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Diasporic education in the mainstream school: creative pedagogies of belonging across time and space

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ABSTRACT

This article builds upon a theoretical framework for “diasporic education” to explore the impact of such an educational approach in a state-funded primary school in England. Diasporic education refers to curricular, pedagogic and political processes that utilise as educational resource the transnational connections of racially and religiously minoritised, or “migrant”, communities. The paper draws on collaborative research with an educational theatre company and a diverse class of year-six (10–11-year-old) children in Birmingham, UK, to show that the inclusion of diasporic education in mainstream schooling can have immediate and deep-running educational benefits. In this way, the paper unifies two strands of research on the education of minoritised communities, one focusing on their “supplementary” educational activities and the other on their chronically disadvantaged position in mainstream schooling. Exploring two themes, (1) the “diasporisation” of educational spaces, and (2) the complexities of home and belonging, I argue that diasporic education helps to redress some of the educational inequities wrought by myopic nationalist policies and discourses that chronically affect minoritised youth. This happens through a reimagining of the learning and teaching of, among other subjects, values and history. Diasporic education also opens avenues for creative teaching practices that are tangibly linked with the local yet transnationally connected urban contexts in which many minoritised pupils live their daily lives.

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Introduction

A great deal of research has focused on the education of racial, ethnic and religious minorities in Global North countries. This body of work has mainly paid attention to two sets of issues. On one hand, often under the rubric of supplementary education, non-formal community-led types of education have been studied. This research has shed light on “minority education” as a site of political resistance and innovative educational practice (e.g. Gerrard, 2013; Gholami, 2017a; Isik-Ercan, 2014; Reay & Mirza, 1997; Shirazi, 2019; Warmington, 2014). On the other hand, there has been interest in the inequities that

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affect minoritised children in mainstream education. This work has been instrumental in framing and conceptualising systemic failings whilst helping to guide education policy towards greater social justice (e.g. Doharty, 2019; Gillborn, 2014; Wallace & Joseph-Salisbury, 2022). This paper attempts to unify these strands by exploring some of the ways in which the unique positions, networks and experiences of racial and religious minority people constitute potent educational resources within mainstream schooling. The paper's main contribution is to conceptualise these educational dynamics through the concept of diaspora, and specifically "diasporic education". Such an approach has implications for wider educational debates: firstly, it demonstrates that a genuine inclusion of the resources offered by minoritised groups can meaningfully enrich all areas of a school's curriculum and enable more creative and engaging forms of pedagogy. In turn, secondly, it can help to address long-standing inequities concretely and in a manner that chimes more precisely with the empirical realities of the daily lives of minoritised children, young adults and their communities.

Applying the lens of diaspora, as we will see, consists in going beyond the usual markers of diversity such as race and religion to foreground – among other things – minority people's transnational connections and connectedness, which can be traced, narrativised and utilised to positive and creative educational ends. Specifically, two themes will be discussed in this paper, based on original research carried out during 2021–2022. First, I will introduce the idea of the "diasporisation of (mainstream) educational space". I argue that diasporisation happens in so far as the transnationally connected lives of diasporans become an overt feature in the national classroom. The educational consequences, as we will see, are potentially far-reaching with immediate impact on the learning and teaching of values and history, as well as on the rest of the curriculum. Secondly, diasporic education will be shown to be of central importance in addressing the complexities of identity and belonging in diverse classrooms. Via the concept of "homing desire", I argue that the teaching of issues of home, belonging and identity is at best incomplete without due consideration of diasporic currents and their serious inclusion in mainstream educational provision.

The concept of diaspora

Why should researchers and practitioners committed to social justice in education be open to thinking and working with the concept of diaspora? The issues that "diasporic education" addresses are, sadly, well-familiar. They relate for the most part to the chronic disadvantages faced by racial, ethnic and religious minority students in Global-North education systems. Statistical and testimonial evidence for these disadvantages, including from governmental sources, is widely available and so need not detain us here.¹ The "headlines" are that many racially minoritised groups have consistently lower attainment levels than their white counterparts across all educational stages; they experience greater rates of exclusion and incompleteness; they endure overt, covert, structural and micro-aggressive racism on school and university campuses. Existing fields of educational research and particularly my own field, the sociology of education, offer strong conceptual and methodological vocabularies for articulating and addressing many of these issues. What tends to be missing, however, is a detailed analysis of some of the unique dynamics that characterise minoritised, or "migrant", communities, including

ongoing transnational connections, diverse urban networks of culture, politics and education, complex patterns of settlement and relationships with other communities and with local and national politics. I argue that the diaspora concept attends to these dynamics as a matter of course thus enabling analyses that are more precisely in tune with the everyday realities of minoritised groups and paving the way for organic educational collaborations and meaningful inclusion.

Diaspora – and the condition of “being diasporic” – references potentially unique forms of social praxis. Traditionally, the concept has referred to groups of people who have migrated from a place of origin (a “homeland”), usually due to persecution or other collective trauma, to settle in different parts of the world (Cohen, 1997; Safran, 1991). But diaspora is much more complex and multifaceted than that. Its particular social spaces and positions can produce novel forms of interaction between culturally and politically diverse but cohabiting communities. These interactions and relations often bring about social and cultural “newness”; they open up hybrid, inclusive and cosmopolitan modes of living inside existing nation-states (Hall, 1990, 2019). In so doing, they stretch, challenge and potentially subvert long-standing national logics, traditions and hierarchies. In this vein, some sociologists have recently suggested that diasporas ought to be seen as central in processes of cultural “translation and decolonisation” (Demir, 2022). I will return to this below.

But diaspora can cut both ways, as it were: some members of a diaspora will favour ideas of national and cultural purity and attempt to superimpose their monolithic visions of identity on the whole diaspora, and indeed the homeland (cf. Anthias, 1998). The ensuing tensions sometimes come to the surface violently, for example in the shape of the clashes between Hindu and Muslim groups on the streets of the English city of Leicester in September 2022. In such situations, opposing groups will vie for recognition as *the* authentic claimants of a certain national or religious heritage and leverage their capital to secure positions of influence in home and host societies. That said, it would be erroneous to think that such groups, or any other group for that matter, have ultimate control over a diaspora and can decide its fate. During my research career, not to mention my own experience of growing up in diasporic settings, I have found Werbner’s concept of “chaorder” (2002) to be a largely accurate description of how most diasporic formations operate. Chaorder – chaos and order – refers to the fact that a diasporic community does not really have a central nervous system, no clear command or control structure. It is not a unified entity but is rather made up of a multitude of groupings and positions that might clash or coalesce at different times over different issues. All these groups may lay claim to representing “the diaspora”, “the homeland” and so forth. But whatever the nature of their endeavours, their agency must never be underestimated, and so I am very much in agreement with Brubaker’s (2005) description of diaspora as a “category of practice”: a diaspora is arguably most usefully thought about in terms of what it does rather than what it is – i.e. what sort of socio-political projects it articulates and operationalises.

However, agency and power are themselves complex, and there is in this regard a third dimension of diasporicity which I have found very interesting. This relates to what I have previously called a “sweet spot” between submission and subversion (Gholami, 2017a). The sweet spot refers to a unique modality of power relation and interaction between diasporic and host-country organisations or structures. Certain socio-political circumstances force these organisations into a sort of collaboration which neither side can ultimately control, but which has a transformative effect on them both. For example, mainstream

politics in multicultural democracies such as the UK or US is, at least outwardly, committed to equality, diversity and supporting and celebrating minority cultures. Financial backing and other resources are therefore made available annually in furtherance of that agenda. This means that regardless of the actual ideological desires of a ruling government, a degree of autonomy and recognition must be afforded to cultural “others”, and “palatable” diasporic groups are sought for collaboration. In turn, the diasporic groups that enter into such formal collaborations must similarly abide by the commitment to equality and diversity, including within their own national/ethnic/religious community, and they must do so irrespective of any factional agendas and purist fantasies they may harbour. I have argued (Gholami, 2017a) that such relations can result in a “stripping away” of the worst excesses of both diasporic and (host) national behaviours and thus open the door for more inclusive, cosmopolitan cultures to exist and become normalised.

Diaspora, of course, references migration. The discussion of how or when various forms of migration may become a diaspora is superfluous to this paper (see Clifford, 1997). But the simple observation that diaspora results from and implicates migratory flows opens up two important analytical avenues. Firstly, it draws our attention to transnational flows involving money, goods, services, ideas and so forth between people who share a heritage. Thus, diaspora enables us to examine education as a set of concrete transnational flows in its own right. Such a conception has wide-reaching analytical, methodological and policy ramifications for thinking critically about dominant/mainstream systems of education. Secondly, and more importantly, although diaspora references movements and flows, it would be a mistake to think of diasporic communities as temporary or transitional communities simply waiting to return to their homelands (see also Tölölyan, 2007). In other words, settlement and therefore permanency are wholly appropriate ways of thinking about and describing diasporic communities. Consider, for example, the Caribbean communities that came to Britain after World War 2, or the Turkish “guest-workers” who settled in Germany: several generations later, those communities are now integral parts of British and German societies, and there can be no question of an *en-masse* return to their countries of heritage. They have as much claim to Britishness and German-ness as the so-called indigenous populations, albeit they may choose not to claim those identities, claim them in different ways, or indeed be excluded from them by ultra-nationalist and white-supremacist discourses and politics (see for example Gilroy 1987; Oldac & Fancourt, 2021). Similarly, they practice unique forms of agency that continually shape and reshape British and German societies at large. These people are diasporic due to their transnational connections and histories, their potentially hybrid identities and their challenge to and re-inscription of narratives of nationhood in Britain and Germany, not to mention their ongoing interactions with and impact upon their countries of heritage. Diasporas, then, must be thought of as normal and permanent features of our world: people who are settled, often as legal citizens, in their adopted nation-states but whose everyday living transcends the real and imagined boundaries (and boundedness) of those nation-states.

Diasporic education

In 2017, based on empirical research in Iranian schools in London, UK, I developed an initial framework for articulating and conceptualising the idea of “diasporic education”

with the aim to inspire further theoretical, methodological and practical/pedagogical discussions. Diasporic education, I argued, refers to

concrete educational practices that:

- (1) Come to exist through the transnational connections of diasporic communities;
- (2) Engage and problematise notions of “home” and “host” (and thus “self”, “other”);
- (3) Are aimed at improving the lives of diasporans as settled citizens of “host” nation-states, usually in ways that fall outside the ability (or willingness) of mainstream education;
- (4) Prevent the “closure” of essentialist hegemonies at national and ethnic/denominational levels; and
- (5) Cannot be ultimately regulated by national or ethnic/denominational policies and ideologies. (Gholami, 2017b, p. 576)

In the years since, these ideas have been taken up in several research contexts to account for the educational endeavours of diasporic groups (see for example Bogossian-Porto & Bogossian, 2021; Shirazi, 2019; Steenwegen et al., 2022). However, given the permanency of the presence of such groups in mainstream education, there is a need to look beyond “minority spaces” and to broaden our research and analytical remit to include the ongoing impact that diasporic groups have on formal (state-funded) schooling. This paper is an attempt to take a step in that direction and to signal a possible avenue for further research around issues of diaspora in mainstream schools.

Regardless of where or how it takes place, diasporic education is centrally focused upon the educative practices and relationships of diasporic communities. It encompasses non-formal and formal arenas of education and implicates diasporans as *agents* as well as “receivers” of education in their countries of settlement. In this way, diasporic education is relevant to some of the chronic educational problems faced by racial, ethnic and religious minorities in Global North countries, such as low attainment and racism. As we will see, a central tenet of diasporic education is minoritised peoples’ reappropriation and/or transformation of the “official knowledge” (Apple, 1993) and curricula of their adopted countries.² The concept of diasporic education, therefore, offers an alternative view of education, one that is not determined by the familiar structures of nation-states but rather stretches across national borders and has implications for how educational problems and solutions are framed, how educational relationships are forged and managed, and how curricula are designed and delivered.

Methodology and underpinning research

Just before the Covid-19 pandemic, I secured funding³ to continue my ongoing research on non-formal intercommunal education whose broader aim is to address the complex and often sensitive issues of intercommunal difference that tend to be either disregarded in mainstream education or only superficially tackled. No sooner had I begun preparations than the world found itself in the grip of the Covid-19 pandemic, which, of course, also severely affected my research. In the autumn of 2021, Covid-19 restrictions in the UK had sufficiently eased to enable me and my partners to carry out a substantially scaled down version of the initially planned research. Specifically, this involved two separate

projects between November 2021 and March 2022 in collaboration with diverse communities in Birmingham, one of the UK's most ethnically diverse cities, as well as with formal and non-formal educators and local artists. Both projects revolved around the idea of sharing stories of and views about migration to and settlement in the city, and, with the help of people's personal objects and artistic practice, using participants' stories to co-produce educational resources.⁴

For the first of these projects, I collaborated with The Play House,⁵ a theatre company that works with local schools to enhance education through drama and theatrical techniques, as well as with staff and pupils at a state-maintained primary school in Birmingham's Balsall Heath area. According to Birmingham City Council,⁶ Balsall Heath is one of the most deprived wards in the city, having the 16th lowest average income out of the city's sixty-nine wards. It also has a younger age profile compared to the city (nearly 45% under the age of 24), lower employment rates, and a higher proportion of people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds (58.3%). The present paper is based upon the data generated from this collaboration. It included conducting a focus-group type reflection session with one class of year-six pupils, and semi-structured interviews with their teachers and other relevant school staff. Seven school staff were interviewed – three teachers, three non-teaching staff and the deputy head teacher. The year-six class was comprised of twenty-seven racially and religiously diverse boys and girls all around ten and eleven years old. Additionally, we separately interviewed thirteen adult Birmingham residents from BAME backgrounds who had all immigrated to the city at some point in their lives. These individuals were recruited through the project's strong connections with community and charity organisations in the city. However, none of them were previously known to me or the other project members.

The main aim of the work with the Play House was to recruit "storytellers" from among the school's community willing to share their real-life experiences of migration and settlement with the year-six school children. It is important, however, not to let the word storyteller trivialise or fictionalise what were powerful analyses of a wide range of historical and present socio-political issues delivered in the form of personal accounts. Theatre practitioners from the Play House worked with the storytellers to prepare an engaging narrative, including where possible visual and tactile aids such as family photos, objects, maps and so on. An entire lesson was then devoted to storytelling and reflection. Importantly, the storytellers were not formal members of teaching staff (i.e. "qualified" teachers); they comprised a teaching assistant, a parent-governor and a lunch time supervisor. One was a white male from Irish background; the other two were females of colour from Jamaican and Pakistani backgrounds respectively. This offered children a more horizontal experience of education and challenged preconceived notions of "proper" teaching and learning by reinforcing the idea that everyone has and can impart valuable knowledge. That said, having qualified teacher status was not in any way an exclusion criterion: in fact, in the pre-pandemic project design, which revolved around having the children dramatise the stories, we had planned for a larger pool of storytellers including teaching staff. (At the time of writing, I am in the process of conducting the more ambitious research project and plan to write about it in future publications.) The participating school had a long-standing relationship of trust with the Play House, which was helpful in recruitment. Nevertheless, all ethical concerns were duly addressed, and all necessary, including parental, permissions obtained. The story-telling session along with the children's reflections

and questions were filmed for subsequent analysis, and the interviews were voice recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed.

The diasporisation of educational space, practice and provision

In her seminal work, Avtar Brah has defined diaspora space as: “the intersectionality of diaspora, border and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes. It addresses the global condition of culture, economics and politics as a site of ‘migrancy’ and ‘travel’ which seriously problematises the subject position of the ‘native’” (1996, p. 181). Diasporic space, then, is produced and inhabited multimodally by subjects whose experience is shot through with migrancy, even if they do not physically travel anywhere, and this necessarily entails a problematisation of the category of the native. This idea is a useful analytical starting point for some of the dynamics produced by what I conceive of as the “diasporisation” of educational space. I regard diasporisation as a process through which educational spaces (i.e. school buildings, classrooms, staff rooms, as well as the discourses and concrete practices around curriculum and pedagogy) are critically engaged with, and as such influenced, by educators and pupils with diasporic connections. This influence can be deliberate and systematic, or it can be mundane and at times not even fully conscious. But diasporisation happens in so far as *the presence of diasporic people as diasporic people* becomes a factor in educational provision. In this context, diaspora is not a competition between “the diasporic” and “the national”; not about whether the former will fully subvert the latter or be swallowed up by it. It is, rather, about the extent to which diaspora prevents the full “closure” of the national, i.e. the latter’s ability to behave, and be taught and learned, as if it is complete, immutable, unrivalled, non-ideological.

This opens up educational spaces in which all sorts of new practices, narratives and knowledges become possible; spaces for critical engagement with and novel interpretations of the “official knowledge” of national curricula. In the context of chronic, systematic educational inequities affecting racial and religious minority communities, such spaces can prove invaluable. The work I did with the Play House exemplifies this point, demonstrating how diasporic education can take place in mainstream schools and not just in typical minority spaces such as supplementary schools, community centres or places of worship. The core idea of our project was to enable young pupils to meaningfully engage with, reflect upon and empathise with other people’s lifeworlds, and in particular around experiences of migration, settlement and processes of racialisation, religification and minoritisation. In so doing, we also wanted them to make better sense of their own experiences of difference and diversity.

Diasporisation of histories

Before the story-telling session, the children were asked whether they preferred real or fictional stories. They clearly favoured the former because, they said, real stories taught them facts and enabled them to relate personally to events and people. And the three stories that were subsequently shared with them did exactly that, giving accounts of family migrations to and settlements in Birmingham from Jamaica, Ireland and Pakistan. For example, the story of Mr J. a white Irish man whose family had immigrated to

Birmingham in the 1960s, recounted bitter experiences of people spitting at his mother for speaking with an Irish accent and his family being associated with terrorists during The Troubles.⁷ This clearly resonated with the pupils, particularly the Muslim pupils, who in the current context of rampant Islamophobia in the UK and beyond could relate to experiences of racism, ostracisation and association with terrorism. For many of them, the stories will probably have made a lasting impact. As one pupil put it: “I will remember how Mr J’s mum had to not talk outside in case anyone found out from her voice that she was born in Ireland and how some people in Birmingham did spit at Irish people because of the bombs.” They also found it interesting, if baffling, that not so long ago in Britain, white Irish people were subjected to overt racism and prejudice. This not only enabled the children to grapple with the complexities of racism, the relatability of the stories also allowed them to empathise across ethnicities, religions and generations. The deputy head teacher at the participating school stated that the formal curriculum does not normally offer opportunities to address such nuanced and complex issues so tangibly and in such depth. In fact, he decided to embark upon a large project of curriculum development in the wake of the work that we did together because, as he put it: “[The project] has given me confidence as a curriculum lead to genuinely grow the curriculum and source the rich resources we have in our great city.” He has extended our diasporic approach to pedagogy and curriculum design throughout the school’s entire provision, including STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects.⁸

Another important aspect of these stories is how they brought to life, and worked to decolonise, histories at macro and micro levels. The stories shared in our sessions opened up an educational space in which to discuss important world historical events such as post-WW2 migration to rebuild Europe and The Troubles, but to do so in a way that shows children and young people how their own lives continue to be entangled in those events, and how their parents, extended families, friends and neighbours may have been involved despite hailing from different countries. They also highlight the multiple positionalities, voices and politics implicated in historiography, allowing for alternative, decolonised narratives. This addresses another clear gap in the official curriculum, as history tends to be taught in “chunks” focusing on “key” events and periods and told mainly from one perspective. As one of the teachers we interviewed said: “You realise how much the children don’t know about the lives of their own parents, how big events affect us all. They learn the big historical stuff but not what’s on their own doorstep.” This teacher was recognising the value of a history education that actively includes the migrations, settlements, experiences and interrelationships of local people. These will be necessarily connected to any set of events deemed locally to be historically important. Their exclusion, therefore, is a *choice* linked to the national politics of curriculum design. A diasporic approach to education, even with as simple a method as storytelling, works to reinscribe these important voices and thus provides children with a much richer, not to mention more accurate and locally germane, history curriculum.

The critical potency of diaspora in dislodging not just nation-centrism but also coloniality has been written about convincingly by Demir (2022). Demir invites us to see beyond the spatial limitations of nationalist thinking and remember that in temporal terms, present-day countries have often sprung directly from the empires that preceded them. Thus, coloniality has been integral to nation-building in the modern world.

Similarly, colonialism has been integral in dictating migratory flows across the globe, which is to say that many a diasporic community has come to exist because of the violence, displacement and disenfranchisement wrought by colonialist movements. As such, Demir argues that diasporas ought to be seen as part of a “tradition of decoloniality” and emphasises their ability to “translate and decolonise” (2022, p. 29). Translation refers in this context to diasporas’ unique position at the intersection of multiple spaces and times and their ability, therefore, to act as cultural and linguistic intermediaries. As Demir puts it:

Diasporas act as agents who connect, translate, shift and move across linguistic and cultural zones [...] They put cultures, identities and languages, and new ideologies, into circulation. They are translators of cultures and identities brought from home. They also often resist existing norms and challenge power relations in their translations. (2022, p. 37)

Thus, translation is not about a precise rendition of one original culture or language into another, the solidity and purity of both being highly questionable in the first place. Translation involves a socio-political process of *negotiating meanings and positions* in both home and host societies and across generations. It is as much, if not more, about reclaiming power, reinscribing histories, “speaking back”, offering correctives and producing new modalities of living, as it is about representing (and teaching) one culture to another. Therefore, it necessarily also involves “editorial” choices of inclusion and omission linked to a politics of collective memory and amnesia, as well as intra-diasporic relations.⁹

Diasporisation of values

The diasporic approach to education being discussed here also challenges and reimagines dominant models for the teaching of values and citizenship. Since 2015, the UK government has required schools to promote Fundamental British Values (FBV)¹⁰ to prevent extremism and foster greater national cohesion and good citizenship. The arbitrary branding of these values as British, alongside the fact that the main vehicle for their institution in public life is counter-terrorism policy, has rightly opened the government’s approach to criticism, including accusations of Islamophobia and an obsession with a nostalgic and exclusive, if caricatured, idea of Britishness (see Hussain & Meer, 2018; Vincent & Hunter-Henin, 2018). There are also serious doubts over the educational efficacy and viability of this approach (see Quartermaine, 2018). A key theme running through our project was the idea that pupils should be able to access and grapple with questions of identity, belonging, values and citizenship *firstly* through their immediate locales, in this case the diverse city of Birmingham, rather than through top-down nationalistic diktats (cf. Osler & Starkey, 2018). This makes sense not only because children generally live their daily lives in their communities and cities, but also because the lives of diasporans unfold at the intersection of local, national and global currents. Cities and communities are therefore a more empirically accurate reflection of people’s social lives than the “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983) of the nation-state.

Following a brief collective discussion about the idea of values, the storytellers and children were asked to reflect on what values were present in the stories and how these mattered to them as “Brummies”.¹¹ All participants agreed that values such as tolerance, equality, hard work and resilience came through strongly in the stories and that they were important in participants’ own lives. For example, one pupil said: “From Miss P’s

story I've learned that your colour, race and religion doesn't matter and to never let anyone stop you from achieving your goals." "No matter what race you are you are equal to everybody," said another. Additionally, however, the children drew particular attention to showing kindness, helping others and giving and feeling love. They clearly saw these values as important within the context of their own lives; important to help them to lead fulfilling and successful lives (as Brummies who are of course also *British* citizens and denizens). What is striking is that, in direct opposition to the government dictated list of values, the children did not just conceive of values as a set of social responsibilities that mark one as sufficiently loyal – sufficiently British – in the eyes of the state. As one pupil said about one of the stories: "[...] Mrs A never really got anything, but she still was happy from the love that her family gave her. You can never feel happy if you have never felt love." The emphasis on *feeling* as well as giving love would indicate that these young people believe citizenship and social responsibility to be intimately tied to personal mental and emotional wellbeing, a positive sense of self-worth that is dependent upon cultivating good relationships with others and that in turn drives one's positive treatment of others. "Whatever you do that is kindness it has a good way of coming back," said one of the children. As such, they also included feelings of happiness and joy among their social responsibilities. It would seem, then, that the function of values and values education is conceived of very differently by these pupils and the government. The latter deploys a narrowly defined notion of Britishness to effectively appropriate universal human values such as tolerance and uses this as a highly racialised and religified test of Britishness. Pupils, on the other hand, clearly see human values in others' diverse life stories and recognise them across times and spaces, as well as in their own lives; they understand that good values are necessary for living happy, fulfilling individual and social lives in their diverse city.

Belonging, de-integration and "Homing desire"

It is clear, then, that the diasporic works by laying bare within the national classroom the spatially and temporally disparate dynamics that have helped to produce the present local reality. It makes them into tangible objects of learning and teaching. This goes a long way towards undoing the ideological work of nationalist myopia, whose inexorable aim is to fully devour and own education and to mobilise it in its own interests. By contrast, diasporic education shows young people that their city is the product of a commingling of a multitude of disparate times, spaces and experiences, including their own. Thus, the city belongs to them – and they to it – in a way that is more immediate, lived and empirically true than the ways in which cities are imagined in nationalist, especially right-wing, narratives.¹² Diversity, then, in all its "messy" complexity, is the constitutive norm that nation-centric educational politics are constantly trying to paint over or redefine in a way that is expedient for them.

For minoritised youth, this upsetting of the established educational order helps to relieve the pressure exerted on them by "integrationist", "BAME" and other minority-related national discourses and policies. These often have the net effect of making minorities feel like second-class citizens, diminishing young people's sense of belonging, even as their ostensible aim is to create cohesion and equality. Integration, for example, can often feel to minoritised people like a set of continually moving goal posts. This is

because whilst dominant discourses place the onus of integration entirely upon diasporic and migrant communities, there is in reality no way for those communities to ever integrate to a lasting satisfactory degree. For one thing, dominant power is always in a position to “de-integrate” settled minorities by redrawing the boundaries of acceptable integration. This is visible in the case of Muslim communities across the West, which, regardless of actual levels of integration, are marked out by counter-terrorism policies (among other mechanisms) as potentially un/anti-Western. Thus, anyone even perceived to be Muslim is under ongoing pressure to prove that they are indeed “Western enough”. For another thing, there is a clear perception among some Black and Brown people that the White majority generally has little desire to mix with racial and religious minorities. The phenomenon of “white flight” is well-established in research literature (e.g. Crowder, 2000; Wilson, 2019) and was also a clear theme in our interviews. To take just one example here, one of our interviewees, a man of Sudanese heritage in his sixties, stated:

People are migrating and the host communities are moving away from where migrants live. For instance, the place where I live there used to be a lot of [White] English people, a lot of Irish, a lot of people from wealthy communities, but most of them are moving. There is no mixing and mingling, so where there are migrants, the host community tend to leave and move somewhere else. [...] integration is not working in my view; it is not working properly. Migrants are mostly integrating among themselves, but the host community are actually out-migrating from them. So, in all Birmingham, you can only find very poor Irish or very poor [White] British living with migrants. Migrants tend to live in very deprived areas. Very very deprived [...] I tried to interview some [White] English in Small Heath;¹³ they just told me that they do not want to live with migrants, they just want to live alone. They can’t coexist together. Yeah, they cannot coexist together.

White flight is a complex issue, and not all white out-migration can be said to be racially motivated (see, for example, Kaufmann & Harris, 2015). Be that as it may, there is little doubt that many White people will opt to move out of racially diverse areas if they have the financial means to do so. Thus, the opportunity to integrate is taken away from migrant and diasporic communities in these situations. One educational consequence is that many minoritised youth end up going to schools with a majority BAME student population, though still with a largely White, middle-class school leadership and teaching staff. In these settings, as well as in wider national debates, BAME pupils tend to be seen primarily through an “attainment” lens, usually low but sometimes high attainment in accordance with national statistics. This framing tends to determine a great deal of their educational experience, including whether they eventually end up being branded as “lost causes” or “worthy of support” (cf. Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). In this way, normalised educational practices associated with BAME issues end up further excluding and disadvantaging minoritised youth, who learn from a young age that they are potentially problem cases (or sometimes “model minorities”) who should be nothing but grateful to the White, middle-class education system that is trying to give them a better future. This works to further erode their sense of belonging to the place that is in a very real sense their home.

Such a system, then, has neither the time nor the space to pay serious attention to concerns raised by minoritised people. For instance, several of the people we interviewed talked about how their children often came home from school in a despondent state

complaining of teacher and peer racism. Sometimes, the children outright refused to go back to school and begged to be taken out altogether. Yet, parents had never managed to engage seriously with schools around these issues. Some interviewees also talked about how their BAME school environment and the deficit model in which it is framed had resulted in their total loss of confidence such that they saw prestigious universities as spaces that belong exclusively to White people. Talking about what she felt was her lack of belonging at university, one interviewee said: “Because I’m, like, Muslim and I wear a hijab and I’m Black, my life experience is going to be, like, completely different to, like, someone who is White and brought up in, like, the south of England. So, I understand that our life is different, there are different people so there’s a lot of ignorance.” Paradoxically, then, this would seem to fly in the face of the purported aspirational nature of the education system and the BAME support mechanisms tasked with fostering and realising the aspirations of minoritised youth.

Diasporic pedagogies of home

Incorporating diasporic educational approaches can help to redress these inequities. Firstly, the serious, sufficiently deep inclusion of diasporic resources in a school’s curriculum will have the effect of breaking down the attainment/deficit framing of minoritised youth and help instead to humanise them and their communities. As demonstrated above, pupils are able to better empathise with and learn from the experiences of people from vastly different backgrounds. Secondly, diasporic education can enable teachers to approach the complexities of home, identity and belonging more concretely, accurately and creatively. And this may include taking inspiration from other cultures, including hybrid cultures, on all sorts of educational matters such as teaching methods, leadership styles and so forth. Let us quickly remind ourselves that “diasporic” does not mean asking minoritised people to simply talk about their cultures or the prejudices they face – though it can of course include those elements; it refers primarily to tracing and utilising people’s transnational connections, current and historical, *as an educational resource* to make sense of and re-narrativise the present local reality. This will in turn illuminate a host of extant power structures especially at the national level. Thus, addressing issues of belonging in schools will at best be incomplete, at worst non-sensical, unless it is in tune with pupils’ diasporic connections.

Conceptually, diasporic dynamics of belonging can be attended to through another of Brah’s ideas, “homing desire”, which she emphasises is not “the same as a desire for a ‘homeland’” (1996, p. 197). That is, despite often having a desire to feel at and belong to a home, diasporans do not necessarily believe that there is a point of origin which constitutes their true home and to which they must return. This includes the place from which they migrated, which will have undergone often substantial changes since diasporans left it. As such, the place of origin quite literally no longer exists. In one sense, then, homing desire is about the ongoing process of negotiating the conditions of belonging in one’s current geographical and social space; and in this way, homing desire can be thought of as creative acts that are necessarily transformative of the cities and countries, indeed the societies, in which diasporans currently live. In another sense, homing desire references the always unfinished, *and the non-physical*, project of “home”. As Sara Ahmed writes:

The narrative of leaving home produces too many homes and hence no Home, too many places in which memories attach themselves through the carving out of inhabitable space, and hence no place that memory can allow the past to reach the present (in which the “I” could declare itself as having come home). The movement between homes allows Home to become a fetish, to be separated from the particular worldly space of living *here*, through the possibility of some memories and the impossibility of others (2000, p. 78, original emphasis).

Home conceived of in this way is much more about the future than the past. As Ahmed goes on to say, it is about “where the subject is going. Home becomes the impossibility and the necessity of the subject’s future (one never gets there but is always getting there)” (Ahmed, 2000). Ahmed is here talking about the effect that migratory transnational journeys have on people’s sense of home and belonging. However, it is important to add that notions of home and belonging are potentially even more complex for subsequent diasporic generations, who have been born and raised in the countries their parents and grandparents settled in. For although they will continue to experience home in the way Ahmed describes, their long-term residence in cities and countries of settlement will also allow them to develop a place/memory-based sense of home, usually closely tied with their experiences of race and class. According to one interviewee: “When I am in my area or places that I am familiar with, I do belong. But when I go to [affluent] areas like where my university is, I really feel out of place, because it’s a majority White area.” Belonging, then, is a multifaceted and complex issue, and dominant approaches to its teaching – e.g. the UK’s FBV framework – are simply unable to or disinterested in addressing these complexities. Instead, existing policies seem obsessively geared towards imposing a narrowly defined top-down vision of home and belonging on diverse youth that carries with it potentially punitive, ostracising or alienating measures if pupils “fail” to learn (i.e. adopt and confirm to) what they are being taught.

Conclusion

This paper has been a foray into the dynamics of diasporic education in mainstream schooling. Although the pandemic forced me to scale down the research on which the paper is based, the empirical and pedagogical evidence discussed, alongside previous research and conceptual developments, go a long way to demonstrate the benefits for the whole educational community of meaningfully and seriously including the diasporic resources that readily exist in diverse social settings. To be sure, the main thrust of a diasporic approach to pedagogy is the creative utilisation of the transnational connections and connectedness, historical and current, of ethnic and religious minorities. The specific ways in which this can be done are potentially innumerable and depend upon the unique educational contexts and collaborations that choose to adopt such an approach. For the project discussed here, I worked with theatre practitioners and (non-teaching) school staff to prepare real-life accounts of migration and settlement. A diverse class of year-six pupils then listened to and engaged with the stories, and this had an immediate impact on how the children grappled with complex questions around race/ racism, values, belonging and local and world history. Our method also had a direct impact on the rest of the school’s curriculum, as senior leaders recognised

the value of using the rich resources “on their doorstep” to enhance and enrich teaching and learning in all subjects.

The “doorstep” is of course often transnationally connected in diverse societies. That is, the lives of diasporic communities are at once local, national and global. This is an empirical reality that nationalist policies usually do not acknowledge. In fact, the nationalist rhetoric of powerful figures like Donald Trump and Boris Johnson, or their non-Western counterparts Xi Jinping, Jair Bolsonaro and many others, tends to demonise diversity and a transnational outlook. The education system is then tasked with placing a particularly myopic vision of the nation-state above all else, and alternative ideas are often branded as dissent and dealt with accordingly. Diasporic education is about simply bringing to the fore the empirical reality of minoritised local communities. As we have seen in this paper, doing so will necessarily provide opportunities to tangibly challenge extant hierarchies and inequities. Furthermore, the theoretical richness of the concept of diaspora offers a robust bedrock for analytical, pedagogical and curricular work. In this paper, I have outlined two core ideas. First, I argued that a diasporisation of educational space will open up new avenues of educational innovation geared towards greater social justice, with immediate impact on the teaching and learning of values, history and inequality. Diaspora is in this context a potent force for translation and decolonisation between multiple languages, cultures, times, spaces and generations. Second, I explored the complexities of home and belonging in a diverse society through the concept of homing desire, which in my reading references *homing* as an ongoing and socially transformative set of practices that disconnect the idea of home from place and memory. A very important analytical dimension that it has not been possible to adequately explore here, but that I hope is latent within the entire text, is that of social justice: there are migrant groups whose activities will run counter to the cause of social justice. What I conceive of as diasporic education does *not* include any educational practices that such groups may be involved in, not least because their activities resemble exactly the sort of monolithic exclusivity that diasporic education seeks to dislodge. That said, we should of course be interested in studying these forms of education too, even if only to develop better strategies for resisting them (see also Gholami, 2022).

Finally, it is worth mentioning here that, in my view, diasporic education works best when it is genuinely and organically collaborative. Apart from the invaluable educational resources offered by diasporic communities, there is a wealth of knowledge and expertise in local organisations that work to support not just migrant communities but the local community at large. Many of these organisations, such as the Play House, have dedicated educational programmes that are highly innovative in nature. But the most important point about collaborating with non-formal educators is that they are not bound by the state’s educational policies in the same way mainstream schools are, and this frees them up to explore new educational ideas. I am therefore convinced that a truly just and excellent education system can only be achieved through a collaboration of formal and non-formal educators, academic researchers, local practitioners, artists and activists, and the wider local educational community including pupils and their parents and carers. I hope my point is not misconstrued as downplaying the importance of having well-trained and qualified teaching staff as well as robust educational structures. On the contrary, I see teachers’ and schools’ role as central. However, it is well documented that in many parts of the world, nationalist and neoliberal education policies have for decades

been stifling teachers' ability to exercise creativity and criticality, or to only exercise them within ever narrowing frameworks; globally, education is increasingly being defined as a test/result driven process that prepares young people to occupy an almost pre-destined social position within the existing world order (cf. Apple, 2012). This is a chilling prospect indeed, and the collaborative, critical, creative and humanising nature of diasporic education seems urgent as one among other solutions.

Notes

1. See for example: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-report-of-the-commission-on-race-and-ethnic-disparities-supporting-research/ethnic-socio-economic-and-sex-inequalities-in-educational-achievement-at-age-16-by-professor-steve-strand> (accessed 20/12/2022).
2. A diaspora's educative efforts also impact education (and the politics of education) in the home country, as well as other countries in which members of that diaspora reside. But these issues are beyond the scope of this paper.
3. From the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Impact Accelerator Account.
4. <https://www.ikon-gallery.org/exhibition/a-gift-to-birmingham>.
5. <https://www.theplayhouse.org.uk/>.
6. https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/downloads/file/15452/balsall_heath_west_profile.
7. The Troubles refers to the violent sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland which lasted for thirty years until the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. The conflict was between the mostly Protestant unionists loyal to the UK and the mainly Roman Catholic Irish republicans (for an excellent historical analysis, see Ferriter, 2019).
8. This work along with further related research is currently ongoing. I hope to be able to report on it in subsequent publications.
9. A discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this paper. For excellent discussions and insights, see edited volume by Agnew (2005).
10. These are democracy; the rule of law; individual liberty; mutual respect for and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs, and for those without faith. Citizens are also not permitted to call for the death of members of British armed forces, whether in the UK or overseas. Vocal or active opposition to these values is the British Government's official definition of extremism.
11. A colloquialism denoting a person from Birmingham.
12. For example, American right-wing commentators describing Birmingham, UK, as a "totally Muslim city" and a "no-go area" for non-Muslims (see <https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/watch-fox-news-commentator-claim-8422693> accessed 26/11/2022).
13. An area of Birmingham.

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