

Maktab education: a community imperative and the making of Muslim ambassadors

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Abstract

Contemporary discourse on Muslims and Islam has included a reassessment of traditional educational institutions; *makātib* and *madāris*. Hitherto, understanding insider aspirations and anxieties appear to be rare. To this end, perspectives of Muslim female teachers in *makātib* (supplementary schools for Muslims, sometimes known as ‘mosque schools’) in England were surveyed. This original article attends to their views regarding the aims of this educational provision. Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction is used to rationalise their perspectives. The findings reveal their professional aspirations and suggestions to better the learning processes. They expose a changing phenomenon. Furthermore, through their services, they challenge stereotyped assumptions about *makātib* and their functions. The data de-mystifies the visions they hold for Muslim children and the wider society.

Key words: *maktab*, Muslim, education, British, women, *madrasah*

Introduction

Discussions surrounding Muslim women in many circles reveal at least one of three common perceptions: suppressed, uneducated, and house bound. Seldom, are they presented as opinionated, educated, and active, let alone being a force for change for both their own communities and the wider society (Ijaz and Abbas 2010). Indeed, often, they are stereotyped as passive, doubly marginalised and invisible (Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015).

The subject of young Muslims learning in *makātib* and their personnel engagement in this process are of interest not only to educators - Muslim and others - but also to families, politicians, welfare groups, and young people themselves. Increasingly, schools and policy makers are taking a proactive approach towards understanding the provisions made in *makātib* and working towards further collaboration (Mogra 2018). Equally, many Muslims are welcoming external support to enhance the quality of provision they offer. Some Local Authorities through capacity development programmes have strengthened the work of faith communities. In turn, some parents have welcomed changes appearing in some *makātib*. The intensity of the debate regarding the role of *madāris* and to some extent *makātib* has increased considerably in recent years, but in commentaries about Muslim educational institutions, the female voice from within has been scarce.

This study takes a first step in exploring insider perspectives from Muslim female teachers about their services to *maktab* education in England. It explored the significance they attached these religious supplementary classes and the contribution they make to British society generally, and, to young Muslims. Investigations into Muslim female teachers'

commitments, participations and responses to allegations against *makātib* and how they envisage improving *makātib* are analysed. This article begins with a review of literature, explains the methodology, analyses the data, and then offers a discussion and conclusion.

Literature review

The *maktab* existed during the time of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). As a teacher, the Prophet taught his early followers. Moreover, teaching took place at the residence of Fatimah, daughter of Umar al-Khattāb (Haykal 1989). After the Prophet's migration to Madinah, a veranda, called *al-suffah*, mainly for the poor and travellers had been established for learning (Boyle 2004). Later, Umar dispatched scholars to teach in those areas where Muslims had established themselves. Educational movements and schools were established in places where they settled (al-Otaibi and Rashid 1997). Henceforth began the worldwide phenomenon of *makātib*. Doing their part, Muslims in Britain have also continued this educational chain.

In Britain and elsewhere, there has been a historical tradition of supplementary schools which have been established for many reasons and which support social aims of peaceful-coexistence, language competency, faith nurture and are key sites within the on-going contested constructions of diasporic identities, pastoral care, spiritual and moral education, scriptural memorisation and transmission of mother tongue and associated cultural traditions (Maḳosa 2022; Rutter 2003; Sai 2018; Scourfield, Gilliat-Ray, Khan, and Otri 2013; Sözeri and Altinyelken 2021). However, the motives for establishing these are not always external. Indeed, sometimes, the lack of religious knowledge among parents provides the determination for establishing *makātib* (Bolognani 2007; Vertovec 1998). Muslim children

receive different kinds of supplementary schooling, and not always in local mosques (Mogra 2004). Some settings organise community groups to support children with homework, basic skills, youth-clubs, and Scout and Beavers groups for leisure and personal development.

In contemporary usage, *maktab* means a place of learning: a primary religious school. Often, in the UK, other terms are used including *madrasah*. Hence, due to this interchangeable application, it is important to distinguish *maktab* from a *madrasah* as a *dār ul-uloom*, when it refers to higher institutes of learning. Furthermore, it is important to note the application of variations for *maktab* elsewhere, including the term *kuttāb*, which is synonymous with *maktab* and is used widely in many Muslim communities (Gent 2018a; Mogra 2022a). In so doing, they reflect, in part, their respective local, linguistic and ethnic traditions. Gent (2006) explored the educational encounters of some Muslim adults and provided a counterbalance to the more theoretical treatment of Muslim education and pedagogy. Though limited in scope, Gent was able to show the contested nature of traditional Islamic education, the lasting influence of a teacher and to challenge the assumed homogeneity of Muslims. Internationally, Boyle (2004) emphasised the many and changing roles of Qur'ānic schools in both preserving and transforming social, educational, and religious practices.

Thus, a prominent feature of *maktab* education is that it supports the continuity of religious knowledge which is central to the Muslim community. They play an important role in addressing social concerns (Rissanen and Sai 2018) and Boyle (2004) argues that they assist children and their communities to 'mediate between the forces of tradition and modernism' and, according to her, they do so by 'fostering and reflecting changes in daily life, social practice and cultural values with a community of practice' (Boyle 2004, 25). Thus, the theory of communities of practice rests on the idea of 'learning as social participation' (Wenger

1998, 4). The involvement here is not merely that of attending events but rather it is ‘a more encompassing process of being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities’ (Wenger 1998, 4). Following this, Boyle (2004) has characterised Islam as a multilevel community of practice. She contends that Qur’ānic schooling facilitates students in social communities, i.e., local, national, and international communities of Islam. In other words, it assists in the construction of Muslim identity for *maktab* students at these three levels.

This research focussed only on reporting the areas outlined earlier, nevertheless, some areas of development feature in the literature which assist in critically evaluating them in view of the empirical data hereunder. Sometime ago, Halsted (2005) had reported the inadequacy of premises in some localities, and, within the classroom, Gent (2006) had found, unsurprisingly, mischievous behaviours, as would be found in other gatherings of learners. Some argued for regulations to protect children (Singleton 2010). In view of this, Gatrad, McGee and Sheikh (2011) alerted paediatricians dealing with Muslim children to be aware of non-accidental injuries. However, it is important to note other studies showing the potential benefits of supplementary schools on children’s learning and development (Maylor et al. 2010). Ouseley (2001) had expressed concern about faith communities and their retention of their strong culture which lead to self-contained communities. Later, a report by the government identified the potential of faith-based schools to promote community cohesion (DCSF 2007). In view of some concerns related to the quality of provisions, many attempts have been made to further enhance them through training initiatives and by exploring mutually enriching encounters between schools and mosque-supplementary classes and proactive approaches to child protection, health and safety, behaviour management and pedagogy are in place (Mogra 2022a).

The educational fields inhabited by Muslim youth have been placed under intense securitisation and suspicion as potential breeding grounds for radicalisation, and concerns over segregation and isolation resulting from failed multicultural policies (Cherti, Glennie and Bradley 2011; HM Government 2015). They have become sites for governments to tackle issues related to ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism’. For instance, David Cameron, as Prime Minister, had invited his party to confront ‘extremism’ and threatened the closure of those found to be teaching intolerance. He had also called for the monitoring, regulating and registering all supplementary schools teaching children intensively (Smith 2015, Mogra 2018). This included *makātib* which are private, personal and communal educational spaces. The government saw some benefits, however, a major concern, across Muslims and many other communities, academics, religious leaders and politicians was around the effect that the proposed regulation would have on their ability to exercise their religious and other freedoms (DfE 2018, 17). The Counter-Extremism Strategy (CES) was also published to counter extremist ideology, radicalisation and strengthen educational institutions (HM Government 2015). In other words, government policies have a bearing on matters of faith development and nurture in the UK.

The geopolitical trends of Islamophobia show that religion has become a significant feature of contemporary systemic racism, bigotry and discrimination (Najib and Hopkins 2020) and one of the most widespread forms of prejudice reported is Islamophobia (Bhatti 2021). Islamophobia is not a new phenomenon. Admittedly, over the past few decades it has intensified. In addition to being associated with terrorism, there has been legislation against clothing, anti-immigration protests and xenophobia, to name a few examples. These narratives and policies, reflect a long history of Orientalism and are based on cultural

prejudices and impact the socio-spatial dimensions of Muslims' lived experiences (Najib and Hopkins 2020). A recent survey revealed two types of Islamophobia which, although are located differently in British society, lend support and overlap one another (Jones and Unsworth 2022). They explain that one type corresponds to other forms of racism and another that is better understood as anti-religious prejudice. The first can be viewed as anti-Muslim, the other as anti-Islamic. On the basis of their data, they argue that Islamophobia cannot be understood or combatted without both these forms of prejudice being acknowledged, and as such, recommend that civil society organisations concerned with prejudice and discrimination should acknowledge that systemic miseducation about Islam is common in British society and forms an important element of Islamophobia (Jones and Unsworth 2022, 37).

The absence of rigorous research and speculation in the media has resulted in a poor understanding amongst policymakers and the wider public about *makātib*. Thus, Cherti, Glennie and Bradley (2011) called for a better understanding of Muslim supplementary education. Importantly, their research reported an absence of strong evidence linking *madrasahs* to the radicalisation of young people in the UK. Moreover, qualitative research of 60 Muslim families suggests that far from promoting isolation and separatism, children who attend *maktab* settings learn not only how to be a Muslim but also what it means to be part of a community and a society, as such, in this way, such formal institutions are perhaps unique in terms of the scope and significance for the production of distinguished British Muslim identities (Scourfield, Gilliat-Ray, Khan, and Otri 2013, 122). In a new ethnographic fieldwork, the claim that Muslim schools are breeding grounds for extremism were inconsistent with its findings (Sai 2018). To these, the perspective of the teachers at the heart of these *makātib* is yet to be explored to gain an understanding of their thoughts and efforts.

Theoretical framework

In this article, Bourdieu's (1997) theory of social and cultural reproduction is used to explain the perspectives of Muslim female teachers in *makātib* in England. In constructing his account of social reproduction, Bourdieu deployed several compelling heuristic concepts such as social capital, cultural habitus, practice and field. For Bourdieu (1997) social capital comprised of social obligations or connections. Cultural capital could be embodied (internalised and intangible), objectified (cultural products), and institutionalised (officially accredited) (Bourdieu 1986). Moreover, he proposed that habitus was the learned set of dispositions by which individuals orient themselves to the social world. These can be rooted in family upbringing (socialisation within the family) and conditioned by an individuals' position in the social structure. He also suggested that habitus shaped the parameters of people's sense of agency and possibility (Bourdieu 1997). The term field referred to the formal and informal norms governing a particular social sphere of activity (e.g., family, learning setting). For Bourdieu, fields are organised around specific forms of capital or combinations of capitals. These can be both the process within, and product of a field (Thompson 2008, 69). Reay (2004) outlines how together Bourdieu's thinking tools can be depicted as a formula which is displayed as '(Habitus 3 Capital) + Field=Practice' (Bourdieu, 1984). Reay interprets this as habitus lying below cultural capital and there being close relationship between capital and field.

Social capital is linked to power (Bourdieu 1986) which is relevant as these teachers are in a position of power over their pupils and communities, in turn, they transfer knowledge-as-power to their pupils. Moreover, the idea of habitus is not only an individual habitus but also a collectivity which results in collective group practices (Bourdieu 1977). Collective habitus

is also relevant when considering the collective nature of *maktab* teachers within the diverse communities of UK and the collective Muslims' worship and ritual practices that are embodied collectively. Thus, Bourdieu's concepts of social and cultural capital are helpful in understanding *maktab* teachers' perceptions of their role as educators when teaching diverse Muslim pupils. To create a context in this article, the *maktab* is taken as representing a 'field'. These *mu'allims* (teachers) are committed in their services to their religion and communities and, by default, they are invested in their fields. The concept of 'capital' is being interpreted as encompassing social, cultural and symbolic capital. However, as capital is not restrictive to the economic sense, capital 'in all their forms' (Bourdieu 1986: 241) is reintroduced to include spiritual capital. Spiritual capital is taken to refer to the three dimensions of *Islam* (submission), *Imān* (faith) and *Ihsān* (virtue) developed through the teachings of Islam (Rustom, Khalil and Murata 2012). The teachers' cultural capital, which is embodied in terms of qualifications, for instance, will consist of their broader knowledge that they have developed through their learning journey and in their roles as teachers. Their social capital is their membership of being *maktab* teachers and belonging to the fraternity of scholars. Their symbolic capital, which is the legitimisation of other forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986), links to their reputation as leaders of learning and honour as scholars within their communities. Their spiritual capital is being linked with their relationship with Allah, the Prophet, Qur'ān and their individual scholarly lineage. In this context, there will be an interplay between specific tools and the field which in turn influences them as *maktab* teachers in England (Bourdieu 1984). These concepts are used as a conceptual framework within this article.

Research method

This research studied the views of female teachers attending training sessions on *maktab* education delivered by the author. A questionnaire elicited their understanding of (i) the aims, significance, and contribution of *maktab* education; (ii) their motives of teaching, the challenges and opportunities; (iii) their responses and reactions to allegations against *makātib*; and (iv) their proposals to enhance its image. The questionnaire was piloted with two teachers, one of whom was a principal. This exercise helped to specify some questions and identified areas of potential confusion based on the nuances of the English language. At the outset, the exclusion of names was emphasised for anonymity, except for those who wished to participate in a follow-up interview.

Being a human endeavour, research methods provide advantages and limitations. The use of a questionnaire offered opportunities to gather straightforward information in a reasonably standardised way, although in using it, the author was restricted in being able to probe beyond the written answer. Nevertheless, participants completed it in their own time and considered their responses thoughtfully. It was also time efficient, giving a high return, and, when dealing with religious and politically sensitive issues, their anonymity was advantageous (Silverman 2022). The questionnaire was designed to elicit qualitative and quantitative data, by using open and closed questions (Gray 2022).

Confidentiality was promised to the participants and a request for honesty was made to enhance validity. None offered to be interviewed which could be explained as resulting from perceptions of intrusion, of being a sensitive topic, or a possible loss of anonymity. The data were manually analysed by the researcher by classifying them into themes and categories, and within these, patterns were discerned (Clark et al. 2021).

Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the quantitative data. The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis (Gray 2022). To begin with, all responses to each question were accumulated under each question. In some instances, these were quantified to show the number of responses received for a particular question. In addition, these responses were then closely examined and read more than once for familiarisation and noting initial ideas. At this stage common codes, for example, '*for the sake of God*', were gathered based on ideas which appeared repeatedly. Thereafter, themes, like '*gaining the pleasure of God*', were generated from these codes. Following this, the responses were reviewed against the themes once again. The themes were then defined, and the data reported accordingly (Gray 2022).

In social research it is important to acknowledge the influence that the researcher's personal values and ideologies may have on the research process, participants and interpretation. Research that is aware of the issues informing its practice and then acts reflexively upon those is more likely to produce enhanced, insightful and systematic studies of the world (May and Perry 2022).

These participants are all female Muslims. However, they are a heterogeneous group with different, linguistic, ethnic, socio-economic and educational backgrounds. As *Muslimahs*, their experiences and interpretation of Islam may be varied regardless of these characteristics. As a male trainer and researcher, some of these characteristics are shared. Therefore, there is an insider and outsider dimension -a problem featuring in the academic study of religion (McCutcheon 1999). Moreover, the design and interpretation may have had certain influences on how and what knowledge is being gathered through this study. Nevertheless, in undertaking research into their work, both perspectives are considered important. Consequently, researchers, gaining an insider's view of society and understanding

participants' world view, will produce situated knowledge rather than universals in order to capture the details of social life (Taylor 2002). Furthermore, being alert to the similarities and differences existing between researchers and their respondents helps to control hidden bias (Hufford 1999). Even then, researchers cannot take into account every eventuality fully.

Results and analysis

From an expected fifty-two, forty-one questionnaires were received; forty declared that they were British citizens. 26 participants indicated that they were born in Britain, Pakistan (4), India (6), Reunion (1), and not declared (4). Their age range and experience are shown below:

[Table 1 near here]

Ages of the participants					
Not declared	19-25	26-35	36-45	46-50	Total
2	18	18	2	1	41

Table 1: Age range

[Table 2 near here]

Years of experience						
	3 months to under 2 years	2-4	5-9	10 -14	15 and over	Total
	9	9	12	9	2	41

Table 2: Length of experience

A significant majority (35) stated that they were *‘ālimahs* (those who had completed a formal study of Islamic theological training at higher level) and one was a *hāfidha* (memoriser of the entire Qur’ān). Twenty-eight participants were married with children, eleven were single, and two did not declare their status. Of these, 29 indicated that they were mothers with one, two, or three children. Over half had five or more years of teaching experience.

The raison d’être of makātib

Every educational system has intended outcomes. In essence, the aim of a *maktab* is to nurture Muslim children into their faith. Some teachers asserted that it was teaching about ‘the principles of Islam’ whereas others offered a generic response. They expected their learners, upon completion of their studies, ‘to understand their roles and responsibilities and to fulfil them as best as they can’. Whitehouse (2002) suggested that the corpus of Islam, as a source of faith-based capital, is transmitted within the private sphere, the primacy of the family through repetition of religious rituals that allowed intergenerational transmission and preservation of cultural value systems, with faith providing the crucial interlocutor for transmission (Scourfield, Gilliat-Ray, Khan, and Otri 2013).

Theologically orientated endeavours were evident from most responses and it was clear that they hold high expectations of their pupils in this regard. In addition to all-encompassing aims, some felt it involved children ‘gaining a deeper understanding of their religion’; ‘knowing how to read the Qur’ān’; ‘maintaining the love for Prophet Muhammad; and ‘making him their role model’. While the applied aspects of learning were not explicitly identified, *makātib* provide experiential learning and model correct routines and practices in

worship and rituals (Boyle 2004). Thus, through this transmission Muslim children adopt beliefs, values and practices embedded within their specific fields, often these are from their particular school of thought. The memorization of the Qur'ān is highly valued in Muslim communities. Thereby representing high-value cultural and spiritual capital. It is also valuable in the secular sphere when transferred into the language of skills (Berglund 2017).

Teachers declared that children learn to develop their confidence 'to differentiate between right and wrong' and 'realise the effects of these in their lives'. Unsurprisingly, therefore, on a personal level, these teachers felt the aims included supporting their learners become more 'confident with a strong identity that would make them proud to be Muslims', 'love Islam', 'know their history and know how to live peaceful lives' and 'respect parents and other people'. In a plural society, where people of different faiths and none co-exist, some hope that their learners will be positioned 'to have a dialogue'. As scholars, their habitus, in the form of the dispositions, which they uphold and their collective practices, continually seek to reinforce symbolic boundaries within their children to help them distinguish themselves from others as these self-constructs are centered around racial, religious and ethnic allegiances (Thobani 2010). Moreover, as repositories of Muslim heritages, power is mobilised by them, through a process whereby 'outsiders' are restricted to certain dispositions which they possess and which they transfer to their pupils in their particular fields and spheres of activity to assist in their identity construction.

The aims of *maktab* education, though, were not confined to this temporal life. They included encouraging children to 'think about the Hereafter'. Therefore, *makātib* provide opportunities to consider how Muslim pupils can make eschatological preparations. Hence, they are

assisted to look beyond materialism and ‘to gain the pleasure of God in this world and in the Hereafter’ and to ‘know about heaven and hell’. As such, *makātib* compensate for the absence of these in state schools as an essential part of their spiritual formation (Gent 2018a).

The development of Muslim personality

That *makātib* are significant educational institutions among Muslim communities globally is borne out by their existence since the beginning of Islam and findings from empirical research studies (Boyle 2004; Brenner 2000; Gent 2018a; Mogra 2022ab; Sai 2018).

Exploring teachers’ perspectives regarding the significance they attach to *makātib* is relevant for gauging their rationale in contemporary discourse surrounding Muslim children, especially in a post 9/11 environment when Muslim identity is politicised and educational institutions are securitised. Unsurprisingly, therefore, expressions of defending Islam become evident. 85 per cent stated that they were either very important or important and justified them both philosophically and practically. A range of explanations was given.

Many participants stated that *maktab* education allows ‘Muslim belief and practices’, ‘attitudes’, ‘morals’, and ‘the history of their religion’ to be known. In the absence of such provisions, some teachers were anxious that children may ‘go off *din* [way of life] and astray’. Therefore, a teacher justified saying that children ‘need to go to a place like a *madrasah* where they can be enlightened and strengthen their *Imān*’ [faith]. In other words, their agent’s practices which constitutes a particular lifestyle (Bourdieu 2010, 167), as internalised cultural capital, provides a faith-based framework to adjust Muslim children towards God-centeredness and nurture their religiosity. Children, it seems, are empowered with a moral framework to live as responsible citizens and as ‘good’ Muslims and for the

Hereafter. Thus, they embody tangible (social) and intangible (spiritual) capital. However, in addition to envisioning them as tutelary, future generations can maintain their identity. Thus, it is believed, that a *maktab* is significant ‘in making Muslims stronger as an Ummah’.

According to some, in the absence of alternatives, *makātib* are established to ensure essential holistic learning about Islam takes place. A participant observed that in school children ‘are taught to stand up to everything, [including] parents and to do what they want to’ and ‘worldly education is given importance’. However, some consider *makātib* as ‘equal in importance to schools.’ Apparently, for this teacher, education for Muslim children should be unified without the dichotomy of secular and religious. In this way, it provides children with Islamic worldview.

A resistance identity that rejects dominant Western culture and identity has been located by Castells (1997) who argued that devalued communities react against the denial of their particular cultural ideologies, identity and customs. Some Muslims may attempt to resist the white, secular, colonial and Western hegemony around them. Such an identity could lead to rejecting the culture of those who reject or marginalise them as the ‘other’ (Rassool 1999, 30). A teacher argued that because Muslims ‘are living in a multi-cultural society it is very important for children to be in touch with the Islamic environment everyday so they do not disconnect with Islam & Islamic morals & values’. In this context, *makātib* are significant as ‘places where Muslim children can gain confidence to resist various pressures existing in society’. Children, it is argued, ‘are surrounded by modern influences.’ Therefore, they assert, that children can learn to respond to ‘the propaganda of the media’. These resist the threats of Westernization and un-Islamic values (Halstead 2005) and also secularism, materialism and

nihilism (Meijer 2009). To resist these, it was argued that *makātib* provide ‘the true *roohāniyat* [spirituality] of the knowledge which cannot be delivered in schools.’ One *ālimah* went as far saying, ‘of course, it is the spiritual aspect: *madrasah* is not just a pen and textbook, it is a whole way of life, not just Arabic and studies.’ In other words, not only were these spiritual and personal elements means of endurance, but the physical environment was also seen as field of resistance, as ‘the *madrasah* environment is unique to itself. It cannot be replicated, especially the spiritual element’.

Social concerns also established their significance. Several teachers observed that children can resist anti-social influences as they ‘are safer, away from roaming the streets and causing problems for other people and themselves’. Moreover, it was maintained that ‘because there is a lot of outside un-Islamic influence’, by learning their social obligations, children can resist these influences. Specific reference was made to giving young Muslims a secure foundation for their identity. This, some felt, was achieved by helping them to ‘learn about different cultures’ and by moulding ‘their character in the way that Islam requires’, and by developing their socialisation among children, in many cases, with varied ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Thus, a Muslim child’s habitus (Bourdieu 1997) develops from the beginning of life in relation to the social milieu of their home and life at the *maktab*. In other words, the *maktab* offers different capitals and forms of resistance.

In service of children

Their continued involvement, despite the scrutiny, negative publicity, challenges and opportunities provided an incentive to enquire their motives of being involved in *makātib*. A prominent absence in their responses was that of gaining accolades as main reasons for

teaching, although a participant felt that there should be better pay. Overall, five main themes emerged.

The pleasure of God is the *summum bonum* of life for Muslims. One way of achieving it is through dedicating oneself to acquire perpetual rewards and render services for God.

Teaching provides perpetual rewards in two ways: through the act of teaching and the subsequent good actions of students. Such sentiments were plentiful among these teachers. At least six used words such as ‘for the sake of God’ and ‘*khushnudi*’ [pleasure].

In addition to achieving the pleasure of God, these teachers are motivated by their duty to serve fellow Muslims and the wider community. Indeed, Muslims are exhorted to teach and the best among them are those who learn and teach the Qur’ān. In view of such significance attributed to teaching, an ‘*ālimah*’ liked ‘the idea that she contributed to a young persons’ faith. She felt ‘a sense of fulfilment in knowing that she was spreading the knowledge’ which she ‘was fortunate to have acquired’. Teaching in a *maktab* is conceived as a form of *dawah* both formally and informally. Naturally, therefore, some teachers link their teaching with propagation. A mother of three believed: ‘I am very busy, and I feel when I teach in *madrasah*, Allah is taking my service for the cause of Islam’.

The core aim, as stated above, is to educate and instruct children in Islam. One ‘*ālimah*’ wrote: ‘I want kids to learn the Qur’ān from an early age and understand that the Qur’ān is the guidance’. Others had specific objectives. They aspire ‘to see GOOD MUSLIMS [original emphasis] everywhere’. The contribution of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) in reducing

ignorance motivates some to teach. Others, however, highlight local hopes for UK children stating:

Alḥamdullillah (praise be to God) it is a great opportunity for me to share my knowledge with other children, to teach them the right way of Islam and I wish each of them will become an ambassador of Islam, *inshaAllah* (God willing).

Being ambassadors suggests that conceptualisations of cultural capital are being situated within normative Muslim values. These values manifest across community boundaries with the aim of foregrounding cohesion through civic and community participation.

In addition to eschatological motivations, there were personal motives, which attracted them to teach. Some ‘enjoy’ and gain ‘satisfaction through their teaching’. Others ‘feel proud after helping children learn’. Indeed, some gain a sense of achievement as they ‘feel they have given something for their religion’. A teacher was enthused by the curious nature of children saying: ‘I love teaching young children especially as they are very open with their questions, and you know whatever is taught moulds them correctly as they grow older’. Two teachers are afforded with ‘an opportunity to do what they love’. This suggests that in its embodied state, cultural capital is a form of dispositions of the mind and of the body (Bourdieu 1986, 243).

Responding to accusations

Muslim educational institutions have come under pressure of various kinds (Meijer 2009; Mogra 2018; Waghid 2009; Wilkinson 2015). Therefore, it was pertinent to explore their continued enthusiasm to teach in institutions accused of promoting ‘extremism’ and ‘terror’. Unsurprisingly, this provoked some emotional responses falling into two main categories. The majority felt adverse about such ‘prejudice’, ‘ill-informed’ and ‘stereotypical’ views. Others were, apparently ‘not affected’ or positively affected.

At least twelve participants felt ‘very bad’, ‘offended’, ‘ashamed that a *madrasah* could be called these things’ and ‘disturbed and upset that they are misinterpreted’. A teacher expressed the personal impact of such judgments: ‘I feel scared. Not in a bad way but it makes me more cautious of the *nasihat* (counsel) language I use in class.’ In addition to such change in her habitus, some attributed these misunderstandings to a ‘lack of knowledge’ of *makātib* among the ‘general public about what is actually taught’. Consequently, one felt ‘angry at this nation and believed that this stereotypical view is very narrow-minded.’ She also believed that ‘the wider society needs to be made aware of what we really do in *makātib* to wipe this out’. However, while some were irked, they offered solutions to address misunderstandings. An ‘*ālimah* stated: ‘but we need to work together to remove this perception’.

In contrast, the majority, apparently, were not intimidated by such accusations. In fact, one countered: ‘I feel we are saving children’. For some, their determination to continue making an essential contribution to the children and the community was not deterred as exemplified below:

I love teaching at the *madrasah*. The wrong portrayal by the media, etc, just causes me to be firmer in my belief that what we do is the right thing, that is why we face so much opposition.

They felt that there is a lack of understanding of these *makātib* as a field.

I get a sense of achievement. I am aware that people have their own narrow-minded discriminatory behaviour. Where I can, I let them know of what I teach, otherwise leave them to it.

Moreover, there were other undeterred responses. A participant claimed to be ‘fully aware of the issues’ and when she ‘is questioned by non-Muslims about *madāris* she tries to give them a better understanding of what she teaches’. Another, whose habitus appeared not to be influenced by the media, insisted:

I don’t feel at all influenced by what the media says regarding our *madāris*. As long as we teach our students the ‘rights and wrongs’ and to differentiate, then only will they grow up to be civilized Muslim individuals.

The habitus of Muslim children is shaped through these religious specialists who are authorised to teach and interpret the Qur’ān. Their motivation to be teachers is noteworthy as it reflects vocation and service to the community—a kind of spiritual capital—as expressed by an *‘ālimah*:

I don’t feel *maktab* is work. *Maktab* is a place where we can help our Prophet’s Ummah with the *maqṣad* [purpose] of life and to do something for the children and to be affectionate and give love. We are teaching them teachings of the Prophet (ﷺ) and he did not teach terrorism.

Evidently, there is a sense of confidence in revealing their teaching and activities. Perhaps based on this confidence, some aspire to develop better relationships especially with the public. They suggested that the public is given ‘knowledge about what we teach and to invite them to open days, etc’. Bourdieu viewed habitus as a potentially generating a repertoire of possible actions and enabling individuals to draw on transformative and constraining actions (Reay 2004, 433). These findings reveal how certain competencies institutionalised within specific habituses facilitate in everyday resistance through informal educational settings located within dominant discourses. These cultural resources in the form of teachers have symbolic and, to an extent, communal value, as agents to counter dominant narratives of the media.

A new vision

It is a challenge to shed the image of a typical *maktab* frequently portrayed by the media and others as out-dated (Alam 2011; Ayyad 2022; Gent 2018a). In view of this, it was significant to explore what these female teachers, most of whom had had theological training had to say. Overall, they advocate internal and external changes.

For the wider community, a participant suggested the organisation of ‘open days for non-Muslims’, perhaps to address an observation made by another teacher who stated that ‘ignorance breeds contempt and we should work towards eradicating their ignorance’. A third response revealed the details: ‘let non-Muslims come to our *madrasah*, give them a tour and [let them] talk to our pupils and teachers’. In addition, to welcoming the wider public, ‘publicising the role of a *madrasah* and informing people about their activities’ was also recommended. Opening these settings to the public would go a long way in dismantling suspicion and misinformation in society. Policy makers recognise the significant role played

by *maktab* education in social cohesion. The IPPR report states that under right conditions, they can strengthen religious identity and help children make sense of their life as a Muslim and as a member of the wider society. They can give children a narrative with which they can explain their religious and lifestyle choices in a non-Muslim environment and this can bring them confidence and self-esteem (Cherti and Bradley 2011, 33).

Apparently, they want to draw from the field of maintained schools and learn from that field for the field of *makātib*. Most encouragingly, they thought that ‘a well-organised staff team’ and ‘improved communications’ would be helpful for managing internal affairs. Some ‘like to be trained’ to ‘further motivate children’. They felt that ‘creating plans’, ‘adopting modernised teaching methods’, ‘observing lessons’ and ‘separate classrooms’ were necessary. Furthermore, they also wanted to observe ‘an increase in the enjoyment of their students.’ Thus, some decided ‘to show more love and determination to their students’. Others expressed ‘the need for more facilities and extracurricular activities’ to further ‘encourage children.’ They welcomed teachers ‘who understood the needs of children and who discussed contemporary issues.’

Participants welcomed ‘a balance between secular and religious aspects of learning’. By this, a teacher meant that the ‘content ought to be reduced when children have school exams and increased when they are not under pressure in school’. One teacher desired ‘an increase in Arabic language’ to augment learning the meaning of the Qur’ān. In this way, it was thought that some of the ‘stereotypical views of mosque schools’ would be addressed. A teacher advocated the necessity to ‘strengthen their security as is the case with schools so that if

something went wrong, the *madāris* would not be blamed or harmed'. At least 29 were mothers, but only one suggested 'provisions for childcare'.

As a community, significantly, collaborative activities and 'partnership work with other *makātib*' was mentioned. Such collaboration, they hoped would result in 'better classrooms and an organised and consistent curriculum across all *makātib* in a town.' A unified syllabus had the advantage of giving parents 'an overview of the aims of the year.' To develop these competencies the training provided was endorsed and 'recommended because the more the teachers are aware of problems, *inshaAllah*, their *maktab* will improve'.

Discussion

The participants were all *Muslimahs* but a heterogeneous group with different, linguistic, ethnic, socio-economic and educational backgrounds. Thus, Muslim learners in a *maktab* join the Ummah by sharing and practicing common features related to aspects of belief and practice. However, children participating in *maktab* education in the UK, as elsewhere in the diaspora, form 'sub communities of practice' (Wenger 1998) which does not entail homogeneity. These teachers showed how they facilitated joining the global community and assisted in the creation of a sub-community flavoured with 'Britishness'.

The debate surrounding the compatibility of Islam in Britain and issues of integration and pluralism have been controversial (Lewis and Hamid 2018). It encompasses numerous areas, including the role of Muslim educational institutes and their contribution in making young Muslims become better British citizens. The views from these participants, in this context, are

significant as over half of them were born in Britain and represented scholarly positions, some of whom are principals. Indeed, it is imperative to note how these responses challenge understandings of ‘mosque schools’ as simply offering lessons in the Qur’ān.

Religion has a positive role in effecting social cohesion and collective identity. Ivanescu (2010) suggests that teaching the values and principles of Islam to young Muslims with a criminal background could discourage involvement in behaviour contrary to religious norms and avoidance of criminality. These teachers believe that through *maktab* education and, as models themselves, their pupils can observe a moral life needed for contemporary Britain, and, as such, the individuals’ ways of applying Islam are paved for them. In other words, they believe that they are contributing to address wider pro-social concerns and the development of *adab* (character and morals) (Gent 2018b; Mogra 2022a). It is encouraging to reflect on the overall field data and discern that, some teachers, in addition to moulding their pupils as good Muslims are also preparing them on how to live as a Muslim in modern Britain. Thus, *adab*, in its widest conception is the essence of their social and cultural capital.

Islamophobia is a pervasive form of racism, one that affects every aspect of many British Muslims’ lives and requires urgent redress at a societal level (Bhatti 2021). Unsurprisingly, the strong feelings, among other perspectives, reflect a discourse of a generation gap where the early generation of teachers in most *makātib* seemed to be content with their work and less responsive to societal or media onslaughts; or crucially, even classroom needs, however, at least in the case of these teachers, they feel the *maktab* is positioned as necessary to address this. Thereby, suggesting a more proactive account of the *maktab* not only for bridging inter-maktab gaps, but it also reveals the need for addressing internal educational

issues within the Muslim communities. Hence, an assertive group exists who is trying, not only to enhancing the image of the *maktab*, but importantly the quality of their provisions and societal matters. These participants allude to the need for *makātib* to reinvent themselves. Changes on many fronts have taken place, which requires further research. Many settings now use a structured curriculum, where the lessons are systematically delivered using a wider range of pedagogies (Mogra 2022b).

Nevertheless, some of these teachers have been critical about certain features in their *makātib*. These constructive responses reflect challenges and opportunities for improving the conditions and provisions of *makātib* in general. Participants intimate for the attitude and contribution of some parents to change so that there they can become more engaged in the education of their children. Such collaboration is also expected from other *makātib* within their local area so that mutual benefits can be achieved. In a post-Covid era, the use of social media has hugely facilitated collaboration which are acting as avenues for improving all aspects of these institutes. Some reiterate concerns over classroom sizes, resources and physical environment. Overall, the challenge of sufficient spatial accommodation persists. However, many have found creative ways of managing class sizes and are providing attractive and child friendly resources.

These participants advance a more flexible and pragmatic adjustment to accommodate the needs of their local schools. Indeed, some *makātib* are known to be flexible and negotiate with schools: dates of exams, holiday, allowing children to arrive later when they participate in school clubs, attending productions and other functions. However, there appears to be

scope for further collaborations in areas such as provisions for children with special educational needs and disability.

Moreso, they propose improvements in the learning experiences by suggesting a move towards a balance which brings in more child friendly approaches to classroom, perhaps this is a reflection of their own experiences. Elsewhere, Gent (2018b, 349) has noted that within European Muslim communities, attitudes towards educational practice and practice itself is changing at the hands of European born Muslim educators.

Conclusion

This article has explored the perspectives of Muslim female teachers serving *maktab* education settings in England. The data reveals their commitment, contributions, fears, hopes and challenges. The sample size was small, and a single research tool was used; therefore, cautious conclusions are made.

Maktab teachers play a key role in the overall education of Muslim children as they teach the essentials of Islam which benefits them through linguistic, political, philosophical, and spiritual development. They transmit their cultural and religious capital of learning to recite the Qur'ān in Arabic, understand beliefs, values, morals, behaviours and everyday practices of Islam. They believe that the essential principles of Islam reflect the principles of being good citizens. Thus, the narrow conception of all *makātib* being schools only for the Qur'ān is challenged. *Makātib* need to be understood as faith based educational institutions which offer not just education but also embed in networks of belonging, provide support, counsel

and sociality. In addition to families and friendship networks, such local congregations provide additional opportunities for socialisation into a religious habitus. Moreover, from a Bourdieuan perspective, *makātib* embed Muslim children in networks of belonging beyond the home and their local settings as it offers them imaginations of national and international communities by linking them to a global community of practice, albeit with some variations.

Fundamentally, such an awareness among the wider society is desirable to minimise misconceptions and mistrust. The negative attitudes held by some could influence the message conveyed to Muslim children about their afterschool learning. Potentially, this may inhibit a constructive attitude towards learning per se and could lead some children perceiving an unsympathetic stance being taken towards their religion. Hence, educators need to be attentive of these perspectives.

Some teachers have been affected to a degree by the global socio-political discourses on Islamophobia, racism, assimilation and integration in public debates and the current policies. To this end, further channels of communication with the public are desirable to break down stereotypes and to create trust and collaboration for the betterment of society. In other words, not all *makātib* operate in isolation and have closed-door attitudes.

Apparently, most spoke favourably and constructively. However, this maybe unrepresentative of the spectrum of viewpoints existing in the sector. Nevertheless, this group depicts what seems to be a forward-looking, contextual, and contemporary outlook for the future. They have identified diverse issues, both internal and external, which confront them, such views challenge the notion of *makātib* as static institutions.

This study was framed to include women only and, as such, some important themes arose from it, which, may or may not, resonate with other colleagues. Their commitment to their work and the children that they teach is significant and, religion appears to be a major factor in serving. However, they all expressed it in their own terms and appear to be teaching in their own right.

Many mention the personal satisfaction gained through teaching and find comfort in observing children understand and practice their faith and hope for a reward in the Hereafter. This is made uneasy by negative publicity mainly caused by the media, which was a recurring theme in their responses. Despite these circumstances, they are determined to continue serving in the hope of better understanding and to lay stronger foundations for Muslim children.

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Biographical note

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