

# Dissonance, (dis)respect, and (not) belonging in the school space: BME Muslim student accounts of their experience in Glasgow schools

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## Abstract

Scottish Government education policies, such as the Curriculum for Excellence, rely on statements about ‘inclusion’, social justice, fairness, and equality for children and young people. However, these values do not apply to all children and young people, particularly non-White students from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, many of whom feel they are treated as racialised outsiders. This paper has emerged from my doctoral research (2016) and takes the opportunity to further explore the educational experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Muslim youth as they prepare to exit compulsory education. In the original study, 17 participants were identified by their schools and agencies as needing support to transition out of compulsory education due to a higher propensity to fall out of education, employment, or training (More Choices, More Chances, 2006), with 14 meeting the criteria of visible ethnic minorities. Eleven of the participants were also of the Muslim faith. This paper focuses on the findings of the 11 Muslim BME young people from the original study, and their responses to the first research question. The research question asked them about their experiences with compulsory education. Participants took part in semi-structured interviews in pairs or small groups of three. Through direct content analysis, three themes emerged: 1. Relationships between young people and their White Scottish peers were weak to non-existent. 2. Relationships between young people and their White Scottish teachers were weak. 3. The young people’s sense of (not) belonging and trust in their schools was strong. Six of the eleven study participants did not feel included in the school environment or treated as equals with their peers. They faced instances of racial discrimination by their teachers. Of the remaining five participants, two were troubled and had to be constantly reassured that the interviews were conducted for research purposes only. They were not required to participate and had the choice of physically leaving the session or contacting the researcher to have their contributions removed from the study. Three of the five participants did not cite unfair treatment; however, they did not seem to recognise or want to acknowledge that

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episodes of miscommunication and differential treatment shared with the researcher constituted discrimination. The study argues that policy language needs to be specific to address equality and inclusion in the school environment if outcomes are to be improved, particularly when it comes to the experiences of ethnic (and religious) minority students in school in Glasgow, Scotland. The young people feel they do not belong, are tolerated, and do not receive the same courtesy as their White Scottish peers. This paper highlights how racism can play out in education, disenfranchising young people. The paper recommends that policy and practice be aligned to ensure that all students are treated equally. This requires alignment of policy and practice, with strong leadership in schools who focus on racial, social justice, and fairness.

### Keywords

policy, young people, belonging, identity, schools, religion, ethnicity, discrimination, othering, trust

## Introduction

This article explores the school experiences of Muslim young people in Glasgow. It draws on data from interviews with young people, aged 16–19 and observational notes taken at the time of the interview. The evidence gathered is organised around three themes. The theme of the paper is not only interesting and topical in Scotland but also internationally, given the rise of systemic and institutionalised racism within the school system (DiAngelo, 2021; Rollock, 2022). I start from the premise that racism is not a new phenomenon in our schools or our society, and that racism manifests and changes over time and context for those in power to maintain the inequalities in society that benefit the status quo. The findings of the study (Riaz, 2016) illustrate how the young people in the study perceive themselves to not belong and in some cases are tolerated in the school space.

The findings on which I write this paper are drawn from my doctoral research, focusing on the experiences of Muslim participants from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds who were about to transition out of compulsory education. Research shows how teachers continue to treat non-White students from diverse ethnic backgrounds, through stereotyping and setting low expectations for them, particularly for Black Caribbean students (Rollock, 2007; Riaz, 2020). This lens of otherness has come to

stereotype Muslim students as a threat to the social order of British society (Bhopal, 2018; Steinberg and Down, 2020), with ethnic minorities, with a focus on Muslims being perceived as a social problem under the Prevent duty. Research findings and literature from the 1980s, beginning with the Rampton Report (DES, 1981), a report for the Department for Education and Science (DES), highlighted the disparities between ethnic minority groups and the achievement gap between boys and girls. Tomlinson (2014, p38) authored the Swann report (DES, 1985) which made 71 recommendations and drew attention to the differences between ethnic minorities as a result of pupils' socioeconomic conditions.

In the UK, England and Scotland continue to struggle with signs of growing intolerance in society before and after Brexit, in the public sector, and in the education system as Davidson et al., 2018 point out in their edited collection 'No problem here: Understanding racism in Scotland'), from the Equalities and Human Rights Commission report (2019) which shows the prevalence of racism in the higher education sector. In England, I give an example of the fallout from the 'Trojan Horse Affair' fiasco in Birmingham in 2014 (Holmwood and O'Toole, 2018), where high-performing schools (rated 'outstanding' by Ofsted in 2012), with majority Muslim, staff and student bodies were targeted and demonised by the state and media for

‘radicalising’ students. This paper is relevant in that it uses policy, literature, and evidence-based research, to contextualise how a small group of Muslim BME young people experience their journey through schools in Glasgow, the city with the largest Muslim population in Scotland – albeit a small study. This paper begins with an introduction to racism in English schools, before looking at Scottish policy and setting the scene for the findings.

## Literature review

There is a growing body of literature that looks at the experiences of diaspora who have chosen to settle in the United Kingdom, from the perspective of South Asian students (Bhatti, 1999), African-Caribbean students’ academic success (Rhamie, 2007), African-Caribbean underachievement (Sewell and Majors, 2001), and family relationships, particularly with parents (Crozier, 2001; Cork, 2005). Racism has been highlighted by many (Connolly, 1998; Pilkington, 1999; Candappa and Ahmed, 2007; Maylor et al., 2009; Hick et al., 2011). Research has found that students from African-Caribbean groups were aware of low expectations from teachers (Rhamie, 2007; Rollock, 2007), where the African-Caribbean students being aware of the different and higher sanctions for inappropriate behaviour imposed on BME students compared to White students. This resulted in African Caribbeans, Black other, and African-Caribbean students of mixed heritage, as well as Gypsy, Roma, and Travellers of Irish origin being excluded from school at much higher rates (Gillborn and Youdell, 1999; Bhopal and Myers, 2008). There are other factors known to affect educational attainment, such as gender, with young women performing better in school than their male peers (Gillborn and Gipps 1996; Bhopal, 2012), poverty (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2006; Netto et al., 2011), socio-economic status (Rhamie and Hallam, 2002), and parental education, with Bhatti (1999) examining the educational background of parents as an indicator of the child’s progress in school.

Alexander, Weekes-Bernard, and Arday (2015) in their report for the Runnymede Trust and Alexander and Shankley (in Byrne et al., 2020) compare UK educational attainment gap percentages which show similar patterns to previous research, suggesting that little has changed.

Further research has now changed to consider South Asian communities as Muslim communities with the same problems as before. The focus now shifts to British Fundamental Values and the assimilation of the Muslim ‘other’ by the state (Welply, 2018, p371), which insists that ‘pupils should be made aware of the difference between the law of the land and religious law’ (Department of Education (DfE), 2014, p4). This leads to the following section, which discusses how young people are marginalised along social class, ethnicity, and gender lines. Based on a perceived difference attributed to them by society (Coburn and Wallace, 2011, p64) a young person can experience ‘othering’, and be perceived by others as not belonging in their groups.

In this paper, I define the concept of ‘othering’ with reference to groups that have been historically marginalised in society (De Beauvoir, 1949; Kumashiro, 2000; Welply, 2018; Meetoo, 2019). This may be due to their socio-economic background, class, race, religion, or gender. By focusing on these and other issues, the image of the individual can be distorted by public perception rather than reflecting what is happening (Jensen, 2011). A social distancing between ‘them’ and ‘us’ is created (Fine, 1994; Schwalbe et al., 2000; Bonilla-Silva and Forman, 2000; Lister, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Youdell, 2012). When we adopt this kind of behaviour as the norm, ‘otherness’ becomes the rationale and justification for inequality (Holden, 1997). We thus begin to see every act of resistance as further evidence that inferiority, low status, and inequality are valid and legitimate, reinforcing the deficit discourse of stigma through the media (Gilens, 2004), political and public discourse, and scientific and academic research (Katz, 1995; Rank, 2005). This discourse of ‘othering’ then becomes the dominant ideology (Richardson and Bolloten, 2015).

Bhopal (2012) discusses this in an educational setting where highlighting equality issues can inadvertently illuminate the social inequalities faced by young people from different cultures and backgrounds, through stereotyping and stigmatisation, leading to further alienation from mainstream schooling and society. Rhamie et al. (2012) discuss this further, drawing on the findings by MacNaughton and Davies (2001) who state that ‘the process of “othering” enables individuals to identify themselves as different from “others” even if they belong to the same ethnic, social, or cultural group. This “othering” results in students setting themselves apart from these “others” by highlighting the problems they bring to the school context that the students themselves do not’ (Rhamie et al., 2012, p180).

Williams (2015, p19) points out that sociology itself can be criticised for creating racial hierarchies through a deficit lens, pathologising those who belong to an ethnic minority which has helped to ‘institutionalise oppression and discrimination through the production of the “other” by the state and academics through a Eurocentric/White lens. This can affect our ability to “look beneath the surfaces of places and actual lives.” Williams (2015, p20) goes a step further and refers to ‘othering’ as ‘the process of attaching moral codes of inferiority to difference’. This can be applied to a school setting based on social class, ethnicity, and gender. The ‘other’ is used in this study to distinguish young people who are not part of the dominant population (Devine et al., 2008; Borrero et al., 2012; Williams, 2015; Gormally, 2019).

## Racism and education in Scotland

This section first presents the aims of a Scottish Government policy, Curriculum for Excellence (2004), before discussing the challenges faced by BME Muslim young people who have been identified by policies such as More Choices, More Chances, (MCMC, Scottish Government, 2008) as having a higher propensity to fall out of

education, employment, and training and therefore needing more support to make the transition from compulsory schooling.

The aim of the Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Government, 2004) is to promote and encourage positive learning environments and one approach suggested is that of inclusion and equality. This approach aims to promote an environment where all children and young people are treated equally, where there is an ethos of mutual respect and appreciation of existing differences, and where these are understood and accepted. It focuses on removing barriers to learning and discrimination and promotes an environment where equality is supported. The values, purposes, and principles for the Curriculum 3–18 in Scotland are set out in A Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Government, 2004). According to policy makers, the Curriculum for Excellence is for all young people in all educational settings and is designed to support them in a variety of ways to maximise their potential. Central to this is the aspiration that all children and young people should be successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens, and effective contributors (i.e. that they should develop the ‘four capacities’). It is expected that the four capacities will be developed through a focus on health and well-being, languages, expressive arts, science, religious and moral education, mathematics, and social studies in the Scottish education curriculum underpinned by the principles of personalisation, choice, coherence, relevance, and depth for the child or young person. On closer inspection, the languages, arts, religious and moral education, and social studies are taught from the perspective of mainstream society with the cultural heritage of BME students posited outside the school door (Cummins, 2001; Banks and Banks, 2019). When it is acknowledged it is through the framework of the multicultural tokenism of ‘steel bands, saris, and samosas’ (Troyna and Ball, 1985 cited in Lander, 2014, p95) to signify the presence of cultural diversity. The experiences and knowledge,

cultural, and social capital of ethnic minority children and young people are perceived through a deficit lens (Fukuyama, 1995; Asahi, 2020), with the value and narrative attached to the curriculum constructed to conform to the norms of the majority society, rather than being inclusive of ethnic minorities. Diversity in the teaching workforce – 3 years on the report, 2021 highlights that ethnic diversity is under-represented in the teaching workforce, making up only 1.6% of the workforce (Scottish Government, 2021). The curriculum is structured around a fixed criterion that excludes worldviews from ‘inclusive’ representation, which is maintained for the privileged by favouring preferred languages such as Gaelic, French, Spanish, and German being prioritised, and excluding heritage languages such as Urdu (Dombrowski et al., 2015).

‘This is where a child is from a non-white Scottish background, and the child or young person’s cultural heritage, history and language are not acknowledged in the school space. This leads to important aspects of the identity of the child being posited outside the school door and interpreted as unequal or of low or no worth by the professional school community’ (Cummins, 2001).

In a research review commissioned by the Scottish Office Education and Industry Department to provide information on education and BME groups in Scotland, Powney et al. (1998) note that Glasgow City Council has been collecting statistical data on ethnic minority children and young people in primary and secondary schools since 1989. Pupils were classified first by their ethnic background, and then by the other languages spoken. This information has been used over the years to help schools with a high proportion of BME students monitor the ethnic composition of the school, subject choices, pupil attainment, and the attainment gap. The risk matrices used in Glasgow schools, use a traffic light system (red – potential to fall out of the education and need most support to transition onto a positive destination, amber – some support needed to transition onto

a positive destination, and green, minimum support needed to transition onto a positive destination, where a positive destination refers to further or higher education, employment, or training after leaving school). The matrix measures a young person’s academic pathway. McEwan (Glasgow City Council, 2013) has identified that young people from BME backgrounds have more than twice the percentage (33%) of those being classified as ‘amber’ than the majority White Scottish student cohort (16%) due to a single risk factor – English as an Additional Language where their English language skills have been assessed as not having reached competency. Therefore, these students have a higher chance of falling into the ‘red’ category and being labelled through policy intervention as needing additional support for transitioning out of compulsory education (Freedom of Information Request, McEwan, 2013). Young people who are most labelled as disaffected and having a higher potential to fall out of education, employment, and training tend to be minority ethnic young people, predominantly of African-Caribbean, Bangladeshi, and Pakistani ethnic heritage (Osler and Starkey, 2005; Hayward et al., 2008; Smeaton et al., 2010; Netto et al., 2011; Barnard, 2014; Byrne et al., 2020). One of the factors identified that can lead young people to need further support for transitioning out of compulsory education is the gap in knowledge and skills associated with the majority language (English).

The language used in politics and the media to describe young people is deficit, especially young people who are considered ‘not in education, employment or training’ (‘NEET’) and socially excluded. Accordingly, a deficit discourse is created and further entrenched through the language of policy. Arshad et al. (2007, p130) identify the challenges associated with educational policy documents where terminology is used in a normative way and where this ambiguity of language is left open to interpretation. This ambiguity can lead to critical issues being subsumed in the wider discourse, with the significance of discrimination diluted or erased.

Thus, the opportunity to implement change is also lost. This suggests that groups of people who do not hold the same values and norms as their peers are marginalised. Fukuyama (1999, p7) states that ‘the area where governments probably have the greatest direct ability to generate social capital is education. Educational institutions do not simply transit human capital; they also pass on social capital in the form of societal rules and norms’.

Gamal and Swanson (2017, p8) argue that education systems are the institutional frameworks and spaces for the construction of national identities. They go on to argue that this is a consequence of the perceived strong socialising effect of education within a state-led general education system and national curriculum framework. Education is the means of creating citizens who serve the interests of the state and its ambitions. This is also where institutional racism and other forms of discrimination are found, through the reproduction of the aforementioned values and norms that do not take into account those who do not hold the same kind of social capital or do not fit the assigned values or norms through the lens of policy makers who are predominantly White, middle class, able-bodied, and heterosexual (Horvat et al., 2003). Wright et al. (2016, p5) discuss how social capital can provide an analytical framework for observing how young people negotiate pathways out of social disadvantage. Yosso (2005, p82) ‘calls into question white middle-class communities as the standard by which all others are judged’. In a socio-political climate that focuses on the working class, ethnic minority, and Muslim communities, it is important to examine how young people who do not belong to these communities perceive their school experiences.

## Methodology

The aim of the original research study was to explore the experiences of young ethnic minority young people with equality and inclusion in the school environment. This paper takes it

one step forward by asking Muslim young people of their experiences in school. In designing a study, a qualitative case study approach was adopted to prioritise the voices of the young people (Stake, 1995).

Using Lincoln and Denzin’s (2000, p3) definition of the ‘situatedness’ of qualitative research, the research design enabled me to situate the research within its contextual parameters as a case study that focused on three secondary schools that had a high proportion of ethnic minorities. Data were obtained through interviews with the research participants in combination with participant observation. Young people from an ethnic minority background who were identified by their school as needing additional support to transition to a positive destination when leaving compulsory education (Opportunities for All, 2012) were invited by their schools to take part in the study. BME research participants were categorised as ‘red’ which referred to pupils identified by schools and external agencies as disaffected/MCMC or pre-NEET by the schools and outside agencies using the ‘risk matrix’ (McEwan, 2013). Young people identified by their schools were invited to participate in the study. Potential participants were informed about the study and the ethical guidelines. They were informed in writing and in discussion prior to the start of any interview. They were informed that they had the option to withdraw from the study at any time. This applied even if they had given voluntary consent. The young people were between 16 and 19 years old. The names of the participants and schools were anonymised to protect their privacy.

Semi-structured interviews (Rubin and Rubin, 2011) were used. Seventeen interviews were recorded and transcribed in the original study. The views and experiences reported in this paper are from Junaid, Shiraz, Iftikar, Ali, Fiza, and Zara. Junaid, Anas, Abdullah, Shoaib, Shiraz, Iftikar, and Ali are male, and Anum, Fiza, and Zara are female. This article is based on the paired interviews conducted with Fiza and Zara; Iftikar and Ali, and individual interviews with Junaid and



Shiraz. During the interview, observational notes (Koshy, 2010) were taken on facial expressions and body language (Schefflen, 1973), which I wrote down on my questionnaire throughout the interview, alongside the questions I asked. I did this to better understand how the young people interpreted the questions and how comfortable or uncomfortable they felt with their answers. This served as a reference point for me to return to after the transcription. Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) qualitative content analysis approach was used to analyse the interviews. The data analysis was guided by the research question and the questions in the interview schedule. I used the concept of social capital to study the research participants. This was in the context of the policy objectives of the Curriculum for Excellence in relation to inclusion and equity in the school environment. I explored the generative potential of social capital as understood through a 'sense of belonging' and 'relational ties' to their peers and teachers.

The themes that emerged through the data analysis were Relationships in Schools with peers and teachers, Sense of (not)belonging, and (dis)respect in the school space.

The themes enabled me to explore the narratives being shared with more nuance, acknowledging my own positionality as a BME Muslim older female. This was a small study which could help build up a bigger picture if used with similar case studies and literature from other academics in the field and locality. The next three sections share the findings of young people's relational ties with

1. their peers,
2. their teachers, and
3. sense of belonging and trust and interpreting and finding explanations for what was occurring.

## Young people's relationships with fellow students

The young people spoke about not feeling a sense of belonging from many of their teachers and the other students in their school year.

Fiza and Zara spoke at length of never fitting in with the main student population, and only socialising with a group of friends who shared their background which was Pakistani and Muslim:

'If we did socialise with them, we would be different people. If you get me? They talk about all these things and we would just feel uncomfortable with...all that stuff'.

Fiza

When I questioned this, they became reflective and indicated that they were not comfortable discussing certain topics with others outside their group. They felt they did not have anything in common with them, so there was no point in taking time to socialise. Fiza discussed this in detail after the recording device finished recording to share that the 'things' she referred to were music, boys, drinking, and clubbing – all activities which are prohibited in Islam.

Fiza and Zara found it difficult to just talk about the students without mentioning how their teachers supported other students over them, perceiving them almost as one group of the 'other' which created social distancing between 'them' and 'us' (Fine, 1994; Schwalbe et al., 2000; Lister, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2005).

Zara followed on by saying that there was a power imbalance in the classroom held by the main Scottish-White student population, which was backed by the class teacher as Zara's facial expression changed to one of disdain when she put her hands out as if to create distance (taken from observation notes):

'They [the students] all thought they were big people, because they're from [Town X] and [Town Y] or whatever, [Town Z], I don't know what those areas are called, but they thought because they were from those areas, they owned [School]. So they had a big say in it, in our classes'.

'If we wanted to say something or, for example, the teacher says what books do you want, or do that, or DVD for example.... I felt it was

quite racist in a way, like we said 10 commandments and that one person stood up and said he wanted other one...'

Zara

Zara shared that it was always White students' choices that were picked, never theirs, which led to the students feeling powerless and worthless in the classroom setting. Teachers' attitudes towards students' identities and backgrounds have strong influences on their relationships with students and classroom expectations (Bhopal, 2012; Liou and Cutler, 2021).

'It was like where is my say in all of this and after that... I did not like my teacher after that'.

Zara

The series of comments suggested that a sense of belonging was not cultivated by the school, the teachers, or the students. Mirza (1996; Liou and Cutler, 2021) highlighted that, due to this need not being met, successful inclusion often did not occur, or any attempt made to meet the Muslim young person's expectations. The young people continued to feel 'outside' of the expected student school experience as their values did not align with the assigned values and norms espoused by their peers, their teachers, and their school.

Meeto states '*the schooling context has been identified as a key site in which such discourses play out. Teachers have been found to draw on culturally reductionist interpretations of South Asian and Muslim girls, consonant with the "between two cultures" thesis*' (Meeto, 2016; 2019, p2). According to Welply (2018), western education curricular narratives position Muslims as 'subhuman', and 'strangers' in terms of race and religion.

Shiraz also spoke in a similar vein about the interactions between different ethnic groups in the school and he inferred that he felt more comfortable with people from his own background, his community, and his culture. Socialising with others who were not familiar to him, he felt that could lead him to unknown destinations, inferring that these could be negative:

'Don't know whys, but people come from different backgrounds and different upbringings, so if you go out of our crowd, you go into people that do other stuff, you'll end up doing other stuff as well'.

Shiraz

Shiraz speaks of 'our crowd' who were a group of friends and family members at the school. He suggests that limiting himself to people who knew him, his family, helped keep him grounded, safe, and perhaps out of trouble. He also painted a picture of groups of similar people having allocated spaces which were 'their' spaces.

'Because like in school... it's like groups, one group will sit over here, and another group of boys will sit over there... people come from different backgrounds and different upbringings ... It's just different upbringing, it's like when I came to the school in first year, I saw my big brother and my big sister, they hanged about with the Asians. I seen so many people doing it, I thought it was normal...'

Shiraz

Shiraz went on to discuss that he did not feel comfortable with young people from a different ethnic and religious background to his, as he felt there was a difference in his and their upbringing in regard to religious values. There appeared to be a cultural dissonance, again of 'othering' before he was 'othered', to maintain some imagined 'religious' 'them' and 'us' due to this behavioural pattern becoming normalised through 'sticking to your own kind' (Rhamie et al., 2012).

'Yeah, like I do have like Christian friends and that but it's like I speak to them in class and say hi and bye to them but I don't hang about with them....but after I got older, I thought it was pathetic because you can't hang about with someone like a group of Christians and boys because of that feeling that you are not fitting in....Sometimes it's just ... talking with a "hi" and a "bye," but it's just too much like, if we go into another group, it feels odd, it feels very odd'.



Shiraz

This was interesting as the schools did have a significant number of students who had arrived from outside the UK. Some of the young people who participated in this study discussed self-segregation based on their feelings of comfort and discomfort as above, whereas other young people discussed ethnic diversity as something to be celebrated:

‘...We get the opportunity to meet people from different parts of the world’.

Umair

‘It’s just a normal school, really. You get taught like the other schools.... They’re all the same really’.

Anas

The above quotes suggest that these pupils had constructed their identities as part of that which was regarded as ‘normal’, thereby adopting a position of privilege, or even a more ‘hardened other’ in relation to their negative perceptions of ‘others’ as potential problems (Gorski, 2013; Kumashiro, 2000; Welply, 2018) into which they had placed the majority ethnic school population, where the ethnic minority population is Scottish-White. The process of ‘othering’ enables individuals to identify who they are by seeing themselves as different from ‘others’. There is also the counter-argument that the school provides young people with a collective social contract via the curriculum which shapes their collective identities and ideals (Liou and Cutler, 2021, p412). Among the current research sample, the consequences of this ‘othering’ resulted in minority ethnic pupils separating themselves from these ‘others’ by highlighting the cultural differences between the majority Scottish-White and BME young people (MacNaughton and Davies, 2001). This finding reinforces Rhamie et al’s (2012) research on young people preferring to ‘stick with their own kind’, as that is where they perceive they belonged. I interpret self-segregation from the main school student community as a closed and negative connotation. This is linked to

previous discourses which feed directly into ghettoization and British values politics and media frenzy, where it is suggested, there is little integration into mainstream society. In this short study, some of the BME students find it becomes easier to self-segregate into groups, where they can protect themselves and fellow BME Muslim students from interactions with their Scottish-White peers. Thus, BME Muslim young people are labelled and label others through discourses of derision to protect themselves from state and media ‘moral panics’ in school and society. Warmington (2020) discusses discourses of derision as voiced by antagonists, where this antagonism ‘being long rooted in long-standing antipathy towards race-conscious social analyses’ (2020, p20).

## Young people’s relationships with teachers in secondary school

This section examines the young people’s perspectives on their secondary school experiences and their relationships with their teachers. The findings show a wide spectrum of responses, although the main responses by the young people discussed weak links with the teachers, expressing feelings of vulnerability, poor communication, and in five cases, anger.

Goodenow (1993) makes the connection between young people’s motivation and attainment and their relationships with teachers within the school and explains how positive teacher–student relationships foster a sense of belonging in students. She suggests that a sense of belonging at school reflects ‘the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment’ (1993, p 80). This is reiterated through research findings specific to BME children and young people (Fives and Gill, 2015; Liou and Cutler, 2021). Does this invite the question: do BME Muslim young people labelled as MCMC feel a sense of belonging to others in their school?

Many of the comments of the young people whose experiences are reported in this article showed an intensity of emotion as they discussed the support or lack of from their teachers, the perceived racism, and the difference in treatment in comparison to the dominant classroom student population, which in all cases was Scottish White.

Junaid thought his school was generally good, but said:

‘It’s a good school, but sometimes it feels like the teachers just don’t understand you. You try and talk to them, you try and be sensible but then you just get “eh eh eh” (making hand movements of two people talking at each other/ duck sounds), in your head...’

Junaid

Junaid felt that it was often the case that teachers did not understand the students, leading to miscommunication and tension between the teachers and the students. He went on to say:

‘...but I think the reason that happens is that teachers don’t actually take the time to listen. And that’s the reason people are always yelling at the teachers because they don’t get listened to... There are a lot of good teachers in the school, it’s sometimes they’re not really that sensitive at all. And they will get you in trouble sometimes, over the stupidest of things’.

Junaid

He felt that this created a situation where he got angry because he felt he was not being listened to. This led to the teacher getting angry, which then led to increased tensions. He felt that if teachers took the time to listen properly, the risk of miscommunication, and tensions would be reduced. In addition, he would not be punished for insolence over what was initially a sortable matter. Powerlessness was again interpreted, where the teacher held the power in the relationship. In this dynamic, Junaid was forced to act as a subordinate when he wanted to have his voice heard. His insistence on being

heard was interpreted by his teacher as insolence. Van der Toorn et al. (2014) discuss how the experience of powerlessness can cause individuals to justify rather than try to change the structures that change them. Although Junaid recognised that there were good quality teachers at his school, one of the failings he perceived was the lack of sensitivity, or dismissal by some teachers in his school in dealing with individual students which might cause students to raise their voices because they were not being listened to or understood, and the student being dismissed (Guyan, 2019). The emotional and mental interaction could quickly escalate into a confrontation which creates a conflict situation in which what he was trying to convey is completely ignored. This resulted in Junaid feeling powerless to come to a resolution. Ord (2009, p42) suggests ‘this crossed communication’ is triggered knowingly when, for example, a teacher commands respect from pupils but does not automatically give the same respect to pupils in return, sometimes unintentionally because of the intrinsic power connected with their position and the lack of power delegated to the young person.

Shiraz was reflective as he looked back on his journey through school as a rebellious child and saw himself maturing into an adult. He spoke of his relationship with his pastoral care teacher Gordon.

‘Sometimes teachers don’t have faith. Someone, like example my year head, is like, he thinks I’m going to mess about “cos as like because from 4th to 1st year I was a mess about but after that I fully changed, but after that he still thinks I’m still an immature boy...”’

Gordon told Shiraz to ‘go away’ when Shiraz tried to speak to him. This caused Shiraz to feel frustrated and upset and say that he ‘hates’ him. Again, a sense of powerlessness is perceived by Shiraz in trying to get his teacher to acknowledge him as ‘of worth’.

I asked Shiraz how that made him feel and if he had tried to speak to Gordon, Low again. ‘It feels like uncomfortable... Tried, but... you have to bond a trust with a teacher first. All

Gordon goes is 'go away, go away'. It's funny though.... Yeah that one. Don't like him, hate him ... [I'd like to] punch him'.

Shiraz perceived this lack of relationship with his Principal teacher as one of conflict, where he tried unsuccessfully to gain respect from his teacher but was told to go away on every occasion, further reinforcing Shiraz's feelings of low self-esteem based on his past behaviour.

On the other hand, Iftikar mentioned his guidance teacher and indicated the care, support, and guidance she provided, as well as being approachable.

'It's like some teachers are really nice to you. It's like my guidance teacher, she was really nice. And stuff like that. She took care of us and told us what to do, help make our choices and she took care of us, and she let us have a laugh sometimes, and sometimes we had to work. She gave a lot of support'.

Iftikar

Similarly, Ali talked about his 'go to teachers', teachers he trusted if he had a problem:

'There were a few teachers who were my go-to teachers. If I want to talk to them personally, they like help me and guide me and stuff. I really like that because, most of the teachers at [school] don't help me, only a few. If I have a problem, I go to the teachers I trust'.

Ali

Ali shared the trust he had built up with a small group of teachers and who he turned to for guidance, and who he did not consider 'racist' because they listened and helped him.

However, both Iftikar and Ali felt they were mainly unsupported by their learning needs. Iftikar had asked for help from his senior teacher in charge of all the classes in his school year, for support:

'Yeah, once I did [ask for support], then of course my year head, well she just kinda goes "you're talking a load of garbage" and to give you extra

work and stuff. And of course, you can't argue with them and then they accuse you of being this and that. Then they phone your parents up and get you in trouble, they write up a bad report, and it affects if you get into college or not. They [the colleges] always look at your report'.

Iftikar

Iftikar said he was rebuffed and was told that continuing to push for support might lead to parental involvement and a bad annual report. It is this threat of contacting his parents and the report and how it would negatively impact his future choices, leading to non-acceptance into college that highlights the lack of power the young person sometimes feels in planning for his future. When he attempted to take the initiative to improve his chances, it backfired.

There were indications that the majority of the young people in this study did not perceive schools as positive learning environments. They observed they were not treated equally, with less or no respect in comparison to their peers, or where a sense of inclusivity was not nurtured in the class or wider school setting. The data has also highlighted that some of the young people who were labelled as disaffected, at-risk, or needing more support, could perceive themselves as being poorly served by their schools and being subjected to lower teacher expectations due to their ethnicity and socio-economic background (Osler and Starkey, 2005; Rhamie, 2007; Rollock, 2007), as evidenced through conversations with the young people in this study.

A recurring thread implicit in the quotes of the young people and the relationships with their teachers was the communication skills of the teachers and the perceived 'bad moods', which the young people found off-putting. Ord (2009) suggests that when professionals such as teachers do not ensure an 'adult to adult' relationship because they behave like authority figures, this results in young people feeling as if they are being treated like children. As the young person wishes to communicate as an adult this inevitably leads to 'crossed

communication' and the breakdown of a relationship (Ord, 2009, p42). The quotes from the current study demonstrate the powerlessness of young people in their schools, with no agency and no voice to be heard by their teachers.

## Young people's perceived sense of (not) belonging in schools

This section looks at the participant's perceptions of belonging in school, equality, and inclusion. There were references to 'racist' behaviour from the teachers towards the young people as in the quote below:

'It's just like the teachers were being racist and making racist comments and obviously we can't do anything. As we're ... and we're underestimated as being young and like ... I'm a Pakistani. I am a Scottish Pakistani, and I was raised up...'

Iftikar

At this point Iftikar is talking about his identity, and how he sees himself as both Pakistani and Scottish, before moving on to talk about how he does not feel acknowledged or supported by some subject teachers in his school.

*'...Everywhere you go there is racism and we're underestimated again – you drop out and don't feel like doing anything really. Some teachers are quite good, but when it comes to your main teachers like your English and Maths and teachers you have to keep on for a long time, it's kinda the way they put you under pressure. They don't give you like no extra support or any'.*

Iftikar

Iftikar spoke on a few occasions about his belief that it was because he was a Scottish Pakistani and Muslim that he was treated differently. He felt he was treated badly and not given any worth as a student in the school. Similarly, Shiraz stated that although he had matured, he was still treated like 'messabout' by

one of his teachers. These same concerns were voiced by Ali, Fiza, and Zara.

Iftikar spoke about being split up in class from his friends and admitted that his behaviour could be interpreted as disruptive, but he felt the level of discrimination and racism towards him had increased as he had progressed up the school:

'...it started gradually, as you go up the school, the topics change, you got more racism...It was usually in class. As you get to know them [the teachers] more, then they start to bully you more, basically. Whenever our mates.... Had to choose their own seats the first time, our wee group of boys, me and another two boys, my mates were put separately'.

Iftikar

I questioned why the teacher would consider moving the groups of friends around. Iftikar acknowledged he was involved in disruptive behaviour, but he claimed no other friendship group had been split up around the class. This was the case with his group.

'It's cos we...Of course we laugh and stuff, we do mess about, I'm not saying that, but it's usually us that are getting places, one at the back, one at the front and one in the middle... If a white Scottish male got into trouble, I'm seeing – he would be seen as bad, but if one Pakistani done it, - it would be bad and thought of something really bad'.

Iftikar

Iftikar perceived the different levels of sanctions being applied by teachers as unfair, which he justified due to the visible difference in his skin colour (Gillborn and Youdell, 1999; DfES, 2006; Bhopal and Myers, 2008) and his religion (Guyan, 2019, p19).

Ali also agreed with Iftikar about being split up from his friends in class and that it was because they were Pakistani Muslim:

'Yeah, when I went into a class...I was with my friends and all my teachers weren't that friendly to us. They were always being in a bad mood. They

would separate us from our friends. One of my friends got accused of doing something he didn't do and it was actually the other boys that were like white. And we got into trouble without any reason and I didn't like that'.

Ali

Iftikar spoke about an incident in school where he felt he was suspended by his school for being a Pakistani Muslim when he was reported by his Religious Education Teacher for laughing in the corridor. He was asked to remove himself from the corridor and report to the head teacher, where he was then suspended for asking what he had done wrong.

'I think, I think its 'cause of the race. Like what happened down in London, just 'cause we were Muslims and apparently they were Muslims, all these attackings and stuff and 9/11 and stuff... Our RE teacher is one of them. Whenever he can, he brings Christianity into it. I was smiling, literally smiling. He said "why are you smiling? This is a Christian school" and that was pure like – huh? At one time I was actually laughing and he said "This is a religious school, you can't laugh in the RE corridor" and he told me to "get to" and I got suspended'.

Iftikar

Liou and Cutler argue that religion plays an active role in the cultural conflict in schools and the systemic conditions of White supremacy. They cite research by [Bang and Medin \(2010\)](#) which shows that curriculum is often a point of contestation in defining whose knowledge matters and how students are epistemologically positioned in the classroom to relate to the dominant knowledge system. School curriculum has positioned Christianity as 'natural' and all other religions as 'cultural' (2021, p411).

Here the young people discussed how they perceived themselves to be discriminated against, specifically because of their religion and ethnicity, and not being part of the host community. They talked about incidents which created fear and uncertainty in them and made them question their sense of belonging and their safety:

'...it's those white people that say treat everybody equally. I just don't get that..... People just go with what they see and what they hear'.

Zara

'People talk about equality. It just doesn't work...we talk and hear about equality and diversity a lot, but no one goes with it...'.

Fiza

Both Fiza and Zara suggested that the equality and diversity agenda is not being put into practice and in their case not working for them. They felt they were judged negatively and discriminated against for being different. These events exacerbated the feeling of 'them and us' as well as privilege and disadvantage, further isolating the young women from school and mainstream society.

There was a repetitive thread amongst the young people that they perceived they were treated differently and unfairly by their teachers, with three of the young men talking of this difference due to their race or their religion. This could be anything from 'looked at differently' due to wearing a hijab (Zara and Fiza), to breaking up friendship groups to being excluded from school. There were instances where the young people used the word 'racist' in describing their interactions with their teachers to illustrate their point, I interpreted this as the young people perceiving themselves to be 'othered'; not feeling valued or respected; and not treated as an equal within the class structure with their peers, and worryingly racial discrimination.

This section adds to the literature that suggests that it is not only African Caribbean students, but other minority ethnic young people who are aware of the different levels of sanctions (in this study the young people perceived them as disproportionately higher levels of punishments) for inappropriate behaviour imposed on BME students to the White students, resulting in much higher levels of school exclusion amongst African-Caribbean, Black other, and African Caribbean students of mixed heritage, Gypsy, Roma, and Travellers of Irish

heritage (Gillborn and Youdell, 1999; Bhopal and Myers, 2008). These recounted incidents highlight how young people are frequently subjected to covert and overt forms of anti-Muslim racism and racial harassment by their teachers and peers from banter, preferential treatment and prioritisation of the majority student, over the BME student, moving them to the ‘fringes’ of the class where they deem themselves as having no power, no agency, or voice.

These young people, all of whom were Muslim, perceived the increase in extremist terror-related incidents after 11 September 2001 and 7 July 2005 were connected to the feelings they had of being treated differently within their schools and communities, often impacting on their own sense of belonging and trust in those around them (FronDIGOUN et al., 2007; Iganski, 2008; Croall and FronDIGOUN, 2012). Research has shown that over this period, sentiment against the Muslim community has grown and is evident in the classroom, where young Muslims are under greater scrutiny and treated in some cases as criminals in waiting (Sian, 2015).

Fiza and Zara shared a story of being in class and being given a choice of films to watch as a reward for working well in class. They shared a sense of frustration as they said the majority of the class chose a film, but the teacher decided to go with a ‘gora’ (White) student and it made them feel as if they were even more invisible and didn’t matter. Despite fully adhering to class values and norms, they were effectively silenced by the teacher, who, in their shared memory, placed them as unworthy of listening to. They became fidgety as they recounted this. Zara touches Fiza on the upper arm as she tells the story (observation notes taken at the time of the interview):

‘I remember once right, I was in my PSE and it was just me and Haris and Iqra, and the rest were white people. It came to DVDs, one was Ten Commandments, the other was Green Nil or something like that and then we all said the Ten

Commandments, a gora got up... a white person and said he wanted the other movie on and the teacher said ok and put that one on’.

Zara

This was perceived by the participants as a clear message that the collective request from three BME students was not equal to the single request of one Scottish-White student by their teacher. It was the latest in a list of being treated differently in their school, where they felt they were tolerated in the school space, yet not accepted.

Goodenow (1993, p25) describes the sense of belonging in schools as:

‘... students’ sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teacher and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class. More than simple perceived liking or warmth, it also involves support and respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual’.

The young women perceive this as the teacher stripping them of recognition of anything positive or of value, along with the refusal to acknowledge, value or acknowledge the voices, knowledge, or agency of the young women in the classroom. Young people have been positioned as separatists without involvement by the school (Meetoo, 2019).

This further adds to my argument that it is not only the lack of understanding of the cultural identity of a young person that can cause disengagement and poor educational attainment but racial discrimination, as the young person does not feel they belong to the environment and is not valued or supported. Something as simple as not having your voice heard or being ignored can become a critical moment which is retold with the same emotion years later (Coussée et al., 2009) as part of internalising racism (Kohli, 2014) where the individual does not believe they have or deserve the same agency as their peers. The lack of specific positive action



in addressing these inequalities at the structural level within schools and institutions was perceived by the young people in the current study as representing inequitable treatment in comparison to the 'White Scottish' students (Arshad et al., 2005).

## Conclusion

The *Curriculum for Excellence* (Scottish Government, 2004) aims to promote and encourage positive learning environments and one approach that is suggested is through inclusion and equality. The aim is to create an environment in which all children and young people are treated equally, where mutual respect and understanding of differences are fostered. In addition, these differences are embraced. It is focused on removing barriers to learning and discrimination and promoting an environment where equality is endorsed. According to the student narratives shared here in this small-scale study, the policy is not translated into practice, and that these students are not treated as full citizens with the same rights and respect as their Scottish White peers as stated in the Curriculum for Excellence (2004). There is a clear dissonance between the policy language and the policy actors (teachers), and where a further study is needed to explore what training is given to teachers to make them both culture and race-cognisant and move towards an anti-racist cultural approach as illustrated by Miller (2021), and that inclusive and anti-racist behaviours are encouraged in the school student and staff community.

In the context of feeling included in their school community, six of the young people who participated in my research study felt strongly that they weren't listened to, had no respect from their teachers, and when asking for help to improve their learning, were threatened with a phone call to a parent and a 'bad report' in one instance. Out of the remaining five, two participants were worried and required constant assurance that the interviews were for research purposes only. They did not have to participate

and had the choice to physically leave the session or contact the researcher to have their contributions removed from the study. Three of the five participants did not cite unfair treatment; however, they did not appear to recognise or wish to acknowledge episodes of miscommunication and differing treatment shared with the researcher as discrimination.

This evidences an environment where dominant practices, rules, and processes are wielded to oppress, silence, and control the young people who participated in this study. This is not an approach which can be described as supportive and nurturing or providing a young person with the best possible experiences and opportunities to succeed and gain from their learning and indicates that the policy aims, and objectives are not being translated into action. Curriculum for Excellence (2004) is explored in this research study and appears not to have worked for the participants and found that:

1. Relational ties between young people and their White Scottish peers were weak to non-existent.
2. Relational ties between young people and their Scottish White teachers were weak.
3. Young people's sense of (not) belonging and low trust in their schools was strong.

It is pertinent to reiterate that this is a small-scale study and not necessarily generalisable. Furthermore, the findings are based on what the participants said and there was no opportunity for triangulation. However, I believe that there is value in giving voice to those at risk of marginalisation and exclusion, such as the participants in this study. This is because their voices are not often heard. The article contributes to the literature on youth studies, education, identity, belonging, and racism by giving young people an opportunity to share their views and experiences.

It is concerning to hear that some BME Muslim young people in Glasgow, Scotland have had negative experiences in compulsory

education, including instances of racial discrimination from their teachers and a lack of inclusion and equality in the school environment. This can have serious impacts on these students' sense of belonging and trust in their schools, and ultimately, on their educational outcomes. It is important for education policies, such as the Curriculum for Excellence, to be specific in addressing issues of equality and inclusion to improve the experiences and outcomes of minority ethnic and minority religion pupils. It is also important for schools and school leaders to create a welcoming and inclusive environment for all students, and for teachers to be aware of and actively work to address any instances of discrimination or bias.

## Current and next steps in Scottish education policy and action

The Scottish Government (2021) Diversity in the teaching workforce – 3 years on the report highlights that ethnic diversity is underrepresented in the teaching workforce (1.6%), and even lower representation of ethnic minorities in leadership positions. Building racial literacy workshops is one way that Education Scotland (2021) has started this conversation to improve racial literacy between teachers and what anti-racism can look like in education, and where Into Headship modules (2021) were revisited and rewritten to include case studies of racism so potential senior leaders had an awareness of how discrimination manifests and how it could be addressed.

The Scottish education policymakers need to continue to work on strategies to explore how this can be transmitted in schools in Scotland pulling upon the expertise of academics and practitioners who are making 'race count' in the development of anti-racist school leaders (Miller, 2021), where Professor Miller has demonstrated how anti-racist school leadership can move from performativity when school leaders, staff, and students are informed, and where there are strategies in place in the school space to enable anti-racism practice.

Post my doctoral study in 2016, the Scottish Government launched its Race Equality Action Plan (2018), which includes a range of measures aimed at tackling racism and promoting diversity and inclusion, with one strand focusing on diversifying the teaching workforce. The plan includes commitments to improve the representation of ethnic minority groups in public life, to improve the monitoring and reporting of hate crimes, and to tackle employment discrimination.

In addition, the Scottish Government has established the Fairer Scotland Duty, which requires public authorities to take steps to tackle inequalities and promote equality. The duty has been used to address a range of issues, including racism.

A further study is needed to explore how these changes are actioned in a school setting, how the changes are measured, and reviewed.

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