

# **Faith, Culture and Community:**

**The educational experiences of  
six young Muslim women  
from London and New York City**

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**Doctorate in Education (EdD)**

# Thesis

## Abstract

This thesis study focuses on six young Muslim women, three living in London and three living in New York City. At the time the research was carried out, the participants were between 17 and 19 years old. They came from various ethnic and national backgrounds, though all had at least one parent who was born in a Muslim majority country who had subsequently migrated to either the US or the UK.

The thesis explores how these young women experienced schooling in London and New York during the early years of the twenty-first century, in the context of increased tension and anxiety about Muslims living in the West following the 9/11 attacks. It foregrounds the voices of the young women themselves, examining their own accounts of the ways in which they negotiate issues of faith, culture and community.

Drawing on postcolonial, critical and feminist approaches, the study explores the complex negotiations around selfhood and subjectivity in which the participants are involved, as young Muslim women growing up in the West. It asks how they are positioned within the education system and how they respond to this positioning, examining the strategies employed by the participants to construct coherent and meaningful identities within a potentially confusing and disturbing context.

A number of themes emerged in the study about the participants' experiences of faith, culture and community within the UK and US education systems. These include the importance of religious and spiritual practices, the desire of participants to combine affiliation with Islam with affiliation to British or American identities, and their struggle to find a sense of belonging within educational contexts that privilege particular sets of experiences and heritages.

## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own. The copyright of this thesis rests with the author and no quotation from it or information derived from it may be published without the prior written consent of the author.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

CRT: Critical Race Theory

DCSF: Department for Children, Schools and Families

DCLG: Department for Communities and Local Government

DfEE: Department for Education and Employment

EdD: Doctor in Education

FoP: Foundations of Professionalism

IFS: Institution Focused Study

IUME: Institute of Urban and Minority Education at Teachers College, Columbia University

MoE1: Methods of Enquiry 1

MoE2: Methods of Enquiry 2

NYPD: New York Police Department

ONS: Office for National Statistics (UK)

US or USA: United States of America

UK: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

## **Statement**

### ***Starting the Doctor in Education (EdD) Programme***

In February 2009, having recently joined my school's Senior Leadership Team in the role of Assistant Headteacher, I was looking for an opportunity to broaden and deepen my understanding of a wide range of educational issues. As a graduate of the Institute of Education's PGCE and Master of Teaching programmes, both of which emphasize connections between theory and practice, I was keen to pursue a course of study combining rigorous academic and intellectual inquiry with a focus on professional practice. The headteacher of my school, who was herself in the process of completing the EdD at the time, encouraged me to join the EdD 'taster course', which involved following one module of the EdD (Leadership and Learning in Educational Organisations). I enjoyed this so much that I decided immediately to join the EdD programme.

My initial proposal for the EdD focused on the role of the National Curriculum in the school improvement process. I was interested in finding out about the implementation of the New Secondary Curriculum, which was introduced in 2008-9, particularly in relation to its social and cultural implications and its potential impact on the academic, personal and social development of students from socio-economically deprived backgrounds. The New Secondary Curriculum was widely seen as representing a shift from a knowledge-based curriculum to one that emphasized the importance of cross-curricular skills and, in terms of assessment, a renewed emphasis on the application of knowledge and skills in real-life situations. It asked schools and teachers to take account of the world outside of school, and to adapt the curriculum to reflect the local context and the individual needs, capabilities and aspirations of individual learners.

My interest in this area of study stemmed partly from the fact that, at the time, a key part of my professional role involved being responsible for curriculum development. The focus of my work has changed quite significantly since that

time, partly because the New Secondary Curriculum was discontinued by the coalition government when they came into power in 2010. In addition, my own interests have shifted from being primarily interested in the curriculum itself, to being primarily interested in young people's accounts of their own educational experiences. I would attribute this shift partly to my own personal and professional experiences, and partly to the work I completed during the first two years of the EdD.

### ***The four taught modules***

The first EdD module, Foundations of Professionalism (FoP), introduced me to new ways of thinking about teachers' professional identities, forcing me to interrogate my own role in relation to different definitions and interpretations of the concepts of 'professionalism' and 'professionalization'. The essay I wrote for this module analysed the changing nature of teacher professionalism in UK secondary schools in relation to the changing policy landscape and, in particular, the introduction of the New Secondary Curriculum in September 2008. This gave me the opportunity to reflect on the development of my own professional identity and the role of New Labour education policy in shaping and influencing my professional values, beliefs and practices.

As part of this essay, I produced a taxonomy setting out existing theories and models of teacher professionalism and their implications for teachers and schools. This included the argument put forward by Mahony and Hextall (2000) that teachers have become adept at appearing to follow new initiatives while, in reality, they ignore or subvert them. I was also interested in Sachs's conception of teacher professionalism as something which is subtle, shifting and context-dependent, leading to the development of multiple professional identities (Sachs 2003). This resonated with my own experience of the challenges involved with taking on a senior leadership role in a secondary school, which required me to reevaluate my own role as a teacher and a school leader. It also helped me to gain a better understanding of the behaviour of other members of staff in my school and their reactions to the changes proposed in the New Secondary Curriculum.

My conclusion, at the end of this module, was that there were a number of important unanswered questions about teacher professionalism and professionalization, not least the question of how teachers can preserve their own integrity while operating within a confusing and, at times, self-contradictory policy context. I felt, at this point, as if my own professional identity had been placed under the microscope and subjected to intensive forensic scrutiny; I was not entirely comfortable with the results.

It was during the second taught module, Methods of Enquiry 1 (MoE1), that the interest of my research shifted to be more focused on the experiences of the students themselves, rather than the teachers or the curriculum. Of course, these things are not completely separate, but it was during MoE1 that I decided to talk to students about their perceptions of the curriculum, which sparked my ongoing interest in finding ways to learn more about what students think about their educational experiences. It was also at this point that I started to develop an interest in questions of culture and identity in relation to the curriculum and, in particular, the implications for second and third generation migrant families of the contents of the national curriculum.

The research I proposed to carry out for MoE1 involved administering a questionnaire and carrying out several sets of interviews with students in my school about their perceptions of the curriculum. Looking back, I am conscious of the over-ambitious scope of my proposed project and the less than fully formed nature of my own ideas about the research I was planning to conduct. I did learn a great deal, however, from the reading I undertook for this module, not only in relation to research methods but also about the complexity of my chosen area of study. Investigating 'the curriculum' was, I discovered, an even more complicated and contested business than I had previously realised, relating not only to students' experiences inside of school but also the things that happen outside which shape and influence their school experiences. It also requires one to take account of issues relating to the intended, planned and enacted curriculum (Kurz, Elliott, Wehby and Smithson 2010) as well as the significance of the 'hidden curriculum' (Jackson 1990) and its role in reinforcing particular social norms, values and beliefs (e.g. Giroux and Purpel 1983, Apple 2000).

While undertaking the next module, Leadership and Learning in Educational Organisations (LL), I continued to develop my interest in what happens in the world outside of school and how this affects students' educational experiences. This was also the point at which I became particularly interested in the related issues of cultural diversity, urban education and school leadership. During this module, I was influenced by Professor Kathryn Riley's work on 'leadership of place' (Riley 2013), which emphasizes the importance for young people of their emotional connections to the places in which they live and the role of schools in helping to create a sense of identity and belonging. The essay I wrote for this module explored questions about the ways in which schools interact with the communities they serve and, more specifically, the role of the school in which I was working in east London, in relation to the Bangladeshi community from which the vast majority of its students are drawn.

The final taught module, Methods of Enquiry 2 (MoE2) involved undertaking a small scale piece of research in my own school context. I chose to focus on one small element of the research I had planned to undertake during MoE1, which involved an investigation into students' perceptions of an alternative curriculum programme for 'under-achieving' students. It was a challenge to complete a meaningful piece of research within the time available and within the constraints of this module; the most useful thing for me about this element of the course was the opportunity it provided for me to focus on the experiences of one particular group of students, and to study in detail their perceptions of a particular element of the curriculum.

### ***Institution Focused Study (IFS) to Thesis***

I had, during the four taught modules, started to develop a number of interests: in the curriculum; in urban education; in school leadership; in cultural diversity; in the importance of place; and in the importance of taking account of the experiences of a particular group of students in a particular place at a particular point in time. All of these interests came together in my IFS, which involved a detailed exploration of the educational experiences of young Muslim women in the Sixth Form at my school. This was also the point at which my research

became more focused on narrative approaches, as I sought to find authentic ways of presenting the accounts given by the young people involved in my research and capturing the complexity of their experiences (Kvale 1996).

Although the outcomes of my IFS research were, in some ways, in keeping with my expectations, there were also elements of my findings which surprised me and made me fundamentally re-think my perceptions of the students with whom I was working. There were also elements of my findings which appeared to challenge existing understandings of the ways in which young Asian or Muslim women experience the education system. Unlike the young women in Shain's study of Asian girls in the north of England (Shain 2003), they did not appear to demonstrate 'resistance through culture', though this may have been because my research focused mainly on students who had been relatively successful in school. Instead, the young women involved with my research expressed exceptionally high levels of motivation and commitment to educational success, expressing a strong desire to do well in school, go on to university and then find a good job.

In contrast with the findings of some previous studies (e.g. Archer 2002, Bhatti 1999, Wade and Souter 1992), my research did not find evidence of racism and discrimination within the school itself. Instead, the vast majority said that they had been well supported by their teachers throughout their time in school. I was shocked, however, by their accounts of experiences outside of school involving Islamophobic prejudice and abuse; I was also struck by the strength of character and resilience they displayed in relation to these incidents. They seemed, for the most part, to be secure in their own identities and confident about their ability to succeed in the future. They talked enthusiastically about Islamic religious beliefs and practices, and it was clear that these played an important role in the young women's lives.

The main research question addressed in my IFS was whether there was anything distinctive about the educational experiences of the young women at Hazel Grove, focusing particularly on their conceptions of educational success. During the course of this study, I became increasingly fascinated by the young

women's accounts of their own experiences and the ways in which they seemed to challenge existing understandings of issues relating to faith, culture and community amongst young Muslims living in the West. I decided, therefore, to make this the focus of the research which I would carry out for my thesis. I was fortunate enough to be awarded a Fulbright scholarship, which enabled me to travel to New York to carry out the fieldwork for my thesis during academic year 2011-12.

### ***The EdD and my professional life***

Studying for the EdD has already had a profound impact on my professional life. After spending a year in New York doing my research full time during 2010-11, I was not quite ready to return to being part of the system which, as I described in my FoP essay, had left me conflicted about the nature and impact of my professional role. Rather than returning to my school as Assistant Headteacher, in June 2012 I chose to start working at the Institute of Education as a Lecturer in Education. My role initially involved being responsible for a Masters programme for international students, but from January 2014 onwards I have taken on a new role as Programme Leader for the Secondary PGCE. This represents, in some ways, a return to the issues which interested me at the beginning of the EdD, particularly in relation to questions about the development of teachers' professional identities. My work on the EdD has given me a particular interest in the experiences of individuals and how these experiences are (re)presented; it also gave me the skills I need to inquire into these experiences in a thoughtful, structured and disciplined way. I plan to put these skills to use when conducting research into the experiences of students on the PGCE course and when helping them to conduct their own inquiries into the experiences of the students they are teaching in London schools.

### ***The future***

Once I have completed my EdD, I hope to continue with my research in a number of ways. Further reflections about this are contained in the final section of this thesis.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction, Rationale and Context**

### **1.1 Introduction**

This thesis explores the educational experiences of a small number of young Muslim women from migrant families living in London and New York City. The participants, aged between 17 and 19 years old, are all the children of migrants from Muslim majority countries and grew up in London and New York in the years following the September 2001 attacks, when there was a dramatic intensification of the 'ongoing conflict' between some Western countries and parts of the Muslim world (Esposito, 2007: ix). Public and academic discourse has subsequently become fixated on essentialised, reductionist questions about whether or not Islam is compatible with secularism and liberal democracy (Marranci 2009). At the same time, young Muslims living in the West have become the subject of increased suspicion and surveillance, owing to the perceived threat from 'Islamic extremism' or 'fundamentalism' (Allen 2010, Apuzzo and Goldman 2011).

The aim of the thesis is to provide insight into the lives of a small number of young Muslim women growing up, and being educated, in this context. The research focuses on the experiences of this group of young people at this historical moment, contributing to our understanding of this under-researched area by centralising the views and perceptions of the participants. Using a critical, transnational framework of analysis which is 'attentive to the global relations that set the context for immigration and immigrant life' (Espiritu, 2003: 4), the research explores the views and perceptions of these young women about their educational experiences, examining how their identities are shaped by the related processes of socialisation, integration and assimilation. It explores how they respond to 'the intersectional dynamics of race, gender and religion' (Mirza, 2012: 6) and the extent to which agency is evident in the way they negotiate, and potentially transform, the narratives of selfhood and subjectivity that are available to them as young Muslim women living in the West.



The thesis makes an original contribution to our understanding of the educational experiences of young Muslim women, by demonstrating how young Muslim women living in London and New York are engaged in complex negotiations around identity, citizenship and belonging and how they experience tension around their ability to negotiate and articulate identities and allegiances to different sets of values and beliefs.

## **1.2 Rationale**

My research seeks to provide a better understanding of the experiences of young Muslim women growing up in London and New York in the early years of the twenty-first century, in order to understand how they position themselves, how they respond to the representations and assumptions they meet in their everyday lives and how they make sense of themselves as young Muslim women growing up in the West. This is lacking in the current literature, where unsupported assumptions are often made about young Muslim women and their views, experiences and identities. Meanwhile, the voices of young Muslim women are noticeably absent from the realms of academic and policy discourse (Mirza and Meeto 2013, Grewal 2014) and media representations in the US and UK reinforce the impression that young Muslim women are members of a homogeneous, monolithic community and victims of patriarchal religious and cultural traditions (Baker 2009, Nydell 2006).

By looking in detail at the accounts of six young Muslim women, my intention is to move beyond simplistic stereotypes and create space for examination of the complexities of these young women's lives, examining the similarities and differences in their experiences and their ways of responding to these experiences.

I have chosen these two locations because, following my previous research into the experiences of young Muslim women in London, I wanted to continue my research in a place where similar issues might exist in terms of the experiences of young Muslims living in the West. New York seemed like the ideal place to do

this because, as well as being widely seen as the two preeminent 'global cities' (Sassen 2001), New York and London are two of the key locations in the West where attacks by Muslim men affiliated to *al-Qaeda*, the global militant Islamist organisation, have taken place within recent years. As a result, these cities have, more than ever, become the location of intense discussion about issues relating to faith, culture, community, identity, citizenship and belonging (Marranci 2009). Debate about the causes and implications of the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks often revolves around questions to do with the relationship between Islam and the West (Esposito and Mogahed 2007) and the extent to which Muslim migrants living in the West can be accommodated within 'a domesticated vision of a multicultural, inner city' (Eade, 2000: 158). As a result, I believed that a dual site study of young Muslim women living in these two cities would provide an ideal basis for my research.

Rather than assuming that young Muslim women are bound to be marginalised, oppressed or alienated from the mainstream, my research asks how they are able to develop narratives and practices that enable them to survive, in the context of an increasingly hostile mainstream society (Allen 2010), and how they navigate opportunities for the expression of multiple, hybrid identities. It takes account of their views about religious beliefs and spiritual practices and explores the ways in which these young women inscribe themselves into narratives of ethnic, religious and national identities. It also examines the extent to which they are developing transnational and transcultural identities and whether they are able to find the cultural, political, spiritual and ideological space necessary to create a sense of home (Espiritu 2003).

My aim was to develop a better understanding of the educational experiences of a small number of individuals in two particular contexts, with the hope that this would provide insight into broader issues around faith, culture, community, identity, citizenship and belonging. Through in-depth analysis of these young women's individual, subjective and personal accounts, I hope that my thesis will contribute to greater understanding of what life is like for young Muslim women growing up in post-9/11 London and New York and therefore, potentially, help

educators and policy-makers in both cities to understand better how to meet these young people's needs.

### **1.3 Terminology**

Three of the key terms used throughout the thesis are 'faith', 'culture' and 'community'. There is some overlap between the meanings of these terms, so it is important to be clear about the way in which they are being used in this study. The term 'faith' refers to the participants' religious and spiritual beliefs and practices, 'culture' refers to a sense of shared history and tradition, while 'community' refers to people living in the present who are brought together by shared experiences or circumstances. These terms are explored in more detail in Section 1.4 and in the Chapter 2.

The term 'Muslim majority countries' is used to refer to those parts of the world mainly inhabited by Muslims, sometimes referred to elsewhere as 'the Muslim world' or 'the Islamic world'. The term 'Muslim majority countries' is more appropriate for this thesis because it enables me to refer to specific parts of the world, without homogenizing the diverse populations living in those places. I am aware that there is a difference between countries like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, which are mainly inhabited by Muslims and designate themselves Islamic states, and those like Indonesia, which are mainly inhabited by Muslims but are not Islamic states. Since the main focus of my thesis is Muslims living in the West, I have chosen not to explore these issues further.

The term 'Islam' is used throughout the thesis to refer to religious and spiritual teachings and practices (i.e. elements of faith). The term 'Muslim', meanwhile, is used to describe individuals who identify themselves as followers of Islam. This is in keeping with common usage and with the Arabic roots of the terms 'Islam', which refers to the act of submitting or surrendering to God, and 'Muslim', which refers to a person who submits to the will of God or a follower of Islam. The term 'Islamic' is used to describe activities, ideas and cultural products, and historical, social or cultural practices, which are commonly associated with Muslims or

Muslim majority countries. When an association with Islam is contentious, for example 'Islamic fundamentalism' or 'Islamic extremism', inverted commas are used.

The terms '*hijab*' or 'headscarf' are used interchangeably to refer to the head-covering worn by many Muslim women which covers the hair and neck but leaves the face visible. I am aware that, strictly speaking, *hijab* refers to the concept of religious modesty rather than the act of wearing the headscarf (Watson, 1994: 139-143) but am following my research participants in using the term *hijab* to refer to the act of wearing the headscarf rather than the concept of modesty. The term '*niqab*', is used to refer to the face-covering worn by some Muslim women that covers both hair and face, revealing only the eyes. The term 'veiling' is used to refer more generally to the issue of modesty in relation to debate about Muslim women's clothing. The term '*burka*' is used only in quotations from the participants, who use it to refer to the loose garment covering the whole body worn by some Muslim women.

Throughout the thesis, for economy of space, the abbreviation '9/11' is used to refer to the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on 11th September 2001 and the abbreviation '7/7' to refer to the attacks on the London transport network on 7th July 2005. The term 'UK' is used interchangeably with the term 'Britain' or 'British' and the term 'US' is used interchangeably with the term 'America' or 'American'. I have used British English spellings throughout, except when quoting from texts published in the US which use American English spellings.

## 1.4 Social and historical context

Within the US and UK, as in many other Western nations, there are significant numbers of people who identify themselves as followers of Islam, most of whom are the descendants of migrants from former colonies in South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. The accounts of the young women involved with my research can therefore only be understood in the context of broader narratives of Muslim settlement in the West, which are themselves inextricably connected to histories of occupation, colonisation and slavery (GhaneaBassiri, 2010: 8), discourses of post-colonialism, post-modernity and globalisation (e.g. Bhabha 1994, Giddens 2002, Saïd 1979), postcolonial and Third World feminisms (e.g. Mohanty 2003, Spivak 1988) and the wide-ranging changes taking place in the Muslim majority world during this time (e.g. Engineer 2004, Esposito 2010, Mahmood 2012).

Esposito argues that 'the cognitive, ideological, political, and demographic map of the Muslim world changed dramatically in the second half of the twentieth century' (Esposito, 1999: ix) as Muslim majority countries started to emerge from long periods of European colonization. The process of decolonization and 'modernization' (Esposito, 1999: ix) did not lead, however, as widely expected, to the decline of the influence of Islam but to the resurgence of Islam as 'a significant force in public life' (Esposito, 1999: x). During the first decade of the twenty-first century, the map of the Muslim majority world continued to change, with profound consequences for young people who are in the process of developing their understanding of, and allegiance to, various sets of values, ideas and principles (Feldman 2012, Suleiman 2012). At the same time, Muslims living in the West became the subject not only of increased surveillance and suspicion (Apuzzo and Goldman 2011) but also prejudice, hostility and violence (Allen 2010, Esposito 2010). For young Muslims living in the West, this has resulted in an ongoing need to negotiate the complexities of multiple identities and allegiances, which do not always appear to be mutually compatible.

### 1.4.1 Muslim populations in the UK

The number of Muslims living in Europe has risen substantially in recent decades (Pew Forum, 2011: 121), with the 2011 census recording 2.7 million Muslims living in the UK, about 4.3% of the population (ONS 2013). Although this represents a relatively small proportion of the UK population, the extent of demographic change has been a cause of concern for some commentators, particularly after the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks (e.g. Phillips 2011). While policy-makers and the media focus on the potentially dangerous influence of 'Islamic fundamentalism' and 'extremism' (Allen, 2010: 117), representatives of Muslim communities are keen to emphasize that most Muslims in the UK are committed to living peacefully alongside other groups (Suleiman, 2012: 9).

The social, political and economic situation of Muslims in the UK, as well as their geographical location, can, to some extent, be explained by their diverse migratory histories. Although the presence of Muslims in the UK can be traced back as far as the Anglo-Saxon era (Becket, 2003: 1), it was during the period of colonial expansion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that there was 'a qualitative and quantitative shift in the nature of Muslim settlement in Britain' (Gilliat-Ray, 2010: 1). As a result, postcolonial migrants from the Indian subcontinent make up the most numerous groups of Muslims in the UK, alongside an increasing number of migrants from Eastern Europe, Africa and the Middle East (Suleiman 2009).

In the 1950s and 60s a second significant wave of immigration, following the independence and partition of India, brought a large number of additional Muslims to the UK (though as Ansari (2004) argues, they did not at that time tend either to perceive themselves, or to be perceived by others, as Muslims in public acts and public identity). Many came from regions where connections already existed as a result of previous waves of migration, including Sylhet, then part of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Arriving on ships into St Katharine's docks in east London, these Sylheti migrants tended to settle nearby in the borough of Tower Hamlets (Eade 2000). This is the area where the participants in the UK

element of my research reside; the majority are the descendants of men who came to the UK during that time.

The fact that many Muslims in the UK are descended from illiterate, unskilled labourers from rural areas of the Indian subcontinent is one explanation for the social and economic marginalisation faced by the British Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities. It may be significant that, in most cases, the pattern of migration involved men leaving behind their wives and children and living in the UK for several years before later sending for their families. This is not the whole story, however, and it is important to recognise the diversity which exists amongst Pakistani and Bangladeshi migrants to the UK, for example those who came from rural Sylheti villages and those from urban centres like Dhaka. Ansari (2004) argues that Muslim migrants from South Asia brought with them not only particular socio-economic characteristics but also a distinctive set of socially conservative cultural values and religious beliefs and practices (Ansari, 2004: 2).

There are Muslims from many other places living in the UK, including those from the Middle East and North Africa, whose experiences of migration are different from those who came from South Asia. There are also regional differences between, for example, the social, economic and political circumstances of South Asian communities in northern cities like Leeds and Bradford and those within the London metropolitan area. It is important to be specific about issues faced by particular communities, while recognising that it can be meaningful to conceive of Muslims living in Britain as a distinctive social group (Gilliat-Ray, 2010: xii). Since the young women with whom I worked at Hazel Grove School were all of Bangladeshi heritage, the UK element of my research focuses on this particular community, which means there are likely to be some aspects of their experiences which are different from those of other Muslim groups.

### 1.4.2 Muslim populations in the US

In the US, as in the UK, widespread anxiety about the growth and influence of Islam has been expressed by a range of political and media commentators, particularly since the 9/11 attacks (e.g. Auster 2009, Knickerbocker 2010, Skerry 2011). Estimates of the US Muslim population remain contentious, partly because the US census does not include a question about religion. The Pew Research Center suggests a figure of around 2.6 million or 1% of the population (Pew Forum, 2011: 137), while others claim the number may be as high as 6 or 7 million (Bagby 2011, Barrett 2007).

The Muslim population of the US, like that of the UK, is diverse and heterogeneous, comprising not only those who have migrated to the US but many others who have converted to Islam (GhaneaBassiri, 2010: 2). Recent research suggests that around two-thirds of Muslims living in the US are foreign-born and one-third native-born; about a third have South Asian heritage, a quarter are of Arab descent and about a fifth are native-born African Americans (Barrett 2007, Curtis, 2008). Muslim populations in the US are also heavily concentrated in particular geographical areas, which means the local experience is often different from the national picture. This is particularly true of large cities like New York, which is the location of around ten per cent of the total number of mosques in the US (Bagby, 2011: 5) and which is where the young women who took part in the US element of my research lived.

The history of Muslim populations in the US can be traced back as far as the ninth century, with a well-documented presence of Muslims in the Americas from the first European voyages of discovery onwards (Dirks 2011, GhaneaBassiri 2010). In addition, a large number of Muslims were brought as slaves from Muslim majority countries in West Africa between the sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Despite often being forced to convert to Christianity, many of these slaves retained their allegiance to Islam (Curtis 2008, Diouf 1998). Black Muslim organisations, such as the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam, which came to prominence during the Civil Rights struggles



of the 1950s and 60s, continue to have a significant role within many African-American communities in the US.

There have been several waves of migration from Muslim majority regions of the world to the US within the last two hundred years. Between the late 1800s and early 1900s, tens of thousands of Muslims came to the US from the Ottoman Empire and parts of South Asia (GhaneaBassiri, 2010: 166). Like many other migrants, many intended to return eventually to their home countries but that became impossible after the start of the First World War and they settled, instead, in places near to where they had arrived or where they found employment. A significant number, having arrived into Ellis Island, decided to settle in New York, creating the foundations for present-day Muslim communities in this area. After the end of the First World War, Muslim migrants from the Middle East and South Asia continued to settle in the US (Curtis 2009, Naff 1985), as the US grew more rich, powerful and influential around the globe. As a result, the US Muslim population tends to be relatively affluent and well-educated, in contrast with Europe, where Muslim immigration was originally a source of menial labour (Barrett 2007, Curtis 2009).

The US element of my research focuses on a group of young women with whom I worked at a community centre in Brooklyn during 2011-12. As the children of migrants from Muslim majority countries in the Middle Eastern and North Africa, they have some, but not all, characteristics in common with the young women who participated in the UK element of my research.

### **1.5 The question of 'culture'**

Debate about the experiences of Muslims living in the West often revolves around questions of 'culture' or 'cultural difference'. According to Williams (1976), 'culture' is one of the most complex words in the English language, which both reflects and encapsulates the complexity of the social and historical context in which its meaning developed. Our idea of 'culture' is rooted in a particular historical era and, specifically, the turmoil of English society during the

Industrial Revolution of the mid-nineteenth century. It is perhaps not surprising that the term has become increasingly problematic in the post-industrial, postcolonial era, in which 'people may no longer count on remaining in a bounded place, having a single position, or even, a stable and invariable identity' (Castanheira et al, 2007: 173).

Hall argues that we need to re-interrogate the notion of 'cultural identity', taking account of its potential to signify not only the 'shared culture' which binds together people with a 'shared history and ancestry' (Hall, 1990: 223) but also the sense in which cultural identity is about 'difference' and 'positioning' (Hall, 1990: 225-6). Although Hall's analysis focuses on the experiences of Caribbean migrants to the UK, it is relevant to those who have migrated to the West from Muslim majority countries, whose common histories and experiences give them something in common yet who are, at the same time, different from each other in many significant ways. They are also subject to essentialising discourses, both within and outside of Muslim communities, which tend to ignore the heterogeneity, diversity and hybridity which define the 'diaspora' experience (Hall, 1990: 235).

Saïd argues that any discussion of 'culture' or 'cultural identity' must take account not only of how 'culture' is defined but also the extent to which 'culture' as a concept has its origins in 'the imperial encounter' (Saïd, 1994: xii) between Western civilization and the non-Western other. Churchill, meanwhile, argues that opposition between the West and its 'Islamic Other' was not only central to the colonial enterprise but fundamental to the very conception of Western civilisation (Churchill 2011). This has particular implications for young Muslims whose families have migrated from Muslim majority countries and who are therefore being educated within societies which have, historically, defined them as outsiders and undesirables. This may not, however, reflect the day to day experience of individuals in Western societies, which may be more open and accommodating than the academic discourse of Orientalism would suggest.

Hussain (2005) emphasizes the provisional character of migrant identities, arguing that the experience of migration is not a single act but a continual

process, with culture envisaged as something fluid and changeable which is constantly in the process of being (re)formed and (re)defined as second and third generation migrants engage in an active process of identity formation (Hussain, 2005: 2). This suggests that it is possible for the migrant experience to be not only difficult and dangerous but also potentially a source of creativity, possibility and renewal. This is an attractive proposition, particularly in relation to the experience of Muslims living in the West, with their history of representing, and being perceived as, the (post)colonial 'other' (Saïd 1979). A note of caution is provided by Moslund (2010), however, who questions the assumption that transnational or transcultural individuals are inevitably imbued with 'special' qualities like 'double-vision' (Moslund, 2010: 6).

## **1.6 Structure of the thesis**

This chapter has introduced the research and its context. The following section, Chapter 2, explores existing research and relevant literature, explaining how this has influenced the thesis and outlining the study's two main research questions. Chapter 3 explains the methodology, research design and data collection methods and Chapter 4 presents an analysis of the individual accounts of each of the six research participants. Chapter 5 returns to the research questions and discusses the findings that have emerged from the study. This final chapter reflects on the methodology of the research, its potential implications, ways in which future research could build on its findings and the way in which the research has contributed to my own professional learning.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Chapter 1 set out some of the social and historical circumstances which are relevant to the experiences of the research participants. The Literature Review builds on this by exploring existing research about young Muslim women which has been carried out in the UK and the US, as well as literature and research which is relevant to both contexts.

Many researchers, rather than focusing on young Muslim women as a separate group, either include them within a wider category (e.g. Asian or South Asian), or as part of a study of a particular ethnic group (e.g. Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Yemeni). The Literature Review takes account of relevant research in these areas, as well as studies which do focus on young Muslim women as a specific group.

### **2.2 The UK**

#### **2.2.1 Race and culture**

In contrast with my research, which focuses specifically on young Muslim women, most British researchers between the 1980s and early 2000s grouped together migrants from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, using the collective terms 'Asian', 'British Asian' or 'South Asian' and focusing on race and culture rather than religion (e.g. Bhatti 1999, Basit 1997). Researchers during this time tended to emphasize the failure of the British education system to meet the needs of young people from 'Asian' and 'South Asian' families, suggesting that, during the 1980s and 1990s, young people from Asian families living in the UK were marginalised and disadvantaged by the UK education system, which failed to provide them with equal opportunities.

Both Bhatti (1999) and Basit (1997) ascribe responsibility for the problems faced by 'British Muslim girls' to the prejudice, inflexibility and inequality of the British education system. Bhatti's ethnographic study of one secondary school in the south of England identifies a relative lack of understanding of Bangladeshi heritage and culture amongst education professionals (Bhatti 1999). Basit, in a similar way, argues that 'indigenous' teachers (Basit, 1997: 429) do not have a good understanding of Muslim culture and tend to make assumptions about students based on inaccurate stereotypes or preconceptions (Basit, 1997: 429-431). Basit's (1997) research, which involved interviews with young Muslim women, their parents and teachers at three secondary schools in the east of England, highlights the frustration felt by some Muslim girls about the restrictions placed on them by their parents, with one participant commenting that 'This life is like a prison. You can't go out. You can't do anything.' (Basit, *ibid*). Some of the participants also commented that their brothers did not face the same restrictions, suggesting there is a gender dimension to the issue.

Haw's (1998) study is particularly relevant to my research because it is one of the few carried out during the 1990s which focused specifically on the experiences of young Muslim women in British schools. Haw's research, which involved interviews with staff and with Pakistani Muslim female students in two single sex schools in the north of England, suggests that at the time there was a significant amount of discrimination against Muslim girls in British schools, including discrimination by teachers and other students, as well as relatively poor achievement for young (Pakistani) Muslim women (Haw 1998). Haw emphasizes the 'fragmentation, hybridity and pluralism' which, she argues, are 'characteristic of the ever-changing economic, social and cultural context in which Pakistani Muslim and other ethnic minority children are growing up' (Haw, 1998: 18). One of the questions Haw raises is whether, in this context, the participants in her research 'feel free to question, challenge and assert their own agendas for an exploration of what it means to be a Muslim woman' (Haw, 1998: 159). This is an important question for my research, which focuses on the ways in which the participants position themselves in response to the expectations and assumptions they meet in their everyday lives.

One reason Haw's study remains significant is because of her emphasis on the importance of opening up spaces 'for critical dialogue and for the 'voices' of Muslim women' (Haw, 1998: 4). This is also a characteristic of Archer's (2002) study of Muslim girls' post-16 choices, which involved interviews with British Muslim male and female students in a town in north-west England and focused on 'how pupils understand and explain notions of post-16 choice through themes of culture, change, identity and inequality' (Archer, 2002: 359). Archer argues that, although it has become common to locate problems relating to Muslim girls' education within their 'culture' (Archer 2002: 361), when asked for their own views young women emphasize their agency and choice in post-16 decision-making and argue against notions of 'restrictive cultures' (Archer, 2002: 364). This contrasts with Basit's (1997) finding that some young Muslim girls feel frustrated by the restrictions placed on them by their parents, though this may simply reflect the different experience of individuals.

Shain's (2003) research also explores questions about agency and freedom, arguing that it has become common for young Asian women living in the West to be positioned in mainstream discourse as 'the victims of oppressive cultures in which men dominate women' (Shain, 2003: 125). Shain's study, which involved interviews with 44 'Asian' girls from eight secondary schools in Greater Manchester and Staffordshire, emphasized instead the way in which young Asian women exhibit what she describes as 'resistance through culture' (Shain, 2003: 111), as they actively challenge existing interpretations of 'what it means to be British - of belonging and non-belonging and inclusion and exclusion' (Shain, 2003: 125).

Shain's research, like Haw's, foregrounds the voices of the research participants, exploring the 'multiplicity of factors' affecting the young women's educational experiences (Shain, 2003: 42). She emphasizes the way in which the participants in her research are actively engaged with the process of 'producing identities', in a way which draws both on 'residual cultures of the home' and the 'local and regional cultures they now inhabit' (Shain, 2003: ix). The question of how identities are shaped and negotiated by second and third generation mi-

grants and how they respond to the ways in which they are positioned by mainstream discourses, was a particular focus in my research.

The participants in Shain's study experienced a range of problems at school, including 'racism and racial harrassment', and expressed a lack of confidence about their schools' ability or willingness to address these issues (Shain, 2003: 130). This may help to explain why many of them appear to have negative attitudes towards school, as reflected in the sub-categories she develops, which include 'gang girls', 'survivors' and 'rebels' (Shain, 2003: 55-56). Each implies some degree of rejection of mainstream values, beliefs or culture, which resonates with Saïd's description of the way in which Western domination of the 'Third World' during the colonial era was met almost universally with 'considerable efforts in cultural resistance' (Saïd, 1994: xii). The question of what 'cultural resistance' means, however, for a second or third generation migrant living in postcolonial, post-imperial Britain is less straightforward than it might at first appear.

### **2.2.2 Citizenship and identity**

One question explored in my research, which is also a focus for Contractor (2012), is whether a supposedly pluralist British society will recognise the compatibility of 'Muslim' and 'British' identities (Contractor, 2012: 148). For young Muslim women, Contractor argues, the process of negotiating between different identities is made more complex by the need to take account of the various meanings that have historically been inscribed on the figure of the Muslim woman, so often been perceived as 'the mutely suffering representative of her faith and her culture' (Contractor, 2012: 2). Contractor's research, which involved interviews with Muslim women in a range of contexts, suggests that young Muslim women living in Britain consider themselves to be 'inherently and completely British' (Contractor, 2012: 146), but are still in the process of developing a coherent 'British Muslim identity' (Contractor, 2012: 147). This process is further complicated, she argues, both by issues of gender and by the contested nature of Britishness. The development of British Muslim identities is



therefore an ongoing and evolving process, 'where multiple players must enter into negotiations in order to establish their positions in communities that they share' (Contractor, 2012: 147).

The complex negotiations in which young 'South Asian' women are involved, as they navigate issues of faith, culture and identity, are also central to Hussain's (2005) research, which does not focus solely on young Muslim women but does nevertheless explore issues relevant to my research. Hussain argues that, while possibilities of existence for the first generation of South Asian migrants to the UK were largely determined by the (post)colonial context, both in terms of the experience of imperialist domination and of resistance to it, the second and third generations are engaged in an active process of (re)forming and (re)defining culture and identity (Hussain, 2005: 1-2). Rather than emphasizing 'cultural conflict' or the need for young British South Asians to choose between a 'Western' and a 'South Asian' way of life, Hussain argues that young British South Asians are engaged in an ongoing process of identity formation and the creation of hybrid and multiple identities (Hussain, 2005: 2). She argues that there may be advantages for 'British South Asian' students in being educated in mainstream British schools, since this provides 'exposure to the integrating services of the majority society' (Hussain, 2005: 26); as a result, she suggests, they are more able to 'join the established social order and gain access to better qualifications and lifestyles' (Hussain, *ibid*). Hussain's research does not, however, involve interviews with South Asian young people; instead, she analyses a range of 'creative works' produced by South Asian women living in Britain (Hussain, 2005: 3).

### **2.2.3 Community and 'belonging'**

As part of the 'Contextualising Islam in Britain' report (Suleiman 2009), Suleiman argues that young Muslim women living in Britain often face conflict because of the extent to which the traditions in which they have been brought up, including particular ideas about 'modesty' in relation to women's bodies, conflict with the possibilities available to women in British society' (Suleiman, 2009: 49).

A common consequence, she argues, is that they tend to end up 'on the fringe of the community and liable to leave it' (Suleiman, 2009: 49). This seems logical, though it is not an inevitable conclusion; other research (e.g. Smart and Rahman 2008) suggests that even though young Muslim women sometimes find it difficult to reconcile their parents' values with those of Western society, this does not necessarily lead them to reject their community or their faith but rather encourages them to find creative and innovative ways of reconciling their different affiliations and discovering spaces within which they can find a sense of belonging.

Thomas, meanwhile, argues that discourse around Muslim identities and communities in the UK, particularly after 7/7, has tended to view them as 'disconnected from, and even antagonistic to, 'British' identity' (Thomas, 2009: 1). Thomas's research found, however, that young Muslims living in Britain do not perceive their affiliation with Islam as incompatible with 'Britishness', with the majority of young Muslims who took part in his research happy to identify themselves as 'British Muslim' or 'British Asian' (Thomas, 2009: 4). This resonates with Gilby et al's (2011) research, which found that Muslim students appeared to place more value on the importance of family and faith than other students but did not perceive a conflict between 'loyalty to Britain and the Ummah', even though many had experienced Islamophobic discrimination and anti-Muslim prejudice (Gilby et al, 2011: 6).

For the participants in Thomas's research, being Muslim seemed to bring 'a strong and positive sense of identity' (Thomas, 2009: 5), while being British was more problematic, owing to issues relating to foreign policy (e.g. the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan) as well as their experiences of Islamophobia. Thomas argues that the strong affiliation which young Muslims living in the UK appear to have with the idea of 'Britishness' may not have a positive effect, in terms of developing a shared national identity, since white Britons are increasingly rejecting the notion of 'Britishness' in favour of a more narrowly defined 'English' identity (Thomas 2009).

Thomas and Sanderson (2011), meanwhile, argue that the UK government's

post 7/7 response, including the 'Prevent' agenda, exacerbated the problem by the way it 'addressed and problematized Britain's young Muslims as a whole through an anti-terrorism prism' (Thomas and Sanderson, 2011: 1035). Since that time, Muslims have been under huge pressure to demonstrate allegiance to British identities, while at the same time experiencing increased levels of Islamophobia in their daily lives (Allen 2010). The implication for Muslim students in British schools is that the process of developing coherent and meaningful identities may be even more complicated, difficult and potentially controversial now than it ever has been (Thomas and Sanderson 2011).

## **2.3 The US**

### **2.3.1 Culture, religion and identity**

In the US, there is relatively little research about young people from Muslim backgrounds (Bell 1992, Vernez and Abrahamse 1996), partly because different patterns of migration mean that students from Latin America have been a greater focus. Cole and Ahmadi (2010) argue that, while race and ethnicity 'have been considered primary to how campus diversity is theorized and examined' (Cole and Ahmadi, 2010: 121), students' religious identities have not been seen as 'a student characteristic integral to academic success or educational satisfaction' (Cole and Ahmadi, 2010: 124). This is partly a consequence of the US emphasis on separation between church and state, which means that religion is not always seen as an appropriate topic of discussion in relation to public education.

This changed, to some extent, after the 9/11 attacks, when Muslim institutions and practices started to come under greater scrutiny, 'fueled by fears that American schools, mosques, and other organisations may be producing radical young Muslims' (Haddad and Smith, 2009: 3). Since that time, research has tended to focus on the role of Islamic education and 'independent private Islamic schools' (Haddad and Smith, 2009: 6) or on Muslim women's experiences of

higher education or employment, rather than the experiences of young Muslims within the mainstream public education system (e.g. Cole and Ahmadi 2010, Mir 2011, Elver 2012).

Ahmad and Szpara's (2003) study, which involved interviews with 12 boys and 8 girls and their parents at a Muslim community centre in Queens, New York, is one of the few US-based studies of the experiences of young Muslims in US schools. The researchers are critical of the extent to which New York public schools are 'responsive to the religious and cultural needs of Muslim students' (Ahmad and Szpara, 2003: 299); their research suggests that more needs to be done to ensure public schools are able to meet the needs of young Muslim students. They argue that public schools in the US have a role to play in ensuring that teachers are well informed about Islam and able to help overcome 'deep-rooted prejudices and unfounded fears of Islam and Muslims' (Ahmad and Szpara, 2003: 300). Ahmad and Szpara, like Haw (1998), argue that it is crucial to talk to Muslim children about their educational experiences, giving them an opportunity 'to tell their stories and express their ideas in an informal conversation' (Ahmad and Szpara, 2003: 295).

Sarroub's (2005) ethnographic study of Yemeni girls in an American high school emphasizes cultural conflict, highlighting the difficulties faced by the research participants in 'attempting to reconcile the American lives they experienced at school with the Yemeni lives they knew at home' (Sarroub, 2005: 1). Sarroub focuses particularly on the challenges faced by young Yemeni American women as a result of the gendered expectations which exist within their families and communities, including the way their ambitions for the future are restricted to 'acceptable occupations within their culture' (Sarroub, 2005: 15). Contrasting the restrictions imposed on students by their Yemeni families with the opportunities available within mainstream American society, Sarroub creates a sense of inevitability about the existence and continuation of cultural difference and the likelihood of conflict between the Yemeni and American aspects of the participants' identities. This contrasts with some research carried out in the UK (e.g. Basit 1997, Archer 2002) which has questioned the idea that young women from Muslim families feel restricted by their families and 'culture', emphasizing

the agency to which young people have access (e.g. Basit 1997, Shain 2003) and the extent to which it is possible for young people to develop multiple, hybrid identities (e.g. Hussain 2005).

### **2.3.2 Community and 'belonging'**

Research carried out by the Pew Research Center (2007) suggests that, although the majority of Muslims living in the US take their religious faith seriously and feel it is an important aspect of their lives, they do not perceive a fundamental conflict between their loyalty to their Islamic faith and their loyalty to America (Pew Research Center, 2007: 24). Amongst American Muslims, about half reported that they consider themselves 'Muslim "first"' with about a quarter saying they see themselves as 'American "first"' (Pew Research Center, 2007: 29). This contrasts with polls conducted in western Europe, where a much higher proportion of Muslims choose to identify themselves as "Muslims first" (Sirin and Fine, 2008: 2), though even amongst these respondents the majority believed there was no inevitable conflict between their Islamic beliefs and living in a modern, secular society (Pew Research Center, 2007: 32).

Despite this, Esposito argues that, nearly ten years after 9/11, 'the taint of "foreignness" and terrorism continues to brushstroke Muslims as "the other"' (Esposito 2010: 23). Curtis (2012) argues this is not a new phenomenon but something which has existed since before the Second World War, mainly focused on the threat posed by African American Muslim groups such as the Nation of Islam (Curtis, 2012). In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, however, the focus of attention for domestic counter-intelligence shifted to 'the transnational Muslim American terrorist' (Curtis 2012). President George W. Bush's 'War on Terror', purportedly aimed at strengthening national security at home and abroad, focused on Muslims, including the 'preemptive invasion' of Iraq and Afghanistan (Ghista 2005) and widespread covert surveillance of Muslims, including infiltration by the New York Police Department (NYPD) of Muslim Student Associations on college campuses (Apuzzo and Goldman 2011). The introduction of various school-based initiatives led to accusations of institutional Islamophobia, for ex-

ample the children's colouring book 'The Kids Book of Freedom', which was criticised for its depiction of US Navy SEALs shooting at Osama bin Laden as he hid behind a *niqab*-wearing woman (Ko 2011).

Sirin and Fine argue that the effect of all of this is to create an extremely problematic situation for young Muslims living in the US, who are 'both culturally grounded and nationally uprooted, transnational and homeless, and swirling psychologically in a contentious diaspora' (Sirin and Fine, 2008: 2). Within this context, questions of faith, culture, community, identity, citizenship and belonging become increasingly contested and contentious, as young people struggle to 'make meaning of who they are amid the global conflict' (Sirin and Fine, 2008: 3). As a result, it is argued, many young Muslim Americans struggle to reconcile the 'American' and 'Muslim' aspects of their identities (Sirin and Fine, 2007: 159).

## **2.4 The curriculum**

In both the US and the UK, questions about the relationship between 'culture' and the school curriculum, and the extent to which the curriculum should reflect cultural diversity, remain contentious. Some argue that the role of a school curriculum is to induct young people into the norms and values of a particular shared or agreed national culture, in order to facilitate 'cultural literacy' (Hirsch 1996) or imbue them with 'powerful knowledge' (Young 2012). Others draw attention to issues of power and status, arguing that the curriculum should be shaped around young people's cultural knowledge, values and beliefs and that it should reflect the diversity of society (Apple 2000). Buras, for example, argues that, in the US, debates about the school curriculum form part of the ongoing struggle between 'progressive' and 'traditional' conceptions of education, which reflect a wider and longer term struggle for 'cultural representation' and 'economic redistribution' that has for a long time been 'a central part of political life in the United States' (Buras, 1999: 2).

### 2.4.1 Islam and the school curriculum

The question of how Islam and Muslims are presented within the school curriculum is a contentious topic within the US and the UK. Panjwani (2010) argues that, within the school curriculum in the UK, Muslims are 'portrayed primarily as a religious group that derives its values and understanding of the world from their faith' (Panjwani, 2010: 160). As a result, rather than learning about those elements of Muslim cultures which do not primarily 'take religion as a central point' (Panjwani, 2010: 161), young people within British schools are given a misleading impression about the centrality of religion within Muslim societies and cultures. Panjwani argues that this 'religiofication' of Muslim cultures (Panjwani, 2010: 160) within the school curriculum creates a misleading impression of contrast between Muslims and other Europeans, who are portrayed as being 'primarily secular' (Panjwani, 2010: 160), thus contributing to the process through which Muslims are constructed as 'the "other"' (Panjwani, 2010: 163).

Revell, whose research focuses on primary schools in the UK, argues that the teaching of Islam 'raises particular challenges for the teacher who wishes to encourage pupils to engage with religion in an atmosphere of open enquiry' (Revell, 2010: 207). Revell's research, which involved talking to white, non-Muslim Year 4 children about various aspects of Islam, suggested that the participants 'saw Muslims as fundamentally different from themselves' (Revell, 2010: 210). Her findings suggest that one area where children tend to have particularly negative perceptions is Muslim women, whose style of dress was seen as 'the result of compulsion' representing 'a level of forced conformity and denial of will which children thought unfair' (Revell, 2010: 210). Revell argues that it is important for teachers to engage with pupils' 'stereotyped, racist' perceptions of Islam, which are often shaped and influenced before they enter the classroom 'or informed by misrepresentation in the media' (Revell, 2010: 207). A failure to do so, she argues, is likely to reinforce, rather than diminish, pupils' 'sense of cultural and social difference' (Revell, 2010: 214).

## **2.5 Racism, anti-Muslim prejudice and religious discrimination**

There is a substantial amount of evidence that young Muslims in the US and the UK are likely to encounter racism, prejudice and discrimination, both within school and outside of it (e.g. Archer 2002, Ali 2008, Kidd and Jamieson 2011). A key focus of my research was to examine the extent to which the participants were affected by the kind of prejudice and discrimination which Abbas (2004) argues has been typical of South Asian Muslims' experience in the UK, particularly in the post-9/11 context (Abbas, 2004: 29). Allen (2010), in a similar way, argues that one thing all Muslim communities in the UK have in common, particularly since the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks, is their experience of 'Islamophobia', defined as a set of exclusionary practices which 'negatively and detrimentally impact the everyday lives and experiences of Muslims and their communities' (Allen, 2010: 161).

Archer's research, which involved interviews with both male and female 'British Muslim' students, suggests that the experience of 'hostility and negative stereotyping from other students and teachers' (Archer, 2002: 364) has an impact on young Muslim women's post-16 educational choices. Her participants' responses suggest that 'Asian girls did not previously participate in post-16 education because of the threat of encountering racism within educational institutions' (Archer, 2002: 368) and that this, rather than restrictions imposed by parents, is a key reason for young Muslim women choosing not to continue with their education after the end of compulsory schooling (Archer, 2002: 368). Her research also suggests, however, that the Muslim girls involved with her research believed that things had changed for the better and that they would be more likely to have freedom of choice about their future educational decisions compared with the previous generation (Archer, 2002: 371).

In the US context, Clay argues that, in the years following 9/11, Muslim Americans have suffered from 'anxiety, depression and even post-traumatic stress disorder', as a result of 'ongoing racial profiling, discrimination and other stressors unique to Arabs' (Clay 2011). This has led to Muslim women, particularly



those wearing the *hijab*, increasingly becoming the targets for anti-Muslim discrimination (Ahmed 2011, Aziz 2012, Elver 2012). This resonates with evidence from the UK that Muslim women wearing the *hijab* or displaying other visible identifiers of their Muslim identity have, since 9/11 and 7/7, been singled out for abuse, discrimination and harassment (Open Society Institute 2005a, Allen, Isakjee and Young 2013).

Clay argues that, for many Muslims, one way of responding has been 'to intensify their religious practices' (Clay 2011), with adherence to Islamic beliefs and practices becoming a more important part of their identities. This resonates with the findings of other researchers, who have identified religious practices as an important source of support for those suffering from Islamophobia or anti-Muslim attacks. Haddad (2007), for example, argues that the 'anti-Islamic themes in the American public square' after 9/11 were perceived by many Muslims not as a new development but as a continuation of the anti-Muslim bias which permeates Western public discourse (Haddad, 2007: 259). As a result, rather than driving people away from their religion, the post-9/11 'context of mutual fear and apprehension' (Haddad, 2007: 263) has led women in particular to see the mosque as a 'shelter' and 'safe space' (Haddad, 2007: 263-4), providing a sense of community and belonging which was markedly absent in the outside world.

## 2.6 The 'problem' of women in Islam

The issue of gender is an important consideration for educational researchers interested in the experiences of young Muslim women living in the West, partly because of the emphasis placed in mainstream discourse on the 'problem' of women in Islam (Esposito 2010).

Ahmed's history of Middle Eastern Arab women explores both the material conditions of women's lives and the 'discourses on women and gender in Islamic Middle Eastern societies' which have shaped those lives (Ahmed, 1992: 2). Ahmed emphasizes the extent to which the 'discourse of colonial domination' has shaped understandings of women's experiences, even amongst those who are critical of the West but are nevertheless influenced by 'intellectual assumptions and political ideas, including a belief in the rights of the individual, formulated by Western bourgeois capitalism' (Ahmed, 1992: 235). The Islamist position regarding women, she argues, is problematic precisely because, while purporting to reject Western values, it 'traps the issue of women with the struggle over culture - just as the initiating colonial discourse had done' (Ahmed, 1992: 236).

This connection between the role of women and the purported 'clash of civilizations' (Huntingdon 1996) is also emphasized by Zine, who argues that at this historical moment, perhaps more than any other, 'Muslim women's bodies are being positioned upon the geopolitical stage not as actors in their own right, but as foils for modernity, civilization, and freedom' (Zine, 2: 20). It is not only that young Muslim women, like young women belonging to other groups, are so often seen as the repositories of cultural traditions, values and beliefs, meaning that womanhood, and particularly adolescent womanhood, is simultaneously idealized and politicized, celebrated and regulated, worshipped and feared (Espiritu 2003). In the post 9/11 context, young Muslim women's bodies have also taken on a hugely loaded symbolic significance, which has complex implications for young Muslim women growing up and being educated in the West.

### 2.6.1 The issue of 'veiling'

Hoodfar (1992) argues that questions about 'veiling' and its relation to the oppression of Muslim women have been prominent topics of discussion in the West, not only since the 9/11 attacks but for many years before that (Hoodfar, 1992: 1). As Ahmed argues, however, the re-emergence of the veil and resurgence of interest in 'modesty' in relation to Muslim women's bodies, both in the Middle East and in the West, is a complex phenomenon that is often misinterpreted and misconstrued but which seems to have resulted in the veil itself becoming 'a quintessential sign (among other things) of irresolvable tension and confrontation between Islam and the West' (Ahmed, 2011: 6). The voices of young Muslim women are not, however, often present in debate about these issues, which tends to be dominated by other voices.

In both the US and the UK, there have in recent years been a number of high profile court cases relating to the wearing of the *hijab* and *niqab*. Many of these have involved young women and their families taking legal action after being excluded from school because of their decision to wear some form of 'Islamic' clothing, with decisions usually being taken in favour of a school's right to impose a particular dress code (e.g. Ibrahim 2013). Other cases include Birmingham Metropolitan College's decision in September 2013 to ban the wearing of the *niqab* within college grounds, which was quickly reversed after widespread protests from Muslim students (Hallam 2013). Those opposing the ban cited not only the rights to religious freedom, cultural expression and freedom of conscience but also the question of 'a woman's right to choose' (Hallam 2013), creating a linguistic connection between the right to wear the veil and other feminist issues like rape and abortion.

Debate in the mainstream media in the UK ranges from tabloid accounts of Muslim women 'demanding' to wear the *hijab* or *niqab* and being forced to remove it, to accounts of Muslim men forcing women to cover their hair or bodies, amidst claims by feminists that the veil is a form of female subjugation which must be resisted at all costs (Baker 2010, Kabir 2010). It increasingly seems as

if the Muslim female body has become a publicly contested 'battleground' (Mirza, 2013: 6) with the veil symbolising, paradoxically, both women's desire for personal, cultural and religious freedom and the gender-related oppression of women within Islam.

Pichler's (2009) study of the group talk of British Bangladeshi girls, which involved self-recordings by five 15-16 year old girls in London, explores how young women from this community challenge the ways in which cultural or religious norms like wearing the veil and arranged marriage are perceived by outsiders. Pichler argues that concepts like '*sharam*' and '*izzat*', which refer to female honour, shame and modesty, remain important within the Bangladeshi community as part of a 'discourse of respectable femininity' (Pichler, 2009: 129). She does not, however, problematize the fact that there are no equivalent concepts for boys or men.

The young women in Pichler's study place a strong emphasis on religious identity and their decisions about love and marriage seem to be determined by religious, rather than cultural, values and beliefs. They also talk in detail about their experiences of dating and their views about sex and marriage but do not seem concerned about the question of veiling or the impact of norms and values about 'modesty' in relation to their own bodies (Pichler, 2009: 188-215).

Mirza, whose research involved interviews with older Muslim women, focuses on the ways in which 'racialised and gendered boundaries are produced and experientially "lived through" a faith-based Muslim female subjectivity' (Mirza, 2013: 6). She argues that these subjectivities are inscribed on Muslim women's bodies, so that the 'external materiality' of their lives (Mirza, 2013: 7) becomes part of their physical experience of the world as it is 'constituted, reconfigured and lived through their corporeal representation' (Mirza, 2013: 7). The participants in Mirza's research perceive their identities as being rooted both in 'ethnic cultures' and religious identities, with Islam becoming 'a conscious site of memory and belonging - a 'second skin' through which their ethnic and religious identity was embodied and lived out through their subjectivity and sense of self' (Mirza, 2013: 11).

Mirza's concept of 'embodied intersectionality' emphasizes connections between larger socio-economic and political issues, the particular historical moment (i.e. post-9/11) and the individual and collective experiences of Muslim women living in the West. Mirza argues that it is at the intersection of 'the material external world and the embodied interior world' where 'the identity of the Muslim female marginal subject comes into being' (Mirza, 2013: 7). She argues that the work of 'transnational postcolonial critical race feminists' (Mirza, 2013: 6) has provided invaluable insight into 'how the Muslim female body has become a battlefield in the symbolic war against Islam and the perceived Muslim enemy "within"' (Mirza, 2013: 6).

Mirza highlights the contrast between the ways in which her research participants perceive themselves and the way in which they are 'racially constructed as "female other" in Britain' (Mirza, 2013: 9). Despite this circumscription, they demonstrate agency, she argues, in the decisions they make about how to negotiate the 'material world' in which they find themselves and in the ways they develop their own understandings of, and feelings about, the world around them (Mirza, 2013: 13). This all takes place in the context of the way in which Muslim practices are presented in British media and public discourse, the 'mythical feedback loop' (Mirza, 2013: 13) which determines both the way in which Muslim women are perceived by others and the way they understand themselves.

Aziz argues that 'veiled' Muslim women in the post-9/11 United States often 'find themselves trapped at the intersection of bias against Islam, the racialized Muslim, and women' (Aziz, 2012: 1). In post 9/11 America, she argues, Muslim women wearing the headscarf have come to be seen as an embodiment of debates about freedom of religion, individual freedom of expression, human rights, gender roles, political conflict and physical safety (Aziz 2012). While resisting the 'misleading reductionism' which often characterises debate about Muslim women and the 'veil' (Watson 1994), Aziz emphasizes the additional challenges faced by Muslim women who wear the headscarf, 'a religious gender marker' (Aziz, 2012: 1). These women, she argues, face increased discrimination from those with 'entrenched anti-Muslim attitudes' (Aziz, 2012: 2), owing to their in-

creased visibility as members of an inherently 'foreign' group. They are also the subject of stereotyping and generalisation by mainstream feminist groups and equally ill-served by Muslim men, who fail to understand the lived realities of Muslim women's lives or to listen properly to their voices (Aziz, 2012: 3). Although Aziz draws extensively on relevant literature, however, she does not herself speak to Muslim women about these issues.

Elver argues that, in the US, debate about the headscarf reflects not only wider debates about tolerance, pluralism and religious extremism but also 'the sentiment of the American public' in the aftermath of 9/11 (Elver, 2012: 158). Watson, meanwhile, argues that non-Muslims tend to have particularly negative perceptions of the headscarf, which 'is variously depicted as a tangible symbol of women's oppression, a constraining and constricting form of dress, and a form of social control, religiously sanctioning women's invisibility and subordinate socio-political status' (Watson, 1994: 137). For Muslim women, on the other hand, wearing the *hijab* is often represented as a personal choice which symbolises not only their commitment to Islamic principles and freedom of religious expression but also their desire 'to negotiate parental restrictions which they locate in ethnicity', thereby 'creating a new fused identity which is both "Western" and "Islamic"' (Open Society Institute, 2005b: 24).

Ahmed, in a similar way, argues that younger generations of Muslims living in America have a different understanding of the meaning of the *hijab* compared with those who are more conscious of its historical links with Islamism and the Muslim Brotherhood (Ahmed, 2011). She recalls feeling disturbed by the growing trend, during the 1990s, of young women in America wearing the headscarf as a sign of religious observance without being aware of its associations, and remembers feeling surprised that these young women, who 'lived in a free country', should be willing to accept the imposition of such a patriarchal idea (Ahmed, 2011). Ahmed points out that, until the mid-1960s, the veil was not particularly related to religious piety and that removing it was often seen as a sign of modernisation and progress. She also recognises, however, that although the re-emergence of the veil was initially part of a political project led by the Muslim Brotherhood, it has come to take on a much more complex set of meanings,

both in the Muslim world and in the West.

Aziz argues that, in the post 9/11 context, the headscarf has been transformed 'from a symbol of female subjugation into a symbol of terror(ism)' (Aziz, 2012: 4). This resonates with Byng's analysis of US media representations of Islam, which suggests that, in the years following 9/11, debate about the headscarf was mainly portrayed 'through the lenses of the assimilation/integration of Muslims and concerns about the possibility that veiling was a tangential indicator of radicalism that could lead to terrorism' (Byng, 2010: 112). There is also evidence to suggest that young Muslim women living in the US have, in the years following 9/11, chosen to wear the headscarf both as a symbol of pride in their identities as American Muslims and as a way of resisting the demonization of Islam during that time (e.g. Elver 2012, Haddad 2007). Williams and Vashi (2007) argue that the *hijab* provides both a clear identity marker for young Muslim women as they transition through different life stages and a 'culturally legitimate space' (Williams and Vashi, 2007: 269) for young Muslim women as they negotiate Muslim-American identities.

Elver, meanwhile, argues that debate about the headscarf is closely linked to issues about the role of religion in public life and, in particular, the role of religion in relation to public education (Elver, 2012: 153). Her analysis suggests that, for most non-Muslim Americans, the wearing of the headscarf by Muslim women was, after 9/11, increasingly perceived as being symbolic of 'antidemocratic and antiseccular feelings', as well as being seen as 'a synecdoche for extremism and the oppression of women in the name of religion' (Elver, 2012: 158). Muslim women, on the other hand, became increasingly conscious of the significance of their decision to wear, or not wear, the headscarf. While some either stayed at home or chose to stop wearing the headscarf, others actively decided to wear it, even if they had not done so before, as a symbol of resistance to the increased Islamophobia that permeated American society during this time. One effect of all of this, Elver argues, was to increase the importance of the role of the mosque in Muslim women's lives, as it became a refuge from the hostility they experienced outside (Elver, 2012: 161).

## 2.7 Transnational Muslim solidarity?

According to Abbas, one consequence of the growth in Islamophobia in the West is the emergence of a 'transnational Muslim solidarity: a genuine and conscious identification with others of the same religion' (Abbas, 2004: 29). Ali (2008) argues that, in the UK, this started to become apparent in the 1980s as young Muslims turned away from 'the ideals of integration' and began instead 'to assert their distinctive character by identifying with the global Ummah of Islam' (Ali, 2008: 5). The main motivation for this, Ali argues, was that the feeling of belonging to a global Muslim community 'seemed to provide a superior identity to any on offer in Britain' (Ali, 2008: 5). One aim of my research was to explore the extent to which the participants in my research would express this kind of 'transnational Muslim solidarity'. This is particularly important in the 9/11 context, given increased awareness about connections between Muslims living in the West and those living in the Muslim-majority world (Esposito 2010), and the failure of Muslim and Western societies to understand each other clearly or to articulate each other's differences in an accurate or meaningful way (Weiss 1994).

Mahmood's (2012) study of the mosque movement in Egypt also emphasizes the mutual incomprehension of Western and Muslim societies, arguing that the separation between religion and state, and between 'embodied practice' and 'the believing subject', is a relatively recent and distinctly Western invention' (Mahmood, 2012: xv):

'Simply put, the Protestant conception of religiosity presupposes a distinction between a privatised interiority that is the proper locus of belief and a public exteriority that is an expression of this belief.'  
(Mahmood, 2012: xv)

For the participants in Mahmood's research, in contrast, there can be no separation between the inward adherence to a religious faith and the outward expression of that faith in 'rituals' and 'bodily practices' (Mahmood, 2012: xv).

These women, she argues, pose a challenge to mainstream feminist analysis and our 'normative liberal assumptions' (Mahmood, 2012: 5) about concepts like freedom, autonomy and agency, because of the extent to which they are both



agentive and committed to a set of practices and beliefs which are 'embedded within a tradition that historically accorded women a subordinate status' (Mahmood, 2012: 5). We cannot, Mahmood argues, simply dismiss them as the victims of false consciousness or as 'pawns in a grand patriarchal plan' (Mahmood, 2012: 1); to understand their behaviour, and the reasons for their participation in the Islamic revival, we have to move beyond our current understanding of key concepts like identity, agency and subjectivity.

Mahmood is critical both of Western scholarship and of the ways in which Islamic scholarship has addressed questions about the role of women in Muslim societies, particularly in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and 'the immense groundswell of anti-Islamic sentiment that has followed' (Mahmood, 2012: 1). She argues that Western feminists, while taking account of sexual, racial, class, and national differences, have failed to explore questions of religious difference, especially in relation to Islam, and that it is impossible to have a meaningful debate about these issues, unless we question the 'secular-liberal assumptions' which determine the framing of the debate in a Western context (Mahmood, 2012: 189). A key way to achieve this, Mahmood argues, is by allowing the voices of young Muslim women to enter the debate and be heard on their own terms.

## 2.8 Research Questions

The Literature Review explored existing research into faith, culture, community and other issues relating to the educational experiences of young Muslim women in the US and UK. In doing so, it highlighted some areas which would benefit from further research.

Although there is some existing research into the experiences of young Muslim women in the UK and US, there are only a small number of studies which foreground the voices of the young women themselves. My research builds on the emphasis placed by Haw (1998) on the importance of exploring how research participants position themselves in response to the expectations and assumptions they meet in their everyday lives. It also draws on the work of Shain (2003) and Pichler (2009), who tried to find ways of giving young Muslim women opportunities to contribute to discussion about issues that affect their lives. In addition, since there are no existing studies which explore similarities and differences in the experiences of young Muslim women living in the US and UK, this is an area where my research will increase the existing knowledge base, which is important because of the global nature of the issues affecting these young women's lives.

In the light of this previous literature, the research questions which are addressed in this thesis are as follows:

- 1. What do six young Muslim women have to tell us about their experiences of living and learning in two Western cities at the beginning of the twenty-first century?**
- 2. What can these young Muslim women's accounts of their own educational experiences reveal about how they position themselves and how they respond to the representations, assumptions and expectations they meet in their everyday lives?**

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter starts by setting out my own position in relation to the research, then goes on to explain the methodological approach, research design and data collection methods, as well as outlining some of the key ethical issues relating to this study and how they have been addressed. The final section explains my approach to data analysis and the way in which I have chosen to present the research findings.

### **3.2 My position in relation to the research**

A key consideration, in terms of my own position, was that in both research locations I had a dual role: at Hazel Grove in London, I was a researcher and a senior member of staff, while at Faith Foundations in New York I was a researcher and a volunteer. In both locations, I was also professionally involved with the young women who became participants in my research; at Hazel Grove in my role as line manager for the Sixth Form team and at Faith Foundations as leader of a young women's discussion group. This means that I must, to some extent, consider myself to be an 'insider' researcher, with all the opportunities and challenges that presents (Malone 2003, Chavez 2008, Greene 2014). On the other hand, however, as a white, older, non-Muslim woman, I was also a socio-cultural outsider, since I was not part of the same social and cultural group as the participants in my research.

I believe it was an advantage that I had the opportunity to build relationships with the participants before interviewing them, because it meant they were willing to talk to me openly about their experiences in a way in which they might not otherwise have done. The fact that I can be seen as a 'partial insider' (Chavez, 2008: 475) does not detract from the value of the thesis, because the research does not claim to give an objective or generalizable account of the experiences

of young Muslim women in London and New York. Since I was primarily interested in obtaining subjective, personal accounts from the young women with whom I worked in these two locations, the fact that I was already familiar with the participants helped make it possible for me to access these accounts.

Roer-Strier and Sands (2014) argue that it is particularly important to consider issues of positionality and power relations 'in cases where interviewers belong to hegemonic groups and interviewees belong to minority groups with respect to national, religious, political, and racial or cultural affiliations' (Roer-Strier and Sands, 2014: 3). This is relevant to my research since, as a white, non-Muslim woman studying at an elite university, it could be argued that I occupy a privileged position in relation to the young women involved in my research (McIntosh 1988). Through my previous work with the participants, I had come to believe that their voices were being silenced, so a key aim of my research was to create the opportunity for them to tell their own stories, in their own words. As Roer-Stier and Sands (2014) argue, however, it is important not to over-simplify the power dynamics that operate in this kind of encounter and to consider the 'bi-directional' nature of the qualitative interview (Roer-Strier and Sands, 2014: 2).

### **3.3. Methodological approach**

My research follows a social constructivist and interpretivist paradigm, predicated on the assumption that 'no aspects of knowledge are purely of the external world, devoid of human construction' (Stake, 1995: 100). It involved carrying out a 'principled enquiry' (Robson, 2002:10) into a specific situation in a particular local context. In this way, I hoped to gain better understanding of the ways in which the research participants experience the world and how they make sense of their experiences, while recognising that this understanding can only be accessed through my own perceptions.

My research utilized qualitative interviews which, from the constructivist perspective, are seen as a 'construction site of knowledge' (Kvale, 1996: 42), within

which researcher and participant converse together and, during the course of their conversation, construct narrative understandings of the world. The aim of my research was not to uncover objective truths or develop grand theories but to gain insight into the ways in which people experience and perceive the world, accepting that these may be multiple, emergent and potentially self-contradictory. Rather than 'causal determination, prediction, and generalization of findings', I was interested in 'illumination, understanding, and extrapolation to similar situations' (Golafshani, 2003: 600).

My desire to obtain accounts of the participants' lived experiences meant that it was essential for me to find ways of entering into 'dialogic encounters' (Bakhtin 1968) with them, to enable them to present their own accounts of their educational experiences in their own words. Rather than attempting to maintain distance from them, it was important for me to enter into relationship with them over a period of time, to gain their trust and to create the space for them to give their own accounts of their experiences in a way that was not overly constrained by a pre-determined structure or set of questions.

By focusing on 'storied accounts of educational lives' (Clandinin and Connelly 2000: 4), I hoped that my research would centralise the voices of the research participants who, as young, non-white women with non-Western heritage and members of a minority religious group, are often silenced by mainstream discourse. Entering into relationship and building trust with the participants was an important pre-condition for obtaining these 'storied accounts' (Clandinin and Connelly *ibid*) from them.

My approach to the interview process was also influenced by feminist researchers, who emphasize the distinctiveness of women's identity and intellectual development, the importance of creating space to listen to women's voices, and attentiveness to questions about the origins and identity of authority, truth and knowledge (e.g. Gilligan 1982, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule 1997). This led me, when conducting interviews, to focus on listening to the participants' voices and creating spaces for them to be heard on their own terms.

Since I wanted to focus on the accounts of students from a marginalised, migrant and rapidly changing community, it was important to find an approach that could 'reach forwards and backwards in time, documenting processes and experiences of social change' (Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf, 2000: 2). In this way, my research had similar aims to life history research, which aims to try to understand how people make sense of the world and how they account for the things that happen to them (Goodson and Sikes 2001: 39). Like life history researchers, I hoped to use qualitative interviews as a way of gaining insight into the complexity of the informants' experiences, thus foregrounding 'the messy confrontation with human subjectivity which we believe should comprise the heartland of the sociological enterprise' (Sikes and Gale, 2006: 8).

In taking a narrative approach, I chose to accept the limitations this may place on my findings in terms of conventional notions of reliability and validity, because I believe this approach is appropriate for the questions I want to answer. This kind of research does not aim to discover something 'true' but to explore 'the social and linguistic construction of a perspectival reality where knowledge is validated through practice' (Kvale, 1995: 19), utilising 'the extraordinary power' of qualitative methods 'to picture and to question the complexity of the social reality investigated' (Kvale, 1995: 23).

The main aim of my research was to use qualitative interviews to gather accounts of the participants' experiences in a way that would enable me to 'to picture and to question' their social reality (Kvale 1995). This reflects my belief that there is value in studying 'a particular experience, in a particular setting, involving particular people' (Pinnegar and Daynes, 2006: 21). It was, nevertheless, important to ensure that my research would be seen by its potential readers as achieving a sufficient degree of 'trustworthiness, rigor and quality', without necessarily being constrained by conventional notions of 'reliability' and 'validity' (Golafshani, 2003: 604). One way of achieving this was to be as clear and transparent as possible in my explanation of the approach I took to the research process, including my interviews with the participants and the analysis of data

gathered during these interviews, as well as my consideration of relevant ethical issues.

I did not aim to undertake a ‘generalizable’ study, since I cannot claim that the participants in my research are a representative sample or that their experiences are likely to be similar to other young Muslim women living in the West. It is, nevertheless, my hope that my research will be useful and relevant to other researchers and practitioners who are interested in similar issues. Firstly, by exploring the participants’ experiences and highlighting the similarities and differences between them, it was my intention that the research would highlight some important issues about the ways in which young Muslim women living in the West are (mis)represented in mainstream discourse. Secondly, I hoped that my research would demonstrate the rich possibilities available to researchers who are willing and able to build relationships and enter into dialogue with participants.

### **3.4 Research Design**

The research conducted for this thesis was a dual site narrative inquiry, exploring the experiences of three young Muslim women from London and three from New York City. It does not claim to be a comparative study, because there are too many discontinuities between the participants, the two organisations and my own role, for that to be possible (Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal 2010). It also does not claim to be a generalizable account. It does, however, aim to give insight into the similarities and differences between the experiences of the participants; I believe that we can learn a great deal from placing alongside each other the life histories of individuals living in particular contexts and studying the connections between them.

Further details of the research design are set out below.

#### **3.4.1 Timeline of research process**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Location</b>
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Invite volunteers from Hazel Grove to take part in research	June-July 2011	London
Obtain informed consent from UK participants	July 2011	London
Interview UK participants	December 2011-June 2012	London
Invite volunteers from Faith Foundations to take part in research	March-April 2012	New York
Obtain informed consent from NY participants	April 2012	New York
Interview US participants	May-June 2012	New York
Transcription of interviews	July-December 2012	London
Initial analysis	January-July 2013	London
Second round of analysis	July-December 2013	London
Writing and editing accounts	January 2014-December 2015	London



### 3.4.2 Research site

The data for this study was collected between September 2011 and July 2012, while I was based in New York as a visiting researcher at Teachers College, Columbia University. The research was collected in two locations:

1. Hazel Grove Secondary School in London
2. Faith Foundations Community Organisation in New York  
(both pseudonyms).

I worked at Hazel Grove between September 2006 and August 2011. Before leaving, I recruited five young women from the school's Sixth Form to take part in my thesis project. The recruitment process involved me issuing an open invitation to the students who had been involved with my previous research at Hazel Grove, to ask if any of them would be interested in being involved with my thesis study. I was not selective about the participants and was happy to involve any who were willing to be involved. Five young women initially volunteered, but two were unable to continue which left three participants. I obtained informed consent from these participants, and interviewed them in person between December 2011 and June 2012, after I had stopped working at the school.

Between January and June 2012, I was a volunteer and researcher at Faith Foundations, a Muslim community organisation in Brooklyn, New York. Through my regular discussions with these young women, I gradually learned more and more about their lives and the issues that were important to them. In April 2012, I again issued an open invitation to ask if any of them would be interested in being involved with my thesis study. Four of them initially volunteered but only three were able to continue. In May and June 2012, after obtaining informed consent, I interviewed three of them for my research.

My method of choosing participants can best be described as convenience sampling. This potentially raises issues for the validity, reliability and generalizability of the research, since I did not go about selecting the participants on a systematic basis. This was, however, the only way in which I could access the

participants; it had to be done on a purely voluntary basis by participants who were willing to take part and who wanted to tell me their stories.

### **3.4.3 Research participants**

Most of the young women involved with my research at Hazel Grove are the descendants of men (and women) who came to the UK from Bangladesh during the 1950s and 60s. The part of east London where the school is situated is populated mainly by other Bangladeshis, who make up one of the largest Muslim communities in the UK. Their experiences are, inevitably, shaped by this geographic, historical, social and economic context.

The experiences of the young women involved with my research at Faith Foundations in New York are the result of a quite specific, and quite different, set of circumstances. All of them can trace their ancestry to the Middle East or North Africa; most of their parents are foreign-born migrants who moved to the US in recent decades for economic or political reasons. As 'Arab Americans' living in post-9/11 New York City, they face particular issues and challenges that are both similar to and different from those faced by other migrants to the US.

### **3.4.4 Data collection methods**

Face to face qualitative interviews lasting between 45 and 90 minutes were conducted with each of the research participants. In keeping with the flexibility provided by the narrative approach, the interviews did not follow any predetermined structure and or set of questions. The aim of these interviews was to give the young women an opportunity to tell me about their experiences in an open, non-judgemental environment where the only agenda was my interest in learning more about their experiences. This was my chosen approach because I felt it was the best way to ensure that the participants would have the opportunity to give their own accounts, in their own words, on their own terms.

In both locations, the interviews took place in a private office, to ensure privacy

while still enabling me to benefit from the familiar relationships I had developed with the participants in each context. I started each interview by welcoming the young women and re-visiting the process of obtaining voluntary informed consent, by explaining the aims and objectives of the research, their right to withdraw at any time and the fact that I would be using pseudonyms for all the individuals and groups mentioned in the research. I then asked each participant the following question:

*‘Please tell me about your educational experiences, focusing on some of the most significant things that have happened to you during your educational life.’*

This request was posed to each of the participants at the beginning of each interview. My role was to listen and to take brief notes, in addition to recording the interviews with a digital voice recorder. When I asked questions to the young women, it was to elicit more detail or to probe further into something they said, rather than to guide them in a different direction.

I had planned to conduct follow-up interviews with the young women in both research sites, to explore further the issues that arose during their initial interviews. This was only possible to a very limited extent, however, mainly for logistical reasons, since it was not easy for me to conduct follow-up interviews in London while I was in New York and vice versa. I therefore decided to base my thesis only on the data collected during the initial one-off interviews, to avoid having different amounts of information for each participant. This made the data analysis more manageable, though it did also mean that I did not have the opportunity to probe in more detail the issues raised in each interview.

### **3.5 Ethical issues**

There are a number of ethical issues relating to my research.

The participants in my research were all volunteers who were fully informed about the research before agreeing to take part. As well as explaining the research to them before it started, the participants were also asked to sign a letter

confirming they consented to taking part; similar letters were also given to their parents. Several of the participants wanted me to use their real names but I decided that it would not be responsible to agree to this request. I used pseudonyms for all participants and the organisations to which they belonged.

Privacy was ensured by carrying out the interviews in a private office within the relevant institution. The interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and transcribed later onto my personal laptop computer. All relevant notes, transcripts and recordings were kept in private, password-protected files on this computer, which was not used by anyone else during this time.

The organisations in which I collected data may be identified by anyone who is familiar with the contexts in which the research was undertaken, owing to their unusual characteristics, though it is unlikely they would be able to identify the individual participants. I tried to make this as clear as possible to the participants and offered to show them the sections of the thesis containing their own accounts once it is completed.

I am aware that my choice to focus on 'young Muslim women' suggests that I perceive these elements of the participants' identities as being more significant than others. In choosing age, gender and religious identity as primary categories of identification, it could be argued that I am guilty of engaging in interpellation (Althusser 1970), by inviting the research participants to inhabit certain subject positions. I do not believe, however, that my approach to the research process had the effect of 'fixing' the participants into particular subject positions in this way. My research does not assume identity is 'fixed and unchanging' (Watson, 2006: 371) but perceives it as something which is 'necessarily relational, to do with recognition of sameness and difference between ourselves and others' that forms part of 'an ongoing process that is never finally and fully accomplished' (Watson, 2006: 372). My approach to the collection and analysis of interview data was underpinned by the assumption that attention to 'complexities, incoherence and ambiguity' (Watson, 2006: 381) was an essential part of the process of 'writing and re-writing' (Watson, 2006: 382) the accounts offered to me by the research participants.

It is almost impossible, in an academic thesis of this kind, to avoid some degree of 'silencing, appropriation and academic colonization' (Sikes and Gale 2006: 72) , as participants' accounts 'pass out of the hands of the creators and become a middle class commodity' (Rosen, 1998: 77). I am, inevitably, constrained by the expectation that my thesis will privilege 'the language of social science' over 'the language used by "ordinary people"' (Mahmood, 2012: 16). The only solution is to be as responsible as I can with the accounts told to me during the course of my research and to be conscious of the ways in which, during the process of retelling, these narratives are inevitably reshaped and reformed.

I am aware that, as a white, British, non-Muslim woman, I cannot avoid speaking from a position of privilege (McIntosh 1988), which may mean I am unable ever to truly comprehend the experiences of the informants in my research. It is impossible for me to escape from the fact that I am a 'Western white' who 'may never need to consider the problems of a marginalized identity' (Gardner, 2006: 5). I am also conscious that there is an asymmetry of power relations between my own position and that of the young people involved in the research. I cannot claim to have completely resolved this issue but do not feel it prevented the young women from talking to me openly about their experiences and do not perceive it as a major issue for my research.

### 3.6 Data analysis

Before starting data analysis, it was necessary to transcribe the audio recordings I had made of the interviews undertaken with the research participants; this resulted in the production of lengthy interview transcripts. The data analysis process involved five stages: reading and re-reading the data; coding and categorization; identifying key themes; further coding of the data; presenting the analysis. This process of data analysis took place over a two and a half year period, following the completion of data collection in June 2012. An example interview transcript is provided in Appendix 3.

The first stage of data analysis was to read through all the data several times and listen again to key sections of the interviews. This helped ensure that I remained as true as possible to the accounts as they were originally told to me by the research participants. The data was then manually coded to identify an initial set of themes and patterns, by formulating a series of sub-questions which were then broken down into a series of sub-categories (Table 3.1).

*Table 3.1 Initial codes*

Research sub-questions	Sub-categories
1. What, if any, distinctive opportunities and challenges do the participants face inside the education system and how do these affect their educational experiences?	a. Distinctive educational opportunities b. Distinctive educational challenges c. Effects on educational experiences of being a young Muslim woman
2. What importance do the participants place on the social and cultural heritage of the places from which their parents migrated, including Islamic religious and spiritual practices and principles?	a. Importance of social/cultural/linguistic heritage b. Connections with 'home' countries c. Importance of Islamic religious/spiritual practices/principles
3. To what extent do the participants define themselves as members of a global Muslim community, and to what extent does this conflict with other local or national affiliations?	a. Importance of 'Muslim' identities b. Affiliation with 'global Muslim community' c. Conflict/alignment with other local/national affiliations

Research sub-questions	Sub-categories
4. To what extent are the participants conscious of tension or conflict between the values and beliefs of their families and communities, and those of the schools in which they are being educated?	a. Values/beliefs of family/community b. Values/beliefs of school/college c. Differences (conflict/alignment) between these sets of values/beliefs
5. How do the participants negotiate and articulate identities, and maintain a sense of belonging, in the context of existing tensions around faith, culture and community?	a. Negotiating and articulating identities b. Maintaining a sense of belonging c. Tensions around faith/culture/community

The next stage of data analysis involved two phases. Firstly, I constructed a concept map (Novak and Cañas 2008) for each of the six individual research participants, which enabled me to visualise the issues and themes which had emerged in each interview and the connections between them. Secondly, I combined the data into a series of overall concept maps, to create a visualisation of the overarching themes and issues and the connections between them. An example concept map is included in Appendix 5.

The data were then further coded so that each sub-category was broken down into a further series of sub-codes. This was an iterative process, with codes emerging from the data rather than being imposed upon it (Appendix 6).

My analysis of the participants' accounts is presented in the following chapter. Analysis of each participant's account is presented individually, with overall analysis at the end of the chapter.

## Chapter 4: Findings

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the individual accounts of the six young women involved with my research, three from London and three from New York. To give a stronger sense of the similarities and differences between the participants from each context and to reflect the way in which I collected the data, I have presented the three accounts from London first, followed by the three accounts from New York. All the data are taken directly from individual interviews with the young women, though they are also informed by the knowledge of them which was gained from working with them over an extended period of time. The interviews took place in the context of a relationship of trust which I had established with the participants before asking them to take part in the research. As a result, they were willing to disclose their personal thoughts and feelings on a range of subjects, in a way which would not otherwise have been the case. Their accounts are fully anonymised and pseudonyms have been used throughout.

The order in which the accounts are presented is as follows:

1. Habiba
2. Sumaya
3. Salma
4. Aminah
5. Marwa
6. Yasmeen

Section 4.2 below gives a very brief overview of each of the participants in terms of name, age country of origin, religious and cultural identity. This information reflects the participants' own self-descriptions, which I asked them for at the start of each interview.

In Section 4.3, the six accounts are presented in the order outlined above.



## 4.2 Research participants

At the start of each interview, I asked the participants to tell me their name, age, country of origin, ethnic or cultural identity and religion. Their responses are collated in Table 4.1 and 4.2 below. This information has not been independently checked or verified and there are also some differences in the information provided by the participants; Yasmeen did not feel she could easily identify her country of origin and Razia felt that being Muslim was an important part of her ethnic/cultural identity.

*Table 4.1 Research participants: London*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Country of origin</b>	<b>Ethnic or cultural identity</b>	<b>Religious identity</b>
Habiba	18	Bangladeshi (born and raised in Bangladesh but now lives in the UK)	Bangladeshi	Muslim
Sumaya	17	UK (born in the UK but parents born in Bangladesh)	British Bangladeshi Muslim	Muslim
Salma	18	UK (born in the UK but parents born in Bangladesh)	British	Muslim

*Table 4.2 Research participants: New York*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Country of origin</b>	<b>Ethnic or cultural identity</b>	<b>Religious identity</b>
Aminah	17	USA (born in the US but parents born in Morocco)	Arab American	Muslim
Marwa	17	Egyptian Moroccan American (born in the US but parents born in Egypt and Morocco)	Arab American	Muslim
Yasmeen	18	Born in Egypt (father born in Egypt, mother born in Syria)	Syrian Egyptian	Muslim

## 4.3 Individual accounts

### 4.3.1. Habiba

Habiba, who grew up in Bangladesh and moved to London with her family at the age of 15, was the only one of the UK participants who was not born and brought up in the UK. She described herself as a well-motivated and hard-working student who had always done well at school. Throughout Habiba's account, there was a tension between her apparent desire to present herself as someone who was a full member of the school community, able to '*fit in*' and be '*accepted*', and a recognition that she may continue to be perceived as foreign and '*different*'.

Habiba recalled feeling daunted by the process of moving to the UK and having to find a new school shortly before she was due to take her GCSE examinations, partly because she wanted to be a doctor and knew '*there was no way I could get into medicine without doing GCSEs*'. Habiba's motivation and willingness to work as hard as possible in order to achieve her ambitions were evident in her description of the anxiety she felt while waiting to find out whether she would secure a place in a UK secondary school:

*'I was quite down at that moment, at that time. And then I got into Hazel Grove, and then, and then that passion was back, no, I have to do this, again. And that drove me on and on, for the whole four months, to work through every minute of free time that I had, and get things done.'*

Habiba's comment that she was '*quite down*' while waiting to hear about whether or not she would find a school place in time, and the way her '*passion*' returned once she secured a place at Hazel Grove, suggests that the start of her time at Hazel Grove was accompanied by relief and renewed motivation. It seems that doing well at school is something important to Habiba, which she prioritises over other elements of her life, as she describes how she worked '*through every minute of free time that I had*'. This resonates with the 'hard-working migrant mentality' which was evident in the accounts of some of the other research participants and which seems to be linked to a desire to make the most of the opportunities on offer in the country to which one has migrated.

Habiba said she thought the main reason she was able to achieve well in school was her own motivation and willingness to work hard in order to reach her goals. She said that she had been helped to achieve well in school by her parents:

*'One of the main reasons was my parents. They've supported me throughout every step of the way, not in terms of tutoring me as such, but just always being there with the support and just always saying that, you know what, you'll get it done.'*

Habiba presents her family as supportive, not in terms of their ability to help her academically but in their general support and encouragement of her desire to do well at school. This is in keeping with the accounts of the other research participants, who all presented their families as being supportive of their education. Habiba also said that '*support from my teachers*' was particularly important, as someone new to the school and to the UK education system:

*'I think the school helped a lot. I mean, without the support I got from all the teachers, and everyone was really understanding, and I had, um, I spent a lot of time one to one with the teachers, so that they could help me, um, get into the flow of things here.'*

It seems that Habiba sees herself as someone in need of additional '*help*' and '*support*' who is grateful for the '*understanding*' shown by the school and her teachers and their willingness to provide extra guidance as she adjusted to the UK education system.

Habiba did not report being on the receiving end of negative attitudes from her teachers; she said she did not feel she was at all disadvantaged at school as a result of being Bangladeshi and Muslim. She also did not identify any issues in relation to the appropriateness of the curriculum and said that she was happy with the opportunities she had been given to develop her knowledge in a range of different subject areas:

*'one of the A\*s I got was in Citizenship, and it's not something I did in Bangladesh. And Citizenship, in GCSE, it's all about Great Britain, British government, politics, that kind of thing, and I've never done it, so I was quite pleased with that, that was one of my biggest successes I would say!'*

Habiba appears to view the requirement to study '*Citizenship*' in a positive way, despite the fact that she had only recently arrived in the UK and did not know a great deal about '*British government, politics, that kind of thing*'. Her pride

seems to stem from the fact that she was able to achieve so well in a subject which was not familiar and which she started studying only a few months before the exam.

Habiba also said that her experience at Hazel Grove had helped her to develop her confidence and self-belief. This seemed to stem partly from the extent to which she felt accepted by other students, who she said '*were really welcoming*' and '*helped me out with every single aspect*'. As a result, she said, she had become more confident and self-assured:

*'I wasn't as confident with myself or who I am. But now I definitely think that, in order to fit in, I wouldn't have to change myself. And I'm gonna leave the school quite confident that, no, I'm my own person, and this is how I'm gonna be, so yeah I'm quite confident about that.'*

The extent to which Habiba was apparently able to '*fit in*' so smoothly at Hazel Grove can be partly explained by the fact that the vast majority of other students are also young Muslim women of Bangladeshi heritage. It does not seem as if she experienced the kind of discrimination which Espiritu (2003) describes new arrivals encountering from second and third generation migrants, perhaps because, having grown up in Dhaka and attended a private English-medium school, she does not fit the '*FOB, fresh-off-the-boat type of stereotype*' (Espiritu, 2003: 184).

As relatively recent migrants, it is clear that Habiba's family are still undergoing some of the turmoil and disruption associated with the process of migration, with her father forced to travel regularly '*in and out of the country*' because he does not have British citizenship or a permanent visa.:

*'the last two years my dad's been in and out of the country, because of visas and him not being a British citizen, so at times it's been quite hard for me and my mum, especially after having come from a place like Bangladesh where you've got maids, where you've got a car, where you've got a chauffeur to drive you around, and you don't have to worry about getting to places that much. Here, we have to share out the responsibilities of getting my sister to school, bringing her back, and, um, helping around the house. So it's been adjustment in that as well.'*

Habiba's account of the '*adjustment*' process also emphasizes the extent to which moving to the UK has been difficult for her family because of the change

in their lifestyle. While the other research participants tended to compare their standard of living in the UK or US favourably with the countries from which their families had migrated, Habiba talks instead about finding it difficult to adjust to a lifestyle which does not involve having *'maids'* or *'a chauffeur'* and which requires the family to *'share out the responsibilities'* for household chores. She also said she hoped in the future to be successful, to ensure she could achieve *'stability and security'* for her family.

Habiba made it clear, however, that she enjoyed living in London and believed she would face fewer difficulties in terms of settling down and being part of a community in London than in Bangladesh:

*'it's much easier to settle down, I think, in here, and people are more accepting of what you are based on who you are and your work, rather than where you live, how big your house is, what you look like.'*

Habiba did not express any particular affiliation to the UK but seemed to feel loyalty and belonging to *'London'* as a city. Even though she said she believed there was *'definitely'* a significant amount of Islamophobia in the city, she evidently still thought of it as a place where she would be more likely to find acceptance than in Bangladesh, where people, she said, are judged on *'where you live, how big your house is, what you look like'*. She said that she loved living in London and that she had found it relatively easy to fit in without feeling like an outsider:

*'Nobody's had a reaction where, oh, ok, you're different, or you're this, you're that. Everyone just judges you on your work, and I think that's why I love London. People don't do that, even in Bangladesh, they judge you a lot about what you wear, where you live, what school you go to.'*

This implies that it is important to Habiba to fit in, rather than being seen as *'different'*, which is in keeping with her earlier comments about the importance of *'fitting in'* at school. Her emphasis on the importance of being judged *'on your work'* and according to her achievements rather than in relation to *'what you wear, where you live, what school you go to'*, is in keeping with the motivation and ambition she expressed elsewhere in the interview. Her positive view about the extent to which this is possible in London may reflect the fact that the area where she lives is particularly multicultural, with a large Bangladeshi population,

where she may have found it easier to *'fit in'* than she would have done elsewhere.

Although Habiba said she believed she was fortunate to be living in London, she also said she had encountered prejudice and discrimination, giving several examples of times she felt people reacted to her in a negative way because of her visible identification as a young Muslim woman:

*'recently we went on a bus, and there was quite a few of us wearing hijabs and jilbabs and all of that. And I think we sat at the back, and then people just moved away (...) I think because there was quite a lot of us (...) I mean, respect to them, I guess they just didn't feel comfortable.'*

Habiba does not express anger or injustice about these incidents; she went on to say that she felt she could understand why people sometimes responded in a negative way to things they perceived as different and that she believed it was partly a question of how one chose to react to particular incidents, with some people choosing to *'make a big deal out of it'*. There is, nevertheless, a tension between Habiba's account of this incident and her earlier claim that she has not been *'judged'* or seen as *'different'*. It seems she has chosen to present her experiences of living in London in a positive way, despite the difficult situations she had encountered, perhaps to emphasize the extent to which she is an insider who does *'fit in'* in the city.

Habiba said that religious faith and practice, including wearing the *hijab*, were important elements of her life which helped to define her as a person:

*'I think that religion is definitely one of the most important factors in me knowing who I am, and me being accepting of other people. (...) it's one of the main factors of my life, and I would be, I would probably be a completely different person, and not as confident, were it not for my religion.'*

It seems Habiba believes her affiliation to Islam has contributed to her self-knowledge, self-confidence and self-belief, as well as to her ability to be *'accepting of other people'*. This contrasts with common perceptions of religious faith, which tend not to emphasize the extent to which affiliation to a particular religion can lead to greater understanding or acceptance of others.

Habiba went on to explain that she knew religion wasn't often perceived this way, since *'people think that religion is what, you know, drives the barrier'*, but that she nevertheless believed her Islamic faith had *'made me more accepting of people'*:

*'it's made me more accepting of different lifestyles and things. Because we read those stories of the scholars and all of them, they've never shunned people based on their lifestyle, they've always been quite accepting. I think this aspect of my religion is often overlooked, and I think that's one of the things that I want to project, that, look, you don't, just because you're Muslim, or just because your religion defines who you are, doesn't mean you're gonna, I don't know, be, er, intolerant of other people.'*

Habiba's religious faith seems to be based, to some extent, on her reading of scripture, as she refers to *'stories of the scholars'* who have *'always been quite accepting'*. She did not elaborate on this reference to *'scholars'* or the thought process she had gone through in drawing these conclusions and I did not have a chance to press her further. Her comment that she wants to *'project'* this element of her religion suggests that, like several of the other research participants, she feels defensive and protective about Islam. This resonates with Ahmed's (2009) argument that young Muslims living in the West have, in the years following 9/11, become more conscious of the extent to which they are under scrutiny amongst the wider community.

Habiba said she had not always been such an observant Muslim and that she had gone through *'a process of change'* during her early teenage years, as Islam gradually became more important to her and she became more observant of Islamic cultural and religious practices, including a more conservative style of dress :

*'I wasn't always like this (...) The hijab, and the, and all of that, it changed. There was a process of change. I was just like a normal person, who would probably just pray and fast, and that was about as far as it went in terms of religion. And then every little good thing that you did, it was just ok, because it's a good thing, so I do it. But then there was a whole process of change.'*

This *'process of change'* seems to have involved not only a change in her appearance but also a change in her lifestyle and way of thinking. She describes this using the passive voice, suggesting it was something that happened to her without her control. It is not clear where the impetus for this change came from,

as she did not given any further explanation, but the result seems to have been that she became increasingly committed to Islamic religious practices. Her comment that she changed at this point from being 'a *normal person*' into something else, suggests that she believes she may not now be perceived as entirely 'normal'.

Although it was not clear where the stimulus for this change originated, Habiba had evidently undertaken a substantial amount of thinking and reading about elements of Islamic religion and culture. She said she believed it was important to distinguish culture from religion, since some rules or practices have come to be seen as 'Islamic' but are simply a legacy of the religion's roots in particular cultural contexts:

*'some parts, like keeping the beard and all of that, that's part of, like, an identity...like the Jews wear, (...) then you have Indians, and you have the Punjabis, the Sikhs, wearing the turban and all that, it's a bit like that. And then, in terms of, um, the punishments, you know, all of that. What people fail to recognise is that there was a whole cultural history behind the time that these laws were established, and yes, some of these laws still exist and, but, I don't know, it was a different situation then and it's a different situation now.'*

Habiba's desire to defend Islam is evident in her reference to the way in which, she says, 'people fail to recognise' the extent to which some laws and customs have been shaped by 'cultural history' rather than rooted in a religious text or tradition. Her uncertainty about these issues, however, is reflected in the caveats 'I don't know', 'all of that', 'it's a bit like that'.

Habiba went on to say that she believed it was important for communities to adapt to their current situations or circumstances, rather than continuing to follow outdated rules or traditions:

*'I shouldn't be saying this, because we believe that it's kind of a universal thing, but I think the whole point is we have to adjust, we have to take out, because some things are quite literal, so we have to take the meaning out, and then use that to govern society at times.'*

Habiba's comment 'I shouldn't be saying this' suggests she is aware of the potentially controversial nature of the views she is expressing here, in relation to the extent to which it is necessary to 'adjust' rather than adhering to practices which may have become outdated or irrelevant. Her use of the word 'shouldn't'



seems to reflect her awareness of the way in which such views might be perceived by more conservative members of the Bangladeshi Muslim community in which she lives. It seems as if she has not completely come to terms with the tension between those who believe the rules set out in the *Qur'an* are '*universal*' and those who argue it is necessary to '*take the meaning out*' in order to adapt to different circumstances.

A strong sense of aspiration and ambition, and confidence in her ability to achieve her goals, was evident in Habiba's account of her intended future career. Her ambition to be a doctor, she said, stemmed partly from her own experience of spending time in hospital as a young child, as well as a desire to follow in the footsteps of her grandfather, who was a doctor in Bangladesh:

*'I had nephritis as a kid, so even as I was growing up, I had to see doctors quite regularly. So I just liked the environment. I remember this one doctor, he was an army general as well, and he always gave me lollipops, he always used to make me smile, and I think that was one of the factors that, I don't know, I just wanted to be in that place, even when I didn't know what a doctor did.'*

Habiba said that, having wanted to be a doctor since she was a child, she had '*never had too much of a doubt*' in her own abilities, because she knew what she wanted to achieve, was willing to work as hard as it would take and knew she could work well under pressure. This positive belief in her own abilities had evidently remained, even though she was not successful in applying to study medicine at her first attempt:

*'I've always wanted to be a doctor and I've always been confident, but I got into bio-medicine, I didn't get into medicine (...) I'm quite happy with that degree as well. After I finish that, I'm going to have a good look at whether I want to go, to do a fast-track conversion course into medicine, or if I want to go into research.'*

Habiba seems both confident in her ability to achieve her ambition and resilient enough to devise an alternative plan, despite some initial setbacks.

Habiba emphasized her desire to mix with a wide group of people from '*diverse*' backgrounds and communities at university; she said she did not want to stick with people similar to herself but to mix with people from different backgrounds. She said she thought her university experience might be '*a bit different*' from the norm, because she would not be drinking alcohol or having relationships with

boys, but also said she did not believe that her identity as an observant Muslim should have a negative impact on her ability to mix with a wide range of people:

*'there's no barrier to being friends with people(...) I mean, it's a lifestyle, they can have whatever lifestyle they want, and I can have whatever lifestyle I want. If we can be friends, I'll be, like, I don't really see that as a big issue. It's all about the person themselves, what kind of a person they are. Now obviously they, um, I don't know, but I wouldn't basically judge that character on their drinking or partying.'*

Although Habiba says she does not believe there should be a barrier between people from different cultural or religious heritage backgrounds, she is evidently aware that, as a young Muslim woman who wears the *hijab* and does not drink alcohol, she may stand out and be the subject of curiosity from others.

Habiba was conscious that she might be seen as a spokesperson or ambassador for her religion and seemed to see this mainly as a positive thing which would give her the opportunity to break down barriers:

*'cause that way people can come to me and ask me questions, and I can say, 'look I'm just a normal person like anybody else'. In that way, I want it to be slightly different, if it makes sense*

There is a tension here between Habiba's desire to be seen as a '*normal person*' and her awareness that being '*slightly different*' might help her to break down barriers. It seems she is still in the process of working out what it means to be a young Muslim woman living in the UK and interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds. She does not seem to have settled the question of whether or not it is a good thing to be seen as '*different*' or '*other*'.

### 4.3.2 Sumaya

At the time of our interview, Sumaya was 17 years old and in the second year of Sixth Form at Hazel Grove School. Her parents were born in Bangladesh, while she was born in east London and attended primary school in the local area.

Sumaya presented herself as someone whose educational experiences had been shaped by her identity as a young Muslim woman in both positive and negative ways. She also presented herself as someone with an academic and scholarly understanding of her situation; her account was inflected with sociological terms and phrases, which Sumaya said she had learned from studying A-level Sociology. She said she had experienced '*Islamophobia*' on a regular basis and believed that growing up Muslim in London is '*probably more challenging than it is for any other group*', particularly since the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks, which led to increased hostility towards Muslims.

Sumaya emphasized the '*supportive*' role her family had played in helping her to succeed at school; she said her family had taught her about the importance of education from an early age and that '*the values and importance they hold about education have transmitted onto me.*' She ascribed this partly to her father who, she said, was '*really strict when it came down to education*' and who '*would always remind my sisters that in order to be a great successful woman, hard work is required*'. She presented her family as being whole-heartedly supportive of every element of her life, including her education:

*'I am expected to study at home without being told to do so, we all sit together and share new things we have learnt nearly every day and have the opportunity to ask each other any questions we may have, we play games that help improve our general knowledge and vocabulary, they always share articles and videos with me about interesting talks and keep me updated with the latest on what's going on around the world. Everything they do is always beneficial and varied; they support and encourage me with education, career choices, religion, politics.'*

Sumaya seemed to find it important to make clear that she did not believe that her religious beliefs, or those of her parents, had led to any restrictions on her education. This, and the idealised portrait of her family which Sumaya presents

here, creates a contrast between her own home life and the common perception that South Asian or Muslim culture in general, and Muslim families in particular, are restrictive or oppressive for young women (Archer 2002, Connor et al 2004).

Sumaya presented her family and her faith as being key reasons for her ability to '*feel optimistic*' and '*maintain her participation and effort*' when, during Year 11, she had struggled to maintain her motivation and subsequently failed some important exams:

*'What had really changed for me, and where my participation and effort comes from, I would say, is from my family and my religion. Religion also played a massive part, as Islam expresses the importance of education; attainment of knowledge is a must for every Muslim. That is what had made me feel optimistic about doing well at school, because not only does education teach people how to make a living, it also teaches us how to make a life.'*

Although Sumaya emphasizes the extent to which her religious beliefs have helped her to do well at school, her explanation is slightly impersonal, referring to the way in which '*Islam expresses the importance of education*' and how '*that attainment of knowledge is a must for every Muslim*'. She demonstrated a practical appreciation of the benefits of education, when she said she was determined to do well in school '*in order to achieve a successful career and maintain a steady life, you need to have certain qualifications*'. In addition, later in the interview, she said that at the age of 16 she had '*decided to work harder only so I wouldn't have to feel the pain of a failing student again*'. Her engagement with school life has, it seems, also been affected by a desire to avoid the '*pain*' of failure.

Sumaya said she had been helped to succeed by the support and '*encouragement*' provided by her school, though she seemed torn between wanting to acknowledge this and also wanting to highlight the problems she had encountered at school. She talked about how the school had a strong sense of community, and how the '*learning mentors*' and '*after school or holiday classes*' had helped her to be organised and motivated. Her description of her relationship with one particular teacher, however, suggested things had not always been so positive:

*'I feel there has been trouble with the communication level between*

*me and a subject teacher of mine and it is evident that this has held me back. This is because it has created a miserable atmosphere during my lessons and, more importantly, has affected my learning as it is nearly impossible to interpret the teaching of this specific teacher. Therefore, I feel on several occasions that I have been denied the knowledge needed to succeed.'*

Sumaya evidently believes this teacher is responsible for failing to achieve the right '*communication level*' and creating a '*miserable atmosphere*' within the classroom, which had a negative effect both on her experience of lessons and on her learning. Her use of the word '*denied*' implies that she feels she has a right to access the knowledge necessary for success and that this has been unfairly withheld from her. In this way, Sumaya depicts herself as the victim of this teacher's inability to achieve the right '*communication level*'.

Sumaya's description of her relationships with other teachers at Hazel Grove also suggested that she had encountered difficulties in relation to teachers having '*negative assumptions*' or '*low expectations*' about her ability to succeed at school:

*'I have come across teachers in the school who have very low expectations of me and perceive me to be of a low ability. Whether this is because of my personality, background or my subject choices, it has held me back and I feel extremely disappointed. A study by Rosenthal and Jacobson, great sociologists, argue that labelling students leads to the self fulfilling prophecy, in which the label becomes reality. Although, in my case these labels have clearly not become reality, many times I have doubted myself and questioned my strength of will to succeed.'*

There is a tension here between Sumaya's suggestion that her ability to do well at school has been affected in a negative way by the '*low expectations*' of some of her teachers and her assertion that '*these labels have clearly not become reality*'. Her reference to the '*great sociologists*' Rosenthal and Jacobson suggests that she wants to make it completely clear that she is now a successful student studying A-level Sociology who has a theoretical and scholarly understanding of the issues. By presenting herself as being comfortable with this scholarly knowledge, Sumaya reinforces the sense of injustice she has created about the way teachers have had '*low expectations*' of her in the past. It is also possible that her perceptions of her own experiences have been influenced by her knowledge of these sociological theories.

Sumaya's comments do not suggest that she believes teachers' 'low expectations' are directly related her religious or ethnic identity, since she says they may have been caused by '*my personality, background or my subject choices*'. Later in the interview, however, she made a stronger connection between teachers' expectations and students' cultural or religious identities:

*'teachers have this perception that because of our culture and we are females, we must be young women who are disciplined and would never challenge authority. Maybe this thought comes from the ideology that Muslim men have control over Muslim women or Asians, and if we can accept that, then we must be disciplined to accept the demands of anyone. (...) And because there are many girls in the school who never question authority when they have every right to, teachers tend to use the defence of us being rude and disrespectful because we are the ones who speak up.'*

Sumaya appears to believe that there is a connection between teachers' perceptions of Islam, as a religion within which '*Muslim men have control over Muslim women*', and their expectation that students will be obedient and accepting of authority. Her comments suggest gender is also an important factor, since she says it is partly because they are '*females*' that teachers expect their students to be '*disciplined to accept the demands of anyone*'. Sumaya's description of the way in which teachers have fixed expectations of young Muslim women resonates with the findings of other research (e.g. Pichler 2009, Aziz 2012) which suggest that teachers tend to assume young Muslim students are more likely to be quiet, passive or obedient. As Shain (2003) argues, this can lead to a tendency for female students to be ignored or marginalised in classrooms 'because it is assumed they are industrious, hardworking and get on quietly with their work (Shain, 2003: 63).

In a school like Hazel Grove, where all the students are female and the majority are Muslim, it seems as if the classroom dynamics are slightly different from the kind of mixed environment which Shain seems to have in mind. Sumaya's comments suggest that, rather than being marginalised or ignored, the majority of students, who '*never question authority*', come to be seen as the norm. One potential implication, Sumaya suggests, is that students who participate in school life in a more active or vocal way will be the subject of negative labelling

by teachers, who assume this is a culturally inappropriate way for them to behave. Sumaya, on the other hand, seems proud to present herself as being amongst *'the ones who speak up'* and went on to express her frustration with the way in which, she said, this was often perceived negatively by teachers:

*'So, because we stand up for ourselves, for all the correct reasons, it must mean that we don't care about our education and are ignorant? When it is they, the education system, that has taught us to be confident and courageous, always stand up for yourself, don't let anyone put you down and make judgements, certain issues cannot be ignored, so do not let them slip away. Conflicting much?'*

Sumaya seems to be suggesting there is an element of hypocrisy about the way in which students are encouraged by *'the education system'* to be *'confident and courageous'*, while at the same time labelling students who *'stand up for ourselves'* in a negative way. She presents herself as someone who is willing to stand up for what she believes in *'for all the correct reasons'* and who has been unfairly labelled as a result. Her final rhetorical question *'Conflicting much?'* both conveys frustration and the impression that she is still in the process of developing her ability to express how she feels about these issues.

Despite the negative views of her teachers which she expressed in some parts of her interview, Sumaya said she hoped to become a teacher herself, partly in order to be a positive role model for other young Muslim women:

*'I have chosen to teach, simply because it is so rewarding; to be a part of the education system, shape the future generation and be a positive role model. Moreover, Islam expresses the significance of teaching others and helping them to gain knowledge as knowledge in Islam is vital and so as well having a career in something I know I will enjoy, I am also fulfilling my religious values.'*

Her comment that it is a *'rewarding'* thing to do and something that will enable her to *'shape the future generation'* is in keeping with common perceptions of the reasons why someone might choose to become a teacher. Sumaya also mentions her religious faith, suggesting an additional dimension to her choice of career, as she refers to being influenced by the importance Islam places on *'teaching others and helping them to gain knowledge'*. Like several of the other participants, it seems that her attitude towards education, as well as her desire to become a teacher, has been influenced by her religious beliefs.

Sumaya went on to say that she thought her identity as a Muslim might also lead to difficulties for her when working within a school community:

*'The whole issue about Muslims is extensive, and many people naturally like to discuss it, so sometimes between staff, it is only normal that there will be conflicts. Being head of year and assistant head are positions I have a high regard for, but feel promotion may be a problem, and that would be a big challenge preventing me from succeeding my goal. To even mention that this is what I want feels so awkward and I don't understand why. Maybe because of the fact that Muslims are portrayed in a negative way and this idea is so widespread, employers may feel I am not the ideal employee to represent such a position.'*

It is not clear what Sumaya means when she refers to '*the whole issue about Muslims*' but it seems she believes there may be a multitude of issues relating to Islam or Muslims discussed amongst colleagues within a school, which might mean she is more likely to encounter '*conflicts*' about these issues. She also evidently believes it may be difficult for her, as a Muslim, to gain promotion to a position of responsibility within a school, partly because of the negative way in which Muslims are portrayed in wider society, since she says that '*employers may feel I am not the ideal employee to represent such a position*'.

Sumaya said she believed there was a great deal of misunderstanding in the UK about Islam and that this had been created by the media, who '*portray Muslims negatively*', creating distorted perceptions of Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular.

*'We came across this documentary sharing a research done in 2008 on what ideas the media creates about Muslims, and 93% of participants from this research had said that the media misrepresented Islam and labelled the majority of Muslims as terrorists. (...). So why is it that news related to Muslims, specify the word Muslim and in cases of other criminals it does not specify religion? And then there's terrorism and suicidal attacks where again they would specify Muslims as terrorist on the news and for others they share only what had happened and where. Strange!'*

As well as referring explicitly to a documentary about research into '*ideas the media creates about Muslims*', Sumaya uses language drawn from her study of A-level Sociology about how Muslims are '*labelled*' and stereotyped to support her argument that the British media portrays Muslims in a biased way. It seems



as if she believes her comments will hold greater weight if they are supported by this kind of evidence, rather than referring only to her personal experiences.

Sumaya's own voice is more audible in the latter part of this extract, where she refers to '*terrorism*' and '*suicidal attacks*' and asks why these incidents are reported in such a way that the involvement of '*Muslims*' becomes the main focus. She went on to talk about issues about Islamic clothing, particularly in relation to women:

*'Dressing in Islamic clothing is also apparently offensive. But it's fine for nuns to cover up and this is because? We ourselves have to deal with terrible comments in the streets, a bunch of youths in the same bus as us shouting out 'there's a bomb on the bus, everyone jump off', and two middle aged men passing by saying they are going to bomb every mosque in the area. None of these comments are fair!'*

It is clear that Sumaya feels strongly about these issues and wants to draw attention to the inequality which she believes exists between perceptions of those who wear '*Islamic clothing*' and those who wear other kinds of religious dress such as '*nuns*'. Her use of the word '*apparently*' and the rhetorical question '*this is because?*' demonstrate her strength of feeling, while the comparison with '*nuns*' highlights the extent to which she perceives there to be a conflict between the way different religions and their associated forms of religious dress are perceived. Her reference to the negative comments she has encountered '*in the streets*' and on public transport in London make it clear that her feelings about these issues stem from personal experience; it seems that she perceives herself as a member of a marginalised group who are the collective target of prejudice and abuse from other members of the public.

Sumaya went on to say that she was aware of the extent to which, by wearing '*Islamic clothing*', young Muslim women make themselves more '*visible*' and therefore potentially the subject of negative perceptions:

*'it is different for young women who wear the hijab and abaya, which is the long loose clothing, because you're basically walking around saying 'I am a Muslim' and there's people out there who do not like that, at all. By wearing the hijab you become more visible and due to a lack of understanding about the hijab, we are perceived as oppressed, passive and unintelligent. Everywhere you go, you have people staring and you'd think that in view of the popularity of Muslims, portrayed in a negative way, people would get used to it'*

*already. But people are not staring because the hijab is unusual to them; they stare with disgust like we're assassins let loose'*

Sumaya is evidently aware of the way in which wearing the *hijab* makes Muslim women more 'visible' in their foreignness or difference and how it marks them out as 'the Other' (Said 1984). She is conscious, and resentful, of the extent to which women wearing it are often perceived by the general public as 'oppressed, passive and unintelligent'. It appears that she feels these negative perceptions stem from the kind of media-created misconceptions to which she referred earlier in the interview. As she says, the problem is not that the *hijab* is 'unusual' in London but that it has come to hold so many negative associations that women wearing it are seen not only as 'passive' or 'oppressed' but as 'assassins let loose'.

Sumaya's desire to explain and defend the religious and cultural practice of wearing the *hijab* and the role of women within Islam was evident in her comments about the way Muslim women are perceived in British society:

*'You also have the media and people against Muslims, who believe that the Muslim women are being oppressed because they must cover up and because this is not a duty upon men, they are to blame for this oppression. The Muslim women are being accused of being oppressed when they are happily following the principles of their religion and the Muslim men equally suffer by being accused of forcing the women when they are doing a perfect job of looking after the Muslim women in our community.'*

It seems that Sumaya is keen to address the ignorance and misunderstanding about Islam which she believes is present in British society and which she believes is caused by 'the media and people against Muslims'. Her statement that Muslim men are 'doing a perfect job' suggests that she also feels it is important to contradict existing negative perceptions of them.

Sumaya went on to say that she believed it was hypocritical for Islam to be judged in a negative way for having distinct gender roles:

*'Let's just forget about Muslim women and men, and think about all men and women in society. There are many families in the UK, Muslim or non-Muslim, white, black, Asian, Christian, Jew, who accept these roles as natural. But why is it that if a Muslim woman chooses to be a housewife, automatically the Muslim men are accused of locking their wives at home?'*

The fact that Sumaya's first priority here is to defend her religious and cultural beliefs seems to make it impossible for her to acknowledge any of the potential complexities of the argument she is making, such as whether particular gender roles are '*natural*' or if all Muslim women are '*happily following the principles of their religion*'. There is a tension here with the sociological theories and principles she refers to elsewhere in her interview, which emphasize the extent to which social roles are socially constructed rather than fixed or '*natural*', and with her own future career plans, which involve becoming a teacher rather than a '*housewife*'.

Sumaya said she was planning to go to university but believed it might be difficult for her to fit in:

*'For us, there are a lot more other difficulties that people from other places may not face. We come from a school and live in an area surrounded by only female peers at school, and majority Asians, and there's also language and beliefs which will certainly create a culture clash and many conflicts.(...) Leaving school and starting again somewhere completely different is scary and there's a lot to be afraid of. I may come across naive and judgemental individuals who, instead of researching themselves in order to have the right to share a view, would rather believe the myths the media have created about Muslims'*

Sumaya evidently believes that, as a young Bangladeshi Muslim woman from east London, she is likely to encounter more difficulties than other young people, and that she thinks she will be seen as '*different*' from other students. She evidently feels apprehensive about the prospect of leaving her school and moving to university, where she is more likely to encounter individuals with '*naive and judgemental*' views about Islam. She also said, however, that she thought it was likely to be only a minority of other students who would treat her in a negative way.

### 4.3.3 Salma

Salma was 18 years old and had just completed her final year in the Sixth Form at Hazel Grove School. She was born in east London, while her parents were born and brought up in Bangladesh. She described herself as British and Muslim, though she said she was *'not really religious'*. Salma presented herself as someone who was seen as *'different'* and *'weird'* by other students at Hazel Grove because she did not conform to their expectations of how a young Bangladeshi woman should look or behave. She expressed negative feelings about the Bangladeshi community and presented herself as someone who was keen to integrate with wider society, in contrast with other students at Hazel Grove whom she described as *'Bengalified'*.

Salma said she believed she was *'different'* from other students at Hazel Grove and that she was perceived as *'weird'* because she didn't usually wear the *hijab* or adhere to other Islamic practices. She also said she had been on the receiving end of criticism from other students about her clothing:

*'there was one girl, and she was like, 'whatever you wear', because she wears the burka, she says that 'whatever you wear, like, skinny jeans and stuff, you shouldn't be wearing that'.'*

In contrast with some of the other research participants, it seems Salma is singled out for criticism because she does not wear the *hijab*, rather than because she does. It appears that at Hazel Grove, where the vast majority of the students are Bangladeshi and Muslim, students are perceived as *'different'* if they do not follow Islamic religious and cultural practices, rather than if they do.

Salma said she also faced pressure from other students to conform to a particular set of expectations in terms of religious observance:

*'all the girls would be talking about the prophet (...) they talk about how you should pray and things, like, the punishments, and that scares me a lot, even though I watch, like, horror films and stuff. They really, like, preach, and they say stuff, like, you should wear the scarf and stuff'*

Her comment that the other students *'talk about how you should pray'* and *'say stuff, like, you should wear the scarf and stuff'*, suggests they are not only

talking about religion but also putting pressure on each other to conform to particular religious and cultural practices.

Salma presented herself as different and separate from these other students, making it clear that she did not feel comfortable with their conversations. She said she thought these students were narrow-minded and *'hypocritical'*, because of the extent to which they create the outward appearance of piety but do not behave in a way that is in keeping with these religious messages:

*'people preach a lot. But it's like, they just pray, and they don't understand it or think about it. Every time they're like, 'don't judge, don't judge', but every single person who wears these headscarves and, like, the outfit, they're always judging people, they sit there and judge all of us.'*

It is clear that Salma has felt *'judged'* by other students at Hazel Grove. It also seems as if she wants to distance herself from them and from the religious and cultural practices they follow, rather than seeing these things as integral to her own identity.

Salma's account suggested that it was the hypocrisy of these students' behaviour which she found particularly problematic. She went on to mention an aunt who, she said, is at university and often asks if they can go out together but doesn't like Salma to accompany her unless she wears the *hijab*:

*'she always asks me to go out with her, but cause I don't wear the scarf, and I dress like this...she wears the whole lot, but then she has the most makeup on her! I don't understand, like you're saying you don't want to attract attention by wearing that, but like everyone's looking at your face.'*

It does not seem that Salma is opposed to the idea of wearing the *hijab* in principle but rather that she has a problem with those within her community who wear it hypocritically or without proper understanding of its meaning. This was reinforced by her description of another Sixth Form student who, she said, *'wears a really tight burka that shows off her figure'* which Salma said was pointless because *'you're supposed to be wearing it because you don't want to show off your figure'*.

Salma said that, in addition to the pressure they faced within school, there was also a great deal of pressure placed on young women within the Bangladeshi community to make sure their public profiles on the internet conformed to certain expectations:

*'Every time they do posts on Facebook and stuff, their statuses are all religious hadiths and stuff like that. It's so annoying! And they get, like, thirty thousand likes on it, but people don't understand what they're saying. It's so annoying. They think liking it makes them more religious.'*

It seems that there is considerable pressure on young Bangladeshi women at Hazel Grove to manage their public profiles within the realm of social media in a particular way, not only in terms of their own 'posts' and 'statuses' but also in their 'liking' of religious posts. Salma went on to say that she had had to 'hide' her own list of 'friends' on Facebook, because of the questioning she had faced from other students:

*'they're really narrow-minded and they want, it's like all your friends have to be Bengali. (...) Yeah, like if they see your Facebook friends list and you've got anyone who's not a Hazel Grove student, they'll be like oh who's that, who's that? And it's really annoying! That's why I hide my Facebook friends list, otherwise they question you about it and then they add them, to see who they are.'*

Salma was the only one of the research participants who talked in this way about the restrictions she faced as a result of pressure from 'narrow-minded' students within her own community. Her comments suggest she felt constrained by the level of scrutiny she faced from other young Bangladeshi women, both within and outside of school. Her repetition of the word 'annoying' implies that she finds this frustrating and is not sure what to do about it. In this way, her experience is not entirely different in character from those participants who faced criticism or harassment for their Arab or Muslim appearance. It does, however, demonstrate a very different way of thinking, since she is potentially marginalised and alienated because of her apparent rejection of the kind of cultural and religious practices which are common within the community where she lives, rather than her adherence to them. Salma's comments are, to some extent, in keeping with Shain's (2003) fifth category 'resistance against culture' (Shain, 2003: 56), though it seems that in this case Salma's resistance is not against culture *per se* but against those who try to impose cultural and religious practices on her.

Later in the interview, Salma said she was proud of her refusal to conform to the way everyone expected her to appear or behave. She said she believed she had the right to express herself by wearing *'weird clothes, different, like mismatching clothes'* or *'plimsolls, yeah, that aren't my size, that my brother got me'*, and that when other students looked at her strangely she would respond *'yes, what's your problem?'* This conveys both defiance and defensiveness, as if she has often had to explain or defend herself. Although she said *'I don't care really'*, it was clear that Salma had been affected by the way she is perceived by other students. One result seemed to be that she had developed hostility towards Bangladeshi culture and Bengali people:

*'I really don't like Bengali people. 'Cause the Bengalis just don't change, all of them are going to have, like, one mindset. It's like, I mean, they're all the same, they'll all stereotype you, and white people, white people don't do it as much, they're really nice'*

Although Salma is of Bangladeshi heritage, she distances herself by referring to *'the Bengalis'* as if they are a separate group who are *'all the same'* with *'one mindset'*. The irony, of course, is that Salma herself could be perceived as evidence that this is not the case; it seems that she sees herself as being so different from the norm, that she does not even include herself within the category *'Bengali'*.

Salma said that, although she had found it challenging to feel accepted by other students at Hazel Grove, her teachers were *'very supportive'*. She said she didn't think there were any major problems with the way young Muslim women were treated by the teachers in her school, except that she felt the Bangladeshi teachers could be guilty of stereotyping students:

*'I like all the white teachers. I don't like the Bengali teachers (...)  
Bengali teachers stereotype you. I like some of the Bengali teachers,  
but I think some of the teachers stereotype you. Like one teacher, I  
think she thinks I'm a bit weird, because I'm not very Bengali or more  
into religion, because people are obsessed'*

These comments again suggest that Salma feels alienated from her own cultural heritage, describing herself as *'not very Bengali'*. It seems as if religion and culture have become so intertwined that the fact Salma is not *'more into religion'* means that she feels less of an affiliation with Bangladeshi culture and

identity.

Salma was particularly dismissive of the beliefs held by some members of the Bangladeshi community relating to the expectations for young women's appearance and behaviour. For example, she spoke with scorn about the belief that it is not appropriate for young women to have short hair, '*because you have to have long hair in case you die, because if you die you have to cover yourself with your hair.*' Salma was dismissive of this cultural belief, commenting that '*you wouldn't be bothered about covering yourself if you're dead!*' She presents herself as making decisions based on reason or logic, rather than superstition; she went on to say that she was glad her parents encouraged her to experience the world, rather than worrying about superstitions and old wives' tales:

*'our parents encourage us to do other stuff. Like, our dad was encouraging us to take horse riding up yesterday, and if you tell other people that, they'll say you can't do that because you'll lose your virginity. I don't know where they get it from but loads of people say that.'*

Salma's tendency to question elements of Bangladeshi cultural traditions and beliefs appears to come from her parents, who have encouraged her to question beliefs like this, which lead to restrictions on young women's dress and behavior. It seems as if her father, in particular, has influenced her in this respect, in contrast to the women from her extended family.

It was clear that Salma's parents had had a strong influence on her religious and cultural beliefs and on her educational experiences. Like all of the research participants, Salma said that her parents placed a strong emphasis on the importance of doing well at school and were constantly encouraging her to work harder and to concentrate on her studies:

*'if it's not my mum it's my dad! They are just like, Salma, you need to revise. I can't sit at the table without my mum telling me to revise, and if she says it in front of my dad, we have to revise! If my dad, if I get in trouble for any old thing, my dad will be like, go upstairs and revise and do some work, do something, be productive!'*

It seems that both of Salma's parents believe in the value of education and are keen to encourage her to do well at school. Her account suggests this is something which is reinforced by both parents, although it seems as if her father



is the authority figure who is more likely to enforce the need for revision, as she refers to getting '*in trouble*' with her dad and says he often tells her to '*go upstairs and do some work*'.

Salma's account also suggested that this encouragement from her parents was not always entirely helpful, because it meant that she felt under a lot of additional pressure, which made it even harder to concentrate on her studies. This was exacerbated, she said, by the fact that her brother had done very well at school and that she felt like she could not live up to his example:

*'I have, like, pressure at home, because my older brother is, like, a genius, and then they expect me to get exactly the same grades or higher, because I'm a girl, because girls do better than boys really, and he does really well, so they kind of expect me to get really good grades.'*

Salma's comment that her parents expect her to get '*exactly the same grades*' as her brother contrasts with common perceptions that Muslim parents do not expect their daughters to achieve well academically. It is clear that Salma's parents place a strong emphasis on the importance of her achieving well in her exams and it also seems they are aware of the growing achievement gap between girls and boys within the UK education system.

Salma said she thought her parents' emphasis on the importance of education came partly from their religious beliefs, '*because the Qur'an actually also says you must educate yourself!*' This was clearly, however, only part of the story, since Salma also said she believed there were '*some families where they put religion a bit too much into education*'. Her account also suggested that her parents' views about the value of education were influenced by factors other than religion, including a desire for their children to make better lives for themselves:

*'Because they think that if we don't do well in school it will be harder for us in later life, it will be really hard. For my dad, right, he doesn't want us to be dumb and not be able to speak in front of someone educated. And he wants people to respect us and his family, yeah, so I think everything comes into it.'*

It seems that Salma's father's desire for his children to achieve well in school stems not only from religious values or beliefs but also from an awareness of the importance of education in terms of improving future life prospects. Salma

said she thought this frame of mind stemmed partly from the fact that her father had not had much access to education himself and wanted his children to have better opportunities. She said that her family was *'really educated, my dad's side especially'*, but that he had not had access to formal education when he was younger and had to teach himself.

Salma's reference to *'respect'* suggests that her father places importance on the way his children are judged by other people, since she says he wants to ensure they can *'speak in front of someone educated'*. It seems as if he is concerned about creating, or maintaining, a certain set of appearances; she says he *'wants people to respect us and his family'* and ensuring his children are well-educated is an important part of this. This was also reflected in Salma's description of her own father's education:

*'He's one of those people who knows everything about everything. He taught himself, and he says, yeah, that he'll be able to talk to anyone without them looking down, because, and he watches the news a lot, and he reads books, yeah.'*

Salma's description of her father as someone who *'knows everything about everything'* implies that she respects and looks up to him. Salma's comment that her father feels it is important to *'be able to talk to anyone without them looking down'* communicates both pride and insecurity, as if he is aware that he may be perceived as inferior because he lacks a formal education.

The extent to which Salma's parents, and particularly her father, have been influenced by pressure from the local community was also evident in her account of the reason she was currently wearing the *hijab*. She said her parents had previously discouraged her and her sister from wearing it, despite the fact that they were both keen, when younger, to put it on:

*'I wore it in Year 9 because, I, because I wanted to, I don't know why. And then my dad, like, every time I used to go out wearing it, he used to just look at me and whisper to my mum, so then I just took it off. They used to be, like, your head is gonna get very hot under there! Yeah, like it's not hygienic and stuff like that..., especially if you're wearing it on a hot day! Because in the summer I used to really want to wear it, and they used to be like, why you are you wearing a headscarf? So then we just stopped wearing it and then we never wore it.'*

It is clear that, although they did not explicitly forbid her from wearing the *hijab*, Salma's parents discouraged her from adhering to a practice which many Muslims see as a religious obligation. She said her initial reason for wanting to wear it was that *'it was cool in Year 8, because everyone in the school was wearing it'*. Her parents, on the other hand, emphasized the practical reasons why it might not be a good idea, including the suggestion that *'it's not hygienic'* and that it would *'get very hot'* in summer. It seems as if her father, in particular, was an influence on her decision to stop wearing it, as she says he used to *'just look at me and whisper to my mum'*.

In a similar way, Salma said that her parents had discouraged her and her sister from fasting during *Ramadan*, despite pressure from other students at Hazel Grove and people in the local community:

*'Our parents don't allow us to fast because, in case our weight went really down, they really want us to be really healthy. (...)  
Yeah, people find it so awkward that our parents don't let us fast.  
Because people go 'are you fasting?' because even the little ones are fasting, everyone fasts, but then our parents don't let me because of weight issues and it's not only that, they never want me to fast, they're just like, not that bothered'*

It is clear that, although Salma feels under pressure to conform to certain religious and cultural practices, her primary allegiance is to her own immediate family and the guidance she has received from her parents. Her parents' primary concern, it seems, is for Salma to be *'really healthy'* rather than the need for her to adhere to particular religious practices. Her comment that her parents are *'just, like, not that bothered'*, suggests they do not, in general, place a strong emphasis on adherence to religious practices such as the *Ramadan* fast. This seems to come particularly from her father, who she said *'doesn't believe in all of that, he thinks you don't really have to pray, pray and all that stuff'*.

Salma's account suggested that, although she felt under pressure when everyone else at school was fasting, she thought it was a good thing that her parents didn't make her follow these practices for the sake of it, and appreciated the way they encouraged her to think for herself. In relation to the *Ramadan* fast, she said her father had explained that it was not necessarily in itself a good

thing:

*'My dad would say, we fast because it reminds us of other people in the world who are starving, and so, my dad says, yeah, that suffering yourself won't help them, if you don't, if you give them some money, that would help them out, but just because you're fasting doesn't mean you're necessarily thinking of them'*

Salma's father has clearly encouraged her to think logically about the potential impact of the *Ramadan* fast and to question the extent to which it is likely to achieve its stated objectives, rather than questioning the principle or teaching that lies behind it. As with the question of wearing the *hijab*, it seems that her parents' approach is to give practical and logical reasons why something might not be healthy or effective. Her father has evidently played a key role in influencing Salma's perceptions about religious practices, encouraging her to think pragmatically about them rather than expecting her to adhere without question to particular sets of instructions or behaviours.

Salma's account also suggested, however, that her father was sometimes influenced by pressure from the local community and that this led him to encourage his daughters to behave in a particular way or to follow certain religious practices. At the time of our interview, for example, Salma was wearing the *hijab* and said she had recently started wearing it because of the pressure from other members of the community for her to wear it during *Ramadan*, which had led her father to change his mind about whether or not she should wear it:

*'He had just started to be religious at the beginning of Ramadan, because, I think, because of what other people were saying, stuff about us not wearing the scarves, you know. I think cousins and people that see us on the street. (...) Yeah, I'm never going to wear it again, I've told them I'm not going to wear it during university, when I'm older!'*

Salma appears to believe that her father has changed his mind about whether or not it is a good idea for her to wear the *hijab* based on pressure from '*cousins and people that see us on the street*'. Although he had discouraged her from wearing the *hijab* when she was younger, he said, he had now encouraged her to wear it because of '*what other people were saying*'. She said she found this difficult to understand or accept:

*'Yeah, but then he kind of changes, like that, when he hears other people, because he doesn't want us, like, even though he knows*

*we're good, other people will think, oh yeah, they don't wear scarves and the way they dress. I think that's so stupid!*

Salma's comment '*I think that's so stupid*' suggests that she finds it difficult to understand when her father succumbs to external pressure in this way. It is clear, however, that she has followed his guidance, in terms of agreeing to wear the *hijab* during *Ramadan*, though she did say that she has told her parents she is '*not going to wear it during university, when I'm older!*'

Salma said that one reason she was looking forward to going to university was because she wanted to have the chance to mix with a wider range of different people from different places. This was in keeping with her emphasis throughout her account of her desire to mix with people outside the Bangladeshi community and to '*fit in*' with mainstream society. She said she had recently been on a school field trip with the Geography department, where she made friends with different people from different places, including boys from a mixed school in south London. She says they '*bonded and made friends*' and she seemed proud of the fact that, she said, '*one of my friends asked me if I was Bengali, he didn't even know!*' She says she thinks they could bond more easily because she didn't look like '*a typical Bengali girl*' with '*this kind of east London look*', so there wasn't as much of a barrier between them as there otherwise would have been. It is clear that Salma is still struggling to make sense of what it means to be a young Muslim Bangladeshi woman who lives in London and does not perceive herself as '*very religious*'.

#### 4.3.4. Aminah

Aminah, who was seventeen years old at the time of our interview, was born in America to parents who were both born and brought up in Morocco. Aminah presented herself as a serious, committed and high-achieving student who loved school and valued the importance of education. She described herself as Arab, American and Muslim, insisting that *'these cultures without a choice have to come together because it's who I am'*. Her account suggested, however, that there was a significant amount of tension between different elements of Aminah's identity, as she struggled to make sense of what it meant to be an *'Arab'* and an *'American'*.

Aminah said that her strong sense of the value of education came from her parents, who migrated to the US partly because of their desire to *'give their children the education they deserve'*. She said she believed the opportunities on offer in the US were better than those available in Morocco, which seemed mainly based on her perception of future employment and economic opportunities:

*'Even in Morocco, although there's great education, there's no opportunity (...) once they get their PhD, they do nothing with that and they have nowhere to go. You know, they're selling doughnuts in the corner or something. For example, my aunt, she has a PhD in physics but at this time she's not working, she sits at home. In the United States, someone who has a PhD in physics would never be sitting at home doing nothing, waking up to make bread and stuff, that would never happen.'*

A strong sense of ambition and aspiration is evident here, as Aminah compares the opportunities available to PhD graduates in Morocco with those on offer in the US. There is also a hint of her awareness of the role of gender in determining future opportunities, as she depicts her aunt as being limited to traditionally female tasks such as *'waking up to bake bread'*. There is also a tension here between Aminah's belief in the superiority of some elements of US society and her loyalty to Morocco.

Aminah's description of her early educational experiences, during which she attended an Islamic pre-school, suggested this was a formative experience which

shaped her views both about education and about religion. She described her pre-school education as a '*wonderful*' and '*fun*' experience which '*was just like the beginning of learning about Islam*'. It was clear that religious instruction, and induction into a particular religious, cultural and linguistic community, was a key element of Aminah's early education. She said she felt grateful that she had the opportunity to learn about Islam, including learning elements of Arabic, at a young age:

*'your curriculum was based on learning Islam and learning Arabic and English at the same time, which means that at a young age religion was a big part of my life. But if I went to a public school, for example, I would not be learning, you know, Arabic or learning about Eden, Islam.'*

Aminah seems to be aware of the extent to which her own early schooling was different from the typical American public school experience, which would be less likely to have such an emphasis on religious instruction. Her comments emphasize the positive elements of this experience and she does not appear to question the extent to which religious instruction was central to her early education. She went on to say that attending an Islamic pre-school helped her to develop a positive relationship with God:

*'I used to all the time talk to God, I thought of God as my friend, and until this day I do think of God as my friend and always having my back and everything. So that was something that was enforced at a very young age.'*

Although Aminah presents the religious element of her early education in a positive light, as something which helped her develop a close affiliation with her religious faith, her use of the word '*enforced*' implies that she is aware, on some level, that her early induction into Islam during pre-school was not something over which she had control and which could be perceived as having been imposed on her.

Aminah's description of her pre-school experiences suggests there was a strong connection between learning about Islam and learning Arabic, which is not surprising given the strong emphasis within Islam on the importance of studying Arabic, the '*language of revelation*' (Bouzenita, 2008: 3). She recalled experiencing difficulties in transitioning from her Islamic pre-school to her mainstream public elementary school, since she was used to speaking three languages in-

terchangeably at home and at pre-school:

*'I would use English and Arabic in the class ... I would even try some French sometimes, because that was, at home, I used to speak English, Arabic and French, or all three, so I would just like, jumble them up together and make it like my own language, when I went to school, so the teachers always wondered sometimes what I'm saying (...) my mom had to explain that not everyone speaks Arabic and not everyone speaks French, and English is the language of the United States.'*

It seems that the process of learning to compartmentalize these three different languages was not automatic but had to be made explicit through Aminah's mother's explanation that *'not everyone speaks Arabic'* and that *'English is the language of the United States'*. Aminah had to learn to separate and compartmentalise her different languages, and therefore elements of her culture and identity, in order to succeed in an American public school where speaking English was the expected norm.

This division of languages has implications for Aminah's perception of different elements of her cultural and linguistic heritage, since the language associated with schooling is most likely to be perceived as the language of authority, privilege and status (May, 2012: 161). In keeping with her presentation of herself throughout the interview as a successful and resilient student, however, Aminah said she felt the transition to a monolingual environment was not difficult for her, because she had learned at a young age how to use different languages for different purposes:

*'It wasn't really hard, because Arabic was taught to me every Saturday and Sunday and Friday in the mosque, and then during school, you know, as homework, I would read books (...) Everything would be in English, so I knew that the school, and I knew that Arabic was for, you know, the mosque, and at home, and talking my parents.'*

Aminah's comment that it *'wasn't really hard'* for her to learn when to use these different languages is not entirely in keeping with her previous comment that she used to *'jumble them all up'*. It is clear, however, that she has learned to connect particular languages with particular places and elements of her identity; whereas Arabic is used in the mosque, English is used at school and for reading books, while a mixture of English, French and Arabic is spoken at home with her parents.



A tension between Aminah's affiliation with Islam and her desire to integrate into the American school system was also evident in her account of her junior high and high school experiences. Aminah said she had often found herself feeling '*annoyed*' about the way in which Islamic history and culture were '*sidelined*' within the school curriculum. She talked, for example, about how she had been looking forward to studying the Islamic Golden Age:

*'The Golden Age - two days. Two days! And I was ready for the Golden Age, I kept asking 'when are we going to do the Golden Age?', because I was like, yeah, the Golden Age, I know so much, I'm going to be able to tell you guys everything about this because it's what I know.'* And she went through it as if it was nothing, as to take so many years, decades, and just put it into one little thing, and I took that as an offence.'

It appears that Aminah, having felt confident about her knowledge of Islamic history and culture and excited about the prospect of sharing this with other students, was disappointed and offended when her teacher spent only two days on the topic, '*as if it was nothing*'. She said she took this as '*an offence*' because it made her feel as if '*it's not worth being told about, it's not worth being taught to my fellow classmates*'. This reinforces the impression that Aminah feels a strong personal connection with Islamic history and culture and believes it should be included within the curriculum.

Aminah said she was '*really into history*' and proud of her knowledge of the Islamic Golden Age, which she believed to be an important and valuable part of the curriculum. When she realised her teacher did not share this belief, she says she took this very personally:

*'It's as if it's not worth being told about, it's not worth being taught to my fellow classmates, and it's not worth them knowing about what I believe to be great people. (...) if it's not being discussed, are you saying it's not important? And that's what was being passed to my mind, is she saying that I'm not important?'*

Aminah evidently feels offended by her teacher's failure to create sufficient time for Islamic history and culture within the curriculum, because of the implication that '*it's not worth them knowing about what I believe to be great people*'.

Aminah went on to say she had found it hard to develop a good relationship with this particular teacher or to feel comfortable in the class, because of her

ongoing feeling that Islamic history and culture, which was so closely associated with her own family and heritage, was *'not being discussed'*. Her rhetorical question *'is she saying that I'm not important'* makes it clear that she felt, as a result, as if she was not sufficiently valued or respected. It is clear that, for Aminah, the school curriculum is not simply an objectively determined set of knowledge or skills but something personal and political, which reflects the values and beliefs of those making choices about what should be included and excluded.

When I asked Aminah how she responded to this incident, she said she did not feel it was worth making any further complaint:

*'Of course, 100%, I said something about it! And she said, no it's just a very small history, so there's nothing much to be discussed. And I started telling her this and that, and knowing, but then, being a smart person, I realised that she makes my grade, so I was like, shut up because she's the one who's going to give me my report!'*

Aminah presents herself here as a sensible and intelligent student who is able to make reasonable decisions about how to interact with her teacher, choosing not to challenge her overtly. In doing so, she demonstrates a considerable amount of self-control, creating the impression that she has the skills to be able to successfully negotiate the school environment, despite her strong feelings about the problematic nature of her teachers' decisions.

Although Aminah said she had always considered herself to be American, she also said that, as she had grown older, she had felt increasingly different from other students in her school, gradually coming to realize that she was *'not the same as everyone else'*. She said it was in junior high school when these differences started to become more obvious:

*'that's when you started seeing people asking questions, like when you would come in and not eat for Ramadan, and it's not like they had a section of the people who were fasting. You sat with everyone else, and they would tell you, 'why are you not eating?', and you would be like, 'I'm fasting', and I would say, 'I'm fasting so I can see how the poor people feel', and they would be like, are you hungry?'*

Aminah's feeling of being different from other students seems to be connected with her adherence to Muslim religious practice, as her observance of the *Ramadan* fast identifies her visibly as different from the other students. The questioning Aminah faced from other students at this point seemed to stem from curiosity rather than hostility, though it does sound as if the other students' questions made her feel uncomfortable.

Later in the interview, however, it became clear that Aminah had been on the receiving end of teasing from other students during elementary and junior high school. She said she had been particularly offended by one student who used to refer to the *hijab* as a 'do-rag', the head-covering commonly associated with African-American rappers and gangsters:

*'there was this girl (...) she used to call the hijab a do-rag, a do-rag! And I used to take that to great offence. And I used to tell her, 'you know, Melanie, that's not a do-rag, that's a hijab, it's something holy'. And she would make fun of my name, and I would say, 'don't make fun of my name because it's making fun of my religion', and she would say, you know, they would start laughing and stuff.'*

Even though Aminah did not wear the *hijab* herself at the time, she clearly feels a strong personal connection with this Islamic practice and sees it as something she needs to defend and protect. Her comments also suggest the *hijab* is something she perceives as being closely associated with her own identity. This is in keeping with the strong affiliation with Islamic culture she demonstrated elsewhere in the interview and is again reinforced by her response that making fun of her name is the same as '*making fun of my religion*'.

Aminah's account did not suggest that she perceived any inherent conflict between Islamic religious practices and Western society. She said, instead, that she believed her adherence to the prayer ritual had helped her to develop the time management and organisational skills she needed to succeed at high school:

*'without prayer I would never have learned organisation (...) So now, in school, a lot of people have trouble with organisation and they procrastinate, but I know, you know, my dad always tells me that the world runs on people who can control their emotions and who wake up early. And, you know, for prayer I would wake up*

*early every single day, you know, four forty five or five o'clock. I know this is time to do this. Those people who are not organised in life, they're not able to do anything, it's the way the world works, we work with time.'*

Aminah evidently believes her adherence to the prayer ritual has helped her to be more successful than other students, who still *'procrastinate'* or *'have trouble with organisation'*. It seems she believes this is partly because time management, being *'organised'* and able to *'control'* one's emotions are important both within Islamic practice and within Western society. This contrasts with some common perceptions of Islam and is in keeping with Aminah's emphasis throughout the interview on the need to find common ground between *'American'* and *'Arab'* cultures. Aminah's comments also suggest that her adherence to Islamic religious practices has been influenced by her father, who has encouraged her to see positive connections between the Islamic prayer ritual and her ability to succeed both at school and *'in life'*.

The importance of Aminah's religious identity was evident in her explanation of how she often found herself taking on the role of *'representative'* or *'ambassador'* for her faith. She said she was initially enthusiastic about taking on this role and, even as a young child, enjoyed the responsibility:

*'I've always thought that I have to be the one who started making the change, and I always felt like it was my job, no matter what. Even in class, I've always felt like I was the representative of Islam, I was the representative of Arabic people, and other kids in my class wouldn't want to stand up, but I felt that, like, it was my duty in the world to say what had to be said.'*

This suggests that taking on this role gave her a feeling of *'power'* and *'extra responsibility'* and made her feel more mature and responsible because she would *'get to stand up and say something in class and make everyone think about it'*. It seemed as if she had been encouraged in this by her father, who was a political activist in Morocco and who, she said, had always taught her to *'be the change you want to see in the world'*.

Later in the interview when Aminah talked about the impact of the 9/11 attacks, she seemed more uncomfortable about the idea of having to take on the role of

ambassador or representative of Islam. She described how a young boy in her class had lost his mother in the attacks and seemed to make a negative association between her family and this tragedy:

*'when someone would pick me up from school, a family member who had the hijab on, he associated that with being the person who took the aeroplane and put it through on 9/11, causing me to be the pain, to be the cause of his pain for the death of his mother. And that did hurt me.'*

She evidently felt uncomfortable about the way in which it seemed all Muslims were 'associated' with, and held responsible for, the actions of the 9/11 attackers. Her comments suggest she found this upsetting and confusing, which is not surprising given she was only eight years old at the time. She went on to say, however, that she did not believe it was fair to expect her to explain or apologise for actions committed by others in the name of her religion.

*'I always realise that I'm not, so I should, you know, I should give my condolences, but I shouldn't be sorry because they're not my actions. You're sorry for what you do. You can feel sad and sympathetic and empathetic, but you should never say 'I'm sorry, it was my fault', because it wasn't.'*

This contrasts, to some extent, with Aminah's earlier comment that she feels she has a 'duty' to act as an ambassador or representative of her religion. It is understandable, however, that she feels a difference between being willing to answer questions or explain elements of her religious beliefs and being asked or expected to apologise for the actions of terrorists or extremists.

When talking about her plans for the future, it was evident that Aminah was influenced by a desire to achieve the best possible educational 'credentials', to ensure she would be perceived as someone with the authority to speak about issues that are important to her. She was in the process of applying to several Ivy League universities and her choice to continue with her studies in this kind of elite institution seemed to stem partly from an awareness of the power and status this would give her within American society:

*'After high school I'm going to obviously go to college, and that was never a question for me. (...) If I want to talk, that's why it's so important to get my education, so if I have my PhD, for example, in international relations, just for example, as a topic, if I have my PhD, that gives me credentials, it gives me the right to be in the discussion, because you can't be in a discussion if you don't know what's being discussed.'*

A strong sense of ambition is evident here, as Aminah says there was *'never a question'* about whether or not she would go on to college after high school. Her rationale for going on to study for a PhD does not seem to be related directly to employment opportunities but rather to her feeling that this will give her *'the right to be in the discussion'*. This desire to be heard, to have *'the right'* to be listened to, may be related to Aminah's frustration with elements of her life which she currently cannot control, such as her teacher's decision about the curriculum or the bullying and harassment she encounters from other students. Her choice of future career is, it seems, a direct consequence of this, as she is choosing to pursue a path which will give her the status that will ensure she has this right.

Aminah went on to say that she wanted to work for *'Doctors without Borders or the World Health Organisation'*. In contrast to common perceptions of young Muslim women, Aminah did not seem to be constrained by *'cultural traditions'* or the expectations of others (Smart and Rahman, 2008: 14). Later in the interview, she said her father had told her he would be happy with whatever career she chose, *'as long as you're not a prostitute, you sell drugs, or steal'*. It seems as if she has a certain amount of freedom in relation to her future career choice, though it is also clear that she has been influenced by her father's views.

When I asked whether or not she thought it would be possible for her to achieve her dreams, Aminah said she knew it would not be easy but that she thought she could do it if she set her mind to it:

*'I can do anything I want and I still believe that. That's where, even though you question what is the American dream, and that term is always thrown out as if it's nothing, but people still come with the notion that when they come to America, they have the opportunity to do whatever they want in the world, and I still truly believe in that. Because I've seen it, you know, first hand, with people who study hard and work hard and they become something in the end. And anything is within my grasp, if I work hard.'*

There seems to be a strong connection between Aminah's belief in her ability to achieve her future ambitions and her belief in *'the American dream'*. By stating that *'anything is within my grasp, if I work hard'*, she allies herself with a key principle of American society, thus laying claim to an *'American'* identity. There

is a certain tension here, however, in Aminah's reference to the way *'that term is always thrown out as if it's nothing'*, in recognition of the many ways in which the concept of the *'American dream'* has been questioned and undermined.

Throughout her interview, it seemed Aminah was trying to reconcile tensions between different elements of her identity and cultural heritage, by affirming her belief in the founding ideas, or ideals, of America, while also acknowledging that these ideals have been imperfectly realised. It was evidently difficult for her to sustain this position, however, in the light of her affiliation to Islamic values, beliefs and practices. While describing herself as *'very patriotic'*, she also acknowledged that a lot of people outside America, particularly in Muslim majority countries, see it as a *'corrupt power'*:

*'they look at America for the death of their brothers and sisters, meaning their Islamic brothers and sisters. They look at America as a nation filled with lies and hypocrisy. They look at America and see murderers and see corrupt officials and see the foundation, the beginning of America as corrupt. (...). So they always say, how can a nation founded on this be considered democratic?'*

These comments reflect both Aminah's desire to inscribe herself into an American identity and her awareness of the way the US is perceived by many people living in Muslim majority countries. She aligns herself predominantly with an American perspective, by referring to *'our founding fathers'*, as opposed to those who blame America for the death of *'their Islamic brothers and sisters'*. She does not, however, deny or dispute these criticisms or the idea that it is difficult to see how it can be seen as anything other than *'corrupt'*.

It seems as if Aminah, as an Arab and an American, is able to see things from both points of view, informed by the different elements of her cultural and religious identity. Earlier in the interview, she described how, following the 9/11 attacks, she was *'no longer identified as an American'* but *'as an Arab, primarily, number one'*. She said she could not accept this because these different elements of her culture and heritage simply had to coexist:

*'That's the way I went through the world to this point, that I'm Arabic, I'm an American, and these cultures without a choice have to come together because it's who I am. And I'm not going to allow myself to*

*separate them, when both of them are very important to me'*

The insistence with which Aminah emphasizes the importance of ensuring that these different elements of her identity are able to co-exist seems to be partly a response to the difficulties she has encountered in a society where the idea of being both American and Muslim has, since the 9/11 attacks, become increasingly problematic (e.g. Haddad 2007, Esposito 2010, Clay 2011).

Aminah does not accept 'the taint of "foreignness" and terrorism' (Esposito 2010: 23) which has characterised the portrayal of Muslims in the public sphere in the US in the years following 9/11, actively insisting on her right to claim an identity which is, at one and the same time, Muslim, Arab and American.



#### 4.3.5 Marwa

Marwa, aged 17, was in the penultimate year of high school in New York. She was born and brought up in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, while her father was born and brought up in Egypt and her mother in Morocco. Marwa described herself as Egyptian, Moroccan, American and Muslim. She presented herself as someone who embraced elements of both 'Arab' and 'American' culture, believing herself to have an '*Arab American*' identity. She expressed loyalty to her family and her religious faith, while not apparently perceiving this as being in opposition to, or contrast with, her affiliation with elements of American culture.

One reason for Marwa's positive account of her school experiences seems to be to do with academic success. She said she had always done well at school and had particularly loved English, Social Studies and Maths:

*'I loved English and I loved, loved Social Studies. (...) Math was easy for me in high school, definitely. Math was the first thing. I had a 98 average in math, out of a hundred, yeah it was easy! Algebra was the easiest thing in my life, 'al-jabr', my uncle!'*

Marwa's reference to '*al-jabr, my uncle!*' refers to the fact that the historical origins of the word 'algebra' can be traced back to the Arabic language and the work of ninth century mathematician Al-Khwarizmi (Rashed, 1994: 8-9). This suggests Marwa is proud of her 'Arab' heritage and also expresses her own kinship with Arab culture, going on to say that she thought it was funny that '*our people created math but we're the worst at it!*'. This combination of pride in the 'Arabic' elements of her identity, with an 'American' sense of confidence and mode of expression, is characteristic of the way in which Marwa presented herself throughout her interview.

Marwa's embracing of elements of American popular culture is evident in her ambition to be a singer and stage performer. Her excitement about this is palpable in her account of her first stage performance at the age of eleven:

*'They asked me to be Tina Turner for our class, and I did, um, 'Rolling on the River'. And then, and I lip-singed that, but I had to be, like, Tina Turner, so I wore the dress and I did the hair,*

*and I had a boa, and, like, the feeling that I got from after that! I got a standing ovation from the crowd, and it was just awesome! Imagine that, like, at eleven, and I was, like, this is what I wanna do, so yeah! And I was lip-singing<sup>1</sup>, but like, I had the energy on stage, it was awesome!*

By performing on stage as an iconic female American rock star, it seems that Marwa has whole-heartedly embraced American culture. She does not appear to see her cultural or religious identity as a barrier to her choice of future career or her desire to perform on stage while at school. She also does not seem to perceive any conflict or tension between these different elements of her identity; her description of this 'awesome' performance communicates feelings of excitement, exhilaration and enjoyment.

Marwa's account of her early educational experiences and her stage performances contrasted with her account of the difficulties her family experienced during her childhood, particularly in relation to the illness suffered by her mother and the accident suffered by her father. She said she thought one reason she was able to be successful at school was because she had had to grow up at a young age, because her mother was sometimes too ill to look after her:

*'When my mum was sick, she couldn't clean the house, I would help out making the bedroom, with my daddy, mopping and sweeping. And sometimes mum couldn't get up cause she was just so tired and sick from all the medicine that would numb her. So (...) my dad would give me five dollars extra and say, go get lunch, bring it home, eat, cause mum's too tired today.'*

Marwa presents herself here as someone who feels a strong commitment to her family and who understands, even 'at a young age', the need to contribute as much as possible by 'making the bedroom' or 'mopping and sweeping'. Marwa's mother's illness was evidently a source of great sadness and distress, which she found difficult to talk about. She also described the devastating effect of a car accident suffered by her father during her childhood, which led to the family encountering severe financial difficulties:

*'Seventh grade, my father got into a car accident and had to have his knee-caps replaced, so he couldn't work for six months, so he was unemployed for six months. So, on top of that, imagine, I'm almost*

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1 She means 'lip-syncing'.

*getting evicted and watching your car getting repossessed by the bank, and sometimes not being able to eat food, sometimes wearing the same clothes cause you can't afford new ones. So it was like drastic measures. My mum had to sell her Arabic, her wedding jewellery, to go pay the rent. And you know how special that is to Arabs!*

Marwa's reference to her mother having to sell her 'wedding jewellery' in order to pay the rent highlights the extent of the trauma which the family suffered during this time, since they were forced to part with something of significant cultural value. Her remark 'you know how special that is to Arabs' exemplifies the way she positions herself both inside and outside 'Arab' culture; it is not clear whether she includes herself as a member of this group or not.

The complexity around Marwa's cultural identity is also evident in her description of how things started to improve for her family once her father was able to re-enter employment:

*'It got better when I was in high school, like, I grew out of my quirky weird phase of, like, weird jeans and man-Ts! And then my dad got a job and he made more money than he used to, so like we started shopping again and stuff. I got like straighteners, and I remember, I got my eyebrows done when I was sixteen, it was awesome!'*

The affiliation with 'American' culture, which Marwa demonstrated in her earlier description of performing as Tina Turner, is also evident here. She describes growing out of a teenage phase of wearing 'weird jeans and man-Ts' and becoming interested in having her hair straightened and her eyebrows done, just as we might imagine a typical American teenager would. It seems as if, at this point, she is deliberately presenting herself in a way that emphasizes her affiliation with mainstream American culture, in contrast with the way in which she distances herself from the 'Arabs'.

When it came to religion, Marwa presented herself as someone who was initially sceptical but who, as she grew older, gradually became more convinced that being Muslim was an important part of her identity. She recalled that, when her family were going through particularly difficult times, her father would always insist that things were going to get better because, he said, God would provide

for them. She also recalled, however, that her own response to her father's unquestioning faith was to question the usefulness of a God who had not provided practical assistance to the family when it was most needed:

*'My dad would always say, 'Allah's with us, no matter what. Allah's always watching over us' (...) But I was like, Allah needs to help us now! You know, you're eleven years old, you're like, where's Allah when you need him? Where's Allah when I wanna eat dinner, where's Allah, you know?'*

Marwa's account of her response to her father seems, at first, like a naïve or childlike response to the situation but in fact her questioning of the existence of a divine being who does not provide assistance for believers when they need it is not dissimilar to the kind of criticism made by those who question religious beliefs from a rational or scientific perspective. In this way, Marwa aligns herself with the Western tradition of religious scepticism, which requires evidence or explanation rather than unquestioning adherence to religious doctrine.

Marwa went on to say that, when she was younger and had found her parents' religious beliefs difficult to understand, she had asked her father to explain to her the importance of the stories in the *Qur'an*:

*'my dad would sit down and I'd ask him, you know, cause you need to know what you're saying, so you're not blindly following something. I said, 'daddy, what about this thing with Muhammad, what happened with him?' And he told me the story and I just started crying, you know? Like, he used to tell me things, like, his neighbour was Jewish and he used to leave his rubbish out every day. And then one day it wasn't there, so he went to visit him to see if he was ok'*

Her father has evidently been a key influence, in terms of the development of Marwa's religious sensibilities. It seems that, rather than emphasizing the importance of '*blindly following*' a religious doctrine or particular religious practices, he has encouraged Marwa to feel affinity with the prophet Muhammad by emphasizing his positive human qualities and kindness to others.

As a result, Marwa said she had become more convinced about her own faith and its importance in her life:

*'This year, I don't know but, I've tried to identify myself with my religion. And I've found that, like, the Qur'an has so many Facebook statuses in there, like it's so good, it's so informative, and your brain actually thinks, you know what I'm saying? Like, my mom would, instead of me go fight, or get angry with someone, my mom would be like, 'go look at the Qur'an, just relax, read the story of, you know.'*

Marwa's growing affiliation with her religious faith appears to stem from a feeling that the stories in the *Qur'an* are useful and 'informative', helping her work out how to deal with particularly difficult situations. It seems her mother has also had an influence, as she has encouraged Marwa to read religious texts as a way of relaxing. Marwa's comment that the *Qur'an* 'has so many Facebook statuses in there' is indicative of the way in which it seems she is trying to make sense of her religious beliefs by finding connections with elements of the contemporary world.

When it came to interacting with other students at school Marwa, like several of the other research participants, said she had often found herself having to act as an ambassador for Islam. She said she found it frustrating and irritating when she had to explain and justify her faith to fellow students, in a way her Christian classmates were not expected to, especially when they would ask her 'stupid' questions:

*'kids who don't understand Islam always ask me questions and it's like, when they're saying something stupid and I answer them back with a smart question, they don't know how to say it back, cause all they hear is from their house, or from their friends, they overhear that thing and they like to say it.'*

As well as finding this kind of questioning irritating, it seems as if Marwa derives a certain amount of satisfaction from being positioned as the 'smart' one, in comparison with the other students who, she says, 'don't understand Islam'. She presents herself as someone with superior knowledge, who is dismissive of the extent to which other students' opinions are based on things they have overheard 'from their house, or from their friends' and who are interrogating her from a position of ignorance, lacking any real understanding of her religion.

Later in the interview, Marwa explained she felt she has a duty to try her best to explain her beliefs to her classmates. In this way, she again presented herself

as someone with superior knowledge and patience compared with her fellow students:

*'Even if he's stupid, and they don't understand what you're saying, you still have to sit down explain to them, smile and be happy, cause smiling is a kind of charity, just sit there and laugh, and, just laugh at their ignorance, 'cause it really is hilarious, it's funny! They tell me 'Allah, Allah's not God', and I just laugh, I say, 'well, what's Allah, bro?' I just say, 'please leave!.'*

These comments again suggest both frustration and satisfaction, as Marwa describes herself *'smiling'* charitably but also laughing at the *'ignorance'* of her fellow students. The way she presents these events also creates the impression that Marwa is confident and secure in her own beliefs, as she describes herself as *'a Sunni'*, who will *'always follow prophet Muhammad's beliefs'*, in contrast with her earlier explanation of how she has only gradually come to accept the importance of religion in her life. Marwa's distinctive way of expressing herself is also evident here, as she describes how she responds to other students with *comments like 'well, what's Allah bro?'*, and *'please leave!'* This encapsulates the way in which Marwa combines adherence to Islam and affiliation with elements of *'Arab'* culture, with a distinctively American way of speaking and of thinking about the world, as expressed in her down to earth humour and self-confidence.

When I asked about her experience of growing up in New York City, as a young Arab American Muslim woman, Marwa said she had not encountered a great deal of racism or discrimination when she was younger, because she lives in *'the bubble of Bay Ridge, which is all Arab and all Muslim mostly'* and where *'we all coexist with each other, even the Irish people and the Greek people that live here, they know us, they wouldn't talk about us.'* Like several of the other research participants, Marwa said that while she felt relatively safe and secure within her own neighbourhood, she had encountered racism and prejudice outside of this area, *'when I went with my mum to the city or something like that'*. She said she felt much more at risk of encountering racist comments in the centre of New York (i.e. downtown Manhattan) because *'that's where it's worst, that's the worst part to go at'*. This reference to the downtown area being *'the worst'* seemed to stem particularly from several incidents which Marwa said

had taken place immediately after the 9/11 attacks. During one particularly traumatic incident, a group of passers-by attacked the car in which she was travelling with her parents, *'broke the window'* and *'called my mum a terrorist'*. She said there had also been several other incidents, mainly in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, when her family had driven into the city and people spat on the windscreen of their car when it had stopped at a red light or shouted obscenities through the car windows.

Marwa said that, during this time, it became relatively common to hear comments such as *'you're gonna go bomb this, you're gonna go bomb that!'* or *'watch out, she might have a bomb there!'*. She said she found it difficult to undergo such experiences but believed every group in society had to go through this kind of experience at one time or another:

*'I believe that history repeats itself, and this is what I see from history books, that every time, every generation, there's one race that gets targeted. Whether it's the Turks from back then, or the Christians during the Roman Empire, the Chinese, the Japanese, or you had the Jews during World War II. And now you have the Arabs in today's society.'*

This suggests that Marwa's way of coming to terms with the attacks on herself and her family is to assimilate these incidents within a larger narrative of unfair and unjustified attacks against minority populations, in different time periods and in different societies. Her comments convey a sense of inevitability, both about the current level of discrimination against Muslims in American society and the sense that they will eventually be recognised as undeserving victims. She presents herself as responding in a rational and informed way, in contrast with the ignorance and irrationality of those who attack her.

Marwa also portrayed herself as someone who, as a result of her own experiences, had developed an increased level of sympathy with other minority populations in the US. She said she felt a responsibility to stand up for members of other minority groups and that she always tried to challenge people when she sees ignorance or prejudice around her, because she knew what it is like to be on the receiving end. She described one recent event when she came

to the defence of a stranger, as a result of comments made by a fellow bus passenger about Mexican migrants in New York:

*'He's like, oh, the Mexicans are coming, they're taking all of our jobs, and I'm unemployed, blah blah blah. The driver of the bus is Mexican, mind you! So he's talking, this guy must be drunk, he must be smoking something. And I'm getting pissed off, cause even though I'm not Mexican, I feel bad for these people, cause there's a Mexican lady right there and she's just putting her head down in shame.'*

Marwa's account of this incident emphasizes her concern for the Mexican bus driver and passenger, which she said led her to feel she had to intervene, *'even though I'm not Mexican'*. She said she started questioning the man about his own situation, asking him why he was judging other people for trying to make a better life for themselves and their family:

*'I said, I bet you live in a million dollar home sharing with yourself. But these people are working from pay check to pay check, or roll to roll - you know, like the roll of money they give you, the roll of money. He's like, 'how do you know all this?' I'm like, sit down mister.'*

Although Marwa's decision to intervene in this situation may have stemmed from her experiences as a young Muslim woman, the viewpoint from which she confronts the abusive passenger is an American one. She comments, for example, that he should respect the Mexican migrants who are working *'roll to roll'* to support their families, in the tradition of the American dream, which accords respect to those who work hard to make a life for themselves. She also presents herself as a tough and fearless character, in keeping with the traits often seen as typical of people living in New York; she said that, when she confronted this man, she wasn't scared because *'if he tried to punch me, I'd punch him in the balls'*.

Marwa said she believed a large part of the reason for people's ill-treatment of minority and migrant groups was to do with ignorance and the misinformation they receive from the media because, she said, people *'won't read a book about Islam, but they'll believe what Bill O'Reilly says about Islam!'* Marwa presented herself as someone with a better understanding of the world and a belief in the importance of education as a way of overcoming prejudice and discrimination. The sympathy which Marwa appeared to feel for migrants did not, however, seem to be reflected in her attitude towards her own family in Morocco. She



recounted, for example, how, when she was eight years old, her aunt tried to arrange a marriage between Marwa and a cousin:

*'My aunt was like, 'can you please help my son to get a green card, can you marry him?' My mom was like, 'yeah yeah yeah, just do it'. I was like, 'momma, what the hell do I look like! Do I look like a human visa?'*

Marwa laughed as she told me this and went on to say that she could have *'ten thousand, fifty thousand'* Moroccan husbands if she wanted, because so many people were desperate to move to America. She recounted an incident when, during a family visit to Morocco, *'my third cousin tried to kiss me and I punched him in the face!* Marwa seems to think it is ridiculous that people are so desperate they would marry anyone for a green card; she also seems to be ridiculing her Moroccan family members. Marwa presents herself as a strong character who does not accept that she is obliged to acquiesce in this kind of plan, even if it appears to be condoned by her aunt and her mother.

The strength of Marwa's personality is also evident in her account of her future plans, as she said she intended to go to university to study political science and international relations, become an ambassador and then, when she is older, become a professor of political science. She also said she was planning to spend a year in the UK, through a study abroad programme *'at St Clare's College'*, before returning to complete her PhD. When I asked whether her parents were happy with these plans, she said she was under pressure from her mother to get married and have children but that her father was keen for her to finish college before getting married:

*'My mom's like, 'look, your dad's 62, I'm 57, we need some grand-kids!' I was like, 'mom, I can get engaged by like 20, 22, and then we'll talk about it'. But my dad is like, 'you're not getting married any time soon in college, because I did not come to this country and work my ass off for you to get married and just throw all your, throw all your shit away', he's like, 'that's not happening!'.'*

This creates the impression that Marwa's mother is more supportive of traditional gender roles and keen for Marwa to marry at a young age. Her father, in contrast with some common perceptions of Muslim families, wants her to continue with her studies and make the most of the opportunities on offer to her, which had not been available to him.

Marwa said she believed it was particularly important for 'Arab women' living in the West to make the most of the opportunities on offer to them, since these might not be available if they lived in Muslim-majority countries:

*'we wouldn't have the chances if we weren't living in where we are. Like in Saudi Arabia - this is 2012, right? They just passed a law that women can drive. It's 2012. And then in Morocco, only two years ago, was it two years ago, they passed a law that women can finally sign their own divorce papers, 'cause before you had to ask the man's permission to divorce.'*

Marwa appears to believe that she has access to additional opportunities and freedoms as a result of living in America. The rhetorical question 'this is 2012, right?' suggests that she believes America is more modern and progressive than 'Arab' countries like Saudi Arabia and Morocco.

Marwa said that her own future plans had been shaped by a desire to try to ensure that 'Arab Muslims' are fully represented within government:

*'seeing as there's not much representation in government from Arab Muslims, or Arab American Muslims, or Muslim women, I think it's my duty, it's my duty to be, to do something in politics, to have a voice be heard, to become, to spread awareness. Like, I wanna do politics. Or if I can't do politics, then be an activist, yeah.'*

Marwa's reference to wanting to 'do something in politics' or 'be an activist', suggests that she wants to work in a field which enables her to make a social and political impact. Her desire to contribute to the 'representation' of Arab American and Muslim women creates the impression that she feels there are problems which need to be addressed and believes it is possible to do something about them.

#### 4.3.6 Yasmeen

Yasmeen was born in Egypt to an Egyptian father and Syrian mother and lived in Egypt until the age of four, when she moved to the US with her parents. At the time of our interview, she was eighteen years old and in the process of completing her high school education. Yasmeen presented herself as someone with a strong desire to be an insider, who kept finding herself on the outside. This seemed to be related to her identity as a Muslim living in America, since she presented her religious identity as something which makes her visibly '*stand out*' as a foreign body, differentiating her from others and helping to make her '*an outsider*'. Like several of the other research participants, her account emphasized the importance of '*fitting in*' and the impact of feeling '*different*' from others.

Yasmeen's account of her early school experiences emphasized how she was able to adapt quickly in order to fit in at her new American school:

*'since I was born in Egypt, I had, I did pre-K over there, and then I came here and I waited a couple of months, cause I came in the middle of the year, like of 1998. So I couldn't apply for school, it was too late, and then I applied the next year and went straight to kindergarten, and, um, it was, I didn't really know English, cause I just came from Egypt, everything was new to me, but I really caught on really fast, I got really used to the environment quickly, I don't remember having any problems whatsoever.'*

Yasmeen presents herself here as someone who adapted and learned to navigate the new social and cultural context without too much difficulty; she said that at elementary school she had '*a great learning experience*'. This included learning English, which she seemed to accept as a necessary part of the adaptation process. She also said she was pleased when, although she did not speak English fluently at the time, she was put '*straight into regular classes*' with '*the regular kids*', rather than being withdrawn for specialist ESL provision.

Yasmeen's desire to fit in and feel like part of the mainstream, rather than a special or unusual case, is also reflected in her description of how, during this

time, she worked hard at school and tried to maintain good relationships with teachers and other students:

*'In elementary school I was a very hard worker and, you know, I was always positive about learning and everything. I had all these thoughts, like back then I wanted to be a like doctor, like, I was, like, a surgeon (...) You know, just me, I was just a really very sweet, like, student, you know. I was good with everybody, never got in trouble with anything or anyone.'*

In this way, Yasmeen presents her younger self as an ambitious and aspirational pupil who was 'very sweet' and 'positive about learning'. She also described herself as 'teacher's pet' and said that 'the teachers were also, I can be honest with you, they were like my friends'. This contrasts with the way in which, later in the interview, she described the negative experiences she had during junior high and high school.

Yasmeen also said that, during elementary school, she tried to make sure her teachers would perceive her in a positive light, because she knew it was important for them to have a good impression of her:

*'You know, it's very good to have a good relationship with teachers. You never know what could go wrong, like say there's some emergency that comes up and you have some huge project due. If that teacher knows you very well and knows that you're not a liar, knows you're an honest person.'*

Yasmeen is evidently aware of the power teachers have over students within schools and understands, to some extent, the implications of this power imbalance and the consequent importance of students maintaining good relationships with her teachers. This does not, however, seem to have helped her when she moved to junior high school and started to encounter problems with teachers and other students.

Yasmeen was the only one of the research participants who said she had experienced serious conflict with teachers; she said she believed this was a result of prejudice and discrimination from staff at her junior high and high schools. She recounted two examples, both involving Jewish teachers who she believed had treated her unfairly because she was a Muslim student. The first situation, at junior high school, involved an English teacher who Yasmeen said

accused her of plagiarising a piece of work and threatened to have her expelled from school as a result:

*'So I wrote, like, a really, really good story, and she said it was plagiarism. And at that time I didn't even own a computer in the house to go online, it was just pen and paper and that's it. I went to the library, I typed it up, and that was you know the end of that. And she took me to the assistant principal and she was like, she's plagiarising this, blah blah blah.'*

Yasmeen's presentation of her own role in this episode is in keeping with her earlier description of herself as a keen and hard-working student who tried her best to do well in school. She emphasizes how much she had previously enjoyed writing and had been 'very creative' but, as a result of this teacher's actions, had lost her love for writing at a young age.

In her description of another incident in the same teacher's class, Yasmeen again depicted herself as an innocent victim, in contrast with her description of the teacher's behaviour, which is portrayed as being unreasonable and unjustified:

*'I was sitting in the back, and I was really exhausted, and I yawned, just a little bit, like, you can't even hear me, and she stops the whole class and she yells at me, 'am I that boring Sarah?' And I'm just like, 'I yawned!', do you know what I mean? I apologised, I was like I'm sorry, you know (...) And she snapped at me like throughout the whole class for random things.'*

Yasmeen makes it sound as if she was singled out for unkind treatment by this teacher, who chose to punish her out for a relatively minor misdemeanour by stopping the whole class and shouting at her. The fact that, earlier in the interview, Yasmeen presented herself as a 'sweet' and 'positive' learner during elementary school, helps to create an impression of unfairness about the way she says she was treated by this teacher during junior high school.

Yasmeen said she was not sure why the teacher singled her out in this way but that she knew the teacher was Jewish; she said that '*I don't know if that had anything to do with her turning against me, but I really don't think there's anything else there*'. Although she did not say that she believed the teacher's Jewish identity was the key reason for her behaviour, Yasmeen clearly implies

she does believe this was a factor in terms of the way she was treated. This suggests that, for Yasmeen, her own identity as a young Muslim woman is a key element of the way she perceives herself as a learner, since she implies that the Jewish teacher is prejudiced against her because of her religious identity. This is important because this incident seemed to represent a turning point in Yasmeen's account of her educational experiences and '*the starting point for me just hating everything about education, period*'; after this point, her account of her school experiences changed from being almost entirely positive to almost entirely negative.

Yasmeen said that, as well as having problems with this particular teacher, her relationships with other students had also been difficult. She described being isolated and bullied by other students, remembering that, in sixth grade, '*these kids would make fun of me all the time...and I legit had no friends, not one friend at all*'. She seemed to believe she was singled out because of being visibly identified as Arab and Muslim:

*'So these girls would just sit there and, you know, make fun of me. And it actually came to a point where they told me, if you would take off your hijab, we would be your friends. And it was this one Arabic Christian girl that said this to me too...she was just, basically, straight up, if you took off your hijab you'd be popular, people would talk to you.'*

Yasmeen evidently believes that, as a young Muslim woman wearing the *hijab*, she is uniquely vulnerable to bullying from the other students. She recalled being called '*toucan*' and '*big nose*', names which clearly relate to Yasmeen's Arab appearance; her account of being told by the other students that they would be friends with her if she took off the *hijab* suggests that her religious identity was also under attack.

Yasmeen presented the *hijab* as a definitive marker of difference which, as a visible symbol of her Muslim identity, sets her apart from other students by identifying her as a foreign body and making her a target for their negative comments. This leads to a tension between her desire to 'fit in' at school and her adherence to her religious and cultural identity. She said she was often the

victim of bullying by other students but that, rather than engaging with them, she went home to tell her parents:

*'I would go home and cry on my mom, but there's nothing I can do about it. Like, I'd go home to, like, a wonderful dad and wonderful mom that always kept my head up, you know, all these thing shouldn't matter to you and all that stuff.'*

In this way, Yasmeen creates a contrast between her 'wonderful' parents, who support and help her, and the difficulties she experiences at school, where she is bullied and made to feel like an outsider.

It is clear, however, that Yasmeen's relationship with her parents is not as simple as her repetition of the word 'wonderful' would seem to suggest but, instead, is suffused with tension and conflict. This is evident in Yasmeen's description of how, after she was told that the other students would be friends with her if she took off the *hijab*, she went home and asked her parents if she could take it off, because she was desperate to stop feeling so isolated from the other students:

*'that day I went home and told my mom, I want to take it off (...) So I was like, mom, can I take it off and just wait until whenever my period comes and I'll wear it. So she was just like, 'why would you want to do that? blah blah blah'. She was, like, speak to your dad. So I spoke to my dad and I will never forget what he said to me. He was basically, like, 'What's the point of you taking it off? God is going to judge you, not them. You're going to be pleasing them and having friends, but at the end who's the one getting judged and who's the one getting sins for doing this?'*

It seems that Yasmeen's parents are keen to encourage her to adhere to the religious and cultural practice of wearing the *hijab*, even if it means she will find it more difficult to fit in and make friends at school. Her father takes a leading role in persuading her that she should keep wearing it and she does not seem to question this, even though she also says that she knows '*you don't really have to wear it up until you get your period*'. Instead, she presents her father's intervention as something powerful which has remained with her and which, she says, she '*will never forget*'.

Yasmeen's account of this episode suggests that her mother and father play different roles in terms of reinforcing the importance of adhering to cultural and

religious practices. Her account of her mother's response, which makes it clear she does not support Yasmeen's desire to stop wearing the *hijab*, includes the dismissive '*blah blah blah*', followed by the suggestion that Yasmeen should talk to her father. It is not clear whether her mother is deferring to her father's authority or simply knows her father will be more persuasive. It is evident, however, that it is her father who persuades Yasmeen she should continue to wear the *hijab*:

*'He had a point. He had a point. So I just, you know, I heard what he said and I believed him, and I just decided to keep it, to keep it on, whatever happens, happens.'*

It seems that Yasmeen perceives herself as having some choice in the matter, as she says she '*decided*' to keep wearing the *hijab*. She does not appear to see herself as having been forced or coerced by her parents, even though they have clearly influenced her choice. On the other hand, her comment '*whatever happens, happens*' conveys a sense of resignation, as if she knows her decision might have negative consequences but that it is unavoidable. This resonates with her father's suggestion that she would be '*losing both ways*', which suggests Yasmeen does not have a more positive choice available to her and that whatever decision she makes is likely to cause her problems.

This sense of impossible choices resonates with Yasmeen's account of the rest of her school experiences; after this incident, things started to get worse and worse until she entered a spiral of depression and despair. Her description of the difficulties she encountered at high school suggests that she continued to feel victimised and singled out as a result of her Arab and Muslim identity. This included a second incidence of conflict with another Jewish teacher:

*'She brings out my lab folder, and my homework folder, and they're surprisingly empty. (...) And she was just like, they're empty. I'm, like, my mother's right here, she saw me do all the work, why, why would anyone do something and not even put them in there. Why would I do my homework, and all those labs, and not even put them in the folder? I was like, who in their right mind would do something like that? She was like, you tell me.'*

When I asked why she thought the teacher treated her this way, Yasmeen said this teacher was '*a very religious Jew*', suggesting she believed she was, again, being mistreated because of her Arab and Muslim identity.



In her account of this incident, Yasmeen again depicted herself as an innocent victim who was powerless to do anything to improve the situation, saying that she tried to complain but that the school '*did nothing about it, absolutely nothing about it.*' From this point onwards, hopelessness and despair pervade Yasmeen's account of her educational experiences. She said she initially tried to get moved out of the Jewish teacher's class and then, when this was not possible, became increasingly depressed. She faced significant emotional and psychological tensions during this time, which permeated every aspect of her life and led to her feeling completely hopeless. She said she wished she had been able to deal with the situation in a different way but did not feel she had any other option at the time:

*'I wish I had never had, but I just completely gave up, it was just like, it's just never gonna work for me. I mean, year after year after year after year...a person gets really sick and fed up with these things, to a point where it's just, like, where do I go now? And then, by the time twelfth grade came, there was absolutely no hope.'*

Her reference to '*year after year after year after year*' seems to refer to the difficulties she encountered with teachers and students during junior high and high school. It seems she felt as if she had undergone years of continuous mistreatment at school which almost inevitably led to despair, as she came to believe that education was '*just never gonna work for me*'.

Yasmeen's account of her educational experiences after this point became increasingly traumatic, as she described how she became so depressed that she stopped going to school and starting harming herself, to the extent that she '*would hit the wall on purpose and break my arm*'. She said that, at one particularly low point, she went so far as to drink a bottle of detergent from the kitchen cupboard:

*'I opened up this thing of Tide, like, detergent, and I just drunk a bunch of it and I just felt sick after, like, I don't know...I just really wanted to just completely get out of this world, like I completely gave up all hope. I did not care about religion any more, I did not care about anything, it was like I'm just done, like that was just the end of it. (...) I just wanted to completely get out of this world.'*

Yasmeen's desperation is evident in her account of how, at this point, she had

lost all hope, including her religious faith, which she says she *'did not care about'* any more. This contrasts with Yasmeen's claim, elsewhere in her interview, that her religious faith was *'the only thing that ever kept me holding on to my life'*. There is an unresolved tension around these two apparently contradictory statements, reflecting the conflict evident elsewhere in Yasmeen's account between different sets of loyalties and allegiances, which she depicts as a series of impossible choices.

After acknowledging that she had previously turned her back on Islam and *'stopped practising'*, Yasmeen seemed to find it important to emphasize that she had subsequently rediscovered the positive role that religious practice could have in her life and that her religion was now one of the most important things in her life:

*'Cause I experience things and I see people, I see how, like, they practice this religion, or that religion, and how I practice it. And, like, you know, just, as life goes on, and the more things I experience, the more I become stronger and hold on to my religion.'*

This contrasts with her previous statement that, when she was in the depths of despair, she had given up on religion along with everything else. She went on to say that, even during this time, she had *'never sinned, like, did anything, besides hurt myself'*, as if she felt it was important to be clear about this. She also gave an evocative description of how her adherence to the Muslim prayer ritual had given her peace:

*'Just, you know, like, whenever I go through rough times and I pray, I feel so peaceful. I feel so, it's like, it's, it's just a feeling that you can never describe. You just, you know, you just, all the problems are gone and it's just you and God and that's it, you know, you just, you know...I can't explain it to you, it's just a wonderful feeling. And, just, during the month of Ramadan, you know, it's all just, it's beautiful.'*

In this way, Yasmeen presents her religious faith as something which has helped to give her support and courage when she has encountered difficulties in her life. Her explanation of how the prayer ritual makes her feel *'peaceful'* when she is going through *'rough times'* is striking, given the conflict and turbulence which characterise other parts of her account. It is hard to reconcile her claim that these Muslim religious practices have given her structure and continuity,

with the chaos that has seemed to pervade her account up until this point and which seems to stem, at least in part, from tension around questions of belonging related to her identity as a Muslim living in America.

This tensions were also evident in Yasmeen's account of her relationship with her Syrian and Egyptian family. She said she thought her school experiences would have been different if she had grown up in a Muslim-majority country like Syria or Egypt, because *'over there you don't really go through obstacles of being an outsider (...), cause the majority are Muslims, so everyone you know around you is like you'*. She appears to believe that her identity as a Muslim is one of the reasons she has faced so many difficulties in trying to *'fit in'* at school and that it has been more difficult for her growing up in America because she is a Muslim. She also said, however, that she believed this could be seen as a good thing, because it had helped her to have a strong sense of her own identity and self-confidence:

*'you come here and it's a mix, and there are so many different religions and, you know, and all different nationalities and everything and it's not, it's just, you feel, you don't feel special, but, you know, you have your own identity and you stand out for that. Over there it's just like you're another person, same thing, same thing. In some ways that makes it harder, but in other ways, it completely has built up my confidence and my belief.'*

It is hard to reconcile Yasmeen's claim that the experience of *'standing out'* has helped to build up her *'confidence'* and *'belief'* with the hopelessness and despair which have pervaded other parts of her account. Like some of the other participants, she seems to be conflicted between her loyalty to the US and the fact that, as an Arab Muslim migrant, she has been made to feel like an outsider. It seems as if she is trying to negotiate her way through this conflict and tension, by trying to find coherence within her own narrative; one way she tries to achieve this is by emphasising the importance of her Muslim religious faith.

The importance Yasmeen places on her identity as a Muslim does not seem to preclude loyalty to the US; she sees herself as *'a proud American'* who does not tolerate people who constantly criticise the country they have chosen to call

home. She said it made her angry to witness migrants who have come to live in the US from other countries and who *'sit here and talk about this country in a terrible way, as much as they can'*:

*'You know, people can sit here and talk about this country, like, in a terrible way, as much as they can. But at the end they would not go back to their countries. This is, like, a completely known fact. They can sit here and say that this place is completely terrible, completely racist, and completely this, and blah blah blah, but at the same time, deep inside them, they know this country is gonna help them out a lot.'*

There is a tension here between Yasmeen's belief that it is right to criticise America, when there are legitimate reasons for doing so, and her belief that people who have chosen to migrate to a particular country should appreciate and respect it rather than criticising everything about it. She said that in her view, those who have migrated from other countries should also acknowledge the benefits of the country in which they are living and the faults of the countries from which they have come. She said her father had told her they should *'thank God for the laws here'* because *'if it wasn't for this government, and if it wasn't for the laws that it has, this place would be a jungle, it would be like a complete zoo like it is back there'*.

By using the words *'jungle'* and *'zoo'*, Yasmeen creates the impression she believes America is superior to the country in which she was born. She also, apparently unconsciously, appropriates the kind of racist language which is often used to describe foreign migrants to Western countries, which reflects the tension inherent in her identity as a Muslim and an American; it seems she is still working out what it means to be a foreign-born migrant living in the US and is not quite sure about how to balance her affiliations to different places and different people. Like other young Muslims living in post-9/11 London and New York, she is struggling to make sense of the way she has been treated in the places she considers to be home (Ahmed 2009, Esposito 2010). It does not seem as if she feels 'homeless' or 'uprooted' (Sirin and Fine 2008) but there is some tension about the way in which she attempts to make sense of the 'American' and 'Muslim' aspects of her identity (Sirin and Fine, 2007: 159).

## Chapter 5: Analysis

This chapter analyses the research findings in relation to the research questions that were posed at the end of Chapter 2.

### **5.1 Research question 1: What do six young Muslim women have to tell us about their experiences of living and learning in two Western cities at the beginning of the twenty-first century?**

The research participants' accounts suggest that their experiences of living and learning in New York and London during the early years of the twenty-first century are characterized by complexity and tension around issues of faith, culture and community. Their accounts also convey a strong sense of agency and autonomy, which contrasts with the way in which young Muslim women are often portrayed in mainstream discourse, though it is important to take account of the complexity that surrounds questions of 'agency' in this context.

#### **5.1.1 'Fitting in'**

All of the participants' accounts were concerned with the question of whether they were able to '*fit in*' or '*be accepted*' at school, within their communities or in wider society. Some focused more on this than others, with Yasmeen's account particularly dominated by a description of her painful struggle to feel like an insider at her high school in New York and the devastating impact of her failure to find a sense of belonging within her school community. Habiba, meanwhile, presented herself as someone who was able to 'fit in' to her school in London, after moving from Dhaka, because of the support and encouragement she had received from students and teachers at Hazel Grove and the way she had been welcomed into the school community. She seemed particularly keen to present herself, and her school experiences, in a positive light.

Most of the participants said that they had, in general, had mainly positive relationships with other students in their schools, though several described

instances of conflict, some of which can be categorised as racist or Islamophobic (Allen 2010, 2013), both before and after the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks. This ranged from teasing or bullying by other students at school to more public incidents, as a result of the participants and their families being identified as Muslims. The New York participants seemed to have more experience of marginalization and alienation within school, while the London participants seemed to have mainly experienced this outside of school.

Marwa described how she was often questioned about Islam by other students at her New York School and as a result came to see herself as a '*representative*' or '*ambassador*' for Islam. Aminah and Yasmeen both also described similar experiences; Aminah's account also emphasized her disappointment at the marginalization of elements of Islamic history and culture within the school curriculum. Like Yasmeen and Marwa, she described feeling '*different*' and experiencing a certain amount of bullying and harassment from other students, as a result of being identified as a Muslim. This resonates with the findings of Ahmad and Szpara's research, which argues that New York schools are not sufficiently responsive to 'the religious and cultural needs of Muslim students' (Ahmad and Szpara, 2003: 299).

The UK participants did not seem to share the experience of having to explain their religion and culture to other students, though both Sumaya and Habiba anticipated having to do this at university, when they believed this would be necessary in a way it wasn't at Hazel Grove. For Salma, on the other hand, the question of 'fitting in' to her school community was complicated by the negative response she encountered from other students to her rejection of Muslim and Bangladeshi cultural and religious beliefs and practices. Salma's insistence that she did not mind being seen as '*different*' and '*weird*' by other students was not entirely convincing and it was clear that her school experiences had been characterised by a feeling of '*otherness*', because of the way in which other students responded to her.

Although it is clear that questions of '*fitting in*' and '*belonging*' were important to all of the participants, Salma's case is distinctive because of the extent to which

she seemed to reject Bangladeshi culture and the negative response she encountered from other students as a result. Her comments pose a challenge to conventional understandings of young Muslim women because she does not fit neatly into one category or another. She rejects elements of social and cultural traditions but does not reject the principles which lie behind them, and her rebellion seems to be against the prevailing orthodoxy amongst other students in her school and in the local community, rather than against her parents or against Islam *per se*.

The different experiences of the participants in the two research sites, in relation to questions of identity and belonging, resonate with Hall's argument that we need to take account of the extent to which 'cultural identity' is about 'difference' and 'positioning' (Hall, 1990: 225-6). The extent to which the young women were comfortable with their own identities was dependent not only on their immediate circumstances but on global issues and the ways in which these led them to be positioned in particular ways in relation to others in specific local contexts. As a result, the participants' identities appear to be in an ongoing state of (re)negotiation and (trans)formation, in response to changing local and global contexts and to shifts in the participants' own understandings of themselves and their communities in relation to wider issues.

### **5.1.2 Strong work ethic and ambition to succeed**

One thing all the research participants seemed to have in common was a desire to present themselves as hard-working, well-motivated and ambitious young women with a strong desire to succeed at school and in their future lives. This contrasts with the findings of some research into the experiences of young Muslim women, including Pichler (2009), who describes the participants in her research demonstrating 'a display of tough and anti-school stances' (Pichler, 2009: 123). The participants in my research did not present themselves as 'anti-school' even when recounting negative experiences within the school environment. Sumaya was critical of some of her teachers for their '*low expectations*' but nevertheless said that she wanted to do well at school and become a

teacher herself. Even Yasmeen, who gave the most negative account of school of any of the participants, described her early educational experiences in an overwhelmingly positive way; although she said she ended up '*hating everything about education*', she seemed to have become depressed as a result of the difficulties she had faced at school rather than being fundamentally 'anti-school'. These differences between my own research findings and Pichler's may reflect differences in the socio-economic and political context, since her research was carried out at a time and place when young Muslim women were much less likely to achieve well in school. The participants in my research all believed in school enough to present themselves as hard-working students who wanted to study hard and do well, even though not all of them were able to achieve this.

### **5.1.3 Positive experiences of schooling**

The responses of the participants in this research do not support the conclusions of many earlier research studies (e.g. Bhopal 1998, Gardner and Shukur 1994, Ghuman 1994, Wade and Souter 1992), which found the racism and prejudice of teachers to be one of the main reasons for the educational underachievement of Asian/Muslim girls. Most of the participants in my research said that they had positive experiences of schooling and supportive relationships with their teachers. Rather than depicting their teachers as being prejudiced, racist or Islamophobic, they talked about the positive impact of the support they had received from their teachers and schools, in terms of helping to facilitate their success within the education system. This was true both of those who had attended mainstream public schools and those who had attended private Islamic schools during early childhood. The one exception was Yasmeen, whose account suggested that she had been the victim of prejudiced treatment from a teacher in a way that had a devastating impact on her education.

There does seem to be an issue, however, around the content of the curriculum, particularly for the participants from New York, who seemed to feel that their culture was marginalised within the school curriculum. The participants in



London seem to be less conscious, or less concerned about this, which may be a reflection of the curriculum they have encountered in school or may have more to do with their perceptions about what should be covered within a school curriculum. The US participants' frustration at the failure of the school curriculum to create opportunities for the discussion of Islamic culture and history resonates with other research (e.g. Ahmad and Szpara 2003, Open Society Institute 2005) which suggests that schools are not responsive enough to the religious and cultural needs of different communities. Further research is needed into this issue, to explore the extent to which Muslim history and culture is included within the school curriculum and the potential impact on young people of its inclusion or exclusion.

#### **5.1.4 Family support**

All the research participants described their families as being supportive of their education and keen for them to succeed at school. Several referred to the emphasis placed in the *Qur'an* on the importance of education, including Salma, who said that her parents placed almost too much pressure on her to achieve well at school, and Aminah, who said that one reason her parents migrated to America was to '*give their children the education they deserve*'. Habiba, Sumaya, Yasmeen and Marwa also presented their families as being supportive of their education, ascribing their ability to succeed at school partly to the support they received from their families. This may, in part, be a conscious response to the common perception that the parents of young Muslim women are not supportive of their education; it certainly contrasts with the findings of some other research studies which have suggested that the future ambitions of young Muslim women are restricted to '*acceptable occupations within their culture*' (Sarroub, 2005: 15).

The way in which the participants presented their interactions with parents is particularly interesting in relation to questions about agency and autonomy. Sumaya's comments about the way in which her family encouraged her to achieve well at school suggested that her belief in the importance of education had been

strongly influenced by her family, who encouraged her to work hard and do well at school by drawing attention to the importance of education within Islam. This resonates with other research into the education of young Muslim women living in the West (e.g. Basit 1997, Franceschelli and O'Brien 2014), which emphasizes the extent to which Muslim families with middle class aspirations 'mobilise' Islam in order to transmit social and cultural capital to their children.

Yasmeen's account of the way in which her parents influenced her decision to keep wearing the *hijab* suggested that, although her parents did not impose their view in an authoritarian way, they were able to persuade her that continuing to wear it would be the right thing to do, while making her feel that it was her choice. Like the parents in Franceschelli and O'Brien's (2014) research, it seems that Yasmeen's parents were able to succeed in the process of 'intergenerational transmission' (Franceschelli and O'Brien, 2014: 4) through their mobilisation of Islamic beliefs and principles which were already firmly established within the family. Yasmeen's comment that her father '*had a point*' makes it clear that she has already accepted the premise on which his comments have been made; the effect would presumably have been very different if she did not fundamentally accept the existence and omniscience of God. This is a useful reminder that it is important not to over-simplify issues of agency: it is not just a question of whether or not Yasmeen felt that she was making a free choice, but of the context in which this decision was made.

## **5.2 Research question 2: What can these young Muslim women's accounts of their own educational experiences reveal about how they position themselves and how they respond to the representations, assumptions and expectations they meet in their everyday lives?**

The research findings are consistent with my initial hypothesis that the voices of young Muslim women tend to be marginalized by mainstream discourses in the US and UK, both within the education system and within wider society. The research participants do not, however, seem to perceive themselves as powerless or oppressed victims of this silencing and marginalization.

### 5.2.1 The importance of faith

The research findings suggest there is a significant amount of complexity in the way the participants position themselves in relation to existing discourses about Islam, particularly in relation to Muslims living in the West. All of the US research participants presented their experience of Islam as something positive, benign and enriching. Aminah, for example, described how the prayer ritual had helped her to succeed at her American high school, while Yasmeen said her religion was '*the only thing that ever kept me holding on to my life*' and Marwa said that she had increasingly '*tried to identify myself with my religion*'. There were also contradictions and inconsistencies within the accounts, however, which were not entirely in keeping with this emphasis on the positive impact of Islamic beliefs and practices on the participants' lives. For example, although Yasmeen said that her religious faith was the one thing that kept her going during the difficult time she experienced at high school, she also said that at this point she lost all hope and belief in everything, including her religious faith. It did not seem, therefore, as if her faith provided her with comfort and security during this difficult time but rather that her faith was one of things that was lost, along with her sense of hope, self-respect and the desire to carry on living.

It may be that the participants' apparent desire to present their faith in a positive way is a response to the negative way in which Islam is constructed in mainstream political and media discourse (Esposito 2010, Curtis 2012). Two out of three of the UK participants, Habiba and Sumaya, demonstrated a particularly strong sense of defensiveness and protectiveness about Islam. Salma was the only participant who did not express a strong affiliation to Islam; she was critical of some aspects of Islamic religious beliefs and practices, such as the hijab and fasting, and the hypocrisy she perceives in some of those adhering to them. As with the US participants, however, there were a number of tensions within the participants' accounts, including Habiba's comment that 'I shouldn't really say this' and Sumaya's acceptance of a 'traditional' role of women within Islam, which did not seem to be in keeping with the political views she expressed in other parts of the interview.

This apparent desire to defend and protect Islam is in keeping with Haddad's argument that, in the post-9/11 context, many women came to see the mosque as a 'shelter' or 'safe space' (Haddad, 2007: 263-4) from the hostility or alienation they experienced in the outside world. It seems as if the research participants, aware of existing negative perceptions of Islam, chose to challenge this by presenting an almost entirely positive image of Islamic beliefs and practices. This also resonates with Mirza's (2013) account of the extent to which Islam is central to the identities of the participants in her research, as a 'conscious site of memory and belonging' (Mirza, 2013: 11). The word 'conscious' is important here; it does seem as if the participants in my research were choosing to identify with Islam as a way of creating for themselves a sense of community that may otherwise have been difficult to find.

### **5.2.2 Creating a sense of 'home'**

Esposito argues that 'Muslim integration into society is more difficult in Europe than it is in America', mainly because Muslim migrants to the US tend to be highly educated and skilled, in comparison with Muslim migrants to Europe, many of who came 'primarily as laborers and blue-collar workers' (Esposito, 2010: 25). My research findings do not entirely support this conclusion, though they do suggest that there are differences in the experiences of Muslim migrants to the US and UK in terms of the process of finding, or creating, a sense of 'home'.

The participants from New York place a stronger emphasis on the importance of national identity and allegiance to America as a nation, claiming affiliation with a particular conception of American values and culture in addition to their loyalty and allegiance to Islam. Yasmeen, for example, described herself as a '*proud American*', while Aminah described herself as '*very patriotic*'. The British participants, on the other hand, do not appear to feel such a strong need, or desire, to inscribe themselves into a particular national identity; or perhaps, in the absence of a coherent and universally accepted conception of 'British' values and culture, this is simply not available to them. This resonates with

Contractor's argument that young Muslim women living in the UK are still in the process of developing a coherent 'British Muslim identity', which is made more difficult by the contentious nature of 'Britishness' (Contractor, 2012: 147).

The research findings also suggest that the participants are aware that, as first or second-generation migrants from Muslim majority countries, they are likely to be perceived as bringing with them a set of values, beliefs and practices that may not be seen as entirely compatible with mainstream UK and US society. This helps to explain why they were so keen to present themselves as hard-working, well-motivated students and to present their families as supportive and encouraging of their education. The uncertainty and instability around identity and belonging, which often accompany the migrant experience, were particularly evident in the accounts of the US participants. In both locations, however, it was clear that the participants were involved in complex negotiations about their positioning within British or American society. Marwa exhibited a strong commitment to Islam and her 'Arab' identity, while also embracing Western culture in her on-stage performance as Tina Turner. Salma, meanwhile, responded to pressure from other students to conform to expectations of young Bangladeshi women by saying '*I don't like Bengali people*' and dismissing cultural beliefs and traditions, as if she had been alienated from her own religious and cultural identity.

This resonates with the emphasis of other researchers on the way in which migrant communities navigate opportunities for the expression of multiple, hybrid identities (Shain 2003, Hussain 2005). For the participants in my research, this does not seem to be an easy or straightforward process; instead, it is one filled with tension and anxiety, as these young Muslim women negotiate between the traditions in which they have been brought up and the possibilities available to them within British and American society (Suleiman 2009). This is exemplified by the way in which Aminah talks about the 'American dream'; it seems as if she wants to believe that anyone who works hard enough will be able to achieve their goals and build a better life, even though she knows that this is not always in reality the case. Or it may simply be that, since this is perceived as

such a cornerstone of American values, it is something to which she feels she needs to express allegiance

All of the research participants, in both locations, are evidently still in the process of trying to make sense of themselves and the world around them. This seems to involve trying to balance loyalty to Islam and 'Arab' culture with a desire to fit in to mainstream society and also trying to inscribe themselves into British or American identity, without losing sense of belonging to another culture and religion. While these kinds of negotiations may be typical for many adolescents, it seems that, for young Muslim women, the process is complicated by a wide range of additional questions and tensions. In all of their accounts, there is tension between different elements of their identities; a key question appears to be working out what it means to be a young Muslim, from a migrant family, living in the West during a time of conflict between the West and the Muslim majority world.

### **5.2.3 Cultural heritage**

For all the participants, it was clear that cultural heritage was important, though their sense of its value and importance was not straightforward and was expressed in distinctly different ways. The participants from London, whose parents all came from Bangladesh, expressed a weaker sense of affiliation with the cultural heritage of their parents and less resistance to the idea of assimilation or integration. None of the participants expressed particular connections to Bangladesh or a desire to retain their Bangladeshi culture and heritage. This was most markedly the case with Salma, who seemed to have completely rejected her Bangladeshi heritage and culture.

The participants from New York seemed to have a stronger sense of connection with their cultural heritage and the countries from which their parents had emigrated. Yasmeen, for example, said that she believed she would have found it easier to grow up in a Muslim country because then she would not have experienced so much hostility as a result of being Muslim. Elsewhere in her interview, however, Yasmeen expressed a strong sense of affiliation with the US, saying

that she saw herself as a proud American who wouldn't tolerate people who constantly criticised the country they had chosen to call home. It seemed that Yasmeen, like some of the other participants, was conflicted between loyalty to the US and the fact that she has been made to feel like an outsider in post-9/11 New York. She is, therefore, struggling to make sense of the way she has been treated in the places she considers to be home (Ahmed 2009, Esposito 2010) and there is a real sense of tension about the way in which she attempts to make sense of the 'American' and 'Muslim' aspects of her identity (Sirin and Fine, 2007: 159).

#### **5.2.4 The question of 'veiling'**

One of the areas of complexity which young Muslim women living in the US and UK must negotiate is that of the wearing of the *hijab*, which is often seen as a particularly contentious or controversial issue in relation to Muslims living in the West because of the extent to which it identifies Muslim women as visibly 'different' or 'other'.

My research findings do not support the argument that young women choose to wear the *hijab* as a symbol of pride in their religious identities or a way of resisting the demonization of Islam (Haddad 2007). The accounts do, however, explore a range of complex issues relating to the wearing of the *hijab*. Aminah, for example, recounted her experience of feeling personally insulted when a fellow student referred to the *hijab* as a 'do-rag', even though she was not wearing it herself at the time. Salma, meanwhile, described how she had been discouraged by her parents from wearing it when she was younger, before a change of heart by her father led to him encouraging her to wear it during *Ramadan*. The research findings also resonate with other research suggesting that Muslim women wearing the *hijab* have become increasingly the target for abuse and discrimination (Ahmed 2011, Elver 2012), with several of the research participants recounting experiences of being abused or harassed in public as a result of wearing it.

Both in London and in New York, the participants reported receiving negative comments in relation to their wearing of the *hijab*. The way in which the partici-

pants in both locations described people's reactions to their wearing of the *hijab* resonates with Ahmed's argument that it has become 'a quintessential sign (among other things) of irresolvable tension and confrontation between Islam and the West' (Ahmed, 2011: 6). It also resonates with the findings of other research (e.g. Open Society Institute 2005, Elver 2012, Allen, Isakjee and Young 2013) that Muslim women wearing the *hijab* have, in the years following the 9/11 attacks, increasingly been singled out for discrimination, harassment and abuse

The way in which the research participants respond to these experiences is important because of the way it illustrates their sense of agency and refusal to accept the role of victim. Aminah, for example, responds assertively to Melanie's derogatory comments about the headscarf, just as she does to being teased about her own name; she vigorously contests the right of another student to criticise elements of her religious and culture, and claims her own right to defend them. Aminah's presentation of her response to Melanie resonates with Shain's (2003) category of 'religious prioritisation', which involves young women working hard to achieve academic success while also positive asserting their religious identities and responding 'defiantly' when an aspect of their religious identity is attacked (Shain, 2003: 56).



## **Chapter 6: Conclusions**

This chapter explores some of the potential implications of this research, both in terms of my own professional practice and in relation to the distinct contribution to knowledge which is made by this thesis. It also sets out some reflections on the methodology and suggestions for further research.

### **6.1 Conclusions**

My research suggests that educators working with young Muslim women in the UK and US need to take account of the complex negotiations between different identities, beliefs and affiliations in which these young women are involved, alongside the usual transitions and uncertainty of adolescence and within the context of local, national and global changes to conceptions of identity, culture, community, citizenship and belonging (Bauman 2007). It is not as simple as identifying the problems these young women encounter within the UK and US education systems or how the structures of these systems discriminate against them. There is also a need to account for the wider historical, social, political and economic context, and the agency young people exercise in the process of negotiating and articulating their own identities and their allegiances to various sets of values, ideas and principles.

Biesta argues that policy-makers and politicians tend to conceive of education as an instrument for the 'production' of good citizens' (Biesta 2010). One focus of my research was to explore what this means for young Muslims living in the West in the early years of the twenty-first century. Bauman argues that, for migrant communities, a dislocation often exists between the desire to preserve traditional, 'solid' values and the 'increasingly fluid, "liquidized"' nature of mainstream society (Bauman, 2000: 125). My research suggests that this may be particularly true for young Muslim women living in the West, not only because of the way in which Muslims have historically been constructed as the uncivilized 'other' (Said 1979) but also as a result of the way in which recent events, including the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks in London and New York have

continued to construct Islam and Muslims in this way. For young Muslim women living in New York and London, negotiating the 'apparent conflict' (Esposito and Mogahed, 2008: 182) between religious identity and gender equality is potentially even more complex than it is for those who live in Muslim majority countries, because of the extent to which their adherence to Islamic beliefs and practices is perceived to symbolise the conservation and continuation of particular religious and cultural traditions.

It is also important for educators to be aware of the challenges faced by young Muslim women within wider British and American society. Bigo and Tsoukala (2008) argue that the growing insecurity and unease amongst the British and American public during the post-9/11 era can be seen as part of a coherent and distinctive set of '(in)securitization processes' which form part of what they describe as a 'politics of unease', associated with 'the development of many diverse mechanisms of surveillance, with global capitalism and unemployment, with urbanism and a planet of slums, with the conditions of late modern society and the roots of uncertainty of life.' (Bigo and Tsoukala 2008: 7). This involves, almost inevitably, growing distrust and intolerance of foreigners, migrants and outsiders, and increasingly negative representations of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in the media (KhosraviNik 2008). It is within this context that schools must attempt to create 'cohesive communities' and to take a central role in 'the development of pupils' sense of identity' (DfEE 2000: 3).

One challenge for educators is to find ways of exploring sensitive issues relating to faith, culture and community. While working at Hazel Grove, I often found it difficult to be sure about how best to talk to students about these issues particularly in the years immediately following the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks when there was a great deal of sensitivity around any kind of discussion about the experiences of Muslims living in the West. Carrying out this research has helped me to have a much better understanding of the ways in which these young women's lives are affected by these issues and the extent to which their educational experiences are shaped by them. It has made me convinced that, rather than avoiding discussion of such sensitive topics, it is essential to create time and space for young people to talk about them, because they are evidently such powerful and

important elements of their lives. It has also made me appreciate, in a way I had not anticipated, the difficulties faced by young women like Salma who feel distanced and alienated from elements of their own cultural heritage.

Although I am no longer working at Hazel Grove, the research has influenced my own professional practice in a number of ways. In my current role as Programme Leader for the Secondary PGCE at the IOE, I am responsible for around 650 student teachers who, as part of their course, undertake teaching practice in schools across London and the south-east of England. This includes a small but significant number of young Muslim women, whose experiences have not previously been the subject of research and about whom I would like to learn more. Working with such a large and diverse student body, it is impossible for me to be aware of each individual's experiences, but the research has made me aware of the importance of taking steps to try to create an inclusive community within which the culture and heritage of every student is valued and celebrated. I have also started to make changes to the programme of study to include more opportunities for trainees to discuss and reflect on the kind of issues explored in this thesis, both in relation to their own experiences and those of the young people with whom they are working while on teaching practice. This is a work in progress, but I believe it has the potential to make a substantial, positive difference to the trainees and the pupils with whom they work.

## **6.2 Reflections on the Methodology**

Like many other forms of qualitative enquiry, narrative inquiry requires the researcher to conduct interviews, analyse data and interpret findings. One potential problem with this kind of research is the subjectivity of the researcher; since the researcher is the main 'research instrument', there is a risk of becoming too close to the participants and the data. Qualitative researchers also inevitably draw on their own world views, values and perspectives, and can therefore never claim to be entirely objective. Most qualitative researchers, however, argue that such subjectivity is not necessarily a failing; Hesse-Biber

and Leavy (2006) argue that 'most qualitative paradigms agree on the importance of subjective meanings individuals bring to the research process' (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006: 79). I believe that, as long as narrative researchers are open and honest about their own subjectivities and provide sufficient detail about their decisions, concerns about unprincipled subjectivity can be guarded against. In relation to my research, the process of entering into relationship with the participants was an important element of the means by which I was able to access their accounts and my subjective involvement with them was not a failing but an important part of the process.

The most challenging aspect of this research study for me, in terms of the research process, was finding a suitable approach to the analysis of the data gathered from my interviews with the participants. Following the lengthy process of transcribing the recordings of these interviews, I had to work out how to approach the coding and re-coding of the transcripts in order to make sense of them, to identify common themes and to prepare for writing the accounts. This was not an area in which I had a substantial amount of training or experience, which meant that I was, to some extent, learning how to analyse the data as I went along. This meant the process took longer than it otherwise would have done, which was unfortunate.

### **6.3 Suggestions for further research**

The findings of this research study suggest a number of further avenues for further research, including:

- A larger scale narrative study of the experiences of young Muslim women living in the London and New York.
- Further mixed methods studies of the experiences of young Muslim women living in these contexts.
- Further narrative studies of the experiences of marginalised groups

whose voices are not usually heard in mainstream discourse.

- Further mixed methods studies of the educational experiences of migrant groups living in the West and the ways in which they position themselves in relation to dominant discourses about faith, culture and community.

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**Appendix 1a: Information letter for participants (London)**

July 2011

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

**Doctoral Research Project: Institute of Education**

I am writing to ask permission for your involvement in a research project as part of my studies for the Doctor in Education degree at the Institute of Education.

The part of the project which I am leading involves a detailed study of the educational experiences of the young women at Hazel Grove. The main focus of my research is to find out more about what it is like to be a young Muslim woman growing up and being educated in east London.

In the interviews, I will ask you and the other young women to talk honestly about your experiences, so that I can gain a better understanding of the factors that have influenced your educational experiences, both inside and outside of school.

The information gathered during the course of the research will be written up as part of my doctoral studies and may be published in an educational journal, but this will not involve the use of students' names or anything else that can identify them individually.

If you have any concerns about this research project, or do not wish to be involved for any reason, please complete the reply slip below and return it to me.

Yours sincerely,

Katharine Vincent

**Assistant Headteacher**

Name: ..... Date: .....

I do not to take part in this research project.

Signed .....

Name.....

**Appendix 1b: Information letter for participants (New York)**

Friday 6<sup>th</sup> April 2012

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

**Doctoral Research Project: Institute of Education**

I am writing to inform you about a research project in which we would like you to be involved through the \_\_\_\_\_ group at \_\_\_\_\_. The project is part of a larger research study led by Dr Arshad Ali from Teachers College, Columbia University and is also part of my studies for the Doctor in Education degree at the Institute of Education in London, UK.

The part of the project with I am leading involves a detailed study of the educational experiences of the young women in \_\_\_\_\_. As you know, we have been working together for the last few months and are currently preparing for a presentation at the TIDE Conference in Boston at the end of May; I would now like to conduct some interviews with members of the group.

The main focus of my research is to find out more about what it is like to be a young Muslim woman growing up in New York City in the last ten years. In the interviews, I will ask you to talk honestly about your experiences during this time, so that I can gain a better understanding of the factors that have influenced your educational experiences, both inside and outside of school.

The information gathered during the course of the research will be written up as part of my doctoral studies and may be published in an educational journal, but this will not involve the use of your name, the names of other members of \_\_\_\_\_ or anything else that can identify you individually.

If you have any concerns about this research project, or do not wish to be involved for any reason, please complete the reply slip below and return it to me at \_\_\_\_\_.

Yours sincerely,

Katharine Vincent

**Visiting Researcher  
Teachers College, Columbia University**

Name: .....

Date: .....

I do not wish to take part in this research project.

Signed .....

**Appendix 2a: Informed consent letter for parents (London)**

July 2011

Dear parent/carer,

**Doctoral Research Project: Institute of Education**

I am writing to ask permission for your daughter, ..... to be involved in a research project as part of my studies for the Doctor in Education degree at the Institute of Education.

The part of the project which I am leading involves a detailed study of the educational experiences of the young women at Hazel Grove. The main focus of my research is to find out more about what it is like to be a young Muslim woman growing up and being educated in east London.

In the interviews, I will ask the young women to talk honestly about their experiences, so that I can gain a better understanding of the factors that have influenced their educational experiences, both inside and outside of school.

The information gathered during the course of the research will be written up as part of my doctoral studies and may be published in an educational journal, but this will not involve the use of students' names or anything else that can identify them individually.

If you have any concerns about this research project, or do not wish for your daughter to be involved for any reason, please complete the reply slip below and return it to me at the school.

Yours sincerely,

Katharine Vincent

**Assistant Headteacher**

Name: ..... Date: .....

I do not wish for my daughter to take part in this research project.

Signed .....

Relationship to child: .....

## Appendix 2b: Informed consent letter for parents (New York)

Friday 6<sup>th</sup> April 2012

Dear parent/carer,

### Doctoral Research Project: Institute of Education

I am writing to ask permission for your daughter, ..... to be involved in a research project through the \_\_\_\_\_ group at \_\_\_\_\_. The project is part of a research study led by Dr Arshad Ali from Teachers College, Columbia University and is also part of my studies for the Doctor in Education degree at the Institute of Education in London, UK.

The part of the project which I am leading involves a detailed study of the educational experiences of the young women in \_\_\_\_\_. As you may know, I have been working with these young women for the last few months and we are currently preparing for a presentation at the TIDE Conference in Boston at the end of May; I would now like to conduct some interviews with members of the group.

The main focus of my research is to find out more about what it is like to be a young Muslim woman growing up in New York City in the last ten years. In the interviews, I will ask the young women to talk honestly about their experiences during this time, so that I can gain a better understanding of the factors that have influenced their educational experiences, both inside and outside of school.

The information gathered during the course of the research will be written up as part of my doctoral studies and may be published in an educational journal, but this will not involve the use of students' names or anything else that can identify them individually.

If you have any concerns about this research project, or do not wish for your daughter to be involved for any reason, please complete the reply slip below and return it to me at the \_\_\_\_\_.

Yours sincerely,

Katharine Vincent

**Visiting Researcher  
Teachers College, Columbia University**

Name: ..... Date: .....

I do not wish for my daughter to take part in this research project.

Signed .....

Relationship to child: .....

### Appendix 3: Example of interview transcript

#### Interview with Aminah May 2012

<p>So, I'd like you to give me an account of your educational experiences, focusing on some of the most significant things that have happened to them during your educational life. Have you got any memories of your earliest education?</p>
<p>Yeah I went to preschool, and I always loved it school, you know, I always found interest in reading because my mom and my dad always stressed the importance of education. You know, the reason why they came to the United States of America was to give their children the education that they deserve. Even in Morocco, although that's great education has no opportunity yes technically you could say most of the kids in Morocco are much smarter than American students, but once they get their Ph.D. they do nothing with that and they have nowhere to go. You know, they're selling doughnuts in the corner or something. For example my aunt, she has a Ph.D. in physics but at this time she's not working, she sits at home. In the United States, someone who has a Ph.D. in physics would never be sitting at home doing nothing, waking up to make bread and stuff, that would never happen but that happens in Morocco.</p>
<p>So your parents have always talked to you about that?</p>
<p>Yes, my parents have always stressed the importance of education and how knowledge is the key to success, and knowledge is power, and only through that can make a difference in the world and impact others.</p>
<p>So tell me about preschool, your teachers and the other students?</p>
<p>Preschool was really fun, I remember there were different activities, but I would sometimes, not knowing, I would use English and Arabic in the class. And that was just because at home and I would even try some French sometimes because that was at home I used to speak English Arabic and French or three so I would just like jumbled up together and make it like my own language when I went to school, so the teachers always wondered sometimes what I'm saying. Then I realised that she doesn't understand what I'm saying, but I thought everyone spoke the languages I spoke, but then I realised, my mom had to explain that not everyone speaks Arabic and not everyone speaks French, and English is the language of the United States...</p>
<p>So you had to divide those languages into different compartments?</p>
<p>Exactly.</p>
<p>And what was that like, was that hard, do you remember?</p>
<p>It wasn't really hard because Arabic was taught to me every Saturday and Sunday and Friday in the mosque, and then during school you know as homework I would read books and my mom would always take me to the library and I would just get books and books and books. Everything would be in English, so I knew that the school and I knew that Arabic was for you know the mosque and at home and talking my parents. Did you enjoy those lessons in the mosque, what were they like?</p>
<p>Oh they were awesome. I remember we would always, Shaikh Ahmed was his name, and we would sit in a circle and it was just like the beginning of learning about Islam and just telling us different stories and telling us if we need anything, if anything happens, just talk to god. I used to all the time talk to god, I thought of god as my friend and until this day I do think of god as my friend and always having my back and everything. So that was something that was enforced at a very young age. And also, they would always make it fun, you know any child loves incorporating fun with anything to do with learning about religion, so you know you would do colouring in and you would have parties, you'd be discussing a certain topic in Islam and you would have different, you know each week different topics. Also my preschool was an Islamic school.</p>
<p>Really?</p>
<p>Yes</p>

How was that, was it different do you think to a regular school? Well it was quite different because your curriculum was based on learning Islam and learning Arabic and English at the same time, which means that at a young age religion was a big part of my life. But if I went to a public school, for example, I would not be learning you know Arabic or learning about Eden, Islam. I believe things stick with you much more when you learn them at a young age, it's just the way it works, like if at 25 years old you're going to learn a language it's, going to be harder than that if you teach a three year old the language they're just like, you know it comes natural to them because their brain is just developing. And can you know take that in easier.
it's interesting how you describe your experience of going to the mosque in particular because I think that some people that just involves memorising doesn't it
yes
it's seems that you had a very positive experience?
definitely and especially our shake he was just one of the coolest people I know and I still go to Queens to my Islamic school, it was at Astoria queens and it's just really cool realising that religion is made to build character and how everything enforces something else. For example, without prayer I would never have learned organisation from where I learned...so now in school a lot of people have trouble with organisation and they procrastinate, but I know, you know my dad always tells me that the world runs on people who can control their emotions and who wake up early and you know for prayer I would wake up early every single day you know four forty five or five o'clock. I know this is time to do this. Those people who are not organised in life, they're not able to do any thing, it's the way the world works, we work with time.
So you always have that kind of structure to your day?
Exactly.
A sense of the day being broken up into of blocks of time?
Yeah exactly and that's only, you know, when there's something to do you set a time, for example from 10am to 5pm this is the time for that. Because every time, you know when it was time to pray you stop whatever you're doing and go do that, and then come back to it.
So Islam was a very essential part of your life from a very young age?
Yes 100%, 100%.
So after preschool, did you go to...
I went to a public school. I remember one of my teachers, Ms Crunch her name was and she was just awesome. I always wanted, I remember we had this little table, like this little table where she would choose monitors and I would want to be the monitor for everything. Like I would want to be the paper monitor, the door monitor, everything, and she told me you can only be the monitor for one thing, and I would tell her that I want to be the monitor for everything, and she would be like you have to share. Also I would want to do everything. We would have different activities and she would be like, guys today you can choose one thing you want to do. I would want to be in the kitchen but at the same time go to the listening station, and then at the same time go to get a book, or do them at the same time!
So you were a good student?
yes definitely
and did you get on well with the other students
a hundred percent. I was, I always used to share everything I had, so the teacher once had to call my mom and tell her that I was giving everything away. I would give them my food, so that I would have no food, and my crayons, my mom would always have to buy new crayons because I would give them out to everyone else. They would never, you know they were little and I was little, so they wouldn't really return it, so my mom would say where are your crayons and I'd be like, I don't know I gave them out. She told me you have to share, but also make sure you get them back. And with my food I would always just like you know, if someone didn't have anything and was hun-

gry I'd be like here you know
that's very generous of you! how did you feel as a Moroccan Arab American Muslim girl, did you feel, were you at a school that was quite diverse?
yes definitely quite diverse
so did you feel different, or did you just feel one amongst lots of people?
it was both. sometimes you knew you were different, but at the same time you, but you were still among everyone else because when you're children, you don't really see those distinct lines, you don't discuss that. but just the idea that, for example being a minority you have more sympathy towards other minorities. So a lot of them, like so a lot of the kids, for example and my dad always, I remember my dad in school, for example when we were learning about Christopher Columbus you know 1492 he helped the people, but I knew first hand that he was evil. because?
Because he killed, he let a genocide, he mass murdered people with the idea that people who are like him are better than everyone else. but everyone else in the class declared him as a hero, declared him as this victorious, you know, man who was character and great characteristics, but in reality he didn't discover the land, he was just, you know there are other people who discovered it, he just made it well known to people.
Well of course there were other people already here?
The same thing you know when we were learning about Martin Luther King, you know there was always that book where we would learn about Jackie Robinson and then you start realising that you're not the same as everyone else, that there are some people in the world that actually think that you are different because I'm from Morocco, and that you're not like everyone else. You know, when your family member comes and picks you up and your parents don't look like their parents and then they wonder, they ask you the next day oh the hijab, or they ask you questions like that, and you just think of it as regular because it's your life, but then when it's questioned you look back and go home and you say oh mom, why this, why that? So you start asking so many questions
Did the other kids say things which wee you know that were negative or were they just curious at that age?
it was something that was not even really discussed, it was just brought up and then forgotten, then we went onto the next thing.
so they would just ask why?
yes something really simple and not really thought about. But the thing it that we live and, you know the reason why I'm very lucky is that because we live in New York and I definitely know 100% if we did not live in New York it would be totally different. my story would have been altered up 100%. I totally believe this. my story would have been altered 100%
in a bad way, or just in a different way?
in a different way. my story would be altered, because in school it wasn't only me that was Arabic, it was diverse, everyone looks different. The people who were different, the people who were considered to be different, were actually the people who were white, because there was so few of them. so it was like you know, juxtapose the reality of many other places
so that what's so special about New York, that it's so diverse, that there are so many people from different places?
100%. I remember, I was coming right now and there was this sign, New Yorkers tolerate all ethnicities but they don't tolerate bad shoes! And I was like, you know what, that's just so true. We are some of the most tolerant people, because, you know when people came from different places the place where, you know think of Ellis Island, that's where they stopped, that's where their life began, in New York, it was nowhere else but in New York and from there they migrated to different areas. But in New York you have a microcosm of the world.



Is it partly about people coming here with the beliefs that your parents have taught you - it sounds almost as if your parents think you should be grateful about the opportunities you have in this country compared with where you came from?
definitely. 100%. my dad always says you should be very very grateful for the opportunities given to you, and never take anything granted in life, and I hold that with me today. I think if everything given to my parents in Morocco was given to them on a platter, then I wouldn't have those values within me. And even though in Morocco they were considered, you know my family were considered middle-class, and they had, you know they always ate, they didn't have problems pertaining to that. It was just your neighbours would have those problems, and when you see your neighbours having this problem that hurts you because it's like you feel sympathetic and empathetic, you feel that you want to help them
but there are people aren't there, even in New York, who are prejudiced or who discriminate against other people, it's not paradise is it?
No, no, paradise is being idealistic, there is no such thing as paradise. there's always you know people who are ignorant towards everything, or towards certain issues. You're always going to find those people because it's the world, you have everything of everything.
okay so elementary school was awesome, you had a great time, studied hard, you had lots of friends and got on well with the teachers. Then junior high school?
Junior high school was awesome too! but then that's when you started seeing people asking questions, like when you would come in and not eat for Ramadan, and it's not like they had a section of the people who were fasting. You sat with everyone else and they would tell you why are you not eating and you would be like I'm fasting and I would say I'm fasting so I can see how the poor people feel, and they would be like are you hungry? And I would be like you know not really because my mom would make sure to wake us up early so we would have breakfast in our body, in our system. And they would question a lot of things. And that's the age when a lot of girls start wearing the hijab, so they would ask you like...
And did you wear it at that time?
No I didn't, I've never won it but inshallah I want to in the future. But they would always ask questions like, oh what is that about? Because when you're in sixth grade, the first grade of the junior high school I went to, they teach you global history. And global history you stop dealing with the crusades, you start seeing you know King Richard the Heart of the Lions as opposed to Salah ah Din, who looks different, and your teachers never explain to you in elementary school, and when a teacher puts up a picture of someone who's dressed in robes, like Salah ah Din, as opposed to someone more familiar to the idea of of king, so you could imagine, you know the idea of the King Richard. So you start saying what's going on here, whois the good one, who is the bad one? Because we're always taught that there is good and there is evil, so when you see two people who expect one to be good and you expect one to be evil ,and you know what then they just assume that the one who was Salah ah Din was the evil one but you look more like him?
Yes, but by my father looks more like Salah ah Din, and, yeah...
So that's an interesting dynamic in terms of your experience of the curriculum
100%
Did that come up a lot or just occasionally
It came up a lot, because I'm really into history, and all my history projects had to pertain to the Arab world. In the math project it talked about the mathematician Al Khurwazi. When it came to my sixth grade history project, I won second place, it was about the crusades. You know, everything, all my history project always had to, and then in the eighth grade they had to do with Islam, the idea of Islam and how it has you know become a world religion.
And how did it make you feel, constantly negotiating the complexity of that, because

it's complex isn't it?
Yes it's definitely complex, but also I come from, I come from, my family, my dad I remember was telling me, you know there's nothing to fear but fear itself. And I was never really scared of anyone except for God because I knew she controlled whether, you know, and my dad always said, do not care what other people say, as long as you can look in the mirror and be happy about what you're doing and your actions. And I took up with me my whole entire life, because I was like you know what I'm able to want to say and if I'm happy with that and if I feel that's what God wants me to do, and my parents are happy, then that's what I'm going to do.
So you navigated junior high school and those kinds of things came up but you dealt with them?
Yes. There were always people who said things, like for example there was this girl, I remember her, and I actually saw her three days ago, from junior high school. She used to call the hijab a dourak, a dourak, and I used to take that to great offence. And I used to tell her, you know Melanie that's not a dourak, that's a hijab, it's something holy. And she would make fun of my name, and I would say don't make fun of my name because it's making fun of my religion, and she would say, you know they would start laughing and stuff. And I was always the one who, you know, and to this day I just don't care what people say. Like sometimes I would come home and be like mom, why are people so mean, why are people not, why are people not taught what you talk to me? you know because my mums was always like, immediately when something was introduced that was different, my mom would say, they are the same, just to reinforce in my mind that every person is the same. Even if it was someone, you when when I was younger, someone in a wheelchair and you start looking at them, without even meaning to be mean, and my mom would say stop looking at them, they're the same as you! And I remember when I went to Morocco, the was a kid who had a skin disease, and I kept on staring, even when my mom was dragging me, taking my hands and walking, I just just kept on looking back to look at the kid because he was different and I remember my mom saying in Arabic, never in your life look at someone like that because they are different. Look at someone like that for their character, and if their character is you know not what you think it should be, but never judge a person by that, only judge a person by their character, not by the content of their skin
So you learnt that so strongly...
Very young!
That was so deeply instilled in you, that you dealt with things within that framework?
Definitely.
And, did, does that come, for your parents does it come from their religious beliefs, are they very religious or is it more than that?
Yes my dad was an activist in Morocco, against the King of Morocco, and he always said that when you see something wrong, you stand up, be the change you want to see in the world. And with that I always said, if something is wrong, I have to take charge. I've always thought that I have to be the one who started making the change, and I always felt like it was my job, no matter what. Even in class, I've always felt like I was the representative of Islam, I was the representative of Arabic people, and other kids in my class wouldn't want to stand up, but I was that like it was my duty in the world to say what had to be said.
So that didn't feel like a burden, it was almost something you wanted to do?
As a child, I was happy because it gave me power, having extra responsibility. When you're younger, you always want more responsibility and, you know, when your mum doesn't even let you cross the street, you think it's cool because you get to stand up and say something in class and make everyone think about it. So that's how I took it.
So like you wanted to be the monitor for everything, you were happy to have that responsibility, whereas some people might want to have kept their head down?
Definitely.

So your personality, in a way, and the way your parents have shaped you as a person, gave you, it sounds like it gave you the skills to deal with these experiences in a very constructive way.
100%. Yes.
Okay, so, high school, what was that like?
Awesome!
It's just now finishing, isn't it?
Yes. I finish June 28th, inshallah. High school was where I learned the most, I have to say. Everything else gave me the foundation and made me the person I was in high school, but in high school this is where people discuss, this is where people were curious. People asked questions, analysed, criticised. You learn in school analysis, but that doesn't stay in the classroom, the analysis goes beyond the classroom into the outside world and into the outside environment. You get into debates. In AP world history, your teacher says something, that's when you know that your teacher is not always the smartest one and you say no, I disagree with you. When she talks about, for example, a Muslim in a negative way, because this is where the topics are no longer taught at a basic level, this is where you go in depth with things.
And did your teachers do that, talk about Muslims in a negative way?
I believe, because I always make excuses for people, I believe that she did it because that's the way she was brought up. She didn't do it because she was trying to be rude, but it was just something that was so instilled in her brain but she believes this to be the truth.
Tell me more.
Just, in general...okay so we would talk about, and this was done naturally, you would talk about you know different time periods and everything is emphasized. The golden age - two days. Two days! And I was ready for the golden age, I kept asking when are we going to do the golden age, because I was like yeah, the golden age, I know so much, I'm going to be able to tell you guys everything about this because it's what I know. And she went through it as if it was nothing, as to take so many years, decades, and just put it into one little thing and I took that as an offence. It's as if it's not worth being told about, its not worth being taught to my fellow classmates and it's not worth them knowing about what I believe to be great people. And even with religions, she didn't talk about Islam, she talked about it very little, and I would say every other religion she talked about the long periods of time, like a week and a half.
So did you say something about this?
Of course, 100% I said something about it ! And she said no it's just a very small history, so there's nothing much to be discussed. And I started telling her this and that, and knowing, but then, being a smart person, I realised that she makes my grade, so I was like shut up because she's the one who's going to give me my report! And my dad said, you always talk but you have to have credentials and credibility, so you don't go full force until you have something to back yourself up with. So if I want to talk, that's why it's so important to get my education, so if I have my Ph.D. for example in Islamic relations, just for example as a topic, if I have my Ph.D. that gives me credentials, it gives me the right to be in the discussion, because you can't be in a discussion if you don't know what's being discussed.
So you're a pragmatist in some ways, aren't you, challenging your teacher but not pushing it too far?
100%
Because you don't want to cause trouble, and you know you're not going to gain any-

thing from making a fight out of it.
100%
Okay, so did that happen many times, or was that, was that a big thing for you in high school?
Like this was also in junior high school, seeing you know Islam not being talked about as much, and this is your life, you know, this is what you know and this is what you believe to be history.
So your history and culture of being marginalised, being sidelined?
Yes exactly, being sidelined and putting others in the forefront. And when you discuss a topic greatly, you always say this is more important? In any other subject, for example in physics, if waves are what's the most, if that topic is what you're going to find in the Regents, that's what's your teacher discusses the most. She will say that waves, frequency and all of the different formulas... well, so if it's not discussed, are you saying it's not important? And that's what was being passed on to my mind, is she saying that I'm not important? Because she's not talking about me, she's not talking about my family. So, yeah, and as it went on, you started to realise that history repeats itself. You know, the Chinese exclusion act of 1882, you have at one point the Japs, the Nazis, even though not all Germans were Nazis, they were considered to be Nazis. Internment camps for the Japanese people... and you start realising, well this is a re- occurrence, there is something wrong with the foundation of the United States of America. As my dad says, and even Churchill said, democracy is not perfect but it's the best, you know, of what there is. And I always said yes, that's true, nothing will ever be perfect, but don't you try to strive, you know if we are the world's leading superpower then let us strive to be excellent in everything we do, and that includes treating all people equally. Because I've always had this foundation that we are one place and that's the human race, but when you see people constantly, especially politicians, the representatives that our nation, not abiding with this, you start to say wow, there is problem here, there is a big problem and what can I do about it?
Okay, so what are you going to do about it, what are you doing after high school?
After high school I'm going to obviously go to college, and that was never a question for me. Graduating high school is not a big step, its something that was expected. High school is, for example in Morocco people don't celebrate graduating high school, you have to graduate high school, and not having a high school diploma is sad! And especially in the United States, you know if you can't acquire, with all the help and all the resources there are in the United States, if you can't acquire a high school diploma there something wrong with you and something has to be reevaluated. But I want to go to college, I want to double major in pre-med and International Studies, join Doctors without Borders, after joining Doctors Without Borders I want to work on health policy in the United States of America and around the world, because I truly believe that health is the number one, without health you have nothing. And I think that's really important, even though I think there are so many issues with health it gives people the strength to speak, you know if you're sick you can't leave your bed, so it's like the foundation that allows people to do what they want to do in life.
And do you feel that this is going to be within your grasp, do you feel it's going to be easy for you to achieve?

Um...nothing in life that's worth fighting for is easy, so it's definitely not going to be easy, but I can do anything I want and I still believe that. That's where, even though you question what is the American dream, and that term is always thrown out as if it's nothing, but people still come with the notion that when they come to America, they have the opportunity to do whatever they want in the world, and I still truly believe in that. Because I've seen it you know first hand, with people who study hard and work hard and they become something in the end. And anything that is within my grasp, if I work hard.

Is it going to be yours to shape in the next few years, do you feel that you have that autonomy, for example to your family put pressure on you in terms of what you should do, or do they give you a lot of reading about your choices?

They give me, my dad always says every job is important, as long as you're not a prostitute, you sell drugs, or steal, whatever you do is okay, as long as you contribute back to society. He said those people collect cans, I would always say they're so dirty, but he said they're trying to make ends meet, at least they're not selling drugs, one person's trash in another person's treasure, they're doing what they can. So that's why my dad always says, you have the choice to be, as long as you can look in the mirror and be proud of what you're doing.

So they encourage you?

Yes, 100%.

And they are happy for you to decide.

Yes, freedoms there's definitely the freedom of choice.

What about marriage, what they say about that? what do you think about that?

Well I want to do a lot of things, so...

I'm only asking you because the other girls raised it, not because I have any preconceptions...

Yes. So there's so many things that I want to do and getting married would just hold me back at the moment, because it's someone extra to deal with. so after I'm done with my education, do what I want to travel the world be independent then I have marriage and if marriage comes earlier than that, then as long as that person can adjust my lifestyle and I can adjust into their lifestyle, it's ok and God brings...

And your family are happy with that?

They' definitely happy with that. it's not going to be like the regular dating and stuff because you know that's not the way it works. He would first have to ask my mom if she could even take me out to dinner, and there would be no hugging no kissing...

But in terms of timing its up to you?

yes it's up to me, oh yes it's up to me... because I was going to say dating, but dating is not your question because dating is not...

So, just to check, it sounds to me that you're saying you're happy with the kind of, not arranged marriage but the way in which marriage works culturally within your family and culture is fine with you, you're happy for it to be that way, that the boy asks permission, with the way it works within that framework.

100%. the idea is, I believe that things should remain at an intellectual level, because a lot of times in society those are put to the back burner and other things take priority, but at the end of the day if you're not mentally compatible, nothing is ever going to work. So that's why I go with you know that notion. Because I see my grandparents, you know being very happy. when my grandfather (may he rest in peace) died, he and my grandmother were married for about 65 years and they were happy. Why? because they were mentally compatible. if they were, you know sometimes you lose track, when you have hormones and stuff and that becomes the forefront and in life that's not the forefront.

Okay awesome

So one of the things that some of the other girls talked about was that some of them remembered when 9/11 happened and how that affected them and their family and their experiences in the city immediately after that. I'm only raising it because it was such a big thing, in some of the other girls interviews. would you, you didn't bring it up as being something that you remembered during elementary school...

It was the second grade and I remember it like it was yesterday. It's very impinged into my brain and I remember... you know I remember it so well because my birthday was September 10 and my mum told me you're going to have about this September 11 because I'm working September 10. so I told her okay, so I'm going to have it September 11 so I remember it is ruining ruining my birthday, at the moment. You know, I wasn't thinking, at that moment about all of the lives, but then I realised the impact it has our society and how it allowed the United States, like the collective voice of society, to establish that anyone who looks and I don't know how to define that, but you know society apparently defines it, the media if define it, because if you control the media then you control society, it looks like the same person arises time after time after time, and the collective voice of society establishes that these people are bad. and when you look, because I look Arabic, so when I walk in the street I'm no longer identified as an American, I'm identified as an Arab, primarily, number one, and with that comes of course discrimination...

Have you experienced that personally?

Of course, of course. the airport security. Air France is next to us and I'm with Air Maroc, and you see people buzzing by, as soon as they open the bags they go through. with us it's 20 questions, I think he wants to give me after his son his basketball these questions so where do you go to school just you know so many questions because they always assume you know, racial profiling, they always assume you're up to no good. they always think that you could you know take part in making a bomb, they think you're a terrorist, so for the actions of a few a million people are judged and that's not the way it should be, so...

Did things happen to you immediately afterwards that you remember, do you remember, was that a change, was it a turning point?

Definitely, because I remember there was a kid in my class he lost his mother, so when he saw me, he almost saw the person who did that to his mother. because when pictures were being, you know obviously after that, you know, his father still had hoped

that his mother would come home, and he would obviously always be watching the news and his son would be right next to him with the hope that his mum would come home. and the people that will being put up were you know the wife of Osama Bin Laden or you know these ladies wearing the hijab. and when someone would pick me up from school, a family member who had the hijab on, he associated that with being the person who took the aeroplane and put it through on 9/11' causing him to be the pain, to be the cause of his pain for the death of his mother. And that did hurt me, but I always realise that I'm not, so I should, you know I should give my condolences but I shouldn't be sorry because they're not my actions, you're sorry for what you do. you can feel sad and sympathetic and empathetic, but you should never say I'm sorry it was my fault because it wasn't.

And did he say things to you, is that how you knew it affected him?

I could just, I could just see it. there are sometimes when you just feel things, and you know when his father picks him up you see the looks he'll give a family member, my mom, my dad, you know my aunt, my grandfather because my grandfather has a beard you know when he was in America he had the whole entire outfit, the Moroccan outfit and you can see in his father's eyes that my grandfather brought back memories. but when you see my grandfather it shouldn't bring back negative numbers if he was never in your life. but they did, and that was when I was like oh, you know..

It's a lot to take in as a kid!

Definitely.

So finally because I must let you go home...

I'm going to my old school actually to pick up award, an award for being a community activist and .young leader

Wow that's amazing! The last thing I wanted to ask you about is what you think about when I say 'home'. I want you to tell me about where you consider home to be, and thinking about being Moroccan and also an American and from Bay Ridge but also engage with the world outside here...

I always think that nothing in life is black and white, everything is in colour, so everything can coexist together, religions can coexist, your race, your identity, your ethnicity everything can coexist. and that's the way I went through the world to this point, that I'm Arabic I'm an American and these cultures without a choice have to come together because it's who I am. and I'm not going to allow myself to separate them, when both of them are very important to me. so when I go to Morocco for example they say to me which one do you like better. And this question is always said, like I can't even remember how many people, everywhere I go people ask, because you know you're a foreigner, the people will ask you which one do you like better Morocco or America and everyone hates America, everyone! They look at America as a corrupt power, they look at America for the death of their brothers and sisters, meaning there Islamic brothers and sisters. they look at America as a nation filled with lies and hypocrisy. they look at America and see murderers and see corrupt officials and see the foundation, the beginning of America as corrupt. When one of our founding fathers had 216 slaves, and he is the one who supposedly said 'we the people' you know and trying to establish a quality. so they always say how can a nation founded on this be considered democratic? and since the beginning of the United States, there were flaws and these flaws remain until today so that you know..

And what do you think when they say that about America?
America's my country. I'm very patriotic. and I totally see flaws, there's nothing that's perfect in life and I always think you know I never expect anything to be perfect but there's nothing perfect in life and the United States is not an exception to this. but I sometimes feel that America tries... its America's fault for portraying that. you know, Theodore Roosevelt used to take a flea around the world to show people what America was, you know, and this established in people's minds that America is awesome. so when you think of someone so highly and they do something wrong, it hits them 100% more and creates such a negative impact. If my mom thought of me as being a great person and they did something bad it would hurt her even more then if, say someone else in my family did something bad and was up to no good, if they did something she would say that's expected. but America establishes themselves as we're awesome, we're great, you know...
Yes, America's narrative of its own...
Yes, it's own self-story' you know history his-story, America wrote their history as this great nation, as this nation of you know tolerance, this nation of acceptance and equality and then you're like they're lying, its not true, and when people come you kind of say you know what, they're right!
So how do you reconcile that, how do you reconcile being Moroccan and hearing that they say about America, but also being American and feeling like it's your country, you're patriotic, you belong here...
Like, I...I think of America as America. not the people that make it up. So I take away the people and I say this is the country, that this is what's written on the paper...
So you mean like the idea of America?
Yes the idea of, the ideal. These ideas I agree with, but I don't agree with the actions of people. it's the same thing with religion. people say that oh there are some Muslims who do this and some Muslims who do that, but you know Islam is between me and god. you do not, it's not what the people do, it's what you do, and that's the way I look at America. I take away the actions of people and I say, what can I do with the principles that are put before me that I agree with. You the start with what you agree with, and these principles that are written, I agree with. it doesn't mean that they are, you know...
The reality is very imperfect!
Yes, exactly, but the principles, it talks to talk but at the moment it doesn't walk the walk. but when people are not walking the walk, you don't start saying oh you know...
You don't give up on the whole thing?
Yes, you don't give up on the whole thing. You eliminate them and you stop and you start again from the bottom. Of course you need the people, but when you think of the nation, I'm trying to say you don't hate it automatically. you say that there is still some good in, that there's still some beauty in it and the beauty comes from what's written on the paper. so that's what you try to take with you, you know, when something is kind of ugly you look for the beauty in it. Cause that's what my dad always says, you



have a cup, do you look at it as half empty or do you look at it as half full? so I see whats there, and this paper is beautiful, so I take that paper: the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, liberty of congress, that paper is has Islam as the influence, Thomas Jefferson's Quran that's engraved with TJ. I take these things and I try to say, there's a future and I take away the negative things.

So it's kind of the ideal and then the reality..

Exactly, it's kind of like a work in progress

And the work in progress, like all human things, is very imperfect and flawed

of course

but you still believe in those principles and you still believe in the future

Yes

Is there anything that you would add anything that is important that you haven't said yet?

Just...America, in general, was founded on, you know, different people, diversity, this is what made America America. without these people, we would be nothing. and that's what has to be understood by everyone. that the collective voice of society should stop establishing what an American is, because in essence, anyone in the world, if they came to this country, would be American. if they take on the ideas that are put down on that paper, if they're willing to accept these ideas as their own, I believe that is what an American is, even if there is a person into Morocci who believes in democracy, they're an American. Why? because they believe in these principles, that the nation is supposed to abide but doesn't, and you can always look at the negative, you can always reflect back and say this does this, this doesn't do that, but be the change you want to see in the world. so it starts with one voice, and is sometimes louder than 1 million. so you start, you do what you can, you take on questions, you allow people to be curious, you try to fill the gaps with people and, you know, because the media has in a sense brainwashed them and created what they see on TV to be their reality, but in essence it is not the reality of the world, not the reality of America, and at the end of the day it's only glass, and glass breaks and is false, and that's what I think of it.

#### Appendix 4: Example of initial coding

Name	Age	Country of origin	Ethnic or cultural identity	Religion
Salma	18	UK (born in the UK but parents born in Bangladesh)	British	Muslim

1	a. Distinctive educational opportunities	<p>I want to go to university and study. I don't mind anywhere really, ! dont think my parents mind. I'm not sure yet what I want to study, because I changed everything after seeing my results yesterday</p> <p>I'm disappointed, because I know I could try harder but I had all kinds of setbacks.</p> <p>I have like pressure at home, because my older brother is like a genius and then they expect me to get exactly the same grades or higher because I'm a girl because girls do better than boys really, and she does really well so they kind of expect me to get really good grades</p> <p>Yeah like my family aren't very practising but even then they go to university they have to do like forensic science some kind of science</p> <p>Oh it's different for boys Yeah because girls have less freedoms, because I think as well, because like, if girls stay somewhere and boys are there too, stuff can happen.</p> <p>They didn't say anything about my geography trip, but they didn't know that the other mixed school were there.</p>
	b. Distinctive educational challenges	<p>with ethnic minorities I think you have to have a certain sense of deception otherwise it not possible to be happy!</p> <p>OPPOSITE</p> <p>Bengali teachers stereotype you, I think some Bengalis would be like that, but not really....I think all our teachers are really nice. I like all the white teachers. I don't like the Bengali teachers No I like Ms B___, Ms H___ I do think so. Like one teacher I think she thinks I'm a bit weird because I'm not very Bengali or more into religion, because people are obsessed. The other students think you're weird, but I don't think I'm weird, I think I'm different.</p>

	c. Effects on educational experiences of being a young Muslim woman	Because the Quran actually also says you must educate yourself!
2	a. Importance of social/cultural/linguistic heritage	
	b. Connections with 'home' countries	<p>OPPOSITE</p> <p>I don't mind cause really. I really, really don't like Bengali people, I mean it I really don't. I love white people!  Yeah I really don't like Bengali people.  Cause the Bengalis just don't change, all of them are going to have like one mindset  Yeah I've not met a single cool Bengali person yet, seriously, cause every single one, I don't talk to them any more, even Salma and them lot, I don't talk to them any more.</p> <p>Yeah no, we don't, because we're not Bengalified! Basically, you know like on our field trip we all bonded and made friends. Then a few months ago one of my friends asked me if I was Bengali, he didn't even know!</p> <p>The Bengali girls, when they make friends, they bring religion into it too much, too too much, but then with us, it's like, with every word they say it has something to do with religion and god in it.</p>

<p>c. Importance of Islamic religious/spiritual practices/principles</p>	<p>PRINCIPLES NOT PRACTICES:  I have only just started wearing the scarf because... He had just started to be religious and at the beginning of Ramadan because I think...because of what other people were saying stuff about us not wearing the scarves, you know. I think cousins and people that see us on the street.  Yeah I'm never going to wear it again, I've told them I'm not going to wear it during university, when I'm older.  Yeah but I'm not fasting!  Yeah they don't let us fast or anything!  Our parents don't allow us to fast because in case our weight went really down, they really want us to be really healthy.  Yeah they don't pressure us to fast or to pray, or anything like that.  As long as people think you're praying then you don't actually have to pray!</p> <p>Yeah but I think that's so narrow-minded, just because you wear a scarf doesn't mean you're good, but that's all they think about and my dad's like, my dad I told him that and he said that even if you're bad people, will still think you're good. Even if you're doing drugs underneath your burka, or whatever, people will still think you're good if they see you wearing one.</p> <p>Because people go 'are you fasting?' because even the little ones are fasting, everyone fasts, but then our parents don't let me because of weight issues and it's not only that, they never want me to fast, they're just like, not that bothered...  My dad would say, we fast because it reminds us of other people in the world who are starving, and so my dad says, yeah, that suffering yourself won't help them, if you don't...if you give them some money, that would help them out, but just because you're fasting doesn't mean you're necessarily thinking of them.</p> <p>It doesn't, exactly, because you're thinking of food the whole day, I would be, you would be thinking of yourself and how much you want to eat. Perhaps it makes you think about yourself more!</p> <p>It's like those girls who...like her friend in the Sixth Form who wears a really tight burka that shows off her figure, and you're supposed to be wearing it because you don't want to show off your figure...  And we're like best friends, and I always back her up, but...  Yeah lots of people wear the headscarf now as a fashion accessory, put those handband things on, but they don't really think about why they're wearing it.  Oh yeah, and they're like I'm so good for wearing the scarf</p>
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3	a. Importance of 'Muslim' identities	<p>BECAUSE SHE IS LESS 'RELIGIOUS' THAN OTHER STUDENTS AT HAZEL GROVE:  Well like our dad was encouraging us to take horse riding up yesterday, and if you tell other people that they'll say you can't do that because you'll lose your virginity. I don't know where they get it from but loads of people say that.</p> <p>Loads of people, the Hazel Grove girls, you have to talk to them miss because half the things they come up with are completely false. It's because they're really narrow-minded and they want, it's like all your friends have to be Bengali, like you have a white friend oh why are you talking to them for.  Yeah you can only be friends with Hazel Grove girls. I'm not friends with any Hazel Grove girls.</p> <p>Yeah, like if they see your Facebook friends list and you've got anyone who's not a Hazel Grove student, they'll be like oh who's that, who's that? And it's really annoying!</p> <p>That's why I hide my Facebook friends list otherwise they question you about it and then they add them, to see who they are, or if...  for us it's easier because our parents are encouraging us to try different things, and to mix with other people.</p> <p>The Bengali girls, when they make friends, they bring religion into it too much, too too much, but then with us, it's like, with every word they say it has something to do with religion and god in it.  And when you see them, they're typical Bengali girls, you know everyone's the same, they're all wearing the burka and stuff, all the Hazel Grove girls will dress the same, or have this kind of east London look...</p> <p>BECAUSE THEY THINK SHE IS 'WEIRD'  The other students think you're weird, but I don't think I'm weird, I think I'm different.  Yeah, all of my friends think I'm weird  Yeah, if I wear, like, plimsolls, yeah, that aren't my size, that my brother got me, that's why I wear them because my brother got me it, and weird clothes, different, like mismatching clothes, they'll be like looking at me and I'll be like yes, what's your problem? I don't care really. If you don't have straightened hair..  Or if you don't have back-combed hair, it's so disgusting, like I walked into the Sixth Form toilets the other day and two girls were back-combing their hair, it looked so funny! I was just like...  Yeah, and if we say we want to do, like bobs and short hair, they're like, oh you can't do it, because you have to have long hair in case you die, and then you can cover yourself!  Yeah, because if you die you have to cover yourself with your hair  But you wouldn't be bothered about covering yourself if you're dead!</p>
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	b. Affiliation with 'global Muslim community'	
	c. Conflict/alignment with other local/national affiliations	
4	a. Values/beliefs of family/community	<p>Cause like nobody can say that we done anything bad to our parents, and our parents wouldn't believe it anyway.</p> <p>We've got extremely religious cousins on our mums side and they're always telling us to wear burkas and stuff, and it's just really annoying...</p> <p>Yeah and we can't go out with them</p> <p>My aunt always asks me, she goes to university and she always asks me to go out with her, but cause I don't wear the scarf and I dress like this, she wears the whole lot, but then she has the most makeup on her! I don't understand, like you're saying you don't want to attract attention by wearing that, but like everyone's looking at your face.</p> <p>Yeah, oh my God she tells me to revise now! if it's not my mum is my dad! They are just like Salma you need to revise, I can't sit at the table without my mum telling me to revise, and if she says in front of my dad, we have to revise! if my dad, if we get in trouble for any old thing my dad will be like, go upstairs and revise and do some work, do something, be productive! Because our family is really like educated my dad's side especially.</p> <p>Because they think that if we don't do well remember in school it will be harder for us in later life, it will be really hard. For my dad, right, he doesn't want us to be dumb and not be able to speak in front of someone educated. and he wants people to respect us and his family, yeah, so I think everything comes into it.</p>

		<p>OPPOSITE</p> <p>but then there are some families where they put religion a bit too much into education, my dad hates that.</p> <p>Yeah, my dads like agnostic! But he doesn't admit it!</p> <p>Yeah because he changes over time, because he like believd in God yesterday because of my results, when I got them he was like it's divine intervention, because I passed!</p> <p>Well then he goes that religion is folklore, so then...and he doesn't believe in all of that, he thinks you don't really have to pray, pray and all that stuff, you know if you have good intentions that's fine.</p> <p>It's soooo nice, you know, because we don't have to, like, you know...and I'm only, I have only just started wearing the scarf because... He had just started to be religious and at the beginning of Ramadan because I think...because of what other people were saying stuff about us not wearing the scarves, you know. I think cousins and people that see us on the street.</p> <p>Yeah my dads so funny, he like believes on evolution too, and he's so, he'll tell us like</p> <p>He's one of those people who knows everything about everything. he taught himself, and he says yeah that he'll be able to talk to anyone without them looking down because, and he watches the news a lot, and he reads books, yeah</p>



	<p>I think that when you get to university, parents don't like it because that's probably the most mixing you do, you know at 19, 20.</p> <p>Well I think it only makes a difference when, it makes a difference when people apply to uni outside of London, that's the big difference cause Bengali parents, obviously Asian parents want you to stay home. yeah they want you to stay home and become a teacher or go to a local university. They don't want you to move away. they want you to go down the road because it's you know it's close to your doorstep they can keep an eye on you especially the girls but even some of the boys.</p> <p>it's also like you have to become, some girls you can't do anything but become a teacher, cause I know some girls who want to do something else but they can't because the parents are like it depends on the family doesn't it</p> <p>it makes a difference when people apply to uni outside of London, that's the big difference cause Bengali parents, obviously Asian parents want you to stay home. yeah they want you to stay home and become a teacher or go to a local university. They don't want you to move away. they want you to go down the road because it's you know it's close to your doorstep they can keep an eye on you especially the girls but even some of the boys.</p> <p>it's also like you have to become, some girls you can't do anything but become a teacher, cause I know some girls who want to do something else but they can't because the parents are like it depends on the family doesn't it?</p> <p>it's really different in my family because my dad wants us to be independent and not rely on anyone. yesterday he was really proud of me, because the whole summer I was grounded because I told them I did really badly, that I'd failed really badly. I told my mum yesterday, you shouted at me for no reason! she just laughed!</p>
	<p>b. Alignment with values/beliefs of school/college</p>

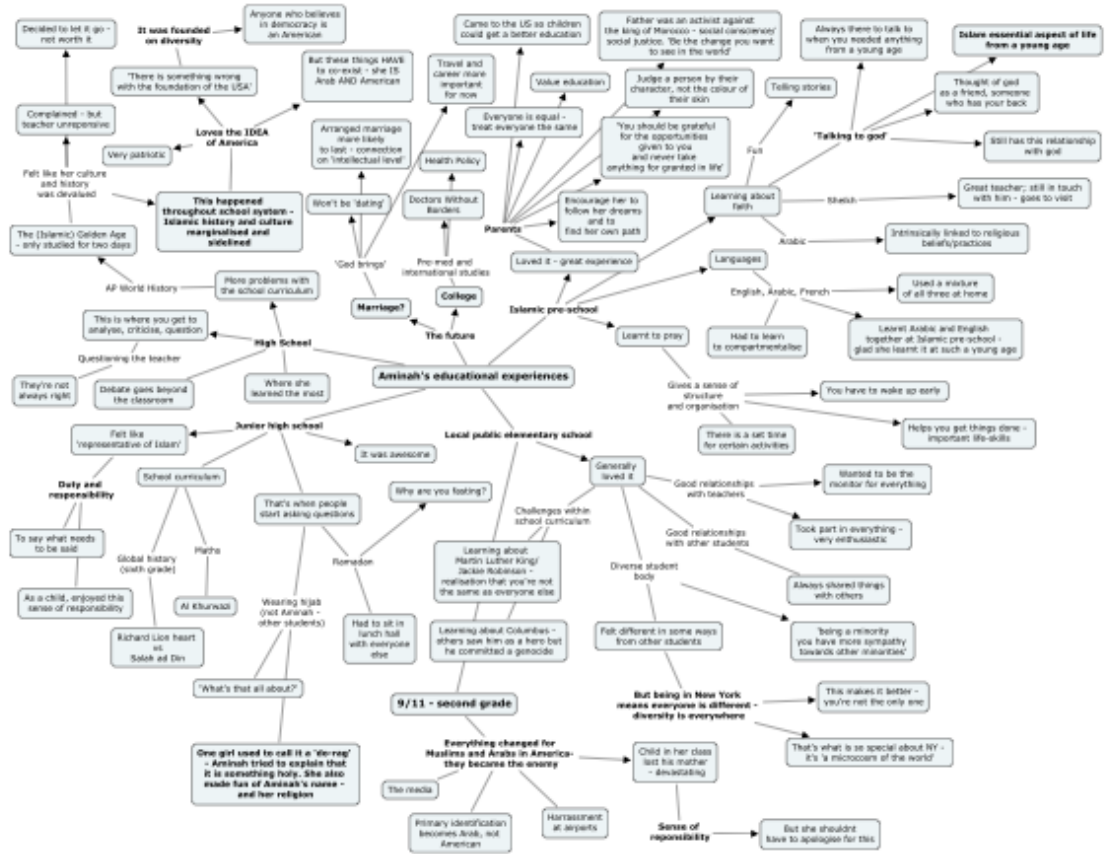
<p>c. Differences between these sets of values/beliefs</p>	<p>they kind of want to keep up appearances a little bit in the community?  that's what it is, for people in the community.  Yeah because in East London everyone's Bengali and if they see you like doing certain things that's not Bengali it's like...</p> <p>Yeah but I think that's so narrowminded, just because you wear a scarf doesn't mean you're good, but that's all they think about and my dad's like, my dad I told him that and he said that even if you're bad people, will still think you're good. Even if you're doing drugs underneath your burka, or whatever, people will still think you're good if they see you wearing one.</p> <p>Yeah but then he kind of changes like that, when he hears other people, because he doesn't want us, like, even though he knows we're good, other people will think, oh yeah they don't wear scarves and the way they dress. I think that's so stupid!</p>
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	<p><b>PRESSURE IN SCHOOL TO BE MORE 'ISLAMIC':</b>  in Year 8 when we wanted to wear the scarf and they made so many excuses about it so that we wouldn't wear it.  KV: Why did you do you do want to wear it then?  Because it was cool in Year 8, because everyone in the school was wearing it. Yeah, we just wanted to be like everyone else.  Yeah I wore it in Year 9 because, I, because I wanted to, I don't know why. And then my dad, like, every time I used to go out wearing it, he used to just look at me and whisper to my mum, so then I just took it off.  Yeah they used to be, like, your head is gonna get very hot under there! Yeah, like it's not hygienic and stuff like that...  Especially if you're wearing it on a hot day...  Because in the summer I used to really want to wear it, and they used to be like, why you are you wearing a headscarf? So then we just stopped wearing it and then we never wore it.</p> <p>Yeah, people find it so awkward that our parents don't let us fast. Because people go 'are you fasting?' because even the little ones are fasting, everyone fasts, but then our parents don't let me because of weight issues and it's not only that, they never want me to fast, they're just like, not that bothered...</p> <p>My dad would say, we fast because it reminds us of other people in the world who are starving, and so my dad says, yeah, that suffering yourself won't help them, if you don't...if you give them some money, that would help them out, but just because you're fasting doesn't mean you're necessarily thinking of them.</p> <p>KV: Interesting. But do you think that your family are unusual? No, I think my family is right!  people find what I say really awkward, like we would just sit and everyone would be talking about religion, especially in Hazel Grove, all the girls would be talking about the prophet and you know... About hell and everything...  they talk about you know how you should pray and the things like the punishments, and that scares me a lot, even though I watch like horror films and stuff.</p> <p>Yeah they really like preach and they say stuff like Oh you should wear the scarf and stuff  Yeah in Miss P___'s class, there was one girls and she was like, whatever you wear, because she wears the burka, she says to you that whatever you wear, like skinny jeans and stuff, you shouldn't be wearing that, which is bad because that's what I choose to wear, not you, and people preach a lot.  Yeah, and like you know when I didn't wear the scarf, I used to feel so odd.</p>
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	<p>Yeah but it's like they just pray, and they don't understand it or think about it.</p> <p>And every time they're like don't judge, don't judge, but every single person who wears these headscarves and like the outfit, they're always judging people, they sit there and judge all of us. Every time they do posts on Facebook and stuff. Yeah their statuses are all religious</p> <p>Yeah hadiths and stuff like that</p> <p>Yeah it's so annoying.</p> <p>and they get like thirty thousand likes on it, but people don't understand what they're saying.</p> <p>It's so annoying.</p> <p>They think liking it makes them more religious.</p> <p>KV: So they're saying don't judge, then doing it themselves.</p> <p>Yeah they do it themselves, so that's why I'm saying think about yourself.</p> <p>Like yesterday, when everyone came to get their A-level results, and I came with her, and everyone was staring because all of the Sixth Form are wearing burkas and its Ramadan, and you can see them staring at you from across the room.</p> <p>KV: Did anyone say anything to you?</p> <p>No and I don't really mind because they're always doing it, and it doesn't make them any better just because they're wearing it.</p> <p>I've gotten used to it. But I don't...</p> <p>I don't really care what they say any more because...</p> <p>I don't care what they think because...</p> <p>Because I know I'm not doing anything bad.</p> <p>Cause like nobody can say that we done anything bad to our parents, and our parents wouldn't believe it anyway.</p>
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5	a. Negotiating and articulating identities	
	b. Maintaining a sense of belonging	<p>KV: So do you think, in terms of you girls, from your family, when you go into university and into the world of work, and you're working somewhere which is not majority Bengali, do you think the experiences you've had within your family will make it easier for you, to be successful within wider British society?</p> <p>Yeah, for us it's easier because our parents are encouraging us to try different things, and to mix with other people.</p> <p>Yeah to integrate more with other people and not just stick to one type, because you learn more from other types of people.</p> <p>Yeah that's what he says, my dad is like don't just stay with your friends but talk to other people, cause then you'll learn new things. But then for other people it will be harder because their parents aren't as open minded.</p>
	c. Tensions around faith/culture/community	<p>OPPOSITE</p> <p>I don't mind cause really. I really, really don't like Bengali people, I mean it I really don't. I love white people!</p> <p>Yeah I really don't like Bengali people.</p> <p>Cause the Bengalis just Yeah I've not met a single cool Bengali person yet, seriously, cause every single one, I don't talk to them any more, even Salma and them lot, I don't talk to them any more.</p> <p>When I say I hate Bengali people they just look at me</p> <p>It's like I mean they're all the same, they'll all stereotype you, and white people</p> <p>Yeah, white people don't do it as much, they're really nice</p> <p>KV: So you don't get racist comments or anything?</p> <p>Yeah no, we don't, because we're not Bengalified! Basically, you know like on our field trip we all bonded and made friends. Then a few months ago one of my friends asked me if I was Bengali, he didn't even know!</p>
		<p>OPPOSITE:</p> <p>It's like I mean they're all the same, they'll all stereotype you, and white people</p> <p>Yeah, white people don't do it as much, they're really nice</p> <p>KV: So you don't get racist comments or anything?</p> <p>Yeah no, we don't, because we're not Bengalified! Basically, you know like on our field trip we all bonded and made friends. Then a few months ago one of my friends asked me if I was Bengali, he didn't even know!</p>

## Appendix 5: Example of individual concept map



## Appendix 6

### Further sub-codes

Sub-categories	Sub-codes
1. a. Distinctive educational opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Valuing the educational opportunities on offer in US/UK</li> <li>• 'Hard-working migrant' mentality - ambition and aspiration</li> <li>• International/global perspective</li> </ul>
b. Distinctive educational challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing and negotiating multiple identities and allegiances</li> <li>• Learning to navigate in a different educational system</li> <li>• Islamophobia/prejudice from teachers</li> <li>• Islamophobia/prejudice from other students</li> </ul>
c. Effects on educational experiences of being a young Muslim woman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Valuing 'Islamic' elements of education/ schooling</li> <li>• Encouragement - value of education within Islam</li> <li>• Discouragement – other priorities</li> <li>• Dissatisfaction with mainstream school curriculum</li> </ul>
2. a. Importance of social/cultural/linguistic heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Natural' multilingualism</li> <li>• Learning to differentiate between aspects of identity(ies)</li> <li>• Feeling that language/culture/ heritage is marginalised within the school system</li> </ul>
b. Connections with 'home' countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive connections with home country</li> <li>• Poverty/lack of opportunity in 'home' country</li> <li>• Relative superiority of 'home' country/ culture</li> <li>• Tension between allegiance to 'home' country and allegiance to UK/US</li> </ul>
c. Importance of Islamic religious/spiritual practices/principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commitment to Islamic principles and practices</li> <li>• Value of the prayer ritual</li> <li>• Belief in God's omnipotence</li> </ul>
3. a. Importance of 'Muslim' identities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling different from other students</li> <li>• Feeling defensive or protective of religious/cultural elements of identity</li> </ul>
b. Affiliation with 'global Muslim community'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling like representative of Islam</li> </ul>
c. Conflict/alignment with other local/national affiliations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Affiliation to idealized version of Western values</li> </ul>
4. a. Values/beliefs of family/community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family emphasizing the value and importance of education</li> <li>• Family emphasizing importance of appreciating opportunities on offer ('hard-working migrant' mentality)</li> <li>• Father reinforcing religious beliefs</li> <li>• Mother emphasizing importance of treating others fairly and equally</li> <li>• Father encouraging community/social activism</li> <li>• Family discouraging 'dating' and promoting benefits of more traditional approach to relationships and marriage</li> </ul>
b. Values/beliefs of school/college	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contributing to school/classroom community</li> <li>• Time management/ organisation</li> <li>• Valuing opportunities that are on offer</li> </ul>

Sub-categories	Sub-codes
c. Differences (conflict/alignment) between these sets of values/beliefs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community vs individualism</li> <li>• Challenging Anglo/Eurocentrism</li> <li>• Treating others fairly and equally</li> </ul>
5. a. Negotiating and articulating identities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning to 'manage' multilingualism</li> <li>• Becoming an activist/advocate for change</li> <li>• Feeling different from other children/students in school</li> </ul>
b. Maintaining a sense of belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Belonging to a particular local context</li> <li>• Valuing the diversity of the global city</li> <li>• Valuing the diversity of US/UK society</li> <li>• Affiliation to Western society, culture and values</li> </ul>
c. Tensions around faith/culture/community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling of solidarity with other 'minorities'</li> <li>• Feeling disillusioned with Western society and culture</li> <li>• Rejecting Western approaches to relationships</li> <li>• Having to explain/justify Islam to others</li> <li>• Having to correct misconceptions/misunderstanding of Islam</li> </ul>