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‘I don't necessarily identify myself as a Muslim [RE] teacher?’: considering the limitations of the category ‘Muslim’ in the case of ‘Muslim RE teachers’

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Abstract

Given the current context of *Prevent* and Fundamental British Values, there has been a surge in academic and political interest surrounding Muslim identities in British educational contexts. Noting this ‘religious turn’ in educational debate, Panjwani & Moulin-Stożek (2017) have questioned the mobilisation of ‘Muslim’ and ‘Muslimness’, suggesting that there are limits to such identification. This paper considers their critique through an exploration of how ‘Muslim RE teachers’ understood and experienced their personal and professional identities, based on recent qualitative research conducted with 21 ‘Muslim RE teachers’ across England. Findings reveal that notions of being a ‘Muslim RE teacher’ are heavily contested, and instead highlight a fluid and dynamic spectrum of configurations of the participants’ ‘Muslim’ and ‘RE teacher’ identities. The paper argues in support of the above critique, demonstrating that the assumed primacy of their ‘Muslimness’ limits the multiplicity of these participants’ identities, and so does not reflect their empirical understanding and experience. The paper then suggests a move toward a more sophisticated understanding of identity, encapsulated in the notion of the ‘RE teacher who is Muslim’.

Keywords: British Muslims, Education, Religious Education, Teacher Identity

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Introduction

Given the current context of *Prevent* and Fundamental British Values, there has been a growth of political and scholarly interest surrounding Muslim identities in British education (Coles and Hassan 2018; Miah 2017; Sian 2015). Panjwani and Moulin-Stožek (2017, 597) have characterised this as a ‘religious turn’ in educational debate, with religious identity ‘supplanting... prior categorisations by race, ethnicity or nationality’. Yet surprisingly little attention has been paid to Muslim teachers within these discussions, and even less so ‘Muslim Religious Education (RE) teachers’ (Everington 2015). This lacuna is especially significant where RE has been identified as the subject *par excellence* for *Prevent* (Gearon 2013). As Farrell (2016) has begun to illuminate, the intrusion of these policies into notions of RE teacher identity and professionalism places ‘Muslim RE teachers’¹ at a precarious intersection between their professional role, the *Prevent* policy assemblage and their own faith identity. ‘Muslim RE teachers’ therefore represent a significant case in examining Muslim identities in education from a new perspective: that of the teacher.

However, there is disagreement amongst scholars as to the efficacy of the category of ‘Muslim’ within these debates. On the one hand, literature pertaining to young Muslims across educational contexts has continuously stressed the primacy of their religious identification (Gillborn and Mirza 2000; Shah 2018; Jensen and Kühle 2016). Shah (2018) has recently drawn attention to ‘Muslimness’ as a key identity marker for Muslim youth: ‘an overarching faith identity’ orientated toward the *Ummah* (global community of Muslims), as well as the embodiment of their faith through physical and visible symbols (Shah 2006).

¹ ‘Muslim RE teachers’ has been placed in inverted commas throughout to reflect both the primary unit of analysis as used in the current study and within wider research, and also the term’s contested nature as discussed in this article.

Similarly, a brief survey of the small body of literature that considers the identities and experiences of ‘Muslim teachers’ stresses the primacy of their Muslim identity-attribute in the construction of their role. There has been increased recognition of the unique intersection of race, religion and professional identity that being a ‘Muslim teacher’ embodies (Haque and Elliot 2017; Iqbal 2019). Black and Minority Ethnic teacher research has constantly highlighted the incorporation of ‘Muslimness’ in the construction of Muslims’ teacher identities, particularly through physical and visible markers such as dress, prayer and observing prohibitions, notably abstaining from alcohol and fasting during Ramadan (Benn, Dagkas, and Jawad 2011; Osler 2003; Shah and Shaikh 2010). Much like the experience of Muslim pupils, these signs of ‘Muslimness’ are also perceived to be a source of marginalisation and alterity from the white teaching norm (Bhopal 2015), further reifying the ‘Muslimness’ of their teacher identities. Elsewhere, Mogra (2010, 2013), approaching from a faith perspective, highlights that Islamic moral and educational values underpin the secular educational and pedagogical values of Muslim teachers. In the case of RE, research exploring Christian RE teachers also suggests the primacy of their faith identity, where faith underpins their educational values and practices (Bryan and Revell 2011).

On the other hand, Panjwani and Moulin-Stožek (2017) have recently devoted a special edition of the *Oxford Review of Education* to critiquing this ‘religious turn’, suggesting that there are limitations to the conceptual efficacy of the category ‘Muslim’. Within this special edition, Moulin-Stožek and Schirr (2017) highlight young Muslims’ use of identification and disidentification with their religious identity to contest prevailing ideas of ‘Muslimness’ and construct their own Muslim identities, emphasising their agency in its construction. They note that with this ‘play’ the category ‘religion’ becomes ‘used and resisted exactly like ‘race’, ‘gender’, or ‘ethnicity’’, incorporating different intersecting identities to construct both recognised and new ways of being Muslim (2017, 592). Similarly, Panjwani (2017)

poignantly reminds us that ‘no Muslim is just a Muslim’, exploring how a ‘Muslim’ identity-attribute is co-constructed along with other intersecting identities.

In turn, they argue that others, notably researchers, can unwittingly privilege the category of ‘Muslim’ at the expense of Muslims’ self-understanding, ‘silencing’ this identity-work (Moulin-Stožek and Schirr 2017). Panjwani (2017) argues that the mobilisation of ‘Muslim’ as the assumed primary identity-attribute of Muslim actors has led to ‘religifying’ and ‘racialising’ tendencies within scholarly analyses, reducing the complex intersections of their identity to this single religious identity-attribute. Their concerns echo wider research that has also problematised fixed notions of ‘Muslim’ and ‘Muslimness’ in everyday life (Liebelt and Werbner 2018; Schielke 2010; Varisco 2005; Jeldtoft 2011). Whilst alerting us to the potential significance of other identity-attributes, these critiques risk obscuring the impact of ‘Muslimness’ and ‘being Muslim’ in Muslims’ self-identification in varying contexts.

Accordingly, this paper considers the efficacy of the category of ‘Muslim’ through an exploration of how ‘Muslim RE teachers’ understand and experience their personal and professional identities within their school contexts. The article draws on qualitative research conducted with 21 ‘Muslim RE teachers’ working across England, representing the largest qualitative study of minority ethnic and religious RE teachers to date. Findings reveal that notions of being a ‘Muslim RE teacher’ are heavily contested, and instead highlight a fluid and dynamic spectrum of configurations of the participants’ ‘Muslim’ and ‘RE teacher’ identities. Such findings show that these actors are ‘playing’ with their identities within the context of their working lives, in turn problematising notions of the primacy ‘Muslim’ and ‘Muslimness’. Here the article makes a significant contribution both to the understanding of Muslim identities in education, specifically the identified lack of attention to ‘Muslim RE teachers’, and also begins to advance Panjwani and Moulin-Stožek’s (2017, 520) rehabilitation of the category of ‘Muslim’ by stressing the need to always considering other,

intersecting identities within specific contexts, such as teaching, by offering evidence of dynamic interplay between participants' professional and religious identities in the classroom.

The Research

This paper is based on research conducted from 2015 to 2018. The research sought to explore the experiences of 'Muslim RE teachers' along the intersections of race, religion and notions of RE teacher professionalism and practice. It is from within this investigation that their notions of identity emerged, along with their contestation of their categorisation as 'Muslim RE teachers'. The term 'Muslim RE teacher' has been put in quotation marks throughout to recognise this contestation.

To entwine these intersections together a 'lived religion' approach was adopted that allowed for analysis to consider the participants' faith and professional identities together. 'Lived religion' considers how the narratives and practices of everyday experience shape the construction of identity (Ammerman 2016). Within this approach religion is 'constituted by the practices people use to remember, share, enact, adapt, create and combine the stories out of which they live', as opposed to the texts and theologies behind them (McGuire 2008, 98). As such, 'lived religion' has been fruitful in de-centring foci on "official" forms and sites of religion, to religion 'at the edges' (Bender et al. 2013). From this, 'everyday lived Islam' has drawn attention to scholarship's preoccupation with "official", often hypervisible, forms of 'Muslimness' (Dessing, Jeldtoft, and Woodhead 2016). As such, the use of 'lived religion' is pertinent to the present analysis given the focus on critiquing prevailing conceptualisations of 'Muslim' and 'Muslimness'. Here, this is considered in how the participants' faith shaped, and were shaped by, their experiences as RE teachers within their school contexts.

Methods

The study employed a qualitative methodology and research design in order to elicit ‘thick descriptions’ from the participants (Flick 2009). A total sample of 21 Muslim RE teachers took part in the study. As there is currently no information pertaining to the religious identification of RE teachers in the UK, this was not intended to be a representative sample. However, the research included the largest sample of minority ethnic and religious RE teachers to participate in a qualitative study to date. This is significant given the current gap surrounding these actors in RE teacher research (Everington 2014, 158).

Biographical data of the sample are worth noting as this is an indication of the diversity of Muslim identities amongst the participants. The research specified only that participants self-identify as Muslim, recognising the conceptual openness of this category, but that were also the holder of Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), and were working as, or had worked as, a Secondary RE teacher as identified by job, or was the principal subject that they taught. The sample consists of 14 self-identified Sunni Muslims, 2 Shia Muslims, 2 Sufi Muslims, 1 Ahmedi Muslim, and 2 who described themselves as ‘cultural’ and ‘political’ Muslims. Yet, in the context of the present discussion there were no links between denominational affiliation and conceptualisation of their teacher identity. They were primarily female (n=15) and, the majority spoke of wearing visible Muslim dress (specifically the hijab) during their teaching. The sample was also mainly of Asian ethnicity (n=20), and there was one white male Muslim convert. Participants were recruited across England, located in the North West, Midlands, South East and South West. Thus, under the category ‘Muslim’ diverse intersections of race, gender, and denominational identifications feature within the participants’ narratives, along with their varied notions of being an ‘RE teacher’.

Within the research two data collection methods were used:

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured, one-to-one interviews were the primary data collection tool and formed the majority of the data. These were designed to elicit the participants' understanding of their personal faith identity, professional identity as RE teachers, and how these two came together and were experienced in their day-to-day work. There were 21 interviews overall (one with each participant), and each ranged between one to three hours in length. All the interviews were recorded on a Dictaphone and were transcribed verbatim.

Participant Shadowing

Participant shadowing formed the second data collection tool. Shadowing has been described as 'observation on the move', as the researcher follows a target participant as they go about their everyday work (Czarniawska 2014, 43). As 'being there' allows the researcher to 'share the experiences' with their participants, shadowing elicited data of a qualitatively different kind to the interviews (Gilliat-Ray 2011). Thus, shadowing was used to enrich the interview data by allowing me to experience how the participants' identities played out in the classroom.

Three periods of shadowing were conducted, each with a separate participant. Participants for shadowing were selected after they had been interviewed because of their accessibility and identification as an important case within the data, representing various orientations to their construction as 'Muslim RE teachers'. This data reflects 24 days of observation conducted over ten weeks during the Spring and Summer terms of 2017. Participants were shadowed for

two to three days a week. Observations were recorded in a fieldwork journal and were then transcribed during the evening whilst my memory of events was fresh.

Ethics, Positionality and Presentation of Data

Being a white, male, non-Muslim researcher ‘outside’ the community presented certain challenges to the research. Bolognani (2007, 282) has documented a ‘general sense of mistrust’ toward researchers investigating Muslim communities, especially those perceived to be ‘outsiders’, which can present barriers to access (see also Gilliat-Ray 2005). Issues with misrepresentation have also been noted as a common criticism of such research, especially where the researcher may not be sensitive to differences in ethnic, cultural or religious positions (Spalek 2005). My experience of RE teaching was a point of commonality with the participants, and in a way provided an ‘insider’ perspective on aspects of their experience, which significantly helped with recruitment and access. Within this research I have tried to remain attentive to the limitations of my perspective by giving significant space for the participants’ own voices, here in the form of extended quotations. Although this is no guarantee to capture the ‘secret knowledges’ of marginalised groups (Spalek 2005, 414), this idea of ‘giving voice’ has been widely used in feminist research (McDowell 2016). Additionally, all names and places have been changed to protect anonymity, but continue to reflect the participants’ denominational identification, gender and ethnicity (Guenther 2009).

Findings

Contesting the ‘Muslim RE Teacher’

Throughout the research the notion of a ‘Muslim RE teacher’ was continually contested, bringing into question the primacy of the participants’ faith in the construction of their

teacher identities. Miss Mazhar brought this immediately to my attention during the pilot study, rejecting her categorisation as a ‘Muslim RE teacher’ for that of the ‘RE teacher who happens to be Muslim’:

Like yes I am Muslim but I don't necessarily identify myself as a Muslim [RE] teacher? I'm an [RE] teacher who happens to be Muslim, like I'm not a Muslim teacher... in that sense (Interview 2, 20:30 – 20:39).

Miss Mazhar’s contestation shaped the whole of the study because the notion of a ‘Muslim RE teacher’ seemed to have failed to articulate how she understood herself. Following the pilot interview, the participants continually clarified their degree of identification with their ‘Muslim’ and ‘RE teacher’ attributes in school.

A common response was to highlight their capacity to distinguish between their personal faith identity and their professional role as RE teachers. For example, Miss Waheed made the following distinction:

Yeah, well yeah, they are very different, because you deal with any person - who they are, what faith they carry, what beliefs are lifestyles they carry that's who that person is, and what profession they do, what profession they work in, again that's different (Interview 5, 57:58 – 59:38).

These distinctions are significant because they are a statement that, in their school contexts, they were not just Muslims but were adopting a professional role, highlighting the other ‘footings’ that they could inhabit and shift ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’ (Goffman 1979). Their ‘Muslim’ identity was conceived as a ‘backstage’ personal identity, encompassing their religious beliefs, practices, values, character, and views about the phenomena under discussion in the classroom, whilst the ‘RE teacher’ represented their ‘frontstage’

professional identity, “what they did” in that context.

As such, the distinction between their personal and professional identities entailed distancing in the identity-work of these participants, allowing the possibility for them to become the non-confessional, ‘neutral RE teacher’ in their pedagogy. Their identities were heavily shaped by their notions of neutrality and RE teacher professionalism, which requires the ‘concealment of any personal commitment on the teacher’s part’ (Jackson and Everington 2017, 10). This impetus to adopt a non-confessional, ‘neutral’ footing encouraged the kind of ‘play’ that Moulin-Stožek and Schirr (2017) highlight, spurred on to avoid potential conflict with their understanding of being an ‘RE teacher’.

Yet, for the participants the notion of a ‘Muslim RE teacher’ did not seem to afford the agentic capacity to occupy and act upon these other identities with their associated sources of meaning. Participants continually expressed their frustration with the assumed ‘Muslimness’ of the notion of a ‘Muslim RE teacher’ in the way that this category seemed to overlook the ‘RE teacher’ attribute. Often this categorisation was seen as a kind of attack on their degree of professionalism, assuming that because they were Muslims they were not able to be RE teachers like anyone else. This was starkly put by Miss Meer:

I just see myself as an RE teacher. That's it. It's not a Muslim RE teacher... You know, stop coming to me like I'm this guru. I'm in the same boat as them, and that, sort of, puts me on par. I'm an RE teacher, like you're an RE teacher. And the Muslim part of it is simply my values part of it, you know, my personal family part of it, rather than me being this female Imam (Interview 17, 47:55 – 51:10).

Miss Meer’s account reflects an active resistance to the ‘religification’ of her teacher identity. This is made explicit through her repeated insistence that she is an “RE teacher”, and in the

juxtaposition to a “female Imam”: a role in which faith and professionalism would be a priority. Others routinely referred to a motif of “I’m teaching not preaching” to resist this tendency. The juxtaposition to religious leaders is a clear clarification of what they were not: primarily coming from their ‘Muslim’ footing in their school contexts. Moreover, the degree of frustration suggests that this is a regular part of their experience, indicated by the presence of a motif itself, along with Miss Meer’s remark “stop coming to me”. Thus, just as Moulin-Stožek and Schirr (2017) argue, my conferring of the category of ‘Muslim’ risked ‘overlooking the unstable positionality and playfulness’ of their self-understanding, thus giving them no other choice but to be primarily a ‘Muslim’.

Toward the ‘RE teacher who happens to be Muslim’

The effect of these contestations caused me and the participants to re-examine the assumptions underpinning the study, and to question the usefulness of the ‘Muslim teacher’ as a conceptual category. This prompted the participants to reflect and articulate their school-based identities in other ways. A continuum of configurations seemed to emerge, with participants talking about themselves as ‘Muslim RE teachers’, ‘RE teachers who happen to be Muslim’, or ‘just RE teachers’. Although there is not the scope to explore this continuum in more depth in this paper, which will be the subject of a future work, it does indicate the underlying complexity of the participants’ self-understanding. Rather than something that was fixed and static, as suggested by the ‘Muslim RE teacher’, the participants shifted and played with different configurations of their identity-attributes in the role. As Essers and Benschop (2009) have shown, these gaps between identities provide a creative space to engage in this kind of identity-work.

For most of the participants this was encapsulated in a shift from ‘Muslim RE teacher’ to the

‘RE teacher who happens to be Muslim’. This shift represents a subtle syntactic demarcation of how they performed these identity-attributes in school. This configuration captured a middle-ground between two attributes - their faith identity and their teacher identity, and discussions were primarily concerned with shifting between these boundaries. Specifically, the participants emphasised their capacity to shift these attributes ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’ in the classroom, as Mr Shah explained:

I see myself as an RE teacher who happens to be a Muslim, just as others would be RE teachers that happen to be humanists or Buddhists or whatever, or nothing at all... I think that maybe being a Muslim teaching RE is with that consciousness also that I have possibly been seen as representing my faith in the classroom without promoting it (Interview 13, 1:37:09 – 1:40:00).

As Mr Shah alludes, there were two forms of Muslim identity in the participants’ work. The most prominent was an understanding of their faith as an ethos or “consciousness” that underpinned their work, resembling Cadge & Konieczny’s (2014) identification of religion ‘hiding in plain sight’. Their faith shaped their ‘backstage’ behaviour, such as being a source of emotional support, a guide for how to respond to peers, and in one instance forgiving pupils who submitted their homework late (Miss Sumar, Interview 7).

At other times, their faith became open and explicit, signalling moments where they “became Muslim” in their role. These moments of self-re-identification were often signalled by explicit verbal cues in lessons, such as a switch from talking about “Muslims” to “we” or “I”, marking a shift in footing from the neutral RE teacher to their faith position. Some highlighted other aspects of their role that incorporated their faith, such as facilitating prayer or offering advice for Muslim pupils. It is from this perspective that the participants’ sense of being role models came to the fore. For Miss Sumar, her experience of role modelling

included her intersecting identities as a Bengali Muslim woman who wore the hijab and had gone to University:

I felt it because it was a school... [with a] Muslim majority, Bengali background, just like me - home situation just like me, a lot of girls who were literally like how I was when I was in Sixth form, so they used to come to me and be like "Oh Miss how was Uni? How did you cope with this?" - they saw me as somebody who had already gone through it and had come out of it still with my faith intact, and so they wanted to know (Interview 7, 1:18:29 – 1:20:21).

Through these other roles the participants have constructed different spaces and capacities in which they could prioritise their Muslim identity, whilst also maintaining a primary ‘RE teacher’ footing in the classroom. Thus, this demonstrates how the participants ‘Muslim’ and ‘RE teacher’ identity-attributes were negotiated and co-constructed together within and between the boundaries between these identities.

‘Being Muslim’

Despite this fluidity, most of the participants still maintained the importance and presence of their Muslim identity within their teacher identity. As mentioned above, participants primarily articulated their faith identity in terms of an underlying character or ethos – “who they were” in school.

Some spoke of their performance and observation of Islamic ritual as something which they would “not compromise”. This tended to be understood in terms of prohibitions rather than positive action, constrained by the busy, practical realities of their teaching diaries. A

particular site of tension was that of abstaining from alcohol, echoing the findings in the wider literature. Many participants spoke of the potentially damaging effects that abstaining from alcohol had on their social life and careers as teachers, such as Miss Mazhar:

Yeah like I've mentioned alcohol and not doing drugs and stuff like that, actually it makes a huge difference. Like with my colleagues they're like "oh you're not drinking" and stuff, and like if we are out on a Friday and there sat with wine and they'll be like "oh you've never tried it why don't you try it", I think because I see them every day and it's a large part of English culture (Interview 2, 26:10 -27:34).

As Miss Mazhar recounts, her abstention constructed her as the 'other' from the norm of the teacher in her working environment, and from "English culture" more widely. Alcohol therefore reflected a significant site of resistance in the participants' construction of their teacher identities from a faith perspective, acting against the dominant pressures of wider teaching culture. As such, the participants' agency and attributes as 'Muslims' could be enacted and evoked in their resistance to their wider professional expectations, distancing themselves from an accepted 'teacher' norm.

These discussions also revealed moments in which others conferred their Muslim identity upon them. Like Miss Sumar, many of the female participants spoke of having their Muslim identity invoked by the pupils in the classroom because they wore the hijab. As such, their 'Muslimness' problematised notions of neutrality as typically understood, and so their capacity to determine their self-identification. For Miss Noor, the visible aspect of her Muslim identity meant she had to identify as a 'Muslim RE teacher':

Erm... I think you'd have to 'cuz like [other teacher] is like an atheist but he doesn't say that he's an atheist, but I'm kinda in your face I'm a Muslim. So, you

have to like - and like I know part of the role is by you not telling the kids your religion, y'know indoctrinating them 'n' all that, but you kinda can't hide it with being a Muslim (Interview 10.2, 4:00 – 6:53).

These visible and physical aspects of 'Muslimness' reveal the intersections of race, gender and racism that have been documented in the wider literature that are critiqued by Panjwani (2017). Hence, the physicality of the participants' 'Muslimness' remains vital to consider, but as one aspect of their experience. Considering these experiences in relation their own self-understanding and agency, this nuance recognises that these conferrals not only impact their capacity to embody their 'Muslimness' as a manifestation of racism, but also that it denies them the agency over their identification or disidentification as 'Muslim' on their own terms, interestingly much like the conferral of the researcher.

Three participants did explicitly identify as 'Muslim RE teachers'. These participants seemed to resist the bracketing off of their faith expressed previously. Mrs Khan exemplified the 'Muslim RE teacher'. When I asked her about her teacher identity, she remarked:

I do see myself as a Muslim RE teacher, and I do see myself as advocating Islam wherever I can, and giving them the knowledge that they need (Interview 16, 13:04 – 23:49).

More so than the other participants, for Mrs Khan her faith was an explicit part of her teacher identity and classroom practice. As an "advocate" of Islam, arguably she has subsumed her role as RE teacher within the repertoire of her faith. This suggests that there is an intimate relationship between her professional role and herself as a Muslim, with the former reflecting the latter. Thus, these few cases challenge the wholesale rejection of the category 'Muslim'

and its assumed primacy, as some have maintained its primacy in the co-construction and practice of their ‘RE teacher’ selves.

Discussion

The participants’ general resistance to the ‘Muslim RE teacher’ label provides further empirical weight to the limits of religious identification for Muslim actors. The prioritisation of ‘Muslim’ was seen to similarly reduce their identities to this Muslim identity-attribute, seemingly overriding any other concerns, such as their educational values or skills as a “secular” RE teacher. The findings also reveal a sophisticated spectrum of configurations that these participants could construct in their school contexts. Their accounts resonate with the critiques of the ascription of ‘Muslim’ in several ways.

The presence of multiple configurations of being a ‘Muslim RE teacher’ raises significant questions about the usefulness of the notion of a ‘Muslim teacher’ itself. Such identification belies the fluidity and multiplicity of these identities, co-construction and the integral boundary-work between each of these identity attributes. As Panjwani (2017) has warned, ‘Muslim’ reduces this internal complexity by encouraging a view through a lens of ‘Muslimness’: a lens that prioritises certain “official” Islamic (theological) discourses and accepted ways of being. More widely, scholars of ‘lived religion’ have warned against such conceptualisations for these reasons. However, maintaining the ascription of ‘Muslim’ identification has the effect of analytically preventing the possibility of these actors occupying other roles by insisting on its priority. Hence, in this study the category ‘Muslim RE teacher’ did not reflect the empirical realities of the participants’ identities because it could not acknowledge this complex identity-work, specifically the moments where they shifted from their ‘Muslim’ identity in terms of their role as RE teachers.

Engaging in this identity-work does not mean that the participants suddenly could not be ‘Muslim’, but, as they emphasised, reflects their capacity to fluidly adopt other footings, of which one was their faith. This reductionism is not just a matter of identity, but also reduces their agency to the ‘Muslim’ identity-attribute. Conceptualising them as ‘*Muslim* RE teachers’ portrayed the sense that everything was seen through a narrow lens of faith, and that ‘Muslimness’ manifest in certain accepted beliefs and practices. This served to deny the participants the capacity to identify as ‘RE teachers’ first and foremost and prioritise their goals, needs and desires according to this professional repertoire, or see any convergence between their work and their faith. Again, this presents an empirically untrue account of the experiences of these participants who have stressed their capacity to be both Muslims *and* RE teachers. Arguably, precluding these possibilities has manifest in calls for specifically Islamic notions of educational leadership in order to ‘cope’ with Muslim identities (Shah 2016, 2018).

Alternatively, I would suggest, as Panjwani (2017, 606) stresses, that there is a need to ‘bring out the fact that religion plays very different roles’ in the lives of Muslims. Although it could only be touched upon here, the participants incorporated their faith into their work in a multitude of ways, both explicit and implicit, based on their own understanding of their faith and sense of professionalism. Of note is the common articulation of faith as an ethos, character or behaviour that underpinned their work, ‘hiding in plain sight’ in their secular schools and role. In this subtle sense, ‘Muslimness’ becomes part of their professional practice in moments of sympathy with students, as a mechanism for coping with stress, and even the role of teaching about religion non-confessionally itself. Religious practice also manifest in their pedagogy, intersecting with their race and gender through particular understandings of neutrality, role modelling and the use of code-switching and ‘personal life knowledge’ (Everington 2015). So, whilst visible and physical manifestations of faith

remained important to many of the participants, it was not the *only way*, nor the most prevalent way, in which they expressed their faith in their work. Yet this subtle repertoire of ‘Muslimness’ does not seem to have been articulated in the literature because of its assumed visibility and physicality.

With this dynamic notion of self-identification in mind, the findings shed further light on the importance of identification, disidentification, and the ‘in-between spaces’ between identities discussed by Moulin-Stožek and Schirr (2017). They identify how Muslim adolescents use disidentification as a strategy to open up interpretive spaces for the performance of their own identities within school. Similarly, the participants here used disidentification as a way to become the ‘RE teacher’, acknowledging that in this context they were embodying other repertoires of meaning by virtue of their professional role. Vital to the participants’ understanding and experience of being RE teachers was their capacity to fluidly shift their personal and professional identity-attributes ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’. The syntactic gap between ‘Muslim’ and ‘RE teacher’ in the preferred notion of ‘RE teacher who happens to be Muslim’ encapsulates the space created by this disidentification. Essers and Benschop (2009) have also drawn attention to how these spaces between personal and professional identity create new possibilities of being Muslim, as a space to creatively incorporate various intersecting identities and practices. Against this fluidity the category ‘Muslim’ seems to be static regarding its assumed positioning and manifestation.

However, caution must be advised in overemphasising the degree of fluidity in which Muslim actors ‘play’ with their ‘Muslim’ identity-attribute. The ‘hypervisibility’ of ‘Muslimness’ (see Jeldtoft 2016), especially for the female participants, meant that they were often reconstructed as ‘Muslim RE teachers’ by both staff and students despite their own distancing, as exemplified by Miss Noor. For the few ‘Muslim RE teachers’ the idea of ‘playing’ seemed to be an uncomfortable prospect, and instead ‘played’ with their other intersecting identities

to fit (such as their sense of RE teaching). Specifically, imaginaries of typical or ‘traditional’ ways of being a ‘practicing Muslim’ should not be completely ignored in analyses because, as Jeldtoft (2011) has also noted, these imaginaries seem to have a pervading normative weight. As has long been recognised (see for example Jacobson 1998), these countervailing cultural/religious imaginaries enact pressures to embody certain forms of ‘Muslimness’, in turn constructing certain boundaries to this fluid identity-work.

This dynamic is something that sits uncomfortably with the notions of ‘disidentification’ and ‘play’ within the above critiques. As such, I suggest that ‘distancing’ is possibly a more nuanced term than ‘disidentification’ to articulate the identity-work taking place. This is because it captures the capacity to shift in footings and frames between identity-attributes. Doing so adds continued significance to the efficacy of categories of ‘Muslim’ and ‘Muslimness’ whilst remaining fluid concepts, as identity-attributes that are still enacted in the ‘background’. In this way, whereas these critiques emphasise the presence other identities, recognising these potential boundaries to ‘playing’ with forms of ‘Muslimness’ could also be a fruitful future research agenda.

Conclusion

This article argues that there are limitations to the category ‘Muslim’ when exploring the identities and experiences of Muslim actors within education. The participants in this study strongly contested their categorisation as ‘Muslim RE teachers’ because of its perceived prioritisation of the ‘Muslim’ identity attribute at the expense of their capacity to be ‘RE teachers’. This categorisation did not accurately articulate the participants understanding or experience working within their school contexts. Instead, they presented an array of categorisations, the most prominent being the ‘RE teacher who happens to be Muslim’.

Where the ‘Muslim RE teacher’ assumed the priority of the ‘Muslim’ identity-attribute, the notion of the ‘RE teacher who happens to be Muslim’ suggests a much more sophisticated, fluid and dynamic concept of identity that captures the capacity to shift to, from and be co-constructed with ‘Muslimness’.

Looking forward, there is a pressing need to put the ‘Muslim’ identity-attribute in serious conversation with other various intersecting identities as alternative positions or footings. Panjwani (2017, 605) has stated this clearly, reminding us that no Muslim is ever ‘just a Muslim’. In the case of these participants, my prioritisation of ‘Muslim’ risked obscuring their identities as ‘RE teachers’: the very role that they were occupying in their school contexts. Scholarship that considers both Muslim and professional identities seems to have been successful at capturing this complexity by its focus on the boundary-work between faith and secular identity-attributes (Essers and Benschop 2009; Gilliat-Ray, Pattison, and Ali 2013), which are perhaps rendered clearer in working contexts. Perspectives from ‘RE teachers who happen to be Muslim’ seem especially valuable given their position as interlocutors between secular educational policy and faith-based perspectives on religion in their work. For this reason, it is striking that this article is amongst the first that has paid specific attention to ‘Muslim RE teachers’ from the perspective of their professional role. Further exploration of Muslims and professional roles, specifically teaching, could be of significant value to attending to the critiques presented here.

Finally, the shift to the ‘RE teacher who happens to be Muslim’ is worthy of further consideration in terms of British Muslim identity more widely. Although within this paper I have briefly noted new configurations and manifestations, within the wider doctoral research it emerges as a notion of new British Muslim identities that are incorporating secular positions and self-understanding, playing with notions of ‘Muslim’ identity and manifestations of ‘Muslimness’. Specifically, ‘lived religious’ expressions of faith, such faith

as ethos, role modelling and the convergence of work as faith could represent new expressions of 'Muslimness' being constructed by Muslims on the ground. Given the unique ontological requirements of RE teaching (Freatly et al. 2016), it could be that these 'RE teachers who are Muslim' are at the forefront of this. Moreover, Muslim women seem to be at the forefront of these new identifications.

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