Young Muslim Women and Their Relation with Physical Education Lessons

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Abstract: Previous research suggests that Muslim women can experience particular problems when taking physical education (PE) lessons, for example with dress codes, mixed-teaching and exercise during Ramadan and they can face restrictions in extra-curricular activities for cultural and religious reasons. The area is under-researched and there is little evidence of comparative studies that explore similarities and differences in cross-national experiences, which is the aim of this paper. Two studies conducted in Greece and Britain that explored the views of Muslim women on school experiences of physical education are compared. Both studies focused on diaspora communities, Greek Turkish girls and British Asian women, living in predominantly non-Muslim countries. Physical education has national curriculum status and a similar rationale in both countries but with different cultures of formality and tradition, which impacted on pupils’ experiences. For the British women religious identity and consciousness of Islamic requirements were more evident than for the Greek women. Differences in stages of acculturation, historical and socio-cultural contexts contributed to less problematic encounters with physical education for Greek Muslims who appeared more closely assimilated into the dominant culture.

Keywords: Young women · Muslim · Physical education · Cultural · Religious

INTRODUCTION

According to the literature, predominantly generated in England, young Muslim women can face particular issues at school during secondary (11-18 years) physical education and sports activities as a result of either actual or perceived restrictions placed on them by their culture, sex, religion and ethnicity. It seems that all these factors can be powerful forces that restrict female participation rates [1]. The aim of this interpretive study was to examine similarities and differences in the perceptions of twenty-four Greek and twenty British Muslim women of physical education, school experiences and extra curricular sporting provision.

Islam is the fastest growing religion in the history of the world [2]. Diaspora communities of Muslims are growing in many Western countries and evidence suggests that Muslim communities and Muslim women in particular, face similar difficulties across national boundaries [3]. As the world confronts increasing challenge in relation to growing media-fuelled Islamophobia in the West and a simmering discourse of polarisation of civilisations’ between Islam and the West, it is important to examine the experiences of similar groups in different diaspora communities [4]. The rationale and value of comparative studies is “… to gain greater awareness and a deeper understanding of social reality in different national contexts” [5]. Thanks to the work of scholars such as there is a wealth of evidence about the ‘macro’ picture of the ‘promises and realities’ of physical education provision in Europe and world-wide [6]. There is less cross-national research into ‘micro’ perspectives, lived experiences and realities of students in physical education and sport, which strengthens the need for the current study [7]. Insight into the experiences of Muslim students in different contexts can contribute to improved knowledge of how complex overlays of religion, gender, culture and ethnicity impact on experience of the subject.

There has been a shift in comparative research towards recognising the importance of interpretative studies provided the societal contexts are acknowledged. The complexities of any cross-national comparative work are acknowledged, because while similarities will exist “… there are also differences and variations based in politico-

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