

# 'Liminal learners' in a global city: the aspirations of young British Bangladeshi women at an east London secondary school

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**Abstract** Young British Bangladeshi women are often perceived as a marginalised, vulnerable group unlikely to succeed within the UK education system. Although achievement at GCSE level has improved significantly in recent years, female British Bangladeshis continue to be identified as an under-performing group at A-level<sup>1</sup> and in higher education (Dale, 2002; Hussain, 2005). This article examines the educational experiences of a group of young British Bangladeshi women at one east London secondary school, exploring their perceptions of educational success and their aspirations for the future. Through a narrative, case-study approach, and drawing on a range of theoretical perspectives, the research seeks to challenge commonly held perceptions of a group of young women whose voices are often absent from academic and policy discourse. Using the concept of 'liminality'<sup>2</sup> (Turner, 1969) as a way to conceptualise the location of young British Bangladeshi women within the education system, the article argues that we need to re-visit the widening participation<sup>3</sup> (WP) agenda, in the light of the real, lived experiences of young people from second-and third-generation migrant communities.

**Key terms:** British Bangladeshi; young women; aspirations; liminality; widening participation.

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## Introduction

The research discussed in this article is a case study of the experiences of students from one single-sex comprehensive secondary school in east London, which I call 'Hazel Grove'.<sup>4</sup> I was a teacher at the school between 2006 and 2011, and started the research as part of my doctoral studies in September 2009. My research initially focused on curriculum provision in the sixth form<sup>5</sup>; this aligned with my professional interests, as I was at the time a member of the senior leadership team with responsibility for curriculum development. During the course of my research, I became interested in issues relating to higher education (HE) and widening participation (WP) because these were, unsurprisingly, foremost in the minds of the young women with whom I was working. Many were in the process

of applying to university, with some having already attended interviews. The views they expressed about their initial experiences of HE, particular in relation to the HE admissions system, were extremely surprising to me. They made me question not only my own previously held assumptions about the ways in which students from ‘non-traditional backgrounds’ (Sutton Trust, 2008:33) experience this phase of education, but also the assumptions of the WP agenda. I wanted to explore this area in more depth, both for my own interest, in relation to my doctoral studies, and with the hope of improving the school’s ability to make appropriate provision for its sixth form students.

## Context

Hazel Grove School is situated in the heart of east London, a place that has experienced successive waves of migration from various parts of the world over several centuries. Most of the young women who attend the school are descendants of migrants who came to the UK from Bangladesh in the 1950s and 1960s (Eade, 2000; Dench, Gavron and Young, 2006). They live in a small, densely populated area that has, since the 1980s, been home to an almost exclusively Bangladeshi population, though that is now starting to change. In this area, child poverty, overcrowding and unemployment are common; the British Bangladeshi community also have the worst health of any ethnic group in the UK, the lowest participation in HE and the highest level of dependence on welfare support. Bangladeshi women have, for several decades, been one of the lowest performing groups within the UK education system and the labour market, though there are some signs this is now starting to improve (Dale, 2002).

The school itself is perceived within the local community as a popular, successful and high-performing institution; it has received many positive accolades in recent years including a judgement of ‘Outstanding’ from government inspectors in 2010.<sup>6</sup> Each year, around 90% of students are retained into the sixth form,<sup>7</sup> with about three quarters of these taking A-level courses. In 2009–10, more than four fifths of students were eligible for the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA),<sup>8</sup> indicating that most were living in relative poverty. In the same year, over 90% of Year 13 students were admitted to university, a significant achievement among a group that typically represents less than 1% of female first-degree students in the UK (Hussain and Bagguley, 2007).

While working at Hazel Grove, I was conscious of the extent to which the school was a target for WP activities. Apart from the Aimhigher-funded<sup>9</sup> activities organised by the school, this seemed mainly to involve high-achieving students being encouraged, by organisations like the Sutton Trust,<sup>10</sup> to take part in summer schools, mentoring schemes and other activities aimed at helping them gain entrance to Oxford, Cambridge and Russell Group universities.<sup>11</sup> My experience of talking to sixth form students about these activities suggested that a large number were

keen to be involved but only a small number met the entrance requirements, which tended to include significant numbers of A and A\* grades at GCSE level. This gives some sense of the way WP has shifted, during the last decade, from a focus on increasing the number of students entering HE to an emphasis on helping students from local income backgrounds to gain entrance to elite universities

## Previous research

Previous research into the education of young Bangladeshi women in the UK has tended to emphasise the failure of the British education system to meet their needs, seeing Asian and Muslim girls in British schools as victims of the prejudice, inflexibility and racism embedded within the structures and practices of the system. The strong emphasis of these earlier studies on issues of race and religion has, however, been challenged by feminist researchers (e.g. Archer, 2002; Pichler, 2007), who draw attention to the impact on young British Asian women of the intersection of different kinds of inequality including gender, poverty and social class. More recent studies have explored young women's agency and their capacity for 'cultural resistance' (Shain, 2003:54), emphasising how second- and third-generation young British Asian women play an active role in the process of negotiating 'hybrid' identities (Hussain, 2005:11).

When it comes to the aspirations of young British Bangladeshi women and their experiences of HE, this is not an area in which a great deal of research has previously been carried out, owing mainly to the small number of Bangladeshi women attending university in the UK in previous generations. Participation and achievement rates remained low during the 1980s, with Bangladeshi women having the lowest rate of Level 4<sup>12</sup> qualifications of any group in the UK throughout the 1990s.<sup>13</sup> Hussain and Bagguley, who interviewed South Asian women attending universities in the north of England, found many barriers to achievement, including racism, Islamophobia and other institutional, financial and community factors; they argue that South Asian women are adept at balancing education with plans for marriage and other issues (Hussain and Bagguley, 2007). Bhopal, meanwhile, explores the experiences of young Asian women in UK HE institutions, highlighting the challenges they face in making sense of an unfamiliar environment and the strategies they use to survive and succeed in this context (Bhopal, 2010).

Smart and Rahman's research into the A-level choices of Bangladeshi girls in Tower Hamlets borough (Smart and Rahman, 2008) is one of the few studies focusing solely on young British Bangladeshi women, who often in other studies tend to be grouped together with Pakistanis and/or Indians. Smart and Rahman examine factors influencing young women's aspirations and intentions, including parents, teachers and careers advisors, arguing that those working with the Bangladeshi population tend to have more fixed notions of culture and identity than the young women themselves:

There is a need to be open to the ways in which Bangladeshi cultural identities are changing, as Bangladeshi young people accept and modify some traditions and forge new cultural identities. (Smart and Rahman, 2008:10)

This construction of young British Bangladeshi women, as agentive participants in a process of ongoing cultural change, resonates with other studies of immigrant groups in Western societies, particularly young people born into the second and third generation, who are engaged in ongoing processes of identity formation and negotiations around allegiances to different groups.

## 'Liminality'

During the course of my research, I found the concept of 'liminality' (Turner, 1969) to be a useful reference point from which to analyse the experiences of the young women at Hazel Grove School. Being positioned as 'liminal' implies both marginalisation and an imminent movement towards the centre; it suggests not only exclusion but also the potential for social and cultural change. It offers, therefore, an opportunity to move away from deficit models and, instead, to place discussion about migrant identities within a wider narrative about possibilities for social change and transformation. This would seem to be in keeping with the WP agenda, a key aim of which was to increase the number of students coming into HE from 'groups with low representation' (National Audit Office, 2002:1), thereby decreasing both social exclusion and marginalisation.

Ladson-Billings and Donnor argue that 'it is important not to regard the liminal space solely as a place of degradation and disadvantage' (Ladson-Billings and Donnor, 2008:281), but also, as Rollock (2012) notes, to recognise the way in which it can provide 'a unique surround vision' that can see through oppressive structures and 'advance the broader objectives of the racial justice project' (Rollock, 2012:66). As Rollock argues, however, the degree to which this can be accessed depends on an individual's context and the resources at their disposal.

It is often the case that, rather than being a powerful vantage point from which to challenge the status quo, the liminal position is one of silence and invisibility. For young British Bangladeshi women, opportunities to access the 'advantageous' (Rollock, 2012:81) aspects of liminality are limited due to social class, poverty, gender and religious identity. As young Muslim women living in the West, they are inevitably affected by the tendency of Western discourse to portray Muslim women as passive, oppressed subjects in need of liberation (Zine, 2002). One aim of my research, therefore, was to centralise the voices and perspectives of the young women involved, in a way that does not distort or obscure the realities of their experiences.

## Methodology

The research is a narrative case study of the perceptions of young British Bangladeshi women at Hazel Grove School, with a focus on their constructions of education success, their aspirations and their expectations for HE. The study draws on data gathered between September 2009 and August 2011, when I was working at the school and pursuing my doctoral studies at the Institute of Education in London. The data was collected as part of a larger study of the educational experiences of young women at Hazel Grove School, which I undertook as part of my doctoral studies.<sup>14</sup> The research was not commissioned by the school, but permission to carry it out was sought and granted by the head teacher at the start of the research process.

This article draws on a series of life history interviews with six young women in Year 13 between January and July 2011. All of the respondents had parents and/or grandparents who came to live in the UK from Bangladesh and almost all the students themselves were born in the UK; all except one completed their primary school education in the UK. The interviews were recorded and the transcripts analysed using a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The interviews were ‘open-ended’ (Reinharz, 1992:19) and did not follow a pre-determined structure, although they were focused around a number of broad questions.

One aim of my research was to develop an approach that would allow me to interpret and represent the stories of the young women at Hazel Grove in a way that gives voice to the realities of their experiences. By exploring their ‘educational life histories’ (Tobin and Kincheloe, 2006:325), I hoped to gain insight into the complexity of the informants’ experiences. As Goodson and Sikes argue, one benefit of using life histories is that this is one of the few approaches that does not avoid ‘the messy confrontation with human subjectivity which we believe should comprise the heartland of the sociological enterprise’ (Goodson and Sikes, 2006:8).

Of course, there are many challenges with the narrative approach, particularly if it privileges the formal language of the social sciences over the language of ordinary people (Mahmood, 2005). This is difficult to avoid in an academic study since, as Rosen argues, ‘as soon as life-histories become transformed from the oral to the written, they pass out of the hands of the creators and become a middle class commodity’ (Rosen, 1998:77). The only solution, I believe, is to try to be as responsible as possible with the stories told to me during the course of my research, and to be conscious of the ways in which, during the process of re-telling, they are inevitably re-shaped and re-formed.

One of the key aims of my research was to challenge the dominant narratives that currently shape perceptions of young British Bangladeshi women, by starting to create ‘counter-narratives’ (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002) that centralise the voices and experiences of the young women themselves. As a result, drawing on

approaches developed within the field of Critical Race Theory (e.g. Rollock, 2012), I have chosen to focus on the story of Humayra,<sup>15</sup> one of the six young women in the group I interviewed at Hazel Grove in the summer of 2011. I do not claim that her story is representative or typical of the others, but her narrative does highlight key themes and issues that also emerged in the other young women's accounts.

## Ethical considerations

When interpreting the data, I had to take account of the asymmetry between myself and the participants, and the extent to which this may have influenced their responses. The fact that I was, while collecting data, a senior member of staff at Hazel Grove School as well as a doctoral student at the Institute of Education, has significant implications for the research: as Malone argues, carrying out research in one's professional context is fraught with difficulties and tensions (Malone, 2003). Although my research was not part of my professional role, it would be difficult to argue that my perceptions and interpretations were not affected by that role; it also seems likely that the students' responses may have been affected by their perception of me as a teacher and a senior member of staff.

One way in which I attempted to overcome the asymmetry in power relations was focusing on the students' life histories, which places them in the role of expert since 'nobody knows better than them the intricacies and intimacies of their life' (Goodson and Sikes, 2006:72). I also made sure participants were aware of the aims and objectives of my research, assuring them that the results would be written up as part of my doctoral studies and would not be used for any other purpose without their consent. The research was written up after I left the school to focus full time on my doctoral studies, which helped give me perspective on the issues and ensured that I was less constrained than I might otherwise have been by concerns about the ways in which my findings might impact on my professional context.

My status as insider researcher brings the benefit of enhanced contextual understanding, while at the same time limiting my ability to maintain an objective distance from the participants. As a critical researcher, I do not see this lack of objectivity as a significant drawback, because I do not claim to separate my own beliefs and values from my work or to be an objective onlooker. Like other critical and feminist researchers,<sup>16</sup> I am primarily concerned with the education of vulnerable and marginalised groups, who might otherwise not have a voice or whose voices might be ignored. My in-depth understanding of the context helped me to do this, because it means I have a greater appreciation of the complexities of the issues I am investigating in my research.

## Findings and analysis

In each of the sections that follows, I have started by summarising my research findings in relation to relevant literature; this is followed by extracts from Humayra's narrative as an example of how the young women at Hazel Grove experience these issues.

### 'Raising aspirations'

An imperative to 'raise aspirations' has been central to the WP agenda in the UK, based on the assumption that aspirations amongst certain communities are too low and that some benefits would accrue from raising them. In reality, of course, it is much more complicated than that. Cuthbert and Hatch argue that most studies of 'aspirations' are in fact measuring 'intentions and expectations', and that 'disadvantaged children do not have fundamentally different aspirations from their more advantaged peers' (Cuthbert and Hatch, 2009:2). There is also evidence that young people from ethnic minorities tend to have higher educational aspirations than their white peers (Strand and Winston, 2008:2), suggesting that low aspirations are not the cause of low participation or under-achievement among young Bangladeshi women.

Dumais uses Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' to explain why young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds often 'self-select themselves out of the college-going track' (Dumais, 2002:47), arguing that the possession or acquisition of cultural capital is a key factor in determining the aspirations and ambitions of young people from 'lower-class' backgrounds (Dumais, 2002:47). This does not, however, take into account the complex positioning in terms of social class of young people from second and third generation migrant communities. For the young women at Hazel Grove, living in poverty did not seem to be a barrier to high aspirations for students at all attainment levels: most were planning to go on to university and then into some kind of professional occupation, such as law, medicine or teaching.

Like most students at Hazel Grove, Humayra's parents did not go to university, and she says that she is aware of not having had 'informal education' at home. She describes her family as supportive but not well informed about the school system. She says that she remembers having a love for reading at a young age, and doesn't quite know where this came from but she thinks it seemed to be 'from myself, really':

**Humayra:** I remember in nursery going to the library for the first time in my life and being really excited ... and then I convinced my dad, I think, to take me and he was like, oh books, yeah that's good, you get books! That's the thing with my parents, they never discourage me from doing anything, if I've just said I want to do it, they just say ok, go ahead.

This is typical of the way in which Humayra constructs herself as a self-motivated learner who is largely responsible for her own educational success. She does not ascribe her high levels of motivation and aspiration to activities she has taken part in at school or with other organisations. She says that she has simply always loved to learn; that is what she enjoys most and what she does best; she describes herself as a lover of learning and even a ‘nerd’. She says repeatedly that she doesn’t know where she gets this from; she thinks it just seems to have come naturally to her.

## Support from parents

Previous research suggests that parents and families are a key factor in determining the likelihood of young people choosing to stay on into HE (e.g. David et al., 2003). A key premise of the WP agenda, as a result, is that intervention from outside agencies is necessary because parents are not able to provide ‘bright children from poor backgrounds’ with the support and guidance required to make it to top universities (Sutton Trust, 2008:19). The vast majority of participants in my research reported that parental influence was, indeed, a key factor in terms of determining their choices about the future. They described their parents as being strongly supportive of their education; the vast majority also said that their parents wanted them to go on to university and then into a professional occupation. This contrasts with the deficit model that tends to construct parents from ‘disadvantaged backgrounds’ (Sutton Trust, 2008:30) as being unwilling or unable to provide students with sufficient support and encouragement in relation to HE.

Humayra believes that she has been ‘fortunate’ compared to other students, because her parents have always encouraged her in her studies, have never prevented her from following her dreams and have even agreed to let her move away from home for university. She sees herself as being relatively fortunate, in this respect, in comparison with other students:

**Humayra:** ... a lot of the friends I have, and the people I know, actually have been a little less fortunate in terms of choosing what university they get to go to, because their parents aren’t comfortable with the idea of them moving away from home. Somebody said to me that that wasn’t necessarily a class thing, rather it’s just an ‘Asian’ thing, which I don’t necessarily agree with. I think it’s just because lots of people’s parents, especially within this school, don’t have experience of going to university, especially outside of home.

Humayra believes that it is the responsibility of the young women themselves to make sure their parents understand their choices; she thinks that the hesitance of many Bangladeshi families about allowing their daughters to move away from home is due to a lack of understanding, rather than a result of religious or cultural beliefs. Like the other young women who took part in my research, Humayra also did not see any conflict between her religious beliefs and her desire for educational success:



**Humayra:** I come from a religious family, but I've never been told 'you're a girl so you can't do this' or 'you're a Muslim so you can't do this'. I think sometimes it really is just making sure your parents understand the process that you're going through.

For Humayra, as for many of the young women at Hazel Grove, applying to university is part of a 'process of negotiation' (Smart and Rahman, 2008: 12) between a daughter and her parents. This resonates with research into the experiences of young Asian and Muslim women (e.g. Dale, 2002; Hussain and Bagguley, 2007), which suggests that it is specific local and individual issues that stand in the way of HE participation, rather than culture, ethnicity, religion or social class *per se*.

## The role of teachers

Previous research has linked the under-achievement of young South Asian and Muslim women with experiences of racism and low expectations from teachers based on gender and ethnicity (e.g. Ghuman, 1994; Basit, 1997). In contrast, the young women I worked with at Hazel Grove placed a strong emphasis on the support and encouragement received from their teachers, and the way in which the resources provided by the school helped them to succeed in their education. Several students, for example, talked about their involvement in a mentoring programme for under-achieving students and how this helped them to build confidence and to have high aspirations. Others mentioned the school's Aimhigher provision and talked about the ways in which this had helped them with the university application process.

Humayra, who moved to Hazel Grove from a local independent Islamic school, is extremely conscious of the fact that the facilities and teaching on offer at Hazel Grove are much better than those at her 'under-funded, independent faith school'. She feels that, in some ways, the lack of resources at her previous school had a positive effect on students, making them 'even more determined to do something, to do something different'. As a young Muslim woman, Humayra, believes she experienced some advantages from being educated in a single-sex, Islamic context: she says that some of her teachers were 'almost feminist' and encouraged the girls 'to take up every opportunity on offer', although a minority promoted a less progressive view:

**Humayra:** You also had the opposite of that, people who wanted to keep you in a sheltered lifestyle ... and if that meant sometimes putting ambitions on hold or whatever it was to ensure you were leading a properly religious lifestyle, then so be it ... there weren't many people who had views like that but those that did really, really annoyed me, and I just thought no, I'm not listening to you!

This antipathy towards anyone trying to hold back her achievement is typical of Humayra's construction of herself as someone who has always been determined to succeed at school, refusing to be held back by anything placed in her way.

Humayra talks about the support she received from the school's 'Oxbridge mentor', a post funded by Aimhigher, which employed an ex-student who had graduated from Oxford five years previously to advise students about their university applications:

**Humayra:** I had Sumaya, who was our Oxbridge mentor, and she was brilliant at looking at courses for us and explaining whatever we didn't understand or actually putting together university open days and helping us out. And also just telling us about her own university experiences at Oxford and making it all seem very within reach.

It is clear that Humayra feels benefited from working with a mentor from the same community, who attended Hazel Grove and Oxford herself; this suggests that providing role models from within low participation communities is an effective way to support high-achieving students who are thinking about applying to competitive universities.

## Access to higher education

The young women at Hazel Grove demonstrated a sophisticated level of awareness about their location on the margins of society and the challenges they may face as a result when entering university. In fact, they were not confident about their future prospects in general; for many, it seemed that they knew exactly where they wanted to go, but were uncertain about whether or not they were likely to be able to get there. Previous research suggests they might be right, since Asian and Muslim women face many challenges within the HE (e.g. Hussain and Bagguley, 2007). As Richardson points out, there is also some evidence that students from non-white backgrounds under-perform within the HE system, since 'ethnic minority students are being systematically awarded grades and degrees that are poorer than one would expect on the basis of their prior qualifications' (Richardson, 2011).

Students' lack of confidence may be linked to their liminal position in relation to the social, cultural and economic structure of British society. As Appadurai argues, aspiration is a 'cultural capacity' (2004:62) determined by an individual's social status and their relationship to dominant norms and values (2004:65). Raising aspirations is not only about encouraging young people to be ambitious and to dream of great things; it is also about giving them access to the map that charts the direction of travel, removing the barriers that stand in their way and, if necessary, supporting them on the journey.

The way in which the young women at Hazel Grove described their experiences of university interviews suggests that this is one area in which significant barriers

still exist for students from particular backgrounds. While a small number of students enjoyed having the opportunity to discuss their chosen subject in more depth with experts in their field, the majority reported that the experience was daunting, confusing and intimidating. Some experienced overt discrimination; many were convinced that they were treated differently compared with other students.

Humayra, unusually, had interviews at two elite universities and describes her encounters with academic staff during both interviews as enjoyable and engaging. While it is often assumed that students from state schools lack confidence and need extra interview training, it is clear that for Humayra the experience was a positive one:

**Humayra:** I found that I liked sitting there discussing things ... I enjoyed taking apart things from my personal statement, I enjoyed having that challenging kind of discussion and actually being made to think about things. I thought, if this is how they teach, then I think I can do it!

At her first interview, however, she recalls feeling that she was not challenged as much as some of the other candidates she met. She remembers feeling 'a bit weird' about this and wondering why her interview was less challenging than she expected it to be. She says that many other students at Hazel Grove have had similar experiences; it seems that for some reason interviewers have a tendency to treat them more gently than other students.

Humayra's encounter with a student 'helper' immediately prior to this interview was more typical of the way one might expect students from 'non-traditional backgrounds' to experience an elite university:

**Humayra:** I said that I was from east London ... and he made a remark, where he just went awkwardly, 'oh right, oh dear!' I was like, aaah that's so unwarranted, why would you say that?

Such an encounter can be seen as evidence of the 'simultaneous oppression of patriarchy, class and race' (Hussain, 2005:41). It is crucial, however, to consider Humayra's response: she is perturbed but not intimidated, and her response is quite literally to take the upper hand by having this young white man carry her bags for her.

**Humayra:** I thought, right, well, you can carry my bag all the way! Because my bag was heavy, you know, it was full of Shakespeare, so I thought, he can carry it, that's fine!

Having failed to gain a place at her chosen institution, Humayra took a year out and re-applied to university the following year. This time, she expected the interview to be easier, as she had already achieved an A\* grade in her chosen subject, but instead found that every time she said something, she was stopped and challenged to explain exactly what she meant:

**Humayra:** I didn't get scared about that actually, I was quite happy she was doing it because it felt like this is good, because it means I'm saying things that are relevant and she's picking up on it, and so actually I got more confident as it went on and I was quite happy to do more critical thinking.

Humayra ascribes the difference in the two interviews to her own increased confidence; after receiving her grades she knew she was good enough and therefore performed better in the second interview. This is typical of her tendency to see herself as being responsible for her own educational success; she does not question the process or the values of the universities but does say she feels 'vindicated' by finally being accepted by the institution of her choice.

## Conclusions

The young women at Hazel Grove, like many other young people from 'non-traditional backgrounds' (Sutton Trust, 2008), are often constructed as disadvantaged, lacking in aspirations and in need of assistance. Approaches to WP, as a result, often focus on 'raising aspirations' (DfES, 2006), which in effect means helping young people from 'disadvantaged', 'non-privileged' or 'non-traditional' backgrounds (Sutton Trust, 2008) to accumulate cultural capital and acquire middle class values. My research findings challenge the assumption that the young women at Hazel Grove have low aspirations, which calls into question the efficacy of strategies that have 'raising aspirations' as their main objective. I want to argue in favour of a more sophisticated approach that takes into account the ways in which young people's aspirations are affected by social and economic inequality and the issues within HE institutions which prevent them from achieving their full potential. It is not only about encouraging them to aspire to professional occupations or to attend elite universities; we must also address the real barriers to successful participation in HE that exist for many students.

There is a practical dilemma here for those advising young people about HE, who have an ethical responsibility to do more than simply raising aspirations and providing practical support and guidance (Sutton Trust, 2008:33). To what extent should HE advisors be honest with students about the inequalities inherent in a system within which access is weighted in favour of middle class students from independent schools? As well as access issues, the significant variations in achievement at degree level amongst young people from different ethnic groups suggest that the current system is structured in such a way that it reinforces social inequalities and 'maintains the pre-existing order, that is, the gap between pupils with unequal amounts of cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1998:20). If we accept this, then we need also to consider the implications, for these young people, of participating in a system within which they are less likely to succeed than those from white, middle-class backgrounds.

Torgerson et al. argue that we need, nationally, to make a decision about HE: either to continue with our current system and ‘live with the stratified patterns of participation that result’ (Torgerson et al., 2008:22), or to enact the kind of radical change that will enable us to move in a different direction. Taking account of the experiences of immigrants from former colonies, like the young women at Hazel Grove, is not a marginal or minority issue but a central part of this process. It is, clearly, in everyone’s interests to promote inclusion and diversity within the university system, since this is likely to benefit both the students themselves and the rest of society (Schwartz, 2004). We could start by working towards a more flexible and inclusive approach to university admissions, accepting that there may be a need for ‘anti-discriminatory legislation and retraining of practitioners’ (Torgerson et al., 2008:22).

It may be that the WP agenda has a key role to play in the immediate future, while we are in the process of creating a better and fairer system. If that is to be the case, we will need to address the way in which the current system constructs young people from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds. It is not simply a case of trying to raise aspirations amongst ‘disadvantaged’ or ‘less privileged’ students, though there is a need for research which tests more rigorously ‘the role of aspirations and motivation in prompting young people to stay on in education’ (Gorard, See and Davies, 2012:10). More importantly, and with some urgency, we must start to re-conceptualise the meaning and purpose of education in the context of the complex, diverse and rapidly changing twenty-first century globalised world, interrogating the structures that construct particular groups as being more or less ‘privileged’, more or less ‘advantaged’, more or less ‘traditional’ than others.

## Liminal learners?

The young women of Hazel Grove have many features that might lead us to see them as ‘liminal’ (Turner, 1969): they are young, they are relatively poor, they are brown-skinned, they are female, they are migrants, they are Muslims living in the West. As well as strong ties to the traditions of their parents and grandparents, they have allegiances to the dominant norms and values of British society. They live in relative poverty, but are not fixed within the class structure like some other groups. They are from here, and yet also from elsewhere, and are in the process of going through a transition from one place to another, one state to another, one set of understandings to another.

One characteristic of ‘liminars’ (Turner, 1983) is the ambiguous way in which they relate to existing social structures. Neither inside nor outside, neither end nor beginning, they are both the antithesis of structure and the places from which new kinds of social structures emerge. If, as Turner argues, the liminal state is a temporary one (Turner, 1983), we should expect that at some point these liminars

will re-enter mainstream society, with social structures having adapted in order to accommodate them. The start of this process can be traced in the way which second and third generation migrant groups are becoming more assertive about their position within British society and starting to ‘demand equal rights within the majority culture’ (Hussain, 2005:25). It is not likely, however, to be a smooth or easy transition; history suggests that migrants face many difficulties moving beyond the margins. The first step is to accept that this transition is both inevitable and highly desirable; the second is to design policies that put the needs and interests of under-represented groups like the young women at Hazel Grove at the centre. Policy-makers could start by asking young people and their families about the barriers they face and the support they need, instead of relying on assumptions and generalisations about those living in ‘disadvantaged’ communities.

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## End notes

- <sup>1</sup> 'A-level' refers to the examinations taken by students at the end of Year 13 – the final year of secondary education in the UK – used to determine admission to university.
- <sup>2</sup> 'Liminality', a concept developed by anthropologist Victor Turner, describes the experience of those undergoing ritual transformation; its meaning comes from the Latin 'limen', meaning 'threshold'.
- <sup>3</sup> 'Widening participation' is a policy approach aimed at increasing the number of young people entering HE and the proportion from 'under-represented groups', such as those from low-income families and ethnic minorities. It was central to the educational policy agenda of the Labour government in the UK between 2000 and 2010.
- <sup>4</sup> 'Hazel Grove' is used throughout the article as a pseudonym for the school at which the research was carried out, to protect anonymity and confidentiality.
- <sup>5</sup> 'Sixth form' refers to the final two years (Years 12 and 13) of secondary education in the UK, during which students usually prepare for A-level examinations and for university entrance.
- <sup>6</sup> Reference omitted to preserve anonymity.
- <sup>7</sup> In the UK, young people complete 11 years of compulsory primary and secondary education; at the end of Year 11, they may choose either to leave education, to stay on at their school – if it offers sixth form provision – or to move to another school/sixth form college.



- <sup>8</sup> The Education Maintenance Allowance is a means-tested financial incentive, paid to students in the UK aged 16–19 who are in full-time education. A decision to abolish EMA payments in England was announced by the coalition government in October 2010; it is still paid in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- <sup>9</sup> Aimhigher was a stream of funding provided directly to schools to pay for activities aimed at increasing or widening participation in HE. The coalition government ended the Aimhigher programme in 2011.
- <sup>10</sup> The Sutton Trust is a UK non-profit organisation that aims to improve educational opportunities for young people from non-privileged backgrounds and increase social mobility.
- <sup>11</sup> Oxford and Cambridge are the most prestigious and high-status universities in the UK. The Russell Group is a group of about 20 UK universities that are seen as being among the most prestigious, high-status and ‘research-intensive’ institutions.
- <sup>12</sup> ‘Level 4’ refers to undergraduate-level qualifications.
- <sup>13</sup> Despite a large increase in participation in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Bangladeshi women made up less than 1% of the total enrolment of female first-degree students in 2004–5, while older Bangladeshi women continue to be the least likely of any group to have a degree-level qualification (Hussain and Bagguley, 2007).
- <sup>14</sup> This study is currently being written up for my thesis, provisionally titled ‘Liquid learners? The education of young Muslim women in London and New York City’.
- <sup>15</sup> All names of students and staff have been changed to preserve anonymity and confidentiality.
- <sup>16</sup> See, for example, Morrell, 2004, and Sprague, 2005.