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How well do we know our pupils? Debating, discussing and exploring the complexity of identity within educational curriculum and pedagogy.

Aminul Hoque

What is identity and why is it important? Can we define identity? More importantly, as educators, do we really know who our pupils are? Are we aware of the **everyday** issues they experience in the social world outside school? Who are they? And what are the issues that they are grappling with? Should this be our concern? And how does getting to know our pupils, having an insight into **their** worlds and a genuine attempt to understand their 'everyday' – how does this enhance the learning experience?

These are some of the complex questions my book *British-Islamic Identity: Third Generation Bangladeshis from East London* explores through an in-depth ethnography of a group of British-born Bangladeshi teenagers from London. Their stories are powerful, clear and unsettling. Their rhetoric is one of social justice, recognition and a yearning for belonging. However, their reality is one of dislocation, non-belonging, marginalization and exclusion. It is within the complexity of their everyday social and cultural worlds that their identities are being managed and constructed. Who are they? Are they British, Bangladeshi, Muslim, Londoners, a fusion of them all, or none of them? The main argument of this article is that we as educators need to explore, debate, recognise and discuss the key sociocultural issues that our students experience outside of the school gates. Central to this, is an exploration of the tricky concept of 'identity' within school curriculum and pedagogy.

The complexity of identity

The questions of 'who am I?' and 'who are we/ they?' contributes significantly to the identity conundrum. The British Islam that I describe in my study is a postmodern identity – dynamic, fluid, multifaceted, diverse, open to change and often contested by its members. In modern complex British society, questions of identity have become less concerned with *who we are* and more *with how have we been represented?* Identity, therefore, is always in 'process' and never completed (Hall, 1996: 2-3). This presents a unique opportunity for educators to seize upon the uncertain 'fuzzy' (Kershen, 1998: 19) nature of Identity and explore it further within educational spaces. The concept of the 'other' was central in the stories of the young Bangladeshi participants from my study. The 'non-Muslim', 'the white man', 'Bangladesh', 'British culture', among many other examples, represented notions of otherness to the participants. Equally, a negative, racialized and Islamophobic representation of the immigrant and Muslim 'other' has also revived notions of 'in'-group and 'out'-group status (Said, 1979; Hagendoorn, 1993; Allen, 2010). We construct our

identity through a complex prism of 'sameness' and 'difference' (Lawler, 2013). As Woodward (2004: 39) observes, 'We present ourselves to others through everyday interactions, through the way we speak and dress, marking ourselves as the same as those with whom we share an identity and different from those with whom we do not.' It is the similarities that mark out differences between us and them. The practice of 'othering', therefore, is a complex two-way process. Hall (1996) and others (Foucault, 1980; Butler, 1990) argue that it is only through the relation to the 'other' – the representable, the symbolic and powerful, the relation to what it is not – that identity is constructed.

So what were some of *their* stories of identity?

It remains difficult to be a British Muslim in the year 2015 (Abbas, 2005; Lewis, 2007; Hoque, 2015). British Muslims are being consistently asked to make a choice between their religious affiliations and also their national British identity. Ever since the London transport bombings of 2005, British Muslims have become increasingly engulfed in the global 'war on terror', constructing British born Muslims as the terrorist, violent and un-British 'other'. This form of contemporary Islamophobia is rooted in 'orientalist' philosophy (Said, 1979). It is a form of racism and constructs Muslims as the distinctive 'other' different to that of the civilised West – a people unable to govern themselves, who lie, are cunning, lack initiative, and who cannot think logically. It is an integral part of the way some Westerners, especially the political elite, understand themselves. It is a colonial ideology that involves the exercise of power from the benevolent West towards the uncivilised East. More recently, we have seen the allegations of a 'Trojan Horse' takeover of schools in Birmingham by a group of conservative Muslims in 2014, after which the Department for Education (DfE) felt the need to reassert Britishness, partly in reaction to the alleged takeover and partly because the term is ambiguous and required definition, and also the disappearance of three seemingly happy, 'British' A grade teenagers from Bethnal Green to Syria (2015) - further scrutinizing the British Muslim community under an Islamophobic lens normalising this 'fear' and 'dread' of Muslims (Runnymede, 1997). This somewhat hostile attitude towards Islam and Muslims, and its tendency to associate Islam with intolerance and extremism, effectively asks British Muslims, yet again, to decide whether they are Muslim or British by constructing these two facets of identity as oppositional and incompatible.

It is within this national and international wider backdrop of exclusion alongside the politics of 'difference', that the stories of my participants emerge. Their stories are multiple and overlapping. Below, I recount three facets of their complex identity, as a means of illustration and also discuss how they present opportunities for educators to engage with their pupils.

The importance of the mother-tongue

The abandonment of their mother-tongue of Bengali was a key finding. Many of them saw Bengali as irrelevant, 'backwards' and 'useless' (Hoque, 2015: 56), and have instead adopted English and Arabic as a form of power, acceptance and belonging. They were highly ambivalent and negative towards Bengali and also the Bangladeshi culture. One participant states, 'Bengali holds no relevance in my life' (Hoque, 2015: 60). As a result, unlike their grandparents and many of their parents, they were not part of Bengali-speaking linguistic community. This intergenerational tension and divide (alongside a linguistic, cultural and technological one) between young people and their parents and grandparents was something that not many educators within the local schools were aware of. The struggle to find a sense of cultural identity was part of my participants 'everyday' reality. So how does this present an opportunity for education?

The young Bangladeshis had differing, complex and competing bilingual and bicultural identities. So how should the local schools respond? Local schools should actively encourage and value the home languages of their student population. Clearly, some of my participants suffer from what Cummins and Skutnabb-Kangas (1988: 5) call 'educational violence': the 'shame' of being a 'minority' within education. I argue that as well as a culturally responsive teaching programme, teachers should view bilingualism as an **asset**. There is a plethora of evidence showing, confidently, that children who are bilingual do well in school and in employment (Miller, 1983; Cummins, 1996; Conteh, 2003; Kenner, 2004). Conteh (2003) argues that when the skills of bilingual and bicultural learners are recognized and valued in the classroom, pupils move confidently and successfully between community, culture and school. The personal and social benefits of bilingualism are many. Learning through different languages provides significant cognitive benefits and also enhances multilingual identities and provides a gateway into other cultural worlds (see Kenner and Hickey, 2008).

The multiple meanings of hijab

Many young British-born Bangladeshi girls wear the hijab (headscarf) both within the community, the home and also within schooling spaces. This raises many questions for educational pedagogy and curriculum. For example, do we, as educators, know why they wear it? What does it mean to them? What does it symbolise? Why do some girls wear it and others don't? Do we know? Have we asked our pupils? Should we care? Is this within our remit as teachers and educators or more of a matter for wider social and cultural spaces? It is folly to reduce the discussion of the hijab to one that revolves around the debate of 'oppression' vs 'liberation' (Mernissi, 2003 [1975]; El Guindi, 2000; Bullock, 2007). It is far more complex than this. For example, one of my participants viewed the hijab as a 'public statement' of her 'inner faith'. She has worn the hijab since the age of 11 and views it as 'the most important' part of her identity. She says: 'It is much more than a piece of

cloth to me ... my personality, spirituality, my faith ... it gives me confidence, direction, pride ... The hijab means everything to me' (Hoque, 2015: 149). As a social practice of identity, it means different things to different girls that wear it – religion, culture, fashion, community, identity, privacy, space, protection, power, autonomy, respect, confidence and to prevent male harassment. Therefore, it is more appropriate to think of the hijab as having 'multiple meanings' (Bullock 2007).

So how does this present a unique opportunity for education? Let's think of a few more questions: would it not be useful to discuss the complexity of hijab within the curriculum? Have we thought about asking these young women why they wear the hijab?, to hear about these issues directly from those that it affects?, as opposed to falling back on our own feminist politics, experiences and stereotypes which are heavily guided by what we see and read in the mainstream media and what we hear from our political leaders. There are examples where educators have developed negative opinions on the complexity of the hijab. For example, Farley's (2009) study of 92 Muslim girls and their teachers in Luton examined whether a state school should offer the hijab as part of the school uniform for Muslim students. Many of the teachers saw the hijab as a symbol of oppression and a way of constantly reminding the girls of their cultural obligations. One teacher regarded the hijab as repressive and a form of 'control' exerted by parents. Some teachers resorted to a role of trying to 'save' their pupils from such oppressive acts of veiling. This is problematic, and worryingly, it highlights the orientalist discourse of Islamophobia, racism, difference that still informs teaching pedagogy in many classrooms across Britain (see Shain, 2003).

Non-belonging

Alongside the complexity of language and the hijab, many other important stories and questions emerge from their identity riddle: notions of community and 'home'; the exclusiveness of Britishness; feeling like a 'tourist' in both their country of birth and the country of their ancestors; the increasing social and spiritual role of Islam in their lives; exclusion alongside a racial discourse of difference; the trauma and dislocation of migration and much more. Central, perhaps, is the migrant story of non-belonging. Marginalized by some sections of mainstream British society due to ethno-cultural and religious differences, many are also excluded from the Bangladeshi community because they've adopted a seemingly western lifestyle. They are also dismissed as British or 'Londonis' by fellow kin when they visit Bangladesh. So the question is: where do we go? Where is home? One 15 year old girl echoes this feeling of non-belonging, 'they keep on telling me to go back to where I came from. I was born here. I am 100 per cent British. Where is it exactly that I am supposed to go back to?' (Hoque, 2015: 2). This is the identity conundrum that weighs them down and is so intensely complex to negotiate.

Using art, literature and poetry can be a very useful way to discuss these issues of non-belonging, migration and the complexity of 'home'. Take for example, an extract from Dave Calder's (2010: 45) poem *Citizen of the World*, in which he explores the migrant story of non-belonging:

*And you grow up in a place
That is never quite your home
And all your childhood people
With a smile or a fist say
You're not from here are you
And part of you says fiercely yes I am
And a part of you feels no I'm not
I belong where my parents belonged
But when you go to their town, their country
People there also say
You're not from here are you*

This powerful poem summarises the identity riddle of non-belonging for many British-born Bangladeshis, and can be used constructively within educational spaces.

A British-Islamic Identity

The peaceful religion of Islam can help fill the identity void. Amidst the daily reality of non-belonging, poverty, Islamophobia and alienation, Islam, offers many young Bangladeshis a sense of peace, humanity, belonging, family and spirituality. And it offers some of us a platform for a political search for identity revolving around equality, voice, recognition and a commitment to social justice. Importantly, it helps manage the 'who am I?' riddle. As such, many have constructed a positive British-Islamic identity for themselves. As a definition, British Islam enables third-generation Bangladeshis to comfortably identify with and fuse the many segments of their multifaceted identities: national, linguistic, ethnic, racial, cultural, religious and gendered. Below are a few illustrations of the important role of British Islam in their 'everyday' lives.



How should education respond to the identity conundrum?

I argue that these issues of non-belonging, exclusion and alienation are experienced by many young people across the UK. The question therefore becomes one of why is it important to try and understand the 'everyday' and social worlds of **all** our pupils, regardless of their social class, ethnic or racial background. These live and evolving stories of identity are rich and resourceful and invite constructive classroom discussions between the teacher and the pupil. They can easily be integrated into existing curricula and across many subject disciplines – geography, humanities, English, history, religious education, citizenship and others. Most importantly, these issues are relevant and interesting to 'their' lives and hence become meaningful, rewarding and educational.

My research shows that it is vital to value and incorporate the cultural, linguistic, ethnic, religious identities of learners within the curriculum and pedagogy, as it:

- Enhances their cognitive development
- Exposes children to a variety of languages and cultures
- Prepares children for a modern multicultural and multiracial society
- Enables the expression of cultural identities
- Prepares young people to compete economically in a global society
- Instils a positive sense of identity, enhances confidence and self-esteem

Consequently, children are better integrated, happier and perform better academically if value and importance are attributed to issues relevant and important to them.

My findings and ideas are neither novel nor revolutionary. This idea of an **inclusive curriculum** underpinned by a pedagogy of collaboration, democracy, dialogue and humanity, has been historically championed by many prominent educationalists such as

Paulo Freire and John Dewey. At the heart of it lies the realisation that young people do not leave their sociocultural worlds behind once they enter the school gates. And neither should they be expected to. The Bullock Report, *A Language for Life*, reported back in 1975 that ‘no child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of the home as he crosses the school threshold, nor to live and act as though school and home represent two separate and different cultures which have to be kept firmly apart’. As Kenner and Ruby (2012) highlight, school, community and language are parts of ‘interconnected worlds’. The ‘funds of knowledge’ that young people bring to the school stem from their personal and cultural experiences and thus becomes central to their learning (Moll *et al.*, 1992).

What needs to happen?

An inclusive curriculum requires the teacher to become socioculturally conscious and also have a firm commitment to bridge the gap between community and school. So the question is how do we as educators become mediators between language, community, culture, identity and the school? I outline below five ways in which this can be achieved:

1. First and foremost, there needs to be a recognition that the incorporation of the cultures, languages, real life ‘everyday’ issues, worries, anxieties and concerns of pupils can and should underpin educational pedagogy.
2. Within the boundaries of a national curriculum, local schools need to develop a curriculum **relevant** to the lives and aspirations of its student population. Local issues such as those identified in my study should inform the school curriculum, especially an exploration of identity, ancestry, heritage, culture, language and a history of local area immigration. British history needs to be rewritten to be inclusive of its ethnic minorities and acknowledge their important contribution to the development of the British national story, and Black history teaching needs to become a ‘mandatory’ (Mirza, 2015). This will instil a positive sense of belonging and make them proud of their own histories. They will also be able to make sense of the ‘past-present’ identity conundrum – a sense of knowing who they are and where they have come from (Bhabha, 1994).
3. If schools encourage students to discuss issues of cultural, social and religious identities with their peers within an educational setting, this will motivate and affirm them and encourage them to try and understand each other’s ‘map[s] of meaning[s]’ (Hall, 1990: 222). An open and trusting school ethos encourages personal and academic achievement.
4. Teachers need to be more than just competent classroom professionals. Both the school and the teachers need to **play an active role** within the local communities. Teachers should get an insight and understanding of the cultural worlds that their students are living in. I argue that strong community partnership will enhance pedagogy and the educational experience for all concerned. This should not be

tokenistic but derive from a genuine desire to get to know the sociocultural worlds of their pupils. Clearly, for this to take place schools must offer support and allocate staff time and other resources, and this should be incorporated within existing teaching timetable and not be viewed as additional or voluntary work, but rather a mandatory, yet organic, part of what it means to 'teach'.

5. A commitment to a **two-way education** should be at the core of the schooling ethos. **Listen** to the stories and concerns of your pupils and adopt a reflexive approach to education – make education fun, engaging and **relevant** to the lives of pupils. Let them draw, act, talk, write and speak about the many layers of identities that they are a part of.

Conclusion

Of course, by no means am I saying that this will be easy. Modern day teachers are overworked and overburdened with the weight of bureaucracy and data management. They are less teachers and increasingly becoming administrators. Teachers are also human-beings who have their own lives separate to their profession. And of course, there are also countless numbers of teachers and schools already out there who propagate, practice and preach this community-child-centred education model that I am advocating here. Importantly, the leadership of schools will need to be brave and visionary in order for such an inclusive education to take shape.

Identity and culture are important to many of our young children and therefore must inform curriculum and pedagogy. However, I realise that grappling with the knotty idea of identity within the schooling curriculum is not a solution to the identity conundrum that many young people are living through, but surely it is a start?

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