

# **Introductory commentary: Lived experiences of qur'anic schooling in Scandinavia**

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## **1 Introduction**

Reading the contributions to this special issue, it is striking how little research has hitherto been conducted on qur'anic schooling and Qur'an faith literacy practices in Scandinavia, despite it being well-known that the Qur'an schools constitute important religious and social meeting points for many Muslim faith members (e.g., Risenfors, Gurdal, & Sorbring, 2011). In all of the Scandinavian countries, numerous children and adolescents regularly attend qur'anic schooling from a very young age. As argued by Day and Rogaly (2014), shared Islamic faith literacy practices and participation in qur'anic schooling thus contribute to creating a sense of social belonging and coherence for many faith members. Despite this being the case, we still know very little about faith members' lived experiences of qur'anic schooling. This lack of attention in the research seems to be a global rather than a local phenomenon. For example, Moore (2011) claims that qur'anic schooling is "[o]ne of the least-studied and most poorly understood educational institutions in today's world." Consequently, all of the papers in this special issue make a valuable contribution in widening the research focus, and in counteracting the invisibilization of qur'anic schooling and faith literacy in the research.

## **2 Recurring patterns in qur'anic schooling across the globe**

In many countries qur'anic schooling plays a vital role in providing children with basic literacy and numeracy education (e.g., Abdi, 2007; Bigelow, 2010, p. 35; cf. Abdullahi, 2006). Moore (e.g., 2011, 2013, 2016) is one of few researchers who has dedicated most of her research to qur'anic schooling, both in the United States and in southern Cameroon. She has brought to our attention the many common traits found in qur'anic schooling across the globe. Moore has noted, for example,

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ISSN: 1457-9863

Publisher: Centre for Applied Language Studies

University of Jyväskylä

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<http://apples.jyu.fi>

<http://dx.doi.org/10.17011/apples/urn.201912185421>

many similarities as regards educational routines and procedures in the teaching of Arabic literacy and memorization skills. Furthermore, she has observed that qur'anic schooling tends to have a gradual design, introducing a focus on literacy as form before moving on to literacy as content. According to Moore, the gradual design rests on an underlying belief that small children are unable to grasp religious meaning until they have matured enough (see also Bigelow, 2010). Instead, children should be fostered into an increasingly reflexive consciousness of the consecrated meanings of the Qur'an. Moreover, Moore's studies have shown that qur'anic schooling, both in the US and in Cameroon, tends to focus largely on rote learning, teacher-guided repetition, and repetition until fluency. In Sweden, Berglund (2017) has observed similar educational routines and procedures in qur'anic schooling, which she refers to as *supplementary Islamic education* (see also Berglund, 2019, this issue). Hence, one could argue that qur'anic school practices, both in more traditionally Islamic contexts and in contexts of diaspora, seem to be underpinned by a shared *transnational religious habitus*, which shapes the faith literacy practices introduced to children through the Qur'an school (cf. Blackledge, 2001, 2011). This explains why we find so many similarities in qur'anic schooling across vastly different national contexts.

### 3 Transformation of qur'anic schooling in the Scandinavian countries

At the same time, language, religion, and (faith) literacy practices are also dynamic, and tend to adapt to and syncretize with the predominant linguistic and educational practices of the surrounding environment (e.g., Aarset, 2016; Gregory, Choudhury, Ilankuberan, Kwapong, & Woodham, 2013). As a result, we would expect qur'anic schooling to have undergone various transformation processes in the Scandinavian national contexts. For example, one would assume that (aspects of) certain dominating secular teaching practices and sociocultural views of language and learning have influenced and/or become part of qur'anic schooling in Scandinavia over time, since both teachers and students have increasingly come to be socialized through the secular school system. As exemplified by Berglund (2019, this issue), qur'anic schooling in Sweden often encompasses much more than pure educational faith practices, for example sports activities, homework studies, and other kinds of leisure activities. In future research, we would like to see more studies that explore these transformational processes, and how these changes affect how young Muslims in Scandinavia relate to and understand the role of qur'anic schooling. It would also be of interest to further explore their views on qur'anic schooling in Scandinavia in comparison to qur'anic schooling in countries where it has a longer history and a stronger tradition (cf. Robleh, 2001). In addition, we would like to see further investigation into how and to what extent young Muslims believe that the skills learned through qur'anic schooling are useful in other educational settings (cf. Moore, 2011), and whether or not they find that their experiences of qur'anic schooling and faith literacy are acknowledged in mainstream schooling. The results in Berglund (2017, also 2019, this issue), indicate that the Swedish mainstream school tends to disregard students' faith literacy learning, and view Qur'an schooling as the antithesis of modern education. Although many of the students with Qur'an school experiences in Berglund (2017) made reference to this "polarized

perspective" (p. 533), at the same time they expressed that their Qur'an faith literacy learning impacted positively on their learning in mainstream school and vice versa (Berglund, 2017, p. 525). A pronounced polarized perspective may thus obstruct opportunities for teachers in the mainstream school to fully acknowledge their students' whole literacy repertoire and literacy learning potentials.

In addition to this, we also need research on the faith literacy practices and experiences of those who choose to practice their religion outside of formalized religious institutions. From previous research, we know that faith beliefs and faith education can be embodied in numerous ways both within and outside of religious institutional settings (see also Day & Rogaly, 2014, p. 82). As mentioned previously, faith beliefs and faith literacy practices may be important for creating a sense of social belonging and coherence for faith members (Gregory, Lytra, Ilankuberan, Choudhury, & Woodham, 2012; Gregory et al., 2013), at the same time that faith beliefs may comprise ambivalence with respect to religious creeds (e.g., Day, 2009, 2010, 2011; also Durkheim, 1965/1912). In a survey conducted with more than 4000 young adults in Sweden, who identified as Muslims, it was found that the majority viewed their faith as something private and personal (Berglund, 2013, 2017). Most of them answered that they did not currently take part in any institutionalized religious activities, although "the social and spiritual dimensions of Islam" were positively valued by many of them (Berglund, 2013, p. 207). Berglund (2013) followed up the survey data with five interviews, since qualitative data are necessary in order to be able to learn more about *in what ways* such spiritual and social dimensions play a significant role in young people's everyday lives. Among other things, spiritual dimensions were found to offer the young interviewees "succor, comfort and relief during existentially challenging times" (Berglund, 2013, p. 220).

#### **4 Qur'anic schooling as a language learning experience**

As discussed in all of the papers in this special issue, Islamic faith literacy practices are based on Arabic as the common sacred language (e.g., Moore, 2016). For many faith members, knowledge of Arabic language and literacy does not form part of their language repertoires before entering qur'anic schooling (Gregory et al., 2013). This means that qur'anic schooling may constitute a significant language learning experience, in addition to being a formal introduction and socialization into Islamic religion and tradition. In future research, we would like to see studies that focus more on the language learning experience of partaking in qur'anic schooling. We would like to know more about how languages are used in this context, and to what extent and in what ways the faith literacy teaching draws on and makes use of the participants' multilingual repertoires. Furthermore, we would like to know more about how the qur'anic school experience may affect the participants' subsequent language learning and language use.

From our own previous research, we know that qur'anic schooling plays a pivotal role in the lives of many children and adolescents of Somali heritage in Sweden. In a study by Palm, Ganuza and Hedman (2019), many of the participants constructed Somali language knowledge as a prerequisite for being able to claim Somali identity (see also Bigelow, 2010; Bigelow & King, 2015). However, some of

them claimed that attending qur'anic schooling and acquiring Arabic literacy skills was equally important to "being Somali." This indicates the important symbolic value (cf. Bourdieu, 1991) that participation in qur'anic schooling might have for some youths, and the degree of social pressure that may possibly also be associated with it.

## 5 The need for emic perspectives on qur'anic schooling

The qur'anic schools could be conceived of as faith settings in which the goal is to transmit consecrated or religious meanings to the participants by means of a variety of literacy practices, through which faith members also co-construct religious meaning (see Skerrett, 2014). This pronounced sacred goal and meaning distinguishes faith literacy practices from other types of non-faith literacy practices. In general, we believe there is a need for more emic perspectives on qur'anic schooling in the research. We need to know much more about young people's subjective experiences, feelings and beliefs about qur'anic schooling and faith literacy practices, and the role they play in their everyday lives, both within and outside of the Qur'an school (as exemplified in several of the papers in this issue). One could formulate this as a call for more research on the *lived experiences of qur'anic schooling in Scandinavia* (in analogy with Brigitta Busch's [2015, 2017] notion *lived experiences of language*).

It is also important to continue to investigate how young people's faith literacy experiences may be carried over into new contexts, for example, into their at-home literacy practices (Christensen, 2019, this issue), into their private diary or poetry writing (as seen in Dewilde, 2019, this issue), and into mainstream schooling contexts (Berglund, 2017, 2019, this issue).

Relatedly, it is important to explore if young people in Scandinavia, who identify as Muslims, run the risk of being "religified," that is, to what extent the role of religion and their Muslim identity is reinforced and emphasized over other aspects of their lives and identities (e.g., Berglund, 2017; Panjwani, 2017; Panjwani & Moulin-Stožek, 2017).

## 6 Qur'anic schooling as investment and exchange

As stated earlier, attending qur'anic schooling symbolizes for many young Muslims the entry ticket into being able to take part in the long tradition of intergenerational and transnational exchanges of religious and linguistic values. In this sense, qur'anic schooling forms an important initiation into becoming a member of an imagined global Muslim community. According to Moore (2016), the ultimate goal of qur'anic schooling is for students to be able to read and memorize the Qur'an in its entirety, in order to have access to its content without the need for a mediator. In the Scandinavian national contexts, this likely requires strong devotion and effort from students, considering that qur'anic schooling tends to be limited to a couple of weekly evening or weekend classes. However, students who are able to accomplish these desirable goals may be well-rewarded, as they are then likely to be seen as individuals worth of respect, with legitimacy to speak on matters of religion. Such individual gains, we believe, can be discussed in terms of accumulated faith capital, which can be converted into other

forms of symbolic capital, for example religious and social prestige (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977, 1991; see also Blackledge, 2001, 2011). Hence, there are important symbolic values (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977, 1991) associated with qur'anic schooling, which may afford young Muslims the incentives needed to invest in the arduous task of acquiring Arabic literacy and memorizing the Qur'an, and for adults to improve and maintain this knowledge. We believe these incentives are worth investigating further from an emic perspective in future research. Meanwhile, such explorations should also include a focus on possible costs for faith members who are unable to participate in qur'anic schooling, or who are unable to maintain their previously achieved faith capital over time (see Gregory et al., 2013).

In relation to this, it would also be interesting to study the experiences of adult Muslim faith members who begin their qur'anic schooling as adults, and to investigate if and how they make use of the many digital tools and resources available to support their qur'anic schooling experience (cf. Daugaard, 2019, this issue).

## 7 Conclusions

The contributions in this special issue reflect multifaceted aspects of the role of qur'anic schooling and faith literacy practices in Scandinavia, which adds new knowledge to previous research. Among other things, the contributions show how faith literacy practices in the Scandinavian context move far beyond formal Qur'an school settings. They exemplify how faith literacy practices are part of faith members' everyday lives and everyday literacy uses. From the viewpoint of the faith members, there may thus not always be a clear dichotomy between faith literacy practices and "mainstream" literacy practices (cf. *the polarized perspective* in Berglund, 2017). Such a dichotomy could possibly also be problematized from the viewpoint of Bakhtinian *dialogicity*, from which different literacy contexts are perceived to be in dialogue with one another. Bakhtin even expressed how words become "socially charged" by their context/s: "Each word tastes of a context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293). This intertextuality also shows the importance of further investigating faith literacy practices from both inside and outside of institutionalized religious settings, as well as how children's and youth's faith literacy experiences are not only resituated in simple ways (cf. van Leeuwen, 1996), but may transform into other genres, practices and contexts.

This introductory commentary acknowledges the much-welcomed contributions in this special issue, and, at the same time, it proposes a call for more research on lived experiences of qur'anic schooling and faith literacy, and their part in everyday multilingual and literacy practices in contemporary societies in Scandinavia.

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