Challenging Culture: Meeting the Career Education Needs of Muslim Girls

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Abstract

For many Muslim girls, decisions about career, opportunity and progression are closely intertwined with family, culture and religion. Choice is often mediated by a sense of collective belonging and responsibility, and this may far outweigh any individual aspirations for members of this group. Yet much career education material continues to focus on the individual, and is presented in a culturally neutral way. This brief article explores ways in which Islam generally impacts on the lives of Muslim girls, and argues that cultural understanding is essential if career education is to be both accepted and effective. The rationale behind the development of a career education pack focused on Muslim girls is discussed, an overview of the pack provided and potential challenges explored.

Career, culture and Muslim girls

There is much evidence to suggest that Muslim girls face significant challenges in western society. Not as a result of their own culture and religion, but often due to the expectations that are held by ‘others’, particularly those of the majority culture, as to how individual lives should be lived. Ed Solh and Mabro (1994) observe that:

‘Muslim women in the Western mind... all too often tend to conjure up a vision of heavily veiled, secluded wives, whose lives consist of little more than their homes, their children, and the other women in the harem or immediate kinship circle.’

(cited in Jawad & Benn, 2003:9)

As Muslim girls seek to find their own pathways in western societies, and learn to manage their lives in relation to an Islamic context, ‘they are having to do this in an environment where there is widespread racism and, more specifically, mistrust of Islam and Muslims’ (Nielsen, 2003). This mistrust and ignorance about Islam, public perceptions about the ways in which religion permeates and informs Muslim communities, and the ‘liberating’ zeal of some sections of the majority population who wish to ‘free’ Muslim women (Jawad, 2003), has a tendency to obscure the realities of Muslim life in Britain. This is not to suggest that 'some' Muslim women do not experience oppression, however to generalise this view and apply it to all denies, 'the relevance of issues such as the centrality of Islamic spirituality or Islam as an issue of identity to Muslim women' (Jawad, 2003:13; Barker & Irving, forthcoming).

Moreover, in many Muslim communities there is a cultural and collective cohesiveness (Parker-Jenkins, 1995) that attempts to transcend the imposed individualistic and materialistic values common to the west.

This article reflects the assertion by Parker-Jenkins et al. (forthcoming) that:

what is being argued for here is a right for all ethnic groups to be equal and different, to participate in the majority world, but not at the expense of their own collective sense of being, as reflected in their cultural and/or religious affiliations.

Putting culture into career education

In Britain, the trend in career education has been to focus on the provision of programmes that are universally applicable, centred on the needs of the ‘majority’ pupil population, and principally reflecting western values. This is evident in the national careers education curriculum framework (DEE & NACGT 2000), and the DOTS model developed by Law and Watts (1988) which still exerts significant influence. However, when generic career education programmes are developed and delivered for all, regardless of cultural diversity, two questionable assumptions can be identified. Firstly, that the needs of pupils will be best served by ensuring that all have equal access to the same curriculum and resources. Secondly, that the pupils themselves will be able to culturally translate their learning and the messages transmitted concerning choice, opportunity and progression. However, if this well-intentioned ‘colour blind’ perspective (Wrench, 1992) is to be overcome, career educators will need to be proactive in their consideration of the cultural dimension of career education, and how this may impact differently on diverse student populations. It will also be necessary for them to develop career education programmes, materials and practices that are appropriate and sensitive for use with pupils from minority cultural-religious groups, and ameliorate wider family and community concerns.
With regards to the career needs of Muslim girls in particular this is no easy task, and to simply assume that all career educators possess the knowledge, skills and resources to adapt existing programmes belies the complexity and depth of understanding that will be required. Muslim girls do not inhabit a static world, but are engaged in a continuous process of shaping and reshaping their individual and collective identity and sense of self (Barker & Irving, forthcoming). They experience competing cultural traditions and values, yet for many their post-school opportunities are shaped by family, community and culture, which in turn continues to be significantly influenced by religion.

Therefore, if career educators are to work effectively and meaningfully with this group of young people, not only do they require the teaching materials and resources that are culturally appropriate, they must also feel comfortable and confident when working with pupils who may hold values and beliefs that challenge their own. This requires career educators to gain some insight into Islam, an understanding of how women position themselves within local Muslim communities, and the creation of opportunities to engage directly with family members who are likely to exert particular influence over any choices to be made. Ibrahim and Arredondo (1986) argue that:

‘Understanding the client as a cultural entity implies an understanding of the clients' philosophy of life, beliefs, values, and assumptions in the context of his or her primary and secondary cultures and in the context of the larger social system... (p.350).

Whilst their discussion is concerned with the need for ethical standards in cross-cultural counselling, what they have to say is equally applicable to those working within career education.

**Shifting careers: delivering culturally sensitive provision**

In earlier research which explored the career guidance needs of Muslim girls (see Parker-Jenkins et al., 1999), we identified that much career education provision is based on western and Anglocentric views of the world that give primacy to the individual, often in isolation of any cultural context. From this work we developed a framework that sought to illuminate the position of Muslim girls, identifying three aspects that impact on 'being a Muslim' within contemporary western society:

1. that there are common influences which affect all clients living in a western society, whatever their own cultural and religious backgrounds;

2. that how clients are affected by, and interpret, these influences is unique to their own cultural setting;

3. that for each client individual characteristics, including the perceived relative importance of personal characteristics as against cultural-religious affiliation, act to influence them. (Irving et al., 2003:118)

It is the second premise that has informed our work in the development of the Muslim Girls' Careers Education Pack (Irving et al., 2003). Recognition is given to the profound impact of culture and religion on the ways in which many Muslim girls construct their present and future lives (see Barker & Irving, 2003). As Baroness Uddin writes in her letter of support for the 'Pack':

‘Acknowledgement of one's faith is acknowledgment of one's whole life... Any reference to 'culture' must ensure that it recognises the importance of parental and family involvement, as well as the possible impact of islamophobia which will inevitably arise in the workplace in later life'.

Islamic communities in Britain can be seen to exist on a continuum, with radical Muslims at one end who tend to have relatively fixed views, and at the other liberal Muslims who have primarily embraced a western way of life. As such, there are many families who occupy the 'middle ground' where career interests are understood in relation to Islamic belief, yet mediated by local cultural and community mores. Such families generally demonstrate a deep commitment towards their daughters' best interests whilst seeking to protect them and safeguard their futures (McIntyre et al., 1997). It is this particular (majority) group of Muslim girls' that the 'Pack' targets.

The development of the 'Pack' was funded by CIBT, an educational charity, and seeks to provide culturally appropriate career education materials that can be used in schools, within communities, or used in 'alternative' settings such as youth centres. It was devised and developed by a team of Muslim and non-Muslim career advisers, educationalists and academics. Advice was also received from a Muslim scholar to ensure that the material reflected an Islamic perspective; a number of head teachers concerning its applicability; and representatives from a range of Muslim communities with regards to its relevance. Key aspects of career education that were likely to encompass a cultural dimension were identified and located within a Muslim context. The 'Pack' therefore is comprised of four key components:

- Notes for career educators which provides a rationale for the pack, an overview of ways in which Islam influences the career choices of Muslim girls, suggestions for how the material might be utilised in a range of situations, a brief list of national contacts/organisations, and suggested further reading.

- Detailed lesson plans and comprehensive supporting materials for the following year groups:
this might result in Muslim girls feeling ‘segregated’, with non-Muslim pupils feeling they were ‘missing out’, or that Muslim girls were receiving ‘favoured treatment’. This issue is of particular importance as it reflects the whole debate around notions of differentiation and targeted provision. Such provision however has become tainted with a negative image, with the benefits of selective curriculum choice undervalued. Yet if the provision of differentiated curriculum is sensitively managed, responds positively to pupil needs, is optional rather than enforced, and is supported within the mainstream curriculum rather being regarded as a second-best alternative, it effectively extends pupil entitlement, rather than restricting access. Irving and Barker (forthcoming) suggest that potential misunderstandings can be overcome through the development of a whole school commitment towards culturally sensitive provision. To ensure that the benefits of this are made clear, career educators teachers, pupils and parents alike will need to be aware of why a differentiated curriculum is offered, supported through open and informed dialogue with all parties. Clearly there is evidence of this already happening with regards to those groups who are considered to be ‘at risk’ of social exclusion.

Challenges ahead

If the career needs of Muslim girls are to be met it will require career educators to revisit their philosophies, review their current practices, and reconsider the value of offering the same to all in mixed cultural groups. Benn (2003) comments that: ‘If respect and cultural diversity is to become a reality for children (MacPherson, 1999) it must first become a reality amongst the professionals’ (p.149). It will be essential to ensure that those working within the career education field actively create opportunities that enable them to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which Islam impacts on the lives of those within local Muslim communities. Being aware of our own values, and reflecting on how these influence our practice, will enable us to work openly with Muslim girls, their parents, and members of the wider community. This is also central to the development and delivery of culturally sensitive and focused career education material that is able to meet diverse needs in a discrete and appropriate way. Malik-Lievano asserts that:

‘Ethnic and cultural diversity should permeate the total school environment and the curriculum, the materials, the teaching methods, and assessment practices should reflect the cultural learning styles and characteristics of the students within the school community’ (2000:12).

It would be unrealistic to claim that the Muslim Girls’ Careers Education Pack, and the associated Guide for Parents and Family members will change entrenched attitudes and opinions. However the ‘Pack’ does make a positive contribution to the development of a socially just multi-ethnic curriculum that responds positively to
diverse needs in a culturally sensitive way. Further, by seeking to avoid any pre-judgement of future decisions that might be made, and involving the family in the career education process, the individual agency of Muslim girls is enhanced by encouraging active dialogue and engagement. Promoting cultural justice is a responsibility for us all.

References


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