

# MUSLIM MOTHERS

AND THEIR  
CHILDREN'S  
SCHOOLING

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# Preface

In this book I set out to present contemporary narratives that relate the lived reality of Muslim mothers to a readership involved in the education and welfare of their children. To communicate, where a void exists. For those genuinely interested in hearing marginal voices, those who recognize the impact family has on students' wellbeing, the personal narratives I present are the frame on which all else is hung.

I approach the subject from an unconventional place: as a practitioner in Adult Education, an English teacher, writer, member of a faith community and, of course a mother – competing roles depending on place and time. As hard as one might try to draw boundaries between professional and private lives, reading candid passages in the works of educational scholars confirms a truth – not universally acknowledged – that the personal and professional, public and private, are never really separate. So this Preface makes no attempt at aloof professionalism or objectivity, but tries rather to communicate the *raison d'être* of this book.

My impetus to write the book has evolved gradually over the past decade as I moved among my many roles. While delivering Family Learning programmes I encountered mothers from many minority backgrounds, heard and observed aspects of their mothering and their children's schooling. In certain parts of areas of deprivation, the mothers were predominantly Muslims from the Asian subcontinent. Our frequent interactions sustained and increased my interest in their relationship with their children's schools. Beneath my professional identity lies two decades of working both voluntarily and freelance on projects with Muslim mothers and teenage girls. Be it for faith-related programmes or parenting workshops, such experiences meant sharing their challenges and dilemmas on a regular basis. Peel that layer away and my personal world as a mother, with three children educated in the state sector, has entailed countless conversations and opportunities to be involved with schools as a parent and parent-governor. I revisit these starting points in relevant parts of the book and present them here as a context to my multifaceted and subjective research.

My Masters study – *Social Justice and Education* – motivated me further. I returned to university 20 years after I gained my postgraduate teaching qualification and had the opportunity to explore the literature and concepts of this discipline. Combined with my grass-roots, professional experiences of a decade earlier, this area of study gave me the idea of

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researching mothers. Public discourse about Muslim women – and by extension mothers – and inaccurate articles and documentaries that speak in absolutes, pressed me on. As a Muslim mother myself, there were many questions I wanted answers to. Surely there is space between the ivory tower and the gritty work as a practitioner to accommodate one's *own* reality as a point of reference?

This book opens a window on the thoughts, struggles, contributions and lives of mothers who are absent from public discourse. I hope its insights facilitate a nuanced understanding of home–school relations. I hope also that it will give researchers, policymakers and those working with Muslim families a path into new territory. And that once there, the blurred view of Muslim mothers will come into focus. A perspective on the subject is the best outcome I could hope for from a book like this, which does not set out to prove or disprove a particular theory.

It is true that there is a growing body of research *about* Muslim women, but we seldom hear *from* them. The need to improve communication and understanding between Muslim parents and those teaching their children, is the guiding principle of my research. Communication has multiple meanings, depending on the structures within which it takes place. Recognized channels exist to encourage a free flow of relevant 'news' in schools: electronic, paper, phone, websites and the yearly set appointments. Yet some types of communication still exist only at the margin, in an unnamed, grey silhouetted area not signposted in the school prospectus, nor accounted for in an Ofsted category, an area that is difficult to define or capture in one image. What do we call the space where teachers ask parents questions 'off the record' at the threshold to their classroom at the end of a day? What do we call the space where parents who don't want to go through official channels to express their concerns, stop you on your way into your car, at a school fete, in a supermarket, to tell all? How do we define these spaces and modes of communication? Such questions have motivated and at the same time troubled me and made me wonder why these spaces exist in the first place? From my own experience I would argue that they grow when there are too many barriers – real or perceived – between the school and the parents.

This space also comes about because of fears and assumptions, which often turn out to be unfounded. Thoughts and issues not readily discussed publicly are nonetheless important – in some cases especially. When a teacher wants to sound someone out about whether a particular attitude is faith related or culture related, there is no manual or policy document to help them, and these off-the-record spaces become sites of learning and bringing

people together on a long-term basis. At its best it is a site of inclusion, dialogue and mutual respect – these are values one hopes it will engender. In reality, school is often a site of mobility, where some stereotypes are reinforced and lines of segregation creep in from outside.

I conclude this Preface with an illustration of the personal/public binary. The following vignette captures my experience delivering an inset in a London primary school. The inset was on using RE resources from Key Stage 1 and 2 to teach Islam.

## Lost in turnips?

*Two hours into the staff inset and the presentation was coming to an end. The condensed, tightly packaged account of the main beliefs, festivals and ideas for contextualizing the Qur'an and Ramadan had been delivered through the PowerPoint, resources and intermittent dialogue. As one does at the end of a session, I asked:*

*'Any other questions, we still have a bit of time?'*

*It was a full catch: with several questions on anticipated themes – protocols about using the Qur'an in class, the two Eids, prayer rituals, and so on, but one question stood out. A teacher who hadn't spoken before raised her hand from the furthest point of the semi-circle, cleared her throat and proceeded:*

*'I take a YR2 class and we were doing some food tasting. I'd sent letters home to say what we were doing ... but there was this one kid who said he was told not to touch anything – and he didn't, I mean he wouldn't. So, I wanted to ask ...' she shuffled forward on her chair, lowered her head, as one does before delivering bad news, and asked: 'Can Muslim children ... like can they touch vegetables? I mean is it alright, or aren't they supposed to?'*

*I repeated her question for those sitting at the other end of the semi-circle – and to make sure I had heard it correctly. Amongst the answers and observations racing through my mind, I began my answer, suspecting that this was another case of 'lost in translation' on the part of the child. It was 'lost' on the teacher too.*

*'Yes', I replied, 'Muslim children can touch vegetables, and pulses, and grains, and just about every edible thing on earth if the need arises.'*

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*But I had to say more.*

*‘Growing up with two other languages as well as English, this seems to me like a case of a young child mistranslating something their parent has said. Maybe mum or dad made an arbitrary comment, in Arabic, let’s say, not to touch anyone’s food at school, or not to eat just anything someone gives you at school, which filtered through a 6-year-old’s head into a rather odd sounding: “I’m not allowed to touch any food”.’*

*In my head I heard some of the daily phrases my mother uses and the absurdity of trying to translate them. I continued:*

*‘I know, when I think of phrases from Bengali and Urdu, if I translate them literally, they’ll sound odd – translation’s complex at the best of times. But I can assure you, there has never been a problem of touching vegetables in the Muslim past, nor is there in the present nor will there be in the future.’*

*She smiled and nodded her understanding. But something inside me shifted, from optimism to reality: is this where we’ve arrived? How did we get to a stage where a child’s faith identity is so alien that the most normal of norms invites a question like this?*

That morning reminded me of a friend’s story about being invited to visit a primary school class as a ‘guest’ from a different faith group. As she made her way down the corridor, looking for the classroom, she heard a teacher’s voice from a doorway: ‘The Muslim’s arrived, the Muslim’s arrived, children.’ One will never know what preparation went on beforehand, but the children asked revealing questions, as the guest sat on the hot seat to answer: ‘Do Muslims wear shoes? Do Muslims have sofas? Do Muslims eat chips? Do Muslims brush their teeth?’ The last one proved the most interesting: the guest, as well as being ‘the Muslim’ was also a dentist. Wryly she lifted her coat and showed them her trainers: ‘Erm, do these count as shoes?’ she joked with the children. Where would these questions sit in the debate about ‘nature’ or ‘nurture’? Do children have an inbuilt ability to ‘other’ or is it coming from somewhere else?

And thus my premise for this book: to reduce the gap, to shift – if that’s possible – educators’ perceptions, which if left can cause alienation and otherness to grow. Misinformation is one thing. But as time has gone on, the otherness has become a void filled with whatever is in the air at that particular time.

I have sought to bring into the educational sphere the diverging and reinforcing voices of 53 mothers from various ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds – some professional, some not, some educated, some with limited literacy. My aim is to offer an insight into their positions. I hoped to facilitate research and practice about Muslim children and their families. Inevitably these voices, like any voices from a group, can only be ‘samples’. Nowhere do I claim that they are representative of all mothers, or all Muslim women, or even their ethnic group. If there is one unifying factor in the group of participants who willingly gave me their time, it is this: they all care about their children’s education and all cared enough about the schools they attend to talk to me for the purpose of improving communication.

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*I'm a Muslim and a mum ... and there's a responsibility of not just raising children but raising them in a certain way, so we have a lot more expectations on ourselves for this life and the next.*

*(Nilofer)*

Personal voices for public spaces; mothers talking about education and school. In essence, this is what this book is about. The content is based on empirical research, which is prioritized above theoretical debates. I present 53 mothers' narratives here to share hitherto unheard experiences and thus create a vocal bridge between them and the school world.

I have used their narratives as a platform to extrapolate themes because I want to present their authentic voice. In *Writing the Motherline* (2006), the relationship between mothers and their daughters' educational trajectories relies primarily on the former's accounts. O'Brien and Sawandar explain why they chose to do their study this way:

... to be human is to be interpretive. Searching meanings from inside out captures the hermeneutic or interpretive understanding of people's life experiences, viewing reality through the lens of the participants and generating ideas and information through their own voices. Thus the linkages of objectivity and lived experience, intersubjective construction of meaning, and identity formation are articulated and illuminated.

(2006: 15)

In the voices heard throughout the chapters, the internal perspective of the women I interviewed is prioritized over popular debates about what constitutes a family, or about the socially constructed institution of motherhood (Abbey and O'Reilly, 1998; Ruddick, 1989; Lazzare, 1976). For readers who want to explore such angles, there are three decades worth of scholarship. By contrast, motherhood as an experience – as an act of 'becoming' – has, according to motherhood scholars, been marginalized in research. Yet there *is* a steady flow of research into their lives. Hollway (2015), for example, constructs motherhood as 'an ontology centred around becoming' to understand what happened for the 19 women in her study who become mothers.

In Chapter 1 I discuss the centrality of parents and the family in a child's educational development – in the widest sense. I also position mothers in research. I explore the policy contexts relevant to the study of mothers for whom gender, faith, ethnicity and socio-economic status are potential sites of distancing and othering in the public domain. The concept of intersectionality thus enters the discussion as I look at multiple sites of marginalization and 'argue for an understanding of how intersectional forces and discourses shape individual and collective experiences of motherhood' (Veazey, 2015: 8). Veazey concludes that 'motherhood is therefore a rich case study for looking at the way social locations intersect, interact and change'.

My rationale for exploring the experience of a group of mothers according to their faith rests upon two facts: first, their children constitute the largest minority faith presence in UK schools – ONS census figures show that 8.1 per cent of all school-aged children in England and Wales are Muslim (Sundas, 2015) – and if we are to understand their backgrounds, we need to engage with and understand those who are central to their lives. Second, this group receives a disproportionate amount of negative press. An anomaly exists: a void of self-representation amidst a vortex of troubling articles and media. In Chapter 2 I wrestle with such issues and present the scriptural evidence, to establish how motherhood is understood from a Muslim faith perspective.

Theoretically it is 'parents' who are in partnership with their children's school. In this book, I look into the partnership between mothers and school, choosing to highlight mothers and not fathers because research has consistently shown that 'parenting' refers overwhelmingly to the work of mothers across ethnicities and class. This is not to diminish the important contribution fathers – who have a deep sense of responsibility to their children – make, but globally the mother is the primary caregiver in a child's upbringing. This is the most important reason for focusing on mothers, although there are more.

I raise the matter of positionality again in Chapter 3, in which I introduce the 53 mothers of approximately 160 children. The chapter also details their educational levels, professional status, involvement in voluntary work and the 'work' of raising a family. In today's society it is ironic that doing such work equates to doing nothing – to 'being lazy' and 'economically inactive' – but any perceived negligence or failure in such 'work' brings heavy scrutiny and sanctions from every sector of public services. Although the mothers in my study are grouped together by their faith, their identities are, on the one hand, specific but on the other hand they are what makes the collective, collective. Gilroy captures this anomaly



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succinctly: ‘Above all, identity can help us to comprehend the formation of that fateful pronoun “we” and to reckon with the patterns of inclusion and exclusion that it cannot but help to create’ (Gilroy, 1997: 302). Chapter 3 contextualizes the mothers’ voices within their ethnicity, demographics and educational status.

Chapters 4–7 are assembled around the themes that arose from my interviews with the mothers. It was there that they exercised their agency, interpreting my questions as they wished, taking discussions along lines that meant something to them and using – as they did in the focus groups – peer dynamics to probe and challenge each other. Accordingly, Chapter 4 begins with their take on their own identity in relation to how they feel they are viewed. It also considers their understanding of what education means to them. This underpins their expectations of the education system and together the two strands inform what they prioritize when making school choices for their children. On the micro level, Chapter 5 presents the mothers’ experiences of their general communication and relationships with the school: surveillance, playground politics and a reflexive exploration of involvement with the school community. Chapter 6 details their interactions regarding academic matters and focuses on specific curriculum areas that present a challenge because of a difference in certain principles and values. Sex and Relationships Education (SRE), parents’ evening and behaviour-related communication were the aspects most commonly spoken about. These form the themes I discuss in Chapter 6. In closing, Chapter 7 broadens out the discussion to address themes that arose in several narratives that I had not been expecting. These relate to children’s wider educational context.

The breadth of subject matter covered here is shaped entirely by the participants’ responses during our interviews and the focus group discussions. The chapters are constructed according to their choice of anecdotes. So the book seeks to capture who these 53 women are in the context of educating their children.