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Shams Ogunmuyiwa, Chief Executive Officer and co-founder of Iconic City Ltd with extensive experience in housing management and business development in UK and Africa. He is also a Customer Service Consultant and trainer in Capacity Building and Leadership Development. He has undertaken various multi-disciplinary roles including Teaching, Publishing, Marketing, Pharmaceutical and Housing. Shams has a penchant for long vision, clear mission, process development and people motivation.

As a Project Manager, Shams was headhunted for the multi-million-pound expansion of an independent pharmacy into a chain of pharmacies in Oxford. He further oversaw the pharmacies' operations, staff management, Customer Service Management and Pharmacy Contract Compliance Regulations, etc for four years. He still consults for independent pharmacies across Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire.

His business development expertise has benefitted several UK businesses. His previous experience in line with his passion, though diverse, centres around the application of Project Management, Marketing and Communications solutions within Housing and across both public and private sectors. Shams is a graduate of Linguistics, English Language & Literature. He also completed Cambridge University's CELTA Course. He is a Public Relations practitioner, Project Manager, Pharmacy Compliance Specialist, Customer Service Consultant and Housing Management Specialist.

In his leisure, Shams is a relationship management counsellor, public speaker and mentor, HIV/AIDS De-Stigmatisation activist and a social-entrepreneur.

PREJUDICE AND IDENTITY: EXPERIENCES OF BLACK MUSLIM TEACHERS

BY MUSLIMA ADELANI

In this essay, I consider race, class, and gender in the experiences of Black Muslim female teachers. Three teachers' experiences, including my own, reveal how Black Muslim teachers in Britain encounter prejudice and discrimination.

EXPERIENCES OF A FIRST-YEAR TEACHER

As a proactive, determined, newly qualified teacher in 2015 searching to secure a steady income, I opted to work as a supply teacher on a long term contract. This is different to being employed directly by the school authority. Supply teachers work through agencies which act as the employment intermediary between a school and a teacher who is deemed as a casual worker.

I went through a rigorous interview (I was the fourth teacher presented by my agency) for the position of a Year 1 teacher and passed their criteria. When I was hired, I agreed to work on the condition that I will be supported for my NQT year, which the school was pleased to accept.

However, trouble loomed from my first day of teaching at the school. While some parents were welcoming and were willing to work with me, I encountered many hostile and very abrupt parents. I later learnt that I had become the topic of vicious gossip on the parents WhatsApp chat - a platform through which some of the neutral parents' minds were changed by the nasty stories they spread about me. Some of the misconceptions were that I wasn't a good teacher, that I shout at children, and that the children are scared of me. Instantly, emails from parents flooded the school while some came in physically to lodge complaints about me. My classroom turned into a place of observation where parents were brought in to see my interaction with the children. Each visit, albeit without my knowledge and consent, yielded the same outcome as each time the parents came to my class, they met their children fully engaged in activities. The students only acknowledged their parents' presence by waving at them and carrying on with their activities. "He's having fun" and "she's immersed in her activity" were examples of parent's comments each time they visited as they witnessed the connection and relationship that I formed with their children.

To say there was excessive pressure on me would be an understatement. I was under constant pressure to prove my capability to the school management and to disappoint the hateful parents who constantly sought but didn't find flaws in what I did. I constantly demonstrated the required knowledge and professional skills in my duty, I taught as prescribed by the school's policy and was efficient and up-to-date in my NQT targets. In addition to the regular routine observations and learning walks, I had my first formal observation and passed. There was clear evidence that I knew what I was doing, the progress was obvious in books and children showed progress in their learning.

In my discussions with staff at the school, I realised that the two other NQTs (of Australian origin) were not subjected to the rigorous observations and visits like I was having because parents didn't object to their teaching. However, it was very difficult to accuse the school of any abnormalities as they could claim that all the observations were ways to support me. For the fact that I was doing very well in most strands of the Teaching Standards, I reassured myself that there was no basis of pinning an incapability label on me.

A two-day parents' evening was slated for December and the conversation with parents at the meeting was a perfect moment for my realisation and validation that my experience was just

the outcome of my racial profiling. A Black woman with a headscarf in a white middle class school. How daring! Four parents during the first evening apologised for displaying feelings of prejudice towards me. Two more opened up on the second evening. They all confessed that the WhatsApp information fuelled their bias, hence, their complaint letters to the school. However, having followed their children's learning, they realised how much their children achieved and were sorry for the way they'd treated me. I welcomed the sincere repentance and embraced their good, kind heartedness. It was awesome and I felt immensely relieved!

Those moments cleared whatever apprehensions I used to have. My goal was just to complete my induction and I sincerely put in my best, regardless of the hostility in the air. Although the challenges were so rife, I summoned the courage and determination to succeed and refused to validate the perception of the discriminatory actions meted out on me. So I just carried on as normal because I had won some parents to my side.

In January, the management team decided to change my mentor who, incidentally is a Black man who supported me when I was challenged. He was replaced by another Black lady for reasons that later emerged. In March, the second major NQT Induction observation was due. This time, the head teacher and my new mentor came to observe my lesson. During feedback, my mentor started to read the positive aspects of the lesson but the head teacher rudely interrupted thus: "What did she do right? That was not a good lesson." She then turned to me and declared, "You didn't teach properly hence, I cannot support your induction any longer, therefore, you have to leave!"

I was appalled to the point of laughing. I only laughed because I didn't want to cry from the effect of the rude shock. I entreated her to consider supporting me through an action plan since it was a first failure. Unfortunately, they had already made up their plans. Their immediate concern was to rid the school of the outsider who 'does not belong here' in their thoughts. The deputy head once jokingly remarked: "You belong to the inner Local Authorities like Tower Hamlets" in an instance when she commended my teaching. However, I didn't read any hidden meaning to that utterance until the head teacher's disclosure. She was insinuating that as a Black Muslim teacher, I didn't belong in Bexleyheath but rather at Tower Hamlets, which has a higher percentage of Muslims according to the 2011 census. This is an example of many microaggressions that I have faced at this school.

The next day, I had the strength and the voice to protest the outright dismissal and asked for an action plan in a meeting with the head and the deputy to correct whatever strands I failed. It must be noted that this should have been the standard practice. Instantly, I was reminded that I had very limited rights to protest as long as I wasn't a direct employee of the school. Having failed in appealing to them, I agreed to leave the school after work on that day (Wednesday). Realising that they had to provide proof for my purported inadequacy, I was told to teach a lesson for observation by the London Borough of Bexley's NQT coordinator. The local authority (LA) was the Appropriate Body (AB) responsible for quality assurance for NQT induction. They also were responsible for ensuring that schools fulfilled their duties in relation to induction. The lady from LA observed my lesson (Maths) on Friday and her first utterance

during feedback was that "The good news is... you can teach. That lesson was good!" She then went on to elaborate on the positives of the lesson. In her report to the head and deputy, she wrote "I'm amazed that she is still smiling, she's very strong and passionate about her job and her lesson was great."

After the meeting with the LA co-ordinator, the head and her deputy booked me until the following Wednesday as they wanted me to hand over to another (Australian) teacher who would be teaching my class.

That was their unmaking. I went to work on Monday as my usual smiling, happy self (my husband advised me every morning and at lunch time to keep a positive demeanour). We had an impromptu meeting in the afternoon where we learned that OFSTED would visit the next day!

To cut it short, the OFSTED crew came in on Tuesday but had to extend the inspection until Wednesday because of some dissatisfaction. One of the inspectors observed my lesson on Wednesday (my last day in the school) and rated my lesson 'Outstanding.' It felt like a triumph! The school Senior Leadership Team tactfully discriminated against me by tagging my skills as being inadequate, although OFSTED rated my lesson as outstanding. I left the school for a better school while they were queried about the decision to sack me.

I later learnt from a parent at the school that the Deputy Head handed in her resignation a couple of days after I left while the Head Teacher was frustrated out of office as she was made subordinate to another Associate Head teacher of one of the partnership schools in the Borough.

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THE INTERSECTION OF RACE AND FAITH

My experience reflects that of many other teachers who are tinged by prejudice and inconsistency. Experiences of other Black Muslim educators indicate how critical race as well as faith is to the experience of educators in Britain.

In a different part of London, the experience of a Black Muslim teacher who was cruelly frustrated out of training resonates with many Black Muslims in the university setting. As a student, the teacher had excelled in the rigorous selection process of the Institute of Education but was denied the chance of training as a teacher; something she had always wanted to be.

Having succeeded in all university modules and assignments, the Institute assigned her to a school in a borough in which the British National Party is well organised. As a Black Muslim with a head covering, she encountered hostile, overt racism from the moment she stepped into the school. The staff taunted her but she responded and corrected their assumptions. She challenged and corrected a Religious Education lesson that was wrongly taught (in relation to the concept on *shirk*³⁰) and that was when the battle line was clearly drawn. She was ostracised in a school where she was supposed to undergo training.

Being a high achiever, she strived to prepare and deliver lessons which were enjoyed by the students. The more she tried to ignore their hostility, the harder the staff tormented her, to the extent of locking her up in the staff room to prevent her from teaching on a certain day.

In a bid to tackle the hostile treatment, she engaged her mentor who blatantly told her that they'd been instructed by her Institute to fail her.

The Institute could not fail her because her papers could be called in for an appeal. However, the assessment on placement could be altered, since it was a subjective assessment which trainers could defend by citing some inadequacies on her part. She could not take it any further and terminated the training – a decision which left her traumatised, although not before one kind-hearted staff in the school reassured her that “It's not you my dear... it's the system.” An unfair system which is biased, and forms prejudiced assumptions on who succeeds in life and who doesn't.

RACE, FAITH, AND DISCRIMINATION IN THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY

Discrimination and prejudice against Black Muslims is not an injustice meted on us by racists or Islamophobes alone, but also within the Muslim community. The most disheartening incidences are rooted in discrimination perpetrated by non-Black Muslims against Black Muslims despite our religion's abhorrence of the act of discrimination.

A Black Muslim head teacher narrates her experience of racism, not from white people but from people who profess Islam. She narrated her racism experience as embedded in her being Black, amidst a gathering of Muslim educators. As a head teacher who has the opportunity to attend conferences or gatherings with other educators generally, she lamented that she receives hostile treatment from some Asian sisters the moment they realise she's a head teacher and not a teaching assistant. She confirmed that she gets better treatment from non-Muslims in such gatherings.

Another Black Muslim woman who now teaches in a secondary school had a bitter tale to tell. The experience played out when she accepted a job offer in a Muslim primary school. She recalled how the head teacher ridiculed and humiliated her in every lesson. He always had a negative comment to make about her sentence structure or accent despite the fact that she wrote better than most other teachers. Frustrated that she couldn't please him, she left the school for good.

³⁰ Islamic precept, to hold something or someone as equal to God

As Black Muslims, we sometimes experience a lose-lose situation whereby we are treated unfairly by racists and not embraced by our Muslim brethren who we think we share a strand of identity with. On the other hand, we enjoy very cordial relationships with some of our Muslim brethren in Muslim settings. This is not a generalisation.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of Black Muslim teachers, including mine, reflect what has been established in literature on race and education in Britain. A report by the Runnymede Trust (Haque and Elliot, 2016) indicates how BME teachers reported feeling isolated and lacking in management support in incidences of racism. Like what I and my respondents experienced, they found that Black teachers, in particular, spoke about being labelled 'troublemakers' or being viewed as 'aggressive' if they challenged any decisions. Similar to what I learned, their research shows that BME teachers have less confidence in being supported by the management in their schools and that they had been subject to discrimination or harassment at work because of their race or ethnicity.

But my experiences and interviews with other Black Muslim teachers suggest that there is a dimension of faith that may shape how Black British teachers are treated in the education sector. There's another aspect of faith that must be considered; that some of the experiences of racism, prejudice, and discrimination come from other BME communities, namely, within the Muslim communities.

As Josiah Isles, an Assistant Head teacher has recently written, a number of factors need to be addressed such as recognition of the experiences teachers face, support that is necessary for Black teachers to succeed, recruitment of Black teachers, for national BAME networks to be more effective, and for trainee teachers to be made aware of support networks.

Black teachers and students are being held back by a society that needs to fully recognise the depth of the endemic social problems if any meaningful plans are to be made to resolve them within the education system. We can and must do better so we can prove that Black lives matter in British society (Isles 2020).



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