This paper explores the influences underlying the inequalities in educational progress experienced by Pakistani-heritage Muslim students in the small city of ‘Newminster’. It is presented against a background in schools and colleges where Muslim students are monitored for their vulnerability to radicalisation. In the media, the advocacy of Islamic values is frequently associated with risks of extremism.

The literature offers a wealth of explanations for the persistent inequalities in attainment among different minority-ethnic groups, from which the voices of the pupils themselves are almost entirely absent. The research question addressed is:

‘What do young Muslims of Pakistani heritage in Newminster consider to be the main influences upon their educational progress?’

In this study, young people offer their own, often competing, explanations of distinctive aspects within the GCSE attainment data, including their rapid progress over the previous decade. A particular focus is the small gap in attainment between those eligible for free school meals and their peers, which contrasts with the dominant explanation of underachievement (see, for example, Strand (2014)).

The principal sources of data are extended discussions with groups of Pakistani-heritage young people supplemented by interviews with parents, and a formal survey conducted by the young people among 165 of their peers. In analysing the variety of data generated by this mixed approach, the paper draws upon the analytical framework of Bourdieu, in particular, the concept of ‘habitus’. The paper engages with the methodological dilemmas of a white researcher conducting research with a community to which she is an ‘invited outsider’, and the broader challenges of attempting ‘participatory’ research.

The findings indicate that the Muslim young people in the study have a strong sense of habitus and religious identity that transcends the divisions of social class. They contend that this fundamental aspect of their identity exerts a positive influence on their educational progress. At the same time, they are actively engaged in habitus transformation. This process drives their educational aspirations but involves personal cost, dilemmas and encounters with barriers constructed by the wider education system. Their insights support a call for further consultation by researchers and practitioners with marginalized young people, in order to develop a shared understanding of the complexities of their own educational progress.

Reference

Strand, S., 2014, ‘Ethnicity, gender, social class and achievement gaps at age 16: intersectionality and ‘getting it’ for the white working class’ Research Papers in Education 29:2 p131-171