



Memorization and focus: important transferables between supplementary Islamic education and mainstream schooling

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Abstract

This article presents the results of a participative study, involving a group of 27 British Muslim students aged 15–18, who were given the opportunity to reflect on the implications of having participated in two different ‘traditions’ of education: that is, Muslim supplementary education (in its various forms) and state mainstream schooling. The project was participative in that school senior managers had invited the researchers to carry out the research as part of their constant striving to identify the conditions under which students learn best. Both the design and outcomes of this research programme are presented and discussed in this article. One of the main findings is that the students experience the skills of memorization and focus as positive transferables. The findings will be discussed in terms of the concept of liturgical literacy.

Keywords Qur’anic education · Supplementary education · Educational traditions · Memorisation · Transfer of skills · Literacy

1 Introduction

Though studies of Muslim youth identity formation have been growing in recent years (Berglund 2012, 2013; DeHanas 2013; Jonker and Amiraux 2006; Panjwani 2017), research on Islamic supplementary education in Europe is in its infancy. In Britain, the growing importance of supplementary education across a range of communities in general and for the Muslim community in particular has been increasingly recognised (Cherti and Bradley 2011; Ramalingam and Griffith 2015). Furthermore, the potential of mainstream schools working with supplementary education providers has sometimes been noted:

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The more diverse Britain becomes, the more scope there is for mainstream schools to take advantage of, and benefit from, the extensive network of supplementary schools that exists in the country. These community-led educational programmes enjoy parents' support, and offer a personalised and informed learning environment that complements mainstream education (Cherti and Bradley 2011).

Little, if any, formal research appears to have been carried out on the relation between supplementary and mainstream schooling, although some small-scale research such as that carried out by Andrey Rosowsky (see below) and as the result of initiatives taken by individual school teachers (DCLG 2010, p. x) exist. Very few attempts have been made to detail the work of such supplementary school classes or the experiences and reflections of individual children and young people within them, particularly on the impact of their often daily movement between two education traditions each with their own aims, philosophical underpinning structures, pedagogies and learning processes.

As such, the research project outlined in this article makes a significant contribution to filling this knowledge gap. The question that guides our study is: *in what ways do British Muslim young people who have experienced both Muslim supplementary education and mainstream "western" education see each as impacting on the other?* In answering this, we want to bring forward both positive and negative experiences. Since one of the most significant results has been the students' claim that several *skills* can be transferred from Islamic supplementary education to mainstream education, a further aim of this article is to discuss how we can understand this result.

Theoretically, we draw on insights from the field of literacy studies, particularly the concept of 'liturgical literacy' as developed by Andrey Rosowsky. The concept contributes to formulating a creative and rationale response to the kind of polarised thinking (Islamic education 'bad'/western schooling 'good') that can often be noted.

2 A polarized view

The activities associated with traditional Muslim education, whether taking place within Muslim supplementary classes or in Muslim-organised institutions of learning such as *madrassas* or *dar ul-ulooms*, and mainstream secular schooling/education are often thought of in polarised terms: as being, so to speak, mutually exclusive. Islamic Qur'an-centred supplementary education is often characterised as primarily involving memorisation, rote-learning and person-to-person transmission of knowledge. As such, it appears to clash with the ethos and other features of mainstream secular schooling in which learning is characterised as an open, interactive process in which the student actively constructs knowledge and reaches understanding and receives answers from either the teacher or other sources (Boyle 2004; Boakaz 2012; Gent 2015, 2016). But, more than this, as the result of a mentality heavily influenced by colonial history it is not uncommon to find an assumption at work that traditional forms of Islamic education are 'inferior' to 'modern' western forms of schooling.¹

¹ Indeed, at a societal level, the power of C. H. Kane's novel, *Ambiguous Adventure* (first published 1961), lies in its fine, though disturbing, portrayal of such polarised views being worked out in the life of an individual being brought up in French Senegal society in which 'new' methods of education were seen to be superior to traditional, Qur'an-centred forms of learning. This same trajectory has been identified in many other Muslim societies, such as Yemen (Messick 1993).

The results of this research project, however—particularly the finding that there would appear to be important areas of complementarity—suggest that the relationship between these two forms or traditions of education (and by implication, other types of educational traditions too) is far more subtle, fluid and nuanced than such a polarised characterisation suggests.

Given the centrality of Qur’anic memorisation and recitation within Islamic traditions of education, traditions unfamiliar to many if not most non-Muslims, we will begin with a brief attempt to place memorisation and recitation into context within Islamic traditions and cultures as well as making a brief comment on memorisation within western culture in general.

3 Placing Qur’anic memorisation and recitation in context

Within traditional Islamic world-views, the place of knowledge (*‘ilm*) together with the individual’s duty of ‘seeking knowledge even as far as China’ (a much-quoted saying) are often claimed to be paramount. At the heart of knowledge-seeking is learning and studying the revealed knowledge as set out in the Qur’an, believed by Muslims to constitute the final message of Allah to humankind as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad over the course of the last 23 years of his life and passed on by him through recitation. Learning to read Arabic so that the Qur’an can be read as well as memorising certain passages (or, indeed, in the case of *huffaz*, committing the whole Qur’ān to memory) are central elements within traditional Islamic culture and education (Berkey 1992).

Traditional Islamic education, then, is a process that has been characterized by memorization (*tahfiz*) and recitation, as well as person-to-person transmission of knowledge (Makdisi 1981; Berkey 1992; Chamberlain 1994). *Tajwid*, the art of reciting ‘properly’, refers to following the elaborate rules governing pronunciation during recitation of Qur’anic Arabic and is a highly regarded skill in Muslim societies. According to Kristina Nelson, it is important to understand the fundamental significance of *tajwid* in that it:

... preserves the nature of a revelation whose meaning is expressed as much by its sound as by a comprehensive set of regulations which govern many of the parameters of the sound production, such as duration of syllable, vocal timbre and pronunciation (Nelson 2001, p. 14).

Given what some scholars have identified as the tendency in the “west” to privilege sight (including text) over sound (Hirschkind 2006, pp. 13–18), commentators on the Qur’an have often struggled to articulate to non-Muslims the notion that the ‘Qur’an’ in Muslim experience is not essentially a ‘book’ at all but is, rather, a sound which continues to transmit the revelation of God that was first revealed to Muhammad. As such, Michael Sells refers to Qur’anic recitation as ‘sound vision’ (Sells 1999, p. 16) and Kristina Nelson succinctly states that ‘the Qur’an is not the Qur’an unless it is heard’ (Nelson 2001, p. xiv). And, as many commentators (including: Nelson 2001; Rasmussen 2010; Gade 2004), have observed, the soundscape of a traditional Muslim community has been one in which the sound of Qur’anic recitation—as well as the periodic call to prayer—frequently fills the air.

Though there has undoubtedly been a debate within historical Islam to the present day about the value or virtue of learning to read and recite the Arabic Qur’an without understanding something of what the constituent words mean in a word-for-word propositional sense (Günther 2006), it is also true that this has been and remains the case for many

Muslims. Indeed, this can be another factor that causes some to challenge the validity of this key element of Islamic education. For, as Michael Rosen, the well-known British children's author and educational commentator, has put it: 'After all, the ultimate purpose of reading is to understand what it is you're reading, isn't it?' (Rosen 2017).

In trying to find a framework in which to appraise and respond to this kind of reaction, the authors have found the concept of 'liturgical literacy' to be particularly helpful. It highlights the linguistic world in which 'minority languages', such as Qur'anic Arabic, can be seen to have immense symbolic value for particular communities, including those who neither speak nor understand Arabic:

There is a need to recognise this symbolic function and acknowledge the intimate link between language and ethnic identity even when language is no longer used ... Knowledge of a religious classical² associated with the collective's religious heritage can also serve as an important symbolic purpose. (Rosowsky 2013, p. 68)

Furthermore, it helps us to understand that though there might be a dominant form of literacy in a particular culture there are others which have their legitimate place and function (Street 2013). This includes 'liturgical literacy', also known as 'faith literacy' (Rosowsky 2015, p. 170), which finds its home within a range of religious and ethnic traditions in which *understanding the literal meaning* of that which is memorised and recited is secondary to its historical and symbolic value and in the identity-formation of community members. Thus:

Faith literacies ... rather than being peripheral social processes and activities, take their place alongside other, more mainstream, literacies playing an important part in the social and cultural lives of those for whom faith, language and literacy are entwined and complementary. In a contemporary world, where, contrary to many expectations, religious life and practice have not withered away, but are still dynamic and playing a full role in the lives of citizens across the planet, faith literacies remain an integral part of people's identities, collectively and individually (Rosowsky 2015, p. 180).

As such, rejection out of hand of a form of liturgical literacy such as Qur'anic memorisation and recitation on the basis that they are 'meaningless' is to betray a rationalistic, western-dominated hegemony in that:

the Rolls-Royce version of reading, where accurate decoding is accompanied by attention to meaning, is not necessarily the default mode of reading in all contexts. In faith settings, where reading has other purposes, decoding is sufficient and most apt. (Rosowsky 2013, p. 76).

Thus, it is vital to recognise that, for Muslims, Qur'anic memorisation and recitation constitutes a form of literacy that is essential to ritual, devotional practice and identity formation, a form of literacy considered a practical necessity in that the Qur'an is considered a 'prayer book, lectionary and hymnal rolled into one' (Graham 1987, p. 61). As such, memorizing the Qur'an is not a kind of learning that is limited to *mere* intellectual involvement with a text but is supposed to involve 'the head' as well as 'the heart'. Instead, memorizing

² The curious term 'religious classical' was coined by Fishman (1989) and refers to a special 'additional language', *additional* to mother tongue languages, transmitted from one generation to the next eg Qur'anic Arabic.

could be understood as a way of incorporating the ‘speech of God’ into the pupils’ being and ideally making it a ‘moral compass’ and part of their physical repertoires within a community of practice (Boyle 2004). Consequently, it is not surprising that, in Islamic thought, the image of the Qur’an being ‘embodied’ (Ross 2004) is very common to the extent that it is assumed that embodying the Qur’an implies living by its norms and regulations (Halilovic 2005). In short, as Eickelman makes clear, memorising the Qur’an is not regarded as a ‘high tradition’ applicable only to a chosen few but is, rather, considered ‘an integral part of learning to be human and Muslim’ (1985, p. 63, 2007).³

Within western culture in general, the place of memorisation as a key part of classical rhetorical training and general education has been well attested (Yates 1984; Spence 1984). In her magisterial study, *Heart Beats: Everyday Life and the Memorised Poem* (Robson 2012), Catherine Robson demonstrates not only how the memorisation and recitation of poetry remained a significant feature of the state school classroom both in Britain up to the 1930s and in the United States up to the mid-twentieth century, but also how the poems chosen for memorisation and recital seeped into general cultural life and perceptions. In England, indeed, the recitation of a specific number of memorised text formed an examinable requirement for those training to be teachers or pupil teachers until the end of the nineteenth century (Moffatt’s Pupil Teachers’ Course: First Year, 137f). It is generally agreed, however, that today:

There is some ambivalence about the place of memorisation in education. A prominent theme of the progressive movement – one that has become a commonplace of modern educational discourse – is that simply using memorisation of knowledge is likely to be educationally useless. (Egan ND)

Within the national curriculum for England, however, the requirement to memorise certain poems has been recently reintroduced into the primary school curriculum (4–11) with the statutory requirement that pupils should be ‘learning to appreciate rhymes and poems, and to recite some by heart’ (DfE 2013, p. 11). Whilst some educationalists and teachers have undoubtedly interpreted this as a reactionary move, others, including those who involve many thousands of secondary school-aged students in the annual ‘Poetry by Heart’ competition (www.poetrybyheart.org.uk/), are fervent in their belief that memorisation (or ‘learning by heart’) remains a powerful means of literary engagement, appreciation and performance. Other arguments that are used to justify memorisation and recitation within general education include the observation that there is a strong link between memory and imagination, as exemplified in stories (Egan ND), and that involvement in memorisation and recitation creates a valuable ‘somatic experience’ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57bvd0c0p10>).

In terms of the research project which is the focus of this article, then, it is highly likely that the Muslim participants will have had a significant experience of memorisation and recitation through engagement with Muslim supplementary education but, on the other hand, little direct experience of such in their mainstream school learning.

³ The virtues of memorising the Qur’an are sometimes listed by Muslim writers as: the sunna of the Prophet; it is required for prayer; it is useful for *dawa*; it leads to more remembrance of God as well as to determination; it leads to deeper faith and understanding (Von Denffer 2003, p. 174).

4 Participatory design

Methodologically, this project could be understood as a type of *participative research* (Bergold and Thomas 2012), since the design was a result of discussions between researchers, teachers and students and involved a joint process of knowledge-production that led to new insights on the part of both researchers and practitioners. It was also the London school itself which invited the researchers since they were curious to learn more about the Muslim students' supplementary education: the background being that they had noticed that these students were doing very well at school and wondered if there was something in their supplementary education that brought about their high academic performance. Furthermore, the school wanted to improve its teaching and learning for *all* students whereby wondering if there was something in supplementary Islamic education that could help all students to perform better. It is generally agreed that the participation of researchers is of importance since this is meant to guarantee the focus of each research project. Thus, although researchers are consumers of the findings, perhaps even more important is the fact that participative research helps educators be more effective at what they care most about—their teaching and the development of their students (Bergold and Thomas 2012).

In order to fulfil the necessary condition of providing the time and opportunity to reflect on their experiences for the students who participated in the study, the authors worked with several senior teachers and several participating students in working out a suitable programme. What emerged was a three-part programme. Element 1 was a questionnaire to be completed by each student which would ask for basic information (correct names, age and family heritage), a series of tick boxes to indicate what types of Muslim supplementary education the student had had experience of, and two questions to encourage the students to think in the subtle, reflective/reflexive way that we were aiming for ('Thinking of what you have learned taking part in Islamic education, what things do you now know [knowledge] and can do [skills] do you value most?' and 'Thinking of what you have learned at Mountain High School (or other schools like it), what things that you now know [knowledge] and can do [skills] do you value most? Element 2 was the most complex activity in that it required students to work sequentially as individuals, in pairs, and then in larger groups and so it was agreed that a 'trial run' of this would make sense. The trial run, which was led by one of the school's senior teachers with the assistance of one of researchers, involved six Year 10 (age 14–15) volunteer students. It did indeed enable the group to clarify and hone the activities for the second element, namely:

- each individual to identify (and write on post-its) ten features that were typical of lessons that could be observed taking place around the school;
- each individual to identify ten features that were typical of Muslim supplementary classes (such as an early-evening class taking place at a local mosque);
- in groups, to compare their responses to the above questions, eliminate duplicates, and then order the 'top' nine (using a 'diamond nine' layout) from the most important to the least important;
- each group to read out their top three responses, allowing all participating students to comment or ask for clarification, as appropriate; and
- each group to agree and note down the following: three ways in which Islamic-type and school-type of education were similar and three ways different; one example of knowledge/skill/attitude gained in Islamic education that helped them at school, and vice versa.

Not only did the trial run enable the group work process to be refined, but it also led to the emergence of a helpful insight which was borne out in practice: that the whole research piece consisted less in clinically ‘abstracting’ information from the students and more in creating conditions in which they could reflect on, discuss, and articulate their educational experiences in two settings.

The last part of the programme, element 3, was a 30 min one-to-one interview with either of the two researchers.

4.1 Design into practice

The school had made information available about the project so that parental consent could be obtained for those students wanting to participate. In all, 27 students participated: 16 girls and 11 boys drawn from Years 10, 11 and 12 (that is, ages 15–17). Though the majority of students had been born in the United Kingdom (many of them third generation British Muslims), the family heritage backgrounds were varied: the majority Pakistani and Bangla Deshi but also Somali, Saudi Arabian and Iraqi. The students with the latter three family heritages had usually arrived in Britain only in recent years.

Once the purpose and structure of the questionnaire had been outlined and justified, participants were willing and able to provide background information and to give a range of imaginative answers to the two (demanding) questions which followed. During the group work, a good level of group discussion and activity was generated with the aid of diagrams that were provided to encourage in-depth involvement and scaffold thinking, and the use of post-its upon which to jot down ideas and suggestions from which to agree the best answers.

5 Results of the study

5.1 Variety of forms and types

What also became abundantly clear initially was that the Muslim students’ engagement with Islamic supplementary education revealed no one standard pattern of attendance in terms of either sequence or locus (that is, where it took place).⁴ Indeed, siblings in the same family could sometimes have markedly different trajectories through Islamic education depending on individual circumstances and dispositions. One Year 11 student, for example, contrasted his younger brother’s experience of going to mosque each weekday after school for 2 h with his own:

My brother did, I didn’t. I was more ... play station (‘Hasan’, age 16).

Asked what his parents’ response was to this, he said that:

They gave me the option and I declined, so – there were no hard feelings.

⁴ That there has always been a wide variety of ways, some more formal than others, through which Muslims could acquire an education is captured by Berkey’s repeated use of the phrase ‘the persistent informality of Islamic education’ (Berkey 1992).

The forms of Islamic education experienced included: attending weekday classes after school (and for those few who were attempting *hifz*, sometimes before school as well); at a mosque or Muslim organisation; as part of a group at one's or another person's home; attending a weekend event or classes; being taught by a tutor via Skype; and attending occasional lectures or events. Furthermore, the more institutionalized versions—such as lessons run by a mosque or a Muslim organisation (several of the girls had attended Muslim schools at some stage)—varied significantly in terms of both organization, pedagogy and the background of people running them.

The pattern of individual engagement depended on a number of factors, including: the geographical relocation of the family, sometimes internationally, during a student's childhood and adolescent years; the preferences of students in discussion with their families; the temperament of individuals; the quality of provision encountered; and the growing pressures of school life leading to students dropping some or all of their Islamic supplementary education in order to concentrate on preparing for public examinations.

5.2 Engagement with the Qur'an

Given the centrality of Qur'anic memorization within traditional Islamic education, it is not surprising that in their recollections and thinking about their experience of Islamic education, learning to memorise the Qur'an (or at least some sections of it) loomed large in the responses of the Muslim students. Some of them had begun this process as young as the age of four (interview with Safa).

The students involved in the research project had all encountered the imperative of mastering Arabic so that it could be recited and Qur'anic passages learned, with a particular emphasis on those that are recited daily during each time of set prayer (*salat*). Many could report that they had read through the entire Qur'an (always marked by family celebration) once or more times.

Basically, I was just taught the Qur'an, how to read it ... I never learnt how to understand [*sic*] it, just purely read it and finished the Qur'an. Most people, you'd find, have finished around five, six times, but I finished around three, four times ... ('Steve', age 15)

I only read it five times ... read perfect, I did pronunciation and stuff. ('Rugina', age 17)

Others reported how many of the 30⁵ standard sections (*juz*) of the Qur'an they had memorised. If early Islamic education had been fragmented, then, later on, students often reported that they had weak skills in both reading and recited Arabic. There was a spectrum of experience with memorising the Qur'an too: some showing such confidence that they had begun *hifz* but others reporting that they had found memorisation difficult (both intellectually and, in one case, emotionally) to begin with, but had become more relaxed and competent with practice.

⁵ Tradition has it that there are 30 sections to aid reciters who sometimes recite the whole Qur'an over the course of a month, particularly Ramadan (the month particularly associated with the revelation and recitation of the Qur'an).

5.3 Memorisation as a key transferable skill

But what is of particular interest is that, during the course of the research activities the students began to openly articulate what they conceived to be the positive impacts of their experience of memorisation as Muslims on their education within the mainstream school setting. For both researchers, it seemed likely from comments that were made in passing that, though the Muslim students as individuals might have previously thought that Qur'anic memorisation had positive spin-offs for other parts of their lives, they had not discussed this with others in any methodical sense before their participation in this research exercise.

For many of them, in short, memorisation was a *skill* which had transferable application. This runs counter to a negative view of Muslim supplementary education that is found amongst many mainstream school teachers and in official reports (see for example IPPR 2011).⁶ Furthermore, the students' perspectives on the benefits of Qur'anic memorization in relation to other school subjects stands in stark contrast to how memorization of religious texts and what it represents is viewed by majority society (Rosowsky 2008, p. 11).

Though some students exhibited a certain ambivalence on the matter, then, and a significant number said that they had difficulty with memorising, particularly when they had first started, most said that their experience of memorisation in Islamic education had benefitted them in school, particularly when they had to learn things in subjects like science and modern foreign languages:

last year when we had our German-speaking assessments, we had to memorise quite a lot in a different language but obviously we knew what it meant so, I managed to get A stars [i.e. the highest possible grade] in most of these ('Robb', age 16)

But also in mathematics:

Maths, for example simultaneous equations, when you memorize something it stays in your head. It's the same with maths as with Qur'an you need to memorize certain things.

('Bob', age 15)

5.4 Impact of mainstream school upon Islamic education

Many students found it difficult to tell how their mainstream education had impacted on Islamic education, possibly because this was the first time that they had compared these two traditions of education formally. Nevertheless, some answers were forthcoming. These included the suggestion that the experience of learning modern foreign languages at school benefitted from learning Arabic in a Muslim setting:

I started learning French in primary school ... and this helped me with my language, Arabic, because, I don't know, it's just language, when you learn one language it helps you with another language. ('Jim', age 15)

⁶ A report from IPPR about madrassas in the British media (2011) reflects that most articles state a negative impact in terms of educational outcome, claiming that pressures from madrasas draw attention from mainstream school subjects.

Other responses included: learning about other belief systems, teamwork/working with other people; and building up a good self-image. Particularly subtle was the suggestion that experiencing different ‘subjects’ at school enables the person to make sense of the different elements of the Muslim class curriculum:

When I went to [the mosque class] we did like *fiqh* and *hadiths* and *tawhid* and all that. So that helped me, like, I considered them as subjects so different things (‘Jim’, age 15).

A further suggestion related to tolerance:

In mosque, like, there’s various visitors like just to visit the mosque like different religion and it’s, like, some people can’t stand them ‘cos they disagree with them, like, entering the mosque. That, but for me, it’s like, it’s tolerance for, to other people too, like, respect everyone. So, definitely from school to a mosque. (‘Isabella’, age 17).

5.5 The transfer of knowledge, skills and attitudes

Given the time commitment that participating in both traditions of education (in its most straightforward form, young Muslims going on to mosque classes after school for each weekday evening for up to 2 h) involves, it is not surprising that some of the participating students said that learning how to organise yourself and your time was a skill that transferred over to school. This coupled with the notion that time spent in Islamic supplementary education could also instil a personal habit of hard work:

When I went to ... the mosque, it was two hours every weekday evening, which was quite a long time. And, obviously, it was every day so I think, as I got used to that, I sort of like, and that kind of prepared me of, like, for – even in Year 6, for SATs preparation, we had to work quite hard so I think that hard work (‘Robb’, age 16).

In terms of specific aspects of knowledge that carried over from the Islamic to the mainstream school setting, one student suggested that:

in RE you obviously learn about right and religions. So when we were learning about Islam, I had like previous general knowledge from my Islamic classes that are Islam. So I knew some of the stuff in the teaching anyways (‘Zaynab’, age 16).

A number of transferable attitudes were also suggested, such as developing the qualities of resilience and perseverance (in traditional Islamic thinking qualities associated with the Prophet Muhammad). The qualities of patience and respect were also identified by some, including respect for teachers:

There’s a verse, like, ‘respect your teachers as you respect your parents’... it puts teachers in that same position as your parents so you know like it’s a big thing to respect them. (‘Isabella’, age 17) Overall, students were able to identify a range of knowledge, attitudes and skills that, upon reflection, they conjectured could transfer from one educational setting to the other so as to benefit their overall learning. The table which follows shows the range of examples that students gave.

	Examples of what is gained in Islamic education that helps in school	Examples of what is gained in school education that helps in Islamic education
Knowledge	History; Islamic history; history of Islam; story of Adam and Eve creation story	Life skills; English reading; experiences for the future
Skills	Evaluation; the scientific information; commitment to learning; memorizing; confidence; concentration; discipline; memorization (x2); avoid distraction	Research; how to accept people; socialising/communication; importance of timing
Attitudes	Self-control; tolerance; patience; respect; positive; tolerance/respect	Respect; equality; tolerance; patience; to be polite; not to disobey

5.6 Positives and negatives of each tradition of education

Regarding the most positive features of Islamic supplementary education, answers included: that it provided guidance for life and a sense of right and wrong; there was a feeling of ‘being together’; and, it generated a positive feeling in being able to greet others in the traditional Arabic form (i.e. *wa salaam aleikum*)⁷. Criticisms included: the rush to get to class after school; it could become repetitive; and, teachers could be bossy and create a feeling of fear.

‘Zulaika’ (age 16) summarised her likes and dislikes as follows:

The thing I liked most was socializing cause when you are in an Islamic Education class you see all these people who have done things similar to you or like experiencing things similar to you so you already have like a connection with them. I also liked the fact that what we were learning ‘cos in normal school you don’t learn Arabic you learn something different to the normal curriculum. That was something I quite enjoyed. And the least, that’s the teachers being strict kind of.

Regarding best features of mainstream schooling, answers included: socialising; the opportunity to study; learning about other religions; and the inclusion of practical subjects. A particularly poignant point was made by one girl about the value to be found in diversity at school:

I’ve also learned stuff outside lessons ... and all my friends, they’re all really different and we’ve all got these different views and they teach me ... like, one of my friends, she is a Buddhist and she believes in like preserving nature and stuff and she’s taught me like how to be kinder to the environment and, like, kinder ... and so that’s helped me. (‘Amina’, age 15).

On the other hand, criticisms included: stress; examinations; students being able to listen to any kind of music (including ‘teenage music’) during revision lessons⁸; and homework. Main stream school was also criticised for favouritism, i.e. some students found that teachers were not treating all students equally.

⁷ This point led to a light-hearted conversation between interviewer and interviewee about what might be the greeting—to become a ‘traditional greeting’—appropriate to school life.

⁸ An interesting comment, of course, given the traditionally very ambivalent Islamic attitude towards music (see Nelson 2001, pp. 32–51; Berglund and Gent 2017).

5.7 Perpetuating what they had experienced in education

In one of our final interview questions, students were asked whether they had valued participating in two types of educational tradition and whether, when they themselves became parents, they would want their own children to also do so. Across the 27 students participating, there was an almost unanimous affirmative response though a significant number of students qualified this by saying that they would give their own future children some degree of choice in the matter, by having for example their own children participating in fewer days a week than they themselves had been engaged.

6 Discussion

Even though the students had had a wide variety of experiences from different types of Islamic supplementary education, it is clear that they saw the experience of moving between two educational traditions as of value. When analysing both group work and individual responses, we can see that they consider attitudes and skills to be transferable between the educational traditions more frequently than knowledge. The most striking example is the skill of memorization where what we refer to here as *liturgical literacy* is experienced as transferable to mainstream schooling thus helping students to master a variety of school subjects. It is clear that, although the discourse around mainstream education often highlights the fact that much of our knowledge is ‘googleable’ today, the students appreciate the fact that they have acquired a technique to learn by heart. Another skill that is experienced as transferable in mainstream schooling is the ability to focus, a skill that is clearly associated with liturgical literacy.

The students’ way of highlighting skills can also, of course, be understood in a Bourdieuan sense, using the concept of *capital*. When the students transfer their experience of liturgical literacy to the secular language of skills, they transmute the liturgical literacy into a form of ‘capital’: that is, something considered valuable in mainstream schooling. As such, memorization of the Qur’an, a highly regarded cultural and spiritual capital within their own Muslim tradition, transmutes into capital in the secular sphere when translated into the language of skills, which is also what is emphasized in liturgical literacy.

This study begins to remedy the lack of evidence related to Muslim children’s and young people’s direct experience of the various forms of Islamic supplementary education. It also breaks new ground in creating data related to the responses of Muslim children and young people to their experiences of partaking in both Islamic education and mainstream secular schooling. As such, it shows that the idea of Islamic and mainstream education being diametrically opposed to each other is an unhelpful over-simplification.

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