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National Curriculum History and Muslim Boys: Absences, Sub-totalities and Creative Possibilities

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Background

The educational achievement of Muslim boys, set in the context of issues of integration, identity and citizenship that face the Muslim community in Britain, is of serious concern to Muslim parents, Muslim community groups and government agencies (The Muslim Council of Britain, 2007). British Muslim pupils in compulsory State schooling are characterised by poor educational achievement relative to both white British non-Muslim children and every other ethnic or other religious minority group except African-Caribbean boys (Department for Education & Skills (DfES), 2006). This is particularly true for Muslim boys: in 2008, 8% more Muslim girls than Muslim boys received five A*- C GCSE's. The national differential between boys and girls is c.4% (UK Gov., 2008).

This paper focuses on the academic and personal development of Muslim boys through the lens of their compulsory education in History. It asks whether the National Curriculum History (NCH) that Muslim boys receive at Key Stage 3, which claims to help young people construct critically informed identities, can help them succeed intellectually, socially and spiritually at school, outside school and in British society at large.

Research Questions

Research aims have emerged out of a critique of NCH specifications and a historical examination of the ideological and pedagogical assumptions underscoring NCH together with a consideration in the literature of the educational contexts and identity-constructions of Muslim males (Archer, 2003; Connell, 1995).

Research aims then constructed were:

1. To explore and map Muslim boys' experiences of NCH and to understand the extent to which they feel the NCH that they receive in school is useful and relevant to their lives and supports the development of their sense of selfhood, or not.
2. To investigate the extent to which NCH fulfils its stated core objectives with regard to equipping pupils for engaged and informed democratic citizenship with relation to Muslim boys.
3. To understand what factors encourage or discourage Muslim boys to continue with History at GCSE.
4. As a result of the above, to come to a judgment whether National Curriculum history can help Muslim boys succeed academically and as engaged, motivated, informed individuals, Muslims and British citizens.
5. To make recommendations for policy and practice with regard the content, structure and delivery of NCH in relation to Muslim boys.

Methods

I have used use a mixed-method approach within a naturalistic, critical realist theoretical framework to respond to these aims. My research tools have been questionnaire surveys, non-participant observations, and diary-interviews.

My sample was c.400 Muslim boys from a wide variety of cultural-ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, all in Year 9, taken from schools in four different locations - North London, East London, Leicester and Birmingham. Three of the schools were non-denominational Community Secondary Schools; one was a voluntary aided Islamic Faith School.

All 400 participants completed the questionnaire survey. 6-8 boys were then chosen from each school to participate in the diary-interviews and to be observed twice in history classes. The respondents completed diaries about their history learning during the interview/observation period about which we spoke at the second interview. The boys were sampled according to the criteria of set, achievement, interest/enjoyment and their responses to variables of citizenship and belonging that had proved significant in the pilot study. The interview respondents' teachers were also interviewed once for the purposes of triangulation.

Frame

I have constructed a critical realist framework that attempts to chart a path between functional structuralism and voluntarism. My analytical framework is not, however, epistemically exclusive and draws upon post-structuralist and feminist theories of gender and identity and various theories (e.g. of Kohlberg, Erikson and Marcia) of the moral and intellectual development of adolescent males.

Research findings

I do not submit the completed thesis until July 2010. However, preliminary findings indicate both the great positive and negative potential for NCH with regards to the development of Muslim boys.

Many Muslim boys value their curricular history intrinsically with a 'love of the past' (Walsh, 1992). Other Muslim boys, who dislike NCH, often do so either because they believe that the way they have been taught NCH has ignored or presented an unacceptable challenge to their cultural or religious identities or because they find it difficult academically. History at GCSE also suffers from a perceived lack of instrumentality for Muslim boys' futures and chances of employment.

There are strong correlations emerging between the receipt of an 'informal' historical education at home and an interest in history and GCSE uptake at school. There are also emergent correlations and connections between 'interest in history' at school, GCSE uptake and the types of topic that inform the development of critical citizenship.

These provisional findings begin to suggest that a more clearly conceived role for history in informing the holistic development of Muslim boys needs to be articulated.

At a theoretical level, the study brings the critical realist concept of 'real determinate absence' (Norrie 2009) to bear upon curriculum studies in an original way and demonstrates clearly how absences from and partial presences in official historical representations can have negative, exclusionary impact both on pupils' experience of history and on their emergent identities.

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