

Special issue on  
**Faith literacy practices among Muslim  
children, youth and families in Scandinavia**

**Guest editors**

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**Editorial**

**1 Introduction**

To many children and young people with a Muslim background living in Scandinavia today, faith literacy practices constitute an integrated part of everyday life. Some go to more or less formalized Qur'anic schools (Berglund, 2009; Bisbjerg, 2011; Kavli, 2007), while others receive Arabic or Qur'anic lessons at home or through Skype (Aarset, 2016). New Qur'anic faith literacy practices emerge when young people interact with the Qur'an through religious apps, when children venture into spontaneous self-organised recitation competitions during school breaks or when they write poetry as part of a larger Islamic textual universe during their spare time. Language and literacy practices originating in Qur'anic schools or in interaction with Islam thus form an important part of the linguistic repertoire of many Muslim children and youth in Scandinavia. This special issue of *Apples* explores such language and literacy practices under the heading of "Faith literacy practices" – a field which has so far been very sparsely researched in a Scandinavian context but which has great importance for our understanding of the everyday lives of Muslim children and youth in contemporary Scandinavia.

The articles in this special issue explore the variation, the breadth and the complexity of Qur'anic faith literacy practices among practising Muslims in Scandinavia. The settings for the studies reported in the special issue are not countries which recognise Islam as their official religion, but Scandinavian countries where Muslims constitute a fairly recent minority. Despite their relatively small numbers, Muslims are reported to receive disproportionately much attention in the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish media (see for example

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Axner, 2015; IMDi, 2009; Jacobsen, Jensen, Vitus, & Weibel, 2013). This attention is mostly highly negative, as Muslims are often cast as a threat to societal cohesion and associated with violence, terrorism, oppression and a hierarchical division between 'us' and 'them'. Due to this predominantly negative focus, important aspects of the Islamic capital among Scandinavian Muslims are at risk of remaining hidden or marginalized (see also Nergård & Nicolaisen, 2015). By describing the Qur'anic faith literacies among Muslims in Scandinavia, the authors of the articles in this special issue thus aim to contribute to a more nuanced understanding and a more many-faceted representation of Muslim children, youth and families in Scandinavia.

## 2 Faith literacies

Faith literacy practices are understood as literacy practices that take place in more or less formal faith settings, involve intergenerational induction of sacred texts and reading practices, use sacred texts as artefacts in rituals and ceremonies, and are integral to both individual and collective identity (see for example Gregory, Choudhury, Ilankuberan, Kwapong, & Woodham, 2013; Rosowsky, 2015). In this special issue, we are concerned with Qur'anic faith literacy practices among Muslim children, youth and families in Scandinavia in faith settings as well as in more general everyday practices.

The four articles in this special issue draw on different, but related theoretical frameworks. Across the articles, faith literacy practices are perceived as social and ideological, building on the seminal work of Shirley Heath (1983) and Brian Street (1984, 2013). The special issue is opened by an introductory commentary by Christina Hedman and Natalia Ganuza on lived experiences of Qur'anic schooling in Scandinavia. Hedman and Ganuza provide an overview of the research field, situate the four articles within the field and point to promising questions to be pursued in further research. In the first of the four articles, *Liturgical Literacy as Hidden Capital. Experiences from Qur'an Education in Sweden*, Jenny Berglund investigates the relation between Qur'anic schooling and secular mainstream schooling and describes liturgical literacy as hidden capital. In the second article entitled *Literacy practices in two Danish-Somali families: between training, testing and "feeding the soul"*, Mette Vedsgaard Christensen instead investigates at-home family literacy practices. The remaining articles in different ways shed light on spare-time faith literacies among young Muslims. In the article *Quranic app practices among multilingual Muslim youth in Denmark*, Line Møller Daugaard focuses on young Danish Muslims' use of Qur'anic apps on smartphones and tablets, while Joke Dewilde in her article *How Islamic are young Muslim people's poems?* explores young Norwegian Muslims' out-of-school writing of poetry. The special issue is concluded by a closing commentary by Nora S. Eggen. Unlike the other authors contributing to the special issue, Eggen's research field is philologically based Islamic studies. In her commentary *What is the Qur'ān?*, Eggen discusses issues related to the definition of the Qur'ān, the dynamics intrinsic to the text, its reception and its functionalities and briefly relates this to the sociolinguistically oriented studies of Qur'anic literacy in focus in this special issue.

### 3 Ethnographic explorations of faith literacies

Each of these studies is ethnographically inspired. They all provide detailed and contextualized analysis of concrete Qur'anic practices among children, youth and families in the Scandinavian countries, and they strive to do so from an emic perspective privileging the understandings and interpretations of the people involved. Within this broadly ethnographic framework, the four studies vary in their choice of methodological approaches.

Christensen describes her efforts to snowball her way into the Danish-Somali community. A local museum exhibition and a series of evening school lectures on Somali everyday life in Denmark served as point of entry to a loosely organized group of Somali mothers who became instrumental in establishing contact to Danish-Somali families willing to open their homes to ethnographic exploration. Dewilde describes how a series of intense conversations about writing practices and texts, unfolding both as formal interviews and as informal communication through social media, allowed her to gain access to two young people's out-of-school poetry; in turn, Daugaard explores the affordances of an exploratory group interview based on an interchange between tactile demonstration and manipulation of concrete Qur'anic apps on smartphones and tablets and joint reflection on digital Qur'anic practices. Finally, Berglund investigates supplementary Islamic education classes in four mosques and conducted semi-structured interviews with 22 Swedish Muslim students who had attended Qur'an-centred supplementary Islamic education alongside their mainstream secular schooling. The four studies thus all offer distinct methodological contributions pointing to promising ways to explore faith literacy practices.

All four studies are located in Scandinavia: Dewilde's in Norway, Berglund's in Sweden, and Christensen's and Daugaard's in Denmark. In Christensen's study, the focus is on two Danish-Somali families, especially mothers in families with smaller children. The other three studies all concentrate on young people. Berglund's study involves young people between 16 and 24 years of age in two larger cities in Sweden, while Daugaard focuses on young people in their early teens who were born and raised in Denmark. Dewilde's study involves teenagers who recently came to Norway. While Christensen's participants all came from Somali-speaking families, the participants in Dewilde and Daugaard's studies also had Afghan and Iraqi backgrounds. A range of languages – among them Dari, Pashto, Turkmen, Hindi, English and Italian – were part of the participants' complex linguistic repertoires.

However different, the participants' linguistic repertoires all contain variations of more or less emergent Danish/Norwegian/Swedish and some knowledge of Arabic tied to religious practice. Most participants in the studies reported in this special issue thus do not have Arabic as their 'first language' or 'mother tongue', but may be described as religious heritage learners of Arabic. They typically do not necessarily use Arabic for family communication and often have little or no secular Arabic language education; however, to various degrees, they are familiar with the highly specialized and codified register of Classical Arabic associated with the Quran and other Islamic texts and practices.

## 4 A mosaic of Qur'anic faith literacy practices

The articles in this special issue describe a mosaic of Qur'anic faith literacy practices. The Qur'an – the sacred text par excellence in Islam – naturally occupies a central role in the form of both the traditional printed book version (*mushaf*) and the digital version of the sacred text available through Qur'anic apps on smartphones and tablets. Being able to read, memorize and recite the Qur'an flawlessly in Classical Arabic stands out as a desirable and important religious and personal objective across the four studies, and the participants engage with the Qur'anic text in myriad ways. They *listen* to readings of the Qur'an from parents or siblings, readings at the mosque or in Qur'anic school or recorded versions in Qur'anic apps by famous or favourite imams. Many also *read* the Qur'anic text themselves in print or on screen, in Arabic or in other languages. Some invest time, energy and emotional engagement in refining their *recitation* skills; finally, some use the Qur'an and other religious Islamic texts as sources of inspiration for their own independent writing, both in and out of school.

When the children, youth and families appearing in the articles tell us about their Qur'anic practices, they tell emotionally charged stories of pride and joy, of comfort and care, of hardship and insecurity, of recognition and misrecognition, of identity and belonging, of hopes, dreams and fears. The articles in the special issue thus provide important insight into the many-faceted faith literacy practices which constitute an integral and interesting part of everyday life among many Muslim children, youth and families in the Scandinavian countries, but which remain largely invisible and unnoticed outside the Muslim communities.

An important common trait across three of the four contributions in this special issue is the fact that, apart from Berglund's study, the analysis presented springs from larger studies not originally designed specifically to investigate faith literacy practices. Dewilde's analysis of Islamic poetry is part of a larger linguistic ethnography of young people's literacy practices in and out of school. Similarly, Christensen's analysis springs from a project focusing broadly on family literacy practices in the Danish-Somali community, and Daugaard's analysis of young people's use of Qur'anic apps is part of a large longitudinal study of linguistic diversity in primary and lower secondary school. The joint research interest in Qur'anic faith literacy practices which we pursue in this special issue is thus largely serendipitous and truly explorative. It is our hope that this special issue can provide an important starting point and indicate promising directions for future research in Qur'anic language and literacy practices in Scandinavia and beyond.

## **Contents**

Line Møller Daugaard & Joke Dewilde  
Editorial (pp. 1-6)

Christina Hedman & Natalia Ganuza  
Introductory commentary: Lived experiences of qur'anic schooling in  
Scandinavia (pp. 7-13)

Jenny Berglund  
Liturgical literacy as hidden capital: Experiences from Qur'an education in  
Sweden (pp. 15-25)

Mette Vedsgaard Christensen  
Literacy practices in two Danish-Somali families: Between training, testing  
and "feeding the soul" (pp. 27-42)

Line Møller Daugaard  
Quranic app practices among multilingual Muslim youth in Denmark  
(pp. 43-69)

Joke Dewilde  
How Islamic are young Muslim people's poems? (pp. 71-87)

Nora S. Eggen  
Final commentary: What is the Qur'ān? (pp. 89-93)

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