PRACTITIONER RESEARCH
IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

International Issues and Perspectives

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INSIDER ISLAMIC SPACES OF INQUIRY: MUSLIM EDUCATORS PRODUCING NEW KNOWLEDGE IN SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

Oznur Aydemir, Fatima Mourad, Leonie Arthur and Jen Skattebol

Key words   epistemic disobedience; intercultural dialogue; collaborative practitioner research; knowledge production.

Chapter overview

In this chapter we share the challenges of educators working 'against the grain' (de Castell, 1993: 185) of orthodox knowledge and explore the enabling contribution of what we have termed 'insider Islamic spaces of inquiry' to generate new knowledge. The chapter draws on data from a practitioner research project involving a group of Muslim teachers working in Muslim schools and secular early childhood settings in Sydney, Australia. This was one of three groups nested in a larger project, named the Collaborative Practitioner Research Project (Skattebol and Arthur, 2014). The members of this group of Muslim practitioners named themselves the *Habibties*, which loosely means friends/darlings/honeys in Arabic and is used to show affection and friendship. This chapter discusses three research projects – Oznur's research on music teaching in Islamic schools, Fatima's research on the professional identities of Muslim educators in a secular setting,

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and Jen and Leonie's research on the processes of practitioner research. The key themes addressed in the chapter are collaborative practitioner research as a space for critical reflection; combining practitioner research with post-colonial theory to open up possibilities for practitioners to produce their own culturally relevant knowledge; and insider spaces of inquiry as particularly important for marginalised groups navigating cultural interfaces as they work across boundaries (Manathunga, 2009). Readers can expect to learn about findings from a project that provided insights into the broader dynamics of collaborative practitioner research practice as well as themes particular to Islamic educational contexts. The chapter provides evidence of the role of collaborative practitioner research as an important avenue for the production of a democratic palette of knowledge to inform teaching.

How the authors came to be working together

A safe space is necessary if practitioners are to challenge dominant discourses and engage in productive dialogue across the cultural interface. The idea of an insider Islamic space for inquiry was co-constructed over several informal conversations between the four authors. It was initiated by one of the authors, Oznur Aydemir, who used her existing networks to invite potential practitioner researchers to join the group and hosted an introductory meeting with the practitioners and the academic partners in her home, where a group of practitioner researchers, called the *Habibties*, was formed.

Oznur is a teacher in Islamic schools and is interested in destabilising the static and limiting constructions of Muslims embedded in Orientalist discourses. She has a continuing interest in exploring the inclusion of religion, or more broadly spirituality, in teacher education programmes to promote better understanding of how this may influence teaching and learning in schools.

Another key member of the *Habibties* group was Fatima Mourad, who is the director of a secular early childhood centre and interested in the potential of practitioner research to develop leadership capacity. Fatima works to integrate Islamic knowledge at all levels of educational practice and theory. To this end she is a strong advocate for greater representation of Muslim voices and hopes to foreground Muslim identities, social, cultural and linguistic knowledge in education. She believes current policies

need to be revisioned if the issues facing marginalised communities are to be effectively addressed.

The two university-based academics, Jen Skattebol and Leonie Arthur, played the role of critical friends to the three concurrent practitioner research groups and researched the processes of practitioner research. Jen and Leonie are Anglo-Australians who taught in a teacher education programme from which Oznur and Fatima had graduated. This course had a strong focus on diversity and culturally responsive learning environments and used post-structural theory to elucidate power relations in educational settings. Jen and Leonie were committed to developing 'intercultural dialogues' (Manathunga, 2009) that can facilitate greater understanding in the academy. As teaching academics they were committed to providing opportunities for educators to produce their own contextually relevant knowledge and pedagogies and interested in researching the processes of collaborative practitioner research.

Rationale for the study

Australia's Muslim population has increased rapidly, growing by 69 per cent between 2001 and 2011 to a total of 2.2 per cent of the population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). There has been a concomitant expansion of the Islamic school sector, with current figures showing 35 across Australia and 19 in our state of New South Wales (Hassen, 2013), which is similar to trends in other Western countries (Memon, 2011). Despite this growth in Islamic schools, and in the number of Muslim teachers graduating from universities, little is known about the career trajectories of these teachers or about how they negotiate their everyday practices and professional identities once they are in the workforce. The Australian teaching profession is predominantly monolingual and Anglo-Celtic (McKenzie et al., 2008). The nuances of working in Islamic schools or as a Muslim practitioner in secular early childhood settings are generally not systematically or rigorously addressed in initial teacher education programmes. In addition, there is little research on the principles of Islamic pedagogy or how it may be valued or included in Western teacher education courses (Memon, 2011).

Since 2001 Muslims and Islamic religious beliefs, values and practices have been the focus of attention 'fomented by divisive discourses' emanating from politicians and the media (Halafoff, 2011: 455) and have been viewed by many as a global threat (Saeed, 2003). The resultant 'Islamophobia' (Poynting and Mason, 2007) has generated discrimination against Muslims and an increase in practices which demean and exclude

them from economic, social and public life (Gottschalk and Greenberg, 2007), exacerbating their fear of scrutiny and resulting in isolation. As a result, Islamic schools and early childhood services tend to be isolated and operate as an enclave and, as Zine (2006) argues, tend to insulate students from the outside world.

More needs to be known about what Australian Islamic schools and early childhood services look like, and the daily experiences of Muslim educators in the Islamic and secular education sectors. We need to know whether there is dissonance between the values embedded in Australian teacher education programmes and the expectations of Islamic educational settings, families and communities and how value dissonances are negotiated in everyday practices. There is also a need for greater understanding about the diversity of Islamic thought and how this informs responsive teaching practices for the array of Muslim communities.

Zembylas (2004: 936) has argued that all professional identities can be considered to be 'contingent and fragile, and thus open for reconstruction'. The *Habibties* were interested in finding out how professional identities were constructed and reconstructed by Muslim educators working across Muslim and secular educational institutions under the pressures of Islamophobia. Given that professional identities are shaped by 'social and structural relations' (Dillabough, 1999: 22), Muslim educators are likely to be influenced by the different discourses available to them, including those about what it is to be a 'good educator' and a 'good Muslim' within the context of Islamophobia.

Aims

The overarching aim of the Collaborative Practitioner Research Project was to provide an environment where educators could identify and research their own dilemmas, produce their own knowledge, explore their professional identities and enhance their leadership skills. It also aimed to facilitate critical dialogue between the academy and the field of practice and between Muslim and non-Muslim educators.

As academics and practitioners we were politically committed to research that resists the pressure to speak with one voice. We were interested in generating multiple perspectives about teaching, academia, the early childhood field, being a Muslim educator and so on. We hoped the multiplicity of these perspectives could challenge universalist assumptions that there is a 'good' teacher/a 'good' Muslim. In this we found it necessary to acknowledge the dominant power relations between the academy and the field and between Muslims and non-Muslims and to

be reflexive in our approach to these fields of power. We aimed to generate practitioner stories that allowed 'unassimilated otherness' (Young, 2011: 227). The collaborative approach to practitioner research aimed to provide the emotional and intellectual support that facilitates educators' reflection, critique and action (Goodfellow and Hedges, 2006).

Theoretical perspectives

Collaborative practitioner research is a methodology that enables educators to research their own issues and dilemmas and produce their own contextually relevant knowledges, and as such was ideally suited to the *Habibties'* inquiries. The term collaborative practitioner research reflects the critical role of communities of learners in facilitating professional dialogue, critical reflection and critical action (Skattebol and Arthur, 2014). This methodology has the potential to break down the traditional dichotomy and the uneven power relationships between the academy and the field and between Muslim and non-Muslim educators to create a third space (Bhabha, 1994) for the production of new contextually relevant knowledge.

Post-colonial theory offers important conceptual frameworks to inform equity driven practitioner research practices. It opens up spaces that enable the contestation of dominant discourses of early childhood education and the academic/practitioner and Muslim/non-Muslim dichotomies. Post-colonial perspectives recognise and value 'knowledges developed outside the dominant hegemonic orientation of the West' (Rizvi, 2004: 161) and allow for 'epistemic disobedience' (Mignolo, 2009: 160) that challenges the Western assumption that there is one way to interpret the world. As Nakata et al. (2012) argue, post-colonial theory challenges the idealising and universalising of Western thought and allows for 'epistemic awakening' (Wiredu, 1995) and 'decolonial knowledge-making' (Nakata et al., 2012: 124).

We draw on Said's (1994) view of educational institutions as sites of both colonial power and post-colonial aspiration in order to reconceptualise possible relations between academic researchers and teacher practitioners and between Muslim and non-Muslim educators. We are interested in how the post-colonial notion of the 'contact zone' (Pratt, 1992: 4) contributes to productive cross-cultural exchanges and knowledge creation (Manathunga, 2009: 165) across Muslim/non-Muslim and academic/practitioner contexts. This 'cultural space' (Pratt, 1992: 4) provides a space for cultural exchange through 'copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices' (1992: 7).

Traditionally the academy holds the epistemological power to define and delimit educational practices and subjects (Rizvi and Lingard, 2006). This power, however, is also undone and troubled through strategic alliances that refigure the relations between the 'centre' (that is the academy) and its margins (in this case the early childhood field and more specifically Muslim educators).

Collaborative practitioner research

As indicated earlier in this chapter the *Habibties* ran concurrently with two other groups under an umbrella Collaborative Practitioner Research Project that aimed to generate process knowledge about practitioner research. The *Habibties* followed the same broad action research processes as the other groups.

Each distinct group met with the university-based critical friends monthly to share dilemmas, engage in reflexive inquiry in communities of practice and discuss their research projects. Practitioners discussed current practices in their settings; shared and deconstructed dilemma stories (Whalley et al., 2004); identified common threads, underlying values and principles; and planned actions.

Processes used within the collaborative practitioner research groups provided a scaffold that enabled each educator to identify a broad research interest and then develop and refine a clear, manageable research question. Educators pursued questions that were significant to them and relevant to their local context. Once they had mapped existing knowledge, these practitioner researchers developed an ethical framework for action, decided on methods of data collection, and then collected their data. At subsequent meetings they shared excerpts of this data with the group and engaged in joint analysis. The ethics of collaborative practitioner research, including the importance of open communication, attentive listening, mutual respect, democratic processes and trust (Whalley et al., 2004) was emphasised and modelled by the academic partners throughout the project. The university academics were positioned as critical friends, rather than the holders of knowledge, and practitioners as the experts and knowledge producers (Dimitriadis, 2006).

Description of studies

Three discrete studies are reported in this chapter. The first is Fatima's research into Muslim educators' professional identities, the second is Oznur's

research about teaching music in Muslim schools and the last is Leonie and Jen's research about collaborative practitioner research processes.

Muslim educators' professional identities

Fatima's overarching question for her practitioner research was: How do Muslim educators' identities impact on their professionalism in secular early childhood settings within the context of global troubles? This question responded to anecdotal evidence that Muslim educators felt that they had been compelled to silence their Islamic knowledge and beliefs in their professional practice with children and families within secular early childhood services. Fatima was interested in investigating how the context of global events such as the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York (2001), the 2002 Bali bombings, and local events such as the 2005 Cronulla Riots[1] in Sydney, impacted on educators' perceptions of self within their workplace and how conscious they had become of their Muslim identity. The research project as a whole aimed to develop conceptual frameworks and identify implications for service delivery for promoting social inclusion and a sense of security for children, families and educators.

Islamic epistemologies and Western music curriculum

Oznur's research question focused on how teachers negotiate state-mandated curriculum while simultaneously implementing music programmes that also embrace Islamic beliefs, culture and pedagogies. The research aimed to investigate and invigorate ways in which Muslim primary teachers can expand their teaching of music, using music that is relevant to the Muslim context and that draws on teachers' personal experiences, interests and capabilities.

The Collaborative Practitioner Research Project

The research conducted by Leonie and Jen focused on the role of practitioner research in building transformative leadership and curriculum change. It investigated the complexities of academic/field partnerships in collaborative practitioner research.

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[1]On 11 December 2005 a riot occurred on Cronulla Beach in Sydney targeting men of 'Middle Eastern appearance'. Many Lebanese-Australians retaliated in response to Anglo-Australian racial taunts and messages promoting 'Aussie Pride'. Social media as well as local radio played a key role in mobilising the rioters and those who retaliated. See www.sbs.com.au/cronullariots/ (last accessed 24 February 2015).

Methodology

While the educators were inducted into action research processes and their role as practitioner researchers, each project took on its own life and methodology. However, all projects were dynamic, positioned as action research and used qualitative approaches to data collection.

Data collection

Fatima's research into Muslim educators' professional identities was undertaken in two early childhood settings situated in south west Sydney, where the majority of the population is low socio-economic, Christian and Anglo-Australian, with around 1.5 per cent Muslims. Early Childhood Setting 1 enrolled children predominantly from Christian, Anglo-Australian families while Early Childhood Setting 2 had a larger number of Muslims in the local community and in the centre.

Phase one of the research involved interviews that explored educators' views about their professional identities. Seven Muslim staff, including Muslim Lebanese, Muslim Iraqis and Muslim Indian-Afghan educators with a range of qualifications and experiences from each of the settings participated in semi-structured interviews of approximately 30 minutes. These interviews were conducted by Fatima herself in one setting and by the owner of the two centres (also a Muslim) at the other setting. Fatima also engaged in ongoing dialogue and reflective conversations with educators about their professional identities based on early findings.

Oznur's research about Islamic epistemologies and Western music curriculum involved six teachers teaching across Kindergarten to Year 6 in a Muslim primary school where she was the leader of the creative arts programme. In Stage 1 of the action research cycle Oznur conducted informal interviews with teachers and collected artefacts such as music related lesson plans. In Stage 2, in her role as creative arts coordinator, she offered and presented three professional learning music workshops based on her analysis of the data collected in Stage 1 interviews. Stage 3 involved the collection of artefacts generated after changes were made.

Jen and Leonie's research involved conducting a cycle of interviews and/or focus groups at the beginning and conclusion of the project with practitioners, and the academics who were critical friends.

Challenges

Each of the distinct groups experienced similar challenges. All the practitioner research groups including the *Habibties* faced an absence of institutional support for either or both the practitioner research initiative and knowledge production. No release time was provided for educators, meaning they had to sustain their research in their own time. There were also no habits of transparency and peer review in the schools and centres, and therefore there were few opportunities for educators to bring private, individual work or workplace dilemmas into the public domain. Practitioners were uncertain, and to a certain extent fearful, about opening their practices to scrutiny and they needed time to build relationships and to find a language to engage in critique of their practices. This fear of outside scrutiny was amplified in the *Habibties* group where the risks of epistemic disobedience were highest. Epistemic disobedience means 'delinking' (Mignolo, 2009: 160) from Western and colonial ideas and ideals that position some regions and people as 'underdeveloped economically and mentally' (Mignolo, 2009: 161). One of the risks facing the *Habibties* was that the academic researchers would not understand the complexities of the dilemmas they faced nor the risks that they were taking in engaging in practitioner research, leaving them vulnerable and exposed.

Discussion of findings

The findings reported here emanate both from Fatima's and Oznur's individual practitioner research projects and the overarching research into collaborative practitioner research conducted by Jen and Leonie. Each of these is reported below.

The impact of Islamophobia on Muslim educators' professional identities

Analysis of the interview data revealed that Islamophobia had a direct impact on the Muslim educators who participated in Fatima's study, illustrating how participating Muslim educators foregrounded or backgrounded aspects of Islamic practice and beliefs depending on who they were interacting with and in which context. Like the Muslim girls in Zine's (2006: 247) Canadian study, educators 'script[ed] their identities by resisting or accommodating themselves' to a range of competing constructions.

It was evident that most participants within Fatima's study had become more conscious of risks posed by their Muslim identities since major events such as the September 11 attacks. The data showed that there was a heightened sense of fear about non-Muslims' perceptions of Muslim educators that was fuelled by the negative media coverage. Educators in both the Muslim dominated and secular setting stated that they felt the need to prove they are 'good Muslims' so that negative stereotypical discourses are challenged.

The educators felt that they had been largely stereotyped as 'terrorists' and 'backwards' within the media, and this impacted on the way families within their secular workplace interacted with them. In this situation of heightened Islamophobia, the Muslim educators explained that they had to constantly defend their Islamic beliefs and explain how their practices do not support acts of terrorism. Global events such as September 11 and the local Cronulla riots resulted in educators feeling that they were treated as suspects by some non-Muslims. As Rivzi (2004: 162) argues, September 11 produced a 'powerful new narrative of security … that rendered the relationship between the West and Islam into one of antagonism', the global effects of which were experienced locally. Negative media coverage made some educators conscious that they are perceived as 'barbaric and cannot be trusted'. One educator commented:

> I have fears with non-Muslim families since September 11. In terms of working with non-Muslims I'm always afraid they will look at me differently because of negative media coverage. I feel that media impacts on how families view me and the way they see me working with children.

Negative media commentary attesting to the role of Islamic schools exacerbating cultural divisions in society (Buckingham, 2010) fuelled these Muslim educators' sense of being 'suspect'. When one of the early childhood settings employed more Muslim staff, educators reported that some non-Muslim parents expressed concerns that 'Muslim workers have taken over'.

Furthermore, the Muslim educators in this study felt positioned as disempowered as women. Zine (2006) describes a nexus of 'gendered Islamophobia' (Zine, 2006: 240) that resonates with the complexities articulated by the practitioners. This nexus is the centre of discourses which posit Muslim women as oppressed and in need of emancipation on one axis and an array of expectations of what it is to be a 'good Muslim' from Muslim communities on the other axis. The practitioners described this as they discussed moving in and out of asserting and practising their Muslim

identity – wearing and removing the *hijab* (headscarf) strategically in response to fears of discrimination and loss of job opportunities in secular workplaces and/or their desires to fit the image of 'good' Muslim women in the Muslim community.

Their Muslim identities were expressed strategically. One Muslim practitioner chose to wear a hat in the secular early childhood setting instead of the *hijab* so that her 'Muslim identity' was not obvious through her dress code. As Zine (2006: 242) notes, the veil has become a marker of otherness and a 'social threat' in the non-Muslim popular imagination. This educator reflected that 'my challenge is wearing a scarf, building self-confidence in my own identity and in being a Muslim'. Not wearing the *hijab* also presented challenges with one educator reporting that:

> when Muslim female parents come in with the *niqab* [full face and body cover] I feel intimidated and 'othered' and feel guilt at the same time because I do not wear a cover and I have the knowledge that in Islam it is wrong.

These educators felt they were vulnerable to diminishing judgements from across cultural interfaces. They were rendered suspect by non-Muslims if they asserted their Muslim identity, and suspect by Muslims if they did not. Furthermore there was little space to celebrate strategic or fluid expressions of identity. The power of hegemonic Western worldviews and practices and its effects in Muslim communities tend to reify cultural practices and view them as bounded and static, while erasing the complexity and diversity within cultures (Keddie, 2012). The risks of compliance or 'epistemic obedience' (Nakata et al., 2012) and 'epistemological closure' (Gordon, 2006: 4) are high. Markers of Islamic identity (such as the *hijab*) have become valorised and universalised by both Muslims and their detractors. This 'single, drastically simplified group identity' (Fraser, 2008: 133) does not account for multiple affiliations and identities. This view of Muslim culture as bounded and universalised was reflected in the data as were attempts to push the boundaries and exercise epistemic 'disobedience'.

The context of Islamophobia also created pressure for educators to conform to Anglo-Australian practices and this resulted in a 'fluidity of practices' (Memon, 2011) as educators moved between communities. However, while it is important to recognise that 'fluidity' of practice was possible and indeed evident, it is also important to acknowledge that it was typically Muslim people who were expected to accommodate cultural differences. Some educators stated that they elected to shake hands with males in the workplace, although this practice was not consistent with

their beliefs, or with their practices in the Muslim community, because they did not want to be seen 'to show any discrimination in the workplace'. This practice is consistent with Zine's (2006: 247) study which found that Muslim girls were conscious of not behaving in ways that would be interpreted as rude.

Furthermore, educators in Fatima's study felt that every day early childhood pedagogical practices such as engaging in conversations about big ideas with children sometimes became unsafe under the gaze of Islamophobia, which further compromised their professional identities. For example, Muslim educators who wore the *hijab* stated that one of their challenges in the workplace was answering questions about the *hijab* or Islam posed by children and their families.

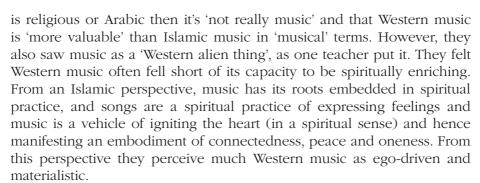## Fluidity and hybridity in approaches to pedagogies

The first phase of the action research in Oznur's study involved discussions with Muslim teachers about their struggles with their government mandated requirements to deliver music curriculum. Interview data indicated that these teachers initially believed they had 'no music' in their childhoods and that they grappled with seeing themselves as 'knowing' music. They did, however, remember childhood lullabies in Arabic but these musical experiences had not been reflected or valued in their Western educations. Consequently, the Muslim teachers had constructed their professional identities as music teachers at the fringes, if not outside the boundaries, of teaching music as defined by the state mandated curriculum.

These educators, all of whom had teaching qualifications from Australia, had constructed their teacher identities within the Western epistemologies and pedagogies in Australian initial teacher education programmes. This was reinforced and circumscribed by Australian education policies and curriculum documents which in the perception of the teachers do not engage the worldviews of Muslims and take for granted particular Western approaches to music.

The educators were faced with the challenge of teaching music within a standardised neo-liberal departmental curricula (with its focus on Western music) while also respecting Muslim beliefs about the value of different kinds of music. The teachers' beliefs about Western and Islamic 'music' were complicated and imbued with the power that circulates between Western knowledge and its Oriental 'other'. On one hand, the dominant epistemologies that position Islamic music as 'non-music' had been taken up by the Muslim teachers in this study. Their perception was that if it

is religious or Arabic then it's 'not really music' and that Western music is 'more valuable' than Islamic music in 'musical' terms. However, they also saw music as a 'Western alien thing', as one teacher put it. They felt Western music often fell short of its capacity to be spiritually enriching. From an Islamic perspective, music has its roots embedded in spiritual practice, and songs are a spiritual practice of expressing feelings and music is a vehicle of igniting the heart (in a spiritual sense) and hence manifesting an embodiment of connectedness, peace and oneness. From this perspective they perceive much Western music as ego-driven and materialistic.

Early analysis by the teachers of their own lesson plans found little evidence of music being included in the classrooms. Interviews at the beginning of the action research cycle indicated that this lack of music was due to the teachers' uncertainties as to how to integrate music into the curriculum in accordance with Islamic values. As teachers in a Muslim school, they were concerned that families would not be happy with music being taught, or would be concerned it was not appropriate Islamically. Their fear of offending families and the Islamic community, and of being judged as 'bad Muslims', had contributed to a prevailing perception in the school that there was one correct position in regards to Islamic epistemology and pedagogy. Hassim and Cole-Adams (2010) note that there is a range of family perspectives about music in Australian Muslim communities. These include the prohibition of music except during festivals and weddings, the use of a drum and singing of religious songs, acceptance of any music as long as it is modest and reflects moral decency, or as long as the individual is able to 'regulate his or her own behaviour according to Islamic moral standards' (Hassim and Cole-Adams, 2010: 43).

The opportunity to engage in workshops that explored a range of approaches to music in Muslim schools was the basis for the second phase of the action research. This opened up dialogue about possibilities for teaching music that moved beyond the strictures of traditional Islamic faith and narrow interpretations of Western music. The workshops facilitated conversations among teachers that enabled them to contest taken-for-granted views about the Koran and music, what constitutes music and where and how certain kinds of music transgress spiritual practices. As a result teachers broadened their views of music. Rather than having 'no music', the teachers realised that in fact they all had a rich tradition of music to draw on in their teaching. For example, one teacher said, 'I listen to *Anasheed* Islamic music and was brought up with Arabic music as a child.' Others talked about lullabies from their childhood and realised the potential of using this music in the classroom.

The professional learning workshops transformed teachers' understandings of music so that by the end of the project they were incorporating more of their own musical traditions in the curriculum. They also found ways for children's ideas and experiences, such as their interest in rap, to be included. By opening up the dialogue about the intersections between spirituality and music, the teachers were able to look at the intersections between their home and their school context, and this opened up a palette of epistemologies and pedagogies.

The practitioner research started the conversation and teachers realised that it wasn't as difficult to integrate music into the curriculum as they had initially thought. They were no longer afraid of what the parents or education authorities might think and were more clearly able to think through and articulate their beliefs and practices. Music is now integrated across the curriculum, with a range of Islamic and Western music, although not popular music, allowing for a 'fluidity of practice and multiplicity of interpretation and adaption' (Memon, 2011: 296) while still meeting the mandated curriculum requirements and family and community expectations. The practitioner research project provided time and space for teachers to reflect on and share their knowledge of music, to deconstruct existing practices and to develop their own pedagogical approaches to teaching music in an Islamic school that allowed for fluidity and hybridity.
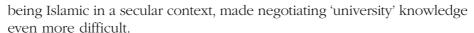
A safe environment where educators can share dilemmas supports transformative practices and creates a third space for knowledge production

One of the key findings from the overarching research conducted by Jen and Leonie is that collaborative practitioner research provides a safe environment for educators to share work that is 'against the grain'. For Muslim educators a secure and trusting environment where they could engage in reflective conversations and critique was particularly important as they were engaging in difficult inquiries into indices of power that sublimate Islamic epistemologies and people.

The Muslim educators were often caught in 'complex knowledge entanglements' (Nakata et al., 2012: 131) involving Western and Islamic epistemologies and pedagogies, where they are positioned as problematic professionals if they question taken-for-granted assumptions about 'what is a good early childhood educator?' and 'what is a good Muslim educator?'. As Muslim early career teachers, members of the *Habibties* group felt vulnerable as they attempted to negotiate a path that drew on their university learning while also taking account of the realities of being a new teacher. The added dimension of being in an Islamic context, or of

being Islamic in a secular context, made negotiating 'university' knowledge even more difficult.

They articulated how teachers in Islamic schools are often insulated in an Islamic enclave that provides them with a shared identity. Islamophobia works to push the enclave closer together and makes it increasingly difficult for it to engage with other educational sectors. The enclave is further compounded by issues of private ownership of Muslim schools and early childhood settings by individuals or powerbrokers within particular Islamic communities. The fear of competition on the one hand and scrutiny on the other can limit possibilities of engagement with other educational communities. In this context a safe environment for articulating dilemmas and constructing new knowledge was of critical importance.

As the academic partners, Leonie and Jen repositioned themselves as 'novices' and 'non-experts' (Said, 1994) and found that there was a shifting of power. This was particularly complex with the *Habibties* group, where the nexus of power relations between academic/practitioner and teacher/student that characterised this research cluster were overlayed with issues of Muslim/non-Muslim worldviews and the uneven power relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. We found that collaborative practitioner research, with academics as critical friends, can make inroads that challenge academic/practitioner, Muslim/non-Muslim and theory/practice binaries and introduce possibilities for new locally produced knowledge and new professional identities where practitioners are recognised as researchers and knowledge producers.

The collegial support provided by the *Habibties* enabled the dissonance between some aspects of Muslim thought and Western pedagogies to be opened up and later, when the group felt confident, these issues were able to be brought into the public domain, firstly by sharing with other groups in the Collaborative Practitioner Research Project, and later through international conference presentations. Because Fatima and Oznur were insiders investigating their own communities, they found that Muslim educators' voices were more able to be heard than if the research had been conducted by outsiders and that educators were able to speak freely about the issues, concerns and experiences they encountered. The exit interview data revealed that the opportunity to be involved in practitioner research gave a sense of agency and empowerment to Muslim educators.

The *Habibties* acted as an insider Islamic space of inquiry where sensitive issues and concerns could be examined and issues of what constitutes Islamic knowledge and pedagogy could be contested. It was a space where Muslim educators could transcend forces of isolation and Islamophobia to reflect critically on practice dilemmas, engage in the epistemic disobedience

necessary to deconstruct the dominant pedagogies of Western education systems, and take steps towards transforming practices and creating new knowledge.

Conclusions and insights gained

To engage productively in practitioner research educators need not only a space where they can transcend forces of isolation and critically reflect on and transform practices but also the time to develop the relationships necessary to feel safe to share dilemmas. This is particularly important for those from marginalised groups who are often taking the greatest risks. Change needs to be taken slowly. It is not possible to shift teachers' practices too far or too quickly from what they know. In Fatima's research, for example, educators initially focused on Islamic practices and responses to Islamophobia. Once they had the opportunity to voice their issues and concerns they were more confident to engage in dialogue and critique and could move forward to focus on pedagogical change, which was the next cycle of the action research. Oznur's research showed that teachers can work collaboratively to make small changes to their epistemologies and pedagogies. Strengthened identities allowed Oznur and her colleagues to see themselves as researchers of their own practices.

Collaborative practitioner research opens up a space for epistemic inquiry and the fluidity of professional identities. The creation of a third space between the academy and the field and between Muslim and non-Muslim educators enables a site for critique and for creative responses to diversity. It provides a safe space to engage in epistemic disobedience and to go beyond this to explore the many 'cultural layers' (Keddie, 2012: 165) and 'complex layers of meaning' (Nakata et al., 2012: 127), which is necessary when working to deconstruct epistemological and cultural assumptions and create new knowledge. As Nakata et al. (2012) argue in relation to indigenous education, there is a need for an awakening to new ideas that take account of the complexities of diverse contexts and new tools and a new language to talk and think about and navigate cultural interfaces.

Both academic and practitioner researchers need to be able to work across boundaries (Manathunga, 2009). This border crossing makes the boundaries more permeable (Keddie, 2012: 166) and creates new possibilities and new knowledge. Moving away from dichotomies, such as Western and Islamic epistemologies and pedagogies, and fixed positions of certainty opens up the potential for the analysis of complexities and diverse views.

> ### Ongoing research considerations
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> - To what extent do initial teacher education courses 'train' teachers to be epistemically obedient members of the teaching profession?
> - What opportunities can you create to cross boundaries and engage in intercultural dialogue?

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