

Challenging Culture: Meeting the Career Education Needs of Muslim Girls

Barrie A. Irving, Senior Visiting Research Fellow, Department for Career & Personal Development, Canterbury Christ Church University College

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 (DfEE & 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 Udin 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 islamaphobia 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 CfBT, 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:

- Year 9:** Self Awareness
Decision making
Value of work
- Year 10:** Influences on career choices (2 sessions)
Qualities and skills
Who can help?
- Year 11:** Decision making
My rights
Coping with change

- A number of photographs/overhead transparencies along with individual profiles of Muslim women in a range of work situations that can be used as case studies to stimulate discussion within the sessions outlined. They might also provide role models that demonstrate career possibilities to Muslim girls/families, or be used more widely to support equal opportunities sessions within the curriculum.
- The 'Careers Guide for Muslim Parents and Family Members' can be used in conjunction with the career education programme, or as a separate stand-alone resource. This 'Guide' seeks to enable Muslim parents to be informed about, and become involved in, the career education process that their daughters are experiencing. Along with an introductory letter written by the Muslim members of the development team, and a number of suggested strategies as to how the 'Guide' might be used, four leaflets are included that cover the following:
 1. Choosing Year 9 options
 2. Work experience
 3. Completing and continuing education
 4. Options after 16 in training and employment.

Early indications emerging from an evaluation of the Pack suggest that this is a valuable and welcome resource as there is currently little career education material available that is sensitive to the needs of Muslim girls. Those who have facilitated learning opportunities using various sessions from the Pack report that the material has served to stimulate the pupils, enabling them to relate the specific career-related issues to their own personal experiences. Whilst some non-Muslim facilitators felt concerned that their lack of knowledge about Islam would hinder their ability to deliver effective sessions, this has been overcome by others by utilising the pupils own understanding of their religion, how it impacts on their culture and how it informs family values. Through this, non-Muslim facilitators have been able to explore issues and encourage their students to engage in career discussions directly with their families.

A key aspect of concern identified by staff in schools where Muslim girls were in a minority related to the potential 'singling out' of particular groups. It was felt

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

- Barker, V. & Irving, B.A. (2003). Challenging Educators. Culture Specific Careers Programmes: A Human Rights Imperative. Paper presented at *UNESCO Conference on Intercultural Education*, Jyväskylä, Finland, June.
- Barker, V. & Irving, B.A. (forthcoming, 2004). Career education for Muslim girls: meeting culture at the crossroads. In Barrie A. Irving and Beatriz Malik (eds.), *Critical reflections on career education and guidance: promoting social justice*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Benn, T. & Jawad, H. (2003). The Way Forward. In Haifaa Jawad and Tansin Benn (eds.) *Muslim Women in the United Kingdom and Beyond: Experiences and Images*. Leiden: Brill.
- Department for Education and Employment & National Association of Career Guidance Teachers (2000). *Better Practice: practical strategies for developing excellence in careers education*. Oxford: DfEE/ NACGT
- Ibrahim, F.A. & Arredondo, P.M. (1986). Ethical standards for cross-cultural counseling: Counselor preparation, practice, assessment and research, *Journal of Counseling Development*, 64, 349-352.
- Irving, B. A. & Barker, V. (forthcoming, 2004). Career education for Muslim girls: developing culturally sensitive provision. *Australian Journal of Career Development*, Vol.13, No.1, Autumn, 2004.
- Irving, B. A., Barker, V., Jones, S. & Woolmer, D. (2002). *Muslim Girls' Careers Education Pack*. Reading: The Centre for British Teachers. The pack, together with individual or bulk copies of the Careers Guide for Muslim Parents and Family Members, are available from Prospects Sales and Marketing, Units 49-51, Trinity Enterprise Centre, Furness Business Park, Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria, LA14 2PN.
- Irving, B. A., Barker, V., Parker-Jenkins, M. & Hartas, D. (2003). Choice and Opportunity: Supporting Young Muslim Women's Career Aspirations. In Haifaa Jawad & Tansin Benn (eds.) *Muslim Women in the United Kingdom and Beyond: Experiences and Images*. Leiden: Brill.
- Irving, B. A., Barker, V., Parker-Jenkins, M. & Hartas, D. (2000). 'In Pursuit of Social Justice: career guidance provision for Muslim girls in England', *Revista Espanola De Orientacion Y Psicopedagogia*, 11(20), 173-240...
- Jawad, H. (2003). Historical and Contemporary Perspectives of Muslim Women Living in the West. In Haifaa Jawad and Tansin Benn (eds.) *Muslim Women in the United Kingdom and Beyond: Experiences and Images*. Leiden: Brill.
- Law, B. & Watts, A.G. (1977). *Schools, Careers and Community*. London: Church Information Office.
- Malik-Liévano, B. (2000). 'Intercultural Competencies and Strategies in Guidance: Tools for Intervention in Schools', Paper presented at IAEVG Conference: *Guidance for Education, Career and Employment. New Challenges*. Berlin.
- McIntyre, D., Bhatti, G. & Fuller, M. (1997). Educational experiences of ethnic minority students in Oxford. In Ben Cosin and Margaret Hales (eds.) *Families, Education and Social Differences*. London: Routledge.
- Nielsen, J. S. (2003). Foreword to Haifaa Jawad & Tansin Benn (eds.) *Muslim Women in the United Kingdom and Beyond: Experiences and Images*. Leiden: Brill.
- Parker-Jenkins, M. (1995). *Children of Islam: A Teacher's Guide to Meeting the Needs of Muslim Pupils*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.
- Parker-Jenkins, M., Hartas, Dimitra., Irving, Barrie A. & Barker, Vivienne. (1999) *The Careers Service and Young Muslim Women*. Sheffield: Department for Education and Employment.
- Parker-Jenkins, M., Hartas, Dimitra & Irving, Barrie A. (forthcoming 2004). *In Good Faith: Schools, Religion and Public Funding*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Wrench, J. (1992). New Vocationalism, Old Racism and the Careers Service. In Peter Braham, Ali Rattansi and Richard Skellington (eds.) *Racism and antiracism: Inequalities, opportunities and policies*. London: Sage in association with The Open University.

Correspondence

Barrie A. Irving - email: birving@pcconnect.co.nz