Chapter 7

Narrative bridges

> *As a parent and professional I can see the problem: teachers need to be aware of the lifestyles and cultures that affect engagement or disengagement. There's a difference between religion and home culture.*
>
> *(Rizwana)*

> *It's about humanity, we need to give respect to each other. If we started with educating the parents a lot of it would be fine.*
>
> *(Erum)*

> *It's very important for children to a get a solid education. Education is the base of living … it's anything that helps you help other people and you'll get rewarded for that.*
>
> *(Hafsa)*

> *It's necessary to be involved more than ever before, making sure we're not misunderstood.*
>
> *(Nasra)*

In the Preface I stressed the need to hear from those who are silent, that their presence is required, that their voices be heard, that they themselves construct a bridge with their narratives. In their distinctive ways, the mothers in this study have shared their experiences and challenges educating their children in state schools. They have carved their own narratives instead of accepting prefabricated stories, and articulated their experiences to fill crevices and shape their numerous realities. Their voices have directed the contents of this book.

This chapter has two purposes. The first is to present an unanticipated subject that arose in several interviews and emerged in all the focus groups: mosque/madrassah education. The second is to explore the mothers' responses to my closing question during the interviews and discussions: could they suggest any ways to encourage better communication and understanding between the home and school?

Regarding and re-guarding capital

In the study, 'education' was understood in the broadest sense and included spiritual, moral and academic grounding (see Chapter 4). From a mothers' perspective, talking about her child's education included their attending supplementary schooling in the shape of a mosque class or madrassah, although this is not the only form of supplementary faith education. Faith education was discussed at length in the two focus groups, and references made to it in a quarter of the individual interviews. Whether it was delivered in a mosque, community hall or someone's home, mothers described it as an integral part of their child's life. The larger focus group discussed the frequency of lessons and their commitment as parents to making sure their children attended the classes – while ensuring they were not overloaded with studies.

In the smaller group discussion mothers probed and debated their views on prioritizing supplementary classes over other extra-curricular activities and school commitments. An example was given of a school trip being shortened because half the pupils had an after-school madrassah class. Opinions voiced included the concern that daily faith classes could be too frequent and how parents needed to be better organized about managing children's madrassah and after-school commitments. The mothers reached a consensus that 'when it's a one-off issue', such as the school trip, madrassahs should accommodate educational trips that benefit the children. Whether better community links are needed between schools and local madrassahs in some localities is a matter for further research. The group discussed how several mothers strove to balance their children's out-of-school duties and the school day. Some alluded to the contrast in the ethos children encounter in their two sites of learning and the challenges inherent in the differing *ways* of learning.

Pedagogical differences certainly do exist between traditional mosque education and mainstream schooling. However, the landscape of supplementary education in the UK is changing. Supplementary mosque or madrassah education varies hugely from one Muslim community to another, depending on location, socio-economic factors, how long the community has been established, what type of cultural heritage they bring with them, the mosque committees' education levels and so forth. Even in one geographical area, there may be several contrasting types of provision, just as one would find variety among Sunday schools between different church denominations. The traditional style of rote learning Qur'anic Arabic, continues to be the customary way the language is taught in mosque classes. The purpose,

initially, is to enable children to read the sacred text phonetically until they acquire fluency in reading the script. For those who want to take their reading to a higher level (usually by their teens), the science of recitation also involves attention to the intricate tempo, intonation and rhythm and training the vocal chords. For the majority, memorizing the set passages and reading the entire Qur'an from cover to cover is akin to a 'rite of passage', celebrated in various ways determined by the family's cultural heritage. The teaching methods are not necessarily static. With developments in teacher training, madrassah management and policy creation and more UK-educated teachers managing these classes, a change is slowly taking place. It still has a way to go until more qualified staff join the sector, however (Faith Associates, 2016).

Curriculum, syllabus and safeguarding requirements have also been developed with training and standard setting becoming the norm. A madrassah manager from the South East discussed their specific requirements: 'We make sure all our teachers are CRB cleared and they have to have read the policies and sign a contract to abide by them. We have safe-guarding training they go on.' While these developments have reached some localities sooner than others, the negative stereotype persists, as Parveen's narrative illustrates:

> Work colleagues hate the fact that kids go off to mosque. I've never heard anyone say anything nice … they think they're being radicalized and can't do their homework. Everyone uses the word 'radicalization' as we've had that training – so they're all experts now. Some children come up to me and say what they've learnt and I praise it like any other achievement.
>
> (Parveen)

Parveen's colleagues' reaction to the mosque classes could reflect the negativity associated with media news stories about mosques. Or it could be opinions about race and class and about what is seen as an acceptable extracurricular activity. In the UK, as in parts of Europe and the US, it is not uncommon to have faith weekend schools, language classes and a host of other children's culture building activities, particularly for migrant groups. How madrassah education fits into the discourse on inclusion is another potential area to explore.

There are subtle differences in parents' efforts to supplement their children's education. The extra-curricular activities and tuition referred to by Reay, in her case studies on social reproduction of middle- and working-class mothers (1998; 2000), for example, reveals the ways mothers from different

social classes approach involvement with their children's education. The studies show that the 'social, cultural and material advantages' that affect educational success, are the stock of the middle classes. Reay's arguments about social injustice and inequality, confirmed by the mothers' narratives in her study, show how inequitable 'success' can be.

A class variable regarding madrassah attendance/supplementary schooling is less prominent in the narratives of the women in my study. Instead, the mothers clearly enact the workings of 'social and cultural reproduction' (Crozier and Reay, 2005), assuming the responsibility for making sure the spiritual and operational aspects of faith are managed in their children's lives. The aspirational and better resourced mothers showed greater prowess in choosing which type of class their child will attend. Several bought in home tutors' services and were discerning about the type of classes, teachers and timings. The less-resourced mothers, on the other hand, sent their children to their nearest madrassah classes. In terms of capital, the choice of supplementary schooling is part of the repertoire of Muslim parents' investment in their children and is relevant to the wider discussion of capital later in this chapter.

Improving communication

Participants interpreted the question about communication in different ways. Most spoke about what they believed would improve communication between the home and the school; others returned to the subject of identity and how to clarify misconceptions. A few took an introspective view of barriers from within the community and outlined the need for community groups and individuals to be proactive in forging links and participating in school life. Mothers who had worked in the education and social services sectors broadened their responses to include the role of multiple agency relationships if there are signs of parents not cooperating with schools. Drawing on their experience, this is their reading of improving communication:

> It's a combination of factors, schools do look out for them and in all fairness they give them designated prayer areas in Ramadan and schools are trying and the parents don't know how the teachers bend over and change things to help them. As a parent and professional I can see the problem: teachers need to be aware of the lifestyles and cultures that affect engagement or disengagement – as it's complicated. There's a difference between religion and home culture.

> Lots of things need to be done with some Muslim parents. Some don't get it … like parents' evening, safeguarding issues, lots of thing are messed up because of culture; there's domestic issues, fathers in prison – the works, that's lifestyles.
>
> Teachers are in a unique position to identify if a child's not achieving, sometimes more than the parents or carers and looking at the family set-up and social side … just like other communities.
>
> (Rizwana)

In a similar vein, Mouna, a mother whose professional role involves supporting marginalized women and families, observed:

> Both the community and the school need to be more open about what they don't understand. The media is not the true story. Schools and agencies need to understand where the parents are coming from and give positive support. If there are problems, then working with the parent and the child together, like we have with mothers and daughters, can build better relationships.
>
> (Mouna, company director, L1)

Back to identities

A prevalent response, given by most of the mothers, returned to correcting essentialized identities. The mothers stressed the need to be seen and understood without being labelled according to preconceived ideas, articulating 'the problematic aspect of identity politics … the politics of recognition' (Vincent, 2000: 6). The fact that this subject was raised again shows the strength of feeling about identity construction, about resistance, about the authentic voice. As in real life, these narratives have no neat, linear progression; they flit from one issue to another, loosely strung as one area of life touches another. The result, as the following extracts show, is a mix of being introspective and critical, retrospective and hopeful. We see evolving identities, oscillating between the public image of a group and the private lived experience of being an individual, a parent and 'just a mum', as one participant remarked. The mothers felt a negative public image precedes their relationship with school. Even those mothers with no professional connection to education or community sectors are vocal about challenging stereotypes and misconceptions:

> They need to hear the views so all kids are comfortable … some of them have wrong views … on both sides. It could be our kids with wrong views 'cos of the wars in other places in the world.

My own school RE was go *gudwara*, go mosque, this is a church, that's how they pray … and that's it – that's RE. Nowadays, it's more intense as there's so much more that happens. I know when kids see, and don't know you, they'll come out with things they've been fed with from home. But when they know, then they can see 'he's just the same as us, they're not a terrorist or shoe bomber'.

(Sonia)

Actually that's quite difficult to think of advice, as there are Muslims and there are 'Muslims'. To one Muslim, it may mean a completely different need and demands and others might be no different to anyone else. So, I suppose the awareness that Muslims are very different and not to make assumptions. Listen to what the parents are saying. One thing I've learnt is you can't make assumptions. As a parent, do not assume teacher will know anything about Muslims. You literally have to spell it out. Would a trainee teacher know these things … are we leaving it up to them to know?

(Tahira)

I think some education on Islam and myths, giving the fact about things when training teachers. There's a lot of difference between Muslims. When I was pregnant and talked to my class about the baby etc., some parents came in and said they don't like their child learning all this as it's not discussed in their culture. Now they're also Pakistani parents and Muslim like me, but have a different perspective. I explained it to them as part of nature and life cycles and part of what I was teaching the children. So there is a lot of difference.

(Afreen)

Sometimes I think people create problems from the outside and those come into schools, and make trouble for everyone. It's better to have respect for everyone. We need respect in this way and give respect that way.

(Kausar)

One member of staff likes to organize socials around betting, or drinking is a big part – that's the two things I just won't do. When they try to be inclusive, they suggest going to an Indian restaurant.

I've tried explaining … but it's that 'just do a bit, it's harmless, I won't tell anyone' comments that show they don't get it.

(Afreen)

I think I'd say have good communication with parents as many parents, especially if they come from outside, don't know anything. And don't assume we are all bad.

(Fahmida)

We need more interfaith dialogue between parents and school; in some areas communities are quite polarized.

(Catherine)

I would advise more basic knowledge is necessary to combat misrepresentation and myths about our community.

(Hibaaq)

… we have to do actions to change the environment. I'm a person, I just want them to see that. I don't want them to judge me on my hijab and *jilbab*. At first they thought I was quiet, but when I spoke they were shocked and their whole body language changed … then afterwards they see past that [the clothes]. I don't judge them, so I don't want them to judge me. It's about humanity, we need to give respect to each other. If we started with educating the parents a lot of it would be fine.

(Erum)

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Zarah: Ideally they need people from the community in the schools … but with Muslims it is difficult, as we have different cultures. But still, I think they need some training, maybe someone who explains what is Muslim, why they celebrate Eid, why they fast, why they pray.

SD: After 21 years in the education system, you still feel there's a need for training?

Z: Yes. Sometimes even though you talk, they don't listen, or forget, they need to hear it again. Eighty per cent in the school I'm in are Muslims – staff understand a lot more because 6–7 staff are

> Muslim. But you know because of the media, it is very difficult. We don't have strong Muslim community here, there are not people who come to represent.
>
> The media is saying Islam is intolerant. Every day in the staff room they bring the METRO in and the first page is someone did something. When the staff read this, the only thing they think is it's not a good religion. Even though they know us as staff, as good, but they get bombarded with the negative. Even for us as Muslim, what can we say? They never ask directly, but you can see in their eyes and I volunteer and say 'this is not Islam'. When they have questions, I will go and explain, it's part of my 'job'.
>
> (Zarah, parent advisor, L3)

Zarah's periodic struggle in the staffroom cuts across faith, ethnicity and class, as she alludes further to a local community that cannot represent itself adequately. Her extract exemplifies the damage negative headlines have on parents' daily interactions with school, a theme identified in Chapter 5. The other mothers articulated wide-ranging suggestions about what they felt would help home–school relations. These had one common thread: better information for teachers that differentiates between faith and culture.

So many of the mothers placed identity at the centre of their responses about improving home–school relationships that it perhaps creates a new perspective on who they are and how their role vis-à-vis their child's education has evolved. I offer the description of an 'authenticating mother', to sign-post their contemporary position. The struggle to authenticate their existence and identity on a daily basis recurred throughout the group discussions. In particular, their language in the interviews included that of validating, of proving and justifying in overt and subtle ways, where they stand. Throughout this book, we have seen the way the mothers evaluate their position, bringing to the fore their roots, their contemporary lives and by extension their agency. In *Maternal Thinking* Ruddick comments on the evolving nature of mothers' voices in the 1980s. It still rings true today:

> Maternal voices have been drowned by professional theory, ideologies of motherhood, sexist arrogance, and childhood fantasy. Voices that have been distorted and censored can only be *developing* voices. Alternately silenced and edging towards speech, mothers' voices are not voices of mothers as they are, but as they are becoming. As mothers struggle towards responsible

> thinking, they will transform the thought they are beginning to articulate and the knowledge they are determined to share.
>
> (Ruddick, 1989: 40)

How these women situate themselves is relevant beyond the school gates. The way the mothers in my study identify themselves is useful to those working across the public service sectors, particularly – as Williams (2015) asserts – where families are involved:

> Spaces are needed in which parenting narrative is valued, particularly for under-represented groups to inform the development of culturally competent and relevant family well being early interventions, while simultaneously encouraging client self-efficacy.
>
> (Williams, 2015: 2)

The aforementioned final comments – intersectional, contradictory, exploratory and explanatory – offer insight into the intricate position of Muslim mothers in relation to their children's education and general upbringing.

Communication and behaviour

Some mothers responded to the question about communication by talking specifically about their children's behaviour. In one of the focus group sites, long-term behaviour issues was a priority, particularly as the mothers there had larger families and therefore a broader experience of behaviour. Their narratives were influenced by what had happened with their older children who had left school, and the challenges experienced at a community level. As one mother said: 'when there are behaviour issues and then when kids end up in the streets … and these behaviour problems are muted in the beginning and we don't know. They'll wait for parents' evening and then it's too late … so communicating earlier would be better.' This corroborated Zarah's views, who was from the same community. Zarah described a memory from the early days of her professional work in the late 1990s, when children coming from Somalia were settling into schools in London – and how some parents and schools moved forward as a community:

> Two boys I remember, one found it difficult to sit in the classroom, disruptive. The whole day they'd sit outside the classroom. I talked to the parents, and they said he had hole in the bottom of his back from an injury. The children came and didn't know they have to sit, there was no system they were coming from,

> like being in a classroom and listening quietly. Also he had a physical problem … then I explained to the headteacher and she understood. We supported the child and worked with him and he improved. So then, from there, I found Somali parents need to understand the education system. I planned coffee mornings and asked teachers to come and talk about behaviour policy, homework policy, how to support children with homework (like reading stories in Somali). I started like this. Then we used to hire halls and invite primary and secondary schools parents and talked about how to support children. They would call each other and come – just mothers.
>
> Next we included fathers also. They usually had a hundred excuses, some think they know everything. In the end they knew they needed to support everything. You see the mums understood – but we wanted the men to understand, some did listen. In the first school I worked in I ran Parents: Partners in Learning and I was covering basic things like supporting children with English, just taking them to the library; fill in forms; ask questions about stories in your language, help with reading and grammar; showing them how to use websites.

If there is one thing these women were united about, it was the value they placed on educating their children. This book has shown the concern mothers have for their children's education: the ways they have supported it, the positive relationships they build with schools and the challenges they face. Conceptually, the narratives I have shared are relevant to Yosso's discussion on 'community cultural wealth' (2005), which asks: '*Whose culture has capital?*' Yosso focuses on the practical manifestation of how schools under-utilize the cultural wealth children from minorities possess. Utilizing such cultural capital is a way to do something for real inclusion, a nexus that can bring parents together on subjects that go beyond the outdated 'saree, steel band and samosa' tropes of diversity. Broader themes such as the environment, arts and culture, science and maths, literature – all of which are central to the school curriculum and particularly to global citizenship – present opportunities for meaningful cultural exchange.

International food stalls have become a feature of summer fetes, opening the way for more parental involvement. Similarly themed events – on arts and crafts from around the world, for example – could include a broad range of disciplines. Schools with eco-friendly projects can use them to draw in parents for whom academic-related support is daunting, as

hands-on activities are an effective way to bring parents together to support the school's projects. I have seen successful projects in primary schools that blended faith and culture in a way that made all the parents and children feel included on occasions like Eid, when international fashion, arts and food were given equal importance and parents from ten or more different cultural backgrounds shared aspects of their heritage.

Retrospective, introspective: perspective

I started with an intersectional framework and I end with it. This book does not take a single problem and offer a neatly aligned solution to it. It has raised the curtain on a small group of women from the largest faith minority and sizeable ethnic minorities in the UK, and shared their experiences. Where normally gender, class and race intersect in ways that show marginalization, the axis the mothers constructed places their faith identity firmly at the centre of their experience. Thanks to the ways Muslims have been placed in the public imagination by the media and political discourse, the struggles they talk of at times position the faith element above gender, race or class. Their accounts of how they view education, what their experiences have been, what they find challenging, what they do not understand, how they contribute, why they do or do not engage, have filled some of the spaces between assumptions, conjecture and fact.

Schools and parents need there to be dialogue between them: that much is uncontested. For the interests of the children, for genuine education that moves society in the direction of compassion and understanding, we need dialogue. More so when there is a dearth of communication and an excess of half-truths and misinformation.

As I began this book acknowledging the personal, it seems right to end with a mother's narrative, told in free-association style, that sets aside the mother–child–home–school rubric so we can hear what she wanted to say. I hope the following vignette – a combination of my field notes and our interaction – brings the diverse subjects in this book back to the heart of the matter: that mothers' commitment to education is heard and their passionate words utilized as the material to build long-lasting bridges with schools. Acknowledging the power of personal stories, Michael Apple expounds their relevance for educators thus:

> Much of the impetus behind personal stories is moral. Education correctly is seen as an ethical enterprise. The personal is seen as a way to re-awaken ethical and aesthetic sensitivities that increasingly have been purged from the scientistic discourse of

> too many educators. Or it is seen as a way of giving a voice to the subjectivities of people who have been silenced. There is much to commend in this position. Indeed any approach that, say, evacuates the aesthetic, the personal, and the ethical from our activities as educators, is not about education at all. It is about training.
>
> (Apple, 2005: 71)

I leave you with Amaal.

> June 2015
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> *For a second week we have the use of the community room and I await Amaal's arrival. A ten-minute delay and I reflect on how this hardly matters in the grand scheme of life and locations I've visited, to talk to mothers. My thoughts stray to the 'to do' list I drew up the night before to tick my own family, correspondence and work boxes, to ensure I was out the of the house by 7a.m., with all bases covered for the next twelve hours until I returned. If only Amaal knew … but she'll see me differently. I wonder what she must have to rig to meet me this morning and just then, she arrives, a little breathless, having rushed to our room through the warren of corridors to reach this side of the school.*
>
> A: She was sleeping. I've just got her up. Sorry, I hope you don't mind. I'm looking after my sister's daughter as she's doing a shift now … she leaves her with me. I didn't realize she was doing today. Is it ok?
>
> *Once she's reassured her niece's presence is not a problem, she sighs with relief, just long enough to catch a stray thought: she apologizes again, anticipating she might have to leave early if the 3-year-old makes a fuss. With the infant sprawled across her chest, we start to chat about the morning rush of getting children out to school. 'How about when you were at school Amaal, what was it like?' Not a question I planned to ask but a natural way in, I felt, to focus on her 'self'. And she was eager, on this summer morning sat in West London at 9.45a.m., to take us both back to Somalia. Her narrative unravelled.*
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> A: My father had a good government job, we were comfortable and I went to school where I had cousins and sisters … lots of family. You know it's big families there. So we were all in school,

and then I had to come here to the UK because of the situation there. With the war, it was getting worse, girls were getting raped, there was violence, my parents wanted me to continue my education outside and I was one of the eldest too.

So with my father's job … he knew people, they sent me to an aunt here in London, I was only 17. My father was afraid of me changing, but my mother wasn't – she trusted me and I've kept my promise to her. She said 'I trust my daughter, I'm sending her for education'.

Amaal adjusts her niece's position as she's fallen asleep and continues.

A: And I promised to my mother, I wasn't going to change, and I would get my education. *She places her hand on her stomach, in the same way people place their hand on their heart; it is no coincidence the words for 'mercy' and 'womb' come from the same root in her mother tongue – Arabic.* I promised her I would do that, she could trust me. So here I went to college to English classes first and I wanted to carry on but after two years, I got married. I was missing my family and I needed some security. My in-laws were good to me. I had my first child when I was young, and my mother-in-law helped me … and I started to work, she looked after my baby when I was working. At the same time it got worse in Somalia so my brothers and sisters had to leave too, they were getting older. Some of them went to Pakistan and studied there. It was my priority to send them help so I worked as a cleaner in the airport. I sent them help by working. At the same time I had another child, then after a long gap I had one more son. It was very difficult, especially the gap … and I wanted my eldest to do well, and she's, thank God graduated now, looking for Masters courses ... but I don't know yet which one.

SD: How did you manage?

A: It was tough, my mother-in-law helped me. After she died, then a sister came, they helped too like with the children and taking care of the flat, and helping with the brothers and sisters that came here for their education. Out of all of us, three have passed away.

SD: So what did they do at university?

A: From the ten left, there's now a pharmacist, a dentist, two working in IT, two did biomedical, one is doing post-grad at Oxford – *the* Oxford. The youngest is doing his engineering degree, he's given me a hard time, changing courses twice.

SD: And what happened to your education, Amaal?

A: Huh! My mother sent me here for education! But I'm not anything – my brain's not working. I did pass Level 1 English but I still have to do an Access course as I want to be a nurse – I want to help people. I want to be a mother who is educated and can educate others. But it's the home, cooking, jobs, working and working, or running around with the children I couldn't do much study. I'm doing some care work now, but not enough hours.

… I want to study now. I'm going to go to college, and do the foundation health care. I've got two sons still in primary, so I have to look there as well. I don't know … with Somali families, the mothers can manage them 'til 15, then they lose control, especially of the boys. Sometimes it's the father's fault – not being around enough. You know, it's some mothers' fault too. They bring their sons up like kings. These men go to work, come back and act like they're holding the sun and sky up for you. That's their attitude … they sleep and don't think the family is their job. So of course the mothers are frustrated. But then people shouldn't raise their sons like that, should they?

Amaal brings her narrative to a close and looks at me expectantly; awaiting the start of the formal interview. I open my notebook and stare at the naivety of my questions in relation to her gendered, classed, raced, migrant's account moulded around her commitment to education. If this doesn't say something, there's nothing in my notebook that will.