On Being a Muslim Teacher in England: The Role of Faith and History in Educational Reflections

by

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Abstract

This article charts a new area in Muslim educational thought by providing insights into perspectives held by Muslim primary state-school teachers in England regarding teachers and teaching. It attempts to explore themes, in the context of education, related to the evolving relationship between faith and professionalism.

Drawing on data from research conducted using a life-history approach to discover the experiences of these teachers, it examines the dynamics of teacher identity and the role of faith in schooling.

The findings indicate that faith is important to these teachers in relation their work, although fundamental distinctions exist about its role. "Ideal teachers" are conceptualized in terms of the religion and teaching. From a teacher's perspective, their narratives give the perception that from various standpoints, Muhammad (ṢAAS) is considered as an ideal teacher and a model. Their interpretation of the meaning of being a Muslim teacher reflects a heterogeneous understanding, and it affects some of their thinking in the classroom.

The article concludes, cautiously, that for these Muslim teachers, while the centrality of faith is significant in their lives, there does not appear to be a necessary transference of being a Muslim and having a faith position into being a teacher. Apparently, their foremost concern is teaching, and successful teaching is achieved by maintaining their integrity and that of the children

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they teach. Some teachers among them are able to meet their faith requirements through the guidelines provided by their faith. Guidelines from faith perspectives need to be understood by school leaders in order to assist teachers from all communities to be comfortable with their faith in a school environment.

Introduction

> No, I'm not. I'm from Lahore. I'm sorry, I'm Urdu speaking. I'm probably, erm . . . the upper-class society, but I'm not. I'm a Muslim, you know.

The above quotation is that of a primary school teacher and exemplifies data from a qualitative research agenda. This particular quote was selected to illustrate the complexity involved in understanding teacher identity, and it indicates the centrality of faith in the life of this particular Muslim teacher. Her identity in relation to the city from which her family originated, her mother tongue, and her socioeconomic background seem to be given a secondary position.

There has been an increased significance for many Muslims living in Britain of religious affiliation as a marker of their identity. Tariq Modood and others found a very high percentage of Pakistani and Bangladeshi populations holding stronger religious beliefs than their White counterparts.[1] While, ethnicity and race continue to be relevant factors in social cohesion, increasingly, minority communities are likely to identify themselves by their faith as well as by their ethnic or racial origins. This developing sense of religiosity is an increasingly normative experience for British Muslims.[2] A Home Office Citizenship Survey revealed that, for some Muslims, religion was a more important aspect of identity than ethnicity.[3] The phenomenon of bringing religion to prominence can be explained variously. It has been suggested that religion provides a response to racism and discrimination; or it may be that religion is perceived to be under attack, and therefore, some Muslims feel the need to seek strength through uniting in their faith; and finally, it could be resulting from religious activism by revivalist groups.[4] Consequently, many are pursuing recognition of religion in the public sphere.

With the aim of assisting in filling a gap of understanding faith perspectives in the lives of teachers, this research provides information from a group of primary teachers in a substantial minority-faith community in England—in this case, a Muslim community.

The aim is to study the conception of Muslim teachers regarding teachers and teaching, and to analyze the identity of Muslim teachers by exploring the role they attribute to their faith and the impact, if any, that it has upon their life and career. Their understanding of what it means to be a Muslim teacher is explored with a view to recognizing the role of faith among teachers and to consider the need for faith to be acknowledged as a potentially important aspect in the construction of teacher identities. The substantive questions utilized are: (1) what is the role of faith in your life and work? (2) have you an ideal teacher? (3) what is your understanding of being a Muslim teacher? and (4) does being a Muslim affect your teaching?

Muslims in Britain have in recent years gained a high profile in the media, although they have been part of the British sociocultural and religious landscape for a very long time. Needless to say, they are diverse in their patterns of migration, doctrinal standpoints, jurisprudential preferences, ethnic roots, linguistic variations, cultural manifestations, geographical locations, and socioeconomic statuses. Bearing this diversity in mind, it would be relevant and useful to find out the understandings and experiences about matters of faith related to education among these practicing Muslims.

Researching the question of their faith identity is relevant not only because they are opinion makers and figures of authority, but also because their resultant attitudes and behaviors in British society show how these teachers have created a space for themselves both in schools and in society. Their narratives might reveal information about the nature of their commitment to their faith and the state, and how they handle diversity both in their professional and personal lives. Finally, the issue of fundamentalism and extremism and its relationship to terrorism—and the positioning of the Muslim community in Britain, within such a situation and its related discourses—make the views of Muslim teachers about their faith relevant, because they will demonstrate the nature of the role that faith plays in their thinking and practice.

I begin this article with a theoretical discussion on teacher identity and follow this by an explanation of how I used the life-history method to understand and explore the life, career, and experiences of these teachers. Thereafter, I present data collected as part of research on the identity of Muslim teachers; then, I discuss an analysis of the data and offer conclusions.

Conceptualizing Teacher Identity: A Theoretical Framework

In various theoretical[5] and empirical studies,[6] teacher identity has become the center of attention in the life and work of teachers. In several studies,[7] the role of faith has been eclipsed and reduced to notions mainly linked with gender[8] and race.[9] Sandra Acker's edited book provides various studies on teachers, gender, and careers. She recognizes that gender is "a fundamental organising principle in society" and that it is an equally important category for analysis as race, class, or age.[10] In it, Barbara McKellar investigates the impact of race, gender, and class on Black women. She concluded that racial and sexual differentiations help in producing positions whereby Black women are torch bearers.[11] In another study by Don Henry, all, except one, of his subjects were of African descent, and his study enables him to propose that when Black people are in a relatively powerful position the dynamics of the situation are altered.[12] So, gender, race, and class have a bearing on the person that a teacher is and the situation they find themselves in, and this raises for me the question about the faith of teachers and its impact on their sense of identity.

Literature on teacher identity shows that its conceptualization has been made in a variety of ways. With reference to literature on religion, multiculturalism, teacher identity, and media, Kimberley White located several types in an effort to provide a theoretical basis for linking teachers' private religious identifications to their professional identities.[13] The first category of teacher identity relates to the manners in which individuals, through their experiences, "think about themselves as teachers, or the image they have of self-as-teacher."[14] This leads toward understanding teacher identity as being individualistic and, according to White, directly related to the way teachers view and enact their practice.[15] The second definition of teacher identity includes the individual's construction of self but extends to how others define that person. In a seminal work, Jennifer Nias conducted research among primary school teachers in England and theorized identity as having a collective nature through their commitment to teaching. Symbolic interactionists, she maintained, posit the existence of multiple selves. She found that personal identities are located in and maintained by in- and extra-school reference groups.[16] In other words, teachers are professionals collectively but play various roles in different circumstances and situations as individuals. This is important as it shows that there is a dialogic relationship and a collective nature of teacher identity development. White notes

that the role of institutional contexts on identity formation as a component of teacher identity has received less attention.[17]

Upon entering the profession, a teacher develops an individual professional identity. This development, suggests White, takes place in broader institutional settings and constraints.[18] In other words, not only does teaching have an influence upon an individual, but the institutional contexts and constraints, such as policy and strategic decisions, also influence the development of the self. It is here that contested identities emerge. The systems and procedures that bring people together may be accepted, accommodated, adapted, postponed, or rejected when individuals position themselves in collective situations or institutions.

Poststructuralist theories of identity developed from the work of Derrida and Foucault recognize identities as being multiple, negotiated, and fluid rather than static.[19] This means the process of identity construction is continuous. Identity markers such as religion, ethnicity, gender, and social class converge or diverge in different ways to develop "the self" so that people refine and contest their identities. This, according to White, means that they "incorporate new information and experiences within their existing notion of identity."[20] It also suggests that teacher identity is constructed actively in a creative process and is not predetermined. Simultaneously, White proposes that people "must feel a stable sense of self," otherwise individuals would experience a constant state of uncertainty.[21] Stephen J. Ball and Ivor F. Goodson explicate this as *substantive* identity, which is a perception of a core self that is central to the way in which individuals think about themselves, whereas the *situated* identity alters according to specific definitions of the situation.[22] From a Muslim theological perspective, *tawhīd,* being what should define a Muslim, and being fundamental to the way a Muslim should think about him- or herself, may be thought of as being the *substantive* identity—whereas other identities, being malleable and negotiated, are therefore *situated*. When considered in religious, class, and ethnic terms, the Muslim community, not only in Britain but in many other countries, makes multiple layers of identity evident.[23]

This final categorization of identity is pivotal in understanding a teacher's identity. Teachers join the profession with previous experiences, which have influenced their current notions of self. These could be cultural, religious, socioeconomic, gender, and other experiences. The development of a professional identity entails the personal and professional process of self-shifting and interacting to form the teacher professional identity, and as White argues, in understanding teacher professional identity, it is impor-

tant to explore how both personal and professional experiences interact and relate to each other.[24] Through this formation, White concludes, teacher-identity development leads us to acknowledge that religion may be a component of a teacher's professional identity, if it is an aspect of a teachers' personal experience.[25] Moreover, Clifford Geertz has defined religion as a symbolic structure that generates meaning for people—a worldview capable of providing answers to human problems, and an ethos telling people how they should act.[26] Therefore, religion, it would seem, confers identity.

Literature on teacher education recognizes identity as important in teacher development as it can be used as an analytic lens for examining aspects of teaching.[27] It is also a "resource that people use to explain, justify, and make sense of themselves in relation to others and to the world at large."[28] The increased interest in teacher-identity construction also mirrors the importance of understanding teachers and teaching in terms of "transformation, as a process of 'becoming' in which teachers fashion and refashion identities as they confront and adapt to varying perspectives, such as those of schools, students and governments."[29] In view of these factors, identity becomes susceptible to external influences, just as it is to internal or personal ones.

Considerable research has been conducted investigating issues of identity and the constituents of its construction. Nevertheless, most theories and research on teacher identity seem to sideline the role of religion.[30] In making sense of Muslims, the centrality of faith had been overshadowed by the ethnicity-centered discourse.[31] But as the quote at the beginning indicates some teachers stress other determinants of their identity, whereas others give more emphasis to their religion, the projection of which is increasingly being recognized[32] by some in the typology of identity.[33]

Researching through the Life-History Method

The authority of stories in human life is a complicated phenomenon because it might tell much about a person's history, faith, successes, and failures—and also explains some innermost truths, or indeed fabrications, whether intentional or unwittingly created to resolve internal conflicts. Nevertheless, stories are not exclusively a means of communication; rather, they are in essence "fundamental to the human search for meaning."[34] Among teachers, it is common to share stories about their practice. Therefore, in the context of schools, it is useful to capture teachers' stories as they assist in exposing, among many other facets of their profession, their involvement in schools and communities and provide access to the meaning they

attach to their work. Invariably, there will be different versions of any life,[35] and it is therefore important to recognize this. In addition, a historical life is understood within current ways of thinking. This thinking is constructed and reconstructed at different moments in different ways by its author.[36] Therefore, in making sense of life histories shared by teachers, the notions of individuality, ideology, time, and context need to be considered. Life history is understood as the sharing by an individual, orally or textually, of selected aspects from their memory about their life and experiences in response to an interested party.

Consequently, the life-history method for studying teachers' careers and work provides several benefits. Ivor Goodson contends that the purpose of studying teachers' lives is to develop a modality of educational research, which speaks both of and to the teacher.[37] It is also argued that life histories, because of their special qualities in revealing the self, have a significant role "to play in the construction of a meaningful, relevant and living teacher knowledge."[38] In the context of religious education, Pat Sikes and Judith Everington observe that life histories provide teachers with opportunities for engaging in self-reflection and self-appraisal.[39] Moreover, Jennifer Nias and Kath Aspinwell maintain that the professional development of teachers can be fully understood and facilitated only when it is seen in the context of their other lives and concerns.[40]

In her research into the experiences of gay and lesbian teachers, Gillian Squirrell[41] suggests that sexuality and education are often ignored because of the unawareness within educational research of the existence of gay and lesbian teachers and pupils. Likewise, through this research, a contribution is envisaged for the emergence of the history of contemporary Muslim teachers as articulated and understood by them, which is at present a significant gap in Muslim educational thought and practice. The historical awareness of one's own history and the history of others is an important step toward empowerment and, therefore, toward inclusion.[42] Life-history interviews also provide an opportunity to view the range of factors that come together to influence and shape an individual's life.[43]

Having said this, the life-history method has been criticized for its perceived lack of generalizability, and "the lack of accepted principles for the selection of participants," and the "paucity of suitable analytical concepts to establish a coherent frame of reference."[44] Moreover, since life histories are basically recollections, people's memory recall may not be reliable. Other limitations of using interviews, such as those noted by Michael Patton, include respondents only reporting their perceptions of and perspec-

tives on events. Those perspectives and perceptions, he asserts, are subject to distortions due to personal bias, anger, anxiety, politics, and simple lack of awareness. Indeed, interview data can also be affected by the emotional state of the interviewee at the time of the interview[45] and interviewees may also reflect biased views due to the researcher's presence.[46]

Sampling and Research Participants

To recruit participants for this research, a number of sampling methods were applied to overcome limitations of time, proximity of locations, and teacher availability. In view of the likelihood of meeting Muslim teachers at professional or communal events anywhere in the city, snowball sampling, which involves composing a network of contacts, was applied.[47] This method provided the advantage of increasing the confidence of being recommended to others. Selected sampling was used because these teachers represented a certain faith group that was considered to be significant on conceptual grounds.[48] Multiple methods proved beneficial since, in the absence of faith-based statistical records about teachers, it was impossible to determine the number of Muslim teachers in Birmingham.

These sampling methods yielded thirteen Muslim teachers who self-declared their ethnicity as Pakistanis (eight), Bangladeshis (three) and an Indian from Malawi. The country of origin of one teacher from North Africa was disguised, in consultation with her, to enhance anonymity. There were five males and eight females; of these, five were born in England. Their ages ranged from twenty-four to forty-eight years, and they held various positions in school: a head teacher, a deputy head, an assistant head, a head of Foundation Stage,[49] a subject coordinator, and eight classroom teachers. In terms of the range of their teaching experiences, one teacher was a newly qualified teacher, and the head teacher had twenty-four years experience. Five teachers were interviewed at two universities in the city—four in their respective schools, two in their homes, and two in the researcher's home. At the time of the interviews, all taught in inner-city primary schools.

Data Analysis and Researcher Positionality

Data generated from the interviews were analyzed in three distinct ways. One form of data analysis provided a purely descriptive life history of a person's life, framed with analytical points about the social, religious or educational significance of that life. A second form took the shape of collective biographies—prosopographies. Life histories of these teachers

consisted of some similarities. This means that an individual story has the potential of reflecting a particular group and raises the question of how to understand individual teachers' professional lives to understanding their lives collectively.[50] Finally, thematic analysis was used to organize the segments of data into broad themes. In order to generate categories, the researcher noted regularities in the setting or people chosen for the study.[51] In addition, the peculiarities of each interview, respondent, and venue were noted. (Further in this article, I present a topic that emerged from the thematic analysis.)

This research focussed on the knowledge, understandings, and experiences of teachers and, for that reason, is placed within the interpretative paradigm. The data were captured using semi-structured in-depth interviews and common questions; the research was devised in such a way that data were gathered concerning the teachers' early life, schooling, training, career, teacher identity, religious upbringing, and spirituality. Some questions were specifically designed by the researcher to obtain views from the respondents about teachers and teaching in Islam. It was important to gain the trust of these teachers at a time of the increased scrutiny of the Muslim community in the United Kingdom. Therefore, these teachers were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality—and to implement these promises, pseudonyms have been utilized. Their life histories were audio recorded; each recording lasted between one and three hours and were transcribed at the earliest opportunity. Based on the information supplied by the participants, I recognize these thirteen Muslim teachers as a heterogeneous group.

As the researcher, this study allowed me to think dialectically on my own philosophy of education and to explore the positioning of my faith in this process. While working in education in state schools, it also provided me with the opportunity to reflect on my own life history and its relationship to my career and life. I believe that this study has potential value for teachers of Muslim faith and for others both inside and outside of the United Kingdom.

I serve inner-city schools in Birmingham as a governor—and consequently, I have seen firsthand the workings of schools and have experienced how setting strategic direction, policies, and objectives affects education. Currently, my involvement in education takes the role of a teacher educator as well. Through this, I have opportunities to visit schools across the city and beyond; as a result, I have established relationships with a range of teachers from various backgrounds, including Muslims.

Previously, I was employed as a primary teacher. Thus, I bring to the research process practical experience both as a primary teacher and as a teacher educator having both knowledge and understanding of the context in which these teachers operate and in which the research was located. (Having said this, I accept that their experience is not the same as my own.)

As a Muslim undertaking research into the lives and careers of Muslim teachers, I acknowledge my own stance and indicate that I consider Muslim teachers' experience and perspectives, including my own, to be important. The religious and faith dimension of teachers and the role it plays in their life remains an under-researched area. I tried to gain insights of their subjective experiences whether cultural or religious, from a faith-based perspective of my own. As a Muslim male teacher educator, I attempt to add such a perspective to existing literature through the exploration of thirteen life histories. These influences are being brought to bear upon the interpretation of the data; one caveat, however, is that I cannot identify unknown biases.[52]

The Findings

Positionality of Faith in Schools

There are many factors that contribute and influence in the process of making teachers who they are and what they do in school. Participants in this research were asked about the importance of faith in their work. From all interviewees, 'Anas was the only one to give precedence to his faith over his work:

> Well my faith is *more* [original emphasis] important than my work. My faith actually helps me to be a better teacher in many ways, which I've gone over. But yeah my faith is very important because if at the moment, with the problem with *Jumuah* . . . its come to the point where my faith is that important, I'm beginning to assess whether or not I need to make a change of some sort. Whether it's leaving the profession, leaving the school, seeking alternative employment that will allow me to not have to lose one or the other. . . .

In the experience of 'Anas, his school was inflexible in meeting his need for Friday prayers since, according to him, as far as he was aware "a Muslim man is told to basically put down tools on a Friday and go to the *masjid* to pray [and] return to work." For him, it is not "a difficult obstacle to

overcome" and claimed that "the problem is the organisation and the heads and the authority have not laid down any guidelines." Consequently, within such constraints, he is prepared to withdraw from teaching rather than compromise his faith duties.

> In contrast, Sawdah first sought clarification by inquiring:
>
> I'll try and be . . . is it what I teach or whether what I put first?
>
> She then revealed:
>
> I try. Well, most of the time work wins over faith I have to say, but it's still there, still I try and balance it all.

For the remaining teachers, faith was important in relation to their work although there were fundamental distinctions about its role. Five teachers considered their faith as an integral part of their work whereas one did not know and another regarded it a private matter.

Mu'adh, a Bangladeshi male, considered his faith to be "very important to his work." Daily prayers provide him with an opportunity to be thankful to God for the guidance and support in his life. Prayers also provide him with occasions to petition God for more assistance for his future career, and as such, he attributes success to his faith. Indeed, Mu'adh was doubtful if he would have achieved what he has been able to achieve so far without his faith. In practice, he is not hindered by the school in allowing him to fulfil his faith requirements, since although a prayer room is unavailable, his classroom is sufficient for this purpose. Similar significance was expressed by Zaid: "My faith is part of me so I suppose it goes wherever I go."

Beyond such personal positioning, faith is also reflected in the professional and social roles that these Muslim teachers fulfil in school. Accordingly, faith guides everything that some of them do in school, especially in the arena of interpersonal relations with parents, staff, and children. This is kept, by some, "in mind from the start of the school day until it ends." While these values are informed by the teachings of Islam their application is inclusive and not special for Muslims. Such is the case for Zaynab, a Pakistani female head teacher: although to her, Islam is the overriding system for moral and social aspects in school, she, nevertheless, ensures that everybody is treated "the way one likes to be treated." For Zaynab, a heightened awareness of her identity might be leading to a strong sense of agency[53] so that in a school with a high social deprivation index such values have helped her create a safe, happy, and harmonious place.

As teachers in state schools, although faith was important in their workplace, there appeared to be a clear distinction when it came to teaching children and matters of faith. It is as though the core self-perception, their faith, is used to think about themselves—and a malleable presentation of the self, being a teacher, is used to think about the curriculum in a given situation.[54] These teachers, it seems, had a mature and professional stance. Hafsah, a Pakistani female, for instance, was cautious and felt that teachers were conscious as to how much influence they could have regarding certain beliefs and whether teachers could bring faith into their practice since it was not encouraged by the school management. Apparently, her identity is being contested as she experiences tension between herself and institutional constraints; so, her professional identity is at the forefront of her work, and it would seem that over time, her identity has become invested in particular aspects or facets of her teaching role,[55]—for example, by contributing to collective worship in school.

Though it is evident that such teachers maintained their professional integrity, it did not mean that curricular enrichment, creativity, and teaching in a meaningful context was avoided. Conversely, some teachers, due to the fact that they had certain beliefs and values similar to the children they taught, coupled with their care for the children and their responsibility to them, felt that, perhaps, as teachers as well as being Muslims, it was more likely for them to draw more perspectives from their cultural and faith background for teaching.

However, after Ummu Salamah declared that for her faith was very important, I asked in what way this was. After a silence, she responded:

> Well when I'm answering a question, I'm always answering from the perspective of, you know, what have I've been taught by my religion, what is it that I accept about my religion? Erm. . . . You know. . . .

Finally, for Safiyyah, faith was a personal matter as reflected in the following quote:

> Well . . . if at work, I I'm just . . . a teacher . . . but my faith is something inside, y'know. . . . It's something . . . I am driven by it, but y'know. . . . and stuff. Basically, it's just a personal thing.

Reading her transcript shows that Safiyyah separates her faith and work. This means that in her teaching and to the children, she projects herself first and foremost as a teacher. However, in school when situations occur that relate to her personally, her faith is brought into action. For instance,

while talking about spirituality, she mentioned abstinence from alcohol and lotteries due to her faith.

That faith is important to some of these teachers in the workplace and the varied role it plays possibly leads Jabir to desire for its further recognition. Having stated that, for him "faith plays a great role." He

> needs the staff, the parents and the children to understand what I believe in, what my beliefs are. I want them and I need them to respect that not just myself but [for] others as well. I would like the staff to treat others and respect their beliefs, where they come from, from their background, their religions.

To summarize, their responses provide two main findings. There are signs of *substantive* and *situated* identities among these teachers so that a separation between teacher and person is delineated.

In terms of the importance of faith to their work, a spectrum was evident. At one end, as evident from 'Anas' views, faith is more important than work, while at the other end, work gained an upper hand over Sawdah. For the rest of the teachers, their positioning of faith falls along this spectrum and plays a distinct role for each.

The "Ideal Teacher" and Teacher Identity

In considering teacher identity, Andrew Pollard suggests that the first step is to consider the person we are.[56] According to him, this could be done in terms of social, cultural, and educational background; experience and qualifications; position; interests; and personality. In other words, these factors are constituents of a teacher's personal biography. Altogether they assist in the development of a unique sense of "self"—a conception of the person we are.[57] An individual's self-conception influences his or her actions and thoughts. It is well-known that for some people, their faith influences their self-understanding, and this means that it has an impact on their perspectives and behavior. Pollard's conception about teacher identity appears to dismiss the role of faith in considering personal identity. As exhibited in the narratives of this research, an individual's personal biography has a faith dimension, and that faith is a contributing factor in the development of a unique sense of self. Pollard continues to state that individuals may also have a sense of an "ideal-self" that they might want to become.[58] For some Muslim teachers, the ideal-self would be exemplified in Prophet Muhammad—that is, some desire to adopt his characteristics and wish to develop

as the type of teacher he was. Ummu Salamah, considering the global role of the Prophet, stated: "as for us Muslims, he was the best teacher for mankind." Perhaps, from a teachers' perspective, Aisha maintained that "he is *the* teacher and to emulate *his* [original emphasis] best practice. We should in theory be following his footsteps." Further, Sawdah, looks up to this ideal-self and, while recognizing her shortcomings, comments: "[I] feel guilty that I am not living up to it." These views show the manner in which they look up to Muhammad and their desire to emulate him.

The second set of factors relates to the roles that teachers occupy. The expectations about their roles develop from many sources—including head teachers, parents, media, and governors—and because these expectations are varied, teachers make independent interpretations and judgments about the most appropriate actions.[59]

A third dimension is a more dynamic perspective, which is brought to bear on the process of looking at teacher identity. Maggie Maclure suggests that people inhabit multiple perspectives on teacherhood and that identities can be argumentative, spoiled, or subversive depending on their various contexts.[60] Pollard, therefore, maintains that this postmodern perspective helps to challenge the simplistic, inflexible, and externally imposed notion of teacher identity by asking what it means to be "male" or "Black."[61] Similarly, religious commitment can impact the choices individuals make in relation to various activities they undertake both personally and professionally. In so doing, faith may influence their motivations and inner states of consciousness. This means that in understanding teacher identity, there is room for including their faith. Currently, there is a view circulating of what an ideal teacher is which is encapsulated both by research[62] and in government policy.[63] All these are critical constructions of teacher identity, which apparently do not fully recognize the inner dimension of teachers. In the United Kingdom, the tendency to advocate a "technicist" and "performative" model of teacher training—which focuses on producing teachers expected to deliver centrally prepared decisions that destabilize the significance of teachers as individuals having experiences, perspectives, insights, and personalities—has been criticized.[64] Stephen Ball has also considered the effects of educational change upon one's social identity and the struggle over the teacher's soul.[65] There are others who are interested in the inner life of teachers and how this relates to the effectiveness of schools.[66] All this suggests it is important to recognize the inner dimension of teachers, an essential element of which is their faith. Therefore, the faith dimension needs to be added to these constructions where appropriate.

Locating "Ideal Teachers"

Teachers enter their classrooms with various intentions, and they develop their understanding of teaching through reflection, professional development, and experience. In gaining an understanding of the life and thinking of these teachers, it was important to learn who they thought were their role models and ideal teachers so that their conception of being teachers became evident.

Peers as Models and Ideal Teachers. Some teachers view ideal teachers theologically and professionally as informing their educational thought and practice, and thereby, showing their deep-rooted ideologies. The research participants see ideal teachers in terms of their educational values, pedagogy, and career advancement. Zaynab, the most experienced teacher among the group, had multiple ideal teachers in her twenty-four-year career. Perhaps, this is a reflection of her vast experience, in which she may have been inspired by more than one teacher in several different educational contexts in the city. Juwayriyah was inspired by her French teacher who was teaching her English. She recalled:

> When I was in high school, the teacher, and I always wanted to be like him, because he was teaching us the right [way] and in a way I feel like I am doing it now because you know I liked how he was doing it and I am like him and the way he was teaching us.

As a child, she aimed to be like him, and his teaching methods have influenced her because she feels, as a teacher, she is modelling his practice in Birmingham. Both these examples show the significance of experience in the creation of ideal teachers.

Beyond experience, ideal teachers were seen in terms of the values the teachers attached to education. Those who, for instance, "valued children and recognized the importance of teaching" and "considered it beyond a mere job," and those who "were creative in their work" were deemed ideal teachers by Khadijah. Inspiring teachers were also those who were "willing to take on new challenges and were open to new experiences" and "most importantly they liked and loved to learn with the children." For Ummu Salamah, it included "someone who was not confrontational and set in their ways." Therefore, teachers, both Muslims and non-Muslims, who had these characteristics, inspire some of these Muslim teachers.

In locating ideal teachers, individual aspirations also play a role in what a teacher is able to learn from peers in order to achieve their personal goals. Such sentiments were shared by Aisha, who explained:

> I think I have very good strong role models within my school and in the environments I have worked in. . . . And what I tend to do is that I don't necessary have *one* [original emphasis] particular role model. I have and take from different people that are like that. I [am] also on very good terms with the deputy here and really she I suppose is the person that I would talk to and sound out and the assistant head. Those are the two people that if I had professional concerns or queries or I wanted directions for example in terms of what the next step is those are the people that I would talk to.

During our conversation, Aisha had stated that her deputy head was Black, which indicated that she was among an ethnically diverse leadership group. It is evident Aisha appears to be strategic since she determines what she wants from those around her for professional decisions, and she too has multiple role models.

Muhammad as Model and Ideal Teacher. I asked the teachers in the research project what they thought about Muhammad as a teacher. Religiously, Prophet Muhammad was, in their words, "obviously," a very important person. Those that had presented their previous teachers and colleagues as ideal teachers referred to Muhammad as a model as well. (Here, it seems, they are thinking about Muhammad as a model and others as ideal teachers.)

Considering Muhammad as a model in the general sense is unsurprising since he embraced numerous sociopolitical, spiritual, and educational functions, and thereby, he opened the possibilities for his followers to look to him from multiple perspectives in their lives—and in so doing, perhaps reflected his designation as an excellent model of the Qur'ān. His *life* [my emphasis] was considered to be the life that Muslims should be following because, as Mu'adh stated, Muhammad was

> a great teacher for the Muslim community. His patience, his leadership skills, his qualities, his communication with people . . . all of that is what we should be trying to instill into ourselves but unfortunately people within the wider society don't regard him as a model, as a role model that we should be seeing. For myself, I try to improve my knowledge and understanding by reading lots of literature, and I also try and follow some of the things that he has done in his life.

Mu'adh projects Muhammad as a model and a teacher and expects others to look up to him favorably. In view of some of the characteristics he finds relevant in the Prophetic-model, Mu'adh shows his continual personal

development by attempting to learn about the Prophet and, consequently, shift his existing knowledge to grow toward the ideal self.[67]

Role models, however, were not restricted to the teaching fraternity and the Prophet. For instance Sawdah included her parents and grandfather with her teachers.

That said, apparently five contemporary Muslim teachers have not specifically declared Muhammad as their ideal teacher. This means, some teachers consider Muhammad as a model in the religious and theological sense, while others think about him both as a model and as an ideal teacher in the educational sense.

Nevertheless, he was specifically mentioned as an ideal teacher by at least six teachers. As an ideal teacher, 'Anas, for instance, specifically mentioned:

> for me, and I think for most Muslims, is the Prophet Muhammad because even if you look at it from an objective point of view, the ideal teacher should be able to spread whatever they are teaching very quickly and easily. If you look at the spread of Islam, it is an ideal teaching. An ideal teacher leads by example. . . .

To judge his success from a teacher's point of view, 'Anas appears to be looking at Muhammad as an outsider. To do so, to draw parallels, 'Anas relied on professional skills and attributes required of contemporary teachers in England.

Further, as teachers, some of them specifically avail themselves of certain characteristics from this ideal teacher, which are applicable in their classrooms and in their professional work. Khadijah learns from him to a large extent "in terms of his mannerisms, self-restraint, and calmness." Safiyyah says teachers "need to be listeners and non-judgmental," like him. She relates to these qualities as she considers them to be "the requirements for her profession."

Some of these teachers find considerable comfort in the example of Muhammad during stressful times in school. This identification is not always easy; emotions rise in discussions of identity as an element of the self and indicate that the emotions teachers experience may alter possibilities in teaching and influence their professional lives and identities.[68] In school, whenever Fatimah feels low, she looks to Muhammad as an example:

> The way he talked, the way he faced challenges, the way he was so calm, the way he portrayed himself as [a] very patient person. So I look at him all the time and that is what really inspires me.

Perhaps, as reflected in her life history, this provides Fatimah with a vehicle to navigate through the constraints and anxieties of teaching, and shapes her view of herself and her role in the profession.

From a teacher's perspective, therefore, it seems Muhammad is considered as an ideal teacher and a model from educational, sociological, psychological, religious, and moral standpoints. His teachings and his characteristics are considered relevant for the challenges that some of them face as teachers and also how to conduct themselves in school. This indicates that Muhammad is not conceived narrowly by these research participants—that is, they do not solely restrict him to religious affairs.

Understanding the Meaning of "Muslim Teachers"

For one teacher, this research provided a first opportunity to reflect on the meaning of being a Muslim teacher. She had clearly not thought about this aspect of her faith and its role in her profession and career. During the interview, Sawdah stated:

> To tell you the truth, I've never really thought of it but after talking to you, I have been thinking about it. Initially I think my main thing was I'm a Muslim at home, but that's just me, and then [the] teacher was separate. *But* when I was thinking about it [after being invited for the interview], I think the last few months it's been coming together where I've been trying to be, not obviously preaching to everyone left, right and centre, but trying to make the way I taught and the way I was at school have more, you know, more of an Islamic influence.

Through this self-appraisal and self-reflection, she was probably able to consider her relationship between different aspects of her life both inside the classroom and outside it. This, thereby, apparently, resulted in improved self-knowledge.[69]

For another participant, the question, "what do you understand by the idea of a 'Muslim teacher'?" appeared obscure. Khadijah felt

> it was up to individuals because at the end of the day they are all just labels. They are more about how much of an emphasis an individual puts on their personality.

It seems she is suggesting that for the general public, being a Muslim may be a label but for individuals their Muslimness depends upon the extent to which individuals develop their personality in relation to the teachings of

Islam. Overall, it was not simple to capture a single conception of what the teachers understood by being a Muslim teacher, and they gave the impression that the meaning attached to being a Muslim teacher focuses on three levels: philosophical, literal, and functional.

A teacher spoke about the distinction between Muslim teachers in state schools and Muslim teachers in *madāris* (madrasahs). While both are considered teachers, perhaps, their training and their function have contributed to the creation of such a distinction. It appears that the dichotomy in understanding what a Muslim teacher is, is continued along religious and secular lines: "Muslim teachers" are related to *madāris*, and "teachers who are Muslim are related to schools." Such a conception of the teacher has been challenged by some Muslims and has led Nabi Ahmed Baloch and others to advocate integration.[70]

A few teachers interpreted the question literally. These understood a Muslim teacher to be someone who practiced Islam and kept the faith because this was what being a Muslim meant—that is, submission to God. 'Anas said:

> A Muslim teacher at the moment is, I suppose what would be understood as, anybody who professes to be a Muslim and has a Muslim name or unfortunately still, if you are not White, you are considered 'perhaps they are Muslim'. But there are Muslims who are White, who are of all various races. What I would see as a Muslim teacher is someone who is comfortable with their faith and can use it to the betterment of their pupils.

'Anas distanced the concept of race as a descriptor for Muslims, and he seemed to suggest that people look beyond Arabs and Asians and recognize Muslims as people from all races. In the context of teaching, 'Anas feels that faith is to be used in the service of the child.

At a functional level, a Muslim teacher was understood in the light of the role he or she played both in school and in the community. Hafsah thought that a Muslim teacher was someone who had "the religious values," and "who uses those values to develop the children as individuals," and "who practices those values and who could integrate into society successfully." In such cases, it seems, Muslim teachers were expected to use their beliefs, their understanding of their religion, and their ideologies that they have learnt from their religion to play a crucial role in presenting good role models for all children, especially Muslim children, within schools. In addition, according to Jabir, a Muslim teacher is one who conforms to the legal requirements and always teaches "the right stuff about life, about reli-

gion, about culture, about tradition." Such positioning of a Muslim teacher, in Jabir's understanding is inclusive of a moral dimension in the role of a teacher.

Most of these Muslim teachers are unreserved about the faith dimension of their identity and Khadijah "would be happy to talk about it in school, especially if colleagues were interested." Some years back, perhaps, such curiosity was interpreted by some Muslim teachers as a genuine search for knowledge and understanding. However, in recent years, it seems a shift has occurred in their thinking. Fatimah, for instance, talked about how questions directed to her about who she was, created a degree of uneasiness for her. Her self-understanding and image have altered in relation to the perception held by colleagues in school. She experienced an unmistakable shift in how she saw herself after the bombings in London in July 2005. In the category of teacher identity, White noted that identities were incomplete.[71] Fatimah, faced with constraints in her institution, was apparently influenced to adjust her identity by emphasizing religion as a positive aspect of her and this reflects the multiple nature of identity. She revealed:

> Nowadays when they ask, "Are you a Muslim teacher?" the incidents that have happened always comes in front of my eyes, and I just feel they are probably trying to relate me to one of those bombers.

Previously, on the other hand, while such incidents may have been irksome on a personal level, she now feels she is engaged with something more fulfilling due to her religion. Anuradha Rakhit,[72] Audrey Osler,[73] and Tansin Benn[74] identified challenges faced by Black, Asian, and Muslim women. The dynamics of gender and religion were significant for Fatimah in challenging stereotypes. She stated:

> Before I used to feel proud that I am, you know, a Muslim woman teacher because they always looked upon women as if they should be staying at home doing nothing and I am outside and I am kind of presenting Muslim women in a positive way. We can come out. We can teach. We can do things and it is not forbidden.

Considering the quote from another perspective, Fatimah appears to be contesting and projecting an argumentative identity—a device for justifying and making sense of her career.[75] In so doing, she gives the impression of weaving together religion, gender, and her profession to confront political, patriarchal, and racial attitudes.

From the responses of these Muslim teachers, it appears that the mean-
ing they attach to what it means to be a Muslim teacher is more complex
than would first appear. Their interpretation is context driven and is bound
within time-place constraints. First of all, there is a sense of understanding
a Muslim teacher in terms of being a teacher. While faith is significant, it is
a factor that informs their role and the values held by them. This sense was
captured by the words of Juwayriyah who stated: "A Muslim teacher is a
teacher like everybody else, only with a different religion."

Being a Muslim: Classroom and Pedagogy

Schools are places where political, educational, cultural, and religious val-
ues are transmitted, contested, and changed, and it is here that knowledge
and skills are gained and attitudes formed. In these arenas, understanding
what it means to be a Muslim in a classroom is meaningful as it gives
people focus around the power structures within which they are located.
Such views are also important to understand as teachers bring into teaching
their values and beliefs that serve as critical components of their classroom
landscape.[76]

Most of these teachers stated that being a Muslim teacher affected their
classroom practice. In the case of Ummu Salamah, since Islam is a way
of life, she felt that she "cannot detach the two." For her, it seems Islam
influences matters related to education and religion equally. For others,
religious responsibilities enhance professional duties to care for children.
Hafsah is an example of such a person. She finds that her "beliefs and
care for children and the responsibility as an individual as well as being a
Muslim makes it more [influential]." Such caring implies a particular per-
spective being taken in relation to professional identity. In both cases, in
addition to professionalism, a religious dimension is reflected as teachers
subjectively negotiate the demands placed upon them.[77]

Some teachers ensure their content is appropriate and avoid being in-
sensitive in response to children. Aisha, for instance, including herself as a
senior person in her school, stated:

> Everything that I do in the classroom I'm very conscious of who I am
> teaching. So, because we have children from a Muslim background I'm
> very conscious so that if we are doing "The Three Little Pigs," we, in an
> educational context, do not cause offence. We are very conscious of the
> curriculum and in terms of what we are delivering and the relevance of
> it to our pupils.

Beyond curricular issues, influenced by his faith, Jabir appeared to take a moralistic position by acting as a guide in the classroom. He claimed:

> I always tell the children what is right and what is wrong. I never take anyone for granted or anyone for advantage. I give them the best advice I can give with regards to the situation they are in.

Catherine Beauchamp and Lynn Thomas[78] have noted the emergence of empowerment that might result from a teacher's realization of his or her identity. In the case of Jabir, it is apparent that a heightened awareness of his faith identity is leading him to a strong sense of agency, and this has resulted in his playing a key role in shaping individuals.

For some teachers, faith is an important marker of their identity, and this permeates their interpersonal relationships. In the context of schools, the significance of good relationships between teachers and their pupils for successful learning is a recognized feature among educators. Zaid seemed to be fully aware of this and felt that being a Muslim affected his dealings but apparently not his methods:

> Yes, it does. I think it does because if you've got life experiences which you can share with the children, it's different. If you're coming from a culture or life experiences which have nothing to do with the children, you have to work a lot harder to make the lessons more interesting and build those relationships with the children. Not the lessons as much I suppose, its more building up a relationship with the children.

In understanding the process behind identity formation, an interesting response was provided by Khadijah. It demonstrated her transformation as she refashioned her position in school identities while she was adapting to varying perspectives in her classroom.[79] As a process for beginners, this phenomenon may not be evident at the start of their career, but it may grow as their experience increases. Such a dichotomy of the self may be abandoned or reduced altogether over time.[80] Khadijah, who had been teaching for five years, reflects such a shift:

> I think when I first started teaching I didn't acknowledge the fact that it [being a Muslim] did, but, I think it generally probably does because if I think about it, my identity and the way I behave is based on my faith, so my ideologies a lot of them are based on faith, so I guess that will come out but in a sort of not very overt way basically, just in a subtle way I think.

Such transformation has the potential of allowing her to position herself as a decision maker in matters related to teaching, and it shows that professionalism and faith identity can act at different moments in the life of a teacher.

Beauchamp and Thomas[81] draw attention to the idea of identity acting as an analytic lens for examining aspects of teaching. Safiyyah, when asked about the importance of her faith to her work, appeared to have separated the two by insisting that she was teacher and that faith was "something inside, driving her" and that it was "just a personal thing." However, when asked whether being a Muslim changed the way she taught, after a long pause, she responded:

> Err, I dunno. That's kinda difficult. [*long pause*] I suppose . . . I don't think—no—I dunno. Perhaps it does. I dunno. [*long pause*] I suppose it does . . .in a way. 'Cause I have, erm, [*long pause*] No. No, because it—no, I don't think it does. I have to think about that one.

Having been asked the question, her pauses are significant as they show her in a reflective mode, and this indicates that she may not have considered such a question before. The role of reflection is widely acknowledged for enhancing teaching and for developing educational thoughts and ideas. For Safiyyah, it appears that she has started to question the role of her faith in relation to her work. Participating in research has contributed to this process, and in so doing, reflection has been a factor in shaping her identity.[82]

The above analysis confirmed the positioning of faith by some of these teachers in relation to its impact on classroom practice. In turn, classroom experience is also a factor among many others, and this affects their work and career. When asked whether her classroom experience shaped her thinking as a Muslim teacher, after a brief silence, Fatimah reported:

> I think because I am a Muslim I feel that I should respect that if there is a majority of Muslim [children] I do touch upon other religions and other cultures because I feel that it's important for children to know about their [own] religion and culture and at the same time they need to understand why there are other religions.

Fatimah exhibits a strong sense of personal identity and personal value. Through this, in an educational context, she has changed due to her classroom situation, and she feels the need to negotiate what it means to be a Muslim learner and teacher in a pluralistic society.

A categorization has appeared above: for some teachers faith is all-encompassing, and it is explicit in their pedagogy; for others, faith is personal and relates to pedagogy implicitly, and for others it is an afterthought coming to the fore when prompted.

Conclusion

The life-history approach is well established in empirical research and is a useful means for studying the lives and career of teachers. Utilizing this method, I gathered perspectives on the life, work, and career of professionals, through the faith dimension of Islam. It has offered insights into the realities, complexities, and contradictions of human experiences and has given voice to Muslim teachers.

Some Muslim teachers attach various meanings to their faith in the context of their profession, and faith influences their teaching and life in many different ways. Through their participation in this research, some respondents have been provided with an opportunity to consider matters of faith and its relationship to their work for the first time. It has been a reflective exercise and has encouraged them to probe their thinking about the role of their faith and the impact that it has on their practice.

The respondents showed that they use their faith and profession as parts of how they define themselves. This sense of religious and professional identity is not exclusive to them; teachers from other faiths would surely also manifest in some respects a similar identity, and in others, a distinct identity. Some of these teachers foreground their faith in describing their identity, and others are comfortable to stress their professional identity. Thus, the relationship between faith and professional identity is a multi-directional one in which different situations give raise to different perspectives.

In view of the high esteem with which Prophet Muhammad is regarded by Muslims, I asked participants who they considered to be their ideal teacher. I received a lack of uniformity in their opinions. A range of ideal teachers was identified by them. Some of them look up to Muhammad as an ideal teacher and a model—whereas others consider him a religious model, while others regard him solely as an ideal teacher.

In the contested arena of schools, for some, being a Muslim affects their educational thought and practice. Some teachers unite religion and their career, thus showing that Islam for such teachers is a way of life. On the other hand, others are influenced by their faith to make decisions about their curriculum so that it is appropriate for their children and conducive to

learning. In fact, for some teachers, their religious responsibilities enhance their professional duties. One teacher was uncertain about the role of being a Muslim and the affect this has in the classroom.

Some teachers among them are able to meet their faith requirements through the guidelines provided by their faith. Guidelines from faith perspectives need to be understood by school leaders to assist teachers from all communities to be comfortable with their faith in a school environment.

Overall, their conception of a Muslim teacher is tied primarily to that of being a teacher first and foremost. Therefore, I could suggest cautiously that generally for these Muslim teachers in their educational settings in the United Kingdom, while the centrality of faith is significant in their lives, there does not appear to be a necessary transference of being a Muslim and having a faith position into being a teacher. It would appear that they are first concerned with teaching. Even though their belief and value system is informed by Islam, they maintain their own integrity and that of the children they teach by a clear demarcation between their personal faith and education.

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