Alevism Lessons in British Schools: Inclusion through Religious Education

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Summary
This entry demonstrates the importance of education as a space for inclusive strategies to integrate minoritised and excluded communities like Alevis and give them a sense of belonging in schools and wider society. We present our work to introduce Alevism lessons in UK schools and to evaluate their impact. Alevis have migrated from Turkey to the UK since the late 1980s mainly as political refugees and launched their own community centre İngiltere Alevi Kültür Merkezi ve Cemevi (İAKM-C) in London in 1993. This allowed them to address the problems facing the community around citizenship and settlement and assert their rights for recognition in multicultural British society. In particular, Alevi youth were identified as a key concern, with alarming suicide rates among second-generation young men and an overall sense of a negative identity. Young Alevis reported feeling invisible at school, where no one knew about their ethnic or religious identity. Through collaboration between the Alevi community, local schools and the University of Westminster, we produced lessons on Alevism for the Religious Education (RE) curriculum. The lessons were first taught in 2011 in a London primary school and in 2013 in a secondary school and pupils reported a greater sense of belonging, acceptance by their peers and pride in their identity. Now the lessons are taught in approximately 70 schools across the UK and generate interest from peers, parents and the wider community, achieving positive outcomes for Alevi youth and greater recognition of Alevis and Alevism as a religion in the UK.

Keywords: British Alevi Federation, İngiltere Alevi Kültür Merkezi ve Cemevi, Religious Education

Context

According to the British Alevi Federation (BAF), there are approximately 300,000 Alevis living in the UK, most of whom originate from Turkey and are ethnically Kurdish. Cetin (2016) describes them as a ‘twice minority’ because they were persecuted in Turkey as Kurds and Alevis. Their experience in Turkey made them wary of identifying publicly

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as Alevi in the UK. Despite these constraints, the first generation Alevis established a successful ‘self contained’ community in London as they settled into a new life in a more secure country where they could practice their religion without fear of reprisals. However, the second generation of Alevi youth had to integrate with British society through going to school and on to work, but struggled with the fact that most of the time, nobody knew they were Alevi and assumed they were Muslim (see Jenkins and Cetin 2028). This created confusion for them and some felt marginalised as Alevis and unsure about their religious identity.

In 2010, İAKM-C requested help from the University of Westminster to address the negative identity of their youth. The community leaders explained the ‘negative identity’ associated with the second generation’s understanding of their Aleviness, in terms of them not knowing much about their religion because it was suppressed in Turkey and associated with negative experiences of massacres, prejudice and discrimination. Their parents had not been taught much about Alevism in Turkey and most of the time, had learnt to hide their identity publicly, through fear of the negative consequences. Thus, religion was not felt as positively meaningful to the younger generation, compounded by the fact that most of their British contacts had never heard of Alevis. Additionally, the community were desperate to stop the high incidence of suicide amongst second-generation young men, unparalleled in any other British minoritised ethnic group. Typically, the profile of those killed by suicide was in their mid-20s, with underachievement and dropping out at school acting as triggers for a downward spiral in their lives. They were more likely to be unemployed or in low-paid irregular employment and trapped in gangs/petty crime, unable to fulfil their aspirations for the lifestyle they wanted to live (see Cetin 2020). More generally, when we talked to young people about their perceptions and potential solutions to the ‘negative identity’ of youth, they talked of their sense of isolation and alienation, particularly at school, where no one

really knew who they were. Mostly, they identified as ‘sort-of Muslim’ to classmates, but because they did not follow Sunni Muslim religious practices, they did not fit in and were sometimes bullied or ridiculed for their beliefs (Jenkins & Cetin, 2018). When they proposed Alevism lessons in RE classes, this offered an opportunity to present their religion positively. We will describe the process of designing and introducing them in schools.

The process of introducing Alevism lessons in UK schools

Shirley (2009) identified the importance of schools and local communities working together to support their children’s education. In our case, the impetus came from the Alevi community to introduce Alevism lessons in schools. In action research, there are three main stages to introducing a problem-solving strategy through identifying and planning it, monitoring the outcomes and evaluating its success. What makes it anti-discriminatory or decolonial is that it aims to work collaboratively to achieve social justice outcomes (Truman, 2004, Cetin and Jenkins, 2025). We were all equal partners in the process and the strategy was agreed together with the community, especially the youth.

Stage 1. Planning and implementing the lessons

The main aim of the strategy was to introduce Alevism lessons in RE lessons to promote a positive identity for Alevi young people and give them a sense of belonging in their schools. We needed to find a school willing to help and were fortunate that the community had contact with a local primary school (ages 5-11) in Enfield, an area where a lot of Alevi families lived and whose children attended the school. The deputy head’s participation was essential because she was able to design the lessons to fit with the curriculum guidelines for teaching RE and to suggest age-appropriate learning activities to make the lessons more interesting and accessible. A unit of 6 lessons on Alevism were designed for Key Stage 1 (ages 5-7) and another for Key Stage 2 (ages

7-11). As there were no available reference sources in English which explained Alevi beliefs, the Alevi committee members working on the project (appointed by the IAKM-C management) determined what was included about Alevism and how it was described.

The lesson plans were designed for teachers to use with no prior knowledge of Alevism but before they could be taught in the school, it was necessary to get permission from the local education authority. In England the law requires religious education to be taught in all state schools and the curriculum is framed by learning about and from religions rather than learning how to be a good Christian/Muslim/Alevi. Under the 1993 Education Act, RE must be mainly about Christianity but includes the major world religions. However, local authorities can introduce other religions not included in the curriculum to reflect the beliefs of local religious groups. A Standing Advisory Committee on Religious Education (SACRE) made up of representatives of different faiths decides which additional religions can be taught in that authority and the process is repeated for schools in other areas (Bacquet, 2019; Cosan-Eke et al, 2025).

The lessons for Key Stages 1 and 2 in the primary school were launched in 2011, making this the first school in the world to teach Alevism as part of the core curriculum. A staff development session introduced the lessons to the teaching team. A launch assembly at the school introduced the lessons and parents were invited, which made the Alevi community feel included for the first time. In 2013, having established contact with a secondary school, lessons were produced and approved for Key Stage 3 (11-14) with Alevi pupils actively involved in designing and teaching the lessons. Community members were present in the classes when they were taught for the first time to provide additional information and support.

Stage 2. Outcomes of the Alevism lessons

The lessons had very positive outcomes in terms of pupils' and parents' identification with both the school community and their religion, improved levels of achievement in the primary school and better relationships between pupils and staff deriving from a clearer understanding of Alevi beliefs and culture. In the secondary school, Year 9 students enjoyed learning about a different religion and the Alevi pupils felt proud and able to speak openly about their faith, possibly for the first time. The lessons gave their religion a legitimate status. This suggests a transformation in the Alevi students' sense of identity through having learnt more about their religion, moving away from defining themselves as 'sort of Muslim' – what they 'did not do that Muslims did' – to a position where they could describe their religion positively, demonstrating the benefits of a multicultural curriculum and feeling a stronger sense of belonging in the school. Our Alevism lessons project could be described as " delivering the right kind of multiculturalism' which is associated with shared humanity and citizenship that supports, respects and builds upon diverse multicultural identities (Modood, 2007).

Stage 3. Evaluation

The Alevism lessons were successful in achieving the aims of the strategy and in providing a greater sense of belonging for Alevi pupils in schools and a sense of pride in their religious identity. The knowledge about Alevism as a religion was produced by and for the Alevi community and has become a resource for them as well as schools with the lessons published on the BAF website. The idea of the lessons being produced so that any teacher can teach them without too much preparation was important in making it easier for schools to include Alevism lessons in RE classes.

The lessons led to numerous positive outcomes for the Alevi community, including increased visibility among the school community and, importantly, the recognition of Alevism as a religion distinct from Islam (Cetin and Jenkins 2024). This achievement motivated the British Alevi Federation to apply for charitable status from the Charity Commission based on

Alevism being classified as a religion which was granted in 2015. This was the first instance of Alevis receiving official recognition as a distinct religion from a British government department.

A further aim of the lessons was to provide a blueprint for Alevi parents and communities to request their inclusion in UK schools but also in other countries and for other religions. The key starting point is to find out the national policy on religious education and if it is possible to introduce lessons on other religions and how to go about the process. Then it is essential that the lessons reflect the community's religious beliefs and values and how they are taught reflects the national policy guidelines. Having contact with a school willing to pilot the lessons is really helpful and to collaborate with them to ensure they feel confident with the design and delivery of the lessons where possible. However, the process is not fixed and can be adapted for the specific context. We hope the description of the process and outcomes may inspire anyone wanting to introduce Alevism lessons in schools.

Conclusion

This entry examines the introduction of Alevism lessons in UK schools as a response to the challenges faced by the Alevi community, particularly second-generation youth experiencing a negative identity. The argument is grounded in the community's historical marginalisation as Kurdish Alevis in Turkey and their continued invisibility in British schools, which has contributed to alienation, identity confusion, and high rates of suicide among young men.

The entry outlines a three-stage process of community-led action research: (1) planning and implementing Alevism lessons in collaboration with educators, (2) observing positive outcomes in student performance, identity affirmation, and community inclusion, and (3) evaluating the broader impact on Alevi visibility, religious recognition, and educational integration. It highlights the importance of

locally produced knowledge, inclusive teaching materials, and collaborative curriculum design to achieve social justice outcomes.

The central conclusion is that the Alevism lessons not only fostered a stronger sense of belonging and pride among Alevi students but also established Alevism as a recognised religion in the UK. The project serves as a successful model of multicultural education, offering a replicable blueprint for other minoritised communities seeking representation in public education systems.

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