

Muslim Parents Association (MPA) of High Wycombe Minutes of an education seminar, at Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College (BCUC) on Wednesday 15 September 2004

Attendees: 40 people were present, including County & district Councillors, Mayor of High Wycombe, former mayors, head teachers, teachers, governors, Wycombe Education Department officials, members of MPA and other professional guests, who were all treated to hot food and refreshments.

Apologies were received from: Mrs Marion Clayton (BCC Cabinet member for Education BCC), Sue Imbriano (BCC Education Dept), Dr Ambreen Shah, Mrs Lorna Caldicott (head of Cressex School) Sharafat Ali, Farikh Mirza, Cllr Mrs Lesley Clarke (Leader WDC) and Cllrs Galbraith, Wassell, Appleyard and Mahboob Hussain,

Welcome and Introductions

Cllr Rafiq Raja, chairman of MPA, welcomed the guests and speakers to the seminar. He thanked the hard work put in by all involved and BCUC and Chaudhry Shafique, for providing a very suitable venue.

This was followed by a Quranic recitation in Arabic and English by **Imam Sahibzada Ghulam Jeelanie**.

Cllr Raja briefly introduced the issue of educational underachievement (with some notable exceptions) amongst Muslim children, who predominantly are of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin. He added that the causes of underachievement include: English as a second language, inherent racism in the education system, discouragement and low expectations from school staff, lack of participation of Muslim parents in their children's schools, and pupils feeling alienated. He explained that the MPA aims to act as a bridge between the Muslim parents and schools by raising the issues and increasing involvement of parents in their children's schooling.

Educational Issues Facing the Muslim Community in High Wycombe

Chaudhry Mohammed Shafique (CMS), head of Equal Opportunities at BCUC, was introduced as the first speaker. CMS was involved in setting up the MPA, which has now been highlighting educational underachievement amongst local Muslims in the Wycombe area for several years. He emphasised the importance of education for the economic prosperity of the country and linked the individual educational attainment with employment opportunities.

The importance of education in Islam was highlighted by a couple of examples from the ahadith of Prophet Muhammad (sallallahu alayhi wasallam), eg, the practice of freeing of war captives in exchange for them teaching Muslims to read and write, and also to acquire knowledge even if it meant having to go to China.

The GCSE results show that the Chinese, Indian and White communities did well, achieving 70%, 60% and 51% A-C grades, respectively, compared with only approximately 40% in the Pakistani/Bengali community.

Factors contributing to local underachievement in Wycombe include:

1. Social class issues, which apply to all communities, eg, deprived disadvantaged neighbourhoods with lower expectations and achievements.

2. The Bucks Grammar school selection system, which has the potential for lingual bias due to the style of questions in the 11+ tests.
3. Cultural/ethnic factors, which are shared with other groups, eg Afro-Caribbean community.
4. Conflicting parental/cultural pressures from the community and school, this can lead to psychological stress and disorientation.
5. Language skills, with many pupils starting school with English as a second language.
6. Perceptions of identity, especially after 9/11. Muslim pupils need to be able to feel part of the school community, and Muslim parents need to move away from the need to “go back home” mentality.

The Relationship between Funding and Underachievement

Dr Katy Simmons, Chair of Governors at Cressex School, in her address explained how Cressex School is truly an international school, with approximately 10-15% Afro-Caribbean and 60% Muslim intake of Asian origin. As a local citizen, she wants to live in a mixed community where job prospects are based on education (not on racial origin).

“The 11-plus system is unfair” as it appears to benefit the better-off. Also, by looking at the pupils in Grammar and other secondary schools, one realises that the system separates on racial lines, with proportionally more whites going to grammar schools. The ‘Brown Judgement in the USA had stated that “separate can never be equal”.

Two years ago, Cressex School, along with other schools, had a funding crisis. Schools that had the largest deficit budgets also had larger ethnic populations. For example, Hatters Lane School, now Highcrest School, had to be revived by extra government money through the Fresh Start programme.

The pupils at Cressex School have many skills, with some speaking up to 5 languages. The school received funding from the DFES through *Excellence in Cities*. Although the Education Authority appeared to attempt to cut funding by a similar amount, this was resisted. The extra funds were used for training staff to work with ethnic minorities, to understanding community diversity, develop language skills, and addressing cultural needs, eg, provision of prayer spaces.

The need for suitable mentors or role models for Muslim pupils, especially young men, was emphasised.

We can learn from good practice in other parts of the country. A book “Thwarted Dreams” about education of young Asians in Bradford provides many lessons, the key being to listen to pupils.

Also, Muslim parents need to become more involved by becoming school governors, and by asking elected members and County Hall about selective education and deficit budgets.

A phrase used by disabled activists, “we don’t just want equal access but equal outcomes” is just as valid in this context.

There are many local schools here that achieve above national average scores – this is mainly due to white children performing well. Considering that the majority of well-paid jobs require 5 A*-C grades, a disproportionate number will be taken by them, considering that only 20-40% of Asian children are achieving 5 A*-C grades. The bigger issue is therefore, the gap of approximately 30% between the lowest and highest achievers.

We need to come together and work on a common focus to tackle this issue.

Guest of Honour

Prof Iftikhar Malik*, a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, who teaches International History at Bath Spa University, was introduced by the Chairman. The professor presented himself as a historian, a teacher for 30 years and a parent for 27 years. He discussed the need to share ideas, highlight issues and work on solutions.

He argued that it was not easy being a Muslim, especially after 9-11, with Muslims in the news over crises in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kashmir and Chechnya.

Importance of learning

The first revelation to Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him [s.a.w]) was “Iqra”, which means “Read”, ie, was directly linked to education. Even the Qur’an is called the ‘Reading’. Muhammad (s.a.w.) was unlettered as he was raised as an orphan, and therefore, placed an emphasis on learning. An example of the importance of learning is that war captives were offered freedom by the Messenger of Allah (s.a.w.) in exchange for them teaching 10 people.

Examples from History

Whilst Europe was still living in the Dark Ages, Muslims setup many centres of learning all across the globe and acted as a bridge between Chinese, Indian, Greek knowledge, thought, science and literature and western learning. If there had been Nobel prizes at that time, Muslims would have won them all!

When the 11th Century Seljuk sultan, Malik-Shah, asked his Wazier, Nizam al-Mulk, to use his resources and time to plan and establish strong defences, instead of spending the money on the military, he set up many universities, the famous Nizzamiyah schools of higher education, throughout the empire. This became a useful resource as the graduates from these centres of learning became the bureaucrats for the expanding Seljuk Empire and even for the invading Turks.

People of many faiths, including Jews and Christians, came from all over the world to study at the Muslim centres of learning and to use the libraries at places like Toledo and Cordoba, which held 2.5 million books in the 11th century.

Muslims made such a huge contribution to education but sadly overtime the Muslim civilizations lost such vigour. For example during the colonial period, Muslims retreated to the madrassahs as they were concerned that Muslims were losing parts of their empire, in India, Egypt and the Ottoman caliphate. However, some assimilated British education, with one Indian Muslim being the first Muslim to write a book in English in the 1780s. Others like Afghani argued for a synthesis of Muslim and Western traditions like that in Muslim Spain. However, the British considered many of the Muslims, the previous ruling class in India, as rebels and did not want to give them authority. This led thinkers like the poet Mohammad Iqbal to argue for the reconstruction of Islamic thought. His proposal for Muslims to regenerate themselves as political entities in order to liberate themselves from colonisation and rediscover Islam led to the creation of Pakistan.

More recently, others like Dr F Rahman have made a significant contribution to Muslim thought and want to bring a change in society via learning and education.

Present day issues

At the present age, young people here and abroad have become marginalised and stressed due to the media focusing on the extremists rather than on the general Muslim masses who are making valuable contributions to society. This has led to a feeling of indifference, intolerance and even feelings of aggression. However, the Muslims generally show a mature response as seen following the banning of hijab in France.

It is concerning that ethnic community surveys are focusing on the underachievement amongst Pakistanis/Bengalis, and becoming a weapon for groups like the National Front. **We should look at our achievements rather than become obsessed about underachievement.** For example, the depth of education in Bosnia is a living example that Islam, and an educated Muslim populous, is not foreign to Europe.

Solutions

- The education of Muslims, in particular children and women.
- The empowerment of our mothers, wives, daughters and sisters through education and increased participation in Islamic activities.
- Increase role of mosques as educational centres

- Mobilise the silent majority of Muslims who are doing such good work and communicate the good works via the media
- Increase politicisation of Muslims &
- Learn how to reconnect with our children

By reflecting on the fallout of 9/11, Muslims may come up with answers. Maybe the renaissance of Islam will come from the West.

Questions and answers followed the end of Dr Malik's talk.

The meeting ended with a vote of thanks by **Bari Malik**.

* **Professor Iftikhar H. Malik** MA (Oxford) MA (Punjab) PhD (Michigan State) FRHisS.
Biographical Note:

Professor Iftikhar H. Malik, a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, teaches International History at Bath Spa University College, Bath. Earlier, from 1989 to 1994, he was the Quaid-i-Azam Fellow at St. Antony's College, Oxford. Dr. Malik has written 12 books, several monographs, 70 research papers and more than 200 review articles. His areas of research are mainly South Asia with special reference to Muslim politics and Pakistan; Muslim communities in the West and U.S.-Muslim world relationship. Some of his books are listed as follows:

- Islam and Modernity: Muslims in Western Europe and the United States* (London, Pluto, 2004)
- Islam, Globalisation and Modernity: The Tragedy of Bosnia* (Lahore, Vanguard, 2004)
- Jihad, Hindutva and the Taliban: South Asia at the Crossroads*, (OUP, 2004, in the process).
- Culture and Customs of Pakistan*, (Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 2005)
- Religious Minorities in Pakistan* (London, Minority Rights Group, 2002)
- Islam, Nationalism and the West: Issues of Identity in Pakistan* (Oxford & New York: St. Antony's-Macmillan Series, 1999)
- State and Civil Society in Pakistan: Politics of Authority, Ideology and Ethnicity* (Oxford & New York: St. Antony's-Macmillan Series, 1997)
- U.S.-South Asian Relations, 1940-7: American Attitude towards Pakistan Movement* (Oxford & New York: St Antony's – Macmillan Series, 1991)
- The Continuing Conflict in Kashmir: Regional Détente in Jeopardy* (London, RISCT, 1993)
- U.S.-South Asia Relations, 1783-1940: A Historical Perspective*, (Islamabad, Area Study Centre, 1988).

His research papers have appeared in various international journals including *Modern Asian Studies*, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, *Asian Survey*, *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, *The Round Table*, *International Affairs*, *Asian Affairs*, *South Asia* and *Economic and Political Weekly*. The BBC, Sky, ITV, Channel 4, CNN and the Asian networks frequently interview him. From September 2001 to January 2004, he has given 330 interviews to numerous international radio and television channels and newspapers on Afghanistan, the Kashmir dispute, Indo-Pakistan crisis, Iraq, Turkey, U.S. foreign policies, British politics and the EU. Since 1997, he has been leading an annual seminar at the **Royal College of Defence Studies**, London. He has offered seminars and papers at Cambridge, Oxford, Chatham House, King's College, LSE, EIAS (Brussels), SOAS, IDS (Sussex), Wilton Park (Sussex), Heidelberg University, Institute of Ismaili Studies (London), Royal Commonwealth Society, Columbia University, Smithsonian Institution, Jawaharlal Nehru University, the BIISS at Dhaka, Beijing's Islamic Association, Sarajevo University and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.