

# Liturgical literacy as hidden capital: Experiences from Qur'an education in Sweden

Jenny Berglund, Stockholm University

*This article focuses on a form of supplementary Islamic education that centres on Qur'an studies and examines the reported experiences of Muslim students that regularly shift between this and their mainstream secular school. Its aim is to better comprehend the dialectical interplay between this type of supplementary education and mainstream secular schooling. Within this framework, the article explores how the traditional way of reading, reciting, and memorizing the Qur'an might relate to the type of teaching and learning that occurs within mainstream public schools. It also explores the possibility of a secular bias within the Swedish school system, the contribution of Qur'an studies to mainstream schooling (and vice versa), Qur'an-based vs. mainstream notions of "reading", especially in relation to the idea of "understanding" and "meaning", and how competency in Qur'an recitation becomes valuable secular "capital" when translated from language of "liturgical literacy" to the language of "skills". To balance and enhance our understanding of student experiences, this article employs a constructive understanding of Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus as well as Andrey Rosowsky's notion of liturgical literacy.*

*Keywords:* Qur'an education, liturgical literacy, capital, Islam

## 1 Introduction

It is fairly well-established that the survival of any given religious tradition is highly dependent on the provision of religious education. Indeed, without the ability to convey religious content from one generation to the next, no such tradition could continue to exist as a living religious phenomenon. Religious education enables older generations to transmit to their young the core meanings, values, understandings, and practices of their religion, thus assuring that those vital elements are carried forward into the future. That is why any serious study of the past, present, and future of the world's various religions must include an awareness of the religious education that has informed and shaped them on their journey through time.

While there are obviously various types of religious education, we are here concerned with religious education as taught within the compulsory school system and religious education as taught outside that system, by way of

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Corresponding author's email: [jenny.berglund@hsd.su.se](mailto:jenny.berglund@hsd.su.se)

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congregations, parents, relatives or private persons. In this connection, two basic approaches have been found to be generally employed: 1) the non-confessional religious studies approach, which in the Nordic countries is most often associated with the compulsory school system; and 2) the confessional or denominational approach, which can be found either inside or outside the compulsory system, depending on the country in question (Berglund, 2013, 2015). Germany and Austria, for instance, are countries that employ the confessional approach within their mainstream school system (see Berglund, 2015), whereas Sweden is a country in which the confessional approach can be found in churches, mosques, temples or religious organizations as well as in state-funded religious schools, as an extra-curricular subject. Interestingly, Sweden is also among the few countries in the world whose compulsory school system provides a mandatory non-confessional school subject called religious education (RE), which every student in every mainstream public school must take. This arrangement leaves only one option for Swedish parents that want their children to be taught *into* a specific religious tradition – that of organizing this sort of denominational schooling outside of their children’s mainstream school, where it often goes by the name “religious instruction,” or in the case of Muslim children, “Islamic instruction.”

The aim of this article is to explore the experiences of Muslim students that have attended this sort of denominational schooling, which I have named *supplementary Islamic education* rather than Islamic instruction. The idea is to map and better comprehend the dialectical interplay between supplementary religious and mainstream secular schooling, with a special focus on how the traditional way of reading, reciting, and memorizing the Qur’an might relate to the type of teaching and learning that occurs within mainstream public schools (see also Berglund, 2018).

The reason I prefer “supplementary Islamic education” to “Islamic instruction” is that the word *instruction* can imply that the “transmission” of knowledge is more of a top-down teacher-to-pupil affair, whereas the word *education* makes more space for the agency of the student (Berglund, 2016). The word *supplementary* is significant as well, because it conveys the notion of an activity that “adds value,” something that my interviewees regularly reported. Supplementary Islamic education, moreover, constitutes a broad category that can reflect a variety of pedagogical outlooks and encompass anything from private home tutoring to weekend Islamic schooling. It is also broad in the sense that its content varies widely, from Muslim standards like Qur’an memorization, Islamic history, and Islamic jurisprudence to non-standards such as theatre, artistic performance, discussion groups, and lessons designed to improve homework performance. Finally, the word *supplementary* is used to indicate that Islamic education is in some ways similar to extracurricular activities such as football, piano lessons, and other such leisure-time preoccupations that add value to (i.e., supplement) a young person’s life.

## 2 Interviews with Young Swedish Muslims

The study’s empirical material consists of 20 semi-structured interviews with Swedish Muslim students that at one point or another had participated in *Qur’an-centred* supplementary Islamic education in tandem with their mainstream secular schooling. The interviews were conducted in two of Sweden’s larger cities, and the interviewees – the majority of whom were contacted through Islamic

educational institutions – ranged from 16 to 24 years of age. Over and above the interviews, I personally attended supplementary Islamic educational classes in four different mosques.

Regarding the participants, all had received varying degrees of Qur’anic training as part of their supplementary Islamic education. For some, this meant that almost all their time had been spent reading, memorizing, and reciting the Qur’an (and sometimes other religious texts); for others, however, this feature was only one aspect of a more multifaceted Islamic educational program that also included social activities such as table tennis, homework studies and “Swedish fika” (Kongshøj & Mardelius, 2017). Here it is interesting to note that two-thirds of the interviewees spontaneously mentioned that my interview marked the “very first time” that anyone had asked them to reflect upon the relation between mainstream secular and supplementary Islamic schooling. While all participants were eventually able to address the question of the mutual impact of these apparently dichotomous educational forms, many required a good deal of time to consider their answers. Apart from the project’s value to researchers, it was obvious that the interview process itself had enabled many participants to view the dynamic between these educational settings with fresh eyes, and in this way re-evaluate their experiences such that they gained insight into potentially positive effects.

### 3 Qur’an Education

It is sometimes assumed that there is a clash between Qur’an education on the one hand and the ethos and other features of secular education on the other. Today, secular-school learning is often described as an open, interactive, democratic process in which the student actively constructs knowledge and reaches understanding by posing questions and receiving answers, whereas Qur’an-centred learning is often characterized as a closed, unilateral, dogmatic process that largely involves the one-way transmission of knowledge (Boyle, 2007; Bouakaz, 2012; Gent, 2015). There are, however, certain implications in this sort of black-and-white characterization that can have a negative impact on the relationship between Muslim students and their mainstream-school teachers. It also can cause one to prematurely conclude that these two teaching traditions are fundamentally incompatible, and in this way miss important aspects that might actually complement each other in various ways. This issue will be discussed in a bit more detail as the article unfolds.

Turning now to the Qur’an, it is important to mention that within Islam this sacred text is considered to be more complete in the form of rhythms and sounds than as printed text (Nelson, 2001, p. 14). Thus, a great deal of emphasis is placed on *orality* in transmitting the Qur’an (Al-Kaysi, 1986, pp. 103–104; Von Denffer, 2003, p. 166). And because it is believed that God’s speech becomes embodied through the process of memorizing and reciting the Qur’an, the “art” of recitation (*tajweed*) is highly valued in Muslim societies. Kristina Nelson notes that it is important for non-Muslims to understand the significance of this “art of correct pronunciation” to Islamic culture and religion:

[*Tajweed*] 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).

Profound appreciation for the recitation of the Qur'an can be understood as both a sign of Muslim faith and a common thread that binds together the different cultures of the Islamic world. Ideally, however, beyond the mastery of rhythms and sounds, the complete embodiment of the text also involves acting in accordance with the Qur'an's presumed norms, rules, and proscriptions. Qur'an recitation, then, is not a "high tradition," only meant for a select few. Rather it is "the back bone" of Islamic education and "an integral part of learning to be human and Muslim" (Al-A'zami, 2003, pp. 12-13; Eickelman, 1985, p. 63; Gent 2018; Von Denffer, 2003, p. 152). Indeed, at the very least, all Muslims must learn by heart the opening *Surah, al-Fatiha*, in order to perform their daily prayers. This recitation, of course, is performed in Arabic, the language of the Qur'an. And since Arabic is not the mother tongue of most of the worldwide Muslim community, many recite without understanding the meaning of the words. This goes for the early years of childhood as well, where emphasis is placed not on understanding the text but rather on the ability to correctly recite it. Andrey Rosowsky notes in this connection that recitation is essential to ritual and other devotional practices that are associated with established religions—"usually... 'religion[s] of the book' such as Judaism, Christianity, or Islam" (Rosowsky, 2008, p. 6).

#### 4 Cultural Capital and Liturgical Literacy

To balance and enhance the understanding of student experiences, this article employs a constructive understanding of Pierre Bourdieu's pointedly inclusive concepts of *cultural capital* and *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1996) as well as the notion of *liturgical literacy*, derived from Andrey Rosowsky's work in literacy studies (Rosowsky, 2008). Cultural capital refers to ideas, symbols, tastes, and preferences that can be strategically used as resources in social action. Bourdieu connects this to "habitus", which can be described as an embodied socialized tendency or disposition to act, think, or feel in a particular way. Like ordinary economic capital, cultural capital can be amassed and invested as well as converted into various other forms. And it is obviously by way of the educational system that cultural capital is converted into educational capital, which then can be converted into other forms of capital, meaning occupational, economic and social opportunity. According to Bourdieu, "this 'conversion' of one form of capital into another is central to the intragenerational or intergenerational reproduction of class differences".

In contrast to Bourdieu's sociology, which addresses the "mezzo" level of societal life, my research deals with individual students on the ethnographic level. The use of Rosowsky's notion of liturgical literacy constitutes an attempt to bridge these two levels. Liturgical literacy refers to the practice of using religious texts in liturgy, where the ability to memorize, recite, and make appropriate use of the content is more important than understanding the content itself (Rosowsky, 2008). Acquiring this type of literacy requires greater emphasis on rote memorisation ("the heart") than on intellectual involvement with a text ("the head"), and thus it is often belittled in comparison to the type of learning that generally occurs in mainstream schooling. Perhaps the most valuable aspect of the concept of liturgical literacy is the fact that it highlights skills. Indeed, this is something that our interviewees consistently mentioned when asked about compatibility and transferability between the two educational settings.

It should here be noted that the Qur'an is used not only in liturgical contexts, such as when praying, but in many non-liturgical contexts as well; it also possesses its own intrinsic literary worth. The Qur'an is regularly recited at the beginning of social meetings, on the occasion of a loved one's death, at the commencement of conferences, as a meditative practice, and so forth (Mir, 1994; Sells, 1999; Waines, 2003, p. 24).

## 5 Memorization as Understanding

Our interviewees consistently mentioned the ability to memorize as the most advantageous skill in terms of its application to their mainstream school coursework. The interviewees mentioned other advantages of Qur'an memorization as well, such as its capacity to increase self-confidence and enable thoughtful listening. One interviewee even noted that reciting Qur'an verses had a calming, stress-reducing effect. Here are but a few examples:

[Because of my Qur'an studies] memorization... is quick and comes naturally [for me]. For example, memorizing parts of homework in history, [which helps] you hang onto your understanding... When I memorize, I sing the text in my head. [Doing this] is also efficient when learning new English words (boy, age 21).

Apart from memorization, I have learned to listen – to listen for a long time to someone who talks and says wise things and to carefully think about what is said (girl, age 19).

It was easy to memorize before tests in school or when I had to make presentations. I didn't get nervous. I was just able to memorize what I wanted to say. In [mainstream secular] school this was useful. But now that I'm at the university there's more of a need to understand (girl, age 23).

One of my friends practice mindfulness to [reduce] stress... and [increase] focus. I do the same with the verses I have learned by heart. They fill my mind and body, and I become calm and gain confidence; this is also a type of mindfulness (boy age 21).

All interviewees noted that they had been taught to *read* the Qur'an from an early age, starting with learning the Arabic alphabet, graduating to reading the Qur'an out loud, and culminating in the actual memorization of verses. In describing their experience of learning to read and recite the Qur'an, interviewees reported that the emphasis was on the ability to recite aloud with fluency and perfect pronunciation rather than on the ability to understand the meaning of each written word. Sometimes word meanings were explained, but most often they were not, since the emphasis of Qur'an education is not on acquiring that sort of understanding. This may seem odd from Sweden's mainstream pedagogic perspective, which is dominated by a relational and contextual approach to education that emphasizes conceptual understanding as well as the active construction of knowledge (Carlgren, Forsberg, & Lindberg, 2009). As for the Swedish system's view of rote memorization, it has been largely considered as an outmoded method of education for quite some time, although of late it appears to have made a comeback, specifically in the area of math memorization, which has been shown to improve performance (Eriksson, Helenius, & Ryve, 2018; Skemp, 1979)<sup>1</sup>.

The stark distinction between the modern Western educational approach and that of Qur'an education has led many Western scholars to conclude that the memorization and recitation of the Qur'an takes place "without any process of thinking as such". Such a characterization, however, can only serve to diminish an oral tradition that is of vital importance to Muslim societies throughout the world (Hodgson in Eickelman, 1985, p. 57; Eickelman, 2007, p. 134). More than providing an understanding of the words, Qur'an studies teachers want to impart an awareness of the specific context in which a given memorized verse may be applied. In this regard, Eickelman highlights the role of parents and other skilled adults in helping children to discover the appropriate contexts, thus enabling them to employ their memorized verses in practical ways (Eickelman, 1978, pp. 492–494). In my own observations of various Qur'an classes, it quickly became apparent that *application* was crucial. Typically, teachers would explain when a given *sura* should be recited and encourage their students to *read* (i.e., recite) certain verses in certain contexts, with an emphasis not on the meaning of words, but rather as a blessing (Gent, 2018). Thus it is important for Western scholars and others to appreciate that there are different types of understanding, all equally worthy in their own right, and, as noted by Rosowsky, different ways of "reading" as well:

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).

There are also different types of literacy:

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

Deemphasizing the need for explanations is perfectly understandable within the framework of a tradition that emphasizes the sacred and spiritual dimensions of the Qur'an. This, however, should not be seen as indicating that understanding the meaning of the Qur'an's words is of no significance. It is obviously important to understand the meaning of the Qur'an, but many argue that this type of understanding should be imparted after the verses have been memorized (Boyle, 2007). As noted earlier, God's speech is said to become embodied through the process of memorizing and reciting the Qur'an. Following along these lines, one might say that the Qur'an must first become an embodied part of a person's identity before the meaning of its words can be truly understood.

Faith literacies ... rather than being peripheral social processes and activities, take their place alongside other, more mainstream, literacies playing an important role in the social and cultural lives of those for whom faith, language and literacy are intertwined and complementary. In a contemporary world, where, contrary to many expectations, religious life and practice have not withered away, but are still 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)

Although Qur'an-centred supplementary education clearly provides a type of religious education, its confessional aims and methods distinguish it from the

type of non-confessional religious education (RE) that is mandatory in Sweden's mainstream public schools. Indeed, if comparisons are to be made, it seems far more appropriate to compare the teaching of Qur'anic rote memorization with the type of teaching that occurs in subjects such as mathematics. According to Sweden's national syllabus, for example, an aim of mathematics is that "[t]eaching should help pupils to develop their interest in mathematics and confidence in their own ability to use it in different contexts" (Skolverket, 2018, p. 55). This same aim could just as easily apply to the subject of Qur'anic recitation – i.e., to develop interest in the Qur'an and confidence in one's ability to *use* it in different contexts. These two subjects are also similar in the sense that both are used in various contexts to display knowledgeable ability and garner social prestige (Bourdieu, 1996; Lundin, 2006). Thus the ability to recite the Qur'an from memory can be seen to serve not only a theological purpose, but also a variety of personal, social, ceremonial, and cultural purposes as well.

## 6 Conversion of Cultural Capital

Looking at mainstream secular and Qur'an-centred supplementary Islamic schooling in the light of Bourdieu's concepts, these two forms of education can be seen as *agencies* that variously augment and/or deplete a participant's cultural/educational capital. Habitus is closely related to the concept of capital since habitus is one of the ways that capital exists. Indeed, one way of understanding capital is as 'embodied habitus' – habitus being the result of social experiences, collective memories, and ways of moving and thinking that are *inscribed* in the individual's body and mind. Every person is by definition equipped with habitus, although habitus often varies between groups, and one person's habitus can be more or less valued than another's (Bourdieu, 1996).

Applying all of this to our two educational settings, we can see that there is a difference between what counts as cultural/educational capital in each. Within Muslim communities, for example, the ability to recognize a quotation from the Qur'an or to place Qur'anic references in appropriate contexts is seen as the mark of a successful education, whereas the mainstream educational community recognizes an entirely different set of success markers, and even tends to question the need for Qur'anic learning altogether. The following response from one of my interviewees exemplifies the point:

If I remember to quote the Qur'an when I visit my grandmother, she is always very pleased, as pleased, or more pleased than if I have succeeded on a test in school (girl, age 18).

I once quoted *sura* Yasin in class and was asked how I knew it. When I told her [the teacher] I attended Qur'an education on the weekend, she said, 'you shouldn't do that'. From then on, I haven't talked about it in school (boy, age 19).

As already mentioned, Rosowsky's point is that there are occasions in which reading is undertaken with no intention of accessing the meaning of words, but where the very act of reading is considered a highly significant social and cultural practice (Rosowsky, 2001, p. 57). Liturgical literacy is required for the performance of Islamic rituals, prayers, and other devotional practices. As such, it is something that all practicing Muslims must possess since the Qur'an is considered a 'prayer book, lectionary and hymnal rolled into one' (Graham, 1987,

p. 61). Reading, in this sense, is not for the purpose of obtaining knowledge so as to inform faith; rather it is the very form and process – *the embodiment* – of religious worship. Muslims believe that when reciting the Qur'an, they are participating in a sacred act that incorporates the 'speech of god' into the *very being* of the reciters, thus making it a part of their physical repertoire or habitus.

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, prior to their interviews, most subjects had never discussed or even reflected upon the possible relation between mainstream secular and supplementary Islamic schooling. One way of viewing such reflections is as a process of transferring cultural capital from one educational sphere to another, meaning that the interviewees had translated their success in Qur'an memorization and recitation from the religious language of 'liturgical literacy' to the secular language of 'skills', thereby transforming *Islamic* educational into *general* educational capital. Even when I attempted to steer the conversation toward the spiritual benefits of Qur'an education, the interviewees avoided this matter and continued describing their acquired religious competencies as 'skills' in the secular sense. In other words, Qur'an memorization and recitation, which represents high-value cultural and spiritual capital within the Muslim sphere, also becomes valuable within the secular sphere when translated into the language of skills.

## 7 A Capital that Needs to be Hidden

The interviewees were in their teens or young adulthood at the time of the interviews; thus, they were reflecting on the earlier experience of shifting between secular and religious spheres. In this regard, an interesting educational question comes to mind that might be worthy of further investigation: if these interviewees had been given the chance to discuss their experiences during the time that they were actually shifting between these two settings, would this have enabled them to take greater advantage of both? Put differently, would these Muslim students have been able to more effectively transfer the skills (the educational capital) gained through Qur'an-based training to their secular school studies and vice versa? And might this sort of real-time self-reflective awareness and understanding have produced a better educational result?

Unfortunately, it appears that these sorts of positive outcomes will continue to elude Muslim students so long as their mainstream teachers lack basic curiosity or are negatively disposed toward their students' supplementary Islamic education. In confirmation of this point, some interviewees reported that if ever they mentioned their Islamic studies to their mainstream teachers, the teachers would respond by overtly discouraging them from continuing with their religious schooling, pointing out that doing so was 'not a very good idea'. This sort of reaction seems to have become so much the norm that a significant number of our interviewees reported feeling extremely hesitant to bring the topic up at all. The following statements summarize what seems to have been a common experience:

Every morning through the summer holiday an Islamic teacher came to our home and taught me and my little brother to memorize and recite the Qur'an. In [my mainstream] school, [instead of telling the truth] I said I had taken a summer course in Arabic (girl, age 23).

I didn't talk about Islam or Qur'an education in school. Religion is a private matter so you don't talk about it. Some people have seen something from a *madrasa* from Afghanistan,

like Taliban's. People wonder if you have to go, they think it's a shame that you go, that it is a waste of time. People do not understand the role of spirituality. "What are you going to do with it?" they say. Many see religion as something that is backward. They see a conflict between religion and science. But in Islam there is no paradox. God has created the world and science explains the process. (boy, age 21)

## 8 Conclusion

This article has attempted to discern the feelings and experiences of Swedish Muslims students that partake of both mainstream secular and Qur'an-centred supplementary education, and how they apprehend their learning of the Qur'an in relation to their regular schooling. We have also examined the means by which these young Muslims were taught to read, recite, and memorize the Qur'an as compared to the type of teaching that occurs in such school subjects as mathematics and non-confessional RE. In the process, it has been difficult to avoid the observation that the secular norms which influence much of the Swedish school system tend to silence the voices and downplay the experiences of young Muslims that also participate in Islamic supplementary education (see Berglund, 2017; 2018). While the data respecting this particular problem is too sparse to allow for broad generalizations (see also Berglund, 2013; Kittelman-Flensner, 2015), one could imagine it to be fairly widespread, especially given the Swedish educational mindset, which largely assumes that secular education is objective, democratic, egalitarian, and so on, while Islamic education is non-objective, authoritarian, anti-democratic, and the like. Worse still, Islamic education is too often thought to promote fundamentalism and undermine both secular society and the core values of the Swedish national curriculum. Given this general attitude, it is not surprising that some Swedish teachers see supplementary Islamic education as having little to offer when it comes to the overall schooling of their Muslim students. And of the Muslim students themselves, who partake of both Islamic supplementary and mainstream education, this study indicates that they derive great benefit from reflecting upon their experience of moving between these two learning environments. Finally, it is hoped that this study will encourage mainstream teachers to recognize that the skills and personal qualities developed via supplementary Islamic education can have a positive impact on their Muslim students' mainstream educational results – and vice versa!

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Eriksson, Helenius & Ryve (2018) show findings on positive effects of memorization in mathematics education.

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