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# **Responses of three Muslim majority primary schools in England to the Islamic faith of their pupils.**

**Julia Iprgrave, Joyce Miller and Paul Hopkins**

## **Abstract**

This paper considers the responses of three English primary schools (with pupils aged between 4 and 11 years old) to the education of their Muslim pupils. It begins by setting out the context of discussion about Muslims and education in Europe and notes an increasing interest in knowledge about Islam as part of this discussion. It then considers some of the structural and pedagogical characteristics and trends in English education influencing the schools' options and choices. The main body of the article is a comparative analysis of the three schools, focusing on the approaches of teachers and school leaders to the faith backgrounds of their pupils, their constructions of Islam for these educational contexts, and their preparation of Muslim children for a religiously plural Britain. As the schools devise strategies and select between options they provide in microcosm differing models of the inclusion of minority Islam in a western society.

## **Contexts**

### *European context*

Debates surrounding the education of Muslim children in England commonly centre around two themes: linkages between the affirmation of children's religious background and their engagement and achievement in school, and concerns that increases in distinctive separate education for Muslim pupils intensify existing trends towards segregation. The former argument is stressed both by advocates of Muslim schools and by those calling for

accommodation of Islamic perspectives within mainstream schooling. (MCB 2007, p. 18). Anxieties about segregation, and a perceived correlation between segregation with intolerance, are frequently expressed by both secular and religious voices in public life and the media. (BHA, 2006; Romain, 2008)<sup>1</sup>. These themes of segregation, alienation and intolerance are part of a wider discourse, as European societies respond to the presence and needs of over 23 million Muslims in Europe (Karic, 2002, p. 436), the 7 to 10 million in the European Union (Fabos, 2005, p.438). A report from the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF, 2005), suggests that, post 9/11, the integration of Europe's Muslims is being undermined by increasing distrust of Islam, and warns of their vulnerability to marginalisation. The young age profile of Europe's Muslims makes education a particularly important arena for addressing these issues. In a series of case studies, the report overviews religious educational provision in eleven European states.

All but a very small minority of Europe's Muslims are educated in the public system but studies undertaken in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands (IHF, 2005) show a parental demand for more opportunities for quality Islamic education. Behind this is a lack of confidence in the ability of the public system to give young Muslims the life chances their parents want for them. In their study of Muslim education in six European states, Daun and Arjmand note a parental interest in competitive education and education for moral living, specifically moral living based on Islamic principles (Daun & Arjmand, 2005). However, faith-based schools in general, Muslim schools in particular, have been the subject of heated discussions and controversy in other European states as well as the UK (e.g. Denmark, Netherlands, Sweden), often fuelled by highly publicised cases of problems with individual institutions but not typically well supported by facts (IHF, 2005, pp. 24-25).

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<sup>1</sup> *Including the religious viewpoints and experiences of Muslim students in an environment that is both plural and secular* in this journal.

Explicit learning about Islam is an area of increasing attention in European educational discourse. Education is viewed as a valuable tool not just for its affirmation of the identity of an increasingly vulnerable community, but also for its potential to use knowledge to combat the ignorance behind fanatical extremism and racist stereotyping. The Council of Europe has recognised a role for education in resisting these trends. Recommendation 1720 (2005), ‘Education and Religion’, advocates increased teaching about religions in European schools on the basis that:

Education is essential for combating ignorance, stereotypes and misunderstandings of religions ...By teaching children the history and philosophy of the main religions with restraint and objectivity ...it will effectively combat fanaticism. (PACE, 2005)

The interest is not just in the rights of individuals and minority groups, but in the cohesiveness and security of the community of Europe and its member states. In the promotion of a European ‘democratic citizenship’, education of Muslims and education about Islam are major concerns. The issues of Muslim schools and of the inclusion of Muslim pupils’ own faith within non-Muslim schools combine both.

Interest in the greater integration of Islam in European schools may be common, but approaches are very different from country to country and region to region due to diversity of political systems, histories and cultures, variety in relationships between religion and state, differing educational cultures,<sup>2</sup> and also the heterogeneous nature of Muslim populations (Karic, 2002). Most European countries include religion in the curriculum of public schools, but on different bases. Even in France where RE is not taught, ‘faits religieux’<sup>3</sup> are now

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<sup>2</sup> Articles in this journal (Lorcerie and Ipgrave) demonstrate differences between French and English educational cultures. For a wider range of European educational systems and cultures with particular reference to religion in education see Jackson, Miedema, Weisse and Willaime (eds) (2007)

<sup>3</sup> The translation ‘religious facts’ does not convey the full sense of this term

incorporated into other curriculum areas such as history, art, literature. In some countries (e.g. England, Sweden, Netherlands) multi-faith RE has developed, and teaching about Islam is readily incorporated into the curriculum. In others, denominational RE is organised in schools in co-operation with churches or specific religious bodies. In some countries (e.g. Austria, Belgium) this arrangement includes Islamic RE; there are pilots of similar models in parts of Germany and Spain. Approaches to Islam in the curriculum vary according to whether the content and nature of RE are determined and delivered by schools, decided by faith communities who bring religious education into schools, or negotiated between schools and faith communities.

### *English Context*

The UK differs from many of its European neighbours, in that its Muslim population is predominantly of Indian subcontinent origin. 70% of all Muslims in the UK have origins in Pakistan, Bangladesh and India (IHR, 2005, p. 138). Due to residence patterns, Muslim children tend to be concentrated in inner-city community schools so most attend schools with significant Muslim representation (OSI, 2005, p. 120). As they formulate policies and strategies for responding to the needs of their Muslim pupils, school leaders and teachers are often working with a substantial proportion, in many cases a sizeable majority, of their school's population.

Most (though not all) English schools fit within a matrix classifying them as either state maintained or independent, and either having or not having 'of a religious character'

designation<sup>4</sup>. English Muslim children are taught within all quadrants of this matrix: a few in the small number (eleven in September 2008) of state-maintained Muslim schools that have been part of the system since 1997,<sup>5</sup> more in the 115 or so independent Muslim schools around the country, many attend local church schools, but the large majority in state-maintained schools that do not have a ‘religious character’ status (‘community schools’).

The distinction between schools designated as being ‘of a religious character’ (popularly known as ‘faith schools’) and those not is far from a simple distinction between religious and secular schooling. Any neat ‘faith school’ and ‘non-faith school’ duality is complicated by a history of church-state partnership in establishing the modern English educational system, and by English law which places a statutory requirement on all maintained schools, whether so-called ‘faith schools’ or not, to hold daily acts of collective worship (commonly known as ‘assemblies’) and to provide religious education (RE) for all pupils (1988 Education Reform Act)<sup>6</sup>. In schools that are not ‘faith schools’ RE is to be open rather than nurturing pupils within a particular tradition, and to include other faiths alongside Christianity. Beyond these requirements, RE is organised at local authority level to suit the particular needs of the localities, and even then is open to different interpretations by schools and teachers at the point of delivery.

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<sup>4</sup> For more information about ‘religious character’ designation see Department for Children, Schools and Families (2007) *Faith in the System: the role of schools with a religious character in English education and society*

<sup>5</sup> Around one third of state-maintained schools and nearly 2 out of every independent school have a ‘religious character’ the huge majority being church schools.

<sup>6</sup> These acts of collective worship are to be “wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character” unless a school requests and obtains ‘determination’ from the Local Authority’s Standing Advisory Committee for RE (SACRE) releasing it from this clause though not from the obligation to provide collective worship. Determinations are usually granted where the majority of the school population is of a faith other than Christianity.

Approaches to the education of Muslim pupils in ‘faith’ and ‘non-faith’ schools are determined not just by structures but also by underlying pedagogies and philosophies. Ashley Rogers Berner traces an early twentieth century move in English educational philosophy away from a teleological understanding seeking to direct children into the right kind of life, as defined by Biblical precept, to a psychological approach focusing on development of individual human beings (Berner 2006 p225f). This approach is still influential in English education today. It does provide points of entry for religion in English schools, but here religion enters on different terms as part of the make-up (experiential, cultural) of the individual child. Dominant education philosophies promote pedagogies building on children’s prior knowledge and experience and holistic understandings of child development. Since the 1992 Education Act schools have been subject to government inspection on the contributions they make to the social, moral, spiritual and cultural development of their pupils (Education (Schools) Act, 1992). An emphasis on personal development and inclusion of self-knowledge, emotions and feelings is further encouraged by the Department for Children Schools and Families both in the S.E.A.L. education programmes designed to promote Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning in primary and secondary schools (DCSF 2005) and in the ‘Every Child Matters’ programme for children’s services (DfES 2004) which views children’s well-being as dependent on a combination of security, enjoyment and achievement. In *Every Muslim Child Matters*, Maurice Irfan Coles argues that the enjoyment and achievement of young Muslims in the school system rely on recognition that faith is the key determinant of so many Muslim pupils’ lives and identities (Coles 2008).

Over the last decade, there has been a return of teleological understandings of education, this time with a new interest in the concept of the citizen and the attitudes and skills that children as future citizens should acquire. There is also (post 9/11) increasing reference to the

contribution education can make to the creation of a tolerant, harmonious and cohesive society. This emphasis has much in common with the promotion of democratic citizenship within Europe. Citizenship was introduced into the school curriculum in 2002, and the ‘duty to promote community cohesion’ formed part of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 [21 (5)]. The citizenship and community cohesion agenda explicitly require consideration of religion and the religions of others as part of education for a harmonious society. The primary school citizenship curriculum demands that pupils should be taught about the social, cultural, religious and ethnic diversity of Britain and non-statutory guidance on community cohesion requires that ‘every school - whatever its intake and wherever it is located – is responsible for educating children and young people who will live and work in a country which is diverse in terms of cultures, religions or beliefs, ethnicities and social backgrounds’ (DCSF 2007).

It is in this context of educational history, discourse and policy that the three schools, that are the primary subject of this article, have developed their approaches and responses to the religion of their Muslim pupils. Having begun with European and national level trends and discourses, the article now moves to the level of individual schools where school leaders and teachers formulate their own strategies and interpretations of what they are doing in reference to these discourses, but also to the day-to-day experiences of educating young Muslims.

## **The Schools**

The schools that form the focus of this study are three of twenty case study schools participating in a research project carried out in 2008 and 2009 by Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit, University of Warwick and funded by the Department of Children

Schools and Families (Jackson et al. forthcoming). The case studies provided rich contextual data about the relationship between school ethos, pupil religion and RE in those institutions. To collect this data researchers observed lessons, reviewed school documentation, interviewed pupils, teachers and school leaders.

The three schools are all primary schools situated in areas of the England (West Yorkshire, East Midlands and Greater London) that have particularly large Muslim communities. North Street School (475 pupils) and Lingard School (650 pupils) are community schools without a designated 'religious character' status, they thus represent the educational experience of the majority of English Muslim children. Al- Hikmah is a small independent Islamic school (170 pupils) established by a Muslim trust in 2002 in a converted textile factory in East London. As an Islamic school it represents a form of schooling experienced by a small minority of Muslim children experience but that, polls indicate, nearly half of Muslim parents would like for their children. Its inclusion in the study enables comparison between Islamic schooling and that which Muslim children might receive in the public 'non-faith' sector. .

In their pupil population, the schools are typical of the Muslim population of England, being predominantly British-born of South Asian heritage, with minorities from other Muslim communities. Within this category there are differences, however. North Street serves the predominantly Pakistani heritage families of West Yorkshire, the area of the country where Muslim socio-economic deprivation and low achievement is of most urgent concern. It is the region where communal unrest in 2001 prompted government sponsored reports which in turn expressed concerns about 'segregated communities' leading 'parallel lives' (Home Office

2001a, 2001b). In their immediate home environment and at school the children of North Street live in a virtually mono-cultural environment.

The East Midlands city where Lingard is located represents a different demographic with a greater cultural mix and sizeable Hindu and Sikh populations as well as Muslims. It enjoys a reputation for positive inter communal relations. The school population is predominantly Indian heritage, an ethnic group that generally achieves more highly than Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage families. The school's catchment area includes families of low socio-economic status but the community is aspirational. As families become more affluent they are likely to move out of the inner-city area where the school is situated, to more 'leafy suburbs'. This move is more common for Sikh and Hindu families and the population of the school has changed over the last ten years from a 30/30/30/10 split of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and white British to about a 60% Muslim intake.

Al-Hikmah has an entirely Muslim population that is mixed in socio-economic terms. Fees are deliberately low to ensure that, as far as possible, families are not excluded from the school on financial grounds. Pupils are selected on a values-based criteria so religious observance and practice in their families is high. Ability is not an admissions criterion but parents tend to be ambitious for their children who in turn tend to be high-achieving. While the other two schools have some Muslim staff members and a majority of indigenous white teachers, the staff of al-Hikmah is entirely Muslim.

In some respects the accommodations made by these three schools to the religion of their students are similar. In common with most other Muslim majority schools in England, they allow pupils and staff to wear Islamic dress (many of the girls wear *hijab*), *halal* food is provided in the school canteen, allowances are made to enable older pupils to participate in the *ramadan* fast and pupils have time off school for *‘Id* celebrations. There is more variation, however, in Islam-related curriculum provision across the three institutions. RE and collective worship are statutory for both community schools. At Lingard RE is taught throughout the school with the younger children exploring themes such as ‘celebrations’, ‘special people’, ‘belonging’. The older pupils continue with themes (‘life’s big questions’, ‘justice’, ‘poverty and wealth’), but also make systematic studies of Christianity, Sikhism, Hinduism, Islam, and a unit on humanism. The children at North Street receive weekly RE during which they study themes such as ‘sacred writings’ and ‘special days’ with material from Islam and Christianity throughout the school, Hinduism, Sikhism for the six to eight year olds, and Judaism and Buddhism for the nine to eleven year olds. In addition to the statutory RE and collective worship at North Street, there are two Muslim worship events each week supported by Muslim faith tutors from the local authority’s Interfaith Education Centre. One of the teachers conducts a parallel Christian worship event at the same time. The school has a community resource manager, a Pakistani-heritage man, whose roles include establishing better links between the school and the local *madrasas*.

Two thirds of al-Hikmah’s school curriculum is made up of National Curriculum subjects and one third of Islamic Studies. Islamic perspectives and culture are also incorporated into other curriculum areas. Although not obliged to do so as an independent school, Al-Hikmah also provides a weekly RE lesson for Year 5 children (aged 9 and 10) in which they learn about the beliefs and practices of Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Hinduism,

spending six lessons on each. The children attend daily acts of collective worship which entail religious teaching and celebration of pupil achievement. Pupils from Year 2 upwards perform *salah* after lunch each day

## **The schools' responses**

### ***Affirmation of pupils' religious background***

Leaders at all three schools used the argument that affirmation of children's background, (including religious background), encourages engagement and achievement. The case was well articulated by the headteacher of al-Hikmah . Although her pupils are already achieving well, her school has its origins in broader concerns about young Muslims nationally, about low levels of attainment and increasing levels of criminality and drug abuse. The headteacher described the genesis of the school in the shared conviction of a group of like-minded Muslims all 'active in the community, educated and upwardly mobile', that solutions to the problem of Muslim youth could be found by providing them with the sense of confidence in their religious identity

What about going right back to schooling and early childhood and creating an environment that doesn't put the child in a situation where they feel a conflict of values or they don't feel that they know who they are, or it takes a longer time to get to the point of self-awareness and identity, or they're given mixed messages, or they're not even affirmed ...and when they talk about affirmation they talk about complete affirmation as a person and your heritage, who you are what matters to you and your family, your culture, your background (Al Hikmah headteacher)

It is an argument from developmental psychology with its emphasis on self-awareness linked to personal history and background. If the children do not get the education they need then they will not 'know who they are', there will be conflict and confusion of identity.

At North Street School teachers are still working to reverse trends towards underachievement in the area they serve. Staff proceed from the premise that even as a community rather than Islamic school, North Street is a place where the Muslim identity of their pupils should be affirmed. Prominent in the school's policy documents is a statement to this effect.

The beliefs, cultures, values and responses of all pupils will be affirmed, acknowledged and respected.

The academic curriculum will value 'pupils' language, religious and cultural experiences'. The headteacher described how the teachers work to embed the personal and social development of their pupils within the pupils' own religious and spiritual tradition in an effort to avoid that very conflict of values or confusion about identity referred to by the head of al Hikmah.

This affirmation of pupils' background and tradition was visible at all three schools. At Lingard Primary School these were celebrated through displays in the entrance hall, showing flags of the pupils' and their families' countries of origin, and the out-of-school groups and associations (including local *madrastas*) to which children belong. Through this recognition of family origins and out-of-school activity, the school was bringing different aspects of the children's lives and identities together. Teachers at Lingard also use the children's experiences in their lessons. In RE, for example, they are encouraged to bring in items of

religious significance from home and talk about them to illustrate lessons on their faith tradition.

At North Street, too, lessons were observed that affirmed the religious identity of pupils. In a session on the *hajj* pilgrimage Year 2 pupils (aged 6 and 7) showed evident delight in the recognition of something important to them and to their families. When shown a video of families arriving in Makkah, one child exclaimed, ‘I want to go there!’, and a classmate was able to talk about his grandfather who was currently on *hajj*. Pupils in the year above were taught about the story of Christmas alongside the Qur’anic account of Isa’s birth. The researcher at this school reported an instance where pupils’ learning at their out-of-school *madrassa* classes, their learning during Muslim worship event at school and their classroom RE all came together. When the children noticed a photograph of the *bismallah* in an RE textbook, they were able to read it with great confidence in Arabic having learnt how at *madrassa*, and could then recite it perfectly in English, the result of learning in their separate faith worship at school. Pupil religion is also recognised in the daily inclusive assembly where pupils Muslim and Christian are encouraged to address prayers to Allah or God:

Dear Allah, dear God, thank you for our families, thank you for our friends and please help us to achieve our targets this week.

This formula contrasts with the approach in assemblies at Lingard where a ‘thought for the day’ is followed by quiet reflection and no prayers to God are voiced, though pupils have the freedom to pray inwardly should they wish.

As an Islamic school it could be said that al Hikmah's very existence is an affirmation of the Muslim identity of its pupils. The members of staff at the school are entirely Muslim and their ethnicity largely reflects that of their pupils. Both female and male Muslim role models are present: the headteacher is female, her deputy, male, the class teachers are female and the teachers of Islamic studies (*ustadh*) male. This latter gender distinction between class teacher and *ustadh* has happened by chance rather than as a deliberate policy by the school. The routines of the school day fit within an Islamic framework with daily *salah* after lunch. Traditional English school practices, are given an Islamic slant. A school assembly observed during research used projected images of natural wonders as signs of Allah's greatness; and celebrated individual pupils' attainments by acknowledging that they had been achieved through Allah's will ('*masha'allah*'). The school choir sing unaccompanied Islamic religious songs (*nasheeds*).

Much of the weekly curriculum timetable at al Hikmah is dedicated to Islamic studies taught in discrete lessons. In the reception class (age 4 to 5 years) the children have a combined Qur'anic and Arabic hour long lesson once a day and an hour a week of Islamic Studies. In all other classes the children have four hours of Qur'an studies (reading, recitation, memorising, translating) a week, one hour of Islamic Studies (beliefs, moral values, lives of the prophets) and four hours of Arabic taught as a modern foreign language. In other areas of the curriculum the teachers plan topics that value the Islamic heritage of the pupils, such as a study of the Ottoman empire in history, or add Islamic perspectives to other topics, such as links made between a science lesson on personal health and hygiene and Islamic purification and cleanliness. A S.E.A.L. lesson with Year 1 pupils (age 5 to 6) used national, centrally-produced materials on the concept of pride, and extended them to engage with 'a type of pride Allah loves' and 'a type of pride Allah doesn't like'. In the school's policy documents

this Islamisation of the curriculum is brought together with the National Curriculum's requirements for social, moral, spiritual and cultural development using the acronym ISMSC. The school's policy is not just to make incidental links with Islam, but to present the whole of learning through an Islamic lens.

Knowledge (other than divinely revealed knowledge) can be thought of as an accrual of scientific observations and the interpretations and the views and opinions about different facets of the world we live in. This mass of fact and opinion has passed through the minds of men before they have reached our eyes and ears. It could be argued that all "knowledge" is influenced by the minds through which it has been "voiced". Thus a Muslim mind will present knowledge that affirms its Creator and purpose and present it to Muslim minds to do the same' (al Hikmah ISMSC policy)

This quote not only shows a difference in the extent of space given to Islam in this school and in the two community schools, it also reveals a major difference in the nature and direction of its engagement with Islam. In the statement above it is clear that teaching is not only being directed to the Islamic perspectives of the pupils, but from the Islamic perspectives of their teachers; it is teaching from Muslim minds to Muslim minds.

### ***Interpreting the role of Islam in school***

Although the previous section began with affirmation of Muslim pupils' backgrounds and recognition of what it is they bring to school in terms of their existing identity, prior knowledge and experience, the above quote suggests another starting point and another end. The values promoted by al Hikmah School are undoubtedly Islamic but they are not exclusively, or even predominantly values that have emerged from the children's Muslim

homes. The leadership of the school acts as interpreter of Islam and delivers that interpretation to the pupils and also to their families. The school's admissions policy requires parents to acquiesce in already given principles. It is a values-based admissions policy using a scoring system that ensures children from religiously observant families are more likely to get a place: those whose family members pray regular *salah*, pay *zakat*, have been on *hajj*, eat *halal* food, regulate children's media viewing, and, if female, wear *hijab*. As the school is oversubscribed, with four candidates for each place, it can afford to be discriminating about the families whose children are admitted, and can also be fairly directive in the advice given to parents about maintaining these high standards at home. The school's prospectus states that;

The moral and Islamic education of a child can only be effective with the co-operation and support of their parents/guardians. We ask all our parents to strive to deflect inappropriate and unsuitable media influences from children. (School Prospectus Al Hikmah)

The school is not just responding to, but directing the Islam of its charges, so, though its purposes might have been conceived within a psychological discourse of self-awareness and identity, its orientation is not very different from the nineteenth century teleological educational philosophy that sought to guide the child into the right kind of life as defined by Scripture. The school prospectus states that;

We aspire to develop an educational establishment that fosters true iman and love for Islam in the hearts and minds of our children with the focus set on promoting excellence in this life to earn excellence in it and in the hereafter. (al Hikmah School Prospectus)

The authoritative voice in the children's education is Islam, but it is an Islam transmitted by the school. The school bears the burden of interpretation. Its emphases are right knowledge and right living.

At North Street too, there is an element of interpretation in the school's responses to the Islam of its pupils. The nature of the interpretation is necessarily different because, as a community rather than a 'faith school', it does not have the same role of nurturing pupils into Islam. The direction of the education is not, as with al Hikmah, that of Islam to Islam but of a non-Islamic institution to the Islamic background of its pupils. The combination of commitment to valuing the pupils' Muslim religion and the non-Muslim status of the school, and many of the teaching staff, can sometimes lead to a rather confused blurring of boundaries between insider and outsider, between religious reverence and role play, between holy objects imbued with religious significance and artefacts for experiential learning. The example of one RE lesson illustrates this.

The lesson was delivered to a class of 7 to 8 year olds. Its aim was to compare the birth narratives of Isa or Jesus in the Qur'an and the Bible. When speaking of Muhammad the teacher adopted insider language adding the colophon 'peace be upon him' after his name, even though she did not share the prophetology such usage implies; she did not, however, use the same formula when speaking of Isa. The teacher introduced the account of Isa's birth, in an atmosphere of hushed reverence, placing a copy of the Qur'an on a stand, taking care to wash her hands before she did so 'because it has Allah's name on it', yet she left it to the Muslim teaching assistant to open it. The story of Isa's birth was told without pictures of people or animate objects, because, to draw a prophet was, as one child observed 'very rude',

yet the lesson ended with the children handling knitted figures representing different characters of the Christian Nativity because, ‘I want them to be able to touch it and feel it and to experience it’. The difficulties for the non-Muslim teacher negotiating her way around the holy things of her pupils was illustrated by an incident at the end of the lesson when, after she had left the room, the Muslim teaching assistant commented to the children on the teacher’s omission of ‘peace be upon him’ after the name of Isa, declaring that “’Isa” is just slang. We have to show respect for our prophets’. Thus the teaching assistant used her alternative authority as a Muslim to undermine the authority of the teacher on this point.

The headteacher and other colleagues at North Street look for guidance from authoritative Muslim voices on how they should relate to their pupils’ religion, respect their integrity and avoid offence. In this they are supported by the local authority’s Interfaith Education Centre, and the advice of the faith tutor from that centre who leads the Islamic worship in the school. They also use the services of their community resource manager, ‘our first port of call for liaison’ (headteacher). Both are Muslims who are trusted by the parents and who effectively mediate the relationship between them and the school.

The school is not entirely responsive. It does not use the particulars of the pupils’ and their families’ particular Muslim values and practices as a yardstick for the Islam it accommodates. Instead it gives some direction to the Islam recognised in school, supported by the authority of these two Muslim advisers. Thus the school actively discourages any pupils below the age of nine from fasting during *ramadhan*, and when a group of parents wanted to withdraw their children on religious grounds from an RE visit to a Sikh *gurdwara*, the headteacher, liaison officer and faith tutor joined forces to persuade them to change their minds showing them

how such a visit did not conflict with Islamic principles. The headteacher consults with the faith tutor on the appropriateness of the school's Christmas celebrations for its Muslim pupils, and he regularly helps her to identify stories common to the Qur'an and the Bible for assemblies, 'so we're always talking about the similarities and differences between the two main faiths'. In these instances officer and tutor act as interpreters of Islam to the parents and for the school. The kind of Islam they promote incorporates community understandings but is also open to learning from and being alongside people of different religions; it is one that suits the school's agenda of recognising religious diversity and respecting other faiths and supports the formation of 'good Muslim citizens'.

At Lingard equality is the guiding rule in the school's response to pupils' faith; in the words of the deputy headteacher, 'we treat all children the same and want to involve them and their backgrounds in the lessons', and 'all the children's experiences from home are valued equally'. The approach at this school to pupil religion is rather more guarded than that of the other two schools. There is some tension between recognition of religion, and fear of religion's potential divisiveness. The school's approach shows concern not to give any group within the school more recognition than others (the equality principle), and to avoid anything that might appear to be proselytising. The deputy headteacher stressed that all religious groups are treated with respect in the school but that they are careful not to 'promote anything about anything else'. Religion tends to be confined to the RE lesson within school; 'it's not something that we push'.

Lingard's links with parents are strong and relationships positive, but it does not experience the kind of involvement with the local Muslim community that North Street has. Though the

school management team is looking for ways to strengthen its relationship with the local community it is conscious that ‘if we are to open up one part of the community we need to make sure that other parts of the community feel that they are able to access the school as well’ (deputy headteacher) and though links with the local *madrassahs* would be appreciated, it is nervous of showing favouritism to either the Muslim pupils as a group or to any particular *madrassah* out of the twenty one *madrassahs* that the children attend. As the deputy head said, ‘we have not made any express links to any of them almost because there are too many for us to work with’.

Expression of religion within the school is managed internally without outside support and takes on a more secular character than in North Street, for example. The principle at Lingard is

That school is a place not where you leave your religion behind but where you are learning in a different way that might require you to think slightly differently from how you are taught at home or how you are taught in your place of worship. (deputy headteacher)

The neutrality of the staff on religious matters is stressed. School assemblies are viewed more as learning experiences than as acts of worship and do not include prayers with reference to God.

We have a ‘thought for the day’. We light a candle and the children are asked to close their eyes and think ...but on their terms so again we are not asking them to do something that is explicitly one thing or the other and we, sort of, have to step back from that. (deputy headteacher)

At Lingard assemblies are times for relating to major events in the life of the school, community or world, , religious references are not made, instead they are approached ‘almost from a humanist point of view’ (deputy headteacher). The religious festivals that are celebrated at Lingard are viewed as occasions for the whole school community, parents as well as children and staff to come together whatever their religion and participate on equal terms. All children have ownership of *all* the festivals as celebrated here, with Hindus involved in *Id* assemblies and Muslims in *Diwali* assemblies, ‘so it is not, “we are the Muslim children presenting our understanding of our faith or this celebration” (deputy headteacher). This impartiality is evident in RE too, though it is complicated by the occasional use of the children as resources for learning about their own religion. The teacher responsible for overseeing RE in the school perceives a tendency for the children to gravitate towards their own religious and cultural groups and seeks to counter this with an RE that emphasises the similarities between religions and uses that emphasis as a main learning point. She describes her approach.

As I keep saying to the children, religions are basically very similar ...all the gods are basically saying the same thing of how we must be patient and how we must be respectful. The more I go into religion the more I point this out. (RE teacher)

This description presents an approach to religion that is, whether consciously or not, one of containment and reduction; the ‘basically the same’ discounts vital differences that make religions distinctive, the ‘be patient’ and ‘be respectful’ is a rather bland and inadequate distillation of their teachings, and the ‘all the gods’ is contrary to the monotheism of the Muslim children’s own faith. Expressions of religion at Lingard tend towards the neutral, inclusive and secular, tailored to fit the citizenship goals of the school (promotion of equality and of tolerance) rather than reflect the pupils’ understanding and experience of religion outside school. While at al Hikmah teachers take knowledge and aim to present it through the

prism of Islam, at Lingard religious content is presented through a secular humanist mindset of impartiality and equal value. This is the authoritative voice in the school's response to the Islam of its pupils.

### ***Relating to wider society***

The approach to religion taken by Lingard is strongly influenced by a community cohesion and citizenship agenda. The school has a commitment to provide experiences which 'broaden pupils' cultural and religious horizons' and multi faith RE as provided in the school, contributes to this. However, in the interests of cohesion the school has chosen to emphasise commonality rather than distinctive identity, and shared humanity is a theme in much of the RE teaching that looks at subjects that have universal import, 'justice', 'neighbours', 'poverty and wealth'.

North Street is also a community school but lays itself open to the criticism of segregation more frequently directed at 'faith schools'. In particular the system of separate faith worship events effectively divides the school population between majority Muslims and very small minority of Christians, twice a week. Counter arguments in support of this system speak of affirmation and support for the faith identity of the Muslim students and welcome an opportunity to give focussed attention to the Christian minority children who might otherwise feel marginalised by the dominance of the larger community.

School leaders are conscious of the pupils' limited experience of communities other than their own and policies combine affirmation of the children's own beliefs, cultures and values, with the statement:

Pupils will learn to know, to understand, to respect the beliefs, practices and values of our culturally diverse community. (North Street Community Cohesion Policy)

The school's commitment to instilling respect for the beliefs and practices of others was visible in a display that brought together information, illustrations and children's work on the festivals of *Yom Kippur* and *Eid ul Adha* presented side by side. The head spoke of a visit to school of a Buddhist monk, and school staff are also used to support learning about religious and cultural diversity. A Sikh member of staff and her mother spoke to the children about their celebration of *Diwali*. The children themselves have been taken on visits to a Hindu temple, a church, a synagogue and *gurdwara*. These direct encounters with difference facilitated through the RE curriculum, constitute determined efforts to break down the barriers of segregation.

At North Street religion is a key factor in the pupils' understanding of themselves and also a major element of difference between self and others, so the school has adopted an approach that uses the children's own religion as a starting point and works from this towards recognition and appreciation of the religions and cultures of others, 'the majority of children in the school are Muslims and you start with where the children are at'. Respect for others in their diversity is one part of the social cohesion equation; another is a sense of shared belonging. The RE teacher, like the teacher at Lingard, emphasised the importance of working on commonalities between religions.

It helps their understanding and it makes them feel part of something. Obviously they feel part of their religion, faith group, their community but that's a very small, enclosed experience. (North Street RE co-ordinator)

Her words imply that the children's religious identity is not just something to be affirmed; it is also something that can impose limitations on the children. The school's role is to break down barriers between the 'enclosed experience' of the children and wider community, but in a positive way that does not sideline but respects and builds on their religious background. The very careful approach of the school that gives space for the children's expression of their own religion while facilitating positive encounters with others, is responsive to the sensitivities of a local context with its history of separate living and inter-communal tensions.

The leadership and staff at al Hikmah are well aware of the degree of public suspicion and scrutiny of Muslim schools; the headteacher spoke of the pressure of being 'under the spotlight'. Accusations that such schools intensify the fragmentation of society are particularly strong. The school has clearly opted for a degree of separation, but what those at al Hikmah seek to demonstrate is a combination of separation and involvement that is supportive and valuable for its children and wider society. Several of its strategies parallel those of other schools, for example its commitment to teaching pupils about religions other than Islam and to effecting encounter with difference through visits to places of worship and links with non-Muslim schools including pupils sharing assemblies with a local Roman Catholic school.

As an Islamic institution, however, some of the questions it asks and has to answer are slightly different from those at 'non-faith' Muslim majority schools. In particular the question for al Hikmah is not how can society accommodate Muslim faith but what can that faith contribute to society? Rather than view religion as a potential for societal conflict or as posing cultural barriers that need to be overcome, the energy at al Hikmah is generated by a

firm belief in the power of faith to restore society; religion, in particular Islam, is not a problem but a solution. The headteacher said of the school's commitment to an Islamic education for its pupils;

[We] believe in it with such fervour – the fitness and rightness of what we're doing, that through the education of children we can be a solution to society's ills – help transform society with its current problems of anti-social behaviour, criminality and drugs (al Hikmah headteacher)

The school's emphasis on morality and right living is the foundation of this mission for the transformation of society. The involvement of al Hikmah pupils in charitable activities, fundraising for victims of war and natural disasters, for example, signals the beginning of this project.

Though the children are being taught in a separate, faith-based institution, a large part of the school's responsibilities towards its pupils' development is their preparation for wider British society. The phrase in the Social Responsibility Policy, 'integrated and helpful citizens', captures both elements of this: fitting in and contributing. Before they leave al Hikmah, usually for non-Muslim state secondary schools, the children follow a programme preparing them for making their own way as Muslims in wider society. Negotiating arrangements for ablutions and prayer is part of this challenge.

They now need to speak for themselves if they need to pray somewhere or to make wudu – they've got to cope really. (al Hikmah headteacher)

The challenge is not just negotiating one's membership of wider society but also being able to play a positive role within it. One of the school aims is to:

Equip every child with the necessary skills and experiences to contribute towards the betterment of our communities and our society as a whole. (al Hikmah Social Responsibility Policy)

Part of that preparation involves a greater knowledge of British society; school policy states that pupils are to learn ‘to appreciate cultural richness of Britain and its people’. The headteacher also stresses the importance of British history in the curriculum, ‘we teach British history as our history because we are British growing up here’. School trips to such British institutions as the British Museum, the British Maritime Museum, The Imperial War Museum and Hampton Court, are all part of this learning. It is instructive in the light of recent concern about the lack of interest in a national narrative, or sense of belonging to Britain, in English schools (Maylor and Read 2007), that it should be at the Islamic school that these are most fully and explicitly promoted.

### **Three different approaches**

Faced with the same issue of educating Muslim children, the three schools have developed different responses. Lingard School works within a secular framework. It has a strong narrative of equality and cohesion through commonalty, and religious difference has the potential to disturb this equilibrium. Religion does not have a prominent place in the life of the school, it is not ‘pushed’ or ‘promoted’, but where it does surface, in RE and in the religious festivals of the school’s families, the emphasis is on what religions have in common and on a sharing of the celebrations by all. What is avoided is religious expression that is ‘explicitly one thing or the other’. Religious faith is generally not voiced publicly in school (unless for purely educational reasons to contribute to teaching about different faiths within the context of a RE lesson) but is treated as something private and personal. There is a

deliberate discontinuity between the expressions of faith with which the children are familiar in their homes and communities and those which are deemed appropriate to the school setting. The Islam of the 60% of the pupils at Lingard who are Muslims is acknowledged but neutralised.

At al Hikmah, the starting point is totally different; it is an Islamic community and its Islamic identity gives it its rationale and its purpose and guides all aspects of school life and learning. It offers Muslim children security and assurance in their faith and at the same time challenges them to grow as Muslims towards an ideal of religious living, thus it is not just responsive to the religious background but is directive, too. The danger of this Islam-to-Islam conversation is that it could become inward looking and attentive only to its own needs, but a great strength of this particular Islamic school is its concern to look outward, to partake in and contribute to wider society, the impetus for this outward orientation being found in scriptural imperative.

A third approach is evident at North Street Primary where the faith of its almost entirely Muslim population is given public expression in a framework provided by a non-Muslim institution. The school leadership's commitment to the affirmation of the children's and their families' religion is genuine and embedded in school structures and practices, but it is dependent on the mediating services of specially appointed advisers, and the authority they have as Muslim voices to win parents' support for the activities of the school. The responses of the school to the religious backgrounds of their pupils are sometimes messy, sometimes mistakes are made, but it is a learning process and school, parents and advisers are in continual consultation about the details.

Between them (more by response to context than by intention) the three schools reflected different elements of varied European approaches to the education of Muslims and about Islam. Al-Hikmah is an example of separate Islamic schooling with emphasis on academic achievement and moral development. All three adopted multi-faith RE, at Lingard as the whole, and at the other schools as part, of the children's religious learning. Muslim children at al-Hikmah and North Street both received denominational RE from specially appointed faith teachers. At the former the learning was intensive and delivered from inside the school, at the latter it was weekly and brought in from the outside. Although pupil affirmation was still very important to school leaders and teachers' understanding and representation of what they were doing, it was evident that they had moved beyond an individualised understanding of education to consideration of the nature of society as a whole. They presented in microcosm, in their own organisation, approaches and goals different models of the role of religion within society. At Lingard what was public was what all could share and celebrate. The differences and distinctiveness of religions were for the private sphere. At al Hikmah, Islam was not just private or for a particular community, but policies and staff expressed high ideals of the contribution it could make to wider society. Muslim pupils were not only being educated to integrate into existing society but to make it better. Finally at North Street the approach was one of partnership between secular authority and faith community, of ongoing discussion and negotiation.

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