



Culturally sensitive schooling: Understanding Pakistani Muslim parents’ school choices

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Introduction

Evidence to inform best practice in schools and at systems level should be sought from a variety of sources. This article offers findings from parents to contextualise issues that impact on culturally sensitive schooling, and which support better practice in this area for policy and practice. Culturally sensitive schooling engages with diverse student populations and culturally relevant pedagogical strategies (Berglund, 2015) and embodies cultural responsiveness (Aronson et al., 2016). Meeting the religious and cultural needs of Muslim Pakistani students, and the wider Muslim school community, is challenging for many schools in England. Culturally (in) sensitive schooling is an important consideration for Muslim Pakistani parents when choosing a school that aligns with their beliefs (Banks and Banks, 2015). This study, based in Blackburn, Northern England, suggests that it is the extent to which a school’s religious education (RE) and relationships and sex education (RSE) curriculum is culturally sensitive that affects Pakistani Muslim parents’ choice of secondary school.

Swann Report, ‘Education for all’ (Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups, 1985). The Swann Report argued for cultural pluralism and opened the door for a range of multiculturalism policies for schools and local authorities (Mathieu, 2018). Cultural pluralism is a setting where a minority group maintains its distinct culture whilst participating in a multicultural society having a dominant, separate culture (May, 2005). Culturally sensitive schooling proposes a curriculum that supports and maintains all religious beliefs and cultural identities of minority groups (Alsubaie, 2015). However, England’s state schools have a curriculum based on Christian and European traditions (Musharraf, 2015). This foundation poses challenges to a culturally sensitive education for Muslim children, particularly in the teaching of RE and RSE.

Religious education (RE)

England’s state education system positions RE in the curriculum in such a manner that it does not promote a particular religion; instead, it develops a student’s personal, spiritual and moral perspective (Berglund, 2015). All students are entitled to receive RE, but parents have a right to withdraw their children from RE lessons, as outlined in the School Standards and

Background and policy context

In England, the approach of culturally sensitive schooling was developed in the aftermath of the



Framework Act 1998. Interestingly, RE is part of the basic curriculum offered by a school but does not constitute part of the National Curriculum (Barnes, 2014), which means that it is not mandatorily examined at the end of Key Stage 4. Concerns have been raised over the purpose, mode of provision and teaching materials of RE (Conroy et al., 2012), an issue for a culturally sensitive curriculum.

Relationships and sex education (RSE)

The teaching of RSE is compulsory in English state-maintained schools from the age of 11 (Long, 2020). The RSE curriculum comprises sexual identity, puberty, menstruation, sexual health, relationships and mental health, with the reproductive and human growth elements being mandatory for all children. Parents can withdraw their children from RSE classes, with the exception of reproductive and human growth (Long, 2020). There is some controversy around the mandatory element of RSE (Lewis and Knijn, 2001), and claims that it should acknowledge the sociocultural contexts in which the teaching takes place (Wight and Abraham, 2000). In a predominantly Muslim school community, RSE presents challenges for a culturally sensitive curriculum.

Muslim parents and school choices in Blackburn, Northern England

Blackburn is a large town in Northern England, with 35 per cent of the population identifying as Muslim and 10 per cent being born in Pakistan (six per cent) or India (four per cent) (ONS, 2021). As of 2021, 38 per cent of the population in Blackburn identified as Christian and 21 per cent as having no religion (ONS, 2021). This makes

Blackburn a religiously segregated town (Cantle, 2001) and an interesting place to explore culturally sensitive schooling for its Muslim residents.

In 2018–19, a qualitative investigation was undertaken to understand the challenges and issues in choices made by Muslim Pakistani parents for their children's education. Thirty-three Muslim parents of Pakistani heritage from Blackburn with children of secondary school age were interviewed. Documentary analysis was also undertaken to contextualise findings in relation to multicultural education policy and literature. The semi-structured interviews offered a snapshot of Muslim parental choices, informed by culturally sensitive school options in Blackburn at that time. Since 2018–19, there has been no significant policy change regarding the teaching of RE and RSE.

Parents' perceptions of RE and RSE

The parents selected for this research represent a range of school choices available in Blackburn: state secondary schools (no religious affiliation), Catholic state secondary schools and additional learning in Islamic schools. Five of the 33 participants chose to send their children to Islamic schools for additional religious instruction. The majority of parents (28 out of 33) spoke positively about the content and teaching of RE in state schools in Blackburn. They found RE helpful, being a subject of ethics and humanity, giving knowledge to their children about the world's major religions, as this parent states:

'I think if you... if you were to consider religious education as being a subject of humanity and about values, then there is no

Axim volupta voluptatio. Equas odis aliquiant essuscim nam, eos as est est, aut haruntin resto blate

contradiction or there is no issue.'
(Parent 27)

However, the five parents who chose additional Islamic schools told us that the RE curriculum in Blackburn's state schools did not reflect Islam or their own Muslim beliefs, as this statement shows:

'I mean, we are Muslims, at least. Muslim children should know their religion. Plus, they should know the prayers, fasting, their religious duties.' (Parent 2)

Despite these parental concerns, all of their children were allowed to attend the RE classes alongside the additional Islamic school lessons on Muslim religious instruction. The pattern of educational choices for Muslim Pakistani children in Blackburn was to attend Asian-majority non-religious state schools or Catholic state schools in the daytime, with attendance for the minority at evening Islamic schools. This arrangement was a practical solution adopted by the Muslim parents to address the gap left by secular day schools.

When we sought parental opinions about RSE, it appeared a contentious issue for culturally sensitive schooling. The five parents that opted to send their children to Islamic schools for additional religious instruction did so primarily due to the RSE curriculum at state schools. These parents were against the teaching of RSE, due to the young age of their children in an environment considered replete with un-Islamic ethos, as this parent's statement shows: >

› ‘You know, I don’t see no, no... I don’t see no moral foundation [in RSE], and that’s one of the main reasons I sent my daughter to Islamic school. That is one of the main reasons.’ (Parent 21)

Eight parents who chose state schools were also concerned about the culturally insensitive teaching of RSE. Some of them felt uncomfortable about their children being taught RSE by non-Muslim teachers or teachers of the opposite sex.

All 28 parents who did not use Islamic school to supplement their child’s state education shared some concerns that RSE was inadequate and inappropriate, stating that RSE lessons should be taught in a way that does not make a child ‘vulgar’ and should be ‘age-related’, being taught at the ‘right time’, and that the lessons should not promote sex outside of marriage. However, interestingly, some parents accepted the issues of cultural insensitivity on the pretext that it was a government policy, as one parent commented:

‘It is the responsibility of state... if state thinks that it is necessary... you know, the think tanks of the state consider it necessary. We should accept it if we want to live in this country.’ (Parent 13)

One parent proposed that state schools in Blackburn should agree on a culturally sensitive curriculum and that this should govern the teaching of RSE:

‘That’s been a HUGE topic for the last [RSE curriculum content]... coming... a year or plus more... to a certain extent,

they do need to be taught about it, how they get taught and what the material is. That is something to question and obviously discussed with the schools and the communities.’ (Parent 24)

Recommendations for school leaders and policymakers

The findings from this study provide the following insights:

- To support understanding by parents of the RE and RSE curricula and the way in which they are taught, schools should publish the details on their school website
- Schools should communicate proactively with parents about the content of RE and RSE curricula before teaching and responding to parental concerns sensitively
- The Department for Education should consider a named secondary trainee teacher pathway in RE and RSE to support quality and cultural sensitivity in teaching the curricula
- At the very least, teachers responsible for RE and RSE curriculum delivery should receive training on how to deliver the content in a culturally and age-appropriate way.

The parents that took part in this study accepted the challenges and issues of the RE and RSE curricula, recognising the importance of the subjects to a child’s development. The parents demonstrated a need for adjustments in both policy and practice of RE and RSE in schools in England if these subjects are ever to be considered culturally sensitive.

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