Qur’anic Literacy: its central role in the life of UK Muslim communities

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NALDIC members have been working with children from Muslim backgrounds for many years. They will all be aware to some extent of the Qur’anic literacy practices nearly all such children engage in on a regular basis. However, despite the longstanding presence of this literacy practice within the UK and the thousands of British children and young people who are acquiring, or who have already acquired, Qur’anic literacy, there have been no substantial in-depth studies of this practice and the role it plays in the lives of so many. At the same time, recent national attention, some of it misinformed and misrepresentative, upon the Muslim community and, in this case, upon the nature of teaching and learning in the mosque school - we are presently, for example, at the consultation stage for a proposed set of national standards regulating mosques and their accompanying education provision - means that such a study is timely and contributory to the ongoing debate regarding not only Muslim education, but also supplementary schooling and faith schools.

This report is of a study into the practice of Qur’anic literacy within a typical (Mirpuri-Punjabi heritage) UK Muslim community. The study focuses on the process of Qur’anic literacy acquisition in a number of mosque schools and has employed, over a two year period, ethnographic methods such as participant observation, interviewing and textual analysis to provide a detailed description of this literacy practice. Against a backdrop of recent questioning of the validity of multiculturalism in the UK, and the negativity facing Islam in the West, following the events of 9/11 and 7/7, this study brings from the margin a hitherto under-researched and misunderstood literacy practice and celebrates the central role it plays within this community.

The study reveals the inter-generational tension that currently exists in respect of teaching methods, mosque school curricula and languages of instruction. The study also presents, almost uniquely, Qur’anic literacy in a favourable light, celebrating the cultural richness this practice provides the Muslim community as it establishes its distinct identity in multicultural Britain.

A number of findings are of immediate interest to teachers in UK schools. Firstly, there is no dispute that the dominant teaching approach for the acquisition for Qur’anic literacy is one that emphasises synthetic phonics, and, given the recent adoption by the DCSF, in the light of the Rose Report, of similar approaches to the teaching of initial reading in UK schools, there is considerable potential in discussions that would illuminate both strengths and weaknesses in such approaches in both settings. Secondly, the prodigious amounts of text memorised in Classical Arabic would astonish most teachers for whom memorisation as a learning strategy is something that perhaps belongs to the past. Rather than seeing this as something to be disparaged, it is argued that schools and teachers would benefit from a greater awareness and understanding of this practice and should identify aspects of mainstream schooling that might profit from such skills (the learning of poetry and script are obvious examples). Thirdly, the study also confirms Fishman’s (1989) sociolinguistic concept of language maintenance, which claims that within a minority context the ‘religious classical’, in this case, Qur’anic literacy, is invariably the language and literacy maintained often at the expense of other, more secular, vernaculars. This has serious implications for the maintenance, in this case, of the community’s literary language, Urdu, which does not always have the same cultural weight within the community as Qur’anic literacy.

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