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In the Child's Best Interest: Analyzing Pedagogical Approaches among Teachers of the Qur'an in Norway

Synnøve Markeng [ID] and Jenny Berglund

ABSTRACT

In this article, we explore pedagogical approaches in Islamic Supplementary Education (ISE) in Norway by presenting the narratives of two Qur'an teachers. Drawing inspiration from narrative research and microhistory, we examine their stories and experiences of teaching ISE in the context of an increasingly multireligious society. When we employ Watts' dimensions of religious scripture and Rosowskys concept of faith literacy, we find that the teachers advocate for various dimensions of the Qur'an in relation to the knowledge deemed most beneficial for Muslim children in Norway. Finally, we explore the potential implications of our findings for teachers in mainstream education.

INTRODUCTION

Religious education (RE), in its broadest sense, is crucial to the survival of any religious tradition. Without the ability to teach religious knowledge and ways of living from one generation to the next, no religious tradition will continue to exist as a living phenomenon. This is the fundamental way in which older generations can share the core meanings, values, understandings, life stances, and practices of their religion with the young generation. In Norway, the RE school subject that exists within the state school system is non-confessional and teaches about different religions. Furthermore, there are no private Muslim Schools in Norway, differing from its neighboring countries and much of Europe (Franken & Gent, 2021; Simonsen & Daun, 2018; Berglund, 2015), and the type of religious education that nurtures children and young people *into* the beliefs and traditions of a specific religion takes place in homes and religious institutions. By teaching children *into* a religion, the older generations ensure that what

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they consider the vital parts of their religious tradition are carried forward into the future. Furthermore, what is considered worthy of teaching to the young generation is, of course, something that is considered good for their well-being.

In this article, we focus on the pedagogical approaches in one such type of religious education, namely Islamic supplementary education (ISE). 'Pedagogical approaches' depict how teachers act and verbally position themselves in relation to a given topic (Flensner, 2020, p. 8). Pedagogical approaches include the act of teaching, the use of pedagogical tools and study materials, but also the implicit or explicit definitions of what counts as valuable and legitimate ways of knowing and communicating (Rajala et al., 2016, p. 17). Pedagogical approaches are informed and shaped by multiple factors, such as personal background and teaching experience, but also values and traditions of the community and society in which they are located (Fives & Buehl, 2012). For instance, to this day, there is debate within Islam about the value or virtue of teaching how to read and recite the Arabic Qur'an. Some argue that learning by rote without understanding should be the starting point, while others that understanding the words is prime (Günther, 2006; Svensson, 2006; Berglund, 2010).

We take inspiration from narrative research and microhistory by bringing forward the personal stories and experiences of two teachers of Islamic supplementary education, whom we call Hossayn and Uthman. Within narrative research, one argues that analyzing people's stories is simultaneously an exploration of the social and cultural narratives in which such individuals' experience was, and are, shaped and enacted (Creswell & Poth, 2018, pp. 67–68; Lepore, 2001). For this article, we focus on the part of the teachers' narratives that are related to the Norwegian context in since this is where their pedagogical approaches are shaped and conformed to meet a specific group of children. In other words, we seek to investigate *what ISE teachers find important to teach, how they do it* and *why they find this to be the right knowledge and methods*. In our understanding, the pedagogical approaches reflect what the ISE teachers find most important to teach children during the short time they have with them. Of course, discussions on what is best for a child, i.e., values, ideals, or goals that characterize and have characterized, the attitude and behavior of adults toward one, several or many children never take place in a vacuum (Nilsson, 2011, pp. 25–27). What people believe to be in the child's best interest is also related to the intentions of the community, whether it is education for citizenship or the continuation of a religion. Thus, the ISE teachers relate to both traditional Islamic education and the Norwegian context as structuring frameworks, in effect negotiating between ideals and reality (Kleive & Horsfjord, in press). For us to better understand the teachers' ideas of what knowledge is best

for children in the context of being a religious minority in Norway, we connect the pedagogical approaches to different dimensions of religious scripture (Watts, 2019) and the concept of 'faith literacy' (Rosowsky, 2013). We will discuss the Qur'an teachers' pedagogical approaches concerning some of the educational, but also social and political questions that at present surround ISE in Norway. The increased scrutiny of Islamic schooling in both academic and public debates in the years after September 11, 2001, is also a part of the context (Berglund, 2015; Boyle, 2006, p. 478). Previous research from Norway shows examples of school leaders who express skepticism toward students' participation in Qur'anic education, while research from Sweden shows that students in mainstream school experience negative attitudes from both teachers and fellow students when mentioning that they participate in ISE (Berglund, 2017; Kjørven et al., 2023). For this reason, we will also, in the end of the article, discuss what implications knowledge about ISE might have for teachers in mainstream schools.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

As already mentioned, we approach ISE in Norway from the perspective of two teachers whom we call Uthman and Hossayn. They were asked to participate in the study because of their experience as teachers of the Qur'an in rural parts of Norway. Recruiting the teachers and conducting interviews were done by the first author.[1] When establishing contact, the author introduced herself as a lecturer of teacher education, with a PhD project aiming to improve RE teachers' knowledge of what the students learn about Islam and the Qur'an in different settings. For this reason, the interviewer's position can be understood as an outsider of the Islamic educational context, but an insider, with potential influence, in the mainstream, public educational system. The interview with Hossayn was held in November 2021 at the Islamic Center where he is teaching, whereas the one with Uthman was held digitally in January 2023. The interviews were conducted on the basis of a three-folded interview guide with questions about the informants' backgrounds, experiences as teachers in supplementary Islamic education, and relations to the public school. The interviews lasted 95 and 115 minutes respectively, but additional time was spent before and after the interviews since the teachers had further comments on the research topic. The two teachers expressed that they found the topic important since it addressed their daily teaching challenges.

The anonymized transcriptions of the interviews were first coded thematically, focusing on themes addressed by both participants. Inspired by the narrative approach, we then structured their stories of being Muslim and teachers of Islamic supplementary education in Norway, in relation to time

and place (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 69). After this, we analyzed their pedagogical approaches by concentrating on *what* each of them said was important for children to learn in Islamic supplementary education, their arguments for *why* this was important, and *how* they moved forward to teach this. In the end, we related the answers to these questions to traditions within Islam to connect the pedagogical approaches to the teachers' narratives about change, negotiation, and context (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2007, p. 362).

The Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD) recognize religion and ethnic background as special categories, that should not be paired with information so that the informants could be indirectly identifiable.[2] Both Hossayn and Uthman have migrated from Muslim-majority countries in the Middle Eastern region, but our focus is on their narratives of being minorities in the Norwegian context. To give in-depth descriptions of the experiences which might be relevant to bring understanding to their pedagogical approaches in the Norwegian context, we will keep additional information about Hossayn and Uthman (e.g., Muslim denomination, ethnic and national background) to a minimum.

CONTEXTUALIZING HOSSAYN AND UTHMAN IN NORWAY

The Muslim minority in Norway is largely a result of labor migration in the 1960s and 1970s (Leirvik, 2014, p. 138). In the following decades, the number of Muslim immigrants increased due to numerous international crises where Muslims came to Norway as refugees (Andreassen, 2021, p. 197). Hossayn, who is now in his sixties, moved to Norway at the beginning of the 1990s. At this point, Norway had a growing Muslim population, where approximately 20,000 were organized in different religious communities. By the year 2000, this number had increased to around 55,000 persons registered in Muslim organizations (Vogt, 2018, p. 142). Uthman, our second teacher, who is in his late twenties, moved to Norway with his family as a teenager in the year 2011. When he started his work in the Muslim communities in the late 2010s, the number of organized Muslims in Norway had increased to 155,000. Today, the total number of Muslims in Norway is estimated to be closer to 250,000, which is approximately 4 percent of the total Norwegian population (Østby & Dalgard, 2017; Statistisk sentralbyrå, 2021).[3]

Hossayn has taught the Qur'an as part of Islamic supplementary education for over thirty years in an Islamic Center in rural Norway. He recounts that when he was new in Norway, the public schoolteachers that he encountered had limited knowledge of Islam. Therefore, he had to take on multiple roles.

> Hossayn: This was in the 90s, it was particularly difficult then. Our children felt that teachers did not know what to do, in this new culture, they had no idea, and the children did not know who to turn to. I had to be both an interpreter, advocate, and mother tongue teacher for children and adults. And [explain] what they were supposed to do.

Hossayn remembers this time as particularly challenging because Norway was new to him and his wife, and Muslims were still "new" to Norway. Much time was spent navigating both the educational system and figuring out how to be Muslim in this new context. Furthermore, Hossayn explains that raising his children as new citizens of Norway was demanding: "We wanted to teach [the children] to be both, at the same time … to become both Norwegian and Muslims, plus the culture. And this was quite tough on them". Even though Hossayn, at that time, was new to Norway, he taught Islamic supplementary education intending to uphold Muslim traditions and knowledge to the next generation, which would be Norwegian Muslims.

Almost 25 years later and in a different part of Norway, Uthman, in his late teens, becomes increasingly involved in a Mosque and its education. In 2015, when many underaged refugees came to Norway from countries like Syria and Afghanistan, Uthman became involved in helping them through his work in the local asylum center. Through conversations with these refugees, he understood the importance of religion which inspired his studies and commitment to Islam. When telling his story about these studies he stresses that following Islam is a deliberate *choice* he made:

> Uthman: I didn't choose to be a Muslim because my parents were Muslims. Like everyone at that age, I had a lot of questions and thoughts that I wanted to find answers to, and Islam was the only religion providing me with answers to all of my questions. So that is why I chose this religion, Islam. And this is something Allah, or the one God, teaches us in the Qur'an. You should keep asking questions and always look for answers … or try to find answers among the right people.

Uthman describes his choices and his Islamic identity in relation to the importance of pursuing knowledge. He wants his pupils to see this importance as well, but not only see it but also to *choose* Islam because they understand its importance and meaning. In our understanding, his story points to one of modernity's central features: the prominent place of the individual over and above the group. In our modern societies, it is the individual, rather than the group or the family, that is expected to make decisions about matters large and small. Tordis Borchgrevink argues that the ability to choose is a "fundamental moral category" in Western societies (Borchgrevink, 1997, p. 31). Moreover, several scholars have noted that how young Western Muslims independently construct their approach to being Muslim tends to reflect modern Western civilization's dominant

beliefs about the self (Berglund, 2013; Jacobsen, 2011). In viewing their Muslim identity as involving personal choice rather than being inherent, young Muslims affirm both the power of the individual and the freedom to choose, which are so much a part of the modern project.

If we now return to Hossayn, it is thus not only the growing number of Muslim inhabitants that has affected the society since he moved to Norway. The public debate on Islam and immigration has also become more prevalent. A new generation of Muslims is more visible and engaged in debates (Døving, 2020, p. 264). Islam, Muslims, and Islamic education have, during this time become a subject of intense public debate all over Europe, especially after Muslims raised in the West carried out attacks against their fellow citizens (Berglund, 2022). Døving (2013) explains how Islam in the first decade of 2000 was portrayed in the media as a problem that must be solved, related to conflict and challenges with social integration. Today, the Norwegian media is rather an arena for negotiating different views, she explains. The newspapers are in general critical of Islamophobic statements, but the discourse on Islam is still dominated by politicians speaking about Muslims in a stereotypical way (Døving, 2020, p. 264–265). A population survey from 2022 shows a slight decrease in negative attitudes over the last five years. Nevertheless, the survey also shows that there are stereotypical ideas about Muslims. For example, approximately a third of the population agreed with the statements that "Muslims constitute a threat to Norwegian culture" and "Muslims do not fit in with a modern Western society" (Moe, 2022, p. 9). Increased attention toward both Muslims in Norway and Islamophobic attitudes are examples of how the relationship between Muslims and the larger society has increasingly become a matter of public concern (Leirvik, 2014, p. 142).

By the time Uthman arrived in Norway, the debate on Islam and Muslims had turned critical (Leirvik, 2014). For this reason, he believes that every Muslim, but especially those who teach Islam to the younger generation, carries the responsibility of being a living representation of Islam.

> Uthman: And people [in Norway] do not read the Qur'an or the hadiths, the stories from the Prophet. People will pay attention to my actions because I am a Muslim, and then evaluate Islam based on what I do. So, if I make just a small mistake, they will draw conclusions about Islam or how Muslims behave. And we are judged right away.

Uthman experiences that he continuously has to justify and negotiate Islam in relation to the Norwegian majority population. The 'right' kind of Norwegian Muslim is seen as having a right understanding of Islam, as they are already "Norwegian". Hossayn, on his side, recalls that he had to pick his battles as a newly arrived Muslim in Norway in the 90s. For

instance, celebrations of Christmas at School were one of the things he found, and still finds, to be okay.

> Hossayn: Yes, we would like [the children] to be Muslims, and even though they celebrate Christmas better than Ramadan, it is the society that is celebrating. I bring my children to see Santa Claus and so on, but it is hard to explain to children in elementary school that they should have two morals at the same time, two faces. Yes, you could partake in the societal celebration of Christmas but don't put too much into it, what is most important is to celebrate Ramadan, and Eid and do the pilgrimage.

The way Hossayn explains it, he wants children to hold on to their Muslim identity, while also partake in joint societal celebrations. In his view, this is an approach that can help children navigate *between* Norwegian society and religion at home without creating a fuss. This way of reasoning connects to Gilliam (2022) who, in her study found that what is perceived as a "good" Muslim in school (and in the majority society) is a "relaxed Muslim", i.e., someone who adapts to the secular discourse. Uthman finds the expectation to be a "relaxed Muslim" problematic. For instance, he has been engaged in debates about whether it would be right for Muslims to greet others with "Merry Christmas". He argues that Muslims should be respectful and wish their colleagues and friends a joyful holiday without saying this exact greeting. However, because Norwegian Muslims disagree on this matter, Uthman experiences that his point of view is perceived as the "extreme" interpretation.

> Uthman: There was this huge discussion on why Muslims cannot say Merry Christmas. Some might argue that they can and therefore they are modern Muslims, and you are more extreme. But this makes it harder for me and anyone who wants to become Muslim who does not have a Muslim background. Because, when they talk to their family members, to make them understand, they might think of this person, who knows nothing about this who says 'I am Muslim, and I do not mind saying Merry Christmas'. Then the parents of this person who reverted might say that they know 'Abdi', 'he is a Muslim, he attends the Mosque, but you have become the extreme one' … So, it becomes a problem for many.

According to Døving, the Norwegian News Media holds a specific view on what is perceived as the "good" imam and "good" role model for Muslims, i.e., someone who knows Norwegian, is liberal, would defend gender equality, accepts gay rights, and actively distance themself from terrorism by attending public demonstrations (Døving 2012, p. 32). Døvings findings connect to the challenges that Uthman describes. He has to represent the "good" Islam for Norwegian society and at the same time the "right" Islam for the wider Muslim society. Research shows that many young Muslims find it challenging to relate to the majority culture while at the same time having to deal with stereotypical representations of Islam (Farstad, 1970, p. 119). Hossayn, who immigrated as an adult and encountered Norwegian

society as a parent, experienced other tensions when raising children within the Norwegian culture compared to his home country.

> Hossayn: Outside they are 'Norwegian', but at home, they are from [home country]. It is hard when they meet up with friends.
>
> Interviewer: To fit in?
>
> Hossayn: Not only that. Happenings at school, sleepovers, going camping… Because of the freedom which is in this system. […] It is safe, but because the children are so free, nothing can stop them, even though we know it is safe. Therefore, we must emphasize what *haram* and *halal* mean, what is okay, and what is forbidden. When they eat, some of this is not for you. It is for your future, really. So, when Norwegians say are you crazy, I answer no, I am not crazy, it is differences in culture. Here the children can do whatever they like and try everything until they grow up, but in our culture, it is different, try it when you have grown up. Learning and trying is … We might have to stop teenagers from doing many things they would like, if they want to do it as adults it is okay, but not now because so many things go wrong.

One of the topics Hossayn mentions is that in Norwegian society teenagers are given a great deal of freedom to make their own decisions (Borchgrevink, 1997, p. 31). Even though he is well aware that the children are generally safe, the Norwegian system does not provide a structure to keep the teenagers from making mistakes that in the worst case can be harmful, especially from a religious point of view. From his perspective, ISE can provide such a framework. Uthman has first-hand experience on what can happen if teenagers run with the wrong crowd, and thus connects ISE to safety and community.

> Uthman: We have had several incidents where teenagers went to fight during the weekends, and unfortunately someone was murdered by stabbing. Of course, this could happen to anyone, not just the Muslims, but to us, who are minority Norwegians, it is important to take care of the youth so that they feel like they belong somewhere and find a good environment, instead of a bad one. […] Those who have a correct understanding of the Qur'an as part of their upbringing will do better in school and become more useful in society. And what I mean by that is teenagers who grow up with a correct understanding of the religion, will not end up in the wrong crowd, for instance criminal environments.

In his view, the aim of ISE is twofold: To provide the children and youth with a right understanding of Islam and the Qur'an, and to create a community of belonging for Norwegian Muslim youth. In our understanding, what Hossayn and Uthman perceive to be the aim of Islamic supplementary education, is connected to the struggles they have experienced. Their narratives depict encounters with 'different Norways'. Nevertheless, they are teaching the Qur'an within ISE because they argue that it is in the best interest of the younger generation. However, their pedagogical approaches are somewhat different.

PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES

Neither Uthman nor Hossayn has a teacher training background, but they have many years of teaching experience in Islamic supplementary education. As a leisure activity, ISE often consists of a multitude of courses and programs, e.g., related to heritage language learning, Islamic morals and piety or social activities (Berglund,forthcoming; Eggen, 2023; Iversen, forthcoming; Kleive & Horsfjord, 2023). It is therefore worth noting that when we discuss the pedagogical approaches, we focus on what content, methods, and pedagogical tools the teachers find important in the act of teaching the Qur'an and Islam in particular. Starting with Hossayn, he emphasizes listening and copying when he describes his lessons. The goal is that the children should learn the Qur'an by heart.

> Interviewer: How do you do it in the lessons?
>
> Hossayn: Copying
>
> Interviewer: Like listening or reading?
>
> Hossayn: Listening. For instance, I know how to read the Qur'an without looking at it, and therefore we teach it to the children without any book. Just like listening to a song. One time we were here I told the kids: you are on your phone all the time, and all the time you listen to music, you know everything about the latest song from this and that… It is not forbidden, but perhaps you could also listen somewhat to the Qur'an as well. Then you will remember more and automatically you will know how to read it. Just do it now and then.

Teaching children how to read, recite and memorize the Qur'an is an important part of teaching children to practice religion since rote learning and recitation of at least the *al-Fatiha* (the opening sura) is necessary to fulfill the obligatory act of prayer. The focus on recitation is therefore related to the ritual aspects of the Qur'an (Svensson, 2006, p. 3). Hossayns' method of teaching consists of letting the children listen to him recite, and then repeat what they have heard. The way Hossayn describes his lessons and method lies close to what can be understood as traditional Islamic education. This education has been characterized by memorization (*tahfīz*), rote learning, and recitation, as well as person-to-person transmission of knowledge (Berkey, 1992; Chamberlain, 1994; Gent, 2018; Makdisi, 1981). Helene Boyle (2006, p. 480) suggests that "Qur'anic memorization is a process of embodying the divine—the words of God—and as such is a far more learner-oriented and meaningful process than is typically described". Hossayn elaborates on what he finds most important in relation to teaching memorization:

> Interviewer: And when the children are listening, what are they listening to?
>
> Hossayn: They need to know about *tartīl*. That is what the Qur'an says, *tartīl* is the Qur'an. It is what it says. People disagree on *tajwīd*, especially the people at the top

of the religion, they say it might become more like singing. It is voice up and down, so there are disagreements. The Qur'an does not say *tajwīd*, but it says *tartīl*, so it is about tempo, faster or slower, and pronouncing the words correctly.

As Hossayn says, there is an instruction in the Qur'an which translates to "Recite the Qur'an with *tartīl* [slowly, deliberately]" (Gade, 2006, p. 482). *Tartīl* thus refers to reading in the way that the prophet Mohammad is supposed to have read, i.e., with no haste and making the letters clear, which is closely related to the art of reciting, *tajwīd*. *Tajwīd* refers to the rules governing pronunciation during recitation and is a highly regarded skill in Muslim communities. According to Kristina Nelson, it is important to understand the fundamental significance of *tajwīd* in that it "preserves the nature of a revelation whose meaning is expressed as much by its sound as by a comprehensive set of regulations which govern many of the parameters of the sound production, such as duration of syllable, vocal timbre, and pronunciation" (Nelson 2001, p. 14). Even though *tajwīd* plays an important role in Muslim communities, Hossayn emphasizes *tartīl* in teaching the children to recite the Qur'an. We connect his emphasis on *tartīl* to what Hossayn finds to be an important outcome of the lessons, namely teaching children the habit of practicing religion.

> Hossayn: We teach them religious practice … We say, teach the children religion as a habit from they are five, or six years, because, even though they are not required, learn it as a habit. One day they can pray and one day they can try to fast from food for a couple of hours, it becomes a habit when they are older. And then they learn the system. We raise our children like this.

In his view, attending Islamic education in addition to what is taught at home, listening to, and reciting the Qur'an regularly, provides a framework to build habits that the child will benefit from when it grows older. Therefore, Hossayn encourages his students to listen to the Qur'an at home. He says that this will give them a routine of religious practice, but also that it helps them to improve their memory. Furthermore, Hossayn points out that today it is easier than ever for students to find input at home through the Internet.

> Hossayn: We used to have a lot of audio cassettes, but now, with the internet, just type in the first two letters in Google and you will find everything, on Google and YouTube. [laughter] […] So we do not have to do all the work in practice, we can just point them in that direction. When you are under the duvet, on your phone, just find something about the Qur'an and about Muhammed, you are required to do so, and then you can return to your movie, to Netflix [laughter].

Back in the 90s, Hossayn used cassettes and audio tapes as pedagogical tools. Today they are replaced by smartphones and computers with Google and YouTube. Hossayn depicts these digital platforms as a positive supplement to his lessons because it makes religious practices a part of the children's everyday life.

As mentioned above, learning to read Arabic so that the Qur'an can be recited, as well as memorizing certain passages are considered central elements within traditional Islamic culture and education (Boyle, 2006; Berkey, 1992; Nelson, 2001). This has been, and remains, the case for many Muslims. But the tradition is not uniform. Within historical Islam, there has always been a debate, to the present day, about the value or virtue of learning to read and recite the Arabic Qur'an without understanding what the actual words mean in a word-for-word propositional sense (Günther, 2006). Previous research from for example Sweden also shows that some teachers of Islamic education hold a different approach to teaching the Qur'an (Berglund, 2010). As we will see, Uthman's way of teaching the Qur'an represents a different pedagogical approach. When Uthman is asked to describe his teaching, he emphasizes that students must learn about the *meaning* and background of the Qur'an in addition to reading out loud.

> Interviewer: And what about recitation, do you teach that as well? Is that included in the same lessons?
>
> Uthman: Yes. If you mean how to read the Qur'an and so on. But there is a problem. We do not want the children to just read the Qur'an. We want them to know the meaning … But it is not always easy considering what time we have. […] We might have one lesson just about the Qur'an, for instance how it was revealed because this is a much-debated topic … is the Qur'an … in its true form or … is it truly intact or is it changed? If we do not read the Qur'an, these are the kinds of questions we discuss.

Even though Uthman says Qur'an recitation is relevant, knowing what the meaning of the Qur'an is as important. This relates to studies of ISE where one finds the cognitive aspects of the Qur'an, that is, what it perceived to be its teachings, to be as important as the ritual aspects (Svensson, 2006, p. 7). Furthermore, Uthman stresses that every person is expected to search for knowledge and the right type of knowledge.

> Uthman: We Muslims, I will use the word obligatory just to explain it, because there is an expectation, for both men and women, boys and girls, to gain the proper knowledge to understand what is correct and what is wrong. And it is not like everyone can interpret the Qur'an …

Within traditional Islamic worldviews, the place of knowledge (*'ilm*) together with the individual's duty of seeking knowledge, is often claimed to be paramount (Boyle, 2006, pp. 484–485). Uthman says ISE provides an environment where children can seek and gain the right type of knowledge. The way Uthman describes it, the most important thing is to provide the students with the knowledge to *understand* Islam. With the right knowledge, students will be able to navigate through everyday life knowing what is right and what is wrong, he argues. Therefore, Uthman prioritizes

discussing questions that are brought up by the student as a method when teaching about the Qur'an and Islam.

> Uthman: Because I grew up here, I know the problems and thoughts and crises that might emerge … I do not right away say this is halal, this is haram, this is forbidden, this is allowed. Rather, I ask what they experience to be a problem because I want them to start the conversations themselves, to open up so that when trust is established, we can talk more freely. […] So … Sometimes you have to be a bit strict and sometimes you have to be like a good friend, laughing together to make it work.

Uthman wants his classroom to be a place where children can speak freely and ask whatever questions they want. He wants to answer them with relevant knowledge on the questions they bring and to provide a safe space where they can and want to return to learn more. Therefore, he sees his background and experience of being a teenager in Norway as an advantage when establishing trust and confidentiality. For Uthman, the question of language is also related to the purpose of understanding and being able to partake in the community. This is both related to learning Arabic, and having pedagogical material and discussions in Norwegian:

> Uthman: I want speeches and things like that to be in Norwegian, everything should be in Norwegian, not Arabic, of course, some texts in Arabic as well, but everything must be translated to Norwegian because that is what the next generation is born and raised up with, it is the language they need to learn and develop. […] Language is the key to success and to better getting to know and understand each other, right. So, language has a great and important role. And for knowledge as well.

Uthman puts emphasis on understanding the meaning of the words of the Qur'an since he claims that this makes the students *understand* what is right and wrong. Hossayn instead says that learning to understand the Arabic of the Qur'an is not the priority: "Arabic is difficult, but you can still read it even though you do not understand it. Therefore, it is not required to learn [Arabic]. But you are required to learn the practice. […] But the Qur'an, reading only." Nevertheless, both of them emphasize that it takes years of education to learn how to understand and thereby interpret the Qur'an. What Uthman explains to be the best way to understand the Qur'an, reading one verse in light of a different verse, is by many seen as the highest-held method for interpreting the Qur'an (Eggen, 2007, p. 186). Even though both Hossayn and Uthman provide examples of methods for interpretation, they put great emphasis on the challenges of both translating and interpreting the meaning of the Qur'an.

> Uthman: And you might find multiple verses in the Qur'an that are referring to the same thing but are found in different chapters. So, it is not easy. First, you must know the Qur'an and what it says and where. So, no, it is not easy for anyone to say 'Today we are going to show how to interpret the Qur'an [laughter]

In addition to the Arabic language, another challenge in this regard is what knowledge is needed about the Qur'an to move forward with a legitimate interpretation. Knowledge of *how* to determine the right meaning and what methods to use is something both Hossayn and Uthman say takes years of schooling to learn when you are an adult. Therefore, it is not a part of what they teach in ISE.

WHAT KNOWLEDGE IS NEEDED ABOUT THE QUR'AN?

To further discuss the differences between Uthman and Hossayns' pedagogical approaches, we connect the results presented above to James Watts' distinction between the semantic, expressive, and iconic dimensions of religious scripture. Watts (2019) argues that religious scriptures are different than other books because they are ritualized along all three dimensions. *The semantic dimension* is related to the interpretation of the content and meaning of texts, which could be relevant when reading a text and interpreting its meaning as part of a religious ritual, in groups, privately or working with content within a theological context (Watts, 2019, p. 14). When Uthman prioritizes teaching his students the meaning of the Qur'an, he emphasizes the semantic dimension of the Qur'an. However, Uthman makes a distinction between teaching the meaning of the Qur'an and making interpretations, providing restrictions when encountering the semantic dimension. According to Watts (2019, p. 14), any performative rendition of the scripture, such as oral or visual representations, is connected to *the expressive dimension* of religious scriptures.[4] Recitations, paintings, songs, graphic expressions of words such as inscriptions, and films that portray the content of scripture exemplify this dimension. Thus, when Hossayn focus on giving his students the skills to recite, we understand this as an emphasis on the expressive dimension. His pedagogical approaches, for instance, using YouTube as materials and auditive learning strategies, are coherent to this dimension as well.

Finally, *the iconic dimension* is expressed through the special treatment or expected behaviors that take place before, during, or after an interaction with a scripture. These could include the placement of a sacred text in the home, decorations of the scripture, purity practices, or rituals of "death" for scripture, such as burying worn-out copies of the Qur'an (Svensson, 2010; Watts, 2019, p. 15). Uthman and Hossayn did talk about purity practices as part of ISE, but not in relation to the Qur'an in particular. A possible way to understand this is that the special treatment of the Qur'an is not explicitly taught but is rather part of an embodied practice in which children are socialized growing up. We can thereby understand it as part of the competencies that Rosowsky (2013, 2015) conceptualize as *faith literacy*.

According to Rosowsky ([2015](#), p. 170) *faith literacy*, also known as *liturgical literacy*, is seen as the array of skills, technologies and knowledge which holds up purposeful social activities, either as they are needed to partake in a particular activity (for instance recitation and expected behavior in relation to the Qur'an) or a group of such activities, for instance in liturgical practices. The concept of faith literacy also highlights the linguistic world in which 'minority languages', such as Qur'anic Arabic, can be seen to have great symbolic value for particular communities, including those who neither speak nor understand Arabic:

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

Furthermore, faith literacy can help us understand that although there might be a dominant form of literacy in a particular culture there are other literacies that have their legitimate place and function (Street, [2013](#)). Thus, understanding the literal meaning of what is memorized and recited is secondary to its historical and symbolic value in the identity-formation of community members. What is understood as important is to embody the words of God and learn *when* and *how* to use them (Berglund, [2018](#); Rosowsky, [2013](#)). In our understanding, depending on the religious community, participants must make use of skills and competencies which relate to both semantic, expressive, and iconic dimensions of religious scripture to partake in a faith literacy.

WHAT KNOWLEDGE IS BEST FOR THE CHILD?

Even though the pedagogical approaches differ in terms of *what* they teach and which *methods* and *material* they use, both Uthman and Hossayn focus on knowledge that they claim is for the greater good in children's lives, i.e., what is best for the child. From Hossayns point of view, it is best for the child to memorize the Qur'an, learn to recite, and make both listening and reciting the Qur'an a habit in life, which relates to the expressive dimension of religious scripture (Watts, [2019](#)). For Uthman, it is instead the choice of Islam that is important. As we have seen, he argues that a child needs to *understand* the words of the Qur'an and its meaning, i.e., the semantic dimension of religious scripture (Watts, [2019](#)). Uthman does not consider this type of understanding as making personal interpretations, instead, understanding the words of the Qur'an is important so that the children's choice of Islam is deliberate and informed. On top of this, the semantic dimension is necessary to make the child understand what is right and wrong, both in terms of Islamic interpretations and actions in everyday

life. To facilitate the process of making Islam a deliberate choice, Uthman wants the children to have the possibility to ask him questions. This connects to the importance of knowledge (*'ilm*) together with the individual's duty of seeking it. He wants to provide a safe space for children and teenagers where they can discuss matters related to their religion. This does not mean that Uthman considers recitation of the Qur'an unimportant. Instead, he argues that the children eventually will be socialized into different aspects of faith literacy, such as knowledge of the expressive and iconic dimension, as they spend time within the religious community (Rosowsky, 2013). From Uthman's point of view, knowing the semantic dimension of the Qur'an will keep the children and teenagers returning to the Muslim community over time, which is in the child's best interest.

Discussion on what is best for a child never takes place in a vacuum. Every society has different, more or less, basic ideas about what is best for children and for people in general (Nilsson, 2011, p. 25). The fact that there is a relatively large, often implicit, consensus in a society on the importance of considering 'what is best for the child', does not mean that there is an agreement regarding the answers to this question. Children are surrounded by actors who not only have strong but also different opinions about what is best for the child. Some parents argue that a religious upbringing is an important and non-negotiable part of what they consider to be best for their children. From a Norwegian historical perspective, a religious (Lutheran-Evangelical) upbringing was for a long period of time a taken-for-granted part of what society at large considered the best for children. Historically there was thus resistance against this state-church-imposed religious education from for example free church members (Breistein, 2022, p. 42).[5] In today's secular Norway, this is no longer the norm, and Islamic supplementary education has been debated during the last decade. For instance, questions have been raised about whether this type of education keeps children away from activities that support social integration (Vogt, 2018, p. 168). Such discussions show a tension between different answers to 'what is best for the child'.

Disagreements on what is best for the child can sometimes become problematic, not least from a minority perspective in a school context, where a number of different actors can have more or less justified opinions about what is best for one and the same child. Berglund (2017) has for example noted that secular norms that influence the Swedish school system silence the voices and experiences of young Muslims who attend Islamic supplementary education. These findings are supported by others as well, where "[…] it is acceptable to be Muslim as long as you behave 'like everyone else' and religion does not affect you 'too much'" at school (Flensner, 2018, p. 14), i.e., you are a 'relaxed' Muslim, without any 'fuss' (Gilliam, 2022).

Consequently, students might not experience mainstream education as a place to express and discuss religious belonging (Jahnke, 2021), even though the ideal RE-classroom is supposed to provide a 'safe space' (Jackson, 2014). Instead, nurturing and instruction *into* religious belonging within families and religious communities might provide a safe space and sense of belonging in a way that religious education in mainstream schools cannot. Even though Uthman and Hossayn express trust in teachers' professional competencies, they are uncertain about what knowledge schoolteachers might have about Islam. This is due to the experiences they have had, as a parent or a student, and through encounters with their students themselves. For instance, Hossayn had to be the one giving information to the teachers about Islam when his children were among the first Muslims in the school in the 90s'. Uthman, as a student himself, found what he perceived to be mistakes in the RE textbooks about Islam, and also stereotypical presentations in history lessons about Islam as a violent religion. These experiences might be yet another reason why they find ISE to be essential in providing what they perceive to be the right knowledge about Islam to Norwegian Muslims. Nevertheless, children have limited spare time, and similarly to studies from other ISE contexts in Norway (Kleive & Horsfjord, in press), time shortage is presented as a challenge by Uthman and Hossayn. In our understanding, the pedagogical approaches reflect what they find most important to spend this time on. Whether it is to equip children with the knowledge or the habit which is perceived as necessary to be a Norwegian Muslim, it is simultaneously how teachers of ISE ensure the continuation of the religious community in a minority context.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

In this article, we have brought forward the stories and experiences of Uthman and Hossayn to illustrate and bring understanding to different pedagogical approaches that can exist in Islamic supplementary education. Their narratives reflect an 'otherness' which mirrors their encounters with different 'Norways', different schools, and different RE-subjects. We connect their pedagogical approaches to experiences of belonging to a religious minority which is much debated and often criticized by the public (Moe, 2022; Døving, 2020). For both Uthman and Hossayn, ISE is an arena where Norwegian Muslim Youth can find a sense of belonging. The ISE teachers highlight the importance of teaching Islam and the Qur'an to the next generation, thus ensuring the continuation of the religious community in a minority context. Uthman and Hossayn relate the ISE to what they perceive to be most important for the children to become good Norwegian

Muslims. As we have seen, from Uthmans point of view this means to create a space where children and young people can learn to understand their religion and thereby make a deliberate choice to follow Islam. To facilitate this, the Qur'anic education must emphasize the semantic dimension of the Qur'an. For Hossayn, this means to provide children with the skills to embody ritual practices, which can be brought and adapted to everyday life in Norway. Therefore, Hossayn emphasizes the expressive dimension of the Qur'an in his lessons (Watts, 2019). Even though these approaches are different, there is a common rationale. Both of them relate ISE to the importance of community and belonging and build on the idea that this is in the child's best interest. As we have argued, both Uthman and Hossayns' pedagogical approaches should be seen as attempts to include children into purposeful social activities with symbolic value, namely faith literacy (Rosowsky, 2015).

Children and teenagers attending Islamic Supplementary Education (ISE) may encounter teachers in mainstream schools with limited or no knowledge about this form of education. This can pose challenges for the child, particularly considering the prevailing negative public discourse on Islam and Islamic supplementary education (Berglund, 2017, 2018). Consequently, we contend that it would be beneficial for teachers and staff in mainstream schools to possess at least some knowledge about the content, methods, and objectives of Islamic supplementary education. There are several reasons for this assertion.

Firstly, ISE can be viewed as a type of leisure-time activity (see Berglund, fourthcoming). In school, students often bring up their leisure-time activities in informal conversations with teachers. Having some knowledge about these activities facilitates positive conversations. Secondly, for teachers addressing the topic of religion in school, knowledge about ISE sheds light on what religion might look like in the everyday life of their local community. Consequently, teachers might be better equipped to incorporate more nuances and everyday examples when teaching about Islam as a lived religion.

The similarities and differences we observe in the pedagogical approaches of Hossayn and Uthman are two living examples illustrating that religious practices cannot be generalized. Instead, they exemplify the idea that religions are shaped by their time and local context.

Notes

1. The Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD) approved of the project in 2020, before recruiting the informants. In this project, we have used Services for sensitive data (TSD) to collect, store and analyze the research data. TSD is provided by the IT services at the University of Oslo.

2. More information about the Norwegian guidelines for processing personal data could be found at https://sikt.no/en/personvernhandbok-forskning/what-personal-data
3. These numbers are often debated, and not always comparative to numbers in other countries (Brekke et al., 2019).
4. The expressive dimension was previously termed the "performative" dimension. However, in his anthology from 2019, Watts argues that the term performative is too broad, and that "expressive" is a more appropriate label (Watts 2019, p. 14).
5. Throughout the 19th century free church societies were established as a result of international revival movements and new legislation in Norway. Although not identical, they shared a common skepticism towards the State, and State interfering with religion (Breistein, 2022, pp. 33–34). Christianity education in school was held by teachers belonging to the state church, and while fighting for a non-confessional subject, parents kept their children away from such lessons because they found it to be in their best interest.

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