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## **A Faith Dimension on the Landscape of Teachers: Professional Muslim Teachers on Recruitment, Retention and Career Advancement**

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*Abstract: A significant area of teacher education is the increasing focus in many countries on how faith and schooling should best be understood. Yet, understanding faith perspectives in the lives and careers of teachers appears to be an under-researched area. To this end, the experiences of professional Muslim teachers in state primary schools in England were explored using semi-structured in-depth life history interviews. This paper focuses on their views regarding the recruitment, retention and career advancement of Muslim teachers in particular, as part of Black and minority ethnic teachers in Britain. Findings reveal a positive picture and their representation at various levels of the hierarchy in the profession has increased. The study, therefore, draws attention for further research on successful teachers from various faith communities.*

### **Introduction**

In Britain, the debate about the under-representation of Black and minority ethnic (BME) teachers has prevailed for decades (DES, 1985; Ranger, 1988; Ross, 2002; Basit, et al., 2007). However, recent figures show progress is being made indicating that further enquiry into this changed phenomenon is required (Howe, 2012). The growing literature exploring the voices of some Black and Asian teachers shows that the most common theme in these studies are those of recruitment, retention and promotion (Maylor, Ross, Rollock, & William, 2006; Butt, MacKenzie & Manning, 2012). Unsurprisingly, a report recommended a continued policy focus on attracting BME teachers as being beneficial in order to redress an existing imbalance within the profession (Carrington, et al., 2006).

However, the voice of faith in teaching remains under-researched. Benn's study (2003) of Muslim female teachers found their experiences were dependent on the views of Islam held by those influencing their career development. Some of her participants did not enjoy a secure school environment and their coping strategies varied. Osler (2003) took an agency-structure approach to concentrate on how the life histories of Muslim women teachers reflect their opinions of citizenship and identity. Her conclusions show that stereotypical and negative views of Muslims undermine the identities and citizenship rights of all Muslims, particularly women.

Hence, the notion of the teachers' voice is important as it carries the tone, language, quality and feelings expressed by teachers. It represents both the unique individual and the collective voice; one that is characteristic of teachers as compared to other groups (Butt, Raymond, McCue, & Yamagishi, 1992). Therefore, it is paramount to speak to and hear the voices of all communities. In this article, the role of the faith of Muslim teachers, who are an example of BME teachers, will be part of the discussion by considering their views about the recruitment, retention and advancement of professional Muslim teachers in state schools.

I was interested in exploring issues related to teachers from the viewpoint of those belonging to Muslim communities, specifically researching their perceptions about the representation of Muslim teachers in the profession. This was important since, in addition to the concerns raised above, some educators have promoted the recruitment of Muslim teachers. Moreover, the presence of more Muslim teachers in schools could potentially address, to some degree, the historical and political misrepresentation, stereotypical view of Islam, Islamophobic bullying and institutional racism (Halstead, 2005).

Hence, insiders' views became necessary to identify the challenges faced and solutions offered by some practitioners. In addition, the statistics of the city of Birmingham regarding ethnic and religious minority groups suggest the need for an increase in the proportional representation of Muslim teachers in relation to Muslim pupils. Moreover, all participants showed a willingness to discuss this topic, thus, it appeared to have some significance for them. This article, therefore, takes a fresh perspective on this issue by approaching it from the viewpoint of professional Muslim teachers in state schools based on an empirical study about their life, work and career. The purpose of exploring these issues with them was to gain a unique view of the problems related to recruitment, retention and career advancement. I begin by discussing the research method, ethics, researcher stance and data analysis methods and then present the findings and conclusions.

## Methodology

Bryman (2012) regards life history as a special form of interview associated with qualitative research. Life histories support defining problems and researching aspects of certain professions. Their value transcends the usefulness of supplying specific information about historical events and customs by showing how individuals interact with cultures and create meaning (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). In fact, life histories offer considerable advantages for school-based research as they reveal diverse ways in which individuals perceive educational issues, experiences and changes (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995).

All research methods have their limitations and advantages. The life history method has been criticised for being unrepresentative and for putting the reader into a story and nothing else (Plummer, 2001). However, this is a misunderstanding of the study of life stories since the purpose is to provide insights, understanding and appreciations rather than producing facts (Plummer, 2001). Other limitations are that generalising is difficult, sample sizes tend to be small and there are few concepts to guide analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). However, Saukko (2003) stresses that, even if a researcher studies a single aspect of human activity, it is important to recognise that it can be understood from several perspectives and is part of a larger puzzle. Thus, a life-story has the potential to articulate wide local, national and transnational politics for analysis (Saukko, 2003).

Significantly, the life history method is about people and their experiences. Accordingly, this research aims to capture this aspect of Muslim teachers. For this research, the life history method was deemed suitable since the subject matter being explored is sophisticated and social in nature and helps in discerning aspects of the experiences and perceptions of the life, career, work, values, attitudes and self-understanding of teachers who are Muslim. In addition, in educational research, life histories may reveal rich data about individuals and groups on a personal and structural level. Consequently, life histories present real experiences of individuals and what sense they make of the world. They can be significant in studying religious and cultural changes and in acquiring insider perspectives of professional teachers from various faith and non-faith backgrounds both locally and

internationally. I used life history method to explore the views of Muslim teachers as it afforded considerable potential for understanding the actions and thoughts of these people.

### **Research Sample**

This research used varied sampling methods to locate teachers based on the proximity of locations and teacher availability. These included the happenstance and snowball sampling methods (Matthews & Ross, 2010). The selected sampling method was also used because respondents represented a certain faith group that was considered significant on conceptual grounds (Miller, 2000). In addition, without statistical records based on religion it was impossible to determine how many Muslim teachers there were in relation to the Muslim population of Birmingham.

I anticipated contacting teachers from the Muslim community from diverse backgrounds giving a range of perspectives on recruitment, retention and promotion. The study yielded thirteen teachers, who considered themselves to be Muslims and self-declared their ethnicity as Pakistani (8); Bangladeshi (3); an Indian from Malawi and one from North Africa. Of these 13, five were born in England; nine were females and four males. Their ages range from 24 to 48 years and they held various positions in their schools. There were eight class teachers, an English co-ordinator, a head of Foundation Stage, an assistant head, a deputy head and a head-teacher. In terms of their teaching experience, one teacher was a Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) and the head teacher had 24 years of experience. They were interviewed at various locations. At the time of the research, all taught in inner-city primary schools.

The author recognises that these thirteen teachers from the Muslim community are a heterogeneous group and as such their diversity is reflected in many ways. Research questions reflected the life history approach to achieve the aims of the research and include: What is your impression about Muslim teachers in state schools? How can recruitment, retention and promotion be improved? Do schools need more teachers who are Muslim? The interviews, which lasted between one and three hours, were recorded and transcribed. Before presenting the findings, it is important to outline researcher stance, ethics and data analysis procedures.

### **Researcher Stance**

As a researcher, this study provided an opportunity for me to reflect on my own life history and its relation to my career and life working in education in state schools. Potentially this study is also important for all teachers, both within and outside Britain. I have served schools as a governor and teacher. As a teacher educator, I have opportunities of establishing relationships with teachers from various backgrounds. Occasionally, I meet Muslim teachers and have observed their visibility and progression within the hierarchy of schools. The majority of these teachers are women participating in varied roles, yet Muslim women tend to be portrayed as passive. Hence, I wanted to gain insights of their experiences whether cultural or religious, from a faith-based perspective of my own and to explore, among other interests, their ideas on recruitment, retention and promotion so that the influence and the role of faith became evident.

As stated above, the religious and faith dimension of teachers and the role it plays in their life remains an under researched area. As a Muslim, male, teacher educator, I attempt to add such a perspective to existing literature through the exploration of these life histories. The

data gathered demonstrates that understanding an individual's life and career experiences depends significantly on understanding the wider life history within which it is placed.

### **Ethics in Research and Data Analysis**

Ethical concerns were addressed by declaring known interests and carefully accounting for the subjective features of this enquiry (Murray & Lawrence, 2000). In addition, respondents were given the right to withdraw. Furthermore, being in a position of relative influence, interviewees were not pressurised to participate and intentional deception over the purpose and nature of the investigation was avoided. Interviewees were promised anonymity and confidentiality and to fulfil these promises pseudonyms are used.

There are numerous ways of analysing participants' conversations about their experiences (Miller, 2000). Researchers differ in the degree to which they edit their material. In analysing data, early users of the life history technique were inclined to impose categories on the data and edit the materials considerably, whereas later researchers, sought to reverse this by stressing the need for the voice of the subject to come through (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995).

I began my data analysis process by transcribing the recordings. Once the life histories had taken shape, the data were presented in three distinct ways: a purely descriptive life history, collective biographies – prosopographies (Cunningham, 2001) and thematic analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). In addition, the peculiarities of each interview, venue and respondent were noted. Furthermore, prominent categories of meaning held by participants which would reflect internal consistency but which were distinct from one another were identified (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). In addition, negative instances of the patterns were identified and were incorporated into larger constructs where necessary. This article presents a topic, which emerged from the thematic method.

### **Results**

This section discusses participants' general perceptions about Muslim teachers and identifies some challenges for the profession. Thereafter, issues of recruitment, retention and the role of teachers are analysed.

#### **Perceptions of Muslim Teachers: The Picture**

When asked what they thought about Muslim teachers in primary schools of Birmingham, participants' responses revealed at least seven main perceptions as explicated below.

First, they unanimously expressed the need for more Muslim teachers in state primary schools. However, participants recognised that this situation was a reflection of the profession in general and not specific to Muslim teachers. 'Aishah, a female of Pakistani background, with seven years experience, declared: 'we are completely under-represented especially in Birmingham' and considering the make-up of the city, this is an issue.

Second, Mu'adh, a Bangladeshi male, with nine years experience, shared his perception about the gender distribution of Muslim teachers. He thought there were more female Muslim teachers than their male counterparts in primary schools, whereas more male Muslim teachers worked in secondary schools. The third perception related to the nature of their experiences. Mu'adh felt most Muslim teachers had a pleasurable experience, however,

usually the first few years in their career prove most difficult. According to him, negative experiences may result from a lack of good experiences, absence of effective mentors and sensitive guidance, appropriate support and from a perceived lack of encouragement leading new teachers to leave the profession. Fourth, Mu'adh also thought that generally Muslims entered the profession for the right reasons, such as aspiring to impact the life of children but 'unfortunately because of how life is, of how society is, some people will encounter difficulties and problems such as racism and bullying' which contributes to their withdrawal.

Another impression evident was in relation to faith and identity. Khadijah, a Bengali female, although not adorning any visible features of Muslimness, regretted that some Muslim teachers were reluctant to assert their identity. She continued to explain:

I think it's because, obviously at the moment you have so many negative stereotypes about Muslims in the media and the last we want is for our children [to] feel powerless and disenfranchised because of these negative images. So we need successful role models in all aspects of life really, and teaching is one of them. Teaching is one way we can get to the children before it's too late really.

A sixth impression was about the distribution of Muslim teachers across the city. Fatimah's experience led her to believe that geographically the picture was varied and that their distribution perhaps depended on, and reflects, the areas they are currently employed in. For example, she claimed that if one visited Moseley, Alum Rock and Sparkbrook, one may 'see lots of Muslim teachers whereas if you go to Staffordshire, Warwickshire and the Shires, you wouldn't see any Muslims.'

Finally, in relation to promotion, whilst Safiyyah felt some were advancing, Hafsa, having eight years of experience, recognised the insufficient number of Muslims in school leadership even though she felt that the situation had nevertheless improved since her childhood at school. In any case, when she assesses Birmingham as a whole, she feels that the population of Muslim children in state schools is such that sufficient Muslim teachers are justified.

### **Challenges for the Teaching Profession**

Having presented respondents' general perceptions, in exploring their experiences some noteworthy challenges related to the profession became evident as discussed below.

Respondents revealed that teaching may be unattractive to some people due to issues related to racism. Juwayriyah shared a close observation:

Maybe they haven't been treated properly. I say I am lucky but then I am not from Pakistan or India. I am not Asian but I know some Asian people have been discriminated and people look at me as one of them. Though I do get a bit of discrimination but not as much as the Asian ones...

On the other hand, Fatimah revealed that some members in her family were unconvinced about teaching due to the nature of the job. According to her, her family thought people make a mistake by going into teaching as it was underpaid with a lot of work, very little respect, longer hours, no social life and teachers were miserable all the time. These were the opinions held by some of her family members about teachers and teaching.

Other challenges related to the status and attitude towards teaching. Traditionally, according to 'Aishah, first generation parents would not value teaching as highly as medicine, accountancy, or law. In addition, Khadijah noted that most Muslim teachers in England were of South Asian origin, and, unfortunately, in her opinion, many were materialistic. Whilst she considered this as positive, she had reservations, as it was more about the wealth and status

that the profession provided. Consequently, she thinks teaching has lost its status as a highly respected profession where everybody looked up to teachers.

### **Energising Recruitment, Retention and Career Advancement**

In response to questions about improving recruitment and retention, respondents gave a wide range of responses. In essence, two drivers emerged from their narratives. These teachers considered the City Council and the mosque as external drivers and gender featured too.

#### ***External Drivers***

The City Council is influential and, therefore, some respondents, based on their experiences, desired specific recruitment schemes to continue and various networks used. Hafsah spoke favourably about this, saying: “The type of scheme through which I qualified when they specifically recruited Asian people [are useful], I think even if the networks like, the *Muslim Teachers Association*, do certain events or encourage [recruitment].”

Nationally, the government was judged as the main external provider for sustaining such schemes. However, Khadijah considered this as the responsibility of Local Authorities because it was a local issue. She acknowledged that the City Council proactively recruited teachers from very mixed backgrounds. However, she argued that the time had come for the Council to say, ‘Yes we do actually need more Muslim teachers as well, not just ethnic minority teachers.’

Those with authority, as external drivers, include the Department of Education who could target people of different faiths. In this context, several respondents identified a role for the mosque. Khadijah advocated self-examination by the Muslim community:

Oh! Yes, I do think that would help because the Muslims are directly responsible for themselves. I don’t think we should get into the culture where we blame other people for the state of affairs of the Muslims. So if we want more successful Muslims, we need to do it for ourselves.

Some interviewees thought that partnerships between mosques and schools or Initial Teacher Training providers are useful. In addition, some felt mosques could invite teachers, both Muslim and non-Muslim, to promote teaching.

In addition to such cultural, socio-political and geographical factors, Ummu Salamah, a Pakistani female, commented on recruitment and retention from a gendered perspective. For female teachers, she said, one has to get society to understand that:

...women do have their role out of school whether they have a husband or not, children or not. What is the role of a Muslim woman at home? Then what role can she play within society? You know, at the end of the day, she is not superwoman. She can’t give a 100% to a school and then give a 100% at home. Something will have to give.

#### ***Further Contributions from Schools and Universities***

Educational establishments feature as internal drivers for recruitment, retention and promotion of Muslim teachers. Schools have a pivotal role in training future teachers, providing a foundation for new teachers and nurturing established teachers so that they may

flourish in their careers but the reality is that schools provide assorted experiences, hence, meeting individual needs continues to be a concern for these teachers.

When asked about the role of schools regarding recruitment and retention, Anas, believed schools should be more practical and flexible. Personally, he would not recommend teaching to a Muslim because attending Friday prayers remains an unresolved need for him. Regarding retention, Hafsa hinted at a perceived inequality. Muslim teachers, according to her, were more likely to stay when schools understood their needs, they felt happy, secure and valued, and were treated as adults and considered equal to people of other races or religions.

Zaynab, a head teacher approached retention practically and systematically, stating that there should be effective teacher training for all in the first place as well as sincere secondary school careers advice and after qualifying appropriate nurturing and proper induction should take place. Mu'adh encompassed the thoughts of several teachers. To him, several factors in schools were significant for retention and promotion. These included role models who provide guidance, share experience, and good practitioners to approve their efforts. He maintained that Muslim teachers, as with others, should be promoted where deserving and be given opportunities to demonstrate their skills to make a difference.

The participants in this research highlighted that universities, as key providers of teacher training, had a role to play in recruiting Muslim teachers. Sceptically, Safiyyah thought that without targets and quotas for universities to recruit BME teachers, 'there probably wouldn't be any {laughs}.' Fatimah went further and claimed, 'Maybe they don't want to see any Muslim teachers.'

On the other hand, Zaynab maintained that universities have a low intake of Muslim teachers and some universities lacked an understanding of Islam and cultural matters, and that 'students are made to feel like they are different.' Moreover, Anas thought there was less effort made by universities to engage with Muslim graduates, particularly with males, to attract them into teaching both during training and after graduating. He also felt universities could be more flexible in allowing students to fulfil religious obligations. Anas sometimes missed a lecture on Fridays because his 'faith came ahead of the lectures'. He also desired universities to collaborate with mosques.

However, in addition to these external and internal drivers, Ummu Salamah shared a contrasting perspective by focusing on personal preferences:

No. You see, I always say teaching is a calling. If you're quite an academic, are you going to look into the teaching profession or elsewhere? Which is why I still think it's a calling, you're either made out to be a teacher or you're not.

### **Enhancing the Image of Teaching: The Contributions from Teachers**

To make teaching more appealing in general and encourage the recruitment, retention and promotion of Muslim teachers in particular, these respondents considered professionals in schools to have an important contribution to make. In advocating the role model argument for the teaching profession, Mu'adh stated, "a primary school is the foundation of education. More primary schools should have Muslim teachers so that Muslim children can see that this profession is important and they can see how education is paramount [for] their success in this world."

Hafsa, a Pakistani female, maintained that the role model argument was not about developing Islam or anything like that. "Children see you as a role model, as in they [teachers] have the [same] beliefs that I [the child] have and if they [teachers] can get to a particular position then I can. So there should be a lot more I think done."



In addition to raising aspirations, Juwayriyah, of North African background, believed that the presence of Muslim teachers, especially in schools with a predominantly Muslim population was valuable because, according to her, children felt more confident being with a Muslim teacher as “they can talk to that teacher about their own experiences and the teacher will understand. But the teachers who are not from the same religion don’t understand that much.”

These respondents also expected all teachers to address issues of racism, stereotypes and discrimination to enhance the image of teaching, thereby encouraging more Muslim teachers. ‘Aishah wanted teachers to be more inclusive and acknowledged that ‘elements of colour never change’, and living in a multicultural society there is definite racism and prejudice which need addressing and so Ummu Salamah thought Muslim teachers are predominantly represented in the lower ranks of the teaching profession because:

[It] could be that management don’t want them to go any further. [It] could be they themselves don’t want to go any further because there is this balance isn’t there, between the home and work place and what is the role of a Muslim woman.

Furthermore, in the current political climate, a visible faith identity adopted by some Muslims might appear as a risk for employing them. ‘Aishah shared insights of how this might happen. She claims that maybe she was more employable than someone “who wore a traditional dress with a hat and beard.” She explained, “They may question, ‘Hang on! What are this man’s beliefs? Is he politically active?’” According to her, “there will be a judgement attached ...because of ...appearance[s] even though [they] may be more competent to do the job than I am, but appearance will be dictating a lot perhaps for a woman who wears a full *hijāb* than myself.”

### **The Need for Teachers from the Muslim Community**

There were four themes identified from the participants’ responses regarding the need for teachers from the Muslim community. These centred on a consideration of the self-esteem of children, appreciating their belief system, meeting the needs of the profession and the wider community.

Most teachers in this study were anxious about the absence of Muslim teachers. They felt pupils would mature with negative thoughts and low self-esteem. Some Muslim children, they claimed, would develop difficulties with their religion, as they ‘would not see anybody who has been successful in education, standing in their classroom.’ Children need, they stressed, ‘to see positive role models and people like themselves who are making a difference’. Mu‘adh contended that it is natural for people to be more at ease with people from the same culture and religion and therefore a shared identity is significant in the life of some children.

Zaynab sensed Muslim children will have diminished aspirations and potentially think that teaching is only for White people and this would be ‘a very bad situation’. In the mind of Safiyyah this reality was created as a child. She recalled, “As a Muslim, I know all the teachers were White. You just think it’s a profession for White teachers. If you hadn’t known anything different, you wouldn’t know it was a profession that you could get into.”

Safiyyah thought of role models beyond career conceptualisations. She questioned the role of faith whilst acknowledging that children learn right things from other teachers but wondered whether a role model had to be someone from the same religion. For her, an absence or shortage of Muslim teachers would be an unhelpful situation, as some children would not benefit from cultural and religious diversity, which develops respect and reduces

prejudice. Therefore, Khadijah envisaged the development of such a situation as unhealthy for the whole community:

Well I think non-Muslim teachers will continue to be bombarded with negative images and see those images as being the norm for Muslims. I think Muslims will continue to feel ashamed of their faith and will continue to demean their faith. [They will] see themselves lower than other people.

Khadijah felt such a situation would disenfranchise some youth who have issues such as 'difficult home lives' or it might trigger them which might mean that they go off on the wrong path. So, according to her, communities need 'as much positive images and messages as we can' [have]. In contrast, Ummu Salamah, with thirteen years experience in a school with over 90% Muslim children claimed, that the low representation of Muslim teachers did not have an impact on her. For her, teaching was a calling and nobody in particular had influenced her.

## Discussion

This article explored the perceptions of professional Muslim teachers regarding the recruitment, retention and career advancement of fellow Muslim teachers in state schools.

Most respondents recognised recruitment and retention was a challenge in general and not specific to Muslim teachers. Some of their views on the need for more Muslim teachers resonate with those of earlier researchers (Carrington, et al., 2000). In the context of widening participation, Halstead (2005) advocated that universities should proactively recruit Muslim trainee teachers. He suggested that training should become more Muslim-friendly and additional support be provided to encourage them to become teachers. Indeed, to address the situation, a range of initiatives at various levels has been implemented. However, on the question of promoting the teaching profession within the Muslim community, there has been a noticeable absence of reference to the primary sources of Islam. Islam regards teaching and teachers highly as in most communities around the world and, therefore, an attempt to utilise this theological framework has become apparent.

In supporting the need for more Muslim teachers, some participants, both male and female, recognised a need for more Muslim men in particular. Again, this viewpoint corroborates other reports and opinions of children who express the need for more men in primary education (DoE, 2012). However, for some men, teaching is tied with their ambitions and motivations (Ross, 2001) and for some Asian men; teaching is seen as regressing (Carrington & Tomlin, 2000). Moreover, the organisational and structural features of the profession can also be dissuading for some (Ghuman, 1995). Adding to this complexity, this study has revealed that for some Muslim men having the opportunity to fulfil their religious obligations can act as an incentive to take up teaching. Based on this study, it has been noted, often Muslim communities elsewhere and in the UK are projected as patriarchal and more men are seen to be more actively involved in educational institutions. In view of this, overall, the absence of such a phenomenon from the British state primary educational landscape is interesting and reveals the need for further research.

A respondent gave the impression which reproduces the image of Muslim teachers clustering in inner city areas - a feature observed previously about BME teachers (Ranger, 1988). This study was unable to discover in detail why this was so. Teachers are in a position to choose where to work. Nevertheless, in order to reflect the multi-faith nature of Birmingham it is important that Muslim teachers are enabled to serve the city as a whole as some ethnic minority teachers, of which Muslims are a part, recognise the important role that they can play in all-White schools (Carrington, et al., 2006; Butt, et al., 2010). Arguably, some would feel that such an additional expectation is misplaced, since all teachers should be

expected to reflect, effectively and efficiently, an international perspective in schools. Nonetheless, in the current political climate this might not be easy for some Muslims. Also, the fact that some choose to self-exclude themselves from certain areas raises critical questions.

Teachers are leaders too and leaders play an important role in the development of communities. In the absence of the category of faith, it was not possible to determine the number of Muslim head, deputy, and assistant head teachers. The need to have representations of ethnic minority teachers participating and succeeding in training for leadership was long established (Ross, 2001). In addition, Basit and McNamara (2004) reported that some BME teachers, of which Muslim teachers are a part, had clearly formulated plans for future career ambitions. Indeed, despite being aware of challenges in their career development arising from cultural and religious factors, few restrictions for career advancement appear for women (Butt, et al., 2012). Nevertheless, in light of comments appearing in this study, proactive measures need to be juxtaposed with recurring perceptions of injustice. Factors such as conforming to the individual school systems, personal preferences, accents, and awareness of the education system as a whole and gender, play a part in the progress and promotion of teachers. Yet, data from this research and personal observations suggests the disparity identified by Ross (2001) has changed and several factors may have contributed to this change. These included opportunities made available for Muslim teachers through years of experience, utilising initiatives of the National College for School Leadership and the reported shortage in uptake of leadership posts.

In justifying the need for more Muslim teachers, the role model argument persists among these respondents as in other BME studies (Ross, 2002; Basit & McNamara, 2004). However, the term 'role model' is imprecise and its meaning is taken-for-granted. Consequently, simplistic claims about the capacity of male and ethnic minority teachers as 'role models' to bring about change in the status quo can be made (Carrington & Skelton, 2003). Despite these reservations, Carrington and Skelton (2003) maintain that matching teachers and children by gender and ethnicity may be helpful in bringing about a situation of greater justice and equity in schools. However, in clarifying the potential conflict that may arise between teachers and pupils belonging to the same faith, some respondents stress that for them being a role model is not related to nurture and faith transmission in state schools.

Related to the above view was the submission by some respondents that Muslim teachers relate better to Muslim children, and therefore, increasing teachers from the Muslim community justified. However, this supposition raises a plethora of questions, and assumes the homogeneity of Muslim children and teachers. In addition, professional teachers are trained to meet the needs of all children. Furthermore, the 'religious' facet is one among many in the life of Muslim children. Teacher educators can address this issue in the context of inclusive education and future research can examine this phenomenon by exploring teacher attitudes, their expectations and Muslim children in England (Niyoroz, 2010).

The findings of this study are limited as they are based on a small sample in one city and were void of 'Black' or 'White' Muslims. A factor contributing to the low uptake of teaching has been racism in schools and in training institutions (Carrington & Tomlin, 2000; Arora, 2005; Basit, et al., 2006). Respondents, in their experience, have not explicitly reported any direct discriminatory practice, in the recruitment, retention and promotion of Muslim teachers neither have incidents of Islamophobia been mentioned. Nevertheless, according to a deputy head teacher, Muslim men in traditional attire may be seen potentially as 'risky' and less employable and, for some, especially women, asserting their identity has been challenging to an extent. Benn (2002) suggested that this might be due to a misunderstanding of their Muslim identity, staffroom prejudice and the experience of wearing the *hijāb*.

## Conclusions

This article explored the views of professional Muslim teachers regarding the recruitment, retention and career advancement of professional Muslim teachers in state primary schools in Birmingham, England. Understanding their viewpoints and perceptions may assist in furthering their attraction, retention and promotion in a multi-faith city with an increasing Muslim population. The study has provided a glimpse into the significance, as they see it, of ensuring Muslim teachers are sufficiently represented in Birmingham schools.

Respondents appear to be mainly concerned with the projection of themselves as career role models and laying foundations for the success of the next generation rather than as role models of being Muslims. In other words, increasing Muslim teachers is apparently not seen as a faith promoting activity within schools or among the children.

There has been an increase in the number and professional advancement of Muslim teachers. Nevertheless, respondents have felt more BME and Muslim teachers were required and for recruitment and retention initiatives to continue to reflect the wider educational landscape of the city. Not only is Birmingham multicultural and multi-faith but many cities across the world are increasingly becoming so. Therefore, if schools are to reflect such societies then there is a clear argument for the teaching profession to reflect the same.

The image that serving teachers create about their profession needs reconsideration. Whilst the media may project populist images and some within the Muslim community see teaching as lacking in prestige and financial reward, teachers need to share more widely the many changes that have taken place in schools over the years. Indeed, the recent changes in government policy, focusing on school based training and other routes into teaching need to be publicised afresh.

Researchers have documented experiences of racism and faith discrimination (McNamara, et. al., 2009). The data from this research have revealed an absence of reports of Islamophobia and discriminatory practice in the recruitment and retention of teachers from the Muslim community. However, a fair-skinned North African teacher explicitly mentioned that an Asian teacher, according to her, faced discriminatory behaviour from peers. These actions need to be monitored continuously. In addition, the mainly successful and positive experiences need further investigation to learn lessons for the development of good practice. Moreover, since the reasons for participating and withdrawing from the profession are varied and complex, these need to be understood with changing times by regularly examining the entire system of the teaching profession.

Poor promotion prospects and lack of career advancement are also disincentives from entering the profession. However, there is some evidence of the professional advancement of Muslim teachers, particularly women, who are actively seeking promotion and asserting themselves by defying prejudice. Such increases in senior managers among Muslim teachers may assist recruitment, retention and advancement. Therefore, these teachers are potentially a valuable resource for promoting and making teaching more attractive to Muslims.

These findings are limited by the respondents' demographics and geography. In addition, life histories are susceptible to imperfect recollections and are reconstructed subject to time and events. Nevertheless, these narratives have proved to be valuable for understanding recruitment, retention and promotion from a faith perspective and the experiences of Muslim teachers. Findings from this study point toward further exploration of successful practitioners from the Muslim community and the journeys made by head teachers and leaders to assemble their experiences in teaching and leadership.

The study also provides impetus for undertaking research into the lives and careers of teachers from other faith backgrounds and of teachers from the Muslim community working

in other parts of the world. The gathering of this data will add to the body of knowledge about teachers and teaching around the world.

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