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# Anchoring Identity in Faith: Narrative of an Anglo-Asian Muslimah in Britain

Imran Mogra

Birmingham City University, [imran.mogra@bcu.ac.uk](mailto:imran.mogra@bcu.ac.uk)

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## Anchoring Identity in Faith: Narrative of an Anglo-Asian Muslimah in Britain

### Abstract

This article is based on a narrative of an Anglo-Asian Muslimah, studying in a prominent university in the city of Birmingham, England. The trainee teacher was a suitable candidate for my research for the additional characteristics, which she had. She was born as a Muslimah in England, she was neither totally Asian nor English in reality; she was the daughter of a Pakistani mother and an English father. Using narrative analysis, several key themes, such as family, friendship, and cultural practices, emerged. These themes shed light about her life experiences. Significantly, she reveals the important influence of Islam and faith as the core of her identity, which is apparently used as a mechanism in contemporary society. In conclusion, the narrator presents a positive representation of a Muslimah who is at ease with her dual heritage whilst being rooted in Islam. She presents herself as open-minded and undeterred, thus implying that such counter narratives need to be added to the wider Muslim narratives.

### Keywords

Muslim, Muslimah, Narrative, Anglo-Asian, Faith, Identity

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## **Anchoring Identity in Faith: Narrative of an Anglo-Asian Muslimah in Britain**

Imran Mogra  
 Birmingham City University, Birmingham, England

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*This article is based on a narrative of an Anglo-Asian Muslimah, studying in a prominent university in the city of Birmingham, England. The trainee teacher was a suitable candidate for my research for the additional characteristics, which she had. She was born as a Muslimah in England, she was neither totally Asian nor English in reality; she was the daughter of a Pakistani mother and an English father. Using narrative analysis, several key themes, such as family, friendship, and cultural practices, emerged. These themes shed light about her life experiences. Significantly, she reveals the important influence of Islam and faith as the core of her identity, which is apparently used as a mechanism in contemporary society. In conclusion, the narrator presents a positive representation of a Muslimah who is at ease with her dual heritage whilst being rooted in Islam. She presents herself as open-minded and undeterred, thus implying that such counter narratives need to be added to the wider Muslim narratives. Keywords: Muslim, Muslimah, Narrative, Anglo-Asian, Faith, Identity*

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### **Anchoring Identity in Faith: Narrative of an Anglo-Asian Muslimah in Britain**

I, a lecturer, interviewed Iman, a pseudonym chosen by the interviewee, towards the end of the summer term of 2011. Prior to this, I had been gathering data for my research on primary school trainee teachers and the role of faith in their lives and its significance to them.

I found out about Iman's faith background incidentally through self-disclosure. Before contributing to a discussion point in the session, she revealed that her father had reverted to Islam. Subsequently, I approached her and expressed my research interest. She agreed instantly without hesitation. I was excited for her to be among my sample because she was the first dual heritage female Muslimah who I met at the university, training to be a teacher. I was intrigued to explore her experiences, her faith and about her belonging, aspirations and tension, if any, between Islam and her cultural roots. She afforded an excellent opportunity to gain insights into her experiences of adaptation and creation of her identity by allowing her to speak for herself. In addition, she provided me with a distinctive opportunity to talk to her about the identity construction of an Anglo-Asian Muslimah in England. It appeared to me that there is a growing need and realization for the construction of their social histories and, in so doing, allowing them to offer their perspectives of being Muslims in contemporary Britain.

#### **The Researcher's Role**

In qualitative research, the researcher is a primary data collector; therefore it is important to share my position and its relationship to this research. Like Iman, I am a Muslim, but with cultural and ethnic roots in India and East Africa. After completing my education, I, as did my interviewee, embarked on a career in primary education in state schools. Later, I became a teacher educator. In other words, this research was anchored in my own personal and professional journey as much as in the narrative of Iman. I, therefore,

acknowledge that I bring this background and experiences to the research process and make the interpretation of the data subjective; nevertheless, I produce and present the voice of Iman. This research, conducted by a male tutor, I believe is beneficial in showing the potential of using narratives to study the life and work of teachers. It is also useful for understanding identity construction of people from a variety of backgrounds and is valuable in challenging the idea about Muslims being homogenous. In addition, it demonstrates some of the features of the socialization taking place in some universities which are multicultural and multi-faith. The narrative reveals the challenges and opportunities in the experiences of a young Muslimah as she foregrounds faith positively in her life. In others words, instead of shying away from it, she freely and willingly tells her story despite the onslaught on her religion in recent times.

### **Research rationale**

There has been little in-depth exploration into the life, educational pathways and experiences of Anglo-Asian trainee teachers in England. Currently, as far as could be ascertained, in the absence of detailed studies of this kind, there appears to be a gap in knowing and understanding issues of identity formation of Anglo-Asian Muslimahs especially those training to be teachers (Butt, MacKenzie, & Manning, 2010; Wilkins & Lall, 2011). The narrative of Iman complements information for understanding British female Muslim educators in primary schools by exploring their developing identity and life story. It demonstrates that identity is complex and that the different subject positions and social identities that people take are related. In view of such intersectionality, it would be simplistic to view the life of Iman from an ethnic perspective alone as it would ignore her other categories such as gender, class and especially religion and their interplay. In other words, leaving out religion in the intersectional analysis would lead to possible misunderstanding of the relations between race, gender, religion and class.

Thus this study is relevant and important globally because it explores, through the analysis of an individual life, the relationship between social forces and personal character. Although it cannot be considered as representative, nevertheless, within the narrative, there are episodes, experiences and emotions with which others can readily identify (Thomas, 1995). Hence, it is important for studying religious and cultural changes that have taken place over the years, in knowing more about integration and assimilation, and in acquiring a view of the inside of a religion or culture. Furthermore, it assists in ascertaining the outcome of the interaction and how these are connected to individual lives so that one is able to appreciate the significance of and the response to these interactions by certain individuals. Finally, this introductory study presents a means of understanding the negotiation and how dual family orientation fares with the preference of Iman as a trainee teacher and to evaluate her positioning within two cultures.

The intended audiences of this research are sociologists interested in identity construction, Muslim faith leaders, teacher educators and researchers interested in applying the narrative method. Iman illustrates the inclusion of faith and spirituality as aspects of one's identity. The research is beneficial in showing the potential of using narratives to study the life and work of teachers. It is also useful for understanding identity construction of people from variety of backgrounds and is valuable in challenging the idea about Muslims being homogenous. Other benefits include that of showing some of the features of socializing that take place in universities, which are multicultural and multi-faith.

This is a narrative whose findings contribute toward shedding the myth of Muslims being monolithic as well. The narrative reveals the challenges and opportunities in the experiences of a young Muslimah as she foregrounds faith positively in her life. In others

words, instead of shying away from it, she freely and willingly tells her story despite the onslaught on her religion in recent times.

## Literature Review

Much has been written in relation to Muslim identities in recent years. Identity has been recognized as being important in understanding individuals and their relationships. People develop relationships based on similarities and differences (Lawler, 2008). In explaining the construction of identity, at least two positions are evident. Essentialist consider identity to be static, fixed and non-negotiable (Holstein, & Gubrium, 2000; Lawler, 2008). However, such notions of identity have been considered inadequate and have led to alternative ideas. In contemporary thinking, identity seems to be proposing that, for many individuals, it is fluid. According to post-structuralism, identity continually interacts with the environment, contexts and experiences (Haw, 1998). At the same time, it has been acknowledged that identity can be exposed to internal and external factors (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Thus exposure to internal and external factors shows that identities are in a state of flux and malleable in social contexts.

Based on her ethnographic study of four Muslim young men of Pakistani heritage, Bhatti (2011) expressed the need for better understanding of Muslim youth. In analyzing identity, she noted that transcontinental migrations redefine and reposition Muslim identities, making it difficult to describe identity, including national identity, as something fixed and unchanging (Bhatti, 2011). More so, Muslims, and other communities, have reconfigured their religious and ethnic traditions with class, gender and national identity (Din, 2006; Seddon, Hussain, & Malik, 2004). In other words, Muslims have continually negotiated their identities, balancing the personal with the public, communal and political.

In contemporary British landscape, studies on identity construction of Asians have captured the complexities, tensions and contradictions within their lived realities (Keddie, 2011). Shain (2003) conducted in-depth interviews with Hindu, Sikh and Muslim secondary school girls from Indian and Bangladeshi heritages. She demonstrated the dynamic ways in which Asian school girls defined themselves through the interplay of race, ethnicity, gender, class and religious relations (Shain, 2003). Such sophisticated investigations challenge previous studies which tended, as noted by Keddie in her interview based study, “to stereotype and inferiorise Asian girls and women as passive, shy and timid and as victims of a ‘backward’ and over-strict culture and religion” (Keddie, 2011, p. 175).

On the other hand, Din (2006), using questionnaires and semi-structured in-depth interviews with young British-born Pakistanis, argued that the voices of the youth should be heard. His findings also challenged fixed and rigid depictions of Asian cultures. Din (2006) showed that some Pakistani youth comfortably construct their identities within and against various discourses of their specific contexts. Therefore, depending on a particular situation a young Muslim woman of Pakistani descent living in Britain may be defined or define herself with reference to race (as black), religion (Muslim), nationality (British) or ethnicity (either Pakistani or Asian; Bhatti, 2011; Haw, 1998; Shain, 2003).

One of the benefits of considering case studies, within their contexts, is that they assist in challenging generalizations from research studies since the reality might be different. Thus a Muslimah, as is the case in this narrative, may also define herself or be defined entirely differently to another Muslimah of similar background as a response to contrasting frameworks of class and culture as a response to different sets of gender, religious, community/kinship discourses (Haw, 1998). The fact that Muslims depict hybrid and fluid identities is useful, although Yuval-Davis (1997) has cautioned against these being susceptible to essentialism. Nevertheless, for some Muslims, what is critical is the use of

instruments of identity construction which are at their disposal to serve their varied purposes. In other words, it is suggested that whilst there is an identity which is at the peripheral, there is a core identity at the same time; the recognition of which is relevant for understanding the frequently raised issues by the wider society of loyalty and belonging. Such a perspective on Muslim identity lead to enquire from an Anglo-Asian person questions of faith, identity and culture and belonging.

Beyond the questions of citizenship, Keddie (2011) has drawn attention to the contention around feminist calls for reform in Muslim communities. She notes that “there has been critique of Western-informed reductionist or Orientalist approaches that construct Muslim women as similarly passive, misled and in need of saving from their patriarchal religion” (Keddie, 2011, p. 177). Despite the recognition of the complexities and contradictions within the lived realities of Muslim girls in British schooling contexts, Western versions of autonomy and success continue to be privileged in schools and continue to characterize the ways in which Muslim girls are constructed and supported or “empowered” (Haw, 1998; Keddie, 2011). It is therefore, important for educators to be conscious of and critically examine their own discursive positioning in their construction and support of Muslim girls (Keddie, 2011).

To summarize, studies exploring Muslims of dual heritage, who might be incorporating aspects of “other” cultures to create evolving identities, are limited. The literature review has also shown that identity can be understood as being static and fluid. Over the years, the consideration of Muslim identity in Britain has shifted from being thought of as rigid to being negotiated and multiple. It is from multiple identities that individuals project their preferred identity in a given context. Therefore recognizing individuals as having an amenable identity is important as it assists in reducing stereotypes, for example. The literature review has also shown the relevance of case studies in challenging reductionist approaches to the study of Muslim women in particular. In so doing, this article seeks to stimulate further research about the life and experiences of Anglo Asian Muslims.

## **Research Method**

### **Setting and sample**

My research focused on exploring the role of faith in the life of trainee-teachers pursuing the undergraduate Bachelor of Arts Honours with Qualified Teacher Status course, in Birmingham, England. These students come from all walks of life and from many different parts of the country. I was particularly intrigued about their relationship with their religion. Iman was apt as a participant for this research, as she was neither Black, White, nor Asian instead she was of “mixed race” (*sic*). She was a daughter of an English convert and an Asian mother of Pakistani origin, born and brought up in England as a Muslimah. As a child, at the age of three, she had visited Pakistan but could not recall any profound memories.

Iman’s narrative appealed to my research since she belonged, in part, to an Asian and English family. Simultaneously she was part of a Muslim and Christian extended family. Couple with the fact that she was female, her perspective on being such a Muslimah, at a time of broken relationships between the Muslim community and society in general, were pertinent.

## **Data collection**

My semi-structured interview lasted over an hour, was tape recorded with her permission, transcribed and analyzed with her written and oral consent. At time of the interview, Iman was approaching the end of her second year of a three year course. She was wearing jeans, blue dress, ankle boots and a blue scarf which covered her hair but exposed her forehead. She had a small brown satchel matching with her ankle boots. The interview took place very soon after her second teaching practice in the hope that she would share her school experience. I took notes in my research diary throughout the research.

## **Narratives and research**

There is a long tradition in the social science interpretivist paradigm of using qualitative methods to understand the meaning people attached to their lived experiences. In research, the term narrative is well established, although the manner in which it is used is rather complex (Chase, 2005, 2010; Earthy & Cronin, 2008). A narrative may be oral or written and, may be elicited or heard during fieldwork, an interview, or a naturally occurring conversation (Chase, 2010). For Bruner, humans construct their understanding of the world mainly in the form of narrative – stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on (Bruner, 2003). In other words, for him, narratives operate in thought and action, shaping the ways in which people conceive and react to the world.

Narratives are, therefore, a means of constructing a world without which people would be lost in murk of chaotic experience (Bruner, 1990). In addition, narrative analysis enables researchers to explore the role of stories in construction of identity (Earthy & Cronin, 2008). Simultaneously, it gives the narrators a mechanism through which they construct themselves through the narration. This means that the researcher has at least two roles; to give a sense of narrating and to make sense of the narrative, which may consist of intellectual, emotional and spiritual details. As such the researcher is enabled to get the import of the meaning making process and outcome. Therefore, narrative analysis is about a narrative both in terms of how the text has been created and why it has been created in that way.

Experience can be presented in narrative form and in that process researchers can gain perspective/s on the meaning of interviewees' lived experiences. Through the exploration of individuals, one can also acquire the beliefs and emotions that interviewees hold about them including identity. Identity work is one of the five major approaches in contemporary narrative inquiry. This is the work in which "people are engaged in as they construct selves within specific institutional, organizational, discursive, and local cultural contexts" (Chase, 2005, p. 658).

The use of interpretivist approach to research was valuable in this study as I was able to gain a view of phenomena about which little is known (Gray, 2009) and related to Iman's beliefs, behaviors and activities.

## **Ethical considerations**

In-depth detailed interviews are in a sense an intrusion of privacy, and therefore raise ethical issues. At the outset, I made it clear to Iman that she was fully entitled to preserve her privacy by declining to respond to any question which she felt was intrusive or was uncomfortable with. Moreover, I informed her that she could withdraw at any point (Silverman, 2006). When explaining the procedures of the research, I unequivocally stated to her that the emergent narrative will potentially be published and, consequently, I could

guarantee anonymity of her name and promise confidentiality (Silverman, 2006) but not of the narrative, as it would be in public domain to which she agreed. To achieve this, I requested a pseudonym and she provided Iman.

Raising the issue of publication helped to address the sophisticated ethical issue concerning narrative research. I was conscious about some of the effects of the research on Iman, who at this stage might already been cognizant about the content she was sharing and the effect that such sharing might have on her either immediately and in future. Therefore the article was offered to her, prior to publication, for verification (Gray, 2009) and confirmation of accuracy (Patton, 2002).

### **Trustworthiness**

The noteworthy issue of trust was applied. As her tutor, I was conscious about power relations and the potential manipulative nature of such research. As a consequence, I assured her that she was under no obligation to participate (Silverman, 2006) and that her views would not be divulged to other tutors. Moreover, the requirements of informed consent were applied as stipulated by University ethical committee procedures by explicitly obtaining consent through a signed paper.

### **Sensitivity to religious and cultural aspects**

Another ethical aspect of consideration was gender, cultural conduct and religious dress code. Gender, in particularly, was important within religious and socio-cultural contexts rather than the issue of segregation by gender which is not the norm at the University. Nevertheless, it was felt that gender issues needed to be deliberated in this research and a point was made about this with Iman prior to the interview, so that appropriate methods and processes were chosen since it was expected that religious and cultural norms would prompt certain expectations. Iman consented to her interview being tape recorded and chose her own time, date and place.

### **Bias and authenticity**

Researchers try to minimize bias in their studies to increase the reliability and authenticity of their work (Silverman, 2006). Trustworthiness was enhanced through identification and acknowledgement of researcher bias (Creswell, 2007). In this study, although there had been some predetermined questions, I avoided the use of leading questions. Also, I tried as much as possible to remain neutral in body language and physical gestures and avoided giving opinions. Moreover, thick and rich descriptions of the experience of Iman are given.

Furthermore, bias may be introduced through the selection of topic by the researcher and as such becomes a challenge for narrative research as it tries to capture as much as it can from a person's life. Thus, I identified broad themes and within these themes, I utilized open ended questions to allow Iman the freedom to say what she considered worth saying. This leads to bias from the respondents' perspective which is more difficult to control, such as the responses given by Iman might have been biased by her recollections, and also by reflecting both positively and/or negatively on previous events. These approaches, offer a level of verification of the information gathered (Dodson & Schmalzbauer, 2010).

The approach to analyzing narratives does not assume objectivity but, instead, privileges positionality and subjectivity (Riessman, 2002). This means that an effort was made of not reducing the participant to an object; rather, I placed her 'voice' at the center of



the research. In this instance, through the narrative, the beliefs, attitudes, values and behaviors of Iman are advanced and given prominence. Iman's single narrative has conveyed tacit knowledge and has offered an avenue to make sense of how she constructs her identity. Being an individual construct it is a limited and therefore generalization cannot be made.

Earthy and Cronin (2008), following Lieblich et al. (1998), identify two intersecting approaches to narrative analysis. Categorical analysis is usually used when a researcher is concerned with experiences shared by a group of people, whereas, holistic analysis explores significance and change in the context of a persons' life. To bring meaning to the narrative, themes of patterns such as concepts, behavior, interactions, incidents, terminology or phrases were identified first. Then, they were organized into coherent categories that summarized and brought meaning to the narrative.

This rest of this article presents the narrative of Iman who is in her early twenties and from an Anglo Asian Muslim background. It examines her positioning which generate particular discourses that foreground and background specific issues of relevance for her (Haw, 1998).

## Results

I began by enquiring about her background. These included questions about herself, place of residence, parents, childhood, schooling, and her socialization in general prior and post-university. Thereafter, questions related to the role of faith in her life, her career choice, marriage, and about other religious and cultural matters were asked. I followed up this first interview with a shorter self-completed interview sheet seeking clarification and additional information as is the case with some qualitative researchers who rely on and use multiple methods and interviews (Gray, 2009).

The significant themes that emerged from the conversation were: *mixed race person, coconut, head scarf, language, Urdu, mother, Muslim, dad, choice, Islam, marriage, Pakistani, friendship, childhood, side-lined, traditional, education, shalwar kameez, career, festivals, music and food*. The main categories emerging were: identity, friends, culture, family, education and religion.

## Identity

Iman's narrative sheds light on how people construct and possess a personal or core identity, which for her gravitates to Islam, and a secondary identity comprising of sub-cultural life around them. She appears to associate with a secondary identity in such a way that it does not seem to be entirely in dissonance with her religious and/or family life. This is in congruence with some findings in a study among Pakistani youth in England (Din, 2006) and among other Muslims (Seddon, Hussain, & Malik, 2004), which establishes that identity can be demonstrated in many different ways. After acknowledging that she had experienced an identity crisis whilst in secondary school, Iman revealed the position of Islam in her life, saying:

*Now, after all those questions and burning desires in me, I would say that I base it on Islam. For me, foremost Islam is my identity. I wouldn't say I'm Pakistani or Asian or English because yes, whilst, I am mixed race say, for example, if I was in a Pakistani group sitting I do not necessarily feel very Asian because I feel a bit left out, we don't do all those things they do. Whereas, within the English community, I still do feel a bit left out as well, so it's within Islam where I feel most comfortable. I identify more with the*

*Islamic culture as it permeates into the Asian culture so there are common grounds for it with regards to family ethics and social responsibilities.*

In the past decade, Muslim dress, especially the *hijāb*, has become a key signifier regarding the lives of Muslim women globally; with considerable debate about its significance, role and symbolism. It has been asserted that identity can be expressed in numerous different means, including dress (Din, 2006). This is because whilst Islam is universal in its essence, it is not monolithic in its specific practice or cultural manifestations (Seddon, Hussain, & Malik, 2004). I queried about the first time she adorned her scarf, Iman's response shows that it had been part of her life from an early age: "*Probably since I was about 7 years old and I am totally comfortable with it right through.*"

The focus of analyzing narratives can either be its content or its form (Earthy & Cronin, 2008). Accordingly, a careful reading of Iman's narrative reveals her omission of the words *hijāb* and *niqāb*. Thus it appears that there is some significance of language and its usage in Iman's narrative. She chose to use the word scarf seven times for her own head covering and *duppata* when referring to her mother's head covering. It seems she has deliberately chosen to do so and perhaps there is some significance in this usage; possibly endeavoring to fit in with the more acceptable word for a head covering, reflecting, thereby, the consensus of young people avoiding to be different; alternatively, it may be that she is trying to distance herself, both orally and via design aesthetic, from the stereotypes and negativity portrayed about the *hijāb* and/or *niqāb*. Should her outward omission be deliberate, then, her decision corroborates with the notion that narrators in narrating their narrative are sometimes deliberate in how and what they say. Hence, their participation can be agentic (i.e., intentional; this is where people rely on others to act on their behalf to secure desired outcomes; Bandura, 2001).

The issues of identity and belonging cannot be separated from discussions about the relationship between local, national and global levels. The study by Bourn (2008) showed that young people construct their own sense of who they are in response to all three levels, and in the UK context, perhaps the most challenging is the national identity. Iman conveys this tendency and appears to locate herself toward being English. She adorned a scarf and described herself as someone with light skin. Peoples' responses to her appear to have been affected by these. She commented:

*I don't think anyone would jump to the conclusion that I'm say White. They, people, who I am meeting for the first time - probably think I was either a light skin Pakistani or probably from Iran that's a big thing, or Turkish even so. I mean to say that Iran is a popular suggestion for where people think I come from.*

On enquiring about her scarf at secondary school, she revealed:

*Back in secondary school because it's a mostly White area, I made a lot more White friends and they did ask whether I used to go to sleep with the scarf on, or can I come home and take it off, who can I show my hair in front of. In that way. Or why I wear it.*

However, her experience in university was different, she mentioned:

*But I think by the time you reach university, most people have met people who have been wearing scarfs and have already asked these questions. So I probably had that more back at secondary school.*

In addition, Iman's narrative shows her negotiation, redefinition and integration of ethnic and cultural identities, the manifestations of some of these are culturally British, and at the same time she holds Islam as a determining apparatus. When she faces a crisis she falls back on Islam and gives it precedence. Islam, therefore, seems to offer her a deeper sense of meaning to her life. It has been argued that religious identities can predominate over other group identities such as class and professions (Chanda-Gool, 2006). Gender appears to be subsumed by religion as it seems to be an overarching world-view.

*For me, class is not really a big deal because I moved from, from back in (English city), inner city to suburban areas so I could in a sense deal with both, so for me that was fine. Ethnicity, more probably white, white girls, not necessarily practising just white girls really.*

Having observed that religion seems to be the epitome in her life; looking at her narrative holistically, reveals that whilst the influence of Islam creates comfort for her; it is manifest from her account that its influence cannot be separated from cultural and familial relations. For instance, themes like marriage, festivals and dress (Chanda-Gool, 2006) expose that religion, culture and family are entangled. When exploring her family's observance and participation in traditional Pakistani or Islamic festivals, she said:

*Yeah like for Eid a big deal is made of it. Weddings as well, we've got all like the typical Pakistani culture such as at the mendhi party and everything like that so, we have all that. We celebrate Pakistani Independence day and attend Eid melas.*

Globalisation impacts upon young people in complex ways and forces them to constantly re-think and revise their sense of identity and place within society (Bourn, 2008). Religious, cultural and technological trends influence their lives, and therefore, as reported by Ajegbo, Kiwan, and Sharma (2007), these identities interact with each other. Iman's narrative shows that she not only understands her identity and feels a sense of belonging, but that she recognizes others' identity as well, which is fundamental to education for diversity and essential as young people construct their own interpretations of the world around them and their place within that world (Ajegbo, Kiwan, & Sharma, 2007). This was reflected when she talked about her father's family and their festivals:

*I'd say if my grandparents on my dad's side were to come down then we'd make something special for Christmas or anything like that. But it's always been, we've always known as children that it's for them, never for us. So they'd bring us Easter eggs but we always knew that we don't celebrate it. Other than that if we're not with the White side of the family then, for example, on Christmas, you know, when the Queen gives her speech, dad does make sure that all the family is down and it's a bit of an occasion at home, but, I think that's just because dad likes the Royal Family.*

Din (2006) also noted that for some among the Pakistani community cultural attitudes may over take religious ones. Hence, in understanding life experiences, it is critical to note the foregrounding by narrators of their preferred identity. This of course would be performed, as is evident above, in a complex way; which means narratives are mechanisms which make human experiences comprehensible by connecting the socio-political, cultural and individual aspects of a life together.

## Friends

Iman attended a primary school in the city which she describes as one where predominantly there were children from the Asian sub-continent. However, as opposed to attending a local school, her father purposefully enrolled her elsewhere. Her interaction in this secondary school and at the university informs us about her friendship. This includes those she feels closer to and the reasons for this. Whilst talking about her childhood, she also began to reveal her initial ideas about race relations.

*I think as I've been growing up it's become more of an issue because when I was younger we were actually from in inner city (English city) so primary school was full of Asians. Children mainly from Pakistani, Bengali and Gujarati families from the area. So I didn't feel left out or, different. Whereas, my dad purposely sent us to an all White girls' secondary school. It was mainly all White with a few Black girls, so that we could mix with other girls from other backgrounds and there you could feel a bit different. And then you would think, well my dad's White, so, why can't I not mix with them properly. And then you would think Pakistani, but, in the Asian community you still felt a bit left out. So there was a bit of an identity crisis, but, you just fall back on to, you know, Islam and being Muslim as your main identity. Not anymore now, but I would say through my teenage years. You know when you're asking these questions like who do I feel more comfortable with, or how do I see myself?*

In discussing her friendships she expounds an open mind-set regarding others. She claimed to ignore religious affiliation, and preferred values and characters instead. Where the universal guide provided by religious faith is emphasised, it seems, in her case, that the discursive motif also involves a form of colour transcendence where race and ethnic affiliation is construed as less important as an ascribed identity than faith (Edwards, Caballero, & Puthussery, 2010). Her relationship with Muslims, both *hijābis* and *non-hijābis*, and with non-Muslims was explicated as follows:

*For me, it's not really, I don't see it like that any more, you know. I don't identify people by [whether] they are Muslim, they are not Muslim. For me, for a moment I see them as human beings. I see them as people and I judge them by their character not really by their religion. Because you could see a Muslim girl, she could be dressed completely, you know, Islam appropriately, but could be the worst person or the most horrible, spiteful person you would ever meet. So I wouldn't judge them by that.*

Allan (1989) notes that relationships are often presented as voluntary, informal and personal, and still operate within the constraints of social and physical limitations such as class, gender, age, religion, ethnicity and place. This introduces an important question against

the notion that friendship is totally a matter of choice. Indeed, Iman's narrative indicates that, for her, choice was defined by certain parameters; some were external, such as acceptance by others, and others internal, such as seeking comfort. Further, in these friendships, she has, apparently, created a culture which is aligned, rather than antagonistic, with family traditions. In this sense, there is little in her narrative which suggests that she has strayed between two worlds, a feature which is also evident in her preferences for music. She appears to present a discourse of moderation in the English context possibly due to the perceived uncertainty that exist in relation to music between theological contestations and reality. However, in other matters, such as clubbing, her position is unambiguous. About her social life she revealed:

*Bit of a dead one but (laughter). If you mean social life in terms of going out clubbing with friends then I am not engaged in those activities. However I socialize actively with friends with things like cinema, eating out, shopping etc. I also enjoy weekly badminton sessions. In addition to this, family social life is ongoing with something always happening.*

## Culture

In exploring cultural aspects of her life, Iman explained her acquisition of Urdu in the following way:

*As we were growing up, mum would dip in and out of Urdu and Punjabi while speaking to us, so I picked it up and also during primary school, I attended Urdu lunchtime classes. My mother tongue is Urdu because my mum is from Lahore. I know it's very confusing. She's from Lahore but for her she feels most comfortable with Punjabi but she speaks Urdu because my dad only knows Urdu, he does not understand Punjabi. And Punjabi is like the slang version of Urdu. Urdu is more refined. My dad learnt Urdu in like I think the first 3 months of their marriage. I live with my parents and I speak English, generally, but Urdu if I want something (laughter). To my mum, if I want something, then Urdu will come out (laughter). I think it just gets to the point quicker.*

As she was growing up she did not think that she had been discriminated against. However, the response of the Asian community towards her was interesting as some of them knew that she was "half" White. She narrated:

*In terms of my family, that's never been an issue that's never been brought up. But what most people fail to realize is that I understand Urdu perfectly [original emphasis] in terms of Punjabi as well. So whenever we go to, say, Islamic gatherings and, you hear, some of the aunty-ji's talking and they are talking in Urdu and they are talking about us blatantly and I can understand everything. So they are just intrigued as to who are we, whose daughters are we. That's a big question, ye kiski beti hein? (Whose daughter is she?), you know.*

When conversing about the reaction of some people within the Asian community to someone like her of dual heritage; in her above reply, she poignantly stressed her tone, made facial expression, and turned her face slightly to her left, reflecting a stylist performance when using the word perfectly. This became evident as she was expressing her surprise at

people who do not realize about her language capacities. Her articulation of perfectly gives the impressions of a performative feature to achieve identity. This positioning of the self in personal narratives signifies the performance of identity which is enacted in an immediate discursive context (Riessman, 2002). Giving further insight into such gatherings, she elucidated:

*Yeah I mean yes. We go to most places and there are four sisters and we sometimes do stick out because we are not always wearing shalwar kameez. We wear our scarfs differently to how most girls would wear it and we are with our mum. So that does make quite a scene because my mum is very Pakistani looking in terms of shalwar kameez, the way she just flings her dupatta (long scarf) across. It's a very stark difference and those are the kind of questions that they want to know.*

Regarding stereotyping her, she illuminated:

*Shockingly most stereotypes come from within the Asian community rather than anybody else. They want to know can we cook, why [original emphasis] are we studying for so long, are we getting married [original emphasis] soon. You know these kinds of stereotypes.*

The subject of marriage provided fascinating insights. On the prospects of marrying a non-Asian person, she admitted:

*I think when we were younger say 14 or 15. It was quite idealistic like we're gonna have this mixed race person because we have had it so it's not as far fetched. For some girls that's quite a far fetched dream but I mean as I've got older I realize that I feel more comfortable within the Pakistani community. So it's not a dream any more so I'm happy with how it is now. I mean I am quite close with my mum and she has a very strong Pakistani mind-set. So I do understand how the Pakistani community ticks and going into a Pakistani family I don't think I'll be that, you know, I won't stick out too much compared to other communities. And I think it's very important in terms of marriage, you should marry to backgrounds similar to yourself for optimal understanding.*

The purpose of these meetings was justified in the following terms:

*We had these meetings with the intention of marriage. This was considered by our parents as the most Islamic friendly way of getting to know one another within the correct parameters. I am aware that does happen in our culture.*

She was inclined to her husband because:

*First and foremost, the obvious thing that I was concerned with that he had to be a practicing Muslim. And, then, with that all the other admiring qualities should follow en suite such as considerate, understanding, patient etc. I was open to a partner from any community, there was no issue there whatsoever, but it just happened that this family were Pakistani and ticked all the boxes of what I was looking for.*

The themes of her head scarf and marriage illustrate the management of identity in practice, where she appears to be regulating information to influence how people perceive her motives and image. In contrast to popular depictions of Muslim women as being contracted in arranged and/or forced marriages and having no choices in matters of head covering, Iman is presenting these through a desirable self, in situations which are politically and socially hostile. People have different understandings of arranged marriage, and therefore this was discussed with her. She explained:

*I mean arranged marriage is normally synonymously linked with forced marriages and with arranged marriages it starts off with the parents. They are the key instruments in it happening. So in this case it was [name given] parents who approached our family when I was actually 16. And at the time I was not interested, marriage was never on the cards even in my parent's head. So then they approached us again at 18, and then we thought about it further, I had a few meetings with him, we talked and then we agreed that that's what we wanted to do.*

About cuisine and food, Iman shared interesting information:

*Pakistani mostly, daal and rice, huh, without fail. I think that's because mum is the main cook in the house. She feels most comfortable cooking Asian food, dad happily eats it. It's very mild though we don't have any chilli. But I mean I've cooked a few times at home and through recipe books we've made things like fish and pasta, stuff that my mum doesn't really touch but we're quite adventurous with what we eat.*

On music she commented:

*Yeah, ok, (laughter), I think in Islam there are two opinions, one is that, music is completely prohibited with instruments and all that only for Allah. And the second is, in moderation. And I probably have to say that I am more swayed towards the second one. Yes I do listen to music and I know for some people that could be a problem but Inshallah (God willing) in time.*

She admitted:

*I mean, yeah, I listen to the nasheed (vocal music) and things like that and yes with instruments as well but then, you know, with the whole Asian influence and some Bollywood is coming into it and all that.*

Regarding her preference towards any particular kind of music, she elaborated:

*No not at all, I don't mind, just no rock or anything like that because I don't know I just find it very depressing, not really my thing. I listen to a range of music spanning from Islamic nasheeds to mainstream music such as Mumford and Sons, to some Bollywood songs and Qawalis (devotional music), so it's quite a diverse mix! I probably like from some of the films I've seen if some songs that I've really liked, I just replay those or whatever.*

Shedding light on her dress, she spoke:

*Dress code ok. For example, of course we dress to be modest; we wear a scarf as well to be modest, as well for all these reasons. I know that's the exterior kind of form but it's your intentions for wearing the loose baggy clothing and things like this so for that reason, it's not really the actions but it's the intentions behind it, which are the same.*

Regarding the impact this might have and whether there was any sense of standing out on campus, she recounted:

*Not really through my dress because although, you know, hopefully, I try and dress modest. I'm not really wearing the traditional clothes shalwar kameez. I don't feel like I'm being alienated because of my dress. But, I knew, for example, say if we were to go out, dress to impress is different for both of us you know. We'd have different understandings of that and in that reason, that's where the difficulties would lie. For a young woman living in this society, this phrase has a different understanding. For Muslim women, dressing nice would be to wear stylish clothes (western and/or ethnic) but with the main focus centering on being modest and covering.*

Seemingly, in most instances, looking at the narrative as a whole, Iman associates tradition and cultural elements of her identity with reference to her mother. In this theme, she connects her mother with ideas about language, caring, vocation, being practical and food. Her, dad features as taking a keen interest in her educational experiences; choice of school, and being fond of royalty.

It is interesting to note the way Iman uses some of her language and phrases to create the effect of additional conviction and strength. Apparently, when she refers to information related to her mother, she tends to be less buoyant, whereas, when she talks about her father, she appears to be more emphatic and celebratory in tone.

*Traditional Pakistani dress would be shalwar kameez. It would be on special occasions such as Eid or a wedding for example. At home generally not. I generally don't mind. I don't mind wearing it but it's just not been part of my identity to wear it outside of family surroundings so I wouldn't wear it to university or to school or anything like that. I don't know. It's just ever since we were growing up we would either dress like frock and then as we were growing older it was just western clothes, never really really shalwar kameez. Shalwar kameez is the traditional clothing of the country where my mum is from. So I associated it with the sub-Indian countries. For me, I wear Asian clothing in times of family gatherings where we all meet for events such as weddings, Eid, family get-together etc.*

Indeed, culture is acquired through sophisticated processes (Li, 2010). Language, values, knowledge, and skills as a way of life are acquired through enculturation (Kottak, 2007). Berry, Phinney, Sam, and Vedder (2006) writing about immigrants, maintained that, through acculturation, they learn about the norms of host culture, making social and psychological



adjustments to fit into the new society. Berry et al. (2006) posit that for integration to occur a mutual accommodation is required.

## Family

Iman grew up in a very practicing religious family of ‘mixed race’ (*sic*) in a city in the West Midlands. After her recent marriage she had settled in another city in the West Midlands; her father is a professional and her mother was described as being a house wife. She was one of six in her family with two brothers and three sisters. She exposed positive and supportive relationships in her family:

*I am the eldest of the children. There is roughly about 13 months between myself and sister number 2, so we are the closest, but, as we are all getting older, it is increasingly becoming apparent, that as sisters, we are closer than we are to our brothers. My relationship with my siblings has generally always been positive but of course as with families there have been a few strained occasions where I may have been acting too bossy/authoritative!*

*I am 20 years old. I'm a Muslim born in (English city). Originally my mother is a Pakistani and my dad is an English Muslim convert. I have lived all my life in (English city) My mother's only actually studied to the age of 12 in Pakistan. Her mother was actually dying of diabetes and as she was the youngest her education was stopped and she had to look after my grandma. So my mother is quite illiterate to a level. However, my father has an MA in Islamic Studies and is quite advanced in comparison. My dad is a secondary school teacher with the responsibility of coordinating special educational needs, and all my siblings are all currently in full time education, spanning from primary school to university. He was born into a White family growing up with one brother, a single parent family and, then, at the age of about 20, he left England to travel the world in search of the true religion. Who is the creator? Why are we here? Asking these key questions. And he was in Turkey, at the time interested in Hinduism, so with the aim of traveling to India to find out more he ended up in Pakistan and stumbled upon Islam which he had stumbled on before but hadn't taken much of an interest. But, then, living with Muslims, seeing them, he actually became a bit more interested and ... when he came back to England, he thought, well I've spent all this money and time so and he felt that he didn't want it to be a wasted journey, came here and read more about Islam and realized that this was the religion. If you asked my dad he'll say well half English, bit of Scottish in me, bit of Irish, so we'll stick with English.*

Socio-cultural traditions are changing phenomena and, in this milieu, Iman appears to have applied the leverage of her religious understanding to marriage procedures. Narrators can position themselves as agentic beings that assume control over events and actions: they purposefully initiate and cause action. As noted earlier, they can shift among positions, giving themselves agentic roles in certain scenes, and passive roles in others (Reissman, 2002). In talking about the selection of a university, she shifted her social position by presenting herself as being in charge and as the initiator, whereas, when talking about marriage and of meeting her fiancé, she appeared to have taken a passive role.

*His religion of course is Islam and he is full Pakistani, meaning both of his parents derived from Pakistan. It was arranged, yes. His parents approached us but when my dad went to Pakistan and where he had become Muslim. I think a week into his conversion a friend took him to see (states name) my fiancé's father and it was actually on that day that his dad (fiancé's father) was actually getting married. So as the groom he left his wedding party to speak to my dad about Islam and then he (fiancé's father) was actually living in England but had gone back to Pakistan to marry. So when dad had finished talking to him they then met up again in England, by this time dad had also married so we've kept contact you know before both of us were born.*

### **Education**

In theorizing identity, the works of Goffman are important. Goffman (1969) is famous for his dramaturgical metaphor. He suggested that social identity is analyzed with reference to theatrical performance. Goffman is concerned with the genuineness of an individual's performance of their role. He discusses the issue of role performance, likening it to a theatrical role of an actor. Actors who assume this new role find other well-established fronts from which they choose (Goffman 1969). Nevertheless, to emphasize the performative element is not to suggest that identities are inauthentic, only that they are situated and accomplished in social interaction (Reissman, 2002).

Her parents, especially, her father continued to take a keen interest in her studies:

*Umm yeah, dad took a keen interest. I initially started Year 7 at my local catchment area school and again that was very Asian dominated and because dad had been trying to get us into the girl school, which was predominately all White. I got my place in Year 8. So I'd moved and initially I hated it because it was not my comfort zone at all. So yeah school has had, yeah, school life, dad's had, you know, big part to play.*

On occasions, parents spoke about Islamophobia and racism:

*Yeah, I mean the first that I'd experienced was in Year 7, when I first started. Oh sorry Year 8 when I'd first started at the (secondary) school, my scarf was pulled off me and, you know, I came and I said that is it dad why have you condemned me to this school! I hate it, I'm not going back. But I mean, you know, once I was at that school and I had then made friends with other Muslim girls I realized, yeah, it's not normal, you shouldn't expect it, but that's what happened and I mean it was a one off.*

She summed up her achievements and relationships with teachers in both schools in the following words:

*I performed quite well during my time in both schools. Teachers always were impartial to your religion/culture; they always were professional in my experience.*

She went on to elaborate the educational experience and the fervor in her father for their education.

*Dad has because dad's very strong minded in education. He wants us all to achieve, and you know, reach our best potential. In terms of education, mum's a bit like, 'well I've only done it till I was 12 and I'm still, you know, continuing life.' So mum doesn't see education as important as say my dad. But there is a balance. For my mum because I think, for her, she just she's very practical, she sees when we are just reading books or writing essays she thinks it's a bit futile, you know, she wants us to learn life skills, be more vocational with our life, be very practical. My mum's education was stunted at the tender age of 13 when she was required to leave school and to act as a child carer for her mum who was severely ill. Dad, I think because he's pushed himself in it. He sees education as a means of striving further to be more successful in life. Dad has always valued education and while he was a student, learning was always easy for my dad. He enjoyed school and became a head boy.*

Her friendship and the background of people who she was with in school or university was expressed as follows:

*Ok in university I knew that I would err what is the word err gravitate towards the Muslims; I knew that would eventually happen. So, initially, I started university thinking yes I know I will go there and they will be my friends. But I want to try and make other friends you know get some other kind of experiences with other people because back at school it's a very limited environment whereas at university they are coming from all walks of life. And I found it actually quite hard. I didn't feel very comfortable, you know, making friends with the other kind of people. So when I did fall back on the Muslim girls I have made friends with now, and, who I have stuck with, that's where I feel most comfortable. I feel I gravitated towards them just because common background, you know, in a weird sense we understand each other before we were even talking to one another. From the way we dress, what we would be doing in our free time, probably even the fact that we were enrolled into a teaching course, probably for the same reasons. So for those reasons, I kind of knew that we would have common ground between us.*

In these hard and sometimes uncomfortable circumstances within other groups, she was asked to explain who those others were and to explain why she was feeling uncomfortable and how she responded and her gravitation towards Muslims.

*I mean when we first started [University] you know everyone was getting to know one another so lots of questions are being asked about your social life. And I realized that when we were in a group talking, they would all be very enthusiastic about each other, whereas, I could not feel that I could input as well. All I was doing roughly, I was doing the questioning so I felt like I was the interviewer rather than being able to be part of the group because I could not offer any of my own background or my own experiences.*

But Iman said that she was comfortable interacting with trainees from a range of religious and ethnic backgrounds.

*Yes, yes, I'm doing it now I mean I have made friends who are not Pakistani, who are not Muslims and they are my friends but I would not hang around with them all the time. I have friends who are from backgrounds where religion is not a personal matter of interest and friends who are Sikh, Hindu and Christian.*

In general, she admitted to being more comfortable interacting with Muslims but this seemed to have changed. She explained:

*I'd say more with the Muslims but that was again in first year. Coming into 2<sup>nd</sup> year we've made a lot more Hindu, Sikh friends, so yes still staying within the Asian social circles but in a sense we have kind of branched out a bit so there is progression.*

Her response and feelings about the nature of those interactions are detailed favourably:

*I love it to be honest because I can relate to that. There are times when I do feel like I don't understand what's going on because I feel like a bit of a coconut then. But I mean in general I think it's fine because back in primary school, my roots and I suppose that's how it's always been. From university when I'm going home I'm going back to an Asian community so that's where I feel my home is.*

She elucidated on the concept of a coconut as follows:

*Huh. As in like, ok yeah, my mum's Asian but there are times when I feel a bit like a gora, a bit White, like what's going on, you know, and they are all like get lost 'n you know.*

She experienced a kind of alienation in a session as depicted by the following disclosure:

*Within my social circle? Um, yes. Sometimes, but it's always been done in good nature, you know. Yeah, sometimes I get picked on because you don't know what's going on. For example, well my cousin it's her wedding in the Easter holidays, currently happening and there are a few things that she said that she would like us to do and some of these rasams (rites) that I don't understand. So I'm asking my friends and they are just laughing at my expense. These are weddings (they) are such a fundamental part of our lives that we've been growing up with. So I should know these things like the back of my hand. Whereas, for me, it's not something that we normally do so.*

Iman did not have any kind of adjustment problems while at University linking this directly to her friends:

*No. I mean once I'd found the girls that I am with now, I totally felt at ease here.*

## **Religion**

Not only is religion playing an important role in her contemporary life and activities, but a clear feature in her narrative is that she refers to religious orientation as one of the determinants of her future plans: temporal and eschatological. It appears that this is a conscious decision in the English contexts, where Muslim identity has featured as a highly political and politicized issue. She has, apparently, taken recourse to Islam, especially its discourse on women and education, and used it to satisfy and validate taking up teaching as a career and, in so doing, for her, Islam is a way of justifying attitudes and behavior (Din, 2006). Her career choice was declared unambiguously; religion, in part, played a role in this too.

*I chose teaching for a number of reasons, first and foremost because it is vocational. With the situation around you it's very stable. There will always be jobs for us. Secondly, because as a woman you can fit it in with your family life, so say if I did want a family later on in life, I would be able to have the same holidays and be there for my children and, thirdly because education is very highly esteemed in Islam. Knowledge is a sacred duty for every Muslim so if I could you know even for a bit just impart that to other children, it would be seen as like a sadaqah jariyah (perpetual merits). It's like a charity, not necessary like giving money but and it's not compulsory but from my own free will.*

When asked about her decision to become a teacher, her response reveals a complex philosophical approach consisting of a variety of perspectives that act as motivators. She appears to have combined her mother's orientation (vocation); economic circumstances (secure job); gender (fits with family life) and religion (knowledge is a sacred) and eschatological (*sadaqah jariyah*). Perhaps this, couple with her ethnic rooting, as stated earlier, is a further exhibition of the notion of multiple identities postulated by post-modernism as being negotiated, flexible and reconfigured rather than static. She sees herself entering the teaching profession from multiple lenses. This is also a reflection of the challenging endeavor of understanding identity and the issues related to it (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

## **Discussion**

Iman shares a valuable narrative which like Khan's (2002) study on Muslim women in Canada, provokes a rethink about the static and fixed conceptions of Muslim women. Khan (2002) points out that because minority identities are fixed, women who happen to be Muslim are often forced to enter social and political spaces as Muslim women. Such restraints, she argues, make it almost impossible to create a place for progressive politics, change, and fluid identities. Therefore, Khan (2002) appeals for such notions from which hybrid identities can be constructed. But, identities are also said to be substantive, or authentic (Lawler, 2008). This means that, whilst the notion of a fluid identity is helpful for shifting away from static identity; there is more to be derived from human experiences. Iman, for instance, demonstrates fluid identity regarding culture, ethnicity and race. However, her core identity remains that of being a Muslim albeit within its varied interpretations.

There appear to be signs of resistance within the narrative presented by Iman. There seems to be a framework, which she has created to use for social activities in the wider community, and she evidently operates within the boundaries of this framework; and, in so

doing she is confronting various pressures. In a mainstream culture, the majority assumes dominance politically, socially, and economically, but minority communities also actively contest and resist such domination (Li, 2010, cf., Sonn & Fisher, 1998). Iman's resistance, which shapes a facet of her identity, is evident in her claim of abandoning aspects, which are considered prohibitive by her religion. In some ways this resonates and questions the essentialist and static representations of Asian cultures and communities, which Keddie (2011) refers to and, Iman exemplifies how she actively constructs her identities within and against the available discourses of specific contexts. In other words, identity is multi-dimensional and sophisticated. It intersects and overlaps with several categories of difference including ethnicity, social class, gender, linguistic, cultural, and religious affiliations (Bhatti, 2011).

This narrative implies that religion, for some people, seems to have an important role in the construction of their identity. Moreover, for Iman her faith and religion seems to play a constructive role for pluralism and integration. From her narrative it seems that to enhance pluralism and integration, the fears of discrimination and Islamophobia need to be addressed through policy and practical actions. In addition, through this narrative, I have also identified the need for further research among the growing number of Anglo-Asian British Muslims and their experiences in other aspects of their lives and careers.

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### **Author Note**

Imran Mogra is a senior lecturer in the School of Education, Faculty of Education, Law and Social Sciences, Birmingham City University, Birmingham, England. His current research interests, carried out through qualitative research, include understanding teacher trainee identities. He is also interested in the revelations about learning in sacred spaces as reflected in student narratives and their potential for teaching and learning in religious education.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Imran Mogra, School of Education, Birmingham City University, City North Campus, Attwood Building Room A210a, Franchise Street, Perry Barr, Birmingham, UK B42 2SU. E-mail: imran.mogra@bcu.ac.uk

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