts result in very different experiences in the lives of Muslim girls and women. There is little evidence we have 'got it right' in England yet in terms of striving to improve social cohesion in increasingly fragmented and diverse societies, so broadening the debate could help.

Although this case study focused on a specific group, one curriculum subject and one English university, insights have raised more questions about the lived reality of

minority groups: of equity and inclusion; citizenship; state versus individual rights; islamophobia; and the need to extend dialogue on issues of identity related to the complexities of interlocking axes of oppression such as gender, ethnicity and religion.

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