**Tarbiyah for Shakhsiyah (Educating for Identity)**

– Seeking out culturally coherent pedagogy for Muslim children in Britain

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**Abstract**

Drawing upon Islamic epistemology to confront the challenges of a postcolonial world, some European Muslims are rejecting existing educational provision, seeking to formulate culturally-coherent pedagogy. This paper contributes to the debate on Islamic schools in Britain through the findings of a qualitative study of a British Muslim community education project initiated by home-schooling mothers, who believe in ‘Holistic Islamic Education’ (HIE). The study demonstrates parallels between the experiences and motivations of these mothers and indigenous education movements in that they seek to provide a ‘Qur’an-centred’ worldview; reviving classical Islamic education and synthesizing it with modern pedagogy as a defence against the dominant secular culture. Their pedagogy involves the nurturing of shakhsiyah (personality/identity) through tarbiyah (holistic upbringing) as a means to navigate the complexity of multiple identities and the challenges of modernity faced by Muslims in Britain.

**Key Words**

Muslim women; faith schools; indigenous knowledge; identity; holistic education; cultural coherence

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Introduction

This paper offers a comparison between Holistic Islamic education (HIE) and mainstream British education from the perspective of ten Muslim mothers who teach in Islamic Shakhsiyah Foundation (ISF) primary schools. Through providing an insider perspective, this paper seeks to shed new light on a contentious debate which rages as much in the media as in academia. The following episode demonstrates that much more research is needed to understand both the host societies’ concerns about Islamic education and the Muslim communities desire to establish Islamic educational institutions in western countries.

On 25th October 2009 the Sunday Telegraph ran a headline ‘Islamists who want to destroy the British State get £113,000 in funding’. The article drew a crude false picture of a small community project, Islamic Shakhsiyah Foundation (ISF); alleging that it is a front organisation established by members of an ‘extremist’ Muslim group, Hizb-ut-Tahrir in order to inculcate children into ‘extremist’ ideology. In fact, ISF grew out of initiatives by home-schooling Muslim mothers to educate their children within an Islamic and alternative ethos. Over twelve years, these small beginnings have grown into two independent primary schools and two attached day-care centres with an alternative non-Eurocentric pedagogy called ‘Shakhsiyah Education’. On 25th November 2009 David Cameron, then leader of the Opposition raised the issue in the British House of Commons alleging that ‘Prevent’ funding was being used to fund extremism. As the UK government demonstrated that this was untrue, Cameron had to apologise to the House on 1st December 2009. Nevertheless the resulting media tempest brought ISF into the public spotlight; placing it at the heart of an on-going vociferous debate about Islamic Schools, their beliefs, practices and relevance for modern Britain. This debate is as much a crisis for comparative education (Sayed et al, 2011; Ozanne, 2011) as it is a crisis for this small Muslim community educational project set up by Muslim women to meet the cultural needs of their children.

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1 See The Independent Newspaper Website (2009, 12th December): Islamic school condemned by Cameron is cleared. and http://www.charitycommission.gov.uk/Library/rcr_isf.pdf

2 See Hansard 25th November 2009 Column 525

3 ‘Prevent’ refers to the controversial preventative strand of the UK government’s 2007 counterterrorism strategy which funded some Muslim organisations.

4 Source: BBC News Website (2009, 1st December). Cameron says sorry to MPs over Hizb-ut-Tahrir Claim. The schools had actually received funding in the form of the ‘Nursery Education Grant’ which parents can use to pay private providers for early years education.

5 ‘Islamic schools’ is a contentious term, as it presupposes that the school represents Islam. Some schools prefer to identify themselves as Muslim and others would argue that they are in fact only ‘schools for Muslims’ (Hewer, 2001). ISF sees itself as ‘Islamic’ in the sense that it seeks to provide HIE.
As a founder, trustee, parent and head teacher of one of the schools I found myself at the centre of the storm. At the time I was also engaged as a practitioner-researcher in a small-scale qualitative case study of ISF founders and teachers conceptualisations of ‘Holistic Islamic Education’ (HIE). My intention had been to explore HIE pedagogy as an ‘indigenous knowledge’ (IK) approach to being Muslim in Britain, which has been developed by these women as an alternative to the National curriculum and mainstream pedagogy. However the media storm and resulting investigations meant that participants were forced to question the very existence of ISF. Their conceptualisations of identity thus became the focal point with pedagogy becoming a secondary but related topic of discussion. Thus the particular episode described above had a major impact on the study. Although the study produced a range of useful findings, most of the data generated was around issues of identity and education as they relate to conceptualisations of IK in a globalised world, which this paper will analyse in depth. I shall also briefly discuss two related issues, namely, halaqah, the IK research method used in the study and participants’ perspectives on liberal concerns about Islamic education and student autonomy. The key finding of the present analysis is that the main motivating factor for these women’s involvement in ISF was dissatisfaction with their own education and their perception that mainstream British education had failed them. These insider perspectives add to the debate concerning Islamic schools in Britain particularly in relation to multiculturalism, identity and social cohesion. Their voices also offer a useful comparison in understanding the foundational principles and pedagogical outcomes of two culturally variant views of education: British mainstream education and ‘Holistic Islamic Education’ (HIE). In this context, I aim to move the discourse forward from issues of religion and security or religion and identity, to relating IK pedagogy (HIE) to identity and social cohesion.

The Value of an Insider Perspective

Existing research on Islamic schools has been mainly conducted by outsiders, reflecting societal concerns about the presence of expanding Muslim communities. The 2001 UK census recorded 2.8% of the British population as Muslim, with 371,000 school-aged Muslim children. State-funded faith–school provision is available for less than 0.3% of Muslim children, compared with 33% of Christian children and 39% of Jewish children. Approximately 4% of Muslim children attend Muslim schools. Nevertheless, concerns voiced about faith-schools are essentially about Muslims, perceived as the threatening

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6 Source: UK Census, Office of National Statistics,

7 Source: Muslim Council of Britain (2005) gives a 3% statistic. I have increased that to an estimate of 4% allowing for the increase in Muslim schools
‘other’ in Europe\(^8\), identified not by race or ethnicity but by religion (MacEoin & Whiteman, 2009; Bald et al, 2010; Wright, 1992). However, statistics relating to Muslim educational underachievement are collected by ethnicity not religion; mainly Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Turkish and Somali ethnicities leaving out a range of pupils including Arabs, Indonesians and children of indigenous converts.

Despite differences in race and ethnic culture, the Muslim community also maintains and/or constructs a distinct religious identity (Tinker, 2009; Shah, 2009; Meer, 2009; Coles, 2008 p23) and is unlikely to integrate in the way that had been expected (Halstead, 1989). Halstead suggests this is because Islam is a *deen* (way of life), both a “civilization and a religion”. Instead of embracing secular-liberal freedoms, second generation Muslims have turned to Islam as a means of challenging cultural assimilation into a Eurocentric paradigm. Islamic identity is at the core of the debate on integration and citizenship (Parker-Jenkins, 2002; Shah 2009; Shah, 2008; Haw 2009). Conversion of indigenous people to Islam and inter-marriage between ethnicities complicates the question of what it means to be a ‘British Muslim’. In a secular, multi-cultural, multi-religious Britain, political, social, historical, immigration, economic, race and gender factors compound the ‘integration’ and ‘Islamic schools’ discourse (Kashyap, 2012; Abbas, 2002; Hussain, 2004; Meer, 2009).

Much of the literature, like the media storm around ISF, centres on concerns about awarding state-funding to a small number of Islamic schools since 1998\(^9\). As a third of state-funded schools are faith-schools, principles of equality make it difficult to deny Islamic schools state-funding, (Parker-Jenkins, 2002; Flint, 2007; Meer, 2007; McReery, Jones & Holmes, 2007). Nevertheless concerns persist and analysis of the literature reveals that they are rooted in a deeper issue, namely secular-liberal principles of individual autonomy and the ‘liberal dilemma’ regarding Muslims in general and faith-schools in particular (Tinker, 2009; Merry, 2007; Moti Gokulsing, 2006; Parker-Jenkins Hartas & Irving, 2005; Burtonwood; 1998; Williams, 1998). Limitations of space do not allow extensive discussion of this literature here. The difficulty for liberals is that individual autonomy rests on truths they consider to be ‘self-evident’ and universal. Whilst liberalism argues that reason must challenge dogma, many non-western peoples challenge non-negotiable liberal truths as dogmatic and oppressive. Liberalism’s perspective that secular education is essentially neutral in contrast to faith education which necessarily proclaims the superiority of that faith, as argued in Sayed et al, 2011 has been strongly challenged (Ozanne, 2011; Coles, 2008 p 14), thus turning the ‘Liberal Dilemma’ into an intractable problem. Burtonwood (2000) identifies that Afro-

\(^8\) Source: BBC News. (2010, 7\(^{th}\) June) A recent government survey showed that 58% of Britons link Islam with extremism.

\(^9\) It took 15 years of campaigning by the Muslim community to achieve equality with other faith communities in this regard.
centric, Islamic and other IK movements are partly concerned about the loss of communitarian values to an unfettered liberal emphasis on individualism. Whereas secular-liberals may feel they have won hard fought rights for the benefit of all, non-European communities have their own values and ideas of cultural development. For some westerners, rights that they assert as self-evident should be accepted by the rest of the world, so that everyone can reach the same developmental stage as the west. Implicit in this view, however, is a notion of ‘intellectual-cultural superiority’, no different to notions of racial superiority that drove colonialism. The response to this and the concern of this paper is the IK movement and the drive for culturally-relevant pedagogy (Bishop, 2008; Stonebanks, 2008; Said, 1978).

This paper builds on existing literature to analyse these complex issues through the perspectives of a unique group of Muslim women from ISF. As this is insider-research, claims of neutral objectivity are necessarily replaced by an emphasis on the value of presenting an insider perspective (Mercer, 2007). In the case of Islamic schools this is especially important, because contentious public debates focussed on such schools are mostly conducted by outsiders. Thus the continued stereotypical views expressed by journalists, politicians and even, in some cases, academics become apparent as Muslim women, who are usually spoken about and/or for, speak for themselves. Secondly whilst these women’s perspectives confirm some of what has already been said on the issues of Islamic education and western Islamic schools, they also expose a complexity and variedness, which is often unknown and unexpected. The internal discourse within the Muslim community of aporia (Lawson, 2005) or irreconcilable contradictions both within being a Muslim in a secular society and within secular-liberal society’s struggle with multiculturalism in general and Islam in particular, is often ignored. The role of Islamic schools as a location for this discourse, and therefore as potentially a place for building respectful coexistence or even common ground, is side-lined by stereotypical media hysteria and a counter-subversion agenda labelling schools as extremist breeding grounds (Mills, Griffin & Miller, 2011).

Undoubtedly the core of the conflict between a secular-liberal and Islamic concept of education is underpinned by epistemological and ontological differences. Therefore only an increase in knowledge and understanding of Islamic epistemology and ontology, as well as the sophistication of Islamic thought on the question of what it means to be human can explain and provide opportunities for dialogue between these contrasting yet intertwined intellectual traditions.

The ‘Holistic Islamic Education’ paradigm and IK movements

Holistic Islamic Education (HIE) as adopted by ISF has parallels to ‘critical pedagogies’ and indigenous educational movements found in post-colonial societies. The Muslim mothers who formed ISF draw on HIE as an alternative to the management-standardisation
pedagogy characteristic of contemporary British education and perceived by HIE educators as potentially dehumanising, providing qualifications not education (D’Oyen, 2008; Tauhidi, 2007; Henzell-Thomas, 2004). They argue that mainstream education neglects spiritual and moral growth (Halstead, 2007; Hussain, 2007) whereas HIE is considered to provide for the holistic needs of the growing child and aims to develop a strong confident Islamic yet individual human personality. HIE views learning as worship of Allah, a lifelong effort of reflection and self-realisation through critical pedagogy; this illustrates the inadequacy of those western stereotypes that characterise all Islamic education as non-thinking indoctrination.

The Islamic Paradigm

To understand HIE it is essential to appreciate Islamic epistemological and ontological concepts. Islam begins by asserting tawhid, the holism, oneness or unity of Allah (God) and extending this to unity of creation, unity of knowledge, unity and therefore equality of humanity, unity of those who have testified and submitted (Muslims), unity of deen, Islamic way of life and unity of every other concept and human endeavour within Islamic culture. Human nature, fitra is essentially good; human beings have a natural disposition to recognise, know and love Allah and live by Islam, the natural way, deen-al-fitra. Human beings are khalifa-tul-ardh (stewards of God on earth); our natural role in the Kawoun (universe) is to take responsibility for the rest of creation by fulfilling the will of Allah. The literal meaning of Islam is peace through submission; living Islam brings sakinah, inner tranquillity and salam outward peace and harmony on earth. Insan, the human, is the best of creation as s/he has unique attributes of irada, freewill and ‘aql, intellect, the capacity to acquire and use ilm, knowledge. It is through knowledge man comes to know his inner potential and attains pure submission to Allah in inner and outward actions. The Qur’an repeatedly exhorts humans to use their ‘aql, intellect and tafakkur, reflection to come to know Allah through his ayat, signs. In the Islamic paradigm, knowledge is located in the qalb, heart as well as the mind. The Qur’an makes seeking knowledge an obligation asking believers,

“Can they who know and they who do not know be deemed equal?” (Qur’an 39:9).

Thus, knowledge is sought internally and externally. Human beings have been given senses and ‘aql, intellect to understand the material world. They have been given the Qur’an and ‘aql, insight to understand the internal world. In Islamic ontology, from the tawhid perspective there is a material world with a unified objective reality. All objective knowledge lies with Allah.
“For with Him are the keys to things beyond the reach of a created being’s perception: none know them but He. And He knows all that is on land and in the sea; and not a leaf falls but He knows it” Qur’an 6:59

Human beings bring multiple perspectives and interpretive frameworks to our understandings of this world. The limited human mind/heart cannot attain totality of knowledge. Nevertheless it is through seeking external and internal knowledge that we fulfil our purpose. The search for truth leads ultimately to Allah. It is through tarbiyah (personal development/education) that human beings realise their purpose and attain their true worth as the ‘best of creation’. The above paradigm conceives of the human as a ‘servant of Allah’ and thus does not distinguish between genders. Although many Muslim cultures provide segregated education for males and females, the Qur’an is clear that seeking knowledge is obligatory on all Muslims and men and women can learn from each other (Coles, 2008 p31).

HIE as Indigenous Knowledge

Holistic Islamic Education (HIE) is a reworking of classical Islamic educational thought based on the preceding Qur’anic understanding, attempting to synthesize classical Islamic pedagogy with contemporary educational methods especially modern full-time schooling. Western Muslim educators have developed various approaches to the theory and implementation of HIE, such as ‘Kinza Academy’, a support system for home-educators in the U.S. (Hanson, 2003); ‘Sakinah Circle’ an innovative early years project in Canada (Harder, 2006); the ‘Tarbiyah Project’ which provides an ‘Integrated Learning Model’ in the U.S. (Tauhidi, 2007); and a proposal for a neo-Classical/Montessori approach devised by D’Oyen (2008). All are innovative approaches to the challenge of aporia (contradiction, dilemma or paradox) generated by being Muslim in a secular society (Lawson, 2005). These aporia include: Isolation – Integration, Islamic Identity – British Identity, Islam – Secularism, Autonomy – Tradition.

Like Euade (2010), and Merry (2006), Lawson accepts there is no resolution to these dilemmas; rather they should be accepted as real and worked with. As with other IK movements modernity must be accepted and navigated through critical self-examination. IK movements need indigenous research to underpin indigenous schooling/pedagogy.

[10] Gender is not a characteristic of Allah who ‘nothing is comparable to’. Qur’an 114:4. However accepted practice is to use the male pronoun.

[11] This summary of Islamic epistemology and ontology is from my own reading of Islamic texts supplemented by attending halaqah and seminars. See Also Nasr (2006)
There are limitations in drawing a parallel between British Islamic schools and other indigenous educational systems, Kaupapa Maori schools for example. First, not all British Islamic schools adopt a holistic approach, some simply teach the English National Curriculum alongside Qur’an and Islamic Studies (Walford, 2004). Secondly, the majority of Muslims are not indigenous to the British Isles; they are rather part of a postcolonial diaspora to the seat of empire. Thirdly, although Islam is not considered as part of British culture, western science and culture has drawn on Islamic sciences and culture and on the Judaeo-Christian tradition which itself has similarities with Islamic beliefs. This shared heritage is largely ignored when issues about Islamic schools are raised within the contemporary secular-liberal paradigm and Islam is portrayed as the alien ‘other’ (Parker-Jenkins, 2002; Meer, 2007; Said, 1978). A few studies have begun to demonstrate the need to address both the shared heritage and differences between Islamic philosophy and mainstream education (Shah, 2009; Merry, 2007; Coles, 2008 p38).

**Research Methodology: Halaqah, eliciting rich multi-layered meanings within an Islamic epistemological context**

This study used a traditional Islamic pedagogy known as halaqah and adapted it for use as a research method. *Halaqah* is a spiritual circle-time instituted by Prophet Muhammad in his *tarbiyah* (education) of early Muslims; it is conducted purely orally with students and teacher sitting in a circle on the floor. An integral part of traditional Islamic education, *halaqah* continues to be core practice in Muslim cultures. *Halaqah* is credited with transformation of personalities, empowerment of individuals and communities through a social-justice agenda, and the development of Islamic intellectual heritage including sciences, arts and mysticism (Zaimache, 2002). The format varies immensely and can be transmission based/teacher-led or dialogic/student-led. It can also be a collaborative group effort. The ‘curriculum’ or content is open, but the paradigm is an Islamic worldview and the frame of reference is the Islamic revealed texts i.e. Qur’an and *Sunnah* (sayings of the Prophet).

This study drew upon an existing ethos of collaboration and critical engagement in ISF by using a series of *halaqah* as a platform for teachers’ and school leaders’ voices. To my knowledge, this is the first time *halaqah* has been used as an academic research method in a formal manner, although *halaqah* is often an informal way of understanding students’ thinking and understanding. A number of Muslim researchers including Faruqi (1980) and Zeera (2001) have called for research to be conducted from a holistic Islamic basis with a transformative agenda. I would argue that *halaqah* has the potential to achieve this.

Participants in this study are familiar with *halaqah* both as a form of teaching in ISF and as a means of personal and communal development. This format therefore allows participants to refer to and draw on their Islamic worldview for their discussions, thus becoming a form of indigenous knowledge generation. It is important to note that *halaqah* recognises the sacred,
spiritual and transformative nature of ‘ilm (knowledge) and like other indigenous research methodologies values the beliefs, cultural aspirations and collective autonomy of non-western peoples in realising their collective goals. Halaqah as a method does not treat participants as complex ‘material subjects’ but values human potential for realisation of deep meaning and personal growth on a spiritual level.

By its very nature, halaqah as research method may be viewed as a challenge to dominant academic and social norms, where Muslim communities are ‘natives’ to be studied by the ‘enlightened’ scientific academy of the metropole (Connell, 2007 p7). Figure 1 illustrates how halaqah nests within a wider methodological and epistemological worldview.

Figure 1: Research Paradigm, Epistemology, Methodology, Methods

The Study and Findings

The halaqah in this study consisted of reflexive group conversations within an Islamic spiritual context conducted over a period of twelve weeks. Although all teachers were invited to volunteer, volunteers were organised in a purposive manner, two groups of five were devised to allow for triangulation. Group 1 consisted of founders/school leaders including myself and Group 2 of newer teachers who had been in the school for at least two years. This enabled exploration of how far conceptualisations of HIE formulated by original
members of ISF are shared by newer teachers. School-leaders explored how HIE informs our leadership, our collective journey and how our understanding of HIE has developed over time. Teachers’ *halaqah* enabled an exploration of how those who have joined a functioning organisation understand and adapt existing pedagogical approaches. What elements of ‘*Shakhsiyah Education*’ are important to them and why? Voices of new teachers including three without children in the school, helped explore motherhood as motivation for HIE in ISF. To facilitate an inductive approach, virtually no formal structure was applied to *halaqah* sessions. The format was left entirely open to enable participants to have ownership of their conversations and to encourage holistic discussion of six broad themes. Participants were asked to use these themes to explore their views of HIE in ISF and were invited to relate narratives about their own education and/or reasons for working in ISF. They could choose a group member to lead the *halaqah* or just engage in reflexive conversation about themes. I hoped this would develop a natural environment to exchange views about personal and professional roles; potentially leading to more honest accounts than posing questions like, ‘what impact does your role as a mother have on your HIE practice in ISF?’ Or, ‘How important is HIE to your planning?’ Findings were drawn out of recorded *halaqah* discussions through an iterative coding and analysis process which involved feedback sessions with participants.

**Table 1: Themes and Subthemes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes provided to initiate <em>halaqah</em> discussions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Education and Identity</td>
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<td>3. Policy Practice and Pedagogy</td>
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<td>5. Community and Community Cohesion</td>
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<th>Subthemes that emerged during discussions</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Developing and retaining Islamic identity through education, western cultural dominance as the main challenge to identity</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Developing <em>Shakhsiyah</em> (character/sense of Self) through HIE in Practice; preparing children for the future; identity/character outcomes for children who have been through ISF</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Developing collaboration and teamwork to reaffirm Islamic culture in the local Muslim community; ISF as an extended family; working in partnership with children’s families</td>
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<td>4. <em>Halaqah</em> and the teacher-learner relationship as the core of HIE in ISF; Human-scale education facilitates this relationship</td>
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<td>5. Cross-cultural conflict both within the Muslim community and between the Muslim</td>
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There was extensive overlap in these sub-themes and in the roles adopted by participants. Participants including myself are Muslim mothers working in ISF as teachers/school-leaders to educate our own children. In line with my role as insider/researcher, I wanted to capture participants’ perspectives and present them with as little ‘interpretation’ as possible, making their collective interpretations the focus of the study with my voice as one of many. The *Kaupapa Maori* idea of a connection of the ‘knower’ to the ‘known’ through a ‘participatory mode of consciousness’ (Bishop, 1998), is a useful parallel in explaining this point. As a researcher I cannot be separated from the research claiming neutrality, although I can endeavour to step back from it through reflection and be part of it through reflexivity.

Although this is a study of a unique case, Stake’s (2005) concept of ‘naturalistic generalisations’ is useful here. Women perceived as the incomprehensible ‘other’ to many, may become comprehensible through a naturalistic narrative presentation of their stories and perspectives. Through this process, HIE educators can move from outsiders to a better understood group through ‘vicarious experience’. Although the study comprised a whole
range of findings, this paper will focus only on the core emergent narrative comparing mainstream and HIE education, exploring identity and the challenges faced by participants and their children.

**Ethnicity, Identity, Islam and being British, comparing mainstream schooling and HIE**

An important finding of the study is the variation in the participants’ ethnic backgrounds and marital relationships. Although all ten are British nationals, seven are immigrants and four have mixed-race marriages, which although encouraged in early Islam, are unacceptable in most contemporary Muslim cultures. One participant converted to Islam, two married converts. Nine are mothers, and eight have school-age children who attend ISF. Their children’s education is the primary motive for working at ISF. Four immigrated to the UK as children. Their negative personal experiences of primary education motivated them either to home-school their children or join ISF once it had been established. As participants conceptualise education as intertwined with parenting, I have used the term *tarbiyah* to refer to education. As they continuously used the term *shakhsiyah* (personality) to refer to the unique complex personalised identities of the children under their care, I have loosely translated *shakhsiyah* as identity.

**Table 2: Participants’ biographical information (Pseudonyms are used)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School - Leaders Halaqah Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Approx Length of Time in Britain</th>
<th>Marital Status/ Background of Husband</th>
<th>No. of Years in Teaching/Education Teaching Qualification</th>
<th>No. of Years in ISF or Home-Schooling Group</th>
<th>No. of Children</th>
<th>No. of Children who have attended ISF</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Researcher)</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>30 years</td>
<td>Married Husband of Mixed race Turkish - Pakistani</td>
<td>16 years PGCE</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>Aisha</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>Born in Britain</td>
<td>Married Husband Convert from Seychelles</td>
<td>16 years PGCE</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khadija</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>Kenya - East African Asian</td>
<td>26 years</td>
<td>Married Husband Pakistani Origin</td>
<td>12 years no Teaching Qualification</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salma</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>17 years</td>
<td>Married Husband Iraqi</td>
<td>12 years no Teaching Qualification</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
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</table>
This study gives specific insights on how education is heavily intertwined with issues of culture, identity and parenting in second-generation Muslim communities. Participants confirmed much of what is already in the literature on identity as a major motivation for the establishment of Islamic schools (Zine, 2008; Coles, 2008; Shah, 2009; Meer, 2009), and on tensions between Islam and individual autonomy (Merry, 2007). Participants’ emphasis on Islamic identity overriding multiple ethnic identities confirms Meer’s (2009) findings on the concepts behind the mobilizations for Islamic schools where he cites a number of key advocates for Islamic schools emphasizing Islamic identity over race and ethnic identities. Participants in this study talked in depth about how Islamic identity was compromised by
mainstream British education. Those who had immigrated to Britain made this point more intensely.

Ruqayyah  ‘I felt lost … I felt as though my identity didn’t mean much… it’s like it was buried. I felt as though my identity was buried’

Fatima  ‘I was you know born and brought up here… again the same thing, I felt like my identity was buried’

Their felt their education was disconnected from their Islamic worldview. Islam was absent from their schooling, if it was mentioned, it was presented as negative or strange. At home, parents lacked understanding of their children’s school experiences.

Hafsa  ‘we’re saying we lived one lifestyle… we had double identities basically … One lifestyle at home, another at school but then what we did at home was to please people at home and what we did at school was to please people at school.

This generated conflicts. Challenges had to be negotiated, placing immense pressure on young children; pressure that children should not have to cope with, yet their parents did not understand their difficulties.

Khadija  ‘I thought he didn’t understand me or understand my friends or understand my school … Constant dilemmas, constant dilemmas’

Variation between ethnic and Islamic culture compounded these dilemmas; as children they did not distinguish between the two, but as adults distinctions became apparent.

Hafsa  ‘Because being a Muslim and being Pakistani is totally different and that’s when everything started to fit into place and it all clicked. Prior to that there was no thought behind it.’

Hafsa’s main concerns about Pakistani culture are prejudice based on racial/tribal identity and gender inequality. Participants also rejected the notion of ‘British Islam’ as contrary to a universal Islam which transcends national boundaries. They question what the term ‘British Islam’ means, and concluded that it is superficial, a meaningless construct, rejecting Meer’s (2009) notion that British Islamic schools are constructing a ‘British Islam’.

Aisha  ‘But that’s just saying I say LaillahailallahMuhammadurasulallah (Islamic testament of Faith) and I eat fish and chips as well. I mean come on… is that now saying I’m a British Muslim?’

Participants’ homes and communities are Islamic but multi-cultural, particularly those with ‘mixed-race’ marriages or marriages to converts to Islam. They faced opposition to these marriages from ‘Pakistani Islam’ in contrast to the equality of early Islam, when believers’ marriages overcame previous taboos of tribalism, race and class. For participants, Islam is
based on timeless principles not identified with a particular nation, time or place. They share a concept of holistic Islam, rooted in classical Islamic schools of thought, which they use to address dichotomous *aporia* of being the ‘other’ in Britain. In rejecting ‘British Islam’ participants draw on values of equality, humanity, community, celebration of cultural variation and global citizenship. These Islamic values are also found in conceptualisations of ‘Britishness’, and so raise questions already present in literature of what exactly is meant by ‘integration’ and how far is Islam the ‘other’?

In summary, participants see identity as incredibly complex and personal; multiple identities are celebrated but Islamic identity is actively, determinedly used to generate coherence; to address *aporia*. Coherence is sought both in *shahkiyah* (identity/conceptualisation of self), and *tarbiyah* (bringing up/educating children /self-education). The roles of Muslim, mother, teacher, school-leader and community-leader are multiple layers in this endeavour.

**HIE as a way forward for Muslim Communities in Britain**

For participants, culturally-coherent, that is Holistic Islamic education enhances self-esteem thereby empowering them to become critically thinking human beings who are aware of their role as members of ethnic and religious minorities in a globalised world. Participants’ stories of their own mainstream education having generated dichotomous identities give credence to the arguments that Islamic schools can and should provide for a holistic identity. Participants’ narratives of racist incidents and overall dissatisfaction with their own primary education reveal how their religion and worldview were not only denigrated in certain instances but also entirely undermined by an overarching secular-liberal paradigm shaping mainstream British schooling. They express the view that they do not want their children to have similar experiences of school, therefore they seek to provide a strong foundational education that can enable children to have the knowledge and self-confidence to tackle such experiences positively as they grow older. Motherhood is a prominent aspect of participants’ commitment to ISF. ISF celebrates children’s Islamic identity, providing a coherent experience and clear direction. This is contrasted with the pressures participants faced in their own education, pressures still faced by children in mainstream schools.

*Salma*  
‘*they have to know how to talk and stand up for themselves… be proud about themselves… if you don’t establish this in a young age… they will melt… they will forget who they are.*’

Children sometimes feel ashamed to be Muslim. Since 9/11, media vilification has intensified and Islamophobia is rising. ISF is seen as a sanctuary for children from these pressures.

*Kulthum*  
‘*But when they came here they actually felt really happy… because I think they started, you know, discovering more about themselves, like who they are, what their purpose in life is’
Participants whose children have attended mainstream schools find parenting a struggle. Children lack confidence in their Islamic identity, dislike being different to their friends and need support to deal with conflicting expectations.

*Ruqayyah* ‘...it’s so much confusion you know. It confuses the child so much and this is why I struggled to take them out of that system and to bring them here and I feel so blessed that my children are here.’

Kulthum elaborates on her own experience. Despite being educated in a Muslim country, she experienced the dominance of the western worldview. Having attended an elite convent school in a postcolonial Muslim country, she describes taking part in Christian worship. Like those growing up in Britain, she felt her identity was fragmented. She was only able to synthesize this as an adult through attending Islamic halaqah.

*Kulthum* ‘That’s when I realised what I really am and I didn’t want that to happen to my girls... so when they were really young I started teaching them but I didn’t know much myself and it took a long time to actually disconnect from... (what) I had learnt throughout my childhood’.

Participants narrate the experiences of their older children who have left ISF and are now attending mainstream secondary schools. They stand up to peer-pressure, maintaining their identity. Salma’s children, for example, talk confidently in class about how Muslim scientists’ achievements are ignored whilst discoveries by Europeans celebrated. These young Muslims are confident in formulating their own opinions on complex issues, meeting the aims of HIE.

*Aisha* ‘I went to (see) something with my daughter ...something on history ...she said to me straight away ‘there’s three things I didn’t like about that’ ...she didn’t say to me what she liked. We know linguistically to become of the level where you start asking questions, criticising a literary piece that’s a different level of understanding. ...that’s a product of our school.’

Participants claim that these young Muslims are well-mannered, even conspicuous for their politeness. Schools comment on their respectful nature and positive attitude towards education. Participants’ descriptions of older children, now in mainstream secondary schools, interacting with others in a confident, cohesive manner, support arguments by supporters of Islamic schools that they make a positive contribution to British society.

**Islam, education and autonomy**

The participants’ testimonies in this study challenge the liberal argument of Islam as a threat to individual autonomy. They report enhancement of their own and their children’s autonomy through HIE. Their negative experience of schooling was not just about race, gender, class or religious inequality, although these are part of their lived experience, but of
inequality of ontological and epistemological beliefs, a *deen* (way of life), at odds with secular-liberal society. Islamic cultural meta-narratives are deemed out of date in a secular-liberal world based on enlightenment beliefs. Yet these meta-narratives shape Islamic identity, becoming important through challenges experienced as migrants. So it seems that tensions arising at the margins of communities lead to reaffirmation of an Islamic identity, and this construct encompasses a rejection of cruder ethnic/national identity. Patriarchy is seen by participants as a negative aspect of ethnic cultures; they also perceive secular-liberal society as hypocritical because gender, race and class inequalities are still evident; the original Islamic society, is idealised as truly egalitarian, there the only distinction was in *taqwa* (piety/moral conduct). Participants question whether integration allows equality of cultures and worldviews? If it does then Muslims have the right to educate children from their own cultural context. If identity is formulated through on-going interaction between concepts of self and awareness of how one is perceived by others, then Islamic schools will support a positive conceptualisation of identity in Muslim children. Participants’ close collaborative working relationships, commitment to the cause they have adopted and reference to Islamic sources for guidance; have led to an extraordinary unity of purpose which is expressed in the findings.

As in previous literature (Coles, 2004; Shah, 2009), participants expressed the importance of Islam as *deen* (way of life) to their conceptualisations of education. Personal experiences of fragmented identity, led to a desire to provide an education based on *tawhid*, a ‘Holistic Islamic Education’ for their children; *Tarbiyah* (HIE) for *Shakhsiyah* (character).

*Aisha*  
‘This is why …we’re talking about the whole child because we can’t take a segment of them and just nurture that because they would be lopsided like we all were… what did we have Islamically? We didn’t have any concepts. …we’re really trying to give them tools for life and that’s what schooling is about if you understand it as the *tarbiyah* of Islam.’

Aisha’s comments explain why supplementary schooling is deemed insufficient. Maryam, whose children attend mainstream schools, describes how they have regular family *halaqah* at home. However, this doesn’t compare to ISF because her children hear one thing at home, another in their mainstream school, whereas children in ISF are hearing a consistent message and not being put in a position where they have to negotiate two identities. Even in Muslim countries, parents concerned about loss of identity are motivated to develop a HIE alternative to schools based on western models.

*Khadija*  
‘If you look at your child… you feel you… want to protect it, look after it… for me anyway that was a motivating factor to start my own school in Pakistan… all my resources, all my money went into that school for my children. We’ve all made sacrifices… scrimped and saved… purely for the sake of our children.’
The participants in this study have low salaries, are working mums, bringing children to school with them, sometimes commuting long distances, and taking work home. As mothers committed to developing a nurturing culturally-coherent education for their children, they have forged a spirit of collaboration, with an echo of feminist-communitarian ethics (Christians, 2005), rooted within an Islamic paradigm. Family and community are integral to the work of ISF. HIE inducts children into the Islamic community whilst giving them the tools to fully realise themselves as human beings. The collaborative ethos of ISF, of open discussion and consensus building, may not be representative of all Islamic schools. In this way, the ISF community exercises collective autonomy, carving out its place in wider society. It also helps explain why participants’ perspectives are strikingly univocal. Multiplicity although celebrated, is unified through the Islamic concept of *tawhid* (unity/wholeness) to generate holistic, consensual, complex yet coherent perspectives.

Participants claim that Islamic schools as sites of the integration discourse provide opportunity for *aporia* to be worked through for example in the school-leaders’ *halaqah* they discuss the government imposed Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum (DCSF, 2008). School-leaders explore how to contextualise individual autonomy within Islamic values. They draw upon personal experience as mothers and educators to consider the pedagogical merits of the high level of emphasis on child-initiated play in the ‘Early Years Foundation Stage’. In a lengthy discussion they raised concerns about the limited reference to communitarian values and the possibility this could encourage self-centredness in children. Participants are concerned about the individualistic liberal ideology and pure constructionist epistemology underpinning EYFS. The discussion is complex because of the Islamic injunction that children should play until the age of seven; early childhood is a time of learning through play. Participants’ concerns are not about play, but about centring the child to the extent where individual choices are emphasized over and above social interaction with others. The role of the mother/teacher in directing children’s activities and facilitating learning is marginalised. Participants’ holistic ideology values individual autonomy, encouraging personal development and communitarian values, encouraging community cohesion. In their view, HIE absorbs dichotomies generating harmony. After some discussion participants reach a consensus of time-ratios for child-initiated play to teacher-led group activities through reference to Islamic sources. Participants have thought through their worldview, and are vocal about it, leading to the question of how this worldview can be realised within a society that does not share it. School-leaders draw upon British and Islamic principles of autonomy and equality, and assert the right to define their own approach to social cohesion.

**Spirituality, autonomy and halaqah**

Participants claim *halaqah* enhances children’s autonomy.
Aisha: ‘I think the halaqah is the root of all… we do, it’s a basis for building children’s personalities holistically… I think our halaqah has… a real cutting edge approach because it nurtures children’s different aspects, so it’s their social, it’s their emotional needs, their intellectual needs, …being able to self-reflect’

Teachers appreciate having flexibility to put aside halaqah planning and address issues as they arise. They feel they are able to build the class/school community as well as develop individuals.

Ruqayyah: ‘it was going with the children, it wasn’t just going through set criteria, you know what, I’ve got this lesson planned, it doesn’t matter if they need this right now…. Let me just carry out my lesson, but it was about catering for their needs.’

Halaqah is important to HIE because as traditional learning, it celebrates Islamic culture; enabling shakhsiyah development thereby developing good citizens. Halaqah gives children opportunities to discuss complex issues as they straddle multiple cultures and multiple perspectives, both within Muslim communities and as Muslims in Britain. Teachers understand that their role is to facilitate this discursive space, particularly where children have personal queries, questions about differences or difficulties they are facing. Teachers give examples of issues facing children, issues between parents or conflicting views within families. Non-Muslim relatives or Muslim extended family-members, who disagree with their parents’ viewpoints, raise points of contention teachers have to tackle in school. As HIE teachers they are able to help children negotiate these difficulties, but this is an additional professional challenge.

Participants connect halaqah to the teacher-learner relationship central to Islamic pedagogy. Children are valued through halaqah.

Aisha: ‘…children… engage with an adult… not in that level of hierarchy or anything between them but actually… their engaging… their discussing, they’re free to offer their opinions and speak… confidently and… happily. …children actually feel your listening to them and I think that’s so important because we always say it’s not about the teacher talking, it’s about giving the chance to children. …at that time you’re saying this is our time together but it’s also your time for you to say how you feel and let that out and this is really, really important.’

Teachers enjoy halaqah. It brings them closer to children; it is meaningful on a personal level and provides a powerful context for fostering thinking skills.

Hafsa: ‘We’re building with the Halaq… tools, the ability to take everything else and then make decisions for themselves.’
Aisha ‘...it’s so much easier when they’ve actually had that systematic building of thinking, reflecting, practising, analysing.... These are the skills you’re passing, they’re really... skills that a lot of adults don’t have.’

Children in Mosque classes are not encouraged to question, according to Khadija.

Khadija ‘...whereas in halaqah we can ask these questions and I think the child is also confident they’ll get an acceptable answer, an answer which will satisfy their curiosity whereas in the Mosque these questions are never answered.’

Salma ‘...children are open to questioning you and you questioning them... in very comfortable circumstances and they can open up and talk freely and this is what happened before... we went back to the original way of... teaching in Halaqah.’

Participants feel the oral nature of halaqah develops a range of skills, including quiet contemplation, the discipline of sitting and thinking something through. As children have halaqah daily, they develop confidence and skill in expressing views and opinions. Islamic epistemology links development of ‘aql (intellect) to speech. Halaqah develops thinking skills through discussion. In the teachers group, there is disagreement on how far oracy and thinking skills are transferrable to other curriculum areas.

Through halaqah children learn to maintain their identity whilst learning to play a positive role in their communities. From participants’ perspective, the holistic Islamic worldview resolves the liberal anomaly of self and other. The term shakhsiyah is used precisely because it implies autonomy; individuality at once independent and accountable for itself whilst simultaneously in harmony with everything else through submission to Allah. This holistic perspective recognises the interdependence of individuals and the natural world. Autonomy, a God-given right of man, is tempered with humility, recognising man’s limits in front of the universe and its Creator. Participants recognise that this will not be appropriate for those who do not accept the Islamic paradigm.

From a secular-liberal perspective the anomaly is not resolved; individual autonomy is sacrificed in the name of religion. Nevertheless liberals, active in exploring minority empowerment, recognise this internal tension in their own paradigm. Existing liberal structures continue to privilege the autonomy of some groups over others, (Arnot and Dillabough, 2000; Merry, 2007); not only in terms of race and gender, but as the growth of IK has shown, also culture and worldview. The findings from this study must be considered within the context of wider debates about cultural and religious differences, education and political structures such as Briedlid (2005) and Lall (2008). As an IK study, this paper provides an insider perspective from an alternative epistemological paradigm to a complex and contested debates.

Conclusion
This detailed qualitative study of a close-knit group of female Muslim educators/mothers adds to existing literature on motivations for Islamic schools and debates of social-cohesion and integration through exploring the workings of HIE. For these Muslims, far from posing a threat to individual autonomy, HIE asserts the right of individuals and communities to live in accordance with alternative epistemologies and ontologies. Individuals are empowered to engage in personal development from their own paradigm. Secular-liberalism seeks to secure rights and equality through challenging authoritarian approaches but can negate intellectual and cultural rights when it seeks to impose a secular-liberal education upon immigrant communities. HIE, it is argued, is a valuable approach to meeting the needs of Muslim children in a British context. The idea that secular-liberal education is the only way forward, masks a concept of intellectual and cultural superiority which holds that ‘other’ ways of seeing the world will not generate the moral and civic virtues needed for social cohesion.

As they are insiders, participants’ claims that *halaqah* enables social cohesion are very relevant to the discourse and need further research. All participants identified *halaqah* as core HIE practice; a means to emotional, spiritual and character development through enhancement of the teacher-learner relationship. Deeply rooted in Islamic culture, *halaqah* enhances children’s awareness of their heritage and beliefs. As oral pedagogy, *halaqah* develops critical thinking, questioning skills, discipline, confidence, listening, expression, and social skills. By giving children space to talk things through, *halaqah* enables children to explore tensions they face in maintaining Islamic identity in a sometimes hostile society. *Halaqah* facilitates the development of individual autonomy within an Islamic context. These very strong claims require further examination through an exploration of children’s learning in *halaqah*; a follow on study has been initiated.

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