Abstract
This paper seeks to offer an exploration of an appropriate methodology for the study of Muslim schools in England. For this matter, it focuses on the need for an extensive contextualisation and awareness of cultural subjectivities and identifies some commonalities and dissimilarities that may influence the collection of data concerned with the culture of Muslim schools in one northern European country. The primary focus is an attempt to register the complexity of investigating cultural issues and to propose some tentative steps towards qualitative research that will tell the story of a significant development within state education in England.

Keywords:
schooling system, culture, identity, methodology, and qualitative research

1. Introduction

In the diverse English schooling system, comparisons, whether explicit or implicit, made between schools and the roles of actors within them are likely to use culture as a fundamental concept. Culture itself is a ubiquitous and multi-layered term that demands caution in its definition. Its use as a tool of analysis and interpretation also raises important issues of bias and political vested interests, possibly, if not probably, in all parties to the project. In any study of Islam and Muslim schools, whether or not set in a western context, the seemingly automatic attitudes of some western observers have to be noted and considered in depth. This is necessary lest such observers unthinkingly adopt the stance of orientalism, which Edward Said (1978, 1997), amongst others, has discussed as the western style for dominating, restructuring and interpreting Islam on western terms.

While acknowledging Said’s argument, it is also important to note that Islam in the West is itself undergoing change. As part of this change, Muslim schools are engaged in creating an identity for the school, the students and the larger communities associated with them. Most Muslim schools in England are multi-ethnic and draw children from a wide range
of social and economic backgrounds. Although mono-faith they portray diverse interpretations of Islam. While respecting and supporting the cultural diversity within their student population these schools are also preparing young people for contemporary English society. It would not be an exaggeration to describe their task as developing a kind of English Islam, which is new and is finding its way and its identity within this new context.

The focus of this article is to discuss the considerations that must be addressed when devising a methodology with which to study publicly funded Muslim schools in England. In this context, there is a shared language of public everyday usage, namely English. So, it might appear that any significant methodological concerns might revolve around the technicalities of operationalisation, specifically those of data collection. However, it could be that something more profound and complicated is also present. There is interaction between culture and the meanings people acquire and attribute to events. So though, a ‘shared language’ seems to imply ‘shared meaning’, it could be that the ‘shared language’ often taken for granted sometimes conceals the subjectivity of different cultures or leads to simplistic and sometimes inaccurate ‘translations’ from the studied culture to the one in which the research study is framed (Trautmann, 1987). This could be particularly so in a northern European context where certain religions and cultural traditions have only comparatively recently coexisted in a multi-culturalised context. So as a research project is progressed through the stages of designing of a methodology, collecting and analysing data about Muslim schools in England, the omnipresent challenge will be the need to be self-reflexive about the nature of the cultural subjectivity brought by all participants to the process.

The structure of this article is as follows. For the readers unfamiliar with the English schooling system, we say something about the English dual system and the place Muslim schools occupy in it (section 2). Next we consider the complexity of culture and especially focus on the relationship between culture and identity (section 3). The subsequent section (4), then, constitutes the core of this paper. It is here that we reflect on certain key-aspects of an appropriate methodology for studying Muslim schools. We end our discussion by drawing some conclusions regarding data collection and validity (section 5)

2. THE ENGLISH DUAL SYSTEM

State funding of Christian schools has a comparatively long history in England. In 1833, the British government paid small grants to the educa-