Islamophobia: Issues, Challenges and Action. A report by the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia.
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Editor: Robin Richardson, with Hugh Muir and Laura Smith.
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This is the report of the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia. Dr Richard Stone chaired the commission (an adviser to the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, and chair of both the Uniting Britain Trust, and the Jewish Council for Racial Equality). This report, ably edited by Robin Richardson which ensures its quality, deals in particular with the events after 11 September 2001 ("9/11") and the Iraq invasion. It offers a critique, a collection of documents, and recommendations. It follows the Runnymede Trust's report, *Islamophobia: a challenge to us all* which was given high profile in 1997, and The Report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain ("The Parekh Report", 2000; see the update in Runnymede Trust, 2004).

The main thrust is that, after 11 September 2001, prejudice against Islam has become the acceptable face of racism, "racism with a spin", or "same shit, different lyrics" (p.5). The report surveys media reactions and a range of materials, including abusive emails to the Muslim Council of Britain, that responded negatively and positively to 9/11. The main thrust is that racism against Islam and Muslims has greatly increased and that children are being affected by this, as illustrated by the playground quotation: "We killed thousands of your lot yesterday".

The report gathers statistics about Muslims in Britain and tries to give a balanced view of attitudes and feelings within the Muslim communities, both feelings of pride in Islam and concern that young Muslims are being polarised by recent intolerance. The section on criminal justice plots the increased numbers of Muslims in prison, from 731 in 1991 to 6095 in 2003. It notes graphically the CRE report on racism in the prison service and the rise in stop-and-search 'harassment' of Muslims in pursuit of terrorists. On the other side it describes the successful prosecution (2001) of Mark Norwood of the BNP for "racially and religiously aggravated" posters insulting and menacing to Islam, in contravention of the amendment (2000)of the Public Order Act. Under the section on Employment, it notes the serious under-employment of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis.

I wish however to focus rather more on the sections on *Identity and Education* and *Dealing with the Media.* Here there are topics for teachers to grapple with in order to provide a counter-force against racism. A group of teenage Muslim young women declare their pride in their Muslim identify and choose to wear the hijab as a signal to others – their free choice without family pressure. A similar group of young men are critical of the depiction of Islam, support British Muslim pressure groups, and accept personal responsibility to make Islam better known and respected. They regard themselves as both British and Muslim, and have hopes for the future. Others are poorly educated and unemployed, some involved in petty crime and some assertively

tribal although not knowing much about Islam themselves. Muslim pupils talk of harassment, name-calling and bullying linked with Bin Laden or the Iraq conflict. For teachers, the demands are very challenging.

First, young people need to *know more* about Islam. The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry stressed that the curriculum ought to be both antiracist and multicultural, and both Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and the Department for Education and Skills have responded with websites. These are separate demands and both should apply from nursery upwards. *Antiracism* links with discussions about respect for others, friendship and community ; *knowledge of Islam* should grow not only through festivals, mosques and stories about Islam, but about the contribution of Islamic science, mathematics, architecture and art. The response needs therefore to be interdisciplinary: the real challenge is for teachers to have the knowledge and confidence to do this well, openly and with respect, a process which can start in initial training but needs later support and development also. Of course the same principles apply to knowledge about other religions. Nor should this be ghettoised into the already marginalized religious education programme but should be a cross-school initiative. The issues this raises for curriculum design is one more illustration that the days of the National Curriculum straitjacket should be numbered, and serious re-consideration given to the sometimes abstruse curriculum choices that seem to have been set in stone.

Secondly, pupils need to *challenge their assumptions*. Teachers have to be trained to tackle issues of prejudice, discrimination, harassment and underachievement in a child's educational experience. If the slogan 'learning in terror' (the title of the Commission for Racial Equality's 1988 report) may sometimes be too strong, peer racism can certainly be a barrier to achievement. The underachievement of black and Muslim boys has long been identified as a complex issue which requires tackling from early years onwards. A re-focusing on whether education should be solely through English in the early years is part of this debate. Children fall behind in complex thinking such as in mathematics and science if they cannot access appropriate language. Jim Cummings work (2001) ought to be understood by any teacher with pupils whose heritage language is not English. Bilingual support is not an easy option where there are dozens of mother tongues amongst a student population (it has tended to become the tokenist solution, a bilingual teaching assistant absolving the teacher from having to develop new skills and awarenesses). Teachers need the communication skills to facilitate learning where English is an additional language, and this means training and development. The early years and primary schools build the crucial foundations for later achievement.

Thirdly, *racist name-calling* is revealed in the report as live and well, and still ignored by teachers when it is reported. "You'll have to expect a little teasing at a time like this" (p.55) being the response to "we killed thousands of your lot yesterday". School policies on harassment and racism are no good unless widely understood and internalised procedures are developed about how to respond to such everyday occurrences – and this also requires training and development.

The chapter on the media raises a fourth area for teachers to consider: how to educate children to *read and understand the media*. It is not only the language used (e.g. "Islamic terrorists" when Islamic in no way defines them, any more than "Christian

terrorists " would define Irish paramilitaries). It involves why certain incidents and interviews are selected because they newsworthy, making marginal characters seem main-stream. Teaching children to interpret the press and television (especially the latter) critically should be high on early years', primary and secondary school agendas, so developing in them a facility for critical analysis and scepticism. Islamic misrepresentation in the media ought to be a topic that is *taught*, within the curriculum and not a chance additional extra.

The practicalities of achieving any of this are immense and expensive, and have profound implications for professional development. Since this is not part of the mandatory curriculum, it is unlikely ever to be taken seriously when priorities are drawn up in school. Changing the mandatory curriculum has to be part of the solution, based not only on what a child ought to *know* by the ages of 7, 11, 14 and 16, but on what *experiences they should have had* and *what skills and sensitivities they should have developed*. When *respect for other people* is on this list at all levels, the above agenda might stand a chance. For teachers beginning a piece of research, whether for a Masters or as part of a 'research school' ethos, helpful suggestions are given for projects (p.51) such as *Recognising British Muslim identity, Partnership with Muslim parents and community, Alienation and vicious circles, Religion and faith in secular society,* and *Differentials in attainment between Muslim boys and girls.* All have in common the need to meet, respect and befriend Muslims, the only way a teacher can personally move forward.

References.
Cummins, Jim, (2001), *Language, Power and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
Parekh, Bhikhu (2000) *The Report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*
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