

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Westminster		
Unit of Assessment: 20 Social Work and Social Policy		
Title of case study: The Alevi Religion and Identity Project		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2009 – 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Dr Celia Jenkins Dr Umit Cetin	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Principal Lecturer Senior Lecturer	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: Oct 1991 ongoing; Oct 2014 ongoing
Period when the claimed impact occurred: Aug 2013 – Dec 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? Y/N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Since 2010, Dr Celia Jenkins and Dr Umit Cetin's direct engagement with the UK Alevi community and British schools has transformed Alevi youths' negative self-perception of their identity, raised the community's profile transnationally, and gained broader recognition of this marginalised ethno-religious group. Specific impacts achieved through their work in the UK are as follows:</p> <p>Alevism lessons have been approved by the SACREs (Standing Advisory Committees on Religious Education) of 12 Local Authorities and integrated into their Religious Education (RE) syllabus, demonstrably producing a greater sense of belonging for Alevi pupils and parents in participating schools and helping to create greater social cohesion. These learning materials have also provided a best practice model for teachers of Alevism in other countries, expanding the reach of this impact. Cetin and Jenkins' work with the British Alevi Federation greatly strengthened their successful submission to the UK Charity Commission for recognition of Alevis as a religious group in 2015 and their inclusion as a category in the 2021 National Census question on religion. These institutional acknowledgements increase the Alevi community's sense of inclusivity, which was previously severely lacking.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Alevis are a distinct ethno-religious group in Turkey who have historically suffered persecution and attempts at both assimilation and exclusion in that country. The UK Alevi community have been emigrating from Turkey since the 1980s, mainly as political refugees, and currently number approximately 300,000. In 2009, Cetin began researching the high incidence of suicide amongst young males within the second generation of the London Alevi community in order to identify causes, explanations, and possible solutions to a problem that was causing alarm and divisions within the community.</p> <p>Cetin's innovative methodology took an ethnographic approach to Durkheim's theoretical postulate that suicide is a product of the maladjustment of social institutions whose role it is to regulate and integrate individuals into society [1]. This method situated the experience of Alevi youth within these wider social structures and brought an understanding as to how the social organisation of the community in the UK shapes the integration and regulation of these young, second generation, Alevi men, in such a way that they were prone to anomie and suicide [2].</p> <p>Cetin found that those who died by suicide tended to follow a downward trajectory into the "rainbow underclass", a social position associated with chronic anomie and risk of suicide. Moreover, this journey was often triggered by disengagement with the school system and environment, profoundly affecting their sense of identity. Focus groups confirmed young Alevis' sense of marginalisation and exclusion at school, a key component of which was their frustration at the lack of self-knowledge about their Alevi identity, such that they would describe themselves as 'sort of Muslim' to fit in at school [2].</p> <p>To identify strategies to combat the negative identity of the second generation, Jenkins and Cetin conducted further research with Alevi youth in 2017 to explore the issues they raised about their experience at school. Evaluation of the project showed that the introduction of Alevism lessons gave them more knowledge about their religious identity, made them feel more integrated in the school community, and gave legitimacy and respect to their religion [3].</p> <p>In response to such findings, and as a further contribution to raising the profile of the transnational Alevi community, Jenkins and Cetin published the first special issue on Alevis and Alevism in a British journal (<i>National Identities</i>). Co-edited with a distinguished Turkish anthropologist, Professor Aydın, it aimed to raise awareness and build knowledge of this ethno-religious group by bringing together transnational scholarship in the emergent field of Alevi Studies</p>		

and situating Alevi Studies within the wider discipline of Middle Eastern Studies, where much greater significance is attached to religion than in Western societies. Addressing the Alevis in Turkey and the UK, this special issue emphasised an interdisciplinary approach that highlighted the complex dimensions of these communities' transnational ethno-religious identities in relation to religion, politics, culture, education and national identity [3]. The quality and significance of this special issue is such that Routledge published it as a book [4].

Cetin and Jenkins have continued to research and write about Alevi identity as an ethno-religious identity, editing another special issue which, this time, brought together interdisciplinary research and scholarship on Alevi-Kurds [5, 6]. This externally peer-reviewed special issue for the journal *Kurdish Studies* is one of the first transnationally to address the specific experience of Alevi-Kurds in Turkey and the UK and only the second to be written in English. It features an article by Cetin that develops his earlier research by focusing on the related issues of gang involvement as further evidence of the anomic disaffection amongst Alevi young men in particular [5], as well as an article by Jenkins researching generational shifts in Alevi parents' aspirational capital and engagement with schools, which connects with the impact of the Alevism lessons described below [6].

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- [1] Cetin, U. (2016) Durkheim, ethnography and suicide: Researching suicide in the transnational London Alevi-Kurdish community. *Ethnography* 17 (2): 250-277. Featured in the online Sage guide to Qualitative Case studies for use as a teaching tool in research methods classes.
- [2] Cetin, U. (2017) Cosmopolitanism and the relevance of 'zombie concepts': the case of anomic suicide amongst Alevi Kurd youth. *British Journal of Sociology*. 68 (2): 145-166. The winning entry of the British Journal of Sociology Early Career Prize in 2017.
- [3] Jenkins, C. & Cetin, U. (2017) From a 'sort of Muslim' to 'proud to be Alevi': the Alevi Religion and Identity Project in combating negative identity among second-generation Alevis in the UK, in Jenkins, C. Aydin, S. & Cetin, U. (2017) (Eds) *Contested boundaries: Alevism as an ethno-religious identity*. *National Identities*. Described by the editors of *National Identities* as a "ground-breaking special issue". It raised the profile of the Alevi community, provided a mainstream academic platform for Alevism Studies, and positioned the University of Westminster as at the heart of UK Alevi Studies.
- [4] Jenkins, C. Aydin, S. & Cetin, U. (2018) (Eds). *Alevism as an Ethno-Religious Identity: Contested boundaries*. London: Routledge. ISBN: 978-1-138-09631-8. This edited monograph constitutes an original contribution to Routledge's internationally renowned portfolio of scholarship in Middle Eastern Studies.
- [5] Cetin, U. (2020) Unregulated Desires: Anomie, the "Rainbow Underclass" and Second-generation Alevi Kurdish Gangs in London, in Cetin, U. Jenkins, C. & Aydin, S. (2020) (Eds) *Alevi Kurds: History, Politics and Identity*. *Kurdish Studies*. 8 (1).
- [6] Jenkins, C. (2020) "Aspirational Capital" and Transformations in First-generation Alevi-Kurdish Parents' Involvement with Their Children's Education in the UK, in Cetin, U. Jenkins, C. & Aydin, S. (2020) (Eds) *Alevi Kurds: History, Politics and Identity*. *Kurdish Studies*. 8 (1).

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£10,000 Leverhulme/British Academy Fellowship Award (SG14O481).

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

1. The inclusion of Alevism in UK Religious Education (RE) and its impact on pupils

Seeking to investigate how the downward spiral of Alevi youth into the rainbow underclass might be prevented, Cetin's findings about their disaffection with school provided the focus for the Religion and Identity project. Undertaken with Jenkins, this project sought ways to counter the negative identity of second-generation Alevi youth. The action-based research involved **designing, trialling, and evaluating curriculum units on Alevism for the locally agreed syllabuses for RE at Key Stages 1-3** [a-i].

In 2010, Cetin and Jenkins began building towards the impacts achieved in this REF period by undertaking an initial collaboration with the Prince of Wales primary school in Enfield, which has a significant Alevi cohort, and the British Alevi Federation (BAF), an ethno-religious community organisation serving the Alevi community. Management of the project entailed co-ordinating these stakeholders in the research, design, and planning of Alevism lessons that would fit within the

national framework of RE. In June 2011, the proposal was approved by the Local Authority's Standing Advisory Committee on Religious Education (SACRE) and lessons began in Autumn of that year.

These Alevism lessons at Key Stages 1 and 2 have since continued across this REF period and are ongoing. The Deputy Head of Prince of Wales states that the researchers' *"commitment to provide the best educational materials for children [...] have been key drivers in turning Alevism into a visible religion"* and the *"support [they] have given in terms of parental engagement, inclusion, achievement and behaviour have been crucial"* in redressing the previous *"underperform[ance]"* of their Alevi cohort in their education as a whole [a-ii]. The Deputy Head adds that *"[t]he progress of the Alevi children has been closely monitored for the last 8 years and their attainment has exceeded the National expectations which was not the case prior to the materials being introduced"* [a-iii], with data from across each school year 2014-2018 confirming that *"[p]rogress for almost all [Alevi] children is expected and above"* the national average in the areas of Reading, Writing, and Mathematics at Prince of Wales [a-iv].

These sessions have also had an impact on the parents of Alevi children. The recognition of Alevism at the school has **ensured that parents feel they have an inclusive environment for their children**: *"The schools used to ask us if we were Muslim and I used to hesitate to respond as we are Kurdish Alevi. At this new school, they reassured me that they knew what Alevism was. When I went to the school, I saw they had a display corner where there was information about Alevism, there was a saz and pictures of the prophet Ali. This made me very happy"*, said one parent, while another stated that: *"For my son also, the main factor in choosing his school was that it was close to our home and also that the school would be teaching about Alevism in the near future. [...] The school really understands us"* [a-v]. This inclusivity has been further encouraged by the project team through the establishment of a regular Alevi parents' group at the school in April 2016 to discuss how they can engage with and support their children's education. As a result of this, **Alevi parents now have more confidence in teaching the children about their religion and identity**: *"Thanks to this school, we began to overcome this habit of not explaining Alevism to our children. They were taken to Cemevi [the Alevi place of worship] by the school, and they were given information about the Cemevi. We used to take our children to Cemevi, but once again we never explained the importance or purpose of the building to them. Now my children express that they are Alevi in a more confident and free way"* [a-v].

The Deputy Head of Prince of Wales also states that the researchers *"have been an inspiration to me. I am no academic but they have given me the confidence to organise Alevi lessons at our school and as a result I have spoken to headteachers and teachers on many occasions about our work and it is now being taught in schools across Enfield"* [a-ii]. This **upscaling of the benefits of the Alevi lessons** is such that 10 schools in Enfield now deliver such sessions and, since 2019, Alevism have been given official representation in Enfield SACRE's Constitution which means they now have a strong voice in regard to RE provision in this London borough [a-vi, a-vii].

Due to their extensive engagement activities, the Alevi curriculum (covering Key Stages 1-3), devised by Cetin, Jenkins, and BAF, now reaches approximately 50 schools in the UK, encompassing four other London boroughs (Barnet, Islington, Hackney, and Haringey) and other cities such as Nottingham, Doncaster, and Sheffield [a-vi, a-viii].

The development into Key Stage 3 began in January 2013, when lessons for 11-14 year olds were introduced at Highbury Grove Secondary School, Islington. Cetin and Jenkins used the same model as at the primary school, collaboratively designing the lessons with a teacher and pupils from the school, as well as members of the Alevi community centre. This time, the researchers, aided by the teacher and representatives from the community, gave the Alevi pupils the necessary pedagogic support to deliver the lessons themselves.

These KS3 lessons have continued to be delivered at Highbury Grove across the REF period by the school's RE teachers, and in Autumn 2014 the Religion and Identity project was awarded the British Education Research Association (BERA) prize on the basis of this work. The prize *"acknowledges the importance of collaborative work between schools and universities to improve any aspect of curriculum development in schools and colleges"*, affirming the project's impact in regard to **beneficially changing the RE curriculum** [b-i]. The £2000 BERA prize money was used to set up an enrichment programme – the "Hidden Cultures After School Club" – which provided a forum for Alevi pupils to further explore their culture and identity and was run by the Alevi Youth Federation with support from the researchers.

Significant outcomes have been attested to by the Alevi students of these KS3 lessons [b-ii]. Pupils were found to have **developed their self-knowledge**. One pupil explains that *“when I was younger, I just said I was Muslim because I did not know anything about Alevism and I did not know how to explain it to people but now I am saying I am Alevi”*. Another confirms: *“we learnt how to describe ourselves. We can describe what belief we are and what we do”*. This self-knowledge has resulted in **the building of their self-esteem**. One pupil states: *“it changes the person completely, it gives you confidence and recognition”*, with another adding: *“I like the lessons because it made me speak out confidently about my religion”*. And the sessions have also created **a sense of belonging among the pupils**: *“I like the Alevi class because it made people learn something about Alevism and created a community within the school”*; *“You feel more accepted, and feel like at home”*.

As indicated, the knock-on effect of these sessions, which were delivered to both Alevi and non-Alevi students, has had **a beneficial impact on social cohesion** [b-ii]: *“I think there is more of a peaceful environment because of these lessons because the Muslims and Christians and other religious background people are learning about our religion and there is more of an acceptance”*. Conflicts had previously arisen due to a lack of knowledge of Alevism in the broader school community. For instance, Muslim peers had found issue with their divergence from Islamic practice, having assumed Alevi pupils were Muslim due to their country of origin. As one pupil states: *“these lessons were giving [pupils] a lot of background and this made people more aware what Alevism is and there were less questions about Alevism and what it is and what they do. They were questioning us less”*. Another pupil affirms this positive outcome: *“everywhere we Alevis are a minority, people don’t know about us. When they learn about Alevism they accept it, and you get a lot more respect”*.

2. Global impact on pedagogy

As hardly any of the published materials on Alevism are in English or produced for children, there was considerable interest in the researchers’ Alevism lessons throughout the transnational Alevi community from the outset. In 2019 Cetin and Jenkins responded to this interest by organising an international workshop at the University of Westminster that **facilitated knowledge exchange among international educators**. Covering travel costs for attendees to ensure accessibility, the first half of the workshop provided educators from Turkey, France, Austria, Germany, and the UK the opportunity to compare their diverse approaches to Alevism lessons within their varied contexts. For instance, the Austrian educators were at an early stage, seeking legal permission to deliver their sessions in schools, Alevism was already an option in some German schools, but it was mostly taught by Alevi Federations for Alevi pupils at the secondary stage, while the law forbids RE provision in French schools meaning such sessions would be taught only in Alevi Community Centres. The benefit of this knowledge exchange is that educators in different regions could gain insights into how they might respond to the challenges in their own, as several participants highlighted in their feedback: *“It was really beneficial to see the different perspectives and practices”*; *“Discussing and comparing the different curriculums is very important”*; *“We can learn a lesson from these experiences”* [c-i].

The second half of the workshop **provided best practice guidance on the development of their teaching materials** via a review of Cetin and Jenkins’ own Alevism curriculum by religious and educational experts, including Alevi Federation representatives from Turkey. One participant described the work done in the UK *“as a perfect example for other countries”*, while another adds: *“It was so good to see the Alevism lessons for each stage has been prepared by experts. The symposium enabled us to see the process of their production. It helped us to see how English professionals handle the issue. It helped us to understand how Alevism lessons helped the Alevi children”* [c-i]. Since 2015, the researchers have been working with RE consultant Bill Moore to make sure these resources are fully compliant with the latest guidance on RE teaching, thus ensuring their wider professional use, and following evaluation of the lessons from participating schools and approval from the international workshop, the researchers carefully revised and finalised the curriculum materials [c-ii].

Cetin and Jenkins have **ensured that these curriculum materials can be readily accessed and adopted by schools and the community**, by both publishing the lessons independently and making them available on the British Alevi Federation [website](#) for wider use by the international Alevi Federation for their own teaching about Alevism [c-iii]. Usage data of the educational site for

the lessons is 23,874 hits as of July 2020, demonstrating considerable interest in the lessons in 2019-20.

3. Attaining official recognition of Alevis as a distinct religious group

The Chair of the British Alevi Federation testifies to the further significance of the Alevi lessons, reporting that the lesson materials, and the booklet describing Alevism that the team had produced as background information for schools [d-i], were **vital supporting evidence in their successful 2015 application to the Charity Commission for England and Wales for official recognition as a religious charity**, which had previously been declined: *“The lessons were very important in presenting our case for official recognition as a religious group by the Charity Commission, which we got in 2015”* [a-viii].

As *Hürriyet Daily News* – the most prominent news source for Turkey – explains, the Charity Commission acceptance of BAF as a religious charity has given *“the [Alevi] community a legal recognition that is denied to it in Turkey”* for discriminatory reasons [d-ii]. The article states that *“the Charity Commission ruled that the BAF and associated Alevi centers can promote the Alevi faith in accordance with the beliefs set out in the publication “Alevism” produced by the BAF”* in coordination with Cetin and Jenkins [d-i], and quotes the Chair of the BAF on the importance of this ruling: *“The legal recognition of [Alevism] as a religion and faith, and our cemevis [Alevi places of worship] being recognized as a house of worship [...] gives our children the comfort in defining our belonging and identity”* [d-ii].

In response to the Religion and Identity project’s finding that the Alevis’ invisibility affected their sense of belonging in schools and wider society, Jenkins and Cetin designed the first comparative survey that would provide empirical data about the community. This would allow them to both map the settlement of Alevis in the UK and to describe the community and its transnational connections. The researchers were awarded a Leverhulme/British Academy Fellowship Award to undertake this transnational pilot survey on family and kinship in the Alevi community in London and Turkey. The project began in September 2014 and the data collected by this survey provide a description and estimate of the size of the UK Alevi community [d-iii]. As the Chair of BAF states: *“as there is no official record of us [Alevis] in the UK”, this was “used in our campaign to get Alevism included as a category in the religion question in the 2021 census”* [a-viii]. This application for **inclusion of Alevi in the national census as a distinct religious group was accepted for the 2021 census** [d-iv]. When users choose “Any other religion” in the “What is your religion?” question, “Alevi” now features as a pre-stored option that appears upon partial typing of the term [d-iv].

One of the key benefits of this institutional recognition of the community is that it **redresses the exclusion felt by Alevis**, as expressed by a parent regarding her experience of enrolling a child into school: *“we could not present ourselves as Alevis. It was not on the options when we registered. So we registered as Muslim, we didn’t know how to register them as Alevi. We were scared to say we were Alevi in the early stages”* [a-v]. By elevating their sense of inclusion in these concrete ways, the work of Cetin and Jenkins will continue to impact the Alevi community for years to come.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- [a] (i) Alevism Curriculum Key Stage 1-3 (ii) Testimony from Deputy Head of Prince of Wales Primary School (PoW) (iii) Deputy Head of PoW, Foreword to Alevism booklet for KS1 and 2 (iv) Data for KS2 from PoW 2014-18 (v) Prince of Wales Parents’ Interviews (vi) List of schools and Local Authorities (vii) Constitution – Enfield Sacre (viii) Testimonial from the Chair of BAF
- [b] (i) BERA prize in *Insights* Issue 9, Autumn 2014 (ii) Focus Group with Highbury Grove Pupils
- [c] (i) International Alevi Symposium feedback and programme (ii) Alevism - Key Stages 1 to 3 Planning Grid (iii) Alevi Federation site with course materials [\[link\]](#)
- [d] (i) BAF Alevism [booklet](#) (ii) *Hürriyet Daily News* article [06/10/15](#) (iii) ‘Transnational Alevi Community Survey Report’ on Leverhulme/BA funded project- 2017 (SG14O481) (iv) Portfolio of Office of National Statistics / Census evidence