Chapter 8
Challenging Islamophobia: a whole-school approach

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Setting the context
Islamophobia is not a new phenomenon. Anti-Muslim sentiment can be traced back as far as the early Middle Ages. The first crusade to ‘recapture the Holy Land’ began in November 1095. The Reconquista (re-conquest) of Spain in 1492 ended the ascendancy of the Islamic world.

However, as a current dominant form of the new racism based on perceived cultural differences and hostility to an undifferentiated Muslim identity, Islamophobia has a more recent history. Certainly the West’s response to the Iranian revolution and the appearance of three million Iranians on the streets of Teheran welcoming the return of the Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 marked a turning point in the discourses associated with anti-Muslim ideology (Abbas 2005: 13).

The publication of Salman Rushdie’s Satanic Verses a decade later in 1989 is another key moment in the proliferation of anti-Muslim rhetorical strategies in Britain. This work of fiction became a site of struggle between the Muslims who saw it as a blasphemous insult and liberal (and not so liberal) defenders of the right to freedom of expression. Public protests against the novel allowed the media to circulate a new image of ‘intolerant Muslims’. Nearly a decade later again, the Runnymede Trust identified the motifs of this new rhetoric (Runnymede Trust 1997).

Firstly, as with the creation of all others, Islam is seen as homogeneous and static: there is only one Islam and it never changes. Secondly, there is seen to be a politico-military agenda behind Islam: the ‘colonisation’ of the West motivated by an implacable opposition to Western values and mores (Abbas 2005: 12). Next, the report noted, this perceived colonisation of Western space allowed it to be implicated in the anti-immigration discourse exploited by both New Labour and the current coalition government in order to manage discontent over the invasion of Iraq and, more recently, labour market insecurities.
All this was fuelled in the wake of 9/11. A narrative that had increasingly moved centre stage now came to dominate the media. A violent ‘mad’ fanaticism, intolerant and virulently anti-democratic, was now the lens through which to view Islam. This representation became known as ‘political Islam’ or simply ‘fundamentalism’ (Seymour 2010: 80). The sub-narrative of the so-called ‘war on terror’ has been with us now for over a decade. It has become the discursive context for national policy initiatives. The discourse of community cohesion, a Labour government response to the Northern riots of 2001 sparked by National Front attacks on local Asian communities in towns such as Bolton and Bradford, re-presented the victims of racial violence and marginalisation as the agents of their own victimhood (Cantle 2001). These representations have been counterposed by the Runnymede Trust with more open and fluid approaches.

Eight distinctions between an open and closed view of Islam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distinctions</th>
<th>Closed views on Islam</th>
<th>Open views on Islam</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monolithic/diverse</td>
<td>Islam seen as a single monolithic block, static and unresponsive to new realities</td>
<td>Islam seen as diverse and progressive with internal differences, debates and development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separate/interacting</td>
<td>Islam seen as separate and a) not having any aims or values in common with other cultures b) not affected by them c) not influencing them</td>
<td>Islam seen as interdependent with other faiths and cultures a) having certain shared values and aims b) affected by them c) enriching them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inferior/different</td>
<td>Islam seen as inferior to the West, barbaric, irrational, primitive, sexist</td>
<td>Islam seen as distinctly different, but not deficient, and as equally worthy of respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enemy/partner</td>
<td>Islam seen as violent,</td>
<td>Islam seen as an actual or</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>aggressive, threatening, supportive of terrorism, engaged in a ‘clash of the civilisations’</td>
<td>potential partner in joint co-operative enterprises and in the solution of shared problems</td>
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<td>------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manipulative/sincere</td>
<td>Islam seen as political ideology, used for political or military advantage</td>
<td>Islam seen as a genuine religious faith, practised sincerely by its adherents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticism of West</td>
<td>Criticism made by Islam of ‘the West’ rejected out of hand</td>
<td>Criticisms of ‘the West’ and other cultures are considered and debated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rejected/considered</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discriminating</td>
<td>Hostility towards Islam used to justify discriminatory practices towards Muslims from mainstream society</td>
<td>Debates and disagreements with Islam do not diminish efforts to combat discrimination and exclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>defended/criticised</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamophobia seen</td>
<td>Anti-Muslim hostility accepted as natural and ‘normal’</td>
<td>Critical views of Islam are themselves subjected to critique, lest they be inaccurate and unfair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as natural/problematic</td>
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This approach has begun to influence education policy and many local authorities have encouraged schools to take the ideas implicit within it seriously. As with all national policy initiatives, its translation into policy and practice at school level has been highly uneven. Nevertheless, at a conference on *Challenging Racism* called by South Gloucestershire NUT in February 2010 the lack of guidance and clarity led participants, many of whom were young teachers, to register their feeling that they were unprepared for the challenges of confronting Islamophobia in the classroom.
Enlisted into the rhetoric of community cohesion, teachers wanted to ‘do something’ but were lacking models of what a curriculum that engaged with the racism of school communities might look like, particularly in majority white schools. They were unsure about how to respond to the practicalities of challenging rising Islamophobia. Was a multicultural approach sufficient or was a more explicit anti racist curriculum needed? And was a different pedagogy needed?

**Models of learning**

Models of learning that dominate in schools are never static, though there are many surveillance systems in place to keep an eye on ‘standards’ and ensure that not too much innovation or creativity takes place. Nonetheless, alongside the ‘common sense’ of input-output models of curriculum ‘delivery’ that are currently hegemonic, there is a ‘good sense’ that sits alongside and which is often felt by teachers to be at odds with the officially authorised technologies of teaching and learning (Gramsci 1971: 325–334). This is because most teachers have a broader understanding of what constitutes education than the increasingly narrow conception that is held by the Department for Education. For as teachers learn to negotiate a world of economic turmoil which is resulting in mass unemployment (and recent figures estimate that youth unemployment stands at 22 per cent for 16 to 24 year olds) the debate about education’s purposes is dominated by ideas of employability.

In the light of this, the official ‘basics’ curriculum sits inside teachers’ minds alongside ideas that education should:

- be about the whole person
- enable participation, transformation and enjoyment of the world
- focus on the critical testing of received doxa
- develop collaboration in testing solutions to real moral and practical issues.

This good sense, developed out of the collective experience of working in the day-to-day reality of schools, challenges the individualised consumerist model of education with one in which the learner is the agent of learning in a reciprocal process with peers, community and teachers. As Freire notes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1996: 60–61), this approach begins to deconstruct the dichotomy between educator and
educated and challenges schools to become sites in which both staff and students are learners and everyone educates each other through their interactions with the wider community.

One school that has attempted this model of learning is Abbeywood Community School (formerly Filton High School) in South Gloucestershire. There, a group of teaching and non-teaching staff initiated a network called Alternative Futures. The group came together after the tsunami hit South East Asia in 2004. Many students were concerned about the effects of the tsunami and were interested in scientific, practical, moral and political issues, thrown up by the disaster. In January 2005 the school decided to suspend the curriculum for a week and all faculties planned lessons to allow each year group to enquire extensively into the event. The decision also offered students an opportunity to devise responses to the tragedy.

On a number of occasions since then, the group have consciously set out to offer a different model of learning, one that does not just reconfigure the space and time of established school routines but tries to recast a hands-on social justice model of curriculum design linked to topical issues. In 2009 the school organised a cultural diversity and anti racism fortnight for Year 9 students.

**Themed learning**

Themed learning is where a school works with learners on identifying a thread - in this case racism - and subject areas work towards a whole school outcome. Faculties plan a series of lessons that will empower students to engage with the outcome.

During the fortnight, the maths department created a resource called *The Human Race - the Migrant Species*. This allowed students to examine the history of migration, not just of people throughout time but of how mathematical concepts travel from one culture to another and become assimilated into our thinking. Students were then asked to examine the following statements: ‘Too many immigrants are coming into this country’ and ‘Our country cannot afford to help immigrants’. Students used data to critically examine contentious issues and based the examinations on facts, not preconceived notions. In this example, multiculturalism and anti racist education are seamlessly embedded in a real context determined by all learners, including teachers.
In her evaluation of the fortnight Year 9 pupil Louise said, ‘I always thought there were lots of immigrants coming to this country, but I see that was wrong.’ Pupils calculated that the difference immigrants make to our population is 0.03 per cent. Without helping them to develop such critical faculties however, our young people will remain susceptible to media representations of important social justice issues. To combat this, social justice teaching tries to go beyond surface presentations of issues, precisely because one way in which injustice works is by masquerading as an unchangeable *common sense* beyond the reach of critical scrutiny. Here we saw critical numeracy working on received opinions and allowing students to explore the interconnections between what they learn in school and the beliefs about what is happening in the outside world. They are moving towards a grasp of the totality, even though this process is one that never quite reaches fulfilment, as society is dynamic and understanding it can never be co-terminous with it. The process allows learners to reposition themselves and base alternative decisions on their changed relationship with the world.

This work was complemented by the science department who worked on deconstructing the concept of ‘race’ as a non-scientific term by exploring the idea of genetic variation. This undermined the secondary school division of learning into faculty compartments. Themed learning allowed the school’s specialists to work towards a rare common goal.

The English department took an empathetic approach to migration. Using photographs taken by journalist Guy Smallman, students explored the journey of a Polish migrant who is shown to be living in appalling conditions in a wood outside a small English town. Information about how immigration benefits society and the reasons why people change country was fed to the groups, who then began to try to create the story of the man in the photographs. Collating and analysing evidence and trying to begin to synthesise the material to represent the underlying moral and practical issues created a link between the lives of the learners and the realities of migration inside and outside the classroom.
The next stage facilitated this when the groups were given information about shortages of workers in some of Bristol’s key workplaces such as hospitals and schools. Even in the English lesson, using critical numeracy broke down the hermetic seals between subjects and challenged the fragmentation of knowledge characteristic of secondary schools. This is important as learners’ ideas are not just shaped by the experience of these arbitrary knowledge divisions; they are further mediated by the media, which reports news in a similarly unconnected way. As a consequence of this students offered new solutions to staff shortages in different labour markets and in moving away from conventional responses, they identified barriers a migrant might have in taking up employment. Finally, students were invited to write an autobiography as if they were the man in the photograph. Constantly returning to the emotional and social consequences of migration allowed the whole person to be stimulated.

Like others before it, the project attempted to embed learning in real, often controversial issues. As Freire might have argued, here learning is contextualised or embedded in the concerns of the communities of the school. However, as this is an ‘offline’ simulated reproduction of reality (Wrigley 2006: 92), a bridge is being built between everyday issues and more abstract concepts such as justice or equality. This process affords pupils an opportunity to reflect and allows them to reposition themselves so they can work out their own values and beliefs. During this project one Year 9 pupil, Tasha, commented:

I liked learning about other people. I didn't like Polish people before - they're foreign. Now I know they're not trying to take over. I like the work we've done in English because writing about someone's life makes you realise how hard life is for immigrants. They don't just get everything they want, like benefits and a house, like we think they do.

To make projects even more real we move out of the four walls of the classroom and bring in people involved in the struggles we are exploring to talk and work with students. Previously, the school looked at climate change and had an expert witnesses’ day. One of these was Elaine Graham Leigh representing the Campaign against Climate Change.
Learning also takes place offsite. During the Climate Change project in 2007, Year 9 pupils were offered a choice of trips: to learn how to measure a community's carbon footprint; to work with community artists to make fashion items out of ‘rubbish’; or to cook in Bristol's top organic restaurant. These were a kind of community internship, however brief, where students took with them the question set by the themed learning event: how can we make the world a safer place? The theme was linked to organisations trying to solve or navigate practical solutions to climate change in the community. Again Freire’s idea of praxis - of learning related to informed practice - is evident here.

During the cultural diversity fortnight we also decided to work with Love Music Hate Racism (LMHR). Martin Smith and Weyman Bennett, officers of Unite Against Facism, led workshops on music and migration. On the last day LMHR put on a concert for all the school's pupils with Get Cape.Wear Cape.Fly and Bashy. Young people’s learning is linked to their sub-cultural emotional capital. This has now become an annual event.

**Tackling Islamophobia**

Our latest material on *Tackling Islamophobia in secondary schools* takes this model of learning even further. One of the key challenges when delivering a cross-curricular project is assessment. Our project is designed to challenge traditional summative assessment methods whereby progress is measured against assessment criteria and a grade or level is awarded. In place of this, students will work towards a set of values (listed below) which form the outcome, mediated and negotiated beforehand with the learners themselves.

At the start of the unit, students explore what these values mean and which of the values they consider of most importance to their own learning. This enables each student to set personalised learning targets, using the values as the basis for this. At the end of the unit students have the opportunity to reflect on how well their learning experiences have enabled them to achieve their targets.
The nine values were established by workshop participants at the *Tackling Islamophobia* conference and reflect the expertise and viewpoints of a wide range of educators. The learning intentions for each learning opportunity mirror the traditional ‘learning objective’: each gives a summary of the intended learning that will enable creativity in teaching practice. There are two sets of resources: one for primary and one for secondary. The secondary materials are focused on Year 9.

The Year 9 learning opportunities begin with a pair of introductory sessions in which students explore key contextual issues via a ‘social simulation’ and set ground rules for learning. The subsequent learning opportunities are grouped into three key curriculum areas:

- English and Media
- Art, Citizenship and PSE
- Maths, Science, MFL and PE.

The grouped learning opportunities may be taught in sequence or simultaneously across subject areas.

As the introduction says:

By the end of the learning opportunities, students will:

- be more active citizens
- be able to distinguish between discrimination and victimization
- have explored the idea that everyone is equal and of equal value
- be able to challenge and test those beliefs which they think to be self-evident
- be able to confidently challenge Islamophobia
- want to do as they would be done by
- feel a greater sense of solidarity and community cohesion
- have established a common identity amongst themselves
- be able to evaluate the reliability and accuracy of news media and be able to recognize bias.

The learning sequence begins when Year 9 students are brought together to play a ‘card game’. This simulation activity is designed to enable students to experience living in an imagined social construct inhabited by people belonging to three main age groups: 11–18, 18–34 and 35–60. Students are divided into groups and each group is
given a different identity and a different set of ‘life cards’ depending on the group’s identity. The ‘life cards’ represent the necessary resources (money, food and shelter), services (education, healthcare and leisure facilities) and rights (justice, freedom and equality) which enable individuals to live successfully in society. Each group’s aim is to secure enough ‘life cards’ so that every member has one of each type and secure access to the fundamental resources, services and rights for living well. From each of the groups, one student is also selected as the Guardian who helps to frame the context for the simulation.

After the initial setup and introduction, the groups are given the opportunity to interact; their aim is to negotiate and trade their life cards. However, during the simulation, the Guardians will introduce a number of different scenarios which will affect the context in which students can negotiate and trade. These scenarios are designed to resemble real-life scenarios that may affect certain ethnic, religious and social groupings.

After each scenario has been played out, the Guardians will close trading and groups will be asked to reflect on their position and speculate on why they succeeded or failed to secure enough life cards for every member of the group. Finally, the debrief session allows teachers and students to explore the real-life context for the scenarios faced by groups (South Gloucestershire NUT 2011).

After the two contextualising sessions, students and teachers can take two different routes through the lessons. One approach taken by a London secondary school suspended the curriculum for two days and taught the lessons consecutively. Here the students experienced a themed approach to the learning, one that broke down the boundaries between subjects and enhanced the process by which the developing skills and knowledge were transferred and embedded.

The underlying methodology of this approach is as important as its content. Another approach could allow for the subject areas to use the lessons provided to extend learning outwards and explore the issues in more depth. Which route is taken should ideally be decided in dialogue with the students. The redirection and refocusing of
learning at the request of the learners is central to dialogic pedagogy (Freire 1996: 148–153).

The conference also wanted to support the primary classroom and materials were produced and collated for Year 4 students. The primary learning intentions of these resources are:

- to engage learners as active and expressive participants
- to raise awareness of values and perceptions
- to stimulate reactions and responses to some significant issues about Islamophobia.

The Learning Opportunities also develop a number of key skills from the primary phase including: asking and answering questions; speculation; taking on a role; exploring different interpretations of text and images; identifying an author’s viewpoint; expressing personal opinions and beliefs; and the development of paired, group and class discussion skills.

At the heart of this learning sequence is a series of lessons that aim to support students in deconstructing homogeneous representations of religious and ethnic groups. For example, one lesson uses a series of fairly controversial statements like ‘Chocolate is bad for you and should be banned’ as a basis for getting students to practise agreeing and disagreeing in a calm and respectful manner. Based in experiences and assumptions that students can identify with, the lesson moves into more political statements like ‘All Muslims are…’, which allows the group to explore diversity based on their own experience.

**Reconstructing pedagogies**

It should be clear that these materials offer support for teachers who would like help with a challenging social justice issue such as Islamophobia. The pedagogy draws much from Freire but also Vygotsky.

Freire was concerned to challenge the banking model of teaching in which knowledge is ‘deposited’ in learners’ minds (Freire 1996: 53). It follows from this model that deposits have to be calculated. In most of Western education, this has meant assessment procedures fixated on measuring a learner’s progress using spurious and
often wholly misleading grading systems that in the context of public examinations are then subject to normative criteria after the raw scores have been produced. According to the proponents of this model of education, *assessment for learning* is merely a secondary evaluative instrument that focuses learners on outcomes rather than processes. (Even this is largely ineffective as today’s C grade criteria, for example, even if mastered by the learner, may not get them a C because ‘too many Cs’ have been scored and normative recalculation recurs.) Vygotsky articulated the same point: ‘To implant something in the child is impossible’ (van der Veer and Valsiner 1993: 331). The aim of teaching is to enable certain cognitive processes and create the conditions for learning.

Therefore any attempt to examine the teaching of social justice inevitably raises the dilemma of assessment. Many schools currently use a version of assessment for learning ostensibly sourced from the work of Black and William (1998). It is worth recapping the key points of this work to see how far much current practice deviates from its original aims. The pamphlet argues for:

- the provision of effective feedback to pupils
- the active involvement of pupils in their own learning
- adjusting teaching to take account of the results of assessment
- a recognition of the profound influence assessment has on the motivation and self-esteem of pupils, both of which are crucial influences on learning
- the need for pupils to be able to assess themselves and understand how to improve.

Interestingly, the group’s research also indicated that teachers focussed greater ‘attention on marking and grading, much of it tending to lower the self-esteem of pupils, rather than on providing advice for improvement’ (Black and William 1998: 5).

After being formally adopted by the National Strategies in 2002, *Assessment for and of Learning* turned into a top-down procedure, in which students are shown grade criteria in order to peer- and self-assess, rather than a process in which they
themselves explore collaboratively what success looks like. This has reinforced what the Assessment Reform Group thought was both a key concern and problem of much existing assessment: its fixation on grades. Such an obsession becomes demotivating for students who are unable to achieve key grades like C or a level 5.

Here we have a good example of how the oppressive pedagogy of teacher-led drill-test-grade now sees the child adopting the role of teacher. The learners themselves assess their work using criteria established by exam boards outside of the learning context. The view that assessment could be motivating if the learner was in control of the criteria has completely vanished.

As a secondary resource, *Tackling Islamophobia in the classroom* allows students to establish the assessment criteria in the early stages of the learning journey. For instance, in the third lesson students are told that they will be assessed ‘against a set of values’ rather than a set of grade criteria. Nevertheless, the values are not externally set. For instance, a diamond 9 activity allows the students to determine collaboratively what those values are. This comes full circle at the end of the themed learning experience when they select evidence from the work they have completed to demonstrate success in revealing the values they identified in lesson 3. The whole process is in the hands of the learner with the teacher establishing a collaborative methodology that creates the conditions for learning.

After the initial scene-setting episodes, the lessons address how representations of Muslims affect our attitudes and opinions towards various aspects of cultural identity. In the English and media lessons students explore the complex issue of fact and opinion by analysing emotive language in tabloid newspapers. By the end of the lesson they are prepared for rewriting the story in a more positive register. From being passive consumers of certain representations of ‘Muslims’, students deconstruct the language and presentational devices to evaluate the decisions editors have made, and eventually become active creators of new representations.

Further lessons on challenging stereotypes follow which prepare the students for a lesson where they test out certain so-called self-evident beliefs. Teachers have expressed anxiety over such challenging moments but the ground-setting lessons
forestall these concerns. The lesson begins by getting students to allocate adjectives to a series of photographs of people who they later find out are all Muslims. In one school students were surprised at the images as they did not conform to their expectations. The lesson becomes more sensitive when students look at photographs of people who died on the day of the twin towers attack and read profiles of the victims from the New York Times. Many students are shocked to find out that Muslims died in the towers and the lesson ends with a discussion which focuses on the following question: ‘Do we expect certain behaviours from Muslims and why?’

Some teachers have reported that the power of this activity lies in students unravelling static and homogeneous representations of Muslims. This opens up a space for diverse representations of others to circulate. Others have reported that the dominant view of Muslims is so enduring that changed perceptions are only momentary.

The later Science lessons reinforce this approach. Students are buddied up with an anonymous email friend in another school and informed that they will not at first be told what the cultural identity of the person with whom they are communicating is.

Students then record a series of data about themselves from hand span to food tastes and send the information to each other. After receiving the data, students try to identify similarities and differences in the data and attempt to predict what their buddy is like. After this, groups look at ‘harder’ scientific data and measure such things as heart rate and reaction times after taking in caffeine. After collecting, sending and receiving the data, they set up a webcam and try to identify each other from the data they have collated.

The Maths lesson develops this theme of manipulating data to test self-evident beliefs and uses these skills to explore how data about population is represented. The learning culminates when students select evidence from the work they have completed to demonstrate success in revealing the values they identified at the beginning of the project.

This is a long way from what goes on in most secondary schools. Many have experienced difficulty in continuing the push towards themed learning even though all
evaluation of the themed fortnights indicates a decrease in student discipline issues as measured by the schools’ behaviour for learning policy and despite the high cognitive level of learning.

Perhaps this is why so many schools are moving to at least regular one-day themed learning events or days when the normal fare is not on offer. Another South Gloucestershire secondary, Bradley Stoke Community School, has a Day 16. Every sixteenth teaching day the school offers different learning experiences to the regular curriculum. Abbeywood Community School has humanities days every term.

The desire to break out of the straitjacket will increase as the move towards even more standardised testing and increasingly competitive league tables puts pressure on schools to accept the status quo, rather than take their learners on a journey that links learning to justice and to participating in transformative practices in the communities they serve. It is in this contradiction, between external government direction and the ‘good sense’ of schools and teachers, that a new orientation on social justice can emerge. It will be difficult. It will also become increasingly necessary if education is to become relevant to our learners and their needs.

Further reading:
The South Gloucestershire NUT teaching materials, *Tackling Islamophobia in the classroom*, are available to download at:

https://local.teachers.org.uk/templates/asset-relay.cfm?frmAssetFileID=9488

Tackling Islamophobia in the Classroom by Anna Brooman in Education for Liberation Journal Vol 2
INSTEAD website http://www.instead.co.uk/islam.html

References
South Gloucestershire National Union of Teachers (2011) Tackling Islamophobia in the Classroom. Bristol: South Gloucestershire NUT website