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especially boys, was partly attributed to their marginalization at school and being bullied about their faith.

Through collaboration between the Alevi community, Highbury Grove secondary school and the University of Westminster, we produced lessons on Alevism for the RE curriculum. Alevi pupils helped to design and deliver this successful, inclusive curriculum project, generating considerable interest from peers and the wider school community. Consequently they report a greater sense of belonging and pride in their identity.

**KEY POINTS**

1. Suicide among second-generation youth, especially boys, was partly attributed to their marginalization at school and being bullied about their faith.
2. Alevi youth felt empowered when their proposal for Alevi lessons was accepted and instrumental in presenting their faith to peers.
3. Alevi pupils felt more positive about their identities and integrated with their peers, who enjoyed learning about a different faith.
4. This collaboration has inspired future research to promote inclusion, with the launch of an after-school club to explore hidden cultures and family histories.

**MAJOR IMPLICATIONS**

1. Social exclusion at school negatively impacted on the identity, achievement and life chances of young people from this ethno-faith community.
2. This affirmative strategy gave marginalized pupils a voice and ownership in determining the content and delivery of the curriculum.
3. Curriculum interventions, such as this one to promote social inclusion, have wider application to other ethno-faith communities and other subjects.
4. Academic activism is effective, mutually beneficial and to be encouraged between universities, schools and marginalized communities.
THE RESEARCH

CONTEXT
Approximately 200,000 Alevis live in London, mostly ethnically Kurdish, having come from Turkey as refugees since the 1980s establishing their own transnational, ‘ethno-faith’ community (Cetin, 2014; Keles, 2014; Wahlbeck, 1999). Cetin (2014) describes them as a ‘twice minority’, persecuted in Turkey, as Kurds and Alevis, and invisible here because people assume they must be Muslim. Persecution in Turkey made them wary of identifying as Alevi for official purposes in the UK and many parents would identify as not religious on their children’s school admissions forms, fearing adverse implications for their applications, hence perpetuating their invisibility (Jenkins & Cetin, 2014).

In 2010, the London Alevi Centre requested help from the University of Westminster to address the negative identity of their youth. They evidenced the disproportionate incidence of suicide amongst their second-generation young men, unparalleled in any other British minority ethnic group. Typically, the profile of the suicides was 18-30, underachieving/dropping out at school, unemployed (or in irregular employment in ethnic enclaves) and involved in gangs/petty crime, trapped in a lifestyle that could not deliver their aspirations. Their anomie social position constituted what Portes (1999) describes as a ‘rainbow underclass’. The young people eloquently described their sense of isolation and alienation, particularly at school, where no one knew about their religion. Mostly, they identified as ‘sort-of Muslim’ to classmates, but did not follow the same religious practices, and were sometimes subjected to bullying or ridicule for their beliefs. One pupil recalled identifying her faith as Alevism in an RE class and as her teacher had not heard of it, she was given a detention when she tried to argue the point (Jenkins & Cetin, 2014).

ACTION RESEARCH
Shirley (2009) identified the importance of schools working with local communities to support their children’s education but, in this instance, Alevi pupils approached the school to help raise their visibility. In the tradition of anti-discriminatory action research (Truman, 2004), we discussed the issues with the community, especially the youth. What they wanted most was for schools to teach about their religion. This desire sparked the ongoing collaborative project, creating a new ‘community of practice’ between the community, school and university to promote a positive identity for Alevi children, and to help them to feel like they belonged in the school, which might also improve their achievement (Forsman & Hummelstedt-Djedou, 2014; Keddie & Niesche, 2012). The initial connection was already established with the Prince of Wales primary school in Enfield through a Teaching Assistant, who also was on the London Alevi Centre’s committee, and many Alevi pupils attending the school. The university contributed their expertise in Sociology and Education and project management. Together, we successfully designed and delivered half-units on Alevism for Key Stages 1 and 2 in the RE curriculum. Launched in 2011, this was the first school in the world to teach Alevism as part of the core curriculum and the teachers requested that it should be delivered across the school, not just at KS1 as was originally planned. The lessons had very positive outcomes in terms of pupils’ (and parents’) identification with both the school community and their religion, improved levels of achievement and better relationships between pupils and staff deriving from a clearer understanding of Alevi beliefs and culture. Other community-building initiatives report similar success in raising achievement through building relationships between schools and communities (Shirley, 2009). Since 2012, we have worked with Highbury Grove Secondary School in Islington, where the Alevi pupils have been active in the planning and delivery of the half-unit to Year 9, and it has been a tremendous achievement for them, the school and community.

Much anti-racist research on multiculturalism uses interviews with minority-ethnic students to seek their views on their sense of belonging and inclusion in school and how ideas of identity and Britishness are played out in the school context (Keddie, 2014; Osler, 2011). At Highbury...
Grove, a key feature of the action research was giving them a voice (Taines, 2014). Alevi students from across the school were involved in the design and delivery of the unit, preparing lessons, determining content and associated activities to generate interest among their peers. The four girls who delivered the lessons grew in confidence as they progressed. The Head of RE provided the expertise regarding the RE curriculum framework at KS3 and managed the organization, administration and delivery of classes. Members of the Alevi Centre researched and translated resources into English and supported the students during lessons, whilst the University lecturers performed organizational, translation and pedagogic roles through coordinating meetings, helping to prepare teaching materials and lesson plans and supporting pedagogic delivery.

**EVALUATION**

The unit was launched at a Year 9 assembly in Spring 2013, followed by six lessons to two Year 9 classes, which was a tremendous achievement. The Year 9 students enjoyed learning about a different religion and a buzz went around the school, especially among the Alevi pupils, who felt proud and able to speak openly about their faith, possibly for the first time. Alevism is now officially integrated into the RE curriculum and the lessons are running again successfully this year, which is a testament to the scope of RE to promote community cohesion (DCSF, 2010). However, the difficulties associated with releasing Alevi pupils from their own lessons to deliver the unit last year meant that a member of the Alevi community replaced them this time.

The lessons might be described as delivering ‘the right kind of multiculturalism’ (Modood, 2007), which is associated with shared humanity and citizenship that supports, respects and builds upon diverse multicultural identities (Osler, 2011; Keddie, 2014). There has been a transformation in the Alevi students’ sense of identity through having learnt more about their religion, moving away from defining themselves as ‘sort of Muslim’ – what they ‘did not do that Muslims did’ – to a position where they could describe their religion positively, demonstrating the benefits of a multicultural curriculum and feeling a stronger sense of belonging in the school. Currently, we are producing a curriculum pack for other schools with Alevi families. The project has received critical acclaim within the Alevi community in the UK and Turkey, where it supports the campaign for Alevi lessons in schools. Through this unique collaboration, we have identified an effective strategy for integrating pupils from ethno-faith groups whose religion is not represented in their schools. Moreover, through youth and ‘academic activism’, lecturers and teachers have worked collaboratively with and for the community to support their cultural diversity and social inclusion.

**FUTURE PLANS**

Our next project with the school is to launch an after-school club on ‘Hidden Cultures’ to provide an opportunity for pupils to research their community’s culture and intergenerational transnational experience of migration and settlement that will hopefully form a basis for an exhibition in a London museum so that they might have a more visible presence in London. Additionally, a British Academy Fellowship has been awarded for a survey to map the settlement of the London Alevi community and its transnational connections.
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The British Educational Research Association (BERA) is a member-led charity which exists to encourage educational research and its application for the improvement of practice and public benefit.

We strive to ensure the best quality evidence from educational research informs policy makers, practitioners and the general public and contributes to economic prosperity, cultural understanding, social cohesion and personal flourishing.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

FULL ARTICLE


OTHER REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHORS
Drs Jenkins and Cetin are sociology lecturers at the University of Westminster, connecting with the community through Cetin’s ethnicity and concerns about the second generation. Some Alevi Youth Committee members attended Highbury Grove and Mr Ackerman, as head of RE, managed the school end. Mr Erbil was Chair of the London Alevi Cultural Centre and involved in planning/supporting the lessons and, likewise, Mr Ulus taught the lessons when it became too difficult to release students from their lessons to deliver the classes.

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