

## Babar Mirza

### Director of Education, Nida Trust



#### **ETC: Firstly, what are the aims of the Nida Trust?**

**Babar:** Our main aspiration is to support communities with projects in five areas: education; social welfare; sports and recreation; media, arts and culture; and youth development.

Much of the work we do is with the Muslim community (Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Turkish, Somali, Arab and African); however, we don't want to be thought of as an exclusively Muslim organisation, as we also work with other disadvantaged communities, irrespective of religious or cultural background. Our motto is 'calling communities together' and we believe that through partnership with different communities we can effectively tackle underachievement.

#### **ETC: Nevertheless, Muslim pupils are among the lowest achievers in the country. Pakistani and Bangladeshi young people in particular perform relatively badly when compared with their peers. What do you think the main factors are for this relative underachievement?**

Experienced Muslim educationalists will tell you that there are more than thirty different reasons why Muslim pupils are underachieving within UK schools. Our own research suggests that lack of parental participation is at the top of the list. Clearly, some Muslim pupils do very well, but, more parents need to take an active role. Some Muslims have come to this country from areas where they were unable to obtain a sound education, and therefore, related problems, including having low aspirations for their children, are an issue. We need to challenge that, and have already set up a series of workshops entitled 'Promoting parental participation in education', which

aim to empower parents and provide them with tips and strategies for supporting their children.

Economic status is a key factor. There's a direct link between free school meals and underachievement. It is unfortunately the case that large Muslim communities live in some of the most deprived areas of the country.

Also, what we are finding is that many of the Muslim youth still don't have a defined sense of belonging. When they visit their countries of origin, they are told that they have become 'Westernised' and are different... but, against that, the Muslim communities in this country are being told that they are failing to integrate into British culture. We need to cultivate their sense of belonging – so that they aren't forced into living with a 'split' personality, and are comfortable with and proud of their identity.

#### **ETC: What about the role of faith?**

Faith has not been utilised enough as a means to raise the achievement of young Muslims. Research has been carried out into how much faith plays a part in the lives of young British people. Less than 10 per cent of white British pupils said that religion played a very important part in their lives. In contrast, over 85 per cent of British pupils of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin said that religion played a very important part in their lives.

Also, more can be done to ensure the curriculum is made more inclusive. The curriculum, as it stands, doesn't reflect the experience of Muslim history – perhaps the introduction of something akin to Black History month could remedy this.

In 2003, the DfES (now DCSF) commissioned a major piece of research to

establish the extent and quality of materials reflecting the experience of African Caribbean and Muslim pupils, which could be used by mainstream schools within the national curriculum. The report demonstrated that, in most areas of the curriculum, the position relating to Muslim pupils, generally, is poor.

Since the CREAM report, an initiative called '1001 inventions', produced by the Foundation for Science, Technology and Civilisation (FSTC), has revolutionised the possibilities available for science teachers to incorporate Muslim experiences and heritage into science teaching. '1001 inventions' explores the Muslim contribution to building the foundations of modern civilisation. Surgical instruments, the first camera and flying machines – these are all achievements of Muslim people of the past. The idea is not to say 'we are the best', but rather that Muslims have made an invaluable contribution to humanity and civilisation and there are still role models out there for young Muslims to aspire to.

#### **ETC: One of the main challenges around extended and community focused schools is how to ensure services are accessible and useful to those who really need them. How can schools and children's centres remove barriers to access for the Muslim population in particular?**

There are an estimated 400,000 Muslim pupils who attend madrassahs every evening, and therefore, working with these institutions is a way of forward. This is where the third sector comes in – acting as brokers between the madrassahs and the mainstream sector. Rather than a headteacher going into the community and saying: 'Hello, who's out there?' organisations such as Nida Trust can act on their behalf, and facilitate a partnership between madrassahs and mainstream schools.

Schools also need to be proactive in approaching mosques. The mosque is not just a place of prayer – it is the centre of the community. There are over 1,000 mosques and Islamic centres in the UK, most of which would be happy to help.

Links to reports and a full text of this interview are available at ETC online. Visit [www.nidatrust.org.uk](http://www.nidatrust.org.uk)

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