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# Pakistani Learners in British State Maintained Islamic Schools: The effects of social economic class and faith identity on the gender gap in attainment

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## Abstract

This article examines the effects of social economic class and faith identity on the gender gaps in attainment for those British-born learners of Pakistani heritage that left a British state maintained Islamic faith school in 2015, 2016 and 2017. This research article shows that both social economic class and faith identity exert a far greater influence on the attainment performance of Pakistani boys and girls than gender does its self. Furthermore, this research article assesses whether there is an interaction effect between gender and social economic class or gender and faith identity in terms of their impact on educational attainment gap of British-born Pakistani students. The article asserts that, across all three cohorts, there is no evidence of any systematic variation in the size of the gender differences in educational attainment that exist across either social economic class or faith identity. Simply in terms of the effects of social economic class, faith identity and gender on educational attainment, it is argued that these can actually be understood in terms of a simple 'main effect model'. The implications of this for initiatives aimed at addressing gender differences in educational attainment are considered briefly in the conclusion.

## Introduction

British-born students of Pakistani heritage from either Kashmir or the rural backdrop, unlike most other ethnic groups, tend to highlight their cultural identity that in most cases is underpinned by their Islamic faith identity (Brah, 1996; Jacobson, 1998; Modood T. , Ethnicity and Intergenerational Identities and Adaptations in Britain, 2005; Shah, 2006a), which can be problematic in a secular British context. In addition to the British context, multiple social, economic,

strategic, historical and political factors further add to the complexities of interface. For many British learners of Pakistani heritage, Islam is the key determinant in their lives of which cultural values have been derived; however, schools are not always sensitive to this (Abbas T. , 2006). British-born Pakistani Muslim students, educated in state maintained schools, are often required to leave their religion and cultural identity at home, not through design but because so often the school as a secular institution, is simply unaware of the centrality of Islam in the life of its Pakistani pupils (Coles, 2004, p. 43). The new generation of British-born Muslims of Pakistani heritage often do not see themselves as equal partners in national membership but as still marginalised ethnic group within British society (Basit, 1997; Jacobson, 1998; Hopkins, 2004). In contrast and as a by-product of this, the concept of the Islamic *Ummah* (community) provides the basis for this super-ordinate identity to an otherwise hugely diverse international community (Shah, 2006a; Lewis, 1994; Mandaville, 2001; Modood T. , 2004). Self-identity, as Giddens (1993) argues, is;

*'the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography* (Giddens, 1993, p. 53). *'We are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves'* (Giddens, 1993, p. 75).

The issue is no longer to which group these students have been born but the right to equality as British citizens with multiple identities. Thus, faith identity poses challenges to school leaders, raising issues not only linked to British-born Pakistani student achievement and performance, but also with regard to students' identity constructions and their educational engagement. British learners of Pakistani heritage remain in the second lowest ethnic group of underperformers according to a 2017 data report commissioned by the Department for Education (DfES, 2017) using National Pupil Database (NPD). Using the national measure of attaining A\*C in a minimum of five General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSE) across a range of subjects including English and Maths, the achievement of British Pakistani learners in 2017 was 58% as compared with 51% Black Caribbean, 77% Indian, 67% Bangladeshi, 83% Chinese and 63% white British. Furthermore, of the 58% British Pakistani learners in 2017, 55% Boys achieved 5A\*C as compared to 62% Girls giving a gender gap of 7% in achievement.

There is huge literature on identity in sociology, social psychology and feminist theory (Bhabha, 1994; Brah, 1996; Giddens, 1993; Hall, 1996), but recognition of religion as a category of influence for identity construction is not a fully explored phenomenon. With the recent 9/11 scenario, religious resurgence and the sudden emergence of faith schools across the UK since 1997 to address the underperformance of British-born Muslims of Pakistani heritage, invites us to further explore faith identity constructions, projections and influences on educational attainment.

In addition to faith identity, concerns over the underachievement of British-born Pakistani boys since the mid-1990s have been well researched and understood (Epstein, 1998a; Raphael Reed, 1999; Francis, 2000). However, the main criticisms has been focused on the way in which such research rely upon crude comparisons between all boys and all girls as if they both represent two homogeneous and distinct categories (Mac an Ghaill M. , 'What about the boys?': schooling, class and crisis masculinity, 1996; Epstein, 1998a; Jackson, 1998; Skelton, 2001). Epstein et al. (1998b, p. 11) argues, 'the "underachievement" of boys at school is a strongly classed and racialised phenomenon'. Epstein argues that, it is not all boys who are underachieving but working-class boys and boys from particular minority ethnic groups (most notably African Caribbean, Bangladeshi and Pakistani boys). Equally, it is not all girls who are 'overachieving' but, rather, there are certain groups-particularly working-class girls who are also severely underachieving in education (Demack, 2000). The data on achievement/underachievement is collected by ethnicity and not by faith which has made it hard to explore link between achievement and faith identity (Roberts, 2001). However, certain ethnic groups in Britain such as British-born Pakistanis who are predominantly of Islamic faith are reflective of a faith group which has its own limitations as we must further explore how different levels of faith identity have an impact on educational performance.

A study was carried out in 2006 by Paul Connolly of Queen's University Belfast was a pilot research to generate views and discussions underpinning this research article. Connolly (2006) suggests there are two competing models that can both be applied to these arguments. The first can be termed the *main effects model* that suggests gender tends to exert an effect on boys' and girls' levels of achievement independent of either social class or ethnicity (Connolly P. , 2006). For this model it is accepted that there are differences between boys and girls as a whole and that these are relatively stable across social class and ethnic groups. However, such differences are small and completely overshadowed by the effects of social class and also ethnicity (Demack, 2000; Gillborn D. &. , 2000). The second model-which can be termed the *interaction effects model* goes a stage further than this simple 'additive' approach to suggest that differences between boys and girls in relation to educational attainment are not actually stable but systematically vary across social class and ethnic groups (Connolly P. , 2006).

In terms of boys and schooling, a number of ethnographic studies have highlighted a diverse range of masculine identities adopted by ethnic minority boys of different social economic and faith backgrounds (Connell, 1989; Mac an Ghaill M. , 1994; Mac an Ghaill M. , 'What about the boys?': schooling, class and crisis masculinity, 1996; Skelton, 2001; Connolly P. , 2004). In relation to the former, ever since the early studies of Hargreaves (1967), Lacey (1970) and especially Willis (1977), it has been shown that British Pakistani boys living in marginalised communities are more likely to develop anti-school subcultures that compensate for their relative lack of

success in education by gaining status through constructing hyper-forms of masculinity fostered through the attendance of voluntary religious schooling (Madrassa) that nurtures their faith identities (Corrigan, 1979; Mac an Ghaill M. , 1988; Gillborn D. , 1990; Sewell, 1997). Such forms of faith identity therefore tend to exacerbate or further diminish the 'underachievement' of British-born Pakistani boys.

The study was carried out in 2006 by Paul Connolly certainly provide evidence to substantiate some of the arguments associated with the *main effects model* referred to earlier, that both social economic class and ethnicity tend to have a much greater effect on differences in educational attainment than gender (see also Gillborn & Mirza, 2000). What is still lacking, however, is any published study aimed explicitly at examining the main effects and interaction effects on educational attainment underpinned by faith identity for ethnic minority British born students of Pakistani heritage. Many research studies emphasise underachievement of students from these Pakistani communities across Britain, voicing concern and apprehension (Abbas T. , 2004; 2006; Anwar, 2002; Modood T. , 2003), which will provide the focus for this article to explore the issues.

## Methodology

This article is based upon a longitudinal analysis of student data gathered from three consecutive cohorts in 2015, 2016 and 2017 of British-born learners of Pakistani heritage who left a British state maintained faith school situated in a predominantly large Pakistani/Kashmiri community. It is the schools' internal data gathering systems for each of these cohorts that provide the basis for the analysis to follow. All students' parents are expected to return questionnaires as part of the schools admissions process reflecting final response rates of 100% for each cohort which is an expected response rates for this type of survey. To measure faith identity for each student, attendance to voluntary afterschool Madrassa (Islamic faith schooling) is introduced as a measurable variable. However, there will be respondents who refuse or misinform the school with personal information which is likely to introduce an additional element of bias into the findings. In an attempt to correct response bias, the final datasets for each cohort were subsequently weighted in relation to four key variables: gender, Madrassa attendance and social economic class (SEC) with respect to the attainment of five General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSE) including English and Maths at Year 11. However, even with this attempt to correct for response bias a degree of caution should be maintained when interpreting the findings. The summary characteristics of the three different cohorts are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the 11 cohorts from 2007 to 2017 of British born learners of Pakistani heritage who left a British state maintained faith school situated in a predominantly large Pakistani/Kashmiri community

Year	2015		2016		2017	
	1000		1003		996	
Students	n	%	n	%	n	%
Gender						
Male	501	50	513	51	509	51
Female	499	50	490	49	487	49
Madrassa						
Fulltime	500	50	552	55	478	48
Part-time	200	20	251	25	179	18
Occasional	150	15	201	20	129	13
Rarely	90	9	0	0	129	13
Never	60	6	0	0	80	8
SEC						
Low	560	56	512	51	568	57
Med	240	24	291	29	229	23
High	140	14	191	19	129	13

As one can see from Table 1, five different measures of Madrasa attendance have been used between these three cohorts, reflecting measure of faith identity this variable is coded for. As data has been collected from a state maintained Islamic faith school, Madrasa attendance is a data category collected as part of the admissions process which will be used as a measure and comparison of the students' commitment to practicing their Islamic faith which intern helps develop students faith identity. However, as the intention of this article is more modest and simply focused on examining how gender differences may vary with faith identity for British-born learners of Pakistani heritage within any particular cohort then this does not in itself present a problem. It should also be noted that whichever classificatory scheme has been used over the years, they have all tended to identify the same major divisions (Roberts, 2001), a point that is borne out in relation to the analysis to follow. Furthermore, the relative effects of social economic class, Madrasa attendance and gender is measured through the use of a method known as *logistic regression*. The results of such an analysis performed on the three cohort samples will assess whether a learner has gained five or more GCSE grades A\*-C as the dependent variable with respect to social economic class, Madrasa attendance and gender all entered as independent categorical variables. In addition to this, the actual

existence of any interaction effect is formally tested using a technique known as *log-linear analysis*. In this instance log-linear analysis is used to estimate what the data should look like if there were no interactions either between gender and social economic class or between gender and Madrasa attendance in relation to their effects on GCSE attainment for each of the three cohorts.

In terms of GCSE attainment for each respondent, the measure used will be whether a student has gained five or more GCSE grades A\*-C or not including English and Mathematics. This tends to be the most well-known measure of educational performance at this level and continues to provide the basis for comparisons of differences in terms of gender as well as faith identity and social economic class. It also tends to be the main measure used in relation to school league tables and the identification of 'successful' and 'failing' schools.

### Findings

#### *The main effects model*

With regards to the main effects model, Table 2 provides a breakdown of the proportions of boys and girls gaining five or more GCSE grades A\*-C by social class and also Madrasa attendance for the three successive cohorts.

Table 2 Percentage of boys and girls gaining five or more GCSE grades A\*-C by social class and Madrasa attendance with effect size

Cohort	2015				2016				2017			
	% Total	% Boys	% Girls	Effect Size	% Total	% Boys	% Girls	Effect Size	% Total	% Boys	% Girls	Effect Size
Total	68	57	79	0.022	63	54	75	0.020	66	55	76	0.021
Madrasa												
Fulltime	66	56	78	0.022	62	52	74	0.023	70	59	77	0.018
Par-time	58	49	66	0.017	57	56	67	0.017	58	48	65	0.017
Occasional	48	37	55	0.018	45	36	48	0.022	45	39	56	0.017
Rarely	35	26	48	0.022	37	23	40	0.020	40	30	46	0.016
Never	26	17	35	0.018	29	13	37	0.017	26	17	35	0.018
Social Class												
Low-SEC	27	20	36	0.016	26	18	33	0.022	25	16	37	0.021
Med-SEC	49	38	60	0.022	50	33	55	0.020	47	38	58	0.020
High-SEC	68	58	75	0.017	63	53	75	0.018	65	59	76	0.017

In terms of descriptive data alone, it is evident that social economic class and Madrasa attendance (faith identity) appear to exert a greater influence on educational attainment than simply gender alone. Taking the most recent cohort (2017) for example, it can be seen that 55% of boys as a whole gained five or more GCSE grade passes compared to 76% of girls. However in contrast, 59% of those

boys from higher social economic class gained more GCSEs compared to just 16% of those from a lower social economic class. Similarly, in terms of boys Madrasa attendance, 59% of full time attendees gained five or more GCSE grades A\*-C compared to just 17% who never attend. It would seem, therefore, that membership of particular social economic class and full time Madrasa attendance has a much greater effect on male British-born Pakistani learners' chances of having gained the required five or more GCSE passes than simply gender alone. Moreover, such figures also highlight the dangers of making simplistic comparisons between all boys and all girls of. In terms of social economic class, for example, 59% of boys from higher social economic class gained five or more GCSE grades A\*-C compared to just 37% of girls from a lower social economic class. Similar comparisons can be made in relation to Madrasa attendance which certainly undermine the popular and universal constructions of 'failing boys' and 'succeeding girls'. More formally, the results of the relative odds of a learner that will gain five or more GCSE grades A\*-C as the dependent variable against the independent variables of social economic class, Madrasa attendance and gender measured as the through the use of *logistic regression* are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Relative odds of students gaining five or more GCSE grades A\*-C with respects to independent variable

Cohort	2015	2016	2017
Gender			
Girls	1.760	1.646	1.733
Boys	1.000	1.000	1.000
Madrasa			
Fulltime	7.903	6.801	7.204
Part-time	4.105	3.814	4.682
Occasional	3.894	2.007	2.218
Rarely	1.971	1.651	1.923
Never	1.000	1.000	1.000
Social Class			
High-SEC	8.748	8.316	8.891
Med-SEC	4.779	2.238	3.851
Low-SEC	1.000	1.000	1.000

What Table 3 illustrates here are the relative odds of different categories of pupil gaining five or more GCSE grades A\*-C compared to the reference category for that variable (the category with the odds of 1.000). Again, if one takes the most recent cohort (i.e. those students leaving school in 2017) as an example, then it can be seen

that British-born girls of Pakistani heritage are 1.733 times more likely to gain five or more GCSE grades A\*-C than boys. Similarly, in terms of social economic class, those students from a lower social economic class provide the reference category this time. In this case, respondents in 2017 from higher social economic class are actually over eight times (8.891) more likely to gain five or more higher grade GCSE passes than those from a lower social economic class, those from middle social economic class a little under four times more likely (3.851) and so on. Finally, in terms of Madrasa attendance, it can be seen, for example, that full time attendees were found to be about seven times (7.204) more likely to gain five or more GCSE passes than those that never attend at all (the reference category in this case). The important point to note about these figures is that they represent the effects of one variable (i.e. gender or social class or Madrasa attendance) once the other two variables are controlled. Thus, for example, once we control for gender and social class, occasional Madrasa attendees school leavers in 2017 were still over two times more likely (2.218) to gain five or more GCSE grades A\*-C than school leavers who never attended Madrasa. Overall, by comparing these relative odds it can be confirmed that social economic class and Madrasa attendance (faith identity) do have a much greater impact upon the likely odds of a British-born learners of Pakistani heritage gaining five or more GCSE passes than gender. This, therefore, certainly provides initial support for arguments associated with the *main effects model* in that social economic class and faith identity do exert independent effects on educational attainment and both of these tend to overshadow the relatively minor effect exerted by gender. However, this model does not take into account interaction effects and is assumed that the small gender differences that exist remain relatively constant across social economic class and Madrasa attendance.

Before moving on to a consideration of the interaction effects model, two additional points are worth noting briefly about the findings in Table 3. The first is that the amount of variation in GCSE attainment that these three variables explain is relatively small and need to be treated with a degree of caution. It may well be that the categories used for social economic class and Madrasa attendance are rather crude and gloss over important variations within each of them. Furthermore, if better and more finely tuned measures of social economic class and Madrasa attendance could be developed then they would be likely to account for more of the variation in GCSE attainment. Either way, the proportion of variation in GCSE attainment explained by these three factors does remain relatively low. This in turn suggests that we need to be careful not to be encouraged by the specific focus of this article-limited as it is to a consideration of gender, social economic class and Madrasa attendance to assume that these three variables are the most influential factors associated with educational attainment. This will be a point returned to in the concluding section of this article.

The second point to note from the findings in Table 3 is the apparent fluctuation in the effects of social economic class and Madrasa attendance across the three cohorts. It is evident that, social economic class and Madrasa attendance (faith identity) appear to exert less an influence on the relative odds of pupils achieving five or more GCSE higher grade passes in 2016 compared to 2015 and 2017. There is no simple explanation for this other than random variation in the samples selected for the three cohorts. It is not caused by the application of respective weightings to the three cohorts. Such a pattern in the data was still evident even when the analysis was run again without applying such weights. It is also not likely to be a pattern reflecting a broader underlying trend (i.e. the possible decrease in influence of social economic class and Madrasa attendance on GCSE attainment) as the figures for 2017 have increased again to levels not that dissimilar to 2015. In the absence of any further plausible reason, it is therefore likely that the fluctuation in the relative odds across the three cohorts is due simply to random variation in the three samples selected. This in turn reinforces the need to be careful in drawing too many inferences from just one cohort but rather to focus on patterns evident across a number of cohorts as done here.

#### *The interaction effects model*

A visual inspection of Table 2 does not seem to indicate any systematic variation in gender differences across social economic class and Madrasa attendance on GCSE attainment for all three respective cohorts. This can be most clearly noted by examining the effect sizes (Phi) for gender within each social economic class and Madrasa attendance category. Phi provides a standardised measure of the size of the effect for gender and can vary between 0 and 1 with values closer to 0 indicating a very small gender effect and those reaching 1 a very large gender effect. For the three respective cohorts, there would appear to be little discernible pattern down the effect size columns. Given the interaction effects model and the findings of qualitative research in this area to date, one would expect to find the effect size (i.e. the size of the gender differences) to increase as one moved down the social economic class categories and/or as one examined those Madrasa attendance with lower overall attainment levels. However, the variation that does exist seems to be simply random in nature. Using a technique known as *log-linear analysis* mentioned earlier, Table 4 illustrates what the data should look like if there were no interactions either between gender and social economic class or between gender and Madrasa attendance in relation to their effects on GCSE attainment for each of the three cohorts. These estimates are then compared with the actual data in each case.

Table 4 Log-linear analyses examining the interaction effects of gender, social economic class and Madrasa attendance on whether school leavers in gained five or more GCSE grades A\*-C in 2015, 2016 and 2017

Year	Hierarchical model	Likelihood Ratio chi-square	df	sig
2015	GE*SC, GE*EX, SC*EX	9	2	0.851
	GE*MA, GE*EX, EX*MA	5	8	0.362
2016	GE*SC, GE*EX, SC*EX	3	2	0.849
	GE*MA, GE*EX, EX*MA	10	8	0.885
2017	GE*SC, GE*EX, SC*EX	5	2	0.483
	GE*MA, GE*EX, EX*MA	6	8	0.601

GE=Gender; SC= Social Class, MA= Madrasa Attendance, EX=GCSE Attainment.

The key point to note from the results presented in Table 4 is that there are no statistically significant differences found between estimates of the data based upon a main effects model and the actual data (i.e.  $p > 0.05$ ). The evidence suggests that the main effects model fits the data sufficiently well and thus confirms formally what was noted from the visual inspection of Table 2 discussed earlier, that there is no evidence of any systematic interaction effects between gender and social economic class or between gender and Madrasa attendance in relation to their impact on educational attainment.

#### Conclusions

At one level, the findings presented above confirm what many within the field of gender and education have been arguing for some time now. While gender does tend to exert an influence on GCSE attainment such that British-born boys of Pakistani heritage in general tend to achieve less than British-born Pakistani girls, these differences are relatively small and tend to be overshadowed by the effects of social economic class and faith identity (Madrasa attendance). While British-born girls of Pakistani heritage are one and a half times more likely to gain five or more GCSE grades A\*-C than boys, those British-born learners of Pakistani heritage from the highest social economic class backgrounds have been between eight and a half times more likely to gain five or more GCSE grades A\*-C than those from the lowest social economic class backgrounds. Similarly, those from the with a stronger faith identity attending Madrasa full time have been between four and seven times more likely to achieve at least five or more GCSE passes than those with a weaker faith identity who have never attending Madrasa. Moreover, these overarching effects of social economic class and faith identity undermine the simplistic and universal constructions of British-born 'failing boys' versus 'achieving girls' of Pakistani heritage. As has been seen from Table 3, for British-born learners of Pakistani heritage from the highest social economic class backgrounds have been between four to eight times more likely to achieve five or more GCSE grades A\*-C than girls from the lowest social economic class backgrounds.

This article has contributed to existing work in relation to offering a clearer understanding of the precise nature of the relationships between social economic class, faith identity and gender and their impact upon educational attainment of British-born learners of Pakistani heritage. While a number of qualitative studies would seem to suggest that the relative size of the differences between boys and girls are likely to be bigger among British-born learners of Pakistani heritage that experience the lowest levels of achievement generally, this has not been found to be the case in practice. What the evidence suggests from three consecutive cohorts is that while gender differences remain relatively small compared to social class and faith identity differences; they do appear to be relatively stable and constant across all social economic class and faith identity groups. In other words, the effects of gender appear to be independent of those of social economic class and faith identity, thus providing support for the more simple main effects model.

Finally, it is important to note that simply because the overall effects of gender remain relatively constant across social economic class and faith identity groups (subject simply to random variation), this does not mean that the actual manifestations and practices of gender (i.e. the ways in which young people construct and reproduce dominant forms of masculinity and femininity) are also constant relative to their identity. Clearly, the wealth of qualitative, ethnographic studies of British-born boys and girls of Pakistani heritage in schools has demonstrated that a wide and complex array of differing forms of masculinities and femininities exist. However, such forms of masculinity and femininity are never just about gender but are clearly also a reflection of the many differing ways in which gender combines with social economic class and faith to produce differing and enduring forms of identity. The key implication arising from this, therefore, is that simply because it is possible to statistically separate out the effects of gender from social class and also the commitment to faith, this does not mean that gender differences can actually be addressed practically in isolation from social economic class and faith identity. Given the ways in which gender identities are so intertwined with, and mediated by, social class and faith, then there can be no singular programme of intervention that will be appropriate and applicable to all British-born boys or girls of Pakistani heritage.

With these points in mind there are three key messages to emerge from the findings of this present article for educational practice. First, the underachievement of British born boys relative to girls of Pakistani heritage is not just an issue for working-class boys or boys with a stronger or weaker faith identity. As has been shown, on average boys tend to perform less well than girls and to a similar extent across all social economic class and faith identity groups. Second, while it is necessary to address the general problem of British-born Pakistani boys' underachievement across all these levels, it needs to be accepted that there are no quick-fix or universal solutions. As shown above, different Pakistani boys (and girls) attending a British state maintained

faith school still have very different experiences of education dependent upon their social economic class and different levels of faith identities. As evidence suggests, for boys and girls gender only plays a relatively minor role in dictating their levels of achievement compared to social economic class and faith identity. It is with this in mind that diverse strategies and interventions are further required that are based upon the particular needs and experiences of specific groups of boys and girls in particular contexts. Moreover, such strategies need to focus as much (if not more) on factors such as social economic class and different levels of faith identity as gender. Third, and in relation to the last point, it is important that we resist the temptation simply to replace one set of crude generalisations (i.e. concerning all Pakistani boys or girls) with another (i.e. concerning all working-class boys or Pakistani girls and so on). The fact that the combined effects of gender, social economic class and faith identity were only found to account for an insignificant the variation in GCSE attainment means that we need to be extremely wary of continuing to work with general categories. Whatever specific group we identify there will remain considerable variation within it.

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