Beyond Myths of 'Muslim Education'

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Beyond Myths of Muslim Education: A Case Study of Two Iranian 'Supplementary' Schools in London

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Abstract:

This article has two aims. First, it is concerned with a discourse in British media and politics of 'Muslim education', a concept that often appears alongside words such as 'extremism 'and 'radicalisation' and contributes to the undue 'religification' of people of Muslim backgrounds. I offer a preliminary analysis of this discourse arguing that the description of an educational setting as 'Muslim' opens up a social and political space in which certain types of action can occur, including fundamentally undermining the educational integrity of the setting in question. Second, the article considers original ethnographic data from two Iranian 'supplementary' schools in London as a way to push beyond a mere critique of Islamophobia towards a new theoretical framework. Drawing in particular on the concept of diaspora, the framework accounts for the highly creative, and potentially innovative, modalities of citizenship and education practice that exist in diasporic communities from Muslim backgrounds. With reference to Thomas' (2011) work on the strength of case studies to develop 'exemplary knowledge' (rather than abstract theory), I sketch out some ideas for a theory of 'diasporic education'.

Key words: Muslim schooling; Muslim education; Islamophobia; diaspora; diasporic education

Introduction:

A problematic type of discourse around 'Muslim education' exists in British politics and media. Drawing on

familiar Islamophobic tropes of 'alien', 'fundamentalist/terrorist', 'anti-Western' and so on, and representing

a religified image of Muslims as a monolithic global community (cf. Ghaffar-Kucher 2011; Shryock 2010;

Werbner 2005), this discourse problematises educational spaces and activities associated with

communities from Muslim backgrounds (or from Muslim majority countries). As I show below, the discourse

has three effects/powers. (1) By deploying education-related categories and concepts (e.g. types of school)

in a particular way, it opens up a social and political space in which 'Islam' and 'education' can be viewed

and talked about as essentially incompatible categories. Thus, the mere description in the public sphere of

an educational setting as 'Muslim' is enough for the educational integrity of that setting to become

fundamentally questioned and even dismissed altogether. (2) In problematising Muslim educational spaces,

the discourse takes issue with the nature of Muslims' identities and British citizenship. That is, it depicts

educational spaces associated with Muslims as secretive, abusive, anti-British spaces in which children are

corrupted and potentially radicalised. (3) Problematic practices of an 'Islamist' nature which may exist in a

handful of schools are projected onto 'Muslim education' as a general (and religious) category, glossing over the diversity of educational provision – often dynamic and innovative – in Muslim contexts.

Panjwani (2004) has already written critically about a three-pronged contemporary Islamic discourse that offers an Islamic vision for education, a particular conception of Islam, and strategies for the implementation (in the West) of 'Islamic education'. As Panjwani shows, what these advocates of Islamic education share with the Islamophobic voices I am interested in is a highly monolithic and simplistic understanding of Islam (cf. ibid.: 22). Such simplicity usually results from an inadequate understanding of, or deliberately disregarding, the empirical complexities of Muslim contexts. This highlights a need for more empirical insight into particular modalities and instances of education within minorities from Muslim backgrounds, something this article seeks to contribute by drawing on research in two Iranian schools in London. These schools rely on robust and potentially innovative educational models and provide productive spaces for children and young people to learn academically whilst positively exploring their identities and citizenships. As we will see, the notion of citizenship discussed and foregrounded in these schools is very different from that imagined and taught in the English national curriculum. Thus, the research presented here will go some way towards challenging the religification of people from Muslim backgrounds whilst shedding light on their positive educational activities. I believe that in the era of globalised late-modernity and the challenges thrown up by it – e.g. problems of social diversity and inequality and the need for new models of citizenship and social policy to address global economic, security and environmental questions – such educational spaces and practices offer concrete ideas/strategies that should be taken seriously by theorists, educators and policy-makers.

As such, the article seeks to go beyond the mere critique of Islamophobic currents in mainstream Western culture and politics. Plenty of academic literature exists that deals with Islamophobia in education, the media and elsewhere (e.g. Ghaffar-Kucher 2011; Cannizzaro and Gholami 2016; Poole 2000; Shryock 2010). Useful though this body of knowledge is, it usually resigns itself to documenting Islamophobia – defined here as any situation or practice, especially in Western societies, in/through which Islam and Muslims are hated or feared (Shryock 2010: 2) – and analysing its practices and dynamics. However, I think it is urgently important to also develop new theoretical frameworks for approaching the 'supplementary' educational initiatives of ethnic and religious minorities settled within Western nation-

states. This urgency is owed to the fact that the diversity of educational and citizenship practices in 'Muslim' contexts must no longer be ignored but rather better understood and allowed to inform wider debates, policies and practices, especially given the alarming rise of public Islamophobia and its influence on Western politics probably for years to come.

To contribute to the development of such a theoretical framework, I will make particular use of the concept of diaspora, which is perhaps less familiar to scholars in education studies, including those who have focused on supplementary schooling (e.g. Chevannes and Reeves 1987; Mac an Ghaill 1991; Reay and Mirza 1997; Isik-Ercan 2014; Tsolidis and Pollard 2010; Shirazi 2014). The concept is not only very useful for addressing questions of citizenship, belonging and diversity in contemporary society but is also a powerful theoretical force which enables new insights into the educational practices of minority communities settled in Western nation-states. Specifically, I propose the concept of 'diasporic education' to denote a set of new theoretical ideas with important implications for identity and citizenship as well as for pedagogic and curricular work. In 'diasporic education' I am not claiming to advance a general theory of education. Rather, I use my case study to develop what Thomas (2011) calls 'exemplary knowledge' whose value lies not in abstract notions of generalisability but exactly in that it offers context-specific, nuanced ideas that other theorists and practitioners can engage with in their own work. That said, I firmly believe that the model proposed here can be applied beyond the specific case because of its use of 'diaspora'. As I will discuss, my conception of diasporas is that they are permanent, normal and significant features of the contemporary world and that they occupy a unique position in transnational and local spheres that makes them extremely potent agents of cosmopolitanism (cf. Brubaker 2005; Tololyan 2007; Beck 2002; Gholami 2017).

The Islamophobic Discourse of 'Muslim Education':

Negative representations of Muslims are certainly nothing new in the West and have drawn public attention particularly after 2001 (Kassimeris and Jackson 2011; Richardson 2001; Khiabany and Williamson 2008). However, it is possible to argue that 'public Islamophobia' has taken on a new intensity, becoming much more normalised and acrimonious since 2009, even as its opponents have continued to be vociferous. The English Defence League, Britain First, similar political groups in other European countries such as AFD

(Alternative für Deutschland) in Germany, and Pan-European movements like PEGIDA have all been formed after 2009 and *all* highlight as one of their founding principles an opposition to Islam (thinly veiled as an opposition to 'Islamification'). We must also not forget that the harrowing massacre which Anders Breivik perpetrated in Norway in 2011 had a chiefly anti-Islamic motive.

This rise in large-scale organised Islamophobia is usually attributed to more recent events including the growth of *Daesh*, attacks of an 'Islamist' nature in Western cities, and the huge influx of refugees into Europe from Syria. These events have no doubt played their part. But one can also add the impact of the financial crash after 2008, which intensified the rising tide of disaffection and dispossession, helping populist far-right leaders such as Nigel Farage, Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen to increase their allure by blaming the West's socio-economic problems on 'immigrants' and promising to address 'the Muslim problem'. As a result, 'Muslims' – or those 'looking Muslim' – have now cemented their place as the West's hate figures. As countless social media campaigns and individual accounts demonstrate (for example #MakeAMovieIslamic on Twitter, or tellmamauk.org), Islamophobia is not only reaching new heights in terms of crassness and vitriol, it is also becoming extremely casual.

Meanwhile, some Western governments have found this perfect storm politically expedient. The vilification of Muslims has been helpful in deflecting attention away from social, economic and human crises which arguably governments and corporations are responsible for (cf. Fernando 2009). Thus, in recent years we have witnessed the expansion of policies that ostensibly tackle all forms of extremism yet can be shown to unduly single out people of Muslim backgrounds. The UK's PREVENT policy, which since 2015 has required teachers to spot 'signs of radicalisation' in their pupils (using a vague and problematic 'vulnerability assessment framework') and to intervene by referring them to higher authorities (known as 'Channel'), is a case in point. Not only is the language of the policy itself curiously biased towards Islam/Muslims, there is evidence that schools in England are disproportionally targeting Muslim children, for example by collecting data on religious affiliation and treating common religious expressions as potential signs of radicalisation (Muslim Council of Britain 2015; Guardian 2015; Open Society 2016). Similar policies can be found in other European countries too, such as France's recent 'burkini' ban and Germany's new citizenship laws under which the German citizenship of 'terrorists' can be rescinded. The effectiveness of such policies is certainly open to question: the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) reports that 80 percent of

cases referred to Channel under counter-terrorism legislation between 2006 and 2013 were rejected (MCB op. cit.). And it is not clear – at least not to me – how banning a woman from wearing a headscarf on a beach will prevent another terrorist attack.

It is in this context that the Islamophobic discourse of Muslim education is playing out. It pivots almost exclusively on the two meta-narratives identified above (post-9/11 concerns with Islamist terrorism and the financial crash), which frame debates even when there is no justifiable reason for them to do so. For example, in a recent quantitative study of the press coverage of the 'Trojan Horse' news story in the UK, Cannizzaro and Gholami found that across the political spectrum 61.5 percent of newspaper coverage described the story with reference to Islamist extremism and terrorism, when issues of poor school governance were equally, if not more, relevant. As a result, the Trojan Horse affair was covered predominantly as an issue of Islamist extremism (Cannizzaro and Gholami 2016). The upshot of such an unbalanced and arbitrary representation in the case of 'Muslim education' is that educational spaces associated with Muslims are regarded foremost with suspicion as sites of extremism, or at best as sites of education-gone-bad. In an age of austerity, this draws even more public rancour, making it a social, political, legal and *moral* duty to stop 'Muslim schooling'.

Examples for this sort of coverage abound across British media, including in left-wing outlets (see for example BBC 2014; Daily Mail 2016; the Guardian 2011). However, space permits me only to discuss one here. In December 2015, the Daily Mail, a right-wing paper, reported:

> Clampdown on 'abusive' secret Muslim schools: Illegal madrassas to face prosecution after Ofsted warns children are at risk of radicalisation. Ofsted said it has uncovered unregistered Muslim faith schools which keep pupils in squalid conditions and teach a 'narrow' Islamic curriculum. Education watchdog found 15 such 'hidden' schools in the past year. Taskforce will be set up to investigate and prosecute such schools.

What is above all interesting is the confusing conflation of 'school', 'madrassa' and 'faith school', which in the UK describe very different forms of schooling. A faith school has a distinctly religious ethos whereas 'school' is a generic descriptor for state or private comprehensives. The word 'Madrassa' can be used across the Middle East to mean 'school' generally, though in the West it is most often associated with a particular form of Qur`an school. Yet they are in this case collectively used to refer to a particular type of

'Muslims school' – one which is illegal, squalid, abusive and potentially radicalises children. I would argue that this discursive device does not refer to but in fact helps to create the idea of such a school. Furthermore, juxtaposed to the militant language of 'task force' and 'prosecution', implying a justified war on and annihilation of 'Muslim schools', are the heroic efforts of Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and skills – the UK government's education watchdog) in uncovering and eradicating the problem, thus affirming the importance of the state's continued surveillance of Muslim communities and its guardianship of mass education generally. Of course, the private school sector, from which the children of the richest and most powerful benefit, is not and has never been subject to state intervention in the same way. However, the discourse of Muslim education is dismissive of the very notion that Muslim people might enjoy a similar relationship with the state presumably because 'Muslims' cannot be trusted and will incline towards extremism and terrorism if not monitored – all the more interesting since of the 156 Muslim schools that were officially registered in the UK in 2013, 142 were independent schools (Association for Muslim Schools 2013).

Education in the Iranian Diaspora:

Earlier I mentioned that an effective challenge to Islamophobia requires going beyond critical analysis and developing theories and practices which account for modes of agency that always-already contest absolutism and essentialism at national *and* ethnic/denominational levels. Here, 'always-already' refers to the fact that their contestation is not necessarily organised but happens as a given part of their everyday living, comprising their mundane, un-radical and sometimes even un-self-conscious activities. Such modes of agency exist among diasporic groups (cf. Cohen 2010), though the way 'diaspora' is conceived of is very important, as I discuss below. The educational institutions of the UK's Iranian diaspora are a fertile ground for studying these processes of agency (see also Gholami 2017).

Since 2012 I have been involved in research on a range of Iranian educational settings in Britain. Some of these are affiliated with a specific religious or ethnic group while others offer support for particular social and political needs such as English language skills and citizenship tests. The majority, however, are non-denominational, non-aligned schools that offer tuition in Farsi (Persian language) as well as mainstream subjects like English, mathematics and science. Typically, these schools have been set up and

are staffed by Iranian teachers. I have had the opportunity to work especially closely with two such schools based in north London. One of these is *Rustam School*, recognised by many as the UK's leading Iranian school with over 300 students and fifty-four staff on its roll. The second school, which will be referred to here by the pseudonym *Dabir School* to respect their wishes for anonymity, is also a relatively large operation comprising around 120 students and twenty-six staff. Both schools operate on Saturdays, though extra classes can be scheduled during the week in the evenings if there is demand. They are by and large funded through tuition fees, though they do compete, with inconsistent success, for funding from organisations such the Heritage Lottery Fund. In terms of recruitment, they mainly serve their local areas, but this is not school policy and admission is non-selective in every aspect. They teach across all Key Stages, while Dabir also offers A-Level and Adult tuition. The age range of the students generally reflects this, although the bulk of students at both schools tend to be of compulsory-education age, and the vast majority of teaching is focused around Key Stages 2, 3 and 4. As for students' social background, many come from lower-middle and middle-class backgrounds, but the schools are committed to being accessible to working-class children as well. For example, Dabir's proximity to a well-known deprived part of north London has made it attractive to many poor families. The Head Teacher, therefore, relies on volunteers in many aspects of school operation to keep costs down whilst adopting a 'case-by-case' admissions policy, which means that some parents could potentially pay less in tuition fees. Finally, the schools emphasise as part of their mission a commitment to helping children and young people to succeed in Britain by offering them a rounded education consisting of tuition in Persian and core national-curriculum subjects, as well as providing an array of cultural and artistic activities. It is important to note, however, that Persian is increasingly not a given subject, for reasons I will discuss below. Dabir, for example, has separated its Persian provision from the rest of its operation.

My research in these schools has primarily been ethnographic. In addition to visiting both of them regularly and conducting interviews and focus groups with staff, parents and pupils, I carried out participant observation at Dabir School for nearly six months between January and June 2013. This involved teaching Key Stage 2 and GCSE level English to children whilst offering English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes for adults. It also involved playing a full role in the normal operation of the school by attending staff meetings, marking students' work and meeting with parents. Before being allowed to teach at the school I

had to produce my qualifications, submit a copy of my passport and undergo a full Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check to confirm my eligibility to work with minors.

Two points warrant particular attention: the ethnic diversity of the student body and the diversity of educational provision. These were salient features in both schools as well as in my own classes. My Key Stage 2 group consisted of a total of eight children five of whom were of Iranian descent. Of the remaining three, two were of Turkish and one of Indian background. All the children were British born and raised, and the medium of instruction was English. My GCSE class had nine students four of whom were Turkish, two Indian, two Iranian and one White-British – again, all British born and raised. And although I was not able to obtain definitive records, I knew from observing other classes and conversing with other teachers that ethnic diversity was wide-spread across the school – other ethnicities included Polish, Kurdish, Serbian, Afghan and Pakistani. As for the diversity of educational provision, Dabir had in the previous few years steadily expanded the subjects it offered. In addition to English, mathematics, science and Persian, older students could now also take courses in accountancy, web development and graphic design, as well as EFL and IELTS.

Rustam School, too, has begun to appeal to a more ethnically diverse clientele whilst offering a range of health and well-being related courses such as ante-natal classes. As Mrs. Taheri-White, Head Teacher of Rustam, explained to me, this expansion reflects wider social, cultural and economic shifts. She told me that offering only Persian-language classes no longer made sense because it was increasingly difficult to meet Iranian children whose mother tongue was in fact Persian. Provision must therefore be suited to the particular needs of these children as permanent British citizens – though that is not to say they have lost all interest in and contact with Iranian culture and language. By the same token, schools such as Rustam and Dabir find themselves in a cut-throat economic climate in which sustained funding is extremely difficult to obtain. They thus have to compete with many other organisations and accommodate funders' expectation that the school provide a 'wide-reaching' and 'valuable' public/community service. Of course, in such an environment it also makes business sense to exploit the massive local demand across all ethnicities for supplementary tuition in English, mathematics and science. These trends, then, have not only significantly diversified Iranian schools but have put a logic of diversification at the heart of their ethos.

Importantly, diversification brings with it a number of pedagogic and curricular challenges. Rustam and Dabir have found that the text books they have for years relied on – i.e. those used in Iran – are no longer adequate as they are too culturally and educationally alien, for example because of their emphasis on instilling values of Shi`a piety. They are therefore inappropriate for use in a diverse classroom and tend to alienate Iranian children as much as others. This is partly why Dabir has separated its Persian provision from the rest of its operation – i.e. as the school's central focus has turned to 'education' more generally and targeting a diverse local demographic, Persian has become an elective subject. More importantly, the schools have begun to address this issue by taking some innovative steps. Rustam, for example, has been developing brand new educational materials, including entire text books. What is particularly important to emphasise is that they are developing these materials in collaboration with other Iranian schools around the world – Rustam actively works with schools in Australia, Canada and Germany. Teachers also sometimes use 'non-traditional' techniques such as 'mixing up' and re-interpreting mainstream materials (i.e. bringing together a seemingly disparate range of teaching materials to create a sort of hybrid 'collage' that is then used to teach a particular topic), adapting games played in different cultures and a variety of online resources. The primary source/arbiter of pedagogic and curricular development, then, is not the state; nor is it – as may be the case in some other sub-national groups – denominational or ethno-political forces. The source, rather, are the teachers and students as they creatively work and re-work their experiences. Crucially, these experiences and the pedagogies they produce are 'diasporic'. In other words, teachers and students use their local and transnational connectivity, as well as the particularity of their experiences, to develop materials that are locally germane but equally applicable globally.

Mrs. Taheri-White as well as management and staff at Dabir agreed that educational materials must be directly relevant to a young person's daily living whilst affirming and empowering him/her as an equal citizen of the country in which he/she resides. Thus, staff and students at the schools imagine and approach the notion of 'British citizenship' fundamentally differently than the mainstream sector, as I discuss below. Furthermore, the diasporic nature of education means that issues of identity, citizenship and belonging, as well as general questions about effective pedagogies and curricula, are discussed in local spaces that are transnationally connected – spaces that are neither fully regulated by the state nor by any specific denominational, ethnic or political belief system. The strategies resulting from such discussions

tend to be far more cosmopolitan than anything found in national or ethnic/denominational systems (see Gholami 2017). They can be immediately implemented in those same spaces, and their implementation has a definite impact on local and national structures as the very same children, parents and teachers go about their 'normal' lives in state schools and other parts of mainstream society.

But there is a bigger issue at stake here. The majority of the teachers and parents I spoke to during my research believed that there is a dearth of affirming and empowering teaching in the mainstream sector in relation to ethnic minority children. In other words, they felt that while the school system in general is quite clear as to how ethnic/religious minorities are expected to behave, and despite talk of Britain being an inclusive multicultural society, ethnic and religious minorities – especially Muslims – were ultimately regarded as 'un-British'. This should not detract from the genuinely positive efforts of some schools/practitioners in the mainstream sector to combat inequalities; however, ethnic/religious inequality was a recurrent theme in the research (see also Shain 2011; ComRes 2016) As one middle-aged male teacher at Dabir opined:

> I'm not surprised that [exclusion] happens to my generation. But our children were born here and grew up here…It's sad. They spend the first few years of their life thinking they're proper Brits. But then they slowly find out that they're not – or at least some people think they're not. That happened to my daughter…In a way I think our generation is luckier.

And he could see no significant evidence in mainstream education to contradict or attempt to remedy this. If anything, mainstream approaches made the situation worse – a view echoed by a Turkish mother:

> You know, they talk a lot about multiculturalism and that sort of thing in the schools here. Every week there is some sort of 'celebration' [doing 'air quotes'] of another religion or something. But I've never actually seen anything in the schools that actually (sic.) makes the kids feel good about themselves, you know. They actually end up feeling worse about themselves and where they come from.

What this parent was concerned about is the superficial and monolithic nature of cultural and religious 'celebrations' in mainstream schools as a result of which, she felt, many children feel embarrassed at being

associated with a particular religion, ethnicity or nationality. As I mentioned above, ideas of British citizenship and identity are radically different in the Iranian schools. And this is especially relevant today in the wake of the statutory obsession with 'fundamental British values' and the events of the Brexit vote, which seem to have created sharper lines of division in what it means to be British. Generally, the Iranian schools approach both Britishness and any specific ethnic/national/religious identity as open-ended and mutually constitutive concepts. At every opportunity, children and young people are encouraged to reflect upon and question their identities whilst also learning about their rights and duties as British citizens; they are taught to use their various identities and citizenships as counter-narratives to one another, which for the young people helps to elucidate the most and least 'valuable' aspects of those identities, highlight potential hypocrisies and/or extremisms, and increase their agency.

To give an example, a colleague and I had noticed that our GCSE English Literature students often raised issues of identity and citizenship in relation to the poems they were studying. We therefore decided to encourage this more by way of better structured discussions and reflection tasks. Before long, we had a wealth of highly analytical and reflexive contributions which did not just interpret the poems but also critically examined the structure and context of the curriculum and the aims of the GCSE exam as a whole. For instance, one day a Turkish boy in my class made the observation that the subject matter of poems seemed to vary depending on the race of the poet: whereas white poets often wrote about what he called 'normal boring stuff' (such as picking blackberries), non-white poets seemed mainly to write about 'dark' issues like slavery, genocide and mass poverty. He said that he had tried to raise this question at his comprehensive school but that no one, including his teachers, was interested in discussing it in depth. We then devoted the rest of our lesson to talking about it – a conversation during which the young man himself reflected upon the validity of his ideas and outlined his reasoning. At one point an Iranian boy interjected: "It's because they're trying to get us to only write about certain things…" The other students seemed largely to agree with that statement. But I questioned him on 'us' (and later 'they'). This led, among other things, to a discussion about issues of social solidarity and otherness. Through such discussions, my colleague and I encouraged students to grapple with the complexities of identity and how to approach them in texts/discourses.

Students often told me that they found our discussions valuable. Potentially the most important outcome of the discussions, I think, was that the young people began using them in their daily lives as a

way to reflect upon and explore the world around them. During an interview, the Turkish boy from the above episode told me that he often walked around with a sense of pressure and guilt because he felt unable to express his ideas or was made to feel that it was wrong even to have such ideas. 'In school,' he said, 'if you talk about certain things in a certain way, then people might think you're a trouble-maker.' He did not hold any extreme views whatsoever: as in the example above, he merely had questions about the consistency of claims of racial/ethnic/religious equality in Britain and notions of British citizenship. But he had not found his mainstream school a suitable place to explore these questions. Similarly, he did not feel comfortable talking to his parents or other Turkish acquaintances, because they were usually concerned to 'prove' to him it was better to be Turkish anyway. But during his time at Dabir he had come to understand that his questions were most valid and had learned ways to explore them productively. In short, he had understood that he did not need to define himself as 'either/or' and to do so in a rush.

It should be noted that this approach to identity and citizenship was not reserved for a certain timetabled class at Dabir but was integrated throughout the provision both formally and casually. The Head Teacher, for example, routinely had discussions with individual or groups of students and parents about their short and long term plans. These conversations, some of which I participated in, raised critical questions about the multiple identities of the students and weighed up their ambitions against the expectations, challenges and opportunities of respective cultures as well as wider British society. Often, there seemed to be a sort of 'minority-bond' between the Head Teacher and the parent that made it easier to discuss these issues more candidly. On a number of occasions parents conceded that they had to reconsider certain cultural preferences; just as at other times their worries about 'British society' were assuaged through a critique of national policies or examples from communities in other countries.

Towards a Theory of 'Diasporic Education'

It is hopefully clear by now that the concept of diaspora in this context does not seek to describe experiences of traumatic expulsion from or a sense of longing for a 'homeland'; nor can it be summed up by a checklist of common features (cf. Safran 1991; see also Clifford 1994). Rather, as Tololyan (2007) has argued, 'diaspora' comprises the discourses and practices of *settled* minority communities that cannot be thought of as belonging 'fully' in either the host or the home country. But I would also echo Brubaker (2005) in

seeing diaspora as a 'category of practice'. As such, it has the capacity 'to make claims, to articulate projects, to formulate expectations, to mobilize energies, to appeal to loyalties…It does not so much seek to *describe* the world as seek to *remake* it' (Brubaker 2005: 12, emphasis in original). Previous research has shown how this modality of practice can undermine the nation-state, though it may also favour the particular ethno-national, religious or political desires of a diasporic group (e.g. Gilroy 1993; Anthias 1998). However, the diasporic groups I have worked with do not aim to subvert their host or home country and establish in its place their own utopia. In fact, as we saw, they often place great emphasis on living successful lives within host countries, which entails being integrated and law-abiding citizens. Rather, it is the particularity of their positioning in relation to their country of settlement and other diasporic groups within and beyond it that gives them their unique mode of agency. Such a positioning produces circumstances of social, political and cultural engagement which in turn give rise to novel, and more egalitarian, modes of practice, interaction and citizenship. This novelty is owed to the fact that diasporic groups often prefigure the global and the cosmopolitan in their concrete, local, everyday actions, thus gradually (sometimes pragmatically) transcending/transgressing national and ethnic/denominational essentialisms to produce social change without top-down or bottom-up hegemonies.

'Diasporic education', then, proceeds from a critique of nationalistic systems of education policy, philosophy and practice. Given the increasingly complex and globally-interconnected nature of the contemporary world, and given the considerable evidence implicating nationalised education in causing and perpetuating inequalities (e.g. Gillborn 2008; Troyna 1984), I believe that the best future for education (however defined) is one in which the grip of nation-states on it is *gradually* undone. It is also in part through this undoing that problems of Islamophobia, which in recent years has become entangled in state-provided education especially through counter-extremism policies like 'PREVENT' in the UK, can be resolved. By the same token, diasporic education also challenges narrow ethnic/denominational models of education. In a super-diverse post-metropolis like London, a consistently homogeneous ethnic/denominational experience is increasingly difficult to guarantee, sustain and defend, including in education.

A rejection of a rigid insistence on the national or the ethnic/denominational necessarily puts education on a trajectory towards 'the cosmopolitan' (see Beck 2002). A cosmopolitan educational vision is not uncommon. Many academics and Third Sector organisations, and even some national governments,

have begun to acknowledge the importance of 'global education' or education for 'global citizenship' (see Osler 2010, 2015; Bourn 2014; Nussbaum 2009; Oxley and Morris 2013). But whereas governmental and non-governmental organisations tend to retain 'the national' in their conceptions of 'the global' or define the latter in keeping with specific political aims, academics often posit ideas that require a great deal of radical top-down or bottom-up change (cf. Held 2010; Beck 2002). By contrast, diasporic education *does not call for an immediate radical subversion* of national or ethnic systems from above or below. Taking its cue from the often pragmatic, rhizomatic and decidedly 'un-radical' ways in which diasporic communities deal with local, national and global currents on a daily basis, it argues that such diasporic modes of agency are a progressively common feature of the contemporary world and transform it positively through their own impetus. In other words, positive, and potentially radical, social change *is* gradually happening from within the late-modern world; and diasporic groups – due to the uniqueness of their social, political and cultural positionings – play an important role in it, as is well-exemplified in instances of 'diasporic education'. And although my ideas are based on the Iranian diaspora, the ability of diasporas to generate cultural cross-fertilisation and produce hybrid/creole identities, indeed 'new ethnicities', is well documented. So, too, is their impact on local and national contexts (e.g. *inter alia* Hannerz 1987; Gutzmore 1993; Hall 1996; Alleyene 2002; Eisenlohr 2006; Cohen 2010).

Finally, there is the issue of the 'supplementary' nature of the education discussed here. I have argued elsewhere (Gholami 2017) that it would be erroneous, perhaps unfair, to refer to schools like Dabir and Rustam only as supplementary, which implies that they merely add support in certain subjects to what students are already learning in the mainstream sector. That is, of course, an element of what they do. But as the foregoing has shown, especially when it comes to issues of identity and citizenship, students in the state sector are often being let down by myopic and potentially Islamophobic policies and pedagogies (see also Maylor et al. 2006). This is all the more exacerbated in the current climate where ethnic minority youth, especially those from Muslim backgrounds, are under enormous pressure to continually 'prove' that they do not harbour anti-Western views and have to live in fear of monitoring and censorship. If anything, the state sector can learn a great deal from the schools discussed here. As such, I suppose it would be possible to call these schools supplementary in the sense that they are making up a serious deficit in the national

system, similar to when someone takes supplementary vitamins to 'top up' a shortfall. But that would still not do justice to the wealth of potential at these schools.

Given the fact that their potential for innovation is mainly derived from their diasporicity – i.e. their settlement within 'host' countries; their difference from host and home country; their concrete transnational collaborations – and the fact that their mode of practice, however mundane or un-self-conscious, challenges the 'closure' of absolutist national and ethnic/denominational ideologies, I think these schools should be thought of as *diasporic schools* and the education they offer as *diasporic education*. In order to facilitate theoretical and practical engagement, I would propose that diasporic education has five key features (see also Gholami 2017). It refers to concrete educational practices that:

1. Come to exist through the transnational connections of diasporic communities;
2. Engage and problematise notions of 'home' and 'host' (and thus 'self', 'other');
3. Are aimed at improving the lives of diasporan children as settled citizens of 'host' nation-states, usually in ways that fall outside the ability/willingness of mainstream education;
4. Prevent the 'closure' of essentialist hegemonies at national and ethnic/denominational levels;
5. Cannot be ultimately regulated by national or ethnic/denominational policies/ideologies.

This preliminary list of features can of course be amended. For example, other theorists may choose to focus less on 'diasporic communities' and more on 'transnational connections' (feature 1) and the ways these impact on educational ideas and practices in various communities. Similarly, the third feature could include more than just 'diasporan children': given the growing demographic diversity I have described, this is a very feasible prospect. Or, entirely new features may be added (perhaps at the expense of those listed here). As I have mentioned, my aim here is not to present a general theory but a set of theoretical insights derived from my case study that others may choose to engage with. What is crucially important in my discussion of diasporic education, and what I hope others will seriously explore in their own contexts, is that contemporary educational models can be developed in a collaborative global arena that is neither regulated by nation-states nor by ethnic/denominational belief systems *yet impacts upon them*. In this way, diasporic education can come to be seen as a set of educational principles that takes us away from myopic

nationalistic and ethnic/denominational models towards more egalitarian and cosmopolitan ones. These models are fully germane to local realities, promising everything that nationalised education and citizenship promise. But they do so in a way that is consistent with the complex realities of the contemporary/future world, and especially by instilling a sense of cosmopolitan citizenship in children and young people which is concrete and practicable without being forced from above or below.

Conclusion:

The particular value of a case study such as this one lies not in any notion of generalisation, but rather in the fact that the cases considered mount an explicit challenge to the highly religified image of people from Muslim backgrounds as well as to the Islamophobic discourse of Muslim education (cf. Thomas 2011). As we saw, neither Dabir nor Rustam foregrounds religion/Islam (or secularism for that matter), and their pupils are invariably prepared to lead meaningful and successful lives as British citizens. To that end – and in response to local and global dynamics – the schools are also producing some innovative pedagogies and materials. Thus, they demonstrate that the persistent religification of Muslims in the public sphere is inaccurate whilst blinding educationalists, policy-makers and the wider public to the diverse and novel educational practices that exist in Muslim contexts. By the same token, the cases also highlight the negative impact of religification and public Islamophobia. Teachers at Dabir, for example, described regularly how they had seen public perception of them and their school change negatively in recent years, and teachers and parents often mentioned with frustration that the Islam depicted in the media was drastically different from the Islam they practiced, if they practiced it at all. The importance of empirical research to challenge these trends can therefore not be overestimated.

Perhaps the greatest strength of case studies, however, as Thomas (2011) notes, is their ability to generate 'exemplary knowledge' – i.e. knowledge that is not abstracted to a context-free realm of theory but works through '[an] example *viewed and heard* in the context of another's experience…but *used* in the context of one's own…the example is not taken to be representative, typical or standard, nor is it exemplary in the sense of being a model or an exemplar' (Thomas 2011: 31 emphasis in original). In this light, my aim has also been to sketch out some ideas for a theory of diasporic education, not necessarily a generalisable

theory but a set of context-specific insights that can influence thinking, practice, dialogue and policy. The rationale for this is that approaches to pedagogy and curriculum at schools such as those studied here are potentially so innovative, and therefore relevant to pressing educational questions, that subsuming them under the category of 'supplementary' does not do them justice. Chief among their interesting features is that they are being developed and delivered in spaces that are locally very diverse, transnationally connected and beyond the ultimate control of any given national government or ethnic/denominational ideology. Thus, although their primary aim is the success of minority children in host countries, they produce counter-narratives, opportunities for self/other-exploration and modalities of citizenship which at once contest any essentialism arising from national and ethnic/denominational positions and prevent their full 'closure'. As such, I believe that 'diasporic education' – as a concept and/or mode of praxis – can be relevant beyond diasporic communities. It addresses questions central to social change and social justice in the contemporary world whilst enabling us to envisage more concretely what global or cosmopolitan citizenship might look and feel like. I make these claims with complete awareness of the limitations of my case study, which is why further research and cross-disciplinary dialogues are vital.

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