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Multiple voices: improving participation of Muslim girls in physical education and school sport

Symeon Dagkas^{a*}, Tansin Benn^a and Haifaa Jawad^b

^a*School of Education, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK;* ^b*School of Philosophy, Theology and Religion, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK*

This study reports on data from a larger-scale research project in one city in the West Midlands, England. The study was commissioned by the local education authority because of the rising incidence of parental withdrawal of Muslim girls from physical education. The aim was to provide evidence-based guidance to schools on improving the inclusion of Muslim girls in physical education and school sport. In-depth interviews in eight case study schools provided a thick description of the lived realities for 19 head teachers and teachers, 109 young people and 32 of their parents. Four additional focus group interviews were held with 36 Muslim young people in community/supplementary schools. Questionnaires were sent to 402 city schools and 12 supplementary schools (50 of which were returned). Methods focused on capturing views on experiences and concerns regarding the inclusion of Muslim girls in physical education. Content analysis and inductive and deductive analyses of data procedures were used. Responses indicated a diversity of positive and negative experiences across the community, with the majority of young people enjoying their school-based physical education lessons. Parental influences were strong across the age phases. Body and religious consciousness increased during adolescence. Common concerns centred on the need to improve recognition of religious requirements in schooling processes, policies and practices to provide inclusive learning environments for some Muslim young people. Problems such as poor communication, inflexible dress codes—particularly concerning wearing of the hijab (headscarf)—gender organisation and use of public swimming pools were identified. Patterns of good practice also emerged from across schools. Flexibility of approach, shared decision-making and situation-specific policies were most successful for supporting the inclusion of Muslim girls in physical education and school sport. Findings informed policy-orientated guidance for city schools.

Keywords: *Muslim girls; Islam; Physical education; Religiosity; Culture*

Introduction

The Birmingham Advisory Support Service (BASS) Project 2008 was a research-to-practice study commissioned by an English local education authority to address increased parental withdrawal of Muslim girls from physical education lessons in the city of Birmingham during 2007. The paper captures the voices of stakeholders (young people, teachers, head teachers and parents) on experiences and concerns

*Corresponding author. School of Education, University of Birmingham, Weoley Park Road, Selly Oak, Birmingham, B29 6LL, UK. Email: s.dagkas@bham.ac.uk

regarding the inclusion of Muslim girls' in physical education and school sport. Views were gathered to inform decisions on final guidance produced for Local Authority schools: 'Improving participation of Muslim girls in physical education and school sport' (Birmingham City Council [BCC], 2008, available at www.afpe.org.uk).

Research-based literature available since the early 1990s has identified areas of tension between the cultural practices of Islam and physical education in schools in western contexts (Carroll & Hollinshead, 1993; Benn, 1996; De Knop *et al.*, 1996). While physical activity per se is not problematic, situational factors regarding the participating environments can be problematic, e.g. mandatory 'immodest' dress codes and gender organisation (Dagkas & Benn, 2006). This paper adopts a critical pedagogy approach to identifying situational issues that act as barriers to the inclusion of Muslim girls in physical education and school sport. This is important because it avoids a framework that uses a deficit model of Muslim girls and, instead, challenges systems in education that fail to provide suitable learning environments for participation (Macdonald *et al.*, 2009). Here, the voices of head teachers, teachers and pupils are central in the process of identifying challenges and successes in real situations. Kirk (2000) defines critical pedagogy as an approach that:

...aims to assist people to 'see beyond the obvious', the commonplace and common-sense of the culture of everyday life in order to understand the interrelatedness of human activity at a range of levels... it is centrally concerned with education for social change. In this respect, the term 'pedagogy' should not be interpreted too literally to refer to the 'art and practice of teaching'... pedagogy should be regarded as a multidimensional concept concerned with the interaction of learning, teaching and curriculum and their situatedness in social and physical environments... a critical pedagogy seeks to open up possibilities and alternatives, to reveal the complexity of social life and to resist the imposition of simplistic explanations and quick-fix solutions. (Kirk, 2000, pp. 203–204)

The BASS Project was certainly concerned with social change, managerial and schooling practices, while aiming at opening possibilities and alternatives, acknowledging the complexity of the dynamics of the situation and resisting quick-fix solutions that could exacerbate tensions in such a sensitive area.

There was no intention to homogenise Muslim young people. The dangers of homogenising are well documented (Macdonald *et al.*, 2009). The BASS Project captured a diversity of voices in and between city communities spanning Muslim young women who happily participate in established physical education/school sport contexts; those requesting modest clothing for participation, e.g. wearing of the hijab (here used to refer to head covering) and track suits; and those requiring gender segregated spaces for freedom of participation. In listening to the range of realities faced by young people, their families, head teachers and teachers responsible for policy and practice, the challenge was in creating flexible support for schools so as to cater for diversity. A connected reflective paper addressing four important areas for effective solution seeking in this study: the research/practice gap; significance of context; understanding of embodied faith (Benn, 2009); intersectionality and interdisciplinary approaches, is published elsewhere (Benn *et al.*, 2011).

Underpinning the study was the commitment to the rights of all children to participation in physical education, as enshrined in the English National Curriculum (DfEE/QCA, 1999) and global aspiration (ICSSPE World Summits on Physical Education Berlin, 1999, 2005; www.icsspe.org). UNESCO, WHO and the IOC have highlighted the particular role of school physical education in providing a secure, safe environment for women and girls to gain the skills, understanding and confidence to participate in lifelong physical education (UNICEF, 2000; United Nations (UN), 2003). The first World Summit for physical education called for:

... governments to provide resources to implement policies for Physical Education as a basic human right for all children and young people, and to recognise its intrinsic value and its distinctive role in physical, personal and social development and in health promotion. (ICSSPE 1999)

Overarching issues

Evidence of increasing victimisation of Muslims and Islamophobia in the west, and current concerns about ring-fencing communities, social cohesion, parallel communities and lack of integration, demand that the essential features of any study focusing on Muslim girls are sensitive to the wider context and a positive approach to seeking solutions (Cantle, 2001; Allen & Nielson, 2002; Jawad & Benn, 2003; Richardson, 2004). Any research in this area needs to recognise that individuals differentially negotiate multiple and complex layers of identity. The problems of deciphering religious requirements from pseudo-religious, culturally embedded practices also add to the challenge of any research (Benn, 2003; Dagkas & Benn, 2006). In many Muslim communities, high value is placed on the role of women as wives and mothers. Participation in sport has been seen as a distraction from higher-order pursuits in religious and familial duties. Sports have been associated with 'play' and therefore not worthy of time, commitment and dedication (Benn, 1998). Such views continue to affect the lives and choices of some young Muslim girls and women and discourage them from taking up life-enhancing exercise regimes or career options and higher-education study in the field. Some forms of activities that have a high cultural value in the west, such as dance and music, are considered of low value in some Muslim communities because of the association with popular culture and fears they could lead to moral degradation. There has been a lack of general interest in some Muslim communities in what might be called 'physical culture', centred around 'health' and 'ideal-bodies' discourses (Evans *et al.*, 2004), again more highly valued in 'Western contexts', although globalisation is changing this in many ways.

Many scholars have asserted that Islam supports the participation of girls and women in physical activity, within religious requirements for body modesty (Sfeir, 1985; Daiman, 1994; Pfister, 2003; Koushkie Jahromi & Khoshnanam Jahrom, 2005). Distinction between scholarly attention to divinely inspired religious texts, and cultures based on overlays of pseudo-religious and wider situational and historical cultural influences, can be helpful in challenging negativity towards

women's participation in physical activity. Hence, the inclusion of sociologists and an Islamic studies scholar in the research team for the BASS Project. Socio-cultural views restricting the participation of girls and women in physical activity do not, of course, apply solely to Muslim women. Various 'scientific disciplines' have colluded in creating barriers, including for example from the beginning of the Modern Olympics in 1896, claims that participation in sport by women challenges femininity, reproductive capability and mental well-being (Pfister, 2000).

Despite global advocacy for the importance of physical education and physical activity, Muslim girls and women are still lagging behind boys and men in terms of opportunity in the field of physical activity. The increasing withdrawal of Muslim girls from physical education, which led to the BASS Project, is an example of differential treatment and expectations for girls and boys at school level. There is evidence of similar difficulties for Muslim girls and women at community and international sporting levels (Hargreaves, 2000; Benn & Ahmed, 2006). Both religious and cultural factors have been attributed to this phenomenon. Tensions between physical education contexts and Islamic requirements have been documented in the past. These include modesty, gender conscious groupings/activities and attention to religious practices such as fasting during Ramadan (Carroll & Hollinshead, 1993; Sarwar, 1994; Parker-Jenkins, 1995; Benn, 1996, 2000; McDonald & Hayes, 2003; Dagkas & Benn, 2006; Dagkas, 2007; Muslim Council of Britain, 2007).

In England, physical education and religion have long been integral parts of the state education system. Birmingham is a large multicultural city (population one million, in a region of over three million). In 2001 (last census date), 14.3% of Birmingham's residents declared themselves as Muslim. The majority are of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage following post 1950s immigration of South Asian workers to fill poorly paid, unpopular jobs. There has been a recent influx of Muslim refugees and asylum seekers, e.g. from Bosnia, Afghanistan, Somalia and Iraq. The city is home to almost one in ten of all British Muslims, with the second largest Muslim population outside London (Abbas, 2006, 2008) and is known internationally as the 'global city with a local heart'. Abbas (2006) draws attention to the complexity of socio-demographic features that contribute to multiple disadvantages in the lives of many Muslim people in England. Evidence indicates experiences of poverty, structural and material deprivation in terms of life chances for many Muslims despite government efforts. The Muslim population in the west is growing and Birmingham was one of two cities predicted in BRAP (2003) to have England's first 'black majority' population by 2010, predominantly people of Pakistani and Bangladeshi (and Muslim) origin. The BRAP study has been superseded by Simpson (2007), who analyses differences in age group forecasts with the fastest growing black and ethnic minority population being under 16-year-olds. Currently, in this age group, black and ethnic minorities stand at 50% and are forecast to grow to 64% by 2026. The Simpson (2007) study predicts 2024 as the year when the total population of black and ethnic minority people will be in the majority across age phases. The largest sub-group will remain that of Pakistani origin.

In 2007, the city council reported increasing numbers of Muslim parents withdrawing their daughters from physical education. Reasons were related to concerns about schools' lack of ability to meet religious and cultural needs, e.g. modesty in dress codes and sex-separation. This was not a new problem for the city, but a clear resurgence of the phenomenon. Head teachers approached the city's Advisory Support Services requesting firmer guidelines to address the issues, hence the commissioning of the BASS Project. The double-bind situation that head teachers faced was between meeting the statutory requirements to deliver the national curriculum entitlement, including physical education, for all children (DfEE/QCA, 1999), while safeguarding religious freedoms by meeting the religious requirements of Muslim pupils.

Methods

The study was located within the interpretative tradition. The aim was to identify issues, concerns and solutions related to the realities of those who experience and manage tensions between religious identity and participation in physical education. A team of eight researchers conducted the data gathering, including advisors, subject and religious scholars and teachers. The researchers' ethnic, racial background and gender contributed to building a better rapport and trust with the sample. In addition, leaders from the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), the National Subject Association for Physical Education (afPE) and the National Dance Teachers Association (NDTA) were consulted. Researchers were paired, each pair being responsible for data collection from two case study schools. Regular meetings (bi-weekly) enabled better monitoring of data collection by addressing issues/problems/anxieties as they occurred.

Purposive sampling required a range of school types for the eight in-depth case studies. Schools included four primary (5–11-year-olds), one was also a Muslim state school, and four secondary (11–16+-year-olds). The range of schools included: those with predominantly Muslim pupils and those with more diversity; gender-segregated and mixed-sex schools; those experiencing difficulties with these issues; and those with no reported related difficulties. Interview data from volunteer participants provided thick descriptions of the lived realities for 19 head teachers and teachers, 109 young people and 32 of their parents. Pupil and parent interviews were organised by the schools. Although not a stipulation, volunteer participants were predominantly Muslim. A further four focus group meetings were held with young people in community/supplementary schools in Muslim communities (36). Questionnaires capturing views on experiences and concerns were sent to the total population of city schools (402) and 12 supplementary schools. Fifty responses were received (primary 27, secondary 17, special schools 3, community 3). Poor response could have been due to lack of time, other priorities, or lack of interest where no problems were perceived. Consultations were extended to the afPE, the MCB and the NDTA. After coding the interviews, the process of identifying common themes

started. This process was based on deductive and inductive analytical procedures, which involved scanning the data (both interview transcripts and questionnaires) for themes and relationships among the initial categories, developing working typologies from the examination of initial cases and then modifying and refining them on the basis of subsequent cases. Consequently, new categories emerged as well as subdivisions in each category (Le Compte & Preissle, 1993). In addition, content analysis was employed to assist with the analysis of the questionnaires, providing a more holistic-descriptive picture of a school's practices by providing some quantifiable results. Categories identified in the interview transcripts permeated the analysis of questionnaires. Inductive and deductive analysis of data sources enabled triangulation organised around key emergent themes structured under the responses of managers, pupils and parents (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Robson, 2002). A detailed description of a sample of responses from teachers, pupils and parents was shared among team researchers to enable similarities and differences in the emerged categories to be identified ('peer-debriefing'). Finally, 'respondent validation', and 'member check' methods were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the study; preliminary results were discussed with some head teachers and specialist teachers during informal conversations.

Coding was used to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. More specifically for the questionnaires, the code QSP1 refers to questionnaire (Q) sent to primary schools (SP) with '1' referring to the school code number. For the interviews, code 'I-SP1H' represents the following: 'I' refers to interview, 'SP' primary school, and 'H' head teacher. Furthermore, the code 'SS1' is secondary school with '1' being the school code number. Similarly, pupils' responses were coded 'PL', and parent as 'PT'. Supplementary/community centre data were coded (C), e.g. QC for questionnaire, and I-C1 for interviews.

Results

The presentation of the results captures emergent themes as follows: (1) head teachers' and teachers' perspectives—identified as 'situation-specific balance' and 'locating the gaps'; (2) pupils' perspectives—collated under primary experiences and secondary experiences; and (3) parents' perceptions—captures the struggle to retain religious and cultural identity and preferred notions of embodied practices.

Head teachers' and teachers' perspectives

Situation-specific balance. Using data from 19 interviews with head teachers and teachers of physical education and 50 questionnaires from schools, the majority of participating schools had experienced parents or students raising issues about Muslim girls' participation in physical education. Common concerns included dress code, changing, mixed-sex participation, dance and swimming.

Most incidents were managed individually to avoid undue attention and to be sure of motives. For example, teachers reported incidents where some parents had simply

colluded in their daughter's preference not to participate in physical education. Judgements responded to specific requests, a balance between flexibility and rationalisation of policies was important in seeking solutions:

There's always a fine line—and there's no completely right answer—we are a state school where the majority of students follow the Muslim faith. We have to be sensitive to our students so we look at ways in which we can support students in valuing their faith—so we would allow students to wear headscarves for physical education but within certain criteria (health and safety)...it's being sensitive and keeping a balance. (I-SS6-H)

A minority of cases led to impasse situations, in complex situations where there were competing values or resource implications beyond the control of the school:

We can be flexible within the range of what we can offer but you get to the point where you seem to have barriers you just cannot remove because they would be far too expensive to remove or physically we couldn't due to the constraints of the building or the staffing. It's just not a physical possibility and you have so many other things going on in a school so many other pressures and constraints (I-SP3-H)

Lack of recognition for the multiple challenges faced by some head teachers on a day-to-day basis added to the stresses of problem solving. For example, one school served diverse, territorially split and rapidly changing communities all living within a one and a half mile radius of the school. Of the parents, 80% had little formal education and spoke very little English.

While all head teachers were committed to meet the 'Every Child Matters' agenda (DfES, 2004) to maximise opportunities for all pupils, school situations brought different possibilities. Idealism was high: 'It is the school's belief that most if not all challenges can be resolved through acknowledging that the school is there to serve the needs of all students and their families' (I-SS8-H), but there was empathy for different situations. For example, those in schools with over 98% Muslim pupils recognised it was easier for them to address Islamic requirements than schools serving more plural communities. For some, there was concern about the impact of change for one group causing a backlash elsewhere, it was a question of retaining a balance between multiple needs:

I've had very little to deal with by way of resentment by other groups, but I have had a little bit from parents who have said, 'You bend over backwards for Muslim students but you don't do the same for our community'. (I-SS5-H)

The question of balance also surfaced in addressing needs at primary level. There were frustrations among some school managers who had well-established systems that were challenged by a small minority:

Many Muslims families are happy with how the school runs physical education. It is the few that voice their concerns that often want the whole curriculum to change...(we know) the reason is—that (these) families do not want their children to do physical education. (QSP-271)

Difficult parental situations also arose in the Muslim state school and the female Muslim head teacher located the root of the problem in confusions between religion and culture:

From our point of view—a lot of parents... find it difficult to separate the principles of Islam from their cultural heritage. From our point of view we are educating British Muslims and that's what the mission statement and aims and objectives clearly state—to provide the national curriculum within an Islamic framework. So we have tried to help parents to separate their cultural understanding of Islam from Islamic principle... once they see the differences and they understand the boundaries of Islamic values they are able to make that shift. (I-SP1-H)

Generational differences in parental responses/expectations were identified:

We find the majority of our second and third generation parents are more relaxed. People who have converted to Islam or who are first generation... they are the ones who might say to me (as Muslim head teacher) 'You are not really a Muslim are you?' and that starts a conversation... (I-SP1-H)

Communication and positive links between school and local community were essential to resolving difficulties. For example, questionnaires revealed that fewer incidents arose where activities involving both school and community brought parents and local religious leaders into regular contact with school staff.

Locating the gaps. While some teachers expressed confidence with understanding Islamic requirements, some teachers recognised their lack of knowledge about Islam and physical education: 'If there are any specific Islamic requirements we are not aware of them' (QSS-28). Some teachers expressed a desire to be sure about the distinctions between religious versus cultural requirements. Concerns were expressed that teacher training in the area was inadequate. Discussion areas included concern for appropriate dress codes and provision of single-sex environments with same-sex staffing (including where coaches or artists were employed).

Linked with identifying the need for training was the call for not only local, but also national guidance with the support of national associations, religious leaders and Muslim communities to facilitate more inclusive participation:

A countrywide policy would be relevant also as everyone would be aiming at the same thing... (QSS-28)

We would like clear guidance on the issue of physical education and any clashes with Islamic requirements... advice on ways to encourage students to participate in ways which do not conflict with religious requirements. (QSS-50)

Some teachers identified gaps in parents' knowledge and understanding regarding the value and status of physical education: 'Parents need to be aware of the fact that physical education is compulsory and what physical education actually is in a school' (QSP-28). This was supported in group interviews with parents where, on two occasions, it became clear that some parents thought it was 'OK to just withdraw their children (from PE)' (I-SP2-PT1, -PT3).

More positively, in many cases, exchange of information through clear school policies and induction procedures gave access to clear school/subject expectations and systems, fostering good relations: 'We work very closely with parents firstly to increase knowledge of the importance of physical education and sport' (QSP-189). The most successful schools were those with clear policies and senior management support for whole-school participation in physical education. Good policies contained information on school expectations and requirements with explanations for decisions taken.

The current lack of role models was mentioned by participants in primary (QSP-144), secondary and community contexts: ... 'there are very few (Muslim women) role models in coaching or teaching' (QSS-68), 'Young people don't have any Asian role models they can look up to who are 'sports personalities' especially Muslim women' (QC-10). While out-of-hours physical activity provision was difficult for many young Muslims because of other demands on their time at home or in attending the Mosque, some schools were engaging youngsters in festivals, teams and competitions, maximising lunch-time slots and negotiating opportunities for pupils wherever possible.

Questionnaires from schools revealed that many girls faced pressures from home with regard to swimming participation. The presence of males in the swimming environment for secondary-aged Muslim girls was a main source of the problem: 'Parents have withdrawn Muslim girls from swimming...even after discussion the school feels powerless to support children since the parents feel so strongly' (QSP-282). On the same issue, another extract stated: 'Three girls refused to go swimming ... parents were taken to the pool to see the environment but totally refused permission when they saw male lifeguards present'. (QSP-279)

Pool managers responded unevenly across the city to requests to provide single-sex swimming where requested by schools/Muslim families. Some pools were helpful and willing to accommodate need. Others gave reasons related to lack of sufficient female staff or unwillingness to lose other business by stopping male swimmers entering the pool. Some schools had negotiated successfully for girls to wear appropriate clothing to preserve modesty and eliminate barriers to participation. Others schools reorganised to take 'girls only' and 'boys only' groups. Where impasse situations arose, often they lay beyond the control of the head teacher or teachers.

Pupils' perspectives

Primary experiences. Focus group interviews with 81 primary-aged pupils revealed that, for the primary-aged children there were fewer anxieties about participating in physical education and school sport than for their older counterparts. There was much enthusiasm for the range of activities on offer with some understanding of their importance in healthy lifestyles, as one girl explained: '(physical education) is fun, gives us more exercise—keeps us healthy, gives us stronger bones' (I-SP1-PL). Overall, primary students' responses revealed positive attitudes to physical education and school sport and its life-enhancing potential:

It is good for life...for us—exercise is good for our bodies, for our health.
(I-C2-PL)

Sport can help to bring us together ... it is very good for us. (I-C4-PL)

In terms of situational aspects of learning and teaching in physical education, primary children were happy with their physical education kit. In most schools, allowances were made to meet the needs of Muslim girls, extending to tracksuit bottoms and long-sleeved shirts where requested. Some primary schools allowed headscarves in lessons. In schools where staff preferred children to remove headscarves, anxieties were documented but policies were clear, justifications centring on health and safety.

The majority of students regarded the mixed-sex environment in primary school settings as positive: '(mixed-sex environments) allow us to work in teams with different people' (I-SP2-PL). But at the upper end of some primary schools (ages 9–11 years), changing in mixed-sex classrooms was an issue owing to the lack of specific separate-sex changing facilities in English state primary schools. Where staffing and space resources permitted, some schools had found solutions, e.g. one girl explained: ... 'we (girls) change in one classroom and the boys in another'. (I-SP1-PL).

There were very few cases in primary-aged students where religious identity impacted on participation in physical education. Pupils' religiosity was closely linked with age and became more obvious in secondary schools. Swimming was the most notable exception, with some primary-aged Muslim girls wearing clothing that covered arms and legs and a small number of parents insisting on participation only where sex-segregated environments could be guaranteed.

Secondary experiences. Many secondary-aged pupils shared the positive experiences of the primary children in broad activity areas, including dance, and were aware of the life-enhancing benefits. Focus group interviews with 64 secondary-aged pupils indicated that there was much more consciousness of the influence of their parents' views and religious and cultural imperatives than for primary pupils. As one girl explained when referring to delivery of dance as part of their physical education lessons: ... 'parents will give permission for girls only dance' (I-SS5-PL). While single-sex secondary provision may allay fears related to sexually provocative movements (Muslim Council of Britain, 2007), it raises the question of parental understanding concerning the principles and values of dance in education.

Gender segregation was critical to participation of many Muslim girls in secondary school physical education. Birmingham has a number of single-sex schools, which are attractive to Asian families seeking sex-segregated secondary schools for their children. Issues about body modesty and privacy were more prevalent in mixed-sex schools, though pupils had different views and experiences of this. The following pupil was happy with her school policy to remove the hijab for physical education:

I think its the whole scarf business ... Some girls get angry because they are told they have to take their headscarves off for physical education for health and safety reasons—some girls get upset—I think that's what holds girls back in physical

education. Here there is no choice (school policy is for removal of headscarves)... (I-SS6-PL1)

Another pupil discussed managing movement through open spaces into the 'male-free' physical education space:

I don't see that there is any problem because there are just girls (in the sports hall)—if we have to cross public spaces we are allowed to wear them until we get into the hall. To be honest for some it is just an excuse not to do it. (I-SS6-PL2)

Some pupils had no sympathy for their peers' complaints, suggesting: '...religion does not stop you (participating in PE). If mixing with boys is likely to be a problem then go to a girls' school, similarly if your parents have a problem with that' (I-SS2-PL4). Again, the swimming pool was the most commonly raised problem area: 'We have a problem with swimming because the pool can't guarantee an all female environment and sometimes they have a male pool teacher...this is an issue'. (I-SS6-PL3).

These comments indicate differences in expectation, but there was consensus among secondary pupils that, where all-female environments were offered, this should be respected in terms of staffing. This did present resourcing problems in some schools, e.g. pupils spoke of male cover teachers but being allowed to wear the hijab when that happened: '...for some girls they wouldn't do anything in front of men—they would sit out...'. (I-SS2-PL). Commitment to head covering among secondary pupils was strong. Most successful schools had engaged pupils in decision-making regarding, e.g. dress code and patterns of sporting participation. Where this happened, there was a sense of ownership and empowerment in sharing responsibility for decision-making and enthusiastic engagement with physical education/school sport activities.

Parents' perspectives

Interviews with 32 parents from case study schools, predominantly first or second generation from Pakistani or Bangladeshi backgrounds, raised many interesting points, but no consensus in opinions about their daughters' participation in physical education.

Some raised concerns about the dilution of cultural heritage through the influence of aspects of non-Muslim youth culture:

Back home (country of origin Yemen) they wouldn't wear head scarves until the age of thirteen years. My daughter is ten and asked if she could start wearing it last week. Her friend wears it. I think here (UK)—parents are worried that they (their daughters) won't wear their scarves when they reach adolescence so they wear it younger. The children are influenced by each other—but they could be influenced the other way too—away from Islam and there is a fear about that in the community—for Pakistani and Bangladeshi people as well. (I-SP2-PT1)

This view captures the anxiety about social influences perceived to have the potential to steer young people away from valuing cultural heritage.

The majority of parents interviewed considered physical education valuable and supported participation in learning environments that respected modesty and therefore religious integrity. In one school, contrasting opinions were met:

Everyone needs to know that physical education is good for you. Muslim women have health problems...my daughter goes to a single sex school with all female teachers—I don't have a problem and my daughter can wear anything. (I-SS3-PT1)

My daughter goes to a school where they force them to do physical education. The teachers make them take off their headscarves and they do not understand that we are not happy about that. ...dress sense should be respected. (I-SS3-PT2)

I don't like my daughters running and swimming; it is against our culture. Also they may run out of breath and this might cause asthma. Girls are not made for running. The school is not going to do what we want them to do, they do not listen to us, and they must think physical education is a good thing. I do not agree. ...I have never done any sports in my life. It is not in our ways. (I-SS3-PT3)

The first parent's statement embraces positive attitudes with the acknowledgement that the school's practices comply with religious requirements. The second response indicates a negative attitude to participation related to lack of respect for religious requirements. The third reflects negative views towards physical activity, questioning its appropriateness for 'our ways' (intimating a fear of the challenge to tradition). This range of responses illustrates the lack of congruence of views within communities regarding the value of physical education and sporting activities.

There were also differences of opinion on the degree of freedom they would allow their children, e.g. with comments on dance ranging from '...not appropriate' (I-SP3-PT3) to '...she can do what she wants to do and wear the scarf when she wants, not when I say' (I-SP3-PT4). Such dilemmas were positioned between wanting to fit into the host society and retaining distinctive cultural identity. Much anxiety centred on preferences for 'embodied practices' that protect modesty.

Parents did recognise differences in their own communities. Some related this to the degree of religiosity. When discussing parental problems with physical education, they said: 'That's because some parents are very strict (religiously)' (I-SP2-PT1). 'Mine (children) go to everything but there are some (parents) who will not let them (children) go to physical education or swimming' (I-SP2-PT2). Again, such polarised views indicate the complexity of negotiating outcomes to improve inclusion.

In the context of education, physical education had relatively low status in some Muslim communities. Teachers were aware of this:

Many families and parents do not value sport as an important part of their child's education, they do not encourage it... It is important to change the views of parents and to get them more involved in their children's education. (QC-10)

Generational differences in appreciation of the value of physical activity were also acknowledged: 'The young people in the community have sufficient knowledge of the importance of physical activity but the adult community is lacking sufficient knowledge' (QC-8).

Positive support for school policies and practices in physical education and school sport existed in schools where parents were engaged in school-based family or women's activity sessions. Here, parents were engaging with teachers, extending female social networks and improving awareness of the benefits of participation (I-SS5-T). The 'whole-family approach' to changing attitudes and opening communication between schools and communities was a successful strategy in some city schools for improving inclusion of Muslim girls in physical education and school sport opportunities.

Discussion and conclusions

The contested body is at the centre of anxieties leading to parental withdrawal of Muslim girls from physical education. Requests for particular dress codes and gender organisation relate to preferences for 'safer environments' that meet Islamic requirements for modesty and preserve cultural heritage. Such requests can challenge teachers' normalised assumptions about appropriate policies, organisation systems and expectations (Carroll & Hollinshead, 1993; Dagkas & Benn, 2006). 'Bodies are both inscribed with and vehicles of culture' (Garrett, 2004, p. 141), which means there will be multiple ways in which both social and religious values are embodied. Cultural values legitimise appearance, actions and behaviours. Where these are challenged, as in issues of body covering or gender organisation for some Muslim girls, solutions need to be based on understanding difference (Benn *et al.*, forthcoming).

The perspectives of head teachers, teachers of physical education, pupils and parents provided indicators of concerns regarding the inclusion of Muslim girls in physical education and school sport. Challenges were greatest where schools: were serving diverse local communities; met high levels of religiosity and the desire for strict codes of body modesty; were under-resourced; used local community providers unwilling or unable to meet all-female environment requests; encountered strongly negative parental attitudes towards girls participation in physical education; and had teachers unsure of the boundaries between Islamic and cultural practices (Walseth & Fasting, 2003; Kay, 2006).

More positively, generic characteristics of good practice from more successful schools included an open ethos of celebrating cultural diversity, whole-school agendas committed to health and well-being and clear policies in terms of expectations and organisation in physical education. Good practice existed where there was stability in the local community, regular opportunities for school/home/community links and local sports facilities able to provide all-female spaces for schools' use when required. Positive parental attitudes supported pupils' engagement in the subject. Teachers were confident about Islamic requirements and clear on the extent to which their school was able, or not, to embed these in practice. Flexibility in approaches to policies and practices, but consistency between colleagues, characterised the ethos in these schools, as did pupils' engagement in problem solving.

Regarding the need for localised solutions to problems, Kirk (2000) highlighted the importance of understanding a more holistic view of pedagogy that included social and physical environments. Reasons for withdrawing children from physical education rarely related to physical activity itself. Problems were rooted in the learning environments provided. The nature of spaces, policies and practices inside which learning takes place were creating barriers for some Muslim families. Some of those were fixed, others could be changed. Gaps in knowledge and understanding were raised in connection with teacher training, which often failed to equip student-teachers with sufficient confidence in their knowledge of diversity issues (Benn, 1996; Benn & Dagkas, 2006; Dagkas, 2007; Flintoff, 2008). Also, there were concerns about the misunderstandings of some parents regarding the legal status, educational purpose and value of physical education and activities, such as dance, in the education context. The lack of Muslim women role models for pupils as sporting stars or physical education teachers was also raised as a significant 'gap' in providing strong messages and motivation to young Muslim children (Benn & Ahmad, 2006).

The BASS Project revealed the strong influence of parents on young people's attitudes and behaviour. Most pupils in the study were enthusiastic about their physical education experiences, especially at primary level. Parental responses were more mixed. The degree to which parents chose to influence their children's experiences and lifestyles with regard to participation in physical activity varied. Attitudes related more to parents' own experiences than an informed grasp of what was happening in the school situation. As pupils moved through secondary education, their understanding of, and compliance with, parental attitudes and obligations to religious and cultural requirements increased (Kay, 2006). Gender segregation at secondary level, either in separate schools or separate departments in mixed-sex schools, was essential to maximising participation for many Muslim parents and pupils (Benn & Dagkas, 2006).

The purpose of this paper was to share the perspectives of head teachers, teachers, parents and pupils on experiences and concerns regarding the participation of Muslim girls in physical education. The data captured lived realities and reflected some consensus and much diversity in views on experiences and concerns regarding Muslim girls' participation in physical education. The authors recognise that some voices are missing and that there are always concerns over issues of representation and the positioning of researchers and volunteer participants. This is the first study to attempt to elicit such a breadth of perspectives within a project aimed at challenging the barriers to participation and promoting the development of school-friendly policy-orientated guidance for city schools.

This study raised wider awareness of the complexity of the multiple and often diverse influences of home/school/community cultures on girls' participation in physical education. The political and educational context in the UK places the responsibility with schools and local authorities to meet the diverse needs of all pupils including Muslim girls and to eliminate barriers to participation in physical education and school sport. Practice guidelines have been developed that provide examples of the effectiveness of collaboration between multiple stakeholders (local

authority/school/community, pupils and parents, subject and religious groups) in moving towards more inclusive policy and practice. Religiosity and cultural differences affect values, attitudes and behaviours. Improving two-way channels of communication between schools and homes will contribute to an improved understanding of difference and identify solutions for change. Parental attitudes are particularly influential in the lives of Muslim young people.

Resultant local authority guidance derived from the research is based on principles of negotiation, processes of listening, exchanging views and seeking consensus on ways forward. Flexibility is key to success in developing inclusive policy and practice. The overriding emphasis is about making changes, where required, to facilitate participation and foster positive experiences and benefits from engaging with physical education and sport. This paper reported on data from a project in one multicultural city. There is a need for more research that relates directly to policy and practice in schools, research that encompasses multiple voices and lived experiences in sharing understandings and seeking solutions.

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