The research presented here argues for revitalising traditional Islamic *halaqah* (Islamic oral pedagogy) with a dialogic ethos in order to develop the selfhood, hybrid identities and personal autonomy of young Muslims in the 21st century. It responds to the challenge of Islamic education and identity development in secular-liberal, sometimes hostile societies. Dialogic *halaqah* offers a pedagogical opportunity for the Islamic education sector to generate more inclusive practice by providing a space that facilitates children and young peoples’ collective self-reflection and exploration of their faith. It draws on foundational Islamic educational ideas to revitalise a tradition of dialogue and reflexivity, and to complement existing rote-learning and transmission-based pedagogies.

My study investigated the practice of daily dialogic *halaqah* in two independent British Muslim primary faith-schools, where children explore their faith and its meaning through a cumulative dialogue that builds over time. Like the practice of *halaqah* in these schools, my research method was predicated on values of participation and inclusion. I used classroom *halaqah* as a data collection method (Ahmed, 2014). I posed a series of key questions about personal autonomy, Islam and some potential contradictions between the two to a group of year 6 children (aged 10–11 years) and separately to a group of young adult alumni (aged 15–19 years). I followed this up with questions about their experience of *halaqah* and other educational formats, and whether and how these educational experiences helped form their senses of self and personal autonomy. The dialogue from these ‘data-collection’ *halaqah* was then subjected to thematic (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and dialogue analyses (Hennessy et al., 2016).

As the teacher/researcher my role was simply to facilitate their learning/dialogue through a series of key questions. The meaning-making that occurred in these *halaqah* arose from the participants themselves (pseudonyms are used), as well as the foundational Islamic texts and teachings that they referred to. However, their agency as participants and as learners is evident in the data, for example, Qasim (aged 18) says:

‘When someone questions something you’ve always thought to be right, then you have to readjust your mindset and think, how would I answer the question? Why are they asking the question?’

Here Qasim is describing how the dialogue in *halaqah* generates critical and reflexive thinking. According to these participants, this critical thinking ultimately strengthens their faith. Fatimah (aged 15) talks about how learning happens through dialogue.

‘I think when everybody voiced their different thoughts, that’s when you learn, and when you were asked to re-evaluate your thoughts, and you said something and you thought hang on that’s not worked, and then you went through a thought process where you formed your ideas about something. I think that’s where you learnt most.’

Fatimah here appears to describe the Vygotskian idea of a transition from *interthinking* (which occurs in dialogue between people) to *intrathinking* (an internal dialogue) (Mercer, 2000). Participants describe how these processes help strengthen the internalisation of their faith and its values.

These critical insights from participants are useful to the broad field of educational dialogue research. Their insights into the role of personal autonomy and choice–making – including choosing to be Muslim – and into navigating authority, peer pressure and secular-liberal social expectations are useful to the growing research on the development of Muslim youth identity in Europe and other secular-liberal contexts. Findings from the dialogue analysis demonstrate participants’ capacity to engage...
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in rich critical dialogue with each other, as well as with an imagined secular other. Moreover, there is evidence of personal autonomy in this dialogue, supporting their claims that they do not see a contradiction between their Islamic faith and their ability to think and act autonomously.

This research has significant implications for practice in Islamic education settings. Participants are quite persuasive in arguing that dialogic halaqah helped them to develop a critical reflexive faith identity that enables them to make their own choices as young Muslims. They explain that halaqah provides a safe space in which to have difficult conversations that help them understand the challenges they face while navigating multiple cultures and sub-cultures. The use of dialogic halaqah has the potential to transform existing educational practices in thousands of Muslim supplementary schools (madrasahs) in the UK, attended by as many as 500,000 children. Dialogic halaqah can help update traditional Islamic education so that it centres on the everchanging needs of British Muslim children and young people as they grow up in a society in which their faith is considered alien and sometimes suspect. There is also wide scope for international application.

Beyond Islamic education, wider implications for classroom practices can be envisaged in two interrelated ways. Firstly, this research complements what is already known about classroom dialogue in general (Howe, Hennessy, Mercer, Vrika, & Wheatley, 2017) and the importance of cumulative dialogue in particular (Alexander, 2008). A daily or weekly cumulative whole-class dialogic circle can embed both critical pedagogy and personal, social, emotional and intercultural education into mainstream schools. While recognising the hugely problematic and divisive nature of the policy requirement for schools to promote ‘fundamental British values’ (Lander, 2016), this research seeks to offer an alternative: a positive way of imagining intercultural dialogic pedagogies that are inclusive and can generate the personal autonomy required to enact the values of individual liberty and mutual respect of others. ■

REFERENCES