Journal of Religious Education (2022) 70:25–42
https://doi.org/10.1007/s40839-022-00164-y

Islamic Studies in Australian Islamic schools: educator voice

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Accepted: 11 February 2022 / Published online: 21 March 2022

Abstract
This paper responds to calls for renewal in Islamic schooling and education. In doing so, it provides insight into educators' views on Islamic Studies (IS) in five Australian Islamic schools, with a focus on senior years (years 10, 11 and 12). The study offers a 'dialogic alternative' of 'speaking with' rather than 'speaking for' educators in Islamic educational research, planning, and renewal within K-12 Australian Islamic schools. It privileges educators' voice and enables an insight into their experience with one of the most important and distinct features of Islamic schools – IS. Using phenomenology as a methodological framework, educators' voice was elicited through focus groups where eighteen educators provided information describing their experience with IS. The study identified "strengths" and "challenges" of IS. Strengths includes parents' desire for IS, educators' personal connection with learner, knowledge of subject-matter, autonomy in teaching IS and unity among IS educators. The challenges outweigh the strengths and include insufficient time for IS, lack of resources, absence of a clear vision leading to a tokenistic and fragmented approach to the teaching of IS, low-level respect and recognition of IS educators and more.

Keywords Islamic Studies · Educator · Australia · Pedagogy · Renewal · Faith-based school

1 Introduction

The paper is organised in the following manner: background to schools and Islamic schools in Australia; Islamic schools' renewal; Islamic Studies in the Australian context; importance of educators' voice; methodology, findings, discussion and conclusion.

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Schools in Australia include government schools (public schools), and non-government schools (also known as independent schools including faith-based schools). All schools must be registered with the state or territory education department and are subject to Australian government requirements. As a condition of government funding, "Independent schools are engaged in the implementation of the Australian Curriculum, developed under the auspices of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)" (Independent Schools Australia, 2021). Across Australia, school education is divided into: Primary school (Runs for seven or eight years, starting at Kindergarten/Preparatory through to Year 6 or 7); Secondary school (Runs for three or four years, from Years 7 to 10 or 8 to 10); and senior secondary school (runs for two years, years 11 and 12) (Study Australia, 2021).

Australian Islamic schools were first established/founded in 1983 and have grown since then. Although part of the independent sector, unlike say Catholic schools they are not governed or administered as a total system, nor are they overseen by an authoritative or central Governing Body. Though not homogenous in their approach or vision, one of their main purposes is faith formation. Hence, the importance of Islamic Studies (IS henceforth). IS typically includes teaching of the Qur'an, hadith, biography of Prophet Muhammad (*Sīrah*), morals (*Akhlāq*), basic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and history of Islam) (Shakeel 2018, Ahmed 2016). IS is not considered a Key Learning Area (KLA—The 8 key learning areas are English, Mathematics, Science, Health and Physical Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, the Arts, Technologies, and Languages) in the Australian National Curriculum and therefore must compete for time and place in an already congested school curriculum. Thus, Islamic schools end up allocating only one or two classes per week for IS with an average of 45 minutes per class. Research focusing on Islamic schools and related areas is growing, but is very limited when examining educators' voice and IS. Examining the voice of Islamic schools' stakeholders is part of a renewal process that has been emerging since the 1990s, which witnessed a steady but consistent effort to examine and argue for 'overhaul' (Wagner 1987) or 'renewal' (Abdalla, Chown and Abdullah, 2018) of Islamic schools and Islamic education.

1.1 Islamic schools' renewal

Renewal (Arabic—*tajdīd*) relates to the concept of "traditional renewal" (*tajdīd al-turāth*)," best defined as "dealing with the old tradition as a subjective reality that is subject to renewal while preserving firmly established roots" (At-Tayyeb 2014). The focus is on renewal and *not* reforming of the 'tradition.' The former denotes recognition of a rich Islamic education (and otherwise) heritage that responds to the demands of time and place. This is consistent with Muslim scholars' understanding that except for the explicit texts—or "firmly established roots," Islamic education is not static, immutable, or unchangeable but responds to changing social, political, economic, intellectual, educational, and political circumstances (See for example Abdalla, 2012; Basha 1990). It does not mean altering, discarding or replacing the fundamental tenets of the Islamic tradition (here we refer specifically to Sunni Islam), or – as Sahin wrongly assumed, "to be operating within a specific epistemology of 'Islamic revival' that is interested in the literal recovery of an imagined essence of Islamic pedagogy preserved by the past, pious ancestors, *the salaf*, in the Muslim tradition" (Sahin 2018, p.2).

For our purposes, renewal means that Islamic education can be subjected to examination and re-examination of *what* is to be taught, *why* and *how* it should be taught. This would aide in bridging the "significant disconnect between Islamic educational theory and Islamic schooling practice, towards articulating and enacting a model of educational practice that is distinctly "Islamic" (Memon 2021). Fundamental to this renewal is the voice of *all* stakeholders, including educators, learners, parents, school leaders and academics.

Abdalla, Chown and Abdullah (2018) argued that as Islamic schools in Western contexts have negotiated or passed the establishment phase, they must next embrace a period of renewal as defined above. Memon, Alhashmi and Abdalla's (2021) book on *Curriculum renewal for Islamic education* provided possible pathways for "curriculum renewal aspirations of educators globally in schools that teach Islam" which was aimed at educators in Islamic education and academic researchers who 'aspire to renew curriculum through research and practice related to "education *into* religion."' They demonstrated "why and how it is necessary to redesign Islamic Education curriculum in the K-12 sector globally" (p.3) and provided practical example of how to do that in KLA such as science, history and several Islamic disciplines such as *fiqh* and Quranic studies.

The proposed renewal challenges Islamic schools to no longer consider Islam solely as a subject of study [i.e., Islamic Studies] that is isolated from the rest of the school. Rather, to approach it as a pedagogy in the broader sense that provides theoretical understandings of what education means, for what purpose, and to what end. Islam in Islamic schools would then cease to be reduced to an addendum or the sole locus of IS but enacted across distinct education praxis by all educators in an Islamic school. This does not minimise the importance of IS, but it may necessitate creative renewal, potentially re-aligning the aims and aspirations and the place and purpose of the learning area within emerging distinct models of educational practice in Islamic schools.

1.2 IS in the Australian context

Research on IS in the Australian context is new, with limited number of literature on the subject. What follows is a review of all existing literature on IS in the Australian context.

In 2018, Diallo examined the importance of IS (focusing on Quran and Arabic studies only) from an Islamic Worldview. Using questionnaires (self-administered) and face-to-face interviews (tape-recorded) with a sample of sixty-one participants from Darwin (not a school setting but community-based *madrasa*) and Adelaide (students, teachers, religious leaders and school and community leaders, and general members of the Muslim community). He found that "Australian Muslims show strong attachment to IS as a means to develop an Islamic worldview constructed on Qur'anic teachings and prophetic traditions." The study did not explore other areas of IS or stakeholders' perspectives on the content and pedagogy of IS.

Abdalla (2018) explored the strengths and challenges of IS from learners and educators' perspectives at selected Australian Islamic schools. Data was collected from forty-four participants: Ten IS coordinators, fifteen IS educators and nineteen senior learners (years 10,11 and 12). A key finding was the absence of an IS curriculum and syllabus in Islamic schools leading to lack of overarching approach encompassing aims, goals, plans, decision-making process, procedures, and vision for IS. The result, according to IS educators is chaos and confusion in implementation of IS, and a lack of systematic approach to IS subjects making

it difficult to teach. Learners argued that IS was not meeting their needs as young Australian Muslims because it was not always relevant to their lives and decontextualised.

Building on that, Abdalla, Chown and Memon (2020) published their findings into senior secondary learners' views on IS in three large Australian Islamic schools. Using phenomenology as a methodological framework, learner voice was elicited through focus groups where seventy-five learners (years 10, 11, and 12) provided information describing their experience with IS. The findings demonstrated that senior learners recognise the importance of IS but have identified multiple challenges with its content and pedagogy. Learners argued that the content is often irrelevant to their contemporary lives, repetitive, decontextualised, biased and boring.

Following from these important findings, in 2021, Abdalla examined the content of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) in four IS curricula frameworks. Largely, Abdalla found that the content was reflective of the challenges identified by senior learners in previous studies (Abdalla et al, 2020).

In the study by Abdalla et al. (2020), senior learners expressed admiration and respect for their IS teachers but argued that their pedagogy is disengaging leading to misbehaviour and lack of attention in the classroom. It is important to note here that IS teachers are religiously qualified (from recognised higher education Islamic institutions, *madrasa* or *darul uloom)*, but most do not have teacher registration or training. Those who have undergraduate qualifications from recognised Islamic institutions such as Al-Azhar University in Egypt can enrol in postgraduate education/teaching programs at Australian universities to become registered teachers. Graduates from madrasas such as Darul Uloom Zakariyya in South Africa are not recognised with an under-graduate equivalency by Australian Higher Institutes and would have to complete an Australian recognised undergraduate teaching degree to become registered teachers. This is often a difficult path for IS educators, either to continue to teach IS under a special authority for an unregistered person to teach as a Religious/Spiritual Leader or the like across Australia, or to self-fund and negotiate part-time study alongside full-time work as an IS teacher. Often the dilemma is unfairly squared on the shoulders of IS teachers, as a criticism, without a recognition that either as a field, or as individual school communities, we have not yet sought or certainly found a sustainable and viable proactive solution. Discussions with school leaders across IS have impressed on us that for some schools, the easier option is to maintain the status quo and avail from special authorities to teach. An investment in pathways to teacher registration for IS teachers is so far beyond school priorities, given the requisite supports of time and cost.

In the absence of teaching qualifications, it has been argued that IS educators' pedagogy is "based on listening, rote memorisation and regurgitation…," and "tend to view learning as acquiring and accumulation of information, which mostly involves memorisation, recall and reproduction processes" (Ayse and Wright 2019). This approach "does not meet the needs and expectations of young Muslims today due to it being so deeply instilled in the traditional-historical form of Islam" (Selçuk and Valk, 2012) and "fails to engage with the diverse historical, sectarian and cultural understandings of the Islamic scripture that has a significant bearing on contemporary Muslims' identity formation" (Ayse and Wright 2019). To some extent, our previous learner voice studies confirm this, and while these arguments may be valid, there is a need to understand IS from the perspective of IS educators so that we understand their own experiences and perspectives. That is, there needs to be a 'dialogic alternative' of 'speaking with' rather than 'speaking for' educators in Islamic schools. This

paper aims to do this by examining educators' perspectives on IS in selected Australian Islamic schools.

2 Why educator voice matters?

Some reasons for educators' voice include: (1) personal purposes, which are 'associated with the action research and reflexive practitioner movements'; (2) political purposes, which stem from 'concerns for democracy, equality and the transformation of society'; and (3) school improvement purposes, which 'has evolved in conjunction with a political desire for evidence-based practice with a focus on student outcomes' (Leat, Reid and Lofthouse, 2015). Other reasons include: (1) educators' learning and affective response, which indicates that sustained and iterative engagement with research projects primarily yield positive affective outcomes for teachers, both personally and practically; (2) trust and collaboration, where supportive networks, key figures, and climate in general are integral to sustaining educator engagement in education research, and encourage confidence in having their views and voices heard through the process; (3) educators' agency – which is tied to the theme of trust and collaboration – suggests that in the school context, agency 'does not lie predominantly in the individual but in the context, so that agency is something that the individual achieves rather than something they possess' (Ibid, p.276).

From an Islamic worldview (mainly derived here from Islam's two primary sources – the Qur'an and Hadith), educators' voice is necessary for several reasons: (1) educators' moral duty toward learners, where education is considered an inalienable right of the learner (Based on several hadiths including the narration in Sunan Ibn Majah, number 224, 'Seeking knowledge is a duty upon every Muslim); (2) education is a trust (*amanah*) that ought to be fulfilled in the best possible manner, and for which the society, schools and educators are accountable before God (See for example the hadith narrated by Bukhari, number 7138, "Everyone is a guardian and is responsible for those under their care…"); (3) educators' duty of care toward the learner (for example, Bukhari narrates that Mi'qal b. Yasar said the Prophet Muhammad said, 'Anyone who is entrusted over the affairs of [any] people, and betrays the trust before their death, paradise becomes forbidden for them'); (4) mutual consultation (*shura*) (See Quran 42:39 and 3:159) is an important Prophetic practice that fosters inclusivity of, and respect for, all stakeholders and in this case the educators.

The Islamic tradition (including the two primary sources and other scholarly writings) is replete with evidence about the role and significance of educators. This is derived from several references in the Quran, not the least of which the first of the Quranic revelations, 'Read! In the name of your Lord who created…who taught by [means of] the pen, who taught human what he did not know' (96: 1–5). Prophet Muhammad has been described and praised in the Quran as an educator" (3:164) and in the Hadith ('God did not send me to be harsh, or cause harm, but He has sent me to educate and facilitate.' Narrated in Sahih Muslim, Hadith number 1478). The eminence and esteem given to educators in Islam was aptly captured in the poem by the renowned Egyptian poet Ahmad Shawqi (1870–1932), who praised them thus, 'Stand for the educator, give him full honour and respect. Indeed, an educator could have been a messenger [of God]. Can there be any person nobler than the one who builds and nurtures souls and minds?' (Laher, 2018).

The high esteem Islam bestows on educators warrants the inclusion of their voice in whole-of-school renewal, and specifically in renewal attempts of IS.

3 Methodology

We utilised a qualitative, phenomenological methodology because it considers 'the meanings and interpretation of social phenomena and social processes in the particular contexts in which they occur'(Maggie in Jupp 2006); aims to 'capture the essence of the experience' and gain an understanding of 'how the participants make sense of their everyday world,' and 'attempts to understand the essence of a phenomenon from the perspective of participants who have experienced it'(Eddles-Hirsch 2015). Phenomenology allowed us to provide descriptions of 'how' educators ('the participants') experienced IS rather than 'any preconceived perception the researcher may have of the phenomenon being studied.' This allows us ('the researchers') to 'listen and record the participants' description of an experience in an open and naïve manner' (Ibid, p.252). We then uncovered 'structural themes sourced from these textual descriptions,' helping us in developing an understanding of the 'essence of the phenomenon being researched' that is not exhaustive but represent a 'perspective at a particular time and place' (Ibid, p.252).

3.1 This study

This study aims to explore educators' experience ('lifeworld') with IS from their own perspective and not that of the outsider. Educators include teachers and coordinators of IS. The research questions that guided this study were open-ended questions to "offer respondents an opportunity to provide a wide range of answers. Because some of these answers will be unexpected, they will suggest follow-up questions in person-to-person interviews" (Hyman and Sierra 2016). Hence, the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the strengths of IS at Australian Islamic schools from the perspective of IS educators?

RQ2: What are the challenges of IS at Australian Islamic schools from the perspective of IS educators?

3.2 The school sites

Educators were selected from five Islamic schools across five states. These schools are co-educational, independent K-12 schools and are similar in many ways. Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic context of these schools.

As evident in Table 1, the only major difference between these schools is the number of enrolments, where School D has the smallest numbers.

Table 2 provides a summary of number of educators in each focus group at the time of data collection:

While focus groups require a large sample, this was not possible in this study because these were the actual number of IS educators in each school. School C, D, and E represented one school with multiple campuses, and we divided their educators into two focus groups. Therefore, the total of focus groups is four (4).

Table 1 School context overview (2021) [Source https://www.myschool.edu.au/]

Demographic context	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E
School sector	Independent (non-government)	Independent	Independent	Independent	Independent
School type	Co-educational	Co-educational	Co-educational	Co-educational	Co-educational
Year range	Prep – 12	K-12	PP-12	R-12	Prep – 12
Location	Major cities	Major cities	Major cities	Major cities	Major cities
Enrolments	1000+	1500+	1500+	400+	900+
Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA)	1075	1085	996	998	1024
Language background other than English	91%	98%	98%	99%	97%
Indigenous [a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent] students	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Boys	47%	46%	48%	49%	47%
Girls	53%	54%	52%	51%	53%

Table 2 Sample size—Number of educators at years 10,11 and 12

School A	School B	School C	School D	School E	Total
4	2	6	2	4	18

3.3 Data collection

After securing ethics approval data was then collected from focus groups, which provides rich participants' descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation. Data was collected from all schools between 2018 and 2019. Initial discussions with school leaders (Principals, Deputy-Principals, some Board Members) were conducted via email and in person. This was followed up with visits to discuss the project with educators. This process enhanced the trust that already existed between the research team and the schools.

Given the focus on educator voice, enough time was spent at the beginning of every focus group to explain the nature of the project, why it was conducted, expected benefits from participating in the research, and how the data will be used, and any risks involved. Time was also allocated to respond to any questions or concerns. Participants were also provided with information sheets and consent forms. All schools and participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the research at any time without fear of any risk to them or their schools. Researchers' contact details were also made available in case students needed further information or wished to provide feedback on the project. Participants were informed that their identities will be kept confidential when the data is analysed and shared in the form of research publications. We allocated one hour per focus group knowing that the first 10–15 minutes will be used to explain the project and answer any questions.

3.4 Organising, analysing, and synthesising data

First, data was transcribed verbatim and when reading focus groups' transcripts we engaged in the phenomenological process of 'epoche,' also known as 'bracketing whereby the researcher purposefully sets aside any preconceived knowledge or everyday beliefs he or she regards might be used to explain the phenomena being investigated' (Eddles-Hirsch 2015, p. 251). Reading each transcript, we were involved in the phenomenological reduction process of horizontalization of the data (p. 255) to look for themes in their description of IS. Meanwhile, we were receptive to every statement of every participant's experience and giving each comment equal value. Themes that addressed the research questions were cut out of the transcript and pasted on a table in a separate document. This ensured that educator voice was preserved and not altered (Swain, Pendergast, and Cumming 2018). We then reviewed the themes listed for each participant to ensure that there were no overlapping or repetitive statements. We then gathered core themes from all participants and formed composite textual descriptions for each of the schools. We then amalgamated the composite textual descriptions representing the essences of the phenomenon under study from the perspective of the participant.

4 Findings

Overall, thematic content analysis of the data revealed multiple themes, each of which will be explored with educators' insights about IS. These themes can be broadly categorised under "strengths" and "challenges" of IS.

4.1 Category 1: strengths

4.1.1 Theme 1: Parents send their children to Islamic school because it offers IS and an Islamic education

All IS teachers argued that the parents are attracted to Islamic schools because of IS and what it can offer to their children. This is consistent with all the literature on parents' motives for choosing Islamic schools. This was expressed by all participants and is well captured by this educator:

This is a strength of the IS Department. The parents send them here for this mainly. And we hear it from the parents, from management, we hear it all over, that parents send them here for the fact that they expect them to learn about Islam. So, that is one of the biggest strengths of the whole department. It is one of the main things.

4.1.2 Theme 2: Knowledge and experience of IS educators

IS educators have a combined wealth of Islamic knowledge and experience in fields such as Qur'anic studies, Hadith, history, Prophetic biography and more:

I think also as an [IS] department, among us and some of the sisters, we have a lot of experience here in this school particularly. Maybe others have in other places, but there is a lot of experience in this school. That is a strength as a department, where you have people that have been in the system for a very long time, so they know.

4.1.3 Theme 3: Flexibility in teaching IS

Most educators recognised that their schools provide them a certain level of autonomy in teaching IS, as they do not have to adhere to prescriptive or policy mandated features of the Australian Curriculum:

And maybe a strength is that we are given the liberty to do what we feel we need to do. There is no real restriction, as in you have to do this or do that, you know what I mean? It is like you've been given the reigns to teach them IS. We have a program and all that, but as far as what you need to do, there is no real restrictions. So, it's quite a strength, because you are given the opportunity to go and do what you feel you need to do for the benefit of the students.

4.1.4 Theme 4: Availability of teaching resources

Four of the schools in this study are well equipped with reasonable classrooms, whiteboards and/or smart boards, projectors, and decent size libraries (although IS resources are often limited in these libraires):

Another strength for the school is the resources, like the interactive whiteboard, being able to search the internet—although I would like to have more computers in the classroom, maybe the kids can be involved in searching during the period—but when I see other schools, I think we are so lucky to have that many resources.

4.1.5 Theme 5: Personal connection and engagement with learners—trust

Overall, IS educators communicate comfortably with their learners especially in matters related to faith, where IS teachers arguably invoke a nuanced form of pedagogy and council and have open discussions. That is, educators are generally approachable and liked by their learners. This was expressed thus by an educator:

I feel like some classes that we go into—I cannot speak for everybody—but I would find miscommunication between teachers and some of the students, and because we come from an Islamic perspective, the students are sort of calmer when I talk, when we talk where they are concerned. So that's another strength that we can provide.

4.1.6 Theme 6: Unity among IS educators

We found that IS educators often feel left out and isolated from the rest of the school. In one of the large schools IS educators told us that they feel like 'refugees' in their own school because of this isolationism. This may have created a strong bond among themselves as expressed here:

I think personally, one thing I have noticed in all the years that I've been here—this is my fourth year—is the unity of the department itself, as in the members of the IS department. I've found we get along very easily, not to say that we don't disagree among each other, but even though we have these disagreements, I think we're strong, we're pretty gelled together. Even though we have our different opinions, but I think that's one of our strengths.

It should be noted also that IS teachers don't generally feel comfortable in mixed staffrooms and are typically placed in their own – this circumstance leads to poorer quality space and severely reduces the on-the-run collegiality that other educators enjoy in the fleeting opportunities to connect with colleagues in busy school routines.

4.2 Category 2: Challenges

4.2.1 Theme 1: IS lacks purpose, vision and is fragmented

A repeated theme across all schools is that IS does not have clear aims, lacks a clear vision, is tokenistic and fragmented. IS educators often expressed frustration that IS does not seem to have the same value as other subjects:

There is a very general aim, where it exists if we agree on something. There is a very general aim, very general; it is in a broad sense. However, if you want to talk about specific aims, be it short-term goals and long-term goals, it is not very clear yet. We can see what we want to achieve, I believe—but if you do not put into writing, as in 1, 2, 3, 4 points into a specific plan, where you know exactly what is your vision, what you are aiming at achieving, where you can hold yourself and others accountable to it—we do not have that yet.

4.2.2 Theme 2: Lack of IS curriculum relevant to learners

Educators expressed concerns that there is no curriculum for IS and most of what's being taught may not be relevant to learners. In the absence of an IS curriculum, educators create own physical teaching resources (booklets) from bits of information to aid student learning (which, of course is appropriate but not sufficient). This is what several educators said:

Much of the IS curriculum is not relevant for high school students (high school-specific).

Books do not cover contemporary issues; decontextualised; Books are not entirely relevant for Australian students; Lack of practical teaching of Islam; Does not equip students for the real world; Booklets being created from bits of information for teaching.

Shallow or surface teaching of Islam. Focus on externalities only. Not enough focus on essence of Islam in the lives of students – or the internal and more significant dimension of Islam.

Regarding the IS curriculum—when I came in, I just jumped in the middle, not knowing what the curriculum is. I was given a book, but to me, that's not a curriculum. There are no activities, no learning outcomes or lesson objectives, or anything like that. That was one of the challenges I faced—I had to improvise with my teaching material, I had to prepare everything from scratch. There's very little that you can do with the textbook that's provided.

While schools did not have an IS curriculum for years 11 and 12, some relied on imported curricula for years 7–10.

4.2.3 Theme 3: Insufficient time and resources for IS

We have found that due to the demand of implementation of the national curriculum schools allocated one or two hours for IS. In at least two schools IS was not provided for year 12 learners. Educators believed that the allocated time is insufficient leading to the perception that IS is not as important as schools claim. This finding is also consistent with learners' feedback in earlier research.

Another point with timetabling is that we don't teach IS or Qur'an in the early morning. The other classes have that period, so by the time we come there, the children have been there over hours, and believe me, it's so hard for the children to then sit with you for another hour.

4.2.4 Theme 4: Class size too large and limited number of IS educators

Generally, we found class size for IS to range between 20 and 30 students. But in at least one case the class size reached 80 due to insufficient number of educators and time for IS.

4.2.5 Theme 5: Undue pressure on IS educators to perform better

Across all schools we found that IS teachers feel they are under heavy pressure to be the standard bearers of Islamic values/ethos of the school:

When I was discussing with one of our admin staff about IS, he told me, 'You're the people who stand at the pulpit, you should do this and this and this'—he said, 'you people should give a good example, you should start getting involved more'. I was shocked because

I never thought someone would come to me and tell me what to do—teachers, like anyone, should all do the same thing. Because pedagogy involves everything. As bad as I could be, someone else can be good—being an IS teacher doesn't make me perfect. We make mistakes, we're wrong, we do all the same things. And this is the mentality that is governing the school.

Instead, they argued that the Islamic ethos is the responsibility of all staff and more broadly, all members of the school community, not just IS teachers.

4.2.6 Theme 6: Value, place, and recognition of IS

Several educators have lamented at the low-level respect and recognition of IS educators (specifically Imams), and that they are not afforded appropriate adab-respect (i.e. compared to community expectations and Islamic norms). For example, entering classrooms and observing/evaluating IS educators (e.g., a teacher questioned as to why they were sitting down in front of students) – question the value of an authoritative/evaluative (compliance) approach over a culture of practice and growth; Space and presence of IS educators – current staff rooms / spaces are not befitting, giving the impression that IS educators are not valued (despite the importance of IS). One of the teachers summed this up succinctly:

…I'm really interested in knowing why we are here, why Islam is not achieving what it should achieve. So, I run many discussions with the girls about how they perceive the… and why they're not practicing and all these things. And one of the girls – she mentioned something – she said 'look at the [school] report. Look at our report and look where IS is.

When we asked, "how do you see Islam or the teaching of IS in comparison to the other subjects – where does it sit?" the answer was, "it does not have the same value [as other subjects]," and this:

In IS, after year 10, there is no more assessment after year 10 so we assess the student up to year 10 and this is because of the time – because we teach one hour per week for – in year 10 and year 12, one hour per week. How much can you cover in one hour? If you have a Q and A session, the hour will go, so you have – you cannot reflect on the – on content anymore.

Another educator said:

I even must vent to the children that what we have and what we focus on is more important than your marks, your content [inside], and your knowledge even. So, sometimes when we leave, the other teacher will come in and pretty much just – the whole thing will be flipped so they are focusing on [academic] content, do not worry about who [you] are as a student. As long as your marks are excellent…so, that's very tricky on us because if you're a good person, if you have a good character and that character is instilled in you when you get to high school you will keep that and even if you do make mistakes, you'll always come back to that….

4.2.7 Theme 7: Specialisations/priority areas of the school

In some schools, there was a concern that certain roles are filled by IS educators because they have been at the school the longest, or because they have the highest subject-specific knowledge. It was suggested that roles should be based on skills, expertise, and suitability to more clearly defined roles. For example, some IS educators in current roles did not appear

to fully understand curriculum, pedagogy, or assessment, and in a few cases, language was problematic and understanding of context limited.

4.2.8 Theme 8: Learning environments/ecologies

Several educators across all schools raised concerns about issue of classroom learning environments and ecologies being inappropriate and dysfunctional. On several campuses IS classrooms are dirty and disorganised. In most schools, IS teachers travel across classrooms – they do not have their own. They are entering someone else's space.

5 Discussion

One of the main reasons parents send their children to Islamic schools is for faith formation and character building, making IS the more significant. Therefore, understanding the perspectives of IS educators is essential and paying heed to their voice is vital for any renewal process.

Some of the key findings articulated by IS educators include there is a clear dichotomy between IS and the rest of the school; absence of clear aims and outcomes for IS; it's given minimal importance; disjointed; and classifying IS as a single entity with no distinct disciplines or areas of study (e.g., *fiqh*, Qur'an, *Sīrah*, *Tarīkh*) is problematic. Further, there are inadequate resources for IS (as compared to other key learning areas); poor pedagogical approaches; limited planning across the school for IS; the absence of relevant and contextual IS curriculum that meets the needs of learners; confusion about the *broader role* of IS in facilitating a holistic approach to teaching 'Islam' across the school or attaining the 'Islamic aims' of the school; and educators are not commonly provided the professional learning time and space to think innovatively about their educational practice.

It is our view that many of these challenges are a result of the absence or undeveloped faith-based Islamic school model (both content and pedagogy), which has led to several ramifications that impact on IS, and the ability of schools to realise the full potential of IS departments.

There are several assumptions that are reducing the capacity of IS from focusing on the aims and objectives, and the areas in need of attention within IS departments:

a. The false notion that it is the driver of the "Islamic" across the whole school.
b. That it represents the "faith" appendment to the school.

The permeation of the "Islamic" should be viewed as a whole-school effort that is beyond a single department and is not limited to the teaching of 'Islamic content' sprinkled across an otherwise standardised approach to curriculum.

Similarly, an Islamic school is one that *manifests* a faith-based model that shapes the vision, philosophy, and aims of its education. IS must not viewed as the faith *appendment* to a school that otherwise operates outside of a faith-based framework (For example, "Catholic Schools in South Australia utilise a Religious Education Framework entitled *Crossways*, which It supports the integration of faith, life and culture and provides a clear curriculum framework for the development of teaching and learning within the Key Learning Area of

Religious Education") (Catholic Education South Australia, 2021). It would be difficult for the IS Department, in collaboration with the school's executive, to make necessary decisions and subsequent strategic planning in the absence of the broader faith-based (Islamic) school model, and the aims and objectives for the whole-school. Until this model has been at least conceptualised, it is difficult to renew efforts within IS.

Islamic schools could consider investing in a formalised process (i.e., time allotment/loading consideration/resourcing) to develop/renew the vision, aims and direction for their IS department, in consultation with key stakeholders, including the IS Head of Department (HOD), educational leaders, IS educators and coordinators, learners, parents, and IS/educational experts. This should be captured within an IS department's three year Annual Operational Plan (AOP) which: articulates the vision, aims, goals, targets, indicators, priority areas; assigns necessary budget supports in accordance with the AOP aims/goals/targets/priorities; and is aligned and embedded within the schools' strategic plan.

Schools could also consider a formalised (i.e., time allotment/loading consideration/resourcing) collaborative planning process (centring IS educators and professional colleagues/partners/educational experts) focused on:

1. renewal/re-design of the IS curriculum framework (i.e., front section—philosophical orientations and structural pillars of the framework – rationale, vision (for learning), aims, structure, descriptors, capabilities etc.);
2. alignment of assessment with the rationale, vision, aims, etc. above (i.e., after conceptualising principles for high quality authentic assessment for IS and innovative exemplars as to what this could/should look like, allowing for co-design with learners); and
3. renewal/re-design of the IS curriculum framework (i.e., scope and sequence—after assessment has been completed i.e., backward map or backward by design approach).

Further, for everyone to have access to the faith vision for education broadly, and learning specifically, a faith-based pedagogy is essential for all educators (i.e., an Islamic pedagogy as in Catholic pedagogy in Catholic schools, Aboriginal pedagogies in Aboriginal schools) (For more details, see Memon 2021). An Islamic pedagogy would aide in creating a common vision for learning, revamped assessment, and curriculum framework, engage in creative renewal, redesign and realignment of IS (necessitating a rethink of text-book heavy approach, standardisation of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, and reliance on testing).

Other faith-based independent schools, such as Catholic schools, structure key appointments within their schools to uphold faith, as well as appointments responsible for Catholic Studies as a KLA. The faith appointments can include Rectors/leaders who preside over the school's religious/faith domain (such as the newly appointed Director of Faith and Australian Islamic identity at Malek Fahd Islamic School in Sydney, Australia), Chaplains who oversee a faith-informed Pastoral Care role, and Catholic studies teachers who manage curriculum and other KLA related responsibilities.

In addition to these roles, there is the added issue of teacher registration, and commensurate pedagogical and curriculum knowledge and skills for all teachers in the IS department. Therefore, there is a need for on-going professional learning of IS educators to enhance their pedagogical skills and ability to contextualise IS in ways that are relevant to their learners; and on-going professional learning of non-IS educators to enhance their understanding of the meaning, purpose and intended outcomes of Islamic education/schooling. This should

lead to formulation of pedagogical approaches and content delivery that involves educators thinking broadly and deeply [about Islam] using skills, behaviours, and dispositions such as reason, logic, resourcefulness, imagination, and innovation at school and in their lives beyond school.

Second, there is a problem of classifying IS as a single entity with no distinct disciplines or areas of study. There needs to be a recognition that IS is *overarching* and includes *distinctive disciplines* including the sciences of the Qur'an and Hadith ('*Ulum al Qur'an* and '*ulum al-Ḥadīth*), *Fiqh* (jurisprudence), '*Aqāid* (Creed), *Akhlāq* (ethics/morals), *Tārīkh* (history), and *Sīrah* (biography of the Prophet). It is unhelpful to suggest that these are strands of a single banner (i.e., IS), rather than separate and distinct disciplines or subjects (that overlap). For example, in the Australian Curriculum Humanities and Social Sciences (HaSS) is inclusive of History, Geography, Civics and Citizenship, Economics, and Business. HaSS, however, has a larger time allocation, more resources, and specialised teacher training. This is not the case for IS at Islamic schools.

Islamic schools have a cohort of IS educators who are trained in a number of these disciplines, and this strength can be capitalised on. Of course, we recognise that time is a constraint and how difficult it is to allocate more time for IS. Therefore, Islamic schools need to consider the following:

1. Can *Fiqh*, *Aqāid, Akhlāq*, *Tarīkh*, *and Sīrah* be integrated across scope and sequences for grade levels?
2. Could they be integrated across curriculum via an Islamic integration project – thereby reducing the learning intentions and focus within IS?
3. Can schools provide learning support to IS educators/classes, given the very high demands for differentiation?
4. Is the overarching aim of IS about 'teaching Islam' or assisting students to 'learn to live as Muslims'?

Answering these questions will help schools determine the future direction of their IS.

6 Conclusion and recommendations

Australian Islamic schools continue to grow and play a significant role in the lives of Australian Muslims. Having surpassed their establishment phase, they must embrace renewal and embark on the phase towards distinction that can meet the aims of Islamic schooling and demands of life-long learning. Educators, of course, play a significant role in this renewal.

Islamic schools could also strategically invest in extra IS staff versed in traditional Islamic sciences, with undergraduate/postgraduate qualifications in other academic disciplines (ideally in education), so: (1) they are more readily able to contextualise the IS curriculum and enact responsive/innovative/faith pedagogies; (2) and/or, so they can transition sooner and more easily into recognised education degree/qualifications (teacher registration, such as via a Master of Teaching).

Islamic schools could develop and implement a formal professional mentoring/learning plan and approach (intent: growth and practice culture and **not** evaluative or connected to retention) for enthusiastic young IS teachers to support:

1. development of existing IS educators (advance IS educators through early career, proficient, highly proficient and lead educator career junctures as per the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) Professional Standards); and
2. avail from the professional experience and expertise of senior educators in other learning areas in mentoring IS educators (increasing understanding of IS across schools; enhancing the professional efficacy of IS educators and increasing the potential for cross curricula understandings).

Islamic schools could prioritise and invest in high quality teacher training/professional learning to ensure highly developed and responsive pedagogical practices are the norm (a whole-school approach), including in IS classrooms. In the case of IS educators, this would involve:

1. Professional learning (PL) that prepares them for educational practice (addresses gaps), focusing on IS own existential classroom challenges that allows them to access, understand, and connect with whole-school professional development (PD)/PL (educational metalanguage, understanding of Australian Curriculum, pedagogy, and quality assessment).
2. PD and PL along with all other staff (NB. message that PD does not relate to IS department sends the wrong message, impacts on educator efficacy, and compromises the value of IS educators and IS); and
3. tailored PD and PL that is practical, relevant, and IS specific that supports learners learning to live as functional Muslims.

Islamic schools could also address shortfalls in IS staff spaces as well as learning environments and ecologies (aligning with the newly articulated vision for learning), so that: teachers can feel valued, and for increased productivity; to facilitate engagement with learners (classrooms and learning spaces) and other educators and colleagues (staffrooms, common areas and professional spaces).

Funding The authors did not receive support from any organization for the submitted work.

Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions

Declarations

Conflicts of interest/Competing interests (include appropriate disclosures): The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Ethics approval Ethics was approved by University of South Australia's Ethics Committee. Protocol number 0000036199.

Consent to participate All participants were provided with a consent form to sign before commencing interviews.

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