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# ‘Crossing the Road’: The value of inclusive pedagogical practice for South Asian women in Burnley, East Lancashire

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**Abstract** In 2007, the University of Central Lancashire developed a Foundation Degree in Community Leadership. This course was initially conceived to meet a demand within the female South Asian community of Burnley for a higher education programme that would build their capacity to be more effective community activists, and moreover, a requirement for a course that would be able to meet family, cultural and social needs. The purpose of this paper is to explore the value of widening participation to higher education for South Asian women from Burnley in terms of social capital, community cohesion and contribution to the local knowledge economy. The authors used an action research methodology as part of a reflective research process influenced by the work of Paulo Freire (Freire, 1996).

This paper argues that widening participation to higher education for women from minority backgrounds is a valuable tool in addressing cultural and social segregation. Moreover, it demonstrates an added value that by broadening the knowledge economy of the Pakistani diaspora in Burnley there is a resulting resonance within the heritage domicile of Gujrat, Pakistan.<sup>1</sup>

**Key terms:** inclusion; Freire; BME; gender; community; widening participation.

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## Introduction

On the Economic Development Score Card, Burnley scores an E for most areas (North West Improvement Partnership, 2008:6). This is a district-level grade per indicator scale of A to E compiled by Local Futures, ‘where “A” places the district within the top quintile of local authorities and an “E” places it within the bottom quintile’ (North West Improvement Partnership, 2008:3). Moreover, Burnley has one of the lowest levels of educational attainment, not only locally, but also across England. The level of young people achieving the General Certificate of Secondary

Education (GCSE) on leaving high school at age sixteen is the fourth worst in England (Public Health Observatory, 2012). In the Daneshouse and Stoneyholme district, which is the focus of this study, 53% of the population have no basic qualification, including literacy (Office for National Statistics, 2001). Many parents of school-age children from the Pakistani diaspora do not speak English. This means that any information dissemination from schools regarding pupil progress must be translated into Urdu and translators are needed at meetings between school teachers and parents. There are also further issues relating to health, violent crime and poverty (Public Health Observatory, 2012). However, Burnley has another key issue, that of segregation and integration.

In 2001 social and ethnic tensions came to a head in Burnley, Oldham and Bradford, resulting in violent clashes between White and Asian groups. As a result of this, a considerable body of work was carried out to identify causes, resulting in various interventions to bring communities together, such as the Good Relations Programme in Burnley and the Cattle Report (Cantle, 2001).<sup>2</sup> However, a decade on, there are still underlying issues and a growth in support for far-right political ideologies. James Rhodes is a Research Fellow in the Department of Sociology, University of Manchester. Rhodes work on the support for far-right politics in Burnley succinctly explains the ongoing issues, and his conclusions support the Good Relations Project assertion that tensions are aggravated by myths and misunderstanding, perpetuated by a segregated community (Rhodes, 2010). Despite interventions, there are still pockets of segregation in Burnley – Daneshouse and Stoneyholme being an example – where one ethnic group is uncomfortable ‘crossing the road’ into the ‘territory’ of another (Focus Group, 2011 and *The Economist*, 2001). ‘Crossing the road’ in the context of this paper, becomes an analogy for social and educational integration.

The 2007 Commission into Integration and Segregation identified women from segregated communities as having a key role in developing cohesion and discusses ‘unlocking’ the potential of women to forge relationships and break down barriers, as was the case in Northern Ireland. However, the Commission also draws attention to the ways that women from minority backgrounds face significant cultural and social barriers in terms of personal advancement (Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007:84–5). This lack of advancement denies them both the skillset and the social capital necessary to make change. In the same year as the Commission published its findings, the Centre for Volunteering and Community Leadership (CVCL) at the University of Central Lancashire delivered a European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) community education programme to a group of 26 South Asian women from the Daneshouse and Stoneyholme area of Burnley. These women were passionate about learning, not just for themselves, but also so that they could advance their communities and become effective community leaders. However, there were significant barriers to this group achieving a higher education. Nevertheless, in the tradition of Paulo Freire (Freire, 1996:chapter 2) and on the

principles of peer-led community education, a programme was developed by the community it was to serve: the Foundation Degree in Community Leadership. This programme has become a flagship example of inclusivity and is referred to as best practice in the 2012 Joseph Rowntree Foundation Report into university-led community engagement (Robinson, Zass-Ogilvie and Hudson, 2012).<sup>3</sup>

## The Foundation Degree in Community Leadership

The validation rationale for the Foundation Degree in Community Leadership was based around local demand. Over the past decade, the government, regardless of political leaning, has placed increased emphasis on engaging the voluntary and community sector in delivering policy on cohesion, regeneration and young people. Consequently, a significant amount of responsibility has been placed within the groups of community volunteers traditionally responsible for driving community action. This engagement policy has been welcomed as it empowers communities to address salient issues. However, many excellent community activists, including the subjects of this paper, do not necessarily have the skill background to access and manage the opportunities available. The Foundation Degree seeks to address this issue and skill community activists in ways that will build their capacity in meeting local challenges. The Foundation Degree objectives include: the development of communication skills, leadership skills, project development and management; broadening of vision beyond immediate issues to see them in the context of a bigger picture; and raising levels of confidence so the students feel empowered to make a sustainable difference. This is achieved through an action/reflection praxis pedagogical model where the student applies the theory in practice (action) and then evaluates the outcomes (reflection) (Freire, 1970).

## The challenge

The challenge of developing an inclusive programme for South Asian women within this area was significant. First, the group of women are predominantly from the Burnley Gujrat Pathan (Pashtun) diaspora, with very strong community bonds and a highly conservative outlook. Most of the women are married with large and extended families to care for. Any activity outside of the home is usually frowned upon by the community. The women became interested in education through short courses offered by a community learning centre within their ward and also by word of mouth. In order to develop a programme that was both meaningful and yet accessible, a considerable amount of work had to be done with the local community and families, and also with certain elements of academia. This included visiting fathers, brothers and husbands to persuade them that the programme was culturally acceptable and that the students' religious and beliefs and traditions would be respected. Another challenge was convincing academia that the programme was

not ‘dumbing down’. This was done by developing a rigorous interview process for prospective students to ensure they would benefit from higher education. The main barriers to inclusion and to the ‘success’ of the programme have been identified as follows:

- Location: They would not be able to travel outside of their ward as this would be frowned upon for social and cultural reasons.
- Family and community disapproval: Mothers-in-law, husbands, fathers and brothers are particularly salient. The males did not approve of the women mixing with men, and the female relatives were concerned with family care being neglected and reputational dangers.
- Caring responsibilities and gender expectations: As these women have sole caring responsibilities for families and extended families, any outside interest that may impact on this would be discouraged.
- Self-esteem: Although this is an issue for many women from deprived backgrounds accessing education, it is particularly pertinent for this group as they often marry very young and have had no control in their lives.
- Relationships within the classroom: As these women come from exclusive and tight-knit communities, getting them to integrate is difficult at first. Also, interfamily tensions that go on in the community invariably come into the classroom, sometimes resulting in disputes that require an element of conflict resolution.
- Retention and attendance: Women from these communities can be sent to Pakistan at a day’s notice and not reappear for months, so reintegrating them back into the programme is also an issue.
- Institutional perceptions: That an inclusive programme based on peer education techniques is ‘dumbing down’ rather than transformational.

In order to mitigate these considerable challenges, the team from CVCL needed to have a strong presence within and be respected by the community. In fact, the CVCL needed to develop the properties that Green, Preston and Sabates associate with social capital in an educational context: trust, respect and tolerance (Green, Preston, and Sabates, 2003:3). The first barrier was location. The women would not and in some instances, could not, leave their immediate area of residence. This meant that travelling from Burnley to Preston to study for a degree was out of the question. Therefore, the CVCL team linked with a high school that was part of the Building Schools for the Future programme (BSF) with a community remit, and delivered the programme within the school. The school was well known to the women and their families as their children attended, so it was a ‘safe’ and

acceptable place to study. Although the situation was far from ideal, with limited resources and timetable clashes with the school, it was a start. As an aside to this development, University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) acquired a significant amount of funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to build a university campus, literally ‘across the road’ from Daneshouse and Stoneyholme. As the new campus developed, so did the CVCL relationship with the women and their communities, so by the time it was completed, the women felt empowered enough to make the journey across the road to the new campus with its state of the art facilities.

The issue of family and community disapproval was in some ways alleviated by the CVCL team and the relationship of the team with that community. The CVCL had been delivering projects within this area since 2000 and built up strong relationships with local community elders and institutions. Moreover, the programme course leader is from Daneshouse and Stoneyholme and stands as a local councillor. Also, 50% of the CVCL team are Muslim women who can act as positive role models and can also talk to the communities. It is also important to note the observation made in the 2008 *Ethnicity, gender and degree attainment: Final report* that ‘the presence of BME role models would help encourage further affinity with the institutional environment’ (Equality Challenge Unit, 2008:20). Nevertheless, one of the authors had to personally visit the homes of many of the women to persuade their families to let them study at higher education level. The course leader utilised his esoteric knowledge of the community culture, namely the concept of Baradarism, which is derived from the Persian meaning ‘brother’ or ‘family’. A person’s influence within a community is therefore based upon their clan connections rather than their knowledge, ideology or expertise. This concept is a fundamental element of social capital within South Asian networks and understanding this is imperative in accessing the community. Without this initial intervention, which was both costly and time consuming, the women would never have been engaged. However, now these ‘pioneering’ women have graduated and can themselves act as role models and mediators. Moreover, the programme is now accepting applications from male members of the community and they are integrating well into the classroom.

There are considerable gender pressures on the women to be mothers and carers. This is regarded as their main function within the community, and any activity that calls upon them to turn away from these culturally prescribed gender roles will not be tolerated. The relationship between gender expectations, family, home and university is inextricable. One of the most important elements to address is flexibility and timetabling that will accommodate caring and school runs. In an interview, Student A stated: ‘The degree at UCLan appealed to me because it allows women to fit in their studies around their family.’ The 46-year-old fitted in her studies around caring for her husband, who was being treated for cancer. However, as there was a strong cultural understanding between the women in the

group, informal support networks developed. These included helping each other with child care, taking notes for each other, mentoring and supporting those who were undergoing family pressures to leave the course. Over the last three years, a strong learning community has developed on this programme, which although it began as a peer support network for the South Asian women, has now become more inclusive. Gender expectations, however, still remain an issue. The *Ethnicity, gender and degree attainment* project notes that gender expectations placed on men and women were the second-biggest factor perceived to account for differential attainment after pedagogy. The final report also notes:

That taking into account caring responsibilities (which usually fall to females and cut short the amount of time they are able to dedicate to study) and discriminatory attitudes, it might be implied that if females gain better degrees than males, they do so despite the obstacles that have yet to disappear. (Equality Challenge Unit, 2008:22)

Gender pressures also affect self-esteem. There is a considerable body of work around gender and self-esteem related issues for mature women students, and there are some clear, consistent indicators relating to gender. This particular group of women have had a variety of life experiences, but what comes across strongly is that they are controlled by their family and by community culture. They tend to marry through an arrangement between parents to men from 'back home' in Pakistan, who have very strong preconceived cultural expectations of the relationship. There are a lot of issues around control as an expression of masculinity and many of the women therefore struggle with self-esteem. The women believe that this practice also slows down integration between communities (Focus Group, 2011). Getting the women to believe in their abilities to have opinions that are valid and should be listened to is initially difficult, and there is a tendency to regurgitate without critical analysis. Once the process of 'conscientisation' (Freire, 1996:59) and self-realisation has taken place, the women, who have never previously spoken out publically, find they have a voice. It is then necessary to capture and contain this through a progressive and appropriate pedagogy.

The community is based on an exclusive and bonding form of social capital that extends from the villages of Pakistan, to Burnley and then into the classroom. This affects relationships and learning quite significantly. Robert Putnam, in his work on social capital, refers to bonding communities, where networks are exclusive to particular social or, in this case, ethnic groups (Field, 2000:36–7). These communities discourage individualism and apply social control via gossip. In the words of one of the students, everyone is related (through the Pakistani tradition of consanguineous marriage), and there is no privacy with intimate details of people lives shared within family/community networks.

Managing these relationships is challenging. Hocking advocates 'creating safe collaborative spaces by setting ground rules for collaborative learning behaviour,

making time to get to know students as individuals ... Encouraging students to articulate their thinking openly in trusting, respectful environments allows all students to learn by getting stuck, being uncertain, making mistakes and being different.' (Hocking, 2010:7). What Hocking says about 'creating ground rules for collaborative learning behaviour' and 'trusting respectful environments' is very important within this context. It is very useful therefore to engage the students in dialogue around mutual respect and boundaries. The separation of the community and the learning community is not a concept the students are culturally familiar with. Discussing how the group deals with 'community and family differences' that spill over into the learning community is an important way forward in facilitating the students in setting their own group rules for collaborative learning, that embraces their culture at the same time.

One particular challenge is that of retention versus inclusion. The practice of women (and male students) departing for Pakistan with little notice starts in high school and continues into higher education. This again is an area that requires further detailed study. There has been a concerted clampdown on this practice within high schools around Burnley and Pendle, as it seriously affects the attainment levels of pupils. We have found students are pressured into dropping their studies to go to Pakistan to sort out a family problem, attend a wedding or funeral, or get married themselves (Focus Group, 2011). Due to the cost of flights, these visits are usually protracted, lasting anything from a semester to an academic year. It is then problematic to reintegrate the student back into the classroom. Moreover, the practice influences perceptions on retention and inclusion, fuelling the deficit arguments regarding non-traditional students. Robert Jones states:

The focus on retention – a narrow view of student success – is reinforced by the data collection mechanisms and funding regimes. These do not recognise interrupted or partial patterns of participation as valid, but rather perceive them in terms of either individual or institutional failure. (Jones, 2008: 1)

A senior lecturer within the CVCL, has devised a monitoring and tracking process to maintain engagement with students and their families (University of Central Lancashire School of Education and Social Science, 2012). This process builds on the concept of a learning community, where the students and identified staff meet on a weekly basis to discuss issues and also on a regular one to one basis. The retention tutor logs the outcomes of these meetings and they are shared (as appropriate) with the rest of the teaching team. This helps to identify issues before they arise so that staff can work with students to plan ways back into learning if they have to leave. This process has improved retention by around 25% since 2007, including the reintegration of four women from one cohort who all gave birth within one academic year. This process would form the basis of a separate case study article on 'Ethnicity and Retention' at a local level.

Hocking in her research synthesis on inclusivity draws attention to the ‘deficit view of students’ where non-traditional or widening participation students are regarded as having neither cultural capital nor academic ability to succeed in higher education. Hocking also notes that such students are perceived by some as requiring ‘additional resources’ and are seen as more problematic than their ‘traditional’ peers. For some, their participation in higher education is seen as having resulted in a ‘dumbing down’ of the curriculum and a ‘lowering of academic standards’ (Hocking, 2010). Hocking goes on to argue that this view is regressive. This has been a significant challenge for the programme, as many of the students speak Punjabi at home, and even if they are born in Burnley and educated locally, English is not the language they use to converse. These students also access the programme from non-traditional routes including portfolios of evidence and interviews, again leaving the door open to accusations of dumbing down. The team has developed a progressive pedagogy influenced by Freire. The process embraces Hocking’s pedagogical methodology in terms of being culturally and socially relevant, while maintaining academic rigour. By achieving consistently high standards, the programme is now proving itself academically, as well as in the ‘softer’ areas of personal development and confidence building.

## The social impact

In his prologue to the 2001 edition of Freire’s *Pedagogy of freedom*, Aronowitz predicts ‘dark times for education innovation and its protagonists’ due to ‘an over-riding purpose to prepare students, at different levels, to take their place in the corporate order’, rather than as a tool for examining their own subjectivity through ‘intellectual encounters’. Aronowitz refers to the development of critical skills being replaced by ‘training’ for employability, and moreover, he goes on to discuss the ‘new common sense’ (Aronowitz, 2001:1–19) or what Macedo describes as ‘scientism’ within education (Macedo, 2001:xi–xxxii). This rational approach to education and ‘student management’, is, in Macedo’s terms, anti-intellectual, and has particular ramifications for the inclusion and widening participation agenda (Macedo, 2001:xi–xxxii). In the first part of this paper, we have described the challenges and complexities faced in responding to a community identified need for a higher education experience, and how we have worked with the community to develop a programme that achieves its purpose. This work has required constant self-criticism in terms of our methodologies and pedagogy, which although challenging has stretched staff intellectually in ways they would have never otherwise explored.

As a result of the intellectual development initiated by the programme, we are now working with the University of Gujrat to deliver peer-led education in Pakistan (University of Gujrat, 2012). Moreover, the social impact of the programme adds value to the local knowledge economy and the women, as role models, engage

others within their communities and also 'back home' in Pakistan. Student B, a promising student and mother of three, stated that one of her development objectives from the programme was to go back to her village in Pakistan to teach other women, as they are 'hungry to learn' and 'see us as roles models' (Student B, 2012). In May 2012 the students from the Foundation Degree in Community Leadership transferred a youth peer-leadership programme they had developed as part of their applied learning and delivered in Burnley to the heritage domicile in rural Gujrat, Pakistan, in an international collaboration that will have a positive impact on young people and their communities.

Pakistan is in a unique position in terms of a youth dividend, with 60% of the population under 30 years old. However, against the demographics of promise, we also have a situation where only 50% of children attend secondary school and a privileged 5% enter higher education (British Council, 2009:7). Therefore, young people lack the skills necessary for a modern and global labour market. Young people are disillusioned with politics, but lack the capacity to actively engage with the democratic process and make positive changes (The Economist, 2012:9). The Community Leadership students from the Pakistani diaspora in Burnley have been working collaboratively with the California Association of Students Councils (CASC) to develop a peer education process based on situational problem posing. The processes will capacity build Pakistani youth to develop a 'toolkit' to 'critically examine their experience' (Elliott, 2011).

The aim of the project is to work in partnership with the University of Gujrat, to develop 40+ peer educators working in local villages to create action learning communities where young people develop skills for positive change. Thus far, the outcome was phenomenally successful. The Minister for Information visited the training as did the Pakistan Higher Education Commission. In the model developed here, student peer educators engage with young people to train them as positive role models and develop a 'toolkit' for change within their respective communities, so they can work to peer educate others, allowing the process to cascade. The 44 young trainers are now setting up a regional contingent of young peer educators who will deliver training in leadership and key skills. By capacity building and empowering youth effectively, Pakistan can capitalise on its youth dividend. The legacy is a dynamic student-led community peer development 'toolkit' for positive change.

## Conclusion

The question is, how can we value and measure the social impact of engaging these groups in higher education? A Social Return on Investment Audit (SROI) is an option. However, using methodology that places an economic value in GBP on outcomes may cloud some of the important nuances. Macedo reminds us that objectivity always contains a 'dimension of subjectivity; thus it is dialectical' (Macedo, 2001:xi-xxxii). Moreover, an SROI would devalue the broader, more

complex benefits and reduce the student to a 'unit cost'. However, we cannot dismiss outright the fact that as part of their 'applied learning', the initial group of women spent at least 5,100 hours undertaking skilled community action, equating to a contribution of £63,750.00 in volunteer time to the local knowledge economy. We would like to measure the value of engaging the students in terms of the external community beneficiaries and the accumulation of social capital beyond the streets where the women live.

In their work on education and cohesion at a societal level, Green, Preston and Sabates make an important point. They assert that social capital:

does not always translate into societal cohesion since intra-community bonding does not necessarily lead to inter-community harmony. Some types of association may be beneficial for wider societal trust and harmony, others may not be. (Green, Preston, and Sabates, 2003:3)

This is important within the context of community 'value' of inclusive educational practice and widening participation. The communities of Burnley, both White and Asian, have very high levels of 'bonding' social capital at a street level, and as Green, Preston and Sabates emphasise, this variation of social capital does not necessarily translate into social cohesion; in fact, it can have the opposite effect as an exclusive 'bonding' community will not seek to build links or bridges outside except for essential services that cannot be accessed within the immediate community. Green, Preston and Sabates acknowledge that education builds social capital in the sense that it engages the learner with broader networks at both a political and social level, but they conclude that 'some of the individual benefits may be positional so that more education for all does not increase the societal benefits'. They also draw attention to contextual factors that have an impact on societal benefits such as welfare and distributional properties (Green, Preston and Sabates, 2003:3). Although these arguments have validity in a broader sense, it is important to explore the value of inclusive education as a vehicle for social cohesion within the particular context.

Despite the diversity that contributes to the complexity of community relationships in Burnley, there is a core value that transcends difference, and that is the belief in collectivity and the community as opposed to individualism. This is extremely important when evaluating the impact of education. These students do not see education as a means of personal improvement, but more as a vehicle for the advancement of their families and community; they always want to use their new skills in helping others. It is upon this point that the argument for an inclusive education can be based, as it is not the individual that is empowered, but also the indirect beneficiaries. In this regard, all the women have become actively involved in their communities in an empowering capacity: as community educators, supporting those who do not have literacy skills; community researchers;

coordinators of social and professional networks; advisors; mentors; and in youth work and school roles. There are now over 100 students involved in this programme and the value of their learning has a resonance far beyond Burnley.

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## End notes

- <sup>1</sup> Gujrat, Pakistan, is not to be confused with Gujarat in India.
- <sup>2</sup> According to Burnley Borough Council, in 2001, rioting in Burnley was fuelled by 'the myths, misinformation and false perceptions that different community groups held about each other'. The Good Relations Programme developed by Burnley Borough Council 'initiated a mediation programme to generate open discussion about the issues, via a series of meetings and workshops. It subsequently trained 25 mediators to resolve individual conflicts. Residents gained a better understanding about their differences and forged connections with a wider circle of people, which has helped diffuse tension and build trust' (Institute of Community Cohesion, 2012).
- <sup>3</sup> In 2008/9, 21 of the original 26 women started the Foundation Degree, and of this group 17 graduated. Of the 17, 14 went on to 'top up' to a BA (Hons) in Community Leadership in September 2010; of these, 12 graduated in 2011, and 3 went on to study for an MA in Community Leadership and are still on that programme.