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Qur'anic education and non-confessional RE: an intercultural perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the reported experiences of Muslim students that regularly shift between Muslim 'supplementary education' (including its traditional confessional focus on learning to read Arabic and then memorise and recite the Qur'an) and mainstream school education (including its 'inclusive' form of religious education'). The aim has been to better comprehend how these students make sense of this dual educational experience while negotiating the knowledge, skills, and values that are taught to them by two often seemingly disparate institutions. A further aim is to place our findings within the growing field of intercultural education. Though both types of education are often thought to be distinct and oppositional – the former as non-confessional and 'modern', the latter as confessional and 'outmoded' – both English and Swedish students were able to identify a degree of symbiosis between the two, particularly in relation to the process of memorisation. Thus, it became increasingly clear to the researchers that Muslim student reflection on their participation in both traditions of education had an *intercultural* dimension in the sense of encouraging dialogue and discussion *across* educational cultures prompting new knowledge and understanding. This article lays out some of the evidence for this conclusion.

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Introduction

Religious education (RE), in its broadest sense, is crucial to the survival of any given religious tradition. Without the ability to transmit religious knowledge and ways of living from one generation to the next, no such tradition could continue to exist as a living religious phenomenon. Religious education, in terms of nurture/instruction, is a key way in which older generations are able to transmit to their young the core meanings, values, understandings, life-stances and practices of their religion, thus assuring that those vital elements are carried forward into the future. In the contemporary world, this type of

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religious education can take place in homes, religious institutions, but also within some state school systems where provision is made for it (as in Germany, Austria, and Italy, for instance). Complementary to this type of religious education, however, there exists religious education understood as so-called teaching *about* religions. In some countries, this type of education takes place within the context of a non-confessional religious education school subject (in Sweden and England, for example) and in some countries, where religious education does not feature in the curriculum as a distinct school subject, it can appear as elements across different school subjects such as history or literature (for example, in France and the USA) (Berglund 2015). As we can see, then, there is great diversity in what 'religious education' can mean – so much so that it might sometimes be appropriate to talk about the existence of religious educations in the plural. Different forms of RE might be differentiated through the different educational aims that they espouse: nurturing children and young people into the beliefs and traditions of 'their' religious community or introducing them into a range of religious traditions with the aim of contributing to their general education. In some countries children take part in both types, as in England and Sweden, where many students not only learn about different religions in the RE classroom but also take part in one or other type of denominational religious education in their 'spare' time outside school hours.

Little appears to have been written about this phenomenon of a dual experience of religious education, either in general or from the point of view of Muslim children who have experienced, or are experiencing, it. As there is a growing general interest in different forms of education, and religious supplementary education in particular, the two authors of this paper – working in England and Sweden respectively, but also increasingly jointly in each other's country – this seemed like an obvious gap in research and understanding that needed filling.

In this specific paper, our focus will be on Qur'anic studies, as a key part of supplementary Islamic education, and the non-confessional inclusive religious education that is offered in state schools in both Sweden and England. Our prime aim is to better comprehend how Muslim teenagers in these two countries make sense of their dual educational experience of religious educations. How, in other words, do Muslim students negotiate the knowledge, skills, and values taught to them by two distinct institutions that are often considered oppositional or dichotomous, or, indeed, representing two historical educational traditions, namely 'Islamic' and 'western' (and all that each of these terms connote). A further aim is to place our findings within the growing field of intercultural education. By doing this, we want to show that a deeper understanding of religious educations and their different aims and methods are important in enabling students to work across a range of cultures to think through the life consequences for themselves and others.

It should be noted that the term 'Islamic supplementary education' constitutes a broad category that can reflect a variety of pedagogical settings and encompass anything from private home tutoring (person-to-person, in small groups or by Skype with a tutor in another country), weekday classes after state school, through to weekend Islamic schooling. It is also broad in the sense that its content varies widely, from key traditional Muslim foci such as Qur'anic memorisation, Islamic history, and Islamic jurisprudence, to less traditional foci such as theatre, artistic performance, discussion groups, sport, origami and lessons designed to improve school homework performance.

It is also important to note that the concept of 'intercultural' is not value-neutral, but has emerged in a specific intellectual, institutional, ideological and political context. The term is used in UNESCO and Council of Europe reports of the 1970s and 90s when the importance of an educational system that supported democracy, human rights, peace and co-operation was politically addressed in a Europe increasingly characterised by diversity and plurality. An intercultural approach to education has primarily meant a way of combating problems related to migration, such as racism and segregation (Council of Europe 2017).

Here, however, we use it in a wider sense, where it reflects an interest in, and a focus on, diversity in history and contemporary society, as well as its conditions and consequences. In this sense, the concept then holds both a hope for, and an expectation of, the education system – highlighting opportunities for mutual exchange between people and groups with different cultural experiences and backgrounds, as well as exploratory and transformational meetings between individuals in different educational contexts (UNESCO 2011). It is within such a broad understanding that we frame this paper.

Sweden and the United Kingdom offer comparative advantages. In both nations, the proportion of the total population that is Muslim is sizeable: 6.3% of the United Kingdom's and 8.1% of the Swedish (Pew Research Center 2017). Both, moreover, have followed a multicultural integration policy, affording parents the opportunity to choose among several educational alternatives, including different forms of supplementary Islamic education.¹ In addition, both Britain and Sweden are signatories to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), which upholds and promotes 'freedom of religion' and 'the right of parents to ensure that education and teaching conform with their own religious and philosophical convictions' (Protocol, Article 2). There are no statistics on the number of providers of or participants in Islamic supplementary classes in either nation but, given Britain's historically longer and larger Muslim presence as well as estimations based on available research (e.g. Cole 2008; Cherti and Bradley 2011), supplementary classes seem clearly to involve significantly greater numbers of children and young people in Britain than in Sweden. Differences in socio-political activism and identity formation are also important for understanding the differences between the countries. For instance, Britain's colonial and post-colonial record variously mediate the identity formation of a

sizeable proportion of its Muslim population, including through both the state educational system and mosques, many of which are involved in the provision of supplementary Islamic education (Mandaville 2007; Modood 2010). Britain has also long been the second residence of wealthy elites and the exilic home of dissidents from across the Muslim world, with their extensive religious, educational and media outlets (Gilliat-Ray 2010). However, Sweden's history of neutrality, critical distance from Anglo-American foreign policy, and even its socio-economic model, offers a contrasting set of sources of identity formation and multicultural integration (Mårtensson 2014).²

Previous research

It is not only in discussions on the possible incompatibility between religious education as nurture/instruction and the teaching *about* religions, as in inclusive non-confessional RE, that the experiences of the students have often been ignored by researchers and commentators: this has also been the case in relation to Islamic education in general (Gilliat-Ray 2010; Moosa 2015), although there have been notable exceptions (e.g. Gent 2011, 2016, 2018). Another problem is that much research on Islamic education in Europe does not take into account the many different types or conceptualisations of Islamic education, based as it is on a wide range of differences in theology and historical tradition, and also educational approaches. This is important when we introduce the concept of interculturality, since the concept, as already noted, includes a notion of taking difference and diversity seriously. In other words, to obtain a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the two institutions of learning discussed here, to compare and contrast their nature and their impact on students adequately, researchers must both recognise this diversity and define clearly the limits of their own investigations, so as to avoid over-generalising their findings.

Method, material and theory

The empirical material upon which this study is based consists of 25 one-to-one interviews with Muslim students, aged 15–17.5 years-old, in a large London-based secondary (11–18) school in March 2016, and 20 one-to-one interviews with students aged 16–22 in Stockholm (2015–2016) who attended different secondary schools. What the students had in common was that, apart from being Muslim, at one point or other they had all participated in *Qur'an-centred* supplementary Islamic education parallel to their mainstream secular schooling which includes a non-confessional subject of RE.

Regarding the participants, it is interesting to note that a clear majority of the interviewees mentioned spontaneously that the interviews marked the 'very first time' that anyone had asked them to reflect upon the relation

between mainstream secular and supplementary Islamic schooling. While all participants were eventually able to address the question of the mutual impact of these supposedly dichotomous educational settings, many required a good deal of time to consider and frame their answers. In fact, in the English part of this research, the structure of the in-school element of the research – which included students completing a brief questionnaire and then participating in group work before they went on to one-to-one interviews – was designed specifically to promote this engagement with the subtle issue of the possible symbiosis between traditions of education.

In terms of theory, we will use theories drawn from New Literacy Studies to promote greater understanding of the role of Qur’anic memorisation within the mainstream Muslim tradition before discussing this in relation to the concept of intercultural education, as already referred to above.

Results

The interviewees were asked to compare and contrast supplementary Islamic and mainstream secular education with an emphasis on what they found to be compatible between the two systems, or whether they found them to be fundamentally at odds. Both Swedish and British interviewees most often mentioned that the *skills* they had developed by way of reading, memorising, and reciting the Qur’an had had a positive impact on their mainstream school-work. They noted, for example, that Qur’anic education had improved their general ability to memorise and perform in front of others:

In school you do a lot of memorising, for example like my German writing assessment that’s coming up. We need to memorise the whole of our writing and then the memorising that I’ve done in Qur’an lessons helps me with that ... like I know the techniques [visualising and breaking up into parts] from memorising. (British female student, nearly 16 years-old)

I used to read the Qur’an in front of my teacher and the students at mosque when I was little, sometimes at celebrations as well. Presentations at school are similar: you learn what you want to say at home and then add a poster or a powerpoint to that. (Swedish male student, 18 years-old)

Others referred to their enhanced ability to concentrate on specific tasks, behave respectfully towards teachers, recite confidently, and listen carefully.³

However, some students in our own research went further than this in positing that their involvement with Qur’an-focused study in Muslim supplementary education also had an impact on their development of character: with regard to the virtue of patience, for instance:

I think Islam has definitely taught me to be patient because a lot of the times you learn you’re going to go through hardship and struggles and the best thing, what most Muslims believe, is just to be patient and put trust in Allah. And I feel as if I

apply it to everything, when things aren't going my way, when I find a subject hard in school. I just be patient and just hope, you know. I put faith in Allah and everything will go fine. (British male student, nearly 16 years-old).⁴

When shifting their thoughts to what impact their secular education has had on their supplementary education, the interviewees highlighted RE spontaneously, saying that knowledge of different religions and different versions of Islam benefitted them. The interviewees noted not only that the knowledge and abilities they had acquired through their Islamic supplementary education had given them an advantage when it came to their participation in mainstream non-confessional RE (part of the school curriculum in both Sweden and England), but also that mainstream non-confessional RE had contributed to their understanding of 'other Muslims', meaning those coming from different interpretative traditions from their own. When asked what could be improved in their Islamic supplementary education, several of the British interviewees suggested that they wanted more education on different religions in this context also. In this spirit, asked if there is anything that happens in her secular school that she would like to take over to her Islamic supplementary education, a 15 year-old British female student replied:

We can learn subjects like RE, religious studies in Islamic [education] so we can learn more about other religions.

Or

I think teach more about other religions. They don't really do that. 'Cos they mainly focus on Islam. And sometimes Christianity to show an overlap. Not other world religion. I think they should do that.

It is, of course, of no surprise that Qur'anic education only focuses on Islam and not on other religions, but the comments made by the students clearly indicate their appreciation of knowledge about different religions, as Safa explains:

I think that if you don't learn about religions you kind of become ignorant and you don't accept other people. (Swedish female student, 21 years-old)

In terms of pedagogical style, another British student suggested that the one-to-one time spent with a teacher in supplementary education⁵ could be useful in a school context too in that, in the latter:

...it's like 30 people, one teacher, the teacher saying the same thing to everyone, even if you understand or not. So, the teacher there she's gonna stay there until children get it. (British female student, 17.5 years-old)

A Swedish 21 year-old male student highlighted critical thinking as something that he had learned in secular school and that had helped him in his Islamic education studies:

Source criticism/evaluation of sources, you find it in Islam as well I now know, but I have learned to look critically: Who has said this? Is there evidence? Is there a tradition? etc. I have also learned to deduce scenarios, this is also available in Islam, but I have learned to see a situation from different perspectives. What is the cause and/or which is the context of a situation? What are the underlying factors?

For this student, learning about evaluation of sources in secular RE not only meant that he looked at different sources in Islamic education critically, but also eventually made him realise that critical thinking has also been an inherent part of the Islamic tradition, as seen in the classical and ongoing study of *hadith*, for example.⁶

To get a somewhat more critical and personal reflection on their supplementary education, we asked interviewees whether, when becoming parents themselves, they would they want their own children to engage in both secular state education and Islamic supplementary education, as they themselves had done. The British Muslim students answered overwhelmingly in the affirmative, though some wanted their putative children to have a choice as they themselves had sometimes had. Others, in responding, referred to a balance that they thought was necessary in life and learning:

I would want my children, if I have children, to go through both Islamic education because it gives you the best of both worlds, so you want your children to learn about the western culture. (British male student, 17.5 years-old)

Rather than balance as such, some phrased their answers in terms of priorities:

I would want them definitely to go to a school, a good school, first. I think 'cos of the society we live in. It's really important to have the education, the general education that schools give. Then I wouldn't want them to have *hifz* [memorising the whole Arabic Qur'an by heart] yet but I would want them to go to Islamic education. (British female student, 15.5 years-old)

However, others chose to use a traditional Muslim image: the need to balance life and affairs of this world (*dunia*) with life in the next (*din*). Thus:

I'd tell them [their future children] that education at your mainstream school, say in your west ... it gives you the skills and everything that I think you need in this life, whereas the other, I believe that whereas the other one – the Islam education- is the one that you need on the Day of Judgement. I would explain that to them, I think. (British female student, 15 years-old)

Even though the students, in general, articulated positive benefits of taking part in both educational settings, in terms of learning important skills and attitudes, it was the Swedish students who made it clear that 'Qur'an-classes' are a contested practice in Swedish society. They sometimes also experienced the way in which Islam is represented in Swedish schoolbooks to be problematic (Berglund 2017).

In terms of what could be improved in mainstream school, a Swedish student said:

It would be better if teachers knew more about Islamic education, if teachers co-operated. There are new Qur'an schools that are different, unfortunately, some Muslims are also only for the materialist aspects of life. A teacher is like a father teaches for this life and for the hereafter. It would be good if secular schools also taught about Islamic history, Islamic psychology and Islamic stories. People are scared of what they don't understand. In Sweden it tends to become either/or, either science or religion. There is no opposition. (Swedish male student, 21 years-old)

When discussing possible conflicts of interest between mainstream and Islamic schooling, interviewees mentioned frequently that the time spent attending supplementary Islamic education took time away from other activities, among them working on their regular school homework. Interestingly, it was, again, the Swedish interviewees who most often lodged this complaint even though they generally participated in Islamic schooling only once a week (as opposed to British Muslim students where, as we have already noted, the general pattern was attending Islamic classes after school each day of the week).

My mom used to take me on Saturdays, but I wasn't very happy about it. I often missed important football matches with my team. My mom liked to go because she met her friends there. (Swedish male student, 16 years-old)

In the case of the British students, when they had felt that there was a clash between prioritising the needs and pressures of Islamic supplementary education and those of mainstream school – such as when public tests or examinations were being prepared for in school – the pattern appeared to be that accommodation was sought. In a number of instances, this meant the student withdrawing from supplementary educational classes to devote their time to school work. In other instances, it would seem that careful organisation of time and priorities supported students in enfolding both kinds of educational commitment – Islamic supplementary classes and mainstream school – into their daily lives. This was certainly the case in the following example of a British female student who had gone to weekday classes between the ages of 7 and 10 but, at the time of the interview, had been attending weekend classes only since the age of 14:

Every Friday I'd do all my Islamic homework like memorising or doing my Islamic studies homework. But then during the week I'd do all my school work . . . you have to balance your school life, you have to balance life and you have to balance your free time. (British female student, 16.5 years-old)

Discussion

It may appear that Islamic supplementary education, especially the teaching of Qur'anic recitation, lies outside the standard forms of teaching within modern

secular education, since its aims and methods do not compare with those of non-confessional religious education (RE) (Berglund 2017). However, this does not necessarily mean that the students experience a conflicting situation between non-confessional RE, as such, and their Islamic supplementary education. The conflict that the Swedish students in particular experienced (Berglund 2017), was lack of knowledge and understanding of Qur'anic education as an educational practice and that, in terms of time, it competed with other activities.

Thus, this project raises questions about the binary distinction that is sometimes made, either implicitly or explicitly, between Muslim traditional (including supplementary) education and western mainstream schooling, the implication often being that the latter is more 'modern' and 'progressive' than the former. Both of these points are important in that, for many who are unfamiliar with the practices and underlying philosophy of traditional forms of Islamic education, the value of a contemporary young Muslim – English or Swedish – attending Islamic supplementary education *in addition to* mainstream schooling would be questionable. This judgement might be further deepened when it is learned that much time will be spent in memorisation of the Qur'an in such a way that the propositional meaning of the text will not be grasped. After all – it might be asked – isn't the whole point of literacy to understand the meaning of a text, not just to learn it 'by rote'?

This latter specific point could sound convincing but, clearly, it does not take into account diversity and difference across various kinds of educational tradition – or, indeed, of religious education. In this particular case, and to support a call for the recognition of diversity within society – one of the main pillars of intercultural education – support might be found from the field of New Literacy Studies. Here, contemporary scholars such as Brian V Street (2013) and Andrey Rosowsky have, for example, shown that there is a disjuncture in social understanding between literacy as propagated in modern western schools (in which the prime aim is *both* to decode *and* understand text) and that found elsewhere, such as in the focus on memorisation of the Qur'an which lies at the heart of traditional Islamic education (in which memorising, reciting and experiencing the *sound* of the Arabic Qur'an is often regarded as an end in its own right). In order to provide a corrective, then, Rosowsky is adamant in stating that:

For ... UK Muslim students, learning to read in the mosque is as significant a literary experience as learning to read in school. (Rosowsky 2008, 143)

Moreover:

Learning Qur'anic literacy, and other similar liturgical literacies, do not need ... justifying, central activities such as accurate decoding, melodious reciting, extensive and faithful memorisation and artful performing should be considered as valuable cultural and linguistic resources these young people acquire and then employ, to varying extents, in their lives. (Rosowsky 2016, 158)

This does not mean, however, that young Muslims who learn how to read and memorise the Qur'an do not learn to understand the literal meaning of it: it simply implies that they are most often first expected to read and memorise the Arabic Qur'an, the understanding of the text – in a propositional sense – coming at a later stage. Instead, they learn to understand the 'drift' of key Qur'anic passages (such as Surat al Fatihah and the shorter surahs that come at the very end of the Qur'an) and they will learn the 'meaning' of the Qur'an in the sense of what it represents for Muslims, i.e. in both text and sound, God's revelation to humankind and therefore is of ultimate importance for human destiny (see Gent 2018).

It is at this point we would like to link the importance of understanding different types of literacies, pedagogies and educational settings to an intercultural approach to religious education. As we understand it, such an approach needs to take into account the religious plurality we encounter in society and school, as well as the ability to reflect pedagogically on what this complexity means. Although it is important not to over-generalise our findings, we would argue, nevertheless, that the results of this study indicate that students experience far more benefits from taking part in two types of religious education than is most often perceived by the majority society. What in many ways seem to be two mutually exclusive forms of education, in practice turn out to complement each other, at least in the experience of those who have experienced both. An intercultural way of approaching supplementary education could therefore be to learn more about different types of supplementary religious education and to explore, with students, what type of experiences they have. Of course, this does not only concern Islamic supplementary education, but also supplementary education from other religious traditions. To learn more about what religious traditions teach their children and young people tells us much about what is considered most important within a specific tradition. As indicated at the beginning of this paper, the concept of interculturality includes strong notions of hope and positive expectations: a hope and an expectation of opportunities for mutual exchange between people with different life experiences, including different forms of religious education understood in its broader sense.

Notes

1. For more on the topic of multiculturalism and immigration policy, see for example Moodod, 2010 and Meer & Moodod 2012.
2. The percentage of British Muslims who have their roots in South Asia is high: around 68%, which includes just over one million with origins in Pakistan, 400,000 in Bangladesh, and 200,000 in India (Lewis and Hamid 2018, 19). The South Asian heritage of many British Muslims is important for this study in that the theological and educational impact of the Deobandi movement – a conservative and puritan movement founded in India in 1867 – has been, and remains, significant. With their great emphasis on traditional learning, including learning to read the Qur'an and

deporting oneself in the appropriate manner (including close attention to traditional dress including that worn by children attending mosque supplementary classes), it is not surprising that this has created a style of Muslim supplementary education different to that found in Sweden. To take but one example, our research has established that, in Sweden, supplementary classes usually take place at weekends whilst the common British practice is for Muslim children and young people to attend mosque classes each day of the week, Monday to Friday, after school.

3. The notion that Qur'anic memorisation and recitation prepares students for other, secular educational work matches with the findings of a piece of research, conducted by Nawaz and Jahangir (2015) amongst college and university students in Peshawar and Rawalpindi, Pakistan, who concluded that 'Memorisation of Qur'an, including work in Islamic and other disciplines is a skill that will help scholars and students achieve foundations for the higher order scholarly work and understanding' (Nawaz and Jahangir 2015, 59).
4. In this respect, Qur'an 94:5 is often cited by Muslims: 'So truly where there is hardship there is also ease' (Haleem's translation).
5. In traditional methods of learning to read and recite the Qur'an from memory, much of the time in a class will be spent by the individual student revising the last passage committed to memory before reciting it individually to the teacher to check for accuracy (content as well as tone of recitation).
6. Hadith (plural *ahadith*) are reports of what the Prophet Muhammad said and did and attested collections of these were made in the early centuries of Islam. Together with the Qur'an and the use of reason, they form the bedrock of Muslim tradition (*sunna*).

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