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Introduction

This chapter focuses on achievement with specific reference to Asian girls' experiences of schooling. Since the early 1990s education policy in England has been preoccupied with academic 'success' as measured by public examination results. New Labour's record on education in particular, has been marked by an unrelenting focus on 'success', 'standards' and 'achievement' (Bradford and Hey 2007) set in the broader context of policies of marketisation, privatisation and managerialism. This not only marks continuity with the neo-liberal policies of earlier conservative governments but has also had the effect of exacerbating division and disadvantage rather than equalising educational opportunities (Gerwirtz 2002). Despite the rhetoric of inclusion, the overt focus on achievement which also features heavily in recent government documents on gender and ethnicity (see DCSF 2007) has enabled so-called model minorities (Mirza 2005) such as middle class south Asians (mainly Indians) and some Chinese students to be held out as evidence of 'meritocracy at work'. For the vast majority of minoritised and working-class students, however, the dominant version of 'success' remains illusive.

The picture on Asian girls' achievement is quite varied although statistics generally show Indian girls who tend be from more middle class backgrounds outperforming working class Pakistani and Bangladeshi girls (see DfES 2006). While recent

research has focused on high achievement among working class Asian girls (Ahmad 2001; Abbas 2002; Dwyer et al. 2006; Renold and Allen 2006), less attention has been paid to the educational experiences of Asian girls who are defined as 'low-achievers'. This chapter draws on empirical data from two studies to explore the ways in which Asian girls are both positioned and positioned themselves in relation to dominant notions of success as well as ideal versions of Asian femininity and the particular consequences of these negotiations for their experiences of achievement and schooling.

Asian girls in public and policy discourses

Media and public interest in Asian girls especially those from Muslim backgrounds has spiralled in recent years. Culture clash, forced marriages, honour killings and Islamic modes of dress have been among the controversial topics that have served to reinforce and rework historic (colonial) representations of Asian women as the passive victims of oppressive cultures. Intense public and policy debate in the aftermath of the urban unrest in English towns in 2001 and the 2005 London bombings has focussed on the 'limits' of multiculturalism and the extent to which Muslims can integrate into a 'British way of life'. Against this background, the repositioning of Muslim males (who were once regarded as passive and law-abiding) as dangerous fanatics has impacted on representations of Muslim women. Since femininity is defined in relation to masculinity, the more dangerous, volatile, and aggressive Asian and Muslim men and boys appear to be, the more passive, controlled and vulnerable Asian and Muslim girls and women are assumed to be (Shain 2003). Controversies over Islamic dress such as the veil affair in 2006, have further cast Muslim women as the bearers or symbols of backward and barbaric cultures (Brah

1996). Set in the context of broader debate about the management of ethnic diversity and policy initiatives promoting social and community cohesion as the solution to economic problems (Cheong et al 2007), the controversy sparked by Cabinet minister Jack Straw's comments that the veil is a 'visible marker of separation' enabled Muslims girls to be drawn as outward symbols of a 'refusal to integrate'. This was further echoed in Tony Blair's assimilationist call to Muslims and new migrants to adopt British values into order to be accepted into British society (Blair 2006). While policies for the management of ethnic diversity since the 1960s have been based on a complex range of ideologies including 'assimilation', 'integration' and 'multiculturalism' (Cheong et al. 2007), Grosvenor (1997: 49-50) has argued that: 'these identified shifts in policy are more apparent than real ... they exist in the sphere of articulation rather than in practice' and that 'a clear, coherent consistent and uniform' policy goal can in fact be readily identified as running through government circulars, advisory notes, select committee documents and political speeches during the same period, which reflects 'an enduring commitment to assimilation'. As I argue, the pressure to assimilate has and continues to be a daily reality for Asian girls.

Theorising Asian girls' experiences of schooling and achievement

Since the 1980s feminist research focussing on intersections of 'race', class and gender (Basit 1997; Dwyer 2000; Archer 2003; Shain 2003) has challenged popular representations and earlier culture-clash frameworks that positioned Asian girls as 'helpless victims' (Watson 1976) focussing instead on the more active role played by British-born Asian youth in negotiating identities drawn from both residual 'home' cultures and the local cultures they currently inhabit (Dwyer 2000, Archer 2003, Shain 2003).

In relation to achievement, recent feminist research exploring girls' relationships to success has shown that even girls who achieve the highest grades may experience success as fragile or problematic (Walkerdine et al. 2001; Archer 2005) and are often viewed as possessing the 'wrong sort of femininity' for success – they are either 'too loud', 'too working class', or 'too hardworking'. Dominant characterisations of Asian girls as 'quiet', 'passive' and 'demure' resonate to some extent with the idealised and desexualised middle-class femininity of the sort performed by Reay's (2001) 'nice girls' and Renold's (2002) 'square girls', but Asian girls are still often read as the Other of academic success because of the assumption that cultural constraints prevent them from realising their full academic potential. The tight discipline that is believed to characterise Asian family life is also often associated with strong educational values encouraging 'hard work' and 'studiousness'. Yet when Asian girls do not succeed, it is this same tight discipline that is cited in pathology frameworks as placing a burden on girls to conform to family pressures surrounding for example, arranged marriages (Archer 2003; Shain 2003).

Research on primary school-aged Asian girls has also focused on the 'impossibility' of combining academic success with peer popularity. In Renold and Allan's (2006) research, Shamilla, a high-achieving Asian girl, was extremely popular with peers in part because she downplayed her academic success. Nyla, another high-achiever, was described by her peers as a 'loner' and 'miserable' because she refused to diminish her achievements for the sake of popularity. The importance of the peer group and its relationship to academic 'success' and 'failure' is a central theme in the schooling of Asian girls that I take up in the next section.

The Asian Girls (AG) project

In this section I draw on research conducted as part of a wider study on Asian girls'
experiences of schooling (Shain 2003). This research, completed in the mid 1990s,
did not set out to explore achievement but, a re-analysis of the data suggests that
setting by ability across the schools was a critical factor in friendship formations
which were central to the girls' active negotiations of their academic and social
experiences through schooling. The research focused on the strategies that girls used
to deal with schooling and drew on interviews (as part of a broader ethnographic
approach) with 44 Asian girls across eight schools in Greater Manchester and
Staffordshire. The girls were aged 13-16-years-old and were from Pakistani, Indian
and Bangladeshi backgrounds with Pakistani Muslims in the majority (over 80 per
cent). Despite sharing common class and regional locations in economically deprived
areas that had suffered from the decline of manufacturing and whilst also being
subject to common cultural definitions of them as passive, timid and over-controlled,
the girls were able to take up a range of identity positions which I refer to as
strategies. Through an analysis of the girls' accounts of schooling, friendships,
family and peer relations, four main strategies emerged which are not intended to be
static or fixed but illustrate the range of Asian femininities being 'struggled over'
within the context of schooling:

- Resistance Through Culture - The 'Gang Girls' were both positioned and
  positioned themselves in opposition to the dominant culture of the school,
  which they defined as white and racist.

- Survival - The 'Survivors' – whose strategy of apparent conformity was part of an overall conscious drive to achieve academic success, prioritised neither racism, nor sexism though they experienced both.

- Rebellion - The 'Rebels' as teachers referred to them, prioritised uneven gender relations within their communities. Without actively resisting these, they were critical of parental and community values and they actively dissociated themselves from the Gang girls

- Religious prioritisation - The 'Faith Girls' prioritised religion but were well integrated in terms of mixed friendships and pursued a 'survival' strategy to achieve academic success

In this section I focus on the first category, which featured an overwhelmingly large number of 'low-achievers'.   Underachievement is defined here as a combination of the girls' own expectations, their location in the lower sets and teacher predictions of further exam success. The 'Gang girls'- adopted an 'us and them' approach to schooling as in Willis' (1977) study, but unlike the lads, their experiences were defined primarily with reference to racism and their positive assertion of 'Asian' identities. The fourteen girls in this category were both positioned and positioned themselves in opposition to the dominant culture of the school, which they defined as white and racist. It was the experience of racism in the school that led to the formation of an all-Asian female subculture from which white students and teachers and Asian students who appeared to ally with whites in the school were excluded.

Racist name-calling

The majority of the girls in the AG study (not just the Gang girls) were subjected to some form of verbal abuse with terms such as 'Paki' and 'black bitch' being routinely employed. In the Muslim girls study these racist terms of abuse had not lost currency but insults such as 'terrorist' and 'suicide bomber' had been added to this usual repertoire of racist insults. But the girls who occupied the lower sets and who chose all Asian friendship groups were the particular targets of racist name-calling. These girls were also the most likely to actively resist name-calling both individually and collectively within the context of the female friendship group and included both verbal and physical resistance.

> I just swear back . . . [laughs]. Well you know they call me 'black bitch' and I just call them 'white bastard'. (YA)
>
> Yeah I've been called things like because of my colour. 'Paki', 'black bitch' I don't care. I just turn around and call them back. I was born in this country and I'll stay in it. (TH)
>
> This boy called me a 'Paki' but I got him back. I called him white 'B'. If someone calls me, I call them back. If they want to have a fight, I'll have a fight. (PA)

These comments reveal practices of 'sexual Othering' (Connolly 1998) in Asian girls experiences of schooling. Because the girls did not passively accept racism and were prepared to defend themselves, they fell outside the dominant stereotypes associated with both conventional 'nice girl' (Reay 2001) white femininity and 'passive' Asian

femininity. Boys were prepared to physically attack them including punching and kicking them.   The girls' willingness to fight back could be read as a form of reactive violence (Osler and Starkey 2005) which further reinforced their status as deserving of abuse and characterizations of them as 'volatile', 'angry' and 'aggressive' -more resonant with current discourses surrounding Asian masculinity (Archer 2003; Shain 2010).

Dress and language

The Gang girls were also highly visible because of their preference for traditional dress and their 'home languages', which became important visible markers of their 'Asian' identities. They fiercely defended traditional Asian dress, which was allowed by most schools in school uniform colours. While this enabled them to identify positively with other similarly dressed Asian girls, it also marked them out for further racist name-calling because it was read against the schools' dominant white culture as a 'refusal to integrate'. Like dress, language was an important vehicle for expressing identities and eight of the Gang girls admitted deliberately using their home language at school to exclude other groups from their conversation:

> I speak [my language] at school sometimes with friends . . like when you want
> to say something and you don't want others to know like when there's Christian
> people present . . They say speak in our language . . We [say], 'No, we're not
> saying anything about you, it's just our culture.' [Laughs]. English people speak
> English, Asian people speak their own language. (TH)

This use of 'home' language further marked the girls out as separate and 'isolationist' but for the girls it was one way to 'win space' and defeat the boredom they experienced in the lower sets.

Friendships and the policing of sexuality and sexual reputation

The importance of the peer group and the role friendship groups play in defining and performing femininity has been well documented in feminist studies of schooling (see Hey 1997; Walkerdine et al. 2001; Renold 2002; George 2007; Ringrose 2007) but for the 'low-achievers' in the AG study, this was a defining feature of their experience of schooling. The Gang girls were characterised by their all-Asian female friendship groups, to the exclusion of boys (white and Asian) and white students generally. They claimed to mix with their 'own kind' also for security, friendship and empathy: 'I mix with Pakistanis - they understand my ways' (PD). An important reason, however, was the shield from verbal and physical abuse that Asian girl groups were seen to provide, Pakistanis don't bully you' (KB) and 'the English don't treat us very well. They just ignore us and batter us. I used to hang around with English people but Asians understand better' (NN).

Girls' friendships and hostilities show an ongoing fascination with 'deciphering the relationship between gender and sexuality' (Ali 2003: 275). Like Ali's girls, the Gang girls vocalised strongly their ideas about what constituted appropriate kinds of femininity. They employed sexist and abusive language (Hey 1997; Youdell 2005) to refer to Asian girls who befriended white girls and boys. They were most scathing in their comments about girls who engaged in interracial relationships who they labelled as 'sluts' or 'slags' (Hey 1997; Ali 2003).

There's a girl [****], in the third year. She acts like she's English. She goes out

with boys like she hangs round with boys in school like she's got no Asian

friends and just every time hanging round with boys white boys. [People]

swear, to her face and behind her back, 'slag', 'bitch', anything that comes into

our minds, because she's stupid going out with an English boy and she's Asian.

(PA)

As Ringrose (2008) argues, sexual regulation is integral to the microdynamics of

girls' friendship groups. These scathing remarks were one way in which the girls were

able to seize power in their relations with other Asian girls. The comments were

directed mainly at Rebel girls who by dissociating themselves from the Gang girls and

mixing mainly with white students (boys and girls) were often read by peers and

teachers to be performing a more acceptable version of Asian femininity. The Rebels

were more likely to dress in western clothes, which in relational terms further marked

the Gang girls out as 'refusing to integrate'. In relation to current policy, the Rebels'

appropriation of often hyper-feminine westernised forms of dress (short skirts) could

be read as illustrative of the ways in which social integration may be achieved

[ironically] at the expense of the social alienation of Others who have not adopted the

language and culture of the dominant mainstream (Cheong et al. 2008: 40).

Negative relations with staff and the withdrawal from learning
A major consequence of 'being' a Gang girl was negative relations with staff. This

was largely because they appeared to challenge dominant passive Asian femininity.

Teachers often spoke unfavourably of them, in terms such as 'troublemakers' with

some openly confessing dislike because of the girls' involvement in 'gangs'. The gang label has masculine connotations, associated with boys, violence and 'laddishness' and connects with wider current discourses on Asian masculinity. Immediate gratification was another major Gang characteristic and like Keely in Renold's chapter (this volume) the characterisation of them as 'bad girls' led to cycle of negative relations with staff and their location in the lower sets further reinforced teachers perceptions of them as academically incapable. The girls claimed to receive little or no encouragement from the school and staff and thus resorted to strategies to defeat boredom, such as breaking school rules, truancy and being late for lessons. With few positive reports from the school and rare contact between the school and their families, it was foregone conclusion that the Gang girls would not pursue further studies. The gradual withdrawal or self-exclusion from learning is illustrated in the following example:

AP: I can't read or write. I just don't be bothered. It's boring English. I just don't like the teacher he's always picking on us, all the Asian girls.

FS: Can you comment on your progress?

AP: I don't know, I hardly come into school. I'm in the lower sets.

FS: Do you have any career plans?

AP: I'm not interested. I don't want to do anything. I just like coming to meet my friends.

By challenging the dominant stereotypes, the girls played an active role in creating an Asian femininity from which Others were excluded. Identifying the main cause of their oppression as racism, they appeared to accept and provide justification for their

likely exclusion from further education and careers. It was their definition and acceptance of the inevitability of this situation that influenced their approach to schooling. Consequently, school became a place to have fun and defeat boredom. Inherent in their attempts to convince other girls of the inevitability of their future roles as wives and mothers was a fatalism owing as much to their class locations in England than to their cultural backgrounds (see also Plummer 2000; Walkerdine et al. 2001) and as such the girls played an active part in the reproduction of the conditions of their oppression.

The Muslim girls (MG) study

In a pilot study carried out in 2006, I interviewed six girls who in various ways described themselves as Muslims, not all of whom were practising. Four were of Pakistani descent, one was Bangladeshi and one from Afghanistan whose family had migrated to England post 2001. The girls were aged 14-16-years-old and were all from the same Staffordshire school. Two were 'high-achievers', two were in middle sets and two were 'low-achievers'. I refer briefly to the 'low-achievers' before focussing on one high achieving girl whose account both supports and complicates the wider findings of the AG study.

The two 'low-achieving' girls' accounts resonated with the experiences of Gang girls except that they primarily identified as Muslim rather than Asian even though, like the Gang girls, they were not practicing Muslims and religion played little part in their lives. This identification as Muslim reflects the wider impact of the politicisation of Muslim identities in the last two decades when groups who were previously identified and identifying as Asian, Pakistani or Bengali have come to be defined or define

themselves as Muslim. This process has been driven further by policy frameworks that have given prominence to 'faith' over ethnicity   (Worley 2005).

Like the Gang girls, the two low achievers also expected arranged marriages and saw schooling as primarily a place to have fun and defeat boredom. They defined school space as racist and differentiated themselves from other Asian girls who they described as 'sell-outs' for mixing across gender and ethnic groups. They spoke their home language in school and defended Asian cultural practices such as arranged marriages.

Humaira, a 'high achieving' Bangladeshi girl was labelled by girls in the lower sets as a 'sell-out' because she was seen to mix mainly with white students in school. Like a number in the AG study, she spoke at length about a racist incidents that she had encountered including being asked whether she was a suicide bomber.   Within the school though, and like a number of the Rebels in the AG study, Humaira largely dissociated herself from what she described as 'stereotypical Pakistani girls'.

> Humaira: I don't want to be seen as one those stereotypical Pakistani girls.
>
> Interviewer: And what are they?
>
> Humaira: Well you know, they like hang together in a big crowd and don't mix with anyone else. Some of them you see, they do mix in their classes, but as soon as they get out they go back to their [Asian] mates as if..y'know no-one else is good enough. And I think that's just rude and I don't want to be like that.

As this comment suggests, the 'stereotypical Pakistani girls' like the Gang girls, were highly visible because of their preference for other Asian female friends. Humaira justifies her dissociation from these girls by drawing on the dominant a discourse of segregation, 'they hang together in a big crowd' 'no one else is good enough', 'it's rude' – implying that the girls engage in a process of self-segregation (Cantle 2001). She positions herself outside of this discourse, 'I don't want to be like that' and expresses a strong dislike for what she regards as an instrumental attitude on the part of Asian girls who happily mix in their classes with white students but outside of class show a strong own-ethnic group preference. Her account thus resonated with several of the Survivors in the AG study who also felt excluded by the girl groups but more significantly Humaira like some of the Survivors and Rebels, seemed to pay a considerable cost for pursing academic success. This included being disliked or viewed as 'stuck up' by other Asian students for being a high-achiever (she was predicted A* grades in her GCSE exams) but in also being routinely compared favourably with the Asian girls groups she had to be accepting of some racist comments from her own friends:

> ... I hang out mainly with these girls who y'know who smoke and drink and are labelled as 'bad girls' [ie popular white working class girls]. My friends are always saying to me 'you're alright you are; you're dead safe; you don't get offended if we call you Paki like these other Asian girls. I mean I really don't mind being called a Paki because it depends on who is saying it how they're saying it.

In choosing not to define these comments as racist, Humaira performed a Rebel femininity but what complicates a straight reading-off of her account as a Rebel however, is her wearing of the hijab. But unlike hijab-wearing Faith girls, this was not initially for religious reasons. Rather, a hair-cut 'gone wrong' had led to the take-up of the headscarf at 11 and she now felt 'naked without it'. It was interesting that in Humaira's case the hijab was far less provocative than being part of an Asian girl-group. Across the two studies, which were conducted 10 years apart, it seems that the Asian girl- group had not lost its symbolic power. It was just as threatening in the Muslim girls study as in the Asian girls study.

Conclusion

While there is now a considerable body of literature challenging dominant representations of Asian femininity, Asian girls especially those from Muslim backgrounds continue to be represented in media and public discourses in contradictory ways that reinforce historic assumptions about their femininities. Themes of culture clash, subordination and increasingly a 'refusal to integrate' suggest a re-working of old colonial stereotypes in new times.

A number of research studies now focus on Asian girls' high academic achievements but there is still a paucity of research on the experiences of low-achieving Asian girls. Although I did not set out to address the issue of achievement, I did find some correspondence between academic achievement and a range of ways of performing Asian femininity.

A number of issues emerge from a reading of the Gang girls' experiences of schooling. These include the complexity of the process by which the girls gradually withdraw from learning. While family (low) expectations played a part it also emerged from the study that parents were often prepared to allow their daughters to proceed to further and higher education as long as they received positive reports about their daughters' progress from the school. In some cases parental permission was actually withdrawn when school reports failed to support the standard expected by parents. This suggests we need to look more closely at the process by which the failure on the part of some Asian girls to conform to the dominant representations of Asian femininity comes to be translated also as academic failure.

Perhaps the most urgent issue relates to the immense pressure on Asian girls to be 'seen to integrate' in the context of schooling or more specifically to avoid all-Asian girl friendships. I would argue that the same pressures do not exist for white girls to integrate with other ethnic groups. Much of the pressure for Asian girls to conform to westernised version of Asian femininity predates but has been reinforced by recent policy discourses on integration and community cohesion which shift attention from economic problems to the cultural practices of Muslims. This places a large burden particularly on Muslim girls who adopt Islamic dress and who are seen as the most visible and outward symbols of a 'refusal to integrate'. In the MG study there was evidence that despite the introduction of various schemes aimed at promoting 'racial tolerance', friendship patterns remained the much the same as in the AG study with high achievers paying considerable costs in return for social acceptance. Humaira, a high-achieving Bangladeshi girl commented on the racist abuse that she chooses to ignore on a daily basis as part of her dissociation from Gang girl femininity which

was positioned by the schools' dominant culture as the least desirable version of Asian femininity available. That there was an immense pressure on Asian girls to be 'seen to integrate' also suggests, as Grosvenor (1997) has argued, that an enduring commitment to assimilation has been central to shaping education over the last four decades.

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