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Teacher Education for Islamic Education and Schooling

Edited by
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Mohamad Abdalla is Professor of Islamic Studies and Founding Director of the Centre for Islamic Thought and Education (CITE) at the University of South Australia. Over the past three decades, he has held senior academic appointments and spearheaded transformative initiatives in Islamic studies and education. In 2006, he established the Griffith University Islamic Research Unit (GIRU), which emerged as a nationally recognised centre for research, teaching, and community engagement. Two years later, he co-founded the National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies, a tri-university collaboration that significantly advanced Islamic Studies programmes and research across Australia. Professor Abdalla has published extensively in the fields of Islamic studies and education. His works include *Islamic Schooling in the West: Pathways to Renewal*; *Curriculum Renewal for Islamic Education: Critical Perspectives on Teaching Islam in Primary and Secondary Schools*; *Wellbeing in Islamic Schools: Nurturing the Mind, Body and Soul*; and *Leadership in Islam: Thoughts, Processes and Solutions in Australian Organizations*, among others. He has supervised more than 25 higher degree research students and continues to shape national conversations on Islamic schooling, curriculum development, and the intersections of Islamic and Western intellectual traditions. In recognition of his scholarly and community contributions, Professor Abdalla was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 2020. He has also received numerous awards for his service in interfaith leadership and community engagement, including the Pride of Australia Medal (finalist) and the Ambassador for Peace Award.

Preface

This volume explores the development and impact of teacher education for Islamic school educators. It brings together global research on program design, professional challenges, educator identity, and Islamic pedagogical principles, offering fresh insights into teacher formation in Islamic schooling contexts.

Nadeem A. Memon and Mohamad Abdalla
Guest Editors

Article

Laying Foundations for Islamic Teacher Education

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Abstract: Increasingly, educators committed to the vision of Islamic schooling are expressing sentiments of moral dissonance. On the one hand, they choose Islamic schools because they aspire to affect hearts, nurture whole human beings, and grow spiritually while impacting their learners' sense of higher purpose. On the other hand, they are up against an era of globalised educational reform, characterised by neoliberal-engendered market forces and neoliberal policy logic that promote performativity and efficiency. This narrows what counts as learning, technicises the art of teaching, and assumes all learning that counts is visible and measurable. The teacher education and ongoing professional learning that educators working in Islamic schools have access to remains bifurcated. It is unable to address how an educator committed to *tarbiya* as "soul-making" ought to navigate aspirations with realities. This paper serves as the introduction to a special issue (SI) dedicated to conceptualising why Islamically grounded teacher education is needed and what it may entail. This SI will also offer empirical studies related to existing Islamic teacher education and professional learning programmes that capture essential reflections for a burgeoning subfield of Islamic Education Studies. In this introduction specifically, the co-editors and a co-author colleague make three big moves to lay the foundations for Islamic teacher education, including (1) establishing urgency for why Islamic teacher education is needed, (2) conceptualising what makes teacher education "Islamic", and (3) providing an example of one Islamic teacher education programme's attempt to advance a coherent professional learning journey for Islamic school educators. Together, these three moves serve as an attempt to redress bifurcation and advance a contextually relevant in-road to teacher education that is rooted in an Islamic paradigm and worldview while conversant with contemporary debates in education.

Keywords: teacher education; Islamic schools; Islamic education

1. Introduction: Acknowledging Roots for Islamic Teacher Education

Establishing the need for Islamically grounded teacher education is not a new call but rather a renewed call. Teacher education was very much on the minds of scholars and educators at the First World Conference on Muslim Education in 1977, held in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, as evidenced by one of the seven conference publications being dedicated to teacher education [1]. In the late 1980s, the Clara Muhammad School network in the United States established the Muslim Teachers College for the same reason, namely to prepare educators to teach "Islamically" [2]. This need continued to be agitated and echoed as Islamic schools in Muslim minority contexts grew. Teaching Islamically does not narrowly connote a particular strategy or method that is deemed "Islamic", meaning a reductive relegation to solely instructional technique, divorced from an overarching educational philosophy rooted in the Islamic tradition. Rather, it is a commitment to an Islamic Pedagogy, as a distinct philosophy of education [3] that foregrounds 'epistemic confidence and sovereignty' [4], drawing from educational values, beliefs, and principles of education rooted in the Islamic tradition. Islamic Pedagogy is a philosophical commitment and is one that informs the way an educator views the learner, the purpose of learning, and their role and praxis as an educator. These philosophical commitments inform the

way unique expressions of education, coloured by a distinct purpose, manifest within and beyond Islamic educational settings, communities, and schools [5]. Over the past 50 years of Kindergarten to 12th grade (K–12) Islamic schools' growth across Muslim minority contexts, such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia, there has been a recognition that these schools have been established to offer a distinct form of education; one that is faith-based, where educators aspire to affect hearts, nurture whole human beings, and to grow spiritually while impacting their learners' sense of higher purpose. But there are contextual realities that have engendered deep, complex and often interconnected or overlapping forms of cognitive, moral, epistemological, and ontological dissonance for many Islamic school educators. Section 2 will begin with elaborating the roots of this dissonance and establish urgency for Islamic teacher education. Section 3 will conceptualise what makes teacher education "Islamic". Section 4 offers an example of one Islamic teacher education programme's attempt to advance a coherent and integrated personal and professional learning journey for Islamic school educators.

2. Part I: Why Islamic Teacher Education?

Over the past decade, several accredited university-level teacher Islamic education programmes have been established across Western contexts. The University of South Australia (Australia), home to the co-editors of this special issue, established a Graduate Certificate in Education (Islamic Education) in 2017. This programme caters predominantly to both leaders and educators inside and outside of the faith committed to teaching in a K–12 Islamic school, in addition to educators within early years or early learning centres, community education, home-education, or home-schooling settings. Representing an aligned but distinctly different typology of Islamic teacher education, both Bayan Islamic Graduate School (Chicago, IL, USA) and Markfield Institute of Higher Education (Leicestershire, UK) offer an M.A. in Islamic Education, established in 2011 and 2010, respectively. At Markfield Institute, in addition to the M.A. programme in Islamic Education, a B.A. programme was launched in 2017, awarding degrees in the discipline of Islamic Studies with Education [6]. The University of Vienna (Vienna, Austria) established a master's programme in Islamic Religious Education Studies in 2007. In Sydney, Australia, the Islamic Sciences and Research Academy (ISRA) offers a Bachelor of Islamic Studies with a pathway to a Master of Teaching (but not Islamic Education per se). This pathway provides "a solid grounding in classical Islamic knowledge as well as a teaching qualification recognised Australia wide" [7]. These efforts serve to deepen grounding in Islamic studies as a discipline and complement this with a degree (graduate or post-graduate) in education, predominantly focusing on supporting Muslim educators with an Islamic theology background in teaching Islamic, Qur'anic, or Arabic Studies within a K–12 Islamic school. A further typology is also evident as, for several decades, there have been pioneering efforts in the form of higher education programmes for Islamic theologians and religious teachers in many Western European countries, including Denmark, Norway, Belgium, Austria, and, among the earliest, at the University of Osnabrück and the University of Paderborn in Germany [8]. These are programmes in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) for the training and qualification of Muslim teachers of Islamic religious education in public schools [9]. In 2014, the University of Innsbruck established a bachelor's programme for IRE with a similar focus [9]. These programmes serve an important demographic, and an identified need, supporting Islamic theologians and religious teachers in navigating tensions between religious orthodoxy and university policy demands [10] for the training and qualification of Islamic Religious Education teachers. These efforts add an important typology to the broad spectrum of Islamic teacher education. However, the two aforementioned typologies of Islamic teacher education programmes—the first supporting Muslim educators with an Islamic theology background in teaching Islamic, Qur'anic, or Arabic Studies within a K–12 Islamic school, and the second, training and qualification of Muslim teachers of Islamic religious education in public schools—position "Islam" or "theology" or "religion" (Islam) as a subject or discipline of study but not as the genesis of a distinct philosophy of education. As the basis

for an Islamically grounded teacher education programme for all educators in an Islamic school setting, we have made the distinction between these programmes the focus of this article/series. (See Table 1)

Table 1. Typology of Islamic teacher education.

Typology	Distinction	Conceptualisation of Islam and of Pedagogy	Target Audience	Current/Future Educational Setting of Graduates	End Goal	Gap/Need
"Islamic Educationally Grounded"	Endemic restructuring of teacher education within an Islamic paradigm	Islam as a genius of a distinct philosophy of education. Islam not seen solely as a discipline/subject (i.e., Islamic studies)	Predominantly in-service registered/qualified educators (early years, primary, or secondary, any learning area/subject, specialist role or leader; not only Islamic Studies or Religious Studies educators) in a K–12 Islamic school (inside or outside of the faith), or Islamic educational setting	K–12 Islamic schools; Islamic educational settings	Educator graduates who realise a sense of faithful praxis by establishing Islamic Pedagogy, as a distinct philosophy, as a renewed foundation for renewed and distinct educational praxis	What was missing from their secular undergraduate Education teacher education programmes Address bifurcation Islamic school educators cognitive, moral, epistemological, and ontological dissonance in their roles and praxis within an Islamic school/educational setting
"Islamically grounded + Integrated with Education"	Grounding in Islamic Studies-integrated with Education. Typically a hybrid model	Islam as subject/discipline > drawing out a conceptual foundation for a holistic framework to view education. Pedagogy as methodology	Current or future Educators within Islamic Studies Departments within K–12 Islamic schools or Islamic educational settings	Islamic, Qur'anic, Arabic educators in K–12 Islamic schools or Islamic educational settings	Provides educators with reflective exploration of Islamic educational traditions and aims to bridge the gap between Muslim seminary and secular modern education pedagogies	Preparedness of "traditionally" trained graduates of Islamic seminaries with contemporary Islamic Studies complemented by registration/qualification and training in education. Balance/challenge bifurcation between Islamic educational concepts and practical methodologies to address modern educational challenges. Address the contemporary educational needs of Muslim communities
"Islamically grounded + Integrated with Education"	Islamic Religious Education. Grounding in Islamic Studies, integrated with Education. Interface of education about faith within a secular public education system	Islam as a discipline or subject or form of religious education. Pedagogy as methodology	Public-school settings who offer IRE	Muslim pre-service teachers of Islamic religious education	Prepare Muslim Islamic Religious Education teachers to teach Muslim learners within the context of public-school systems	Registration/qualification of Muslim IRE teachers Balance tensions around bifurcation

In addition to accredited programmes across some of the typologies above, there are a plethora of professional learning opportunities emerging for educators in Islamic school settings. Summer institutes, online short programmes, conferences, Muslim educational consultants and coaches, and professional learning communities all contribute toward the array of opportunities available. Many of these, in their own way, are responses to an urgent need, namely, the imparting of a cohesive education in Islamic schools.

Teacher education and ongoing professional learning that educators working in Islamic schools have access to or receive remain bifurcated. It is unable to address how an educator committed to *tarbiya* as soul-making ought to navigate aspirations with realities. Islamic schools, like contemporary schooling broadly on account of globalisation [11] and a subsequent pervasive neoliberal educational era, are forced to either resist or succumb to neoliberal policy logics that narrows what counts as learning, technicises the art of teaching,

and assumes all learning that counts is measurable [12]. In relation to measuring through testing, Rizvi et al. [11] explained,

> The focus on human capital formation for greater competitiveness has created a demand for more robust regimes of testing. Within nation-states, testing has increasingly reshaped notions of worthwhile knowledge as well as pedagogical practices and has affected teacher professionalism. But beyond testing at the national level, international comparisons have also become important. In policy terms, comparative performance on testing regimes such as PISA has even become a surrogate measure for determining the quality and effectiveness of national educational systems. Indeed, it is no longer possible to understand education policy without an appreciation of the central role that testing and accountability regimes now play in policy development and evaluation.

Ball [13] cautioned, "the first-order effect of performativity is to reorient pedagogical and scholarly activities towards those which are likely to have a positive impact on measurable performance outcomes and are a deflection of attention away from aspects of social, emotional or moral development that have no immediate, measurable performative value". Worryingly, Ball [14] argued that policy logics and technologies associated with performativity and the "technization" of pedagogy not only act as vehicles for technical and structural change but "mechanisms for reforming teachers", for "changing what it means to be a teacher", in what he termed a "struggle over the teacher's soul". Ball [13] argued further that the,

> 'crucial aspect of these technologies [of control] and the [dominant educational] reform process generally is that these are not simply changes in the way we do things or get things done. They change what it means to be educated, what it means to teach and learn, and what it means to be a teacher. They do not just change what we do; they also change who we are, how we think about what we do, how we relate to one another, how we decide what is important and what is acceptable, and what is tolerable. As I have said already, these changes are both out there, in the system, the institution, and 'in here', in our heads and our souls (pp. 1049–1050).'

Meanwhile, a presumption Trevathan [15] expressed was that Muslims, and by extension Islamic schools, could be expected to challenge dominant educational paradigms and praxis, reified by calculative and rationalistic thinking, as manifestations of a type of "conceptual idolatry", promoting and privileging a tendency to constantly quantify, codify, and measure (p. 13). This would position Islamic teacher education as prioritising the "teacher's soul" and challenging policy logics that frame education policy and praxis narrowly inside of a so-called Science of Teaching (SoT) paradigm (see Ball, 2016 [13]; Biesta, 2016 [16]; Hattam, 2020 [17]), pushing highly scripted teaching and the further erosion of the autonomy of educators [18].

Teacher education reform has endured significant redirections over the past few decades, influenced by socio-political climate and contexts. Similar to the national curriculum in most Western contexts, paradigm wars and pendulum shifts [19] have equally implicated teacher education to the extent that there "has not been complete consensus in teacher education at any point over the past half-century—nor is there now..." [20]. For Islamic schools, this acknowledgement of a field in flux serves as a reminder of an opportunity for "epistemic resistance" and "epistemic resilience" [21]. It might also serve as a timely reminder to hark back to some of the concerns of the First World Conference. Specifically, the "intellectual colonisation" or "epistemicide" [22] of the colonial era positioned and imposed Western secular epistemology as superior and universal, leading to the bifurcation of schooling systems in the Muslim world and new minority contexts. Recalling such concerns can prevent similar bifurcation of teacher education in the present. Thus, the reinstatement of "epistemic confidence and sovereignty" [4] as companions to "epistemic resistance" and "epistemic resilience" [21] would view the need for Islamic teacher

education outside of enduring Eurocentric and orientalist narratives and discourses that impose and project an imperative around "modernising" Islamic education, schooling, and pedagogies [23]. Presumably, within Western "enlightened" epistemologies, this would thereby be understood within a 'reform' agenda 'redolent of a well-articulated political and ideological position that inherently assumes [the Islamic tradition] contains deficiencies that need correction and modernising rectification' [24]. Instead, we conceptualise notions of reform within *tajdid* or renewal [25]. Specifically, renewing holistic teacher education grounded in Islamic worldview and epistemology with other enabling aligned theories, conversant with current debates in education, to both address contemporary challenges and embrace opportunities.

Returning to contemporary teacher education debates broadly, among the criticisms levelled is the missing ontological domain, that "teachers are human beings in the process of becoming" (Taylor 2006, p. 20 quoted in [26]). This includes being open to the essential question of "who is the self that teaches" [27] (p. 4) and a willingness for deeper inward inquiry into the "inner terrain of the teaching self" [28] (p. 45). Teacher education programmes are criticised for an overemphasis on skills, strategies, and content knowledge over non-cognitive skills such as interpersonal skills, empathy, relationality, motivation, resilience, self-efficacy, and adaptability [26]. Put differently, "The absence of these non-cognitive skills suggests that teachers are like machines that function like technicians, performing pre-conceived routines" [26].

Similar criticisms are levelled at teacher standards as forms of quality assurance [13] that create new frameworks for the construction of performance and articulate a new and narrow discourse around quality (p. 1051). In a highly performative era where teacher standards inform the design of teacher education programmes and notions of the "good teacher" and "good teaching" [12] in the practice of schooling, the absence of teaching standards that are relevant to the full extent of a teacher's work—let alone the distinct role of an Islamic school educator—is damaging. Teacher standards in Australia, for example, have been critiqued for neglecting the affective, enactive, and relational aspects of teaching [29] and for atomising the profession into titbits of skills to be mastered and then measured [30]. Connell [31] (cited in [12]) referred to such accountability frameworks as having 'constrained teachers' work and reduced teaching to discrete sets of codified practice, which simultaneously ignore the complexities of teaching' (pp. 293–294). Hickey et al. [12] argue that this serves to reduce 'possibilities for an emplaced, responsive and transformative pedagogy that accounts for the contextual characteristics of schools' (p. 294). Not only do teacher standards fall short in capturing the relational, social, emotional, empathetic, compassionate, creative, activist, and deep intellectual work teachers do [29], but equally absent is the dynamic interplay between self and learner in the nurturing of faith that educators in the context of Australian Islamic schools aspire. The absence of spirituality, nurturing of faith, and the centrality of God or the Divine in standards said to advance professional growth are key factors in the dissonance Islamic school educators express. The centrality of such factors in the work of Islamic school educators was evident in Alkouatli's [30] research, which found educators supporting learners through forms of "triangulated reflection with the Divine", guiding learners towards "self-refinement", entailing a triangulated relationship between educator, learner, and the Divine, advanced "reciprocal self-development and God consciousness" (p. 205). Outside of Islamic education or schooling, studies on teacher effectiveness and the impact of connecting to God have been recognised by others. Walvoord (2008) [32] highlighted the "educator's role in engaging students in spiritual formation by helping students relate the course to their own spiritual and religious lives" [32] (p. 187). Again, the spiritual domain and sphere of educators' lives and their praxis are not considered within teaching standards. Barsh's [32] study explored research on educator beliefs and spirituality, highlighting educator beliefs, such as spirituality, "are instrumental in influencing teacher decisions, which in turn, affect student achievement in the classroom" (p. 186). Educators were more effective when they "believed there was spiritual connectedness with the work they performed in the classroom", argued Perrone et al., 2006, in [32]

(p. 186), and "[s]pirituality, as a component of teacher beliefs, can impact multiple areas of educational practice", including, directly and indirectly, an educator's sense of efficacy (p. 186). Barsh [32] argued for "teacher education programs and ongoing professional development to holistically train teachers in pedagogical development that accentuates the importance of "connecting" with students and making learning transcendent" (p. 193). For Islamic schools, like other faith-based schools, moral character development is a central part of a teacher's daily work and yet absent in teacher education and teaching standards. Lapsley and Woodbury [32] argued this absence is due to two reasons: (a) an overemphasis on skills, strategies and content and (b) a fear of imposing values. Yet, relational moments in every encounter are informed by moral decision-making: "It animates the life of schools, but it moves about without a sound. It attracts the idealism of teachers and the aspirations of parents and stakeholders, but it is an agenda that also gives pause if it invites suspicions about indoctrination and the imposition of values alien to faith or family" [33]. What is not covered in teaching standards and is central to being a teacher is teacher dispositions-craft knowledge, practical wisdom, and moral purpose, as "Teachers are indeed people. Who you are is how you teach" [34]. Teachers know what makes for a good teacher. In arguably one of the most human-centred professions, summarising major studies on what it means to be a teacher, Talyor [34] reaffirmed that 'having a heart' and having a strong 'personal core' are the foundations of an exemplary teacher.

Circling back to Islamic teacher education, we must equally acknowledge and foreground the highly charged context of anti-Muslim discrimination, Islamophobia, and constructed fear of radicalisation implicating Muslim experience in Western contexts, in particular. An important factor for why teacher education programmes that centre the Islamic worldview in education, Islamic Pedagogy, and would support the growth of Islamic schools have not made greater inroads in Western secular university faculties of education is because of the security infatuation that problematises "Muslimness" and pins it against Western liberal values [35]. A robust commitment to equity, inclusion, and decolonisation would draw from Islamic conceptions of education and see Muslim scholarship on education as assets to the field of education studies.

For us, the way forward toward Islamic teacher education requires an acknowledgement of the realities in the field of teacher education, along with the critique from within, as we have attempted to illustrate. Any move toward advancing Islamically grounded teacher education requires working within and against the grain of policy simultaneously, as argued by Thomson, Lingard, and Wrigley (2012), quoted in [12]. In order to move toward Islamic teacher education and build upon the critique levelled against existing teacher education and standards, we similarly argue that narrow, managerial, technicised definitions of teachers and teacher education are equally insufficient for capturing the esoteric aims or transcendent pedagogical work of an Islamic school educator [36]. As Alkouatli [36] argued, "not all existing secular, social science paradigms are appropriate for producing holistic knowledge for the development of Muslim individuals" (p. 5), similarly, not all educational paradigms are appropriate for fostering a child's *fitrah* (natural disposition or state which a child is born with, which in the Islamic worldview is pure and innocent). If the aim of Islamic schools is to nurture young people to become fully human, where educators engage students in an exploration of transcendence enlivening the mind, body, heart, and soul [36], then surely a distinct form of preparation for being in such learning spaces is required. The following section, Part II, aspires to provide a conceptualisation of what makes teacher education "Islamic" with the hope of defining the aspired distinction.

3. Part II: What Makes Teacher Education "Islamic"?

Teacher education forms the foundation of any educational system, shaping future generations and ensuring the transmission of knowledge, dispositions, values, and skills. In the Islamic worldview, teacher education transcends mere information dissemination; rather, it aims at transforming the teacher and learner at once through incorporating

spiritual, moral, and intellectual dimensions rooted in Islamic principles, values, and philosophy. This holistic approach is fundamentally tied to the purpose of knowledge and its intended outcomes, which, from the Islamic perspective, include the end goal of knowing God and learning to be focused on personal and spiritual growth, deepening God-consciousness (*taqwa*), the cognisance of God (*ma'rifatullāh*), and the refinement of the soul (or soul-making) [37]. This includes spiritual, moral, and intellectual development. These pertain to essential ontological and epistemological anchors, promoting holism [38]. Specifically, the ontological concept of *tawhid* (oneness of God, wholeness) [39] is an overarching principle of an Islamic worldview and education in the Islamic tradition, serving as both a philosophical and methodological construct that centres purpose and enables coherence and alignment with understandings of education and schooling [40] (p. 17). Given this profound purpose, teacher education is intrinsically connected to the sacred nature of knowledge, learning, and growth; therefore, it entails specific aims and responsibilities.

In the Australian context, a recent development has been the launch of a stimulus paper entitled "A Shared Vision for Islamic Schooling in Australia: Learners, Learning, & Leading Learning" [40] which emphasises that educators in Islamic schools have "[s]pecial qualities of mind and heart, as well as very careful preparation and continuing readiness to renew and adapt practice", inclusive of "additional focus on other dimensions and domains of teaching" (p. 43), beyond the Australian Teaching Standards. Some of these include "educator efficacy and spirituality", valued "educator dispositions", and "relationality in and through teaching" (Prophetically inspired "warm, nurturing relationships that are mutually transformative rather than transactional") (p. 44), signalling implications for teacher education and professional learning responsive to the needs of Islamic school educators in Australia.

3.1. The Sacred Role of Teachers

In the Islamic worldview, teaching is not merely a profession but a noble and sacred duty. The Qur'ān and Ḥadīth emphasise this when they speak of the value of knowledge and the revered status of those who impart it. The first word revealed in the Qur'ān was "*Iqra*" (Read) (96:1), underscoring the significance of education and knowing in Islam. This foundational moment highlights the role of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) as a teacher and guide, setting a precedent for the esteemed status of teachers (scholars and otherwise) within the Muslim community. The connection between the sacred duty of Prophethood and teaching is found in several verses in the Qur'ān. For example:

> Allah has favoured the believers in sending them a Messenger from among their own, to recite His revelations to them, to purify them, and to *teach* them the book [Qur'ān] and wisdom–though they were clearly astray beforehand (3:164).

This verse captures the mission of the Messenger, linking it to Divine revelation, to teach and purify the believers and guide them after having been astray. The Islamic world-view views teaching as a transformative practice aimed at both spiritual (purification) and moral and intellectual growth [41]. The status of teachers is further enhanced by the virtue of the fact that education in Islam is fundamentally about the recognition and realisation of knowledge as a manifestation of divine order [42]. Thus, the Islamic worldview sees education as leading to the cultivation of virtue and the development of an individual's ability to fulfil their divine purpose of recognising and worshipping God and fulfilling the rights of His creation. This holistic understanding aligns the pursuit of knowledge with spiritual growth, thereby elevating the role of the teacher as both a guide in learning and a mentor in personal development. Thus, according to Imam al-Ghazālī (d.1111), the excellence of teaching and learning lies in the pursuit of knowledge, which is considered the most noble endeavour [43]. This perspective elevates the teacher's role to one of spiritual and moral leadership, essential to the intellectual and personal development of learners.

Thus, the sacredness of teaching is linked to the purpose of education in Islam, which is not merely the acquisition of technical knowledge or professional skills but the formation

of a moral and ethical human being [44]. Islamic education aims to produce individuals who embody the principles of justice, compassion, and moral integrity, aligned with the broader objectives of the Shariah [44]. This perspective underscores the role of education to cultivate not just intellectual capability or neoliberal conceptions of the good citizen over a good person [42] but also a deeply ethical and socially responsible character. For al-Attas [42], an end goal of a "good citizen" risked a potentially reductive criterion of goodness in the current era that might be viewed along the lines of productivity, while being a good person would naturally encompass a fuller conceptualisation of a good citizen and more. Contestations around citizenship hold additional nuance for Muslim peoples, including learners within Islamic schools in minority contexts, whereby imposed frames as "suspect citizens" can enforce pressure to conform within notions of the "good Muslim", presumably in compliance with dominant values and groups. This is opposed to the mission of Islamic schools, which is arguably 'preparing graduates who benefit humanity' and yet who are 'committed to change-making' and 'transformation' (self and social) [40] via a conceptualisation of citizenship characterised by justice and equity, and the practice of critical citizenship for justice-citizenship that may challenge the status quo and invoke positive change (p. 21).

3.2. The Sublime Status of Teachers

It is agreed among Muslims that Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) is the ultimate role model (Qur'ān 33:21), and he stated, "I have been sent as a teacher" (Ibn Mājah, 229), which at once raises the status of teaching and emphasises the role of teachers as moral and spiritual guides. Several verses highlight the importance of seeking and imparting knowledge, for example, "Say, 'Are those who know equal to those who do not know?' Only they will remember [who are] people of understanding" (39:9); "My Lord, increase me in knowledge" (20:114); and "Allah will raise those who have believed among you and those who were given knowledge, by degrees" (58:11). These verses collectively emphasise the value of acquiring knowledge, presenting it as a divine gift and a means of spiritual and intellectual elevation. The following Ḥadīth elucidates the loftiness of teachers. The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings be upon him) said, "Indeed, Allah, His angels, the inhabitants of the heavens and the earth, even the ant in its hole and the fish in the sea, pray for the one who teaches people goodness" [45].

The renowned Egyptian poet, Ahmad Shawqi (1868–1932), best known as the Prince of Poets, reflected the reverence for teachers in his famous poem:

Stand for the teacher and honor his rank,

For a teacher could almost be a messenger [of God].

Do you know of anyone nobler than the one,

Who nurtures souls and minds? [46]

This poem emphasises the esteemed status and significant role of teachers in society. The first line urges people to stand and honour their teachers, acknowledging their high status. Shawqi elevates the teacher's role by comparing it to that of a messenger of God, highlighting the profound influence teachers have in shaping individuals and society. The rhetorical question in the last two lines underscores the unmatched nobility of teachers, as they are responsible for developing and nurturing both the minds and souls of their learners. This comparison signifies that the impact of teachers goes beyond mere transmission of knowledge; they play a critical role in the holistic development of individuals, thus contributing to the betterment of society. The respect and reverence for teachers is presented as not just a cultural and religious obligation but as a recognition of their invaluable contribution to human development. This sentiment illustrates the high esteem in which teachers are held in the Islamic worldview, almost equating their role to that of a prophet in guiding and nurturing souls.

Such is the recognition of the status of teachers in the Islamic worldview that Muslim scholars have compiled extensive literature on showing *adab* (decorum, respect, and vener-

ation) towards them. An important treatise in this regard was compiled by the 13th-century scholar Imam Burhan al-Dīn al-Zarnūjī, *Taʿlīm al-Mutaʿallim Ṭarīq al-Taʿallum* ('Instruction of the Student: The Method of Learning'), which serves as a comprehensive guide on the proper manners, methods, and mindset necessary for students of knowledge. Imam al-Zarnūjī emphasises the importance of sincerity and the intention to please Allah in seeking knowledge. It advises students to show utmost respect for their teachers, work diligently, and remain humble regardless of their achievements. The text stresses proper classroom etiquette, the significance of associating with righteous companions, and effective time management. It also highlights maintaining decorum in debates, focusing on practical knowledge, relying on Allah, and expressing gratitude for the opportunity to learn. These principles aim to manifest *adab* toward the teacher and nurture knowledgeable, morally and spiritually upright individuals.

3.3. The Distinct Role and Responsibilities of Teachers

The Prophet's pedagogical approach was characterised by compassion, patience, affection, and empathy, serving as a model for teachers in the Islamic tradition [47]. In the Ḥadīth, Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) said, "Indeed, Allah did not send me to cause hardship or to be harsh, but rather He sent me as a teacher and one who makes things easy" [48]. This was also the testimony of his closest companions. Muʿawiya b. Al-Ḥakam As-Sulamī said, "I have never seen a teacher before him or after him better at teaching than he" [49]. The Ḥadīth literature is replete with such examples. The Prophetic pedagogical approach manifested care, respect, and the dignity of people, young and old, friend and foe. The following anecdote exemplifies this:

> Anas ibn Malik reported that he was walking with the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings be upon him) who was wearing a Najrani cloak with a thick hem. A Bedouin approached the Prophet, pulled him violently by his cloak, and the neck of the Prophet showed marks due to the rough tug. The Bedouin then demanded some of money. The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) turned to him, smiled, and ordered that he be given something. [50]

This story highlights the Prophet's exemplary patience, forbearance, and generosity in dealing with the Bedouin. Despite the physical discomfort and the rude demand, the Prophet responded with kindness and ordered that the Bedouin be given what he asked for. This incident is used to illustrate the Prophet's noble character and his emphasis on forgiveness and gentleness, even in the face of harsh treatment. Further, he imparted pedagogical tools to his companions (and later followers) and, in doing so, provided a pedagogical precedent. This is role modelling at its best. When 'Ā'isha, wife of the Prophet, was asked about his character, she immediately replied, "his character was the Qur'ān" [47]. Thus, teachers are expected to embody the virtues they wish to impart, leading by example and fostering a nurturing environment characterised by the principles espoused by the Islamic worldview.

An essential aspect of the responsibility of teachers is, therefore, the nurturing of their learners. The concept of "*Tarbiyah*" (nurturing) is central to Islamic educational philosophy, emphasising balanced development aligned with Islamic principles [51]. While *Tarbiyah* is meant to be holistic, it is the soul-making [52,53] aspect that is most pertinent. This was summed up succinctly in Abu'l-Fatḥ al-Busṭi's (c. 942–1010 CE) most celebrated poem, *Qasidatu ʿunuān al-Ḥikam* ('Epitome of Wisdom'):

> O servant of the body, wretched in its service,
>
> Do you seek profit from that in which lies loss?
>
> Take care of your soul and perfect its virtues,
>
> By virtue of your soul are you human, not your body.

These profound verses underscore the futility of prioritising bodily desires and material gains at the expense of spiritual and moral growth. It urges individuals to focus on

nurturing their souls, as true humanity and excellence come from the soul's virtues rather than physical or material achievements. The central message is the distinction between the transient nature of physical existence and the enduring significance of spiritual development. It emphasises that while the body is temporary and its desires often lead to loss, the soul is eternal, and its cultivation leads to true fulfilment in this life and success in the next life. This entails attaining a "good life" [44] in this world (*dunya*) and salvation in the next (*ʾakhira*). "Good life" is understood to mean having a wholesome balance between the body, soul, and mind, but also one that fulfils the purpose for its existence, which is the worship of God: "And I did not create the jinn and humans except to worship Me" (Quran 51:56). This perspective aligns with the broader Islamic teachings that highlight the importance of inner purification and moral integrity over worldly pursuits, all of which are at the core of the philosophy and aims of education in Islam [44].

This soul-making is concerned with the purification/refinement of the self and, according to the great classical scholar Imām al-Nawawī (d.1277), is based on the following five principles: to 'fear God privately and publicly, living according to the Sunna, in word and deed, indifference to whether others accept or reject one, satisfaction with Allah Most High in dearth and plenty, and returning to Allah in happiness or affliction' [53]. Ultimately, soul-making is "to live and act constantly according to God's Will, to love Him with one's whole being and finally to know Him through that knowledge which integrates and illuminates and whose realisation is never divorced from love nor possible without correct action" [54]. This allows the learner to acquire "the experience and knowledge of this unity and its realisation in thoughts, words, acts, and deeds, through the will, the soul, and the intelligence" [54].

Thus, Islamic education must integrate spiritual, moral, and intellectual training to graduate individuals, both the teacher and the learner, who can navigate modern complexities with a firm grounding in Islamic principles [44]. This holistic approach is essential for forming individuals who can contribute positively to both their communities and the broader society, upholding justice and moral integrity.

3.4. Embodying Islamic Values and Ethics

Teachers are role models who must exemplify the values and ethics they wish to see in their learners. This expectation extends beyond the classroom, influencing interactions with learners, colleagues, and the community. The focus on training teachers with moral and spiritual attributes, in addition to academic qualifications, underscores the continuous expectation for teachers to embody the values they impart. "The imperative for educators to constantly reflect on themselves and their conscious process of becoming is beautifully articulated in the verse of the Qur'an" [40] (p. 44), which reads: 'You command people to goodness, and you forget about yourself?' (Qur'an 2:44) [55]. This highlights the enduring importance of teachers as role models in the Islamic tradition. True knowledge must lead to the cultivation of virtue, and teachers play a critical role in guiding learners towards this ideal [42]. Al-Attas' philosophy suggests that the essence of Islamic education lies in its ability to harmonise intellectual pursuits with moral and spiritual growth, positioning teachers as key enablers in this process.

3.5. Islamic and Secular Education

One of the most significant differences between Islamic and secular teacher education lies in the underlying educational values, concepts, and perspectives that guide pedagogy and, from within pedagogy, zoomed-in instructional practices. Islamic Pedagogy challenges the increasing technicisation of teachers' work and emphasises the importance of holistic education (mind-body-soul), prioritising soul-making as outlined above. Thus, secular and Islamic philosophies of education diverge significantly in their underlying principles and objectives. Secular education typically emphasises rationalism, empirical knowledge, and the development of individual potential within a framework that separates religious beliefs from the educational process. In contrast, the Islamic philosophy of education

integrates religious principles with learning, aiming to develop a balanced personality that harmonises intellectual, spiritual, and moral growth. This approach underscores the significance of knowledge (ʿ*ilm*) to understand and fulfil God's will, promoting values such as respect, humility, and ethical conduct. Islamic education seeks to nurture individuals who are not only knowledgeable but also deeply connected to their faith, with the goal of achieving success in this life and the hereafter.

All forms of teacher education have been implicated in global reform agendas. As Ball [14] asserted, '[w]ithin each of the policy technologies of reform there are embedded and required new identities, forms of interaction and new values' (pp. 217–218). This means that the nature of relations with learners is also changed by reform, and the 'primacy of caring relations in work with pupils and colleagues' has no place in the hard world of performativity' [56] (p. 140). Consequently, within forms of secular education, for those that swim with the tide of reform, the teacher–learner relationship is increasingly and typically more formal and focused on performance and productivity as measured by academic success, with an emphasis on efficiency achieved through professional boundaries and effective content delivery. This reflects a seismic fault line between the pressures of reform and the imperatives of Islamic education. Lyotard [57], cited in ([14], p. 226), identified as part of 'the post-modern condition' threats to the conceptualisation of knowledge, which fundamentally change the nature of relationships between educator and learner, learning, and knowledge. Ball [14] argued further on the point of knowledge relations, describing these as being "de-socialized", something educators must struggle with and against (p. 226). The ideal teacher–learner relationship in Islam is one of mutual growth, where the teacher not only imparts knowledge but also learns from the process of teaching [42]. This dynamic relationship fosters a sense of shared purpose and communal learning, which is integral to the Islamic educational ethos. An Islamic educational ethos, according to Brifkani [58], commenting on Islamic schools in the United States, is one that 'has been undermined in many [Islamic] schools' by 'the demands of the modern positivistic education system' so 'heavily focused on academics and standardization' (p. 2). The teacher–learner relationship in Islamic education should be characterised by a shared commitment to ethical and intellectual development. This relationship should nurture critical thinking and moral reasoning, enabling learners to apply their education in meaningful and socially responsible ways [44].

This section has highlighted the unique nature of Islamic teacher education, emphasising that it extends beyond the mere transmission of knowledge to encompass spiritual, moral, and intellectual transformation. Teachers in the Islamic tradition are seen as fulfilling a sacred duty akin to the prophetic role, where they not only impart knowledge but also guide students in their spiritual and moral development. This holistic approach integrates religious principles with education, aiming to cultivate individuals who are knowledgeable, virtuous, and deeply connected to their faith. The role of the teacher is elevated to one of moral and spiritual leadership, essential for the intellectual and personal growth of students. Islamic education seeks to produce individuals who can contribute positively to society, upholding justice, compassion, and moral integrity, thus aligning educational pursuits with broader spiritual and ethical goals.

4. Part III: A Transformative Model for Islamic Teacher Ed

Part I established that teacher education as we know it is contested. Within existing critiques of teacher education is an opportunity to also acknowledge that contemporary approaches to teacher education are insufficient in preparing educators in Islamic schools, given the distinct aims of Islamic education. Part II defined the distinction of the role of an Islamic school educator as soul-development, and not just of the learner but equally of the educator themselves. When faced with this conundrum of inadequate teacher education, the common reaction we have seen among Islamic school communities is to attempt both approaches separately. Islamic schools commonly expect educators to hold secular teacher education degrees that are intended to have prepared them with contemporary 'best prac-

tices' in imparting nationally mandated curricula, using conventional pedagogies or, worse, a "what works" approach [13] and assessment tools as their foundational qualification. To address the void of what it means to work in a faith-based school, Islamic schools will commonly provide orientation sessions, professional learning communities, or inspiring workshops on the role of an educator in the Islamic tradition. But the two remain bifurcated and, hence, lead to complex and often interconnected or overlapping forms of cognitive, moral, epistemological, and ontological dissonance educators express [59].

This final section, Part III, will elucidate our key reflections from facilitating the Graduate Certificate in Education (Islamic Education) programme, at the University of South Australia since 2018. The authors of this paper established this program at CITE within Education Futures at UniSA as an attempt to challenge the bifurcated approach to Islamic teacher education and to put forward an attempt that works "within and against the grain" [12]. In this final section, we will provide a brief background to the Grad Cert before elaborating on the five 'turns' the program design offers in an attempt to advance a coherent professional learning journey specifically for Islamic school educators.

4.1. Grad Cert Overview

The Graduate Certificate in Education (Islamic Education) was established by the authors of this paper at the University of South Australia's Education Futures. All three authors are faculty at the UniSA within the Centre for Islamic Thought and Education (CITE). From CITE's inception in 2016, developing a teacher education programme to support the growth of Australian Islamic schools was a core part of the centre's mandate. The Grad Cert received formal accreditation in 2018 and enrolled its first cohort the same year. To date, 53 educators have graduated, with 75 currently enrolled in the programme. With Commonwealth Government funding approved for the programme in 2024, commensurate with other graduate programmes in Australia, including the Catholic Education teacher education programme, the programme is more accessible financially than before, both to smaller Islamic schools and individual educators; enrolment numbers are on the rise. Most current and alumni programme participants come from across Australian Islamic schools, which include educators from a wide spectrum of roles, including principals, heads of campuses, curriculum leads, wellbeing and welfare heads, heads of teaching and learning, and teachers from all key learning areas and year levels. Graduates of the programme also include those who are Muslim and those who are not, as well as those rightfully considered Islamic scholars and those with early or emerging understanding of the faith.

From the outset, it was emphasised that the Grad Cert is for all educators working in Islamic schools and not limited to those who teach religion. It was also emphasised that the Grad Cert is a programme about education in the Islamic tradition and not a programme about Islamic Education or religious studies. For us, this remains an important distinction in that the Grad Cert is essentially about education with learners, learning, and leading learning and the implications for curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. In school, this implies the centre of everything that an Islamic school does and everything that Islamic school educators are in service to. This was important for us to avoid the common assumption that the "Islamic" of Islamic schooling is limited to Islamic Studies or an Islamically informed learning environment; albeit, both are important spaces, especially when centred or connected. That said, the Grad Cert is designed to approach the study of education from Islamic conceptions of education—or what we refer to as 'Islamic Pedagogy" [59]. Islamic Pedagogy provides the educational philosophical thought required to mediate a renewed sense of educational praxis relevant to contemporary Islamic schools.

The key aspiration of the Grad Cert has been to challenge the multiple forms of dissonance experienced by Islamic school educators head-on by firstly re-centring how Islam as a faith tradition can contribute to the way we think about educating young people and not solely relegated to the study of religion. To be more forthright, the aspiration of the Grad Cert is to illustrate to educators that the aims of an Islamic school education cannot be achieved in the absence of an Islamic Pedagogy. Said differently, it is not possible to

nurture wholeness if the message systems of schooling [60], curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment are solely unidimensionally cognitive (absent of or separated from the moral, spiritual, relational, and imaginative). Secondly, the aspiration of the Grad Cert is that through re-centring esoteric aims and purposes and transcendent pedagogies [36], the programme inspires a 'faithful praxis', namely an "Integration of faith-informed principles and pedagogy, or the purposeful interaction between educational theory and classroom/instructional practice; also understood as a process by which theory is enacted, embodied, or realised)" [40].

Faithful praxis is the end goal of the Grad Cert. For us, faithful praxis is exemplified by educators who are committed to ongoing personal and professional reflexivity and growth, who continually seek coherence between faith-inspired beliefs about education and challenging realities in contemporary schools, and who are committed to being researchers of their own practice in a constant cycle of *muḥasabah* (self-reflection), as is the aspiration of a believer. For us, educators becoming reflexive and reflective practitioners also entails engaging in epistemic reflexivity [61] towards increased consciousness through increased conscious purpose in practice, both planned and in the moment, toward faithful praxis. The journey to faithful praxis is one that requires a substantial amount of time, cognitive and spiritual presence, and a willingness to challenge, be self-critical, unlearn, and relearn. In the following section, we outline the journey of the Grad Cert and how the programme design takes an educator through key 'turns' or turning points that are intended to challenge the bifurcation discussed and foster coherence for transformation.

4.2. Program Design Key Turns for Coherence

The Grad Cert consists of four courses, each twelve weeks in duration and structured like most conventional university-level graduate education courses that include lectures, readings, discussion forums, live dialogical tutorial sessions, and assessments. In this paper, we will not elaborate on the course content per se (written curriculum) but provide reflections on the inner thought process, pedagogic themes, and intentional moves weaved throughout each course and across the programme. The curriculum of the programme is where we feel the inner coherence is evident. For us, the curriculum is advanced through the following five 'key turns': (1) the 'inward' turn; (2) the 'critical' turn; (3) the 'reflexive' turn; (4) the turn 'back'; and (5) the 'pedagogical' turn.

4.2.1. The Inward Turn

From the outset of the programme, there is an attempt to support each participant (as in-service educators, predominantly in Islamic school or educational settings) to articulate a clear and compelling pedagogical challenge within their practice that is in concert with their unique role and positionality within their school, and their Islamic schools' local vision, mission, and education philosophy. The challenge, we believe, must be practise-focused and strength-based, acknowledging the significant strides the field of Islamic schooling has made and cannot fall into the trap of deficit-student, parent [62], or teacher blaming discourses, thereby resisting "policy logics that frame teachers [or students and parents] as the problem, and require policy technologies of control and compliance" ([18], p. 2). The 'inward turn' over the 'outward guise', the latter typically promoting deficit thinking, blaming, and inaction or compliance serves to claim a hopeful space for our educators and their practice, affording a greater focus on their efficacy, autonomy, and voice in a more integrated personal and professional growth-oriented space. The challenge must also bring people together and foster a shared and deep sense of urgency. For us, the challenge is captured in the way we began this paper, as moral dissonance and bifurcation.

There are ample studies to illustrate the moral dissonance young Muslims who enter university experience, desperately trying to negotiate what it means to be Muslim in a Western, secular context [63]. For an Islamic school graduate, this dissonance is arguably heightened after being sheltered while being educated in an Islamic school [39,64]. Educators in Islamic schools experience a similar dissonance, as we have argued in this paper, and

it is commonly appreciated that despite significant strides in the field of Islamic schooling, the urgent challenge of nurturing young people who can draw on their faith to thrive in a secular society remains, not only in terms of socio-capital productivity or outputs within the neoliberal imaginary but as a whole human being who can benefit others. We have found through educators and their reflections before and after the programme that they frequently invoke a disconnect or a long-held sense that something was missing. Their reflections capture a realisation of being caught in "complex knowledge entanglements" [65] as educators, previously unknowingly and now knowing, caught between Western or secular pedagogies informing notions of "quality teaching and learning" and Islamic Pedagogy [66] (initially the intuitive type, as we believe every Muslim educator clings to the rope of Islamic Pedagogy by virtue of living Islam). Explained by our graduates as forms of ontological and epistemological dissonance in their thinking, perceiving, knowing and doing, paradoxically, they expressed, though deeply Muslim in their daily life, a realisation of not being deeply Muslim in their daily educational practice. The missing anchor is *tawhid*, a unifying principle for their personal and professional identities, and now their integrative co-dependent growth and development. After establishing conviction in a personal pedagogical or practice challenge, our focus then turns to finding common ground with a shared aspiration. This is achieved through reconnecting at the level of vision and mission. All Islamic schools that we have encountered reflect some core aspirations in their orienting documents, including aspiring to foster strong faith identities, thriving in and contributing toward broader communities in which they reside, and a holistic education that nurtures mind, body, and soul. In varying levels of emphasis and terminology, an analysis of Islamic school aspirations provides us with a collective sense of shared aspirations that further enables our inward turn.

4.2.2. The 'Critical' Turn

The 'critical' turn is likely our biggest turning point in the journey to faithful praxis. Most Islamic school educators are tacitly familiar with a critical archive derived largely from Critical Pedagogy scholars (e.g., Paulo Freire, Michael Apple, Henry Giroux, and Stephen Ball, to name a few) that they would have read during their teacher education programmes. But even in conventional teacher education programs, critical pedagogy tends to largely remain bifurcated from what is commonly referred to as core curriculum courses [12]. More importantly, as teachers begin their teaching careers, the overwhelming neoliberal policy logic demarcates any form of strong criticality to the sidelines of their work. Teachers commonly become consumed in the day-to-day—planning, teaching, grading, and reporting. As a result, our second big move in the Grad Cert is to reconnect Islamic school educators to a critical archive to re-establish that (a) schooling remains a contested space, i.e., that there is a significant disagreement within education scholars on the purposes of education and of schooling [67], and how learning should be done [12,18]; (b) national/state-mandated curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment are not free from the impact of dominant neoliberal policy logics [11], neither is it neutral as it is equally embedded in a particular, narrow orientation of education and a particular understanding of a secular worldview [38]; and (c) drawing inspiration from decolonial scholars we reinforce that schools, as we know them today, are reflective of a colonial model of schooling that operates in the absence of transcendent worldview [42,68,69].

Together, the critical turn in our Grad Cert through Critical Pedagogy and decolonial literature archives achieves the following few key shifts for Islamic school educators: (1) it reconnects them to a 'mainstream' and yet 'alternative' archive that is not Islamically driven; (2) it fosters allyship with other critical scholars aspiring for a different type of schooling that equally feel that the current pressures of performativity are damaging on the role of educators [13,14] of children and societies [11]; and (3) it fosters hope and opportunity that Islamic schools can be sites of resistance and ingenuity for doing school differently that are no longer insular religious safe havens for Muslim learners but sites for vision driven; they are alternative approaches to schooling that can offer

solutions to broader schooling problems. They also reach a point in the journey where they appreciate decolonial literature, critical theory, and critical pedagogy, being situated within a constructionist paradigm, holding limitations around the paradigm's relativity [38], and its uncomfortable relationship with the Divine, and ultimate truth, for Muslims, drawn from the canonical sources of Islam (Qu'ran and Sunnah) [70]. While having a decolonising effect on many, if not most, encouraging greater "epistemic disobedience" [71], leading to educators viewing dominant research more critically, it also invokes a search for greater consideration of an Islamic paradigm and an Islamic Pedagogy. As a viable solution to sometimes 'complex knowledge entanglements' ([65], p. 131), educators within Islamic schools can find themselves caught between involving Western and Islamic epistemologies and pedagogies, enabling educators to confidently question take-for-granted assumptions about what a good Islamic school educator is ([67], p. 50).

4.2.3. The 'Reflexive' Turn

At this stage in the faithful praxis journey, we find Islamic school educators affirmed but curious about what the alternative actually entails. They have digested the problem, expressed buy-in for the aspiration, and are inspired to think anew by the critical turn. Having schooled ourselves in a prescriptive and performative system, many educators begin asking for the curriculum that will solve this bifurcation or ask for the model school that is already achieving what we have articulated. Essentially, it is a search for a quick-fix solution. After all, educators need to return to the classroom the following day, and inspired critical thinking is not exactly a "plug and play" solution for tomorrow. At this stage, we make explicit that we do not have "the solution", nor can we point them to a "model Islamic school" or a "model curriculum". Some educators find this reality overwhelming; others feel deflated. This, then, is our 'reflexive turn', where we impress on Islamic school educators that they are experts in their contexts [72] as they know their learners best and what they need. If they focus on internal *renewal* (*tajdīd*) [40] of themselves, reconnecting with the depth of the Islamic tradition, they will find contextually relevant ways of responding to their practice realities and the challenges their school community faces. The reflexive turn is strength-based. It helps educators see their learners and the families of their learners in a new light where people are not the root of the problem but rather the pervasive dominant cultures of schooling and structure and design of curriculum and pedagogy need rethinking to achieve aspirations set out [72]. The reflexive turn is empowering for most educators because they realise that renewed thinking will come from within. It is also a stark realisation that professional learning in schools, particularly in Islamic schools where learning is a mutual endeavour, requires significant amounts of time for deep deliberation, collaboration, dialogue, awakening of voice, and thinking anew.

4.2.4. The Turn 'Back'

Progress is commonly understood to be a forward move, where the ways of the past are shed. In the Islamic tradition, progress is defined as a turn back towards core ontological (beliefs), epistemological (ways of knowing), and axiological (values) that inform the Islamic worldview [69]. Distinct from merely implanting from the past, this turn back reinforces our decolonial move where we take a deep dive into education in the Islamic tradition, beginning with Islam's conception of the human being [36,73], of the purpose of learning [42,74], a conception of education [52,64,75], conceptions of relationality and dialogue [70], of behavioural education [36], and many other. This is decolonial, as it pushes back against orientalist assumptions that the Islamic tradition inherently is backward, in need of modernisation, reformation, or erasure, offering nothing of value to the contemporary world [24] or the existential challenges of contemporary Islamic school. The turn back is the crux of our program and the very essence of our intent for establishing an Islamic teacher education. But it requires a journey to appreciate its value. We find that when we 'turn back' too early in the programme or too quickly on an educator's journey, the depth of conceptualisation, and by virtue, its relevance, is glossed over. The first three

turns outlined above (inward, critical, and reflexive) serve as the necessary foundations for this fourth step of turning back to be truly transformative. The turn back also gives educators in Islamic schools a common language of key concepts that define education in the Islamic tradition [40] that serve as the fodder for renewed thinking, but also the beginnings of articulating school-wide philosophies of education that articulate "*the how*" or process an Islamic school intends to advance to achieve its mission and vision. It is at this stage in the journey that educators in Islamic schools begin to develop a conceptual depth of understanding of education in the Islamic tradition. It is no longer bifurcated but rather from within and with conviction that there is a place to push back or against, as well as work within, national curriculum and standards and dominant policy logic to reshape education from the ground up.

4.2.5. The 'Pedagogical Turn'

At this stage in the journey, Islamic school educators commonly have grown with the conviction that renewal is needed and possible. They express sentiments of aspiration, hope, and eagerness but are tempered with the realities of the pressures of schooling and the influence this holds on the work of educators. At times, the way forward feels daunting to many of our program participants, which is why we then make the 'pedagogical turn.' The pedagogical turn is, in reality, a full circle turn from the initial 'inward turn', now more confidently taking the position that real change begins with ourselves as educators and begins with what we can more readily claim autonomy over—our own teaching and our own practice. The pedagogical turn reminds Islamic school educators about our *amanah* (trust) as educators and that the cultivation of virtues in ourselves [42] is at the heart of soul-making [51,52]. We, therefore, lead pedagogically and not through curriculum or assessment because pedagogy is where the heart is, and softening hearts and nurturing souls are what define the distinction of education in the Islamic tradition [74]. We achieve the pedagogical turn by embedding a process of action research as a spiral throughout our program, enacted at multiple junctures. Action research, in its most robust form, re-establishes educators over top-down policy as the drivers of pedagogical-driven school renewal [12]. It positions educators as researchers and inquirers of their own practice, as ethnographers of their practice, of their unique school/educational settings and communities, and the lives of their learners [18]. In our program, this begins with educators naming their own pedagogical challenges, charting their own program based on their own existential realities for integrated personal and professional growth, collaborating with colleagues to envision their own alternative, and establishing their own "evidence" of impact. This is all done in relation to a constant intersecting reflexivity with aspirations of education in the Islamic tradition, their school's vision and context, and their own wealth of experience [18]. It also redirects efforts towards the dialogic and embodied encounter [76], an encounter as deeply relational as it is triangulated with the Divine [36], among educator colleagues and between educators and learners, where the effort of renewal remains true to its purpose while being centred on material and contextual realities of educators, learners, and schools today ([12], p. 293). Further, Islamic school educators researching their own practice is a key strategy in developing Islamic schools as places that produce distinct Islamic pedagogical praxis knowledge [40]. Our intention here is also to engage the dialectic between theory and practice, as Islamic school educators are now grounded in Islamic Pedagogy. As a renewed foundation for their educational praxis, they experiment with Islamic pedagogic concepts, principles, themes, and values as emergent theories, deepening their understandings of the theory in practice for reciprocally stronger theory and practice. It is also our intention and effort to narrow the recognised gap between the conceptual and theoretical within the field of Islamic Education Studies [77] and actual practice within K–12 Islamic schooling [59]. Action research within our final turn provides educators with a template for ongoing Islamically grounded, vision-driven, and context relevant renewal in Islamic schools. It provides them with the agency to be exemplary educators within their classrooms, irrespective of whether—although ideally—their school

leadership shares similar commitments to renewal reflective of our reframing of a reform agenda as instead an agenda around renewal. Renewal of Islamically grounded teacher education, and by extension, an agenda around "bottom-up" educator-led renewal with implications in K–12 Islamic schools, as an alternative to the bifurcated decontextualised policy agenda presently dominating educators' professional work [12].

5. Conclusions: The Task Ahead for Islamic Teacher Education

This paper began with a problem, namely that Islamic school educators committed to the vision of K–12 Islamic schooling in Muslim minority contexts are expressing sentiments of complex forms of dissonance and that teacher education for Islamic school educators remains bifurcated. To unpack this problem, this paper first established the urgency for Islamic teacher education, then conceptualised what makes teacher education "Islamic" across a typology and closed with the journey that Islamic school educators in one programme experience to challenge the bifurcation and overcome their moral dissonance. The journey outlined in the final part of this paper reflects our collective learning about Islamic teacher education in practice over the past decade. It reflects the necessity for Islamic teacher education to work within and against education policy and practice that assumes universality. The journey outlined illustrates that Islamic teacher education requires time—time to be reflexive and introspective, time to challenge, foster critical allies, and turn back. Islamic teacher education cannot, from our experience, be a grafting of Islamic perspectives but must begin with a willingness to be constructively critical within a framework of aims and aspirations onto epistemically situated, even endemically reconstructed, as necessary, at the paradigm level. The task ahead for this emerging subfield within Islamic Education Studies [77] is to continue to explore, within this typology of Islamic teacher education, each of the three fronts outlined in this paper and possibly more. Initial pillars include the urgency for why an 'Islamic' subfield of teacher education is even required and needs ongoing exploration in universities, as does an Islamically grounded approach to teacher education and professional learning in schools and communities. The conceptualisation of what it means to be an educator from within the Islamic tradition deserves further research on both classical and contemporary thought but also from across contexts of Muslim societies and communities past and present on enactments of philosophies of Islamic education [68]. And the journey of Islamic school educators grappling with what it means to carve out a distinct identity and sense of self-efficacy requires ongoing research. The influence of neoliberal policy logic on the work of Islamic school educators, given the distinct aspirations and end goals of Islamic schools, also requires further research. What we have offered are our own reflections on working with Australian Islamic school educators, drawing broad strokes from reflections on their collective experiences in relation to our own reflexive efforts in attempting to embody, enact, and realise, as Muslim educators, faithful praxis as pedagogues in a programme based on Islamic Pedagogy, for Islamic school educator. Our program is but one attempt to address the forms of dissonance educators experience.

To close, we turn now to our special issue that we hope we have adequately set the scene for. In this special issue, readers will gain conceptual and empirical insights that offer a sampling of emerging thinking and research on Islamic teacher education. The papers in this special issue are far from an exhaustive account of the important work emerging in this subfield, but they serve as a much-needed invigoration and continuation of an urgent need.

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Article

Experiences of Anti-Blackness in Islamic Educational Spaces: Implications for Islamic Teacher Education

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Abstract: This paper is an initial examination of anti-Blackness within a specifically Muslim context, and it presents the experiences of some Black community members who attended one U.S. city's primary local mosque's weekend school program and who either attended or had children who attended the city's sole Islamic school. During this ethnographic project, 18 participants who identified as part of the Muslim community of the city were interviewed; semi-structured interviews and snowball sampling were used to obtain data. Research participants included parents of children in the Islamic school or weekend school program at the affiliated mosque, former students of the Islamic school or the mosque's weekend school program, and former or current leaders in the community. The findings demonstrate that anti-Blackness in Islamic community spaces often manifests through the targeting of Black children for perceived misbehavior in educational spaces and through practices of exclusion toward Black community members. The findings also indicate that there is a need for increased education and training related to anti-Blackness and a need for the implementation of an anti-racist pedagogy in Islamic educational settings.

Keywords: Islamic education; anti-Blackness; racism; religious education; teacher training; anti-racist pedagogy

1. Introduction

The murder of George Floyd by former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, and the subsequent outrage that followed, revealed just some of the life-threatening and life-altering issues that impact the Black community in the U.S. as a result of anti-Blackness [1]. Research on anti-Blackness and its relationship to the White population in the U.S. is growing [2–7], but less attention has been paid to anti-Blackness within populations that are neither White nor Black. Muslim communities in the U.S., for instance, are not immune to anti-Blackness, though it is an anathema to the teachings of Islam. Black Muslims in the U.S. often face anti-Blackness in their local religious and educational spaces, where many individuals within the Muslim community in the U.S. are, indeed, neither White nor Black. The study highlighted in this paper sought to better understand the extent to which race is made to matter in Islamic educational spaces and how the perception of anti-Blackness can impact Black community members' relationship to the wider Muslim community.

To be clear, it is incorrect to refer to a Muslim community as if it is monolithic group. While being Muslim in the U.S. has historically been understood to mean being non-White [8], there are Muslims of every ethnic and racial make-up throughout the U.S. and globally. The Muslim population of the U.S., like the transnational Muslim population, is highly diverse; that being said, many Muslims are non-White, and Islam in the U.S. has its roots in the Black community [9–11].

This paper is an examination of anti-Blackness within a specifically Muslim context, and it presents the experiences of some Black community members who attended one U.S. city's primary local mosque and who either attended or had children who attended the city's sole Islamic school. The findings of this research demonstrate that the targeting of

Black children for misbehavior and exclusionary practices are two of the ways in which anti-Blackness manifests in these spaces. It is necessary for Muslim communities to contend with anti-Blackness, because experiences like those discussed in this paper are alienating families while also failing the socio-religious expectations of the concept of the ummah, a violation that in turn undermines Islamic teachings overall. While there are various methods that can be utilized to confront and tackle the issue of anti-Black racism in Islamic schools, teacher training and the implementation of an anti-racist pedagogy are essential first steps. This paper will examine how these can be utilized to ensure that Islamic educational spaces challenge anti-Blackness in the educational environment.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1. Mis-Education, Re-Education, and Education in the Era of Post-Colonial Religion [12]: Sister Clara Muhammad Schools and Islamic Schools after 1960

The Nation of Islam (NOI), under the leadership of Noble Drew Ali and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, provided a new interpretation of Islam that saw Islam as a "basis for an alternative modality of American Blackness" [13]. The NOI took the notion of this alternative modality and established the first recorded Islamic school in the U.S. in the 1930s [14]. It was born from the vision of the wife of Elijah Muhammad, Clara Muhammad, when she began home-schooling her children [15]. The homeschool initiative led to the establishment of the University of Islam Schools (UofI), later renamed the Clara Muhammad Schools [15,16].

Central to the mission of the schools was re-education, which emphasized pride in being Black, learning professional skills, and pursuing intellectual endeavors [16]. The schools ultimately epitomized the concept of self-empowerment that was foundational to the NOI and elevated Black bodies and lives [15]. The school curriculum was altered after the death of Elijah and Clara Muhammad and was brought closer to mainstream Islam [15].

With the rise in immigration of Muslims from other parts of the world to the U.S., particularly after the 1960s, Islamic education took a turn away from issues of civil rights and toward the needs of the ummah and the desire for a revitalization of Islam, a period that Sherman Jackson refers to as the era of "post-colonial religion", a reference to the fact that many of these immigrants came from countries that were formerly colonized or former colonies [12,15]. Efforts were made by the immigrant Muslim communities to align Islamic schools with Western education models to facilitate integration while also ensuring that young people would have a Muslim identity [15]. There has been an ultimate divergence among these two large groups of Muslims in the U.S., and while much of this may be based on opinions around integration and where, geographically, sympathies should lie, at least some of it is perceived to be based on race.

2.2. Anti-Blackness and Aspirational Whiteness

The benefits of Whiteness and the drawbacks of an association with Blackness have not escaped members of the U.S. Muslim community, particularly those who may feel that their relationship to the U.S. is tenuous. As Karim writes, "the fear of not being accepted, of not making it in America, always looms and lingers. Why associate with the native underclass when one's immigrant status already threatens one's assimilation?" [17]. In other words, if Blackness prevents one from attaining the "American dream", the best option is to associate oneself as closely as possible with Whiteness or, in other words, uphold anti-Blackness.

Anti-Blackness posits that the Black body is outside of humanity because of a perpetual slave status being imposed upon Black individuals [18]. Patterson points out that the slavery of Black individuals in the Americas was a form of death and the life of a slave was only in existence as service to the slave master [19]. As Grimes writes, "while other forms of asymmetrical power relations may bear a resemblance to certain aspects of the master-slave relationship, the slave suffers a reality beyond analogy" [20]. Anti-Blackness is incomparable to other forms of racism, because the nature of the slavery of Black individuals

in the Americas is also incomparable. Grimes further comments that "because slave status had been associated with a body type, the association between slavery and blackness could live on even after slavery itself had been abolished" [20]. The mistreatment of Black individuals in the U.S. is directly related to their being Black and to associations with slavery and, therefore, social death. Anti-Blackness is different from other forms of racism, because Black people are deemed to be different from other human beings, including other non-White groups.

There is a long history in the U.S. of denying rights and citizenship based on racial status [21]. Aspirational Whiteness has led many non-Black Muslims in U.S. Muslim communities to be cautious of being associated with Blackness, as the ramifications of such associations are well understood through historical and modern examples [13,17,22]. In many Muslim communities throughout the U.S., there is a tendency to avoid calling racism what it is, a reluctance to embrace Black members of the community, and a resistance to Black leadership [23,24]. Abdurraqib points out that while immigrant Muslims toe the line between depicting Black American struggles as "like their struggles—to assimilate, to belong", they also put "distance" between themselves and Black American Muslims as a means "to make a case for their assimilation and belonging in mainstream society" [25,26]. Abdurraqib's analysis brings attention to the fact that "Whiteness" in the U.S. provides particular privileges that non-White people simply do not have [27]. People of color and those from minoritized communities are not oblivious to the role that White privilege plays in U.S. society, even if White members of society have been socialized to remain oblivious to that fact. However, anti-racist pedagogy can be used in Islamic schools as a promising alternative to what has been the status quo in many places. Given that it targets learners, there is an opportunity for significant growth.

2.3. Anti-Racist Pedagogy

The relationship between race, ill treatment in society, and a lack of opportunities is grounded in anti-Blackness and is part of the environment of institutions in the U.S., including those that are designed for educational purposes [3]. Anti-racist pedagogy aims to combat racism by connecting the classroom to the wider systems in society in order to bring about social change [28]. Unlike other methods for incorporating race into the classroom, such as multiculturalism [29] or diversity approaches, anti-racist pedagogy is based on Critical Race Theory (CRT) and emphasizes "the analysis of structural racism, power relations, and social justice" [28]. Gloria Ladson-Billings wrote that "racism is a permanent fixture of American life" [30], and the acknowledgement of this fact on the part of the educator is the first step toward an anti-racist pedagogy being implemented in a classroom [3,31]. This is the precursor to examining what is taught in classrooms and, just as importantly, *how* content is taught [28]. Anti-racist pedagogy includes the intentional teaching of critical thinking skills around race, power, and privilege [28]. Kishimoto (2018) highlights that an anti-racist pedagogy is incorporated into the classroom by challenging Eurocentrism through the purposeful centering of the voices and experiences of people of color (POC), deconstructing myths such as "the American Dream", and challenging the idea of ultimate truth, thus encouraging students to make connections to course content and providing students with greater autonomy. One goal of this method is that educators and learners develop a sense of community when critical thinking and autonomy of learners is fostered. Further, anti-racist pedagogy seeks to assist students in recognizing that deficit models of POC are incorrect and that POC have both agency and potential. [28].

This article elucidates upon the complexities of anti-Blackness that manifest in non-White spaces and how non-White environments, in this case Islamic ones, are not immune to anti-Blackness. Furthermore, this work examines the ways in which teacher training and anti-racist pedagogy in Islamic schools can be used to, at a minimum, reduce anti-Black practices.

3. Methodology

3.1. Interviews

Interviews were semi-structured and conducted in a location chosen by each participant. Interviews were audio-recorded verbatim, and participants signed waivers agreeing to the interview prior to it taking place. IRB was approved, and all procedures followed IRB expectations. Questions focused on school experiences, relationships between stakeholders within the community, and how issues were managed by the school or mosque representatives. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, but some went as long as two hours. All data were stored on a secure password-protected computer.

There were inclusion and exclusion criteria for participants. Interviews were held with members of the community who were 18 years or older. Participants had to be former students, a parent of a student who had attended the school and/or weekend school program, or a current or former leader in the community in some capacity. There was some overlap between many of these identities. It was not out of the ordinary that a participant was a current or former parent of a child that attended the full-time school or weekend school program and also had some form of leadership role in the community. It should be noted that most families enrolled their children in both educational programs simultaneously in order to maximize the knowledge that their children would gain about Islam. Much of the participant selection was performed through snowball sampling, a sampling method that gains new research participants through contacts provided by current research participants [32]; however, I also personally knew many of the participants.

This research was conducted using grounded theory (GT). GT allows for findings to be grounded in the data and for themes to emerge, which then leads to the formation of a theory about a phenomenon [33] (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Charmaz [34] (2005) states that "as we learn how our research participants make sense of their experiences, we begin to make analytic sense of their meanings and actions". Patterns of behavior are sought out and then examined (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This method has been selected because, ideally, fewer assumptions are made about the research findings, and instead, the findings are expected to emerge from the research data. As Corley [35] (2015) posits, GT "is engaging a phenomenon from the perspective of those living it". Furthermore, theory is produced because of the data that are collected and, therefore, it is literally grounded in the data. The view of the situation or conditions based on the researchers' opinions or theories is not nearly as insightful, important, or aware as the perspectives and insights offered by the individuals in the situation or impacted by the conditions. GT was selected for this study specifically for this reason. In this study, while I could have predicted that there are anti-Black sentiments in some Islamic educational settings, I could not have predicted the ways in which those sentiments impacted the interviewees, their relationship to their local Muslim community, and in some cases their relationship to Islam.

3.2. Data Analysis

Interviews were coded using the GT method. There were three layers of coding: open, axial, and selective coding. Williams and Moser (2019) [36] point out how these forms of coding are related: "the open, axial, and selective coding strategy enables a cyclical and evolving data loop in which the researcher interacts, is constantly comparing data and applying data reduction, and consolidation techniques. This process entails detailed analysis and comparison of data in order to ensure accuracy and develop a view of what the data means [36]. Again, GT was partially chosen as a means of avoiding preconceived notions, but the way in which data were analyzed also allowed for accuracy checks throughout the data analysis portion of the project. Codes such as "exclusion", "racial bias", and "outsider" emerged from the data, among many others. A theory of anti-Blackness in majority non-White Muslim communities and its relationship to community belonging, organizational inclusion, and the diminished association with abandonment of religion was developed. All participants received a copy of their interview transcription

to allow them to make changes if they felt it was necessary. No participant requested a follow-up interview or requested that changes be made to the initial data collected.

3.3. Setting

The city in which the research sites are located is a smaller-sized U.S. city with a high population of refugees and immigrants that hail from a wide array of countries. The city has two popular mosques; this research focuses on community members who attended the more centrally located institution. The mosque runs a weekend school program and was affiliated with the local Islamic school. This was the sole Islamic school in the city.

The school closed during the COVID-19 pandemic school closures and never reopened. While the school was significantly impacted by the global pandemic, it had also struggled financially for several years. Beyond just the financial challenges, which many Islamic schools face [37], there were allegations of racism and discrimination that impacted the reputation and enrollment numbers of the school. While the school has always had a diverse student body, most of the students tended to identify as Arab, primarily from families that were originally from the Levant region, or were from families of Somali heritage who were originally from Somalia.

3.4. Participants

Some participants in this study were former parents and students of the city's only K-5 Islamic school and the weekend school program operated by one of the two local mosques in the city. All participants had attended the city's Islamic institutions, and some were or had been in positions of leadership. All research participants self-identified as "Black". Many of the participants were originally from the continent of Africa, specifically from five countries.

Table 1 below provides more detailed information about the participants. All categories are applicable at the time of the interview, and all names are pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants. One group of participants were all from the same family. The family is originally from Somalia, but some family members have been in the U.S. for decades.

Table 1. Primary research participants.

Name	Family Origin	Time in U.S.	Approximate Age Range
Muhammad	Sudan	10 years and has lived in various other parts of the Middle East	Mid–late 30s
Yusuf	Burundi	12–15 years	Late 30s
Mansour	Senegal	Almost his entire life. His family came when he was a toddler.	Late 20s to early 30s
Hamza	Somalia	13 years	Late 20s to early 30s
Asif (Member of family)	Somalia	35 years in the city but has lived in other parts of the U.S. and world	Late 40s
Naima (Member of family)	Somalia	20 years in the city but has lived in other parts of the U.S. and world	Early 50s
Mustafa (Member of family)	Somalia	26 years in the city but has lived in other parts of the U.S. and world	Early 50s
Yahye (Member of family)	Somalia/U.S.	Almost entire life	20s
Yacquub (Member of family)	Somalia/U.S.	Almost entire life	20s
Khadija (Member of family)	Somalia	20 years in the city but has lived in other parts of the U.S. and world	Elderly
Hafsa (Member of family)	Somalia/U.S.	Lived in the city off and on for 7 years and lived in various other countries	Early 20s

Table 1. *Cont.*

Name	Family Origin	Time in U.S.	Approximate Age Range
Hammad	Ghana	11 years	Late 30s to early 40s
Kaamil	Sudan	Lived in the city for two years, also lived in another state and the Caribbean	Early 30s
Muhsin	Sudan	5 years	Mid to late 30s
Mahmoud	Sudan	13 years	Mid 30s
Juan	U.S.	Entire life	50s
Hashem	Sudan	4 years and has also lived in the Middle East and Europe	Early 40s
Tahir	Senegal	8 years	Early 30s

4. Results

Research participants provided insights into why Islamic educational institutions or programs were chosen for their families. They also provided useful information regarding how their experiences diverged from their expectations of the programs that they or their children were involved in. This research yielded two primary findings: (1) Black students tend to be singled out for behavioral issues, and (2) there is a perception that Black people are unwanted in community spaces. To best understand what is taken away when the environment in Islamic spaces feels exclusionary, one must first understand what role these spaces play in the life of Muslim attendees.

Based on the available research about Islamic schools in the U.S., most parents put their children in Islamic schools to ensure that their children gain a strong Muslim identity. Interview participants confirmed this. One research participant and former student of the local full-time Islamic school, Aisha, explained this through her own understanding about why her parents put her in an Islamic school. Aisha was eighteen at the time of this research and is of Somali heritage. Her family left a refugee camp in Kenya for the U.S. and has lived in the city included in this study for a number of years. When asked why her parents chose an Islamic school setting for her education, she said, "I think it was for cultural reasons. It's to help us learn our religion because we are not in an Islamic country". For her family, the school was viewed as a viable alternative to what being in a majority "Islamic country" would offer to the individual.

This was a common theme among participants. One participant, Ali, had his children in the local full-time Islamic school, and when asked why he made that choice, he said that he wanted his children "to learn the culture".

Asif is part of the Ali family and works at a local university. He has lived in the city for roughly 15 years and in the U.S. for over 30. He has lived in several other states, primarily in the northeast. He made an interesting statement about the role that the mosque itself plays in daily life for many Muslims: "The mosque is the center of the community, help, normally prayer recitation, and a place to pray. But also, a place to find information, a place to find help if you need help, especially burial grounds and things like that".

However, participants in these institutions also explained that their experiences were not always indicative of what they expected to find in Islamic settings. For many, aside from simply providing access to a religious community, Islamic schools were expected to also prevent the assumed damage that can be caused in the public school system. The perceived threats from traditional public school settings include racism, and anti-Blackness in particular. However, the realities for the participants in this research appeared to differ from the stated intentions.

4.1. Singling Students Out

One significant finding of this research is that Black children are frequently singled out in classes—often for misbehavior. A similar situation occurs in non-Islamic schools. Black

boys are often targeted for discipline, as schools fail to support their development [38]. However, Islamic schools are seen by many Muslims as a haven and therefore, such experiences are unexpected in the Islamic schooling environment.

While Aisha attended the local Islamic school, she had long since aged out, but she did have siblings that were still attending the school. Aisha made claims about discrimination in the classrooms.

> "In the school setting, kids are being treated differently. I don't know. My brothers and sisters, they, complain about being treated differently than the other children...they would do something, and the other kids would also do something, but the teacher would mainly pick on them. Like they get in trouble from it."

Aisha pointed out that the teacher was non-Black and of Arab origin. Aisha's comments are supported by claims made by other participants as well, including parents.

Ahmed is also of Somali heritage, and he came to the U.S. as a refugee. At one time, he had all his children in the local Islamic school. However, when asked about his experiences with the school, he did not have many positive responses. "Teachers were calling me all the time—your kids did this; your kids did that". This led him to believe that his children were being singled out. He removed his children from the Islamic school and enrolled them in the public school system. He described his family's experiences with the local public school as "much better". Some of the racialized experiences of parents were even far more blatant than those of Aisha or Ahmed.

Naima had a markedly negative experience related to her son, and it greatly affected her relationship with the Muslim community in the city. Naima has lived in the city for over 25 years. She has been part of the community off and on during that time. She currently attends primarily during holiday events, though she describes her relationship to the Muslim community as "deeper" than it appears. She explained the experience that led to her distancing herself from the community, although she would be quick to add that she had familial obligations that also resulted in her being less involved than she would have preferred. When her oldest son was six years old, he attended the local Islamic school. While in attendance, he was called the n-word, and she removed him from the school after the incident. In describing her reaction to the event, she said:

> I think what was hurtful to me was when he was finally called the n-word, it was in that space...Yeah, yeah and it was a shock. I look back now that I am fifty-four and I should've handled it better. My memory is poor now, but something happened at the school where the hours I think became such that we couldn't go there cause we needed, we were both either working or in school and we needed the hours to be what they had been and the hours were shortened somehow at the school and so we pulled him out regretfully. But I think what [we] might have taken away was 'wow, that was a really not so nice space for him.' And I was living in an apartment complex and a Pakistani lady asked why we weren't at the school anymore and I told her, and she was a little older than me and she chided me and she said, "the school doesn't belong to that family or that child who said that. What's wrong with you? You know it's bigger than that. You don't deprive your child of religious or the Muslim experience or the masjid experience just because of that one incident". And I understood at the time that she was correct.

Although she mentions scheduling as a partial issue, the incident certainly contributed to her desire to remove her son. Naima essentially felt that she had two equally problematic options: (1) accept that her son would face racial slurs at school but allow him to continue in order to have him in an Islamic environment or (2) pull him out of the school in order to protect him and completely forgo the Islamic environment. She chose the latter and expressed personal guilt for having made that decision, though she felt that the alternative was not acceptable either. Thus, even years later, the anti-Blackness experienced in an Islamic school, a space that was expected to be welcoming, caused distress. This distress

was not simply from the memory of the incident of the slur but also experienced as a deep personal conflict around the appropriate behavior and commitments to intersectional identities—in this case Black and Muslim. Naima's regret expresses the profound difficulty of her choice and the emotional hardship surrounding the decisions of how best to protect and raise her child.

When I asked Naima why she never brought it to the attention of the administration, she essentially said that there was no point to do so and highlighted the fact that she is aware of the existence of racist attitudes toward Black people. Essentially, she felt that it was useless to speak to the administration, and so, since she had no faith in their ability or desire to handle the situation, she removed her son.

> So, I'm a Somali female raised in many different countries and Arab attitudes to African people or Black people, when they're bad—you know that fact, that racism exists, was not news to me. We'd lived in Egypt. We'd lived in Yemen. Um, um, (pauses) I love the Arabic language, I love Arabic culture. I don't blame the people. I'm not saying (pauses). . .but the fact that there are racialized ideologies out there and that you could be impacted by that was nothing new to me. And I just think, I'll be honest with you, I think you are (pauses). . .what hurts is that when you don't expect it in the places and spaces. . .I don't—you know if it happened on the streets of [the city of research]—alright. So, as much as I'm acting all sophisticated, 'ah, these things happen', clearly, we ran for the hills and never looked back.

From this statement, Naima highlights two distinct issues that she recognizes: (1) there is racism that is pervasive toward those of darker complexion in "Arab" countries, and (2) Islamic educational spaces in the U.S. are seen as a place of refuge from the racialized ideologies outside of them—at least in the U.S. Naima's disappointment came with the realization that her second belief simply did not hold true. She did not expect it in that space and that was more hurtful than if the experience had happened anywhere else in her city of residence.

Naima added that such occurrences are particularly terrible because of the impression that Muslim families try to give their children about both Islam and the Muslim community. "You can just imagine whatever a Muslim family is saying to their children about whatever it is to be Muslim and then the child goes there and says, 'wow!' (laughs and rolls eyes)".

Naima's realization that U.S. Islamic educational spaces are not the safe havens so many Muslims assume them to be, at least for some, is a realization that many Black Muslims have been grappling with. Yet, many non-Black Muslims are still unaware of this fact because they have not experienced those issues directly.

4.2. Unwanted

The security that Muslim educational spaces provide for Muslims in non-Muslim majority countries cannot be overstated, and it is especially impactful for those whose bodies and identities are minoritized in more than one way. Naima addressed this when discussing race in general as it pertains to the Muslim community overall and the need to talk about these topics in an open forum. She also addressed the deeper reasoning behind why she never asked anyone to discuss her son having been called the n-word at school.

> N: We're in a country that's struggling with race. Why would we assume that, that we are immune as a Muslim community? Right? And for our children's sake if nothing else I think we've got to just develop language and be okay with that and not assume perfection and not front. You know what I mean? I, I just think it's crazy to be saying that there are no problems. What we should be saying is 'but we work on them'.
>
> R: Right.
>
> N: And I think that, to do, to have that conversation in the masjid, it's to help our children further figure out how to navigate this culture. As having people,

when you add, if you were to add an immigrant identity to a Muslim identity, right? And in addition to that you're Black—those are three things that they are navigating. So, I think the masjid could be a very cool place to help students think this through, but I think ignoring it is the most toxic thing we can do.

R: Do you think it has been slightly ignored?

N: Oh yeah! People don't want to deal with it at all. I never even bothered bringing it up [to institutional leaders]. I just disappeared.

R: Yeah, that's right, your own experience.

N: Yeah, yeah, yeah that's to the degree that I didn't expect—I didn't even give them an option to fix things. I just assumed, 'Oh, like that is it? Oh well'.

The fact that Naima felt that it was useless to try and find some resolution is extremely troubling, and it facilitated pushing her and her family away from the community in many respects.

Hamza is originally from Somalia and is a parent of a child who attended the local Islamic school. However, he can be described as a leader in the greater Muslim community, having served on the board of one of the mosques and been a teacher in the weekend school. He also often acts as a liaison between the Islamic institutions in the city and the Somali community. Hamza pointed out some of the most salient issues that occurred at the local Islamic school.

The Islamic school struggled financially, and many families could not afford to pay tuition. However, they received an outside scholarship for attendance, and the school received the money to cover tuition charges. A large population of the students came from Somali families, and many of those families originally came to the U.S. as refugees. Hamza expressed that there were issues with some changes made at the school, and he felt that those changes were based on race.

At one time, the Somali community—all of them withdraw their kids. Because they [members of the school board] come [up] with a plan…they sat down and they said, 'you know what, [the school], all the kids going there are African kids. Arab kids—maybe [there is] only ten. So, they say, 'what's the benefit for us?' You see? Honestly, they sat down, and they talked about this. They said, 'you know what? These African kids that are going there, most of them are Somali kids. Their parents won't afford to pay if we raise the tuition…' So, everybody withdraw their kids…And [the school] was like seven kids. I'm like, 'now happily you guys can enjoy your school'.

From Hamza's perspective, the focus on increasing finances was deemed to be related to a perception that the Somali families received too much of a financial "break" that had no benefit to the Arab community members. He found this highly racialized and offensive. Some participants felt that this is indicative of a desire among Arabs to distance themselves from Black members of the community. This relates closely to feelings of exclusion that many participants expressed. Furthermore, an important point here is that the school was composed of primarily Somali families and their children. However, the leadership and power were concentrated in the hands of non-Black Muslims who were mostly of Arab origin. Even when Black people/kids are in the majority, the Muslim environment, at least in this setting, skews power towards non-Black community members, and anti-Blackness prevails.

5. Discussion

5.1. Anti-Blackness and the Absence of Safety

The main findings of this research are that (1) Black children are frequently singled out—often for what is deemed to be misbehavior—and (2) among Black community members, there is a perception of exclusion or a sense of being unwanted. While none of the spaces discussed in this study openly promise inclusion, the concept of the ummah, with

its focus on community, ideally, between all Muslims regardless of other aspects of identity, likely led those affiliated with them to believe that they would be inclusive. In theory, the concept of the ummah emphasizes a familial relationship between Muslims, and whether the ummah is conceived of as a united community that happens to be heterogeneous, or as a set of communities bound by Islam as the commonality that leads them to operate in relation to one another [39,40], the participants in this study had a perception that the treatment they experienced was less than acceptable or Islamic.

The results of this research demonstrate the ways that anti-Blackness can manifest in spaces that are meant to serve as a protection from the already hostile world outside of them. Naima discusses how the circumstances feel different when experiences of racism are had in a Muslim-majority country. This is because the incident can be related to the prejudices of the individual, but a sense of solidarity with other Muslims is not shattered. However, in a Muslim space in the U.S. context, the experience is isolating because it is a space for a minority group, and the perceived "safe space" is removed and leaves one to question if nowhere is safe.

Many Black Muslims are forced to choose between the Islamophobic and anti-Black society outside of the Muslim community or the anti-Black elements within the Muslim community. Consequently, this research shows that there are two reactions to these experiences: (1) abstain from attending or (2) accept that there is a diminished sense of security and abstain from seeking community. Both options point to a failure of leaders to provide the safe space that these spaces theoretically aspire to offer. The assumption that school leaders would ignore racial issues shows that there is a lack of trust toward leaders—at least among Black community members. When conflict occurred, nearly all participants chose not to bring it up, because they did not feel that their needs and perspectives would be taken into consideration.

5.2. Islamic Educational Spaces and Anti-Racist Pedagogy

In terms of educational spaces, it is important to better understand the need for recognition of internal biases toward Black students and their families. Todd, Thiem, and Neel (2016) found that the age of a Black male has no bearing on whether a non-Black person sees them as threatening or not [41]. Their research found that even Black boys as young as five years old can be deemed a threat. Small et al. (2012) [42] found that Black infants were similarly demonized, with Black infants more likely than White infants to have negative stereotypes, such as being "fussy", associated with them. As Naima said, the U.S. is a country struggling with race, and one cannot assume that Muslims are not similarly struggling. Being Muslim does not preclude one from being impacted by the dominant racial hierarchy in the U.S., and the same is true for being non-White. An individual can be non-White and still anti-Black.

Anti-racist pedagogy is a means by which students can become critical thinkers and reflect on the status quo in society [28]. It focuses on "racial content, pedagogy, and organizing" [28]. More specifically, the teacher recognizes their own positionality, students work to understand their position and collaborate with others, and, finally, it encourages students to "organize" for an end to racism for the greater good. It is not simply an intellectual endeavor; it is a call to action [43].

Self-inquiry by educators is the first step to implementing anti-racist pedagogy, as teachers must engage in a process that Le Grange refers to as "unlearning and relearning" [44]. Educators must acknowledge the existence of racism and anti-Blackness and an interrogation into its presence within the educational institution [45]. Drawing from the work of Larkin et al. [46], Daniel (2022) suggests that teachers must come to a greater understanding of the "sociopolitical and racial realities of black learners" [45]. Furthermore, oppression needs to be understood from "the epistemic perspective of the marginalized" [45]. Therefore, it is imperative that, in addition to self and institutional examination, teachers familiarize themselves with research and theories that are generated by or in tandem with those from the Black community. This also offers an opportunity to collaborate with Black

community members about their experiences and exhibits a form of solidarity between different ethnic and racial communities.

Self-inquiry and institutional interrogation can give way to curricular changes. The curriculum must be evaluated as part of wider changes but with an eye toward solidarity [47]. Islamic schools vary in the way that they teach about Islam, but there are commonalities, namely, the teaching of religious knowledge and the teaching of the Quran [48]. Beyond that, according to Memon and Abdalla, Islamic schools tend to select one of the following curricular orientations: (1) an Appended Orientation that is in line with the state curriculum but with Islam as an added element, (2) an Integrated Curriculum Orientation that infuses Islam throughout the curriculum, (3) a Ground Orientation or a focus on an Islamic worldview, (4) a Character Orientation or a focus on building Islamic character, or (5) a Civic Engagement Orientation or a focus on civic engagement as a means to actively behave as a Muslim [48]. Each of these has the possibility for an anti-racist curriculum and pedagogical approach through the infusion of anti-racism [49].

An Appended Orientation can use the curriculum of the state and infuse it with anti-racism, and the same can be said for an Integrated Curriculum, which already infuses Islam throughout the curriculum and can also add an emphasis on anti-racism. A Grounded Orientation can include anti-racism as part of the worldview of Islam, as the faith teaches against racial superiority [50]. Character and Civic Engagement Orientations generally have a strong emphasis on engaging with one's faith through active behaviors and deeds. Anti-racism could probably most easily be utilized in these two orientations, as an anti-racist pedagogy emphasizes political activism and social change, and these orientations tend to emphasize action.

Aside from a recognition of biases and examination of curriculum and school practices, it is important to consider the role of teacher training in the implementation of anti-racist pedagogy. Few early career teachers feel comfortable discussing social justice topics in their classrooms out of fear related to a lack of knowledge around the topic [51]. To combat this, teachers should view themselves as co-learners and not experts [51]. However, this may also speak to the race-evasiveness that is predominant in teacher education programs [52]. This has now become a "norm" of teacher education programs [52].

However, anti-racist pedagogy is not essential only for White teachers but for all teachers. While White teachers may need to recognize their own privilege, teachers of color must also work through internalized racism [47]. Furthermore, White-passing non-White individuals might need to acknowledge their privilege and grapple with their own internalized racism. However, if anti-racist pedagogy is not being discussed in teacher training programs, or if teachers have been teaching for an extended period, options seem limited. However, it is the job of the institution to ensure that teachers are properly trained and that all stakeholders are aligned in their desire to implement an anti-racist pedagogy. There is Muslim-run organizations, such as the Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative, that offer trainings and workshops on topics related to race and racism.

One should not assume that any of this is easy, particularly since Muslim teachers in Islamic schools have several unique challenges [15]. Their behavior and habits are often scrutinized by parents and community members because they are seen as role models for students [15]. However, while working to model positive Islamic behavior, it should also be emphasized that such behavior includes anti-racism and efforts to establish a more just society.

5.3. Future Research Directions

While this study provides data regarding the ways in which anti-Blackness can manifest in Islamic educational spaces, further research is needed. It is important to engage with community and school leaders and to gain their perspective about anti-Blackness. Furthermore, generational differences should be taken into consideration, as well as power dynamics between different generations. In general, second-generation Muslims with im-

migrant roots are more likely than their parents to question America's moral high ground on various issues [53].

Additionally, geography should be considered. It would be highly useful to have similar studies that compare Islamic schools in different areas of the U.S., particularly in large cities. Many Islamic institutions appear to cater to certain racial or ethnic groups, and language use in the institutions may be a factor [54]. However, it would be helpful to examine how and why communities initially divide based on what often appears to be racial and ethnic lines and how this impacts Islamic educational spaces.

Furthermore, there is also a need to examine the extent to which finances factor into some of the issues discussed in this paper. In what ways do class differences and stereotypes related to class encourage anti-Blackness? In this study, the inability of many Black community members to pay a higher tuition at the local Islamic school was discussed and deemed to be a detriment to the continuance of the school. It would be interesting to know whether the same conversations were had about non-Black families of similar socio-economic status as the Black families.

Lastly, many Muslims treat racial issues as non-existent because of the assumption that the concept of the ummah eradicated racial bias. This research shows the need for an acknowledgement of racial issues in Islamic educational spaces and a plan for how to deal with those issues as they arise. While the concept of the ummah is one that can bind Muslims together, anti-Blackness can also serve to tear communities apart or, at a minimum, cause some members to abandon their relationship with the community. The results of this research show that the Muslim community is not immune to the anti-Blackness outside of Muslim-led institutions and organizations, even if the community might be primarily composed of individuals who are non-White. Greater attention paid to these issues can lead to a useful examination of community interactions and assist in developing trust between community members and Islamic educational spaces.

6. Conclusions

Future researchers should delve more into these issues within a variety of educational spaces to better understand the prevalence of anti-Blackness and the ways that concerns are addressed—or not. Muslim leaders should work with their community members to bring attention to the issue of anti-Blackness and consider how it can be combatted as an entire community. Working with Black Muslim parents and community members would be an excellent place to start.

Naima made it clear that when her son was called the "N" word at the local Islamic school, she did not feel that it would do any good to go to the administration. The assumption that there was no point in speaking with the administration needs to be replaced with a certainty that all stakeholders would express outrage at such an occurrence. If Islamic educational spaces are going to be the haven many stakeholders wish them to be, they should be so for all students equally.

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Article

Transforming Islamic Education through Lesson Study (LS): A Classroom-Based Approach to Professional Development in Southern Thailand

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Abstract: Private Islamic schools in Southern Thailand face significant challenges, particularly in adhering to national educational standards, which impacts students' academic outcomes. Most Islamic Studies teachers lack formal pedagogical training, resulting in a teaching approach that often fails to engage students effectively. This study employed participatory action research (PAR) involving 32 Islamic Studies teachers across 10 schools. The research was structured around the four phases of PAR: establishing relationships, collaborative design, implementation through LS and Open Approach, and reflective assessment. The implementation of Lesson Study and Open Approach led to significant improvements in teaching practices, shifting from traditional teacher-centered methods to learner-centered approaches that emphasized critical thinking, self-directed learning, and the integration of ICT. This study demonstrates that adapting LS to the context of Islamic education can enhance professional development for teachers and improve educational outcomes. This approach could serve as a model for broader educational reforms in the region.

Keywords: lesson study; open approach; Islamic studies; teacher development; participatory action research; Islamic schools; southern Thailand

1. Introduction

Islamic education plays a fundamental role in shaping the moral, spiritual, and academic development of students. To achieve these goals, professional development for Islamic Studies teachers is essential, equipping them with the pedagogical skills needed to effectively integrate Islamic values with modern educational practices. Private Islamic schools in Thailand, particularly in the southern provinces (Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat), are central to this effort [1,2]. These schools, favored by Muslim parents, offer a curriculum that balances religious and general education, appealing to those who seek both academic success and strong moral and religious foundations for their children [3–5]. However, despite their popularity and expansion, these schools face significant challenges in managing educational quality. Concerns arise regarding their adherence to the Basic Education Core Curriculum standards, as students from private Islamic schools consistently perform below the national average on the Ordinary National Educational Test (O-NET) [6]. This gap in performance reflects systemic challenges, particularly in the quality of teaching, which needs to be addressed through enhanced professional development models. Addressing these challenges requires enhanced educational strategies and resources to improve the quality of education in private Islamic schools in Thailand.

Past studies have identified several crucial factors affecting the quality of education management in Islamic schools in Southern Thailand. These include an overloaded

curriculum, insufficient teacher qualifications especially among Islamic Studies teachers, inadequate school management, and lack of resources and support [5,7,8]. The security situation in the region complicates matters, with frequent inspections and safety concerns affecting the well-being of students, teachers, and administrators [9,10]. Poverty and educational inequality are also significant challenges, with a higher proportion of poor students in the southern border provinces compared to the rest of the country [6].

The intrinsic connection between Islamic education and teacher professional development lies in the critical role teachers play in delivering the curriculum and shaping the moral, spiritual, and academic growth of students within Islamic schools [11]. Professional development directly impacts the quality of teaching, which in turn affects how effectively Islamic values and academic subjects are conveyed to students. This relationship underscores the importance of teacher quality as a critical area for further research and solution development in Islamic education. In the context of Islamic schools, particularly in Thailand, the need for enhanced teacher development is acutely evident. Many teachers in Islamic schools, particularly Islamic Studies teachers, are reported to lack formal pedagogical training and certification, a concern highlighted by several studies in the context of private Islamic education in Thailand [5,8]. This deficiency is compounded by limited professional development opportunities, a challenge exacerbated by the fact that Islamic schools, as private institutions, receive less government funding compared to public schools [12]. Professional development must focus on both pedagogical skills and the integration of Islamic values with modern educational practices to enable Islamic Studies teachers to meet the demands of both religious and academic excellence. By focusing on these teacher-related factors, Islamic schools can potentially achieve more effective educational outcomes. Enhanced professional development not only improves teaching quality but also better equips educators to integrate Islamic principles with modern educational practices [13]. This holistic approach to teacher development could lead to a more comprehensive education that prepares students for future academic and personal success, while maintaining a strong foundation in Islamic values and teachings.

The development of Islamic Studies teachers in Southern Thailand has been the focus of various governmental and educational initiatives, particularly in enhancing the competencies of teachers in private Islamic schools [14,15]. These efforts have included training programs, curriculum development, and short-term professional development opportunities aimed at improving the overall quality of education. However, a significant gap remains in the approach to teacher development, particularly in how these activities are implemented. Most of the existing programs are not classroom-based and do not integrate the day-to-day realities of teaching within the school environment [16]. This has led to criticism from educators who question the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of these development efforts [17–20]. In response to these concerns, there has been a growing interest in classroom-based teacher development models, such as the Japanese Lesson Study (LS), which emphasizes collaborative, reflective teaching practices within the classroom setting [21].

The Lesson Study model, rooted in Japanese educational culture, has been successfully adapted in Thailand, particularly in the teaching of mathematics [20]. Since its introduction in 2002 through the Mathematics Education Research Center at Khon Kaen University, LS has spread across the country, demonstrating its effectiveness in transforming teaching practices and improving student outcomes [17,18,22]. The model involves teachers working together to design lessons, observe each other's teaching, and engage in reflective discussions to refine their instructional strategies [23]. This collaborative process has been particularly successful in shifting the focus from traditional teacher-centered methods to more student-centered approaches that foster higher-order thinking skills. However, while LS has seen successful in improving the teaching of mathematics and science, the broader performance issues in private Islamic schools indicate that these methods have not been uniformly implemented, particularly in Islamic Studies. The application of LS in the context

of Islamic Studies remains largely unexplored, representing a significant research gap and an opportunity to innovate in the development of Islamic education.

This research seeks to address this gap by applying the Lesson Study model to the development of Islamic Studies teachers in private Islamic schools. The goal is to explore how the collaborative, reflective approach of LS can be adapted to the unique context of Islamic education, where teachers often face distinct challenges related to their training and the cultural and religious specificity of the curriculum [24]. By focusing on Islamic Studies, this research not only extends the application of LS beyond its traditional use in mathematics and science but also offers the potential to raise the quality of teaching in private Islamic schools. The significance of this study lies in its potential to transform teacher development in Islamic education by introducing a sustainable, classroom-based model that emphasizes continuous professional growth and student-centered learning [25,26]. If successful, this approach could serve as a model for broader educational reforms in the region, leading to improved educational outcomes and better preparation of students for both religious and general academic success. To achieve the knowledge objectives of this study, the study has set the following research goals: (1) to study the effects of applying the Lesson Study and Open Approach on Islamic Studies teachers in private Islamic schools, and (2) to propose a model for the professional development process of Islamic Studies teachers based on the Japanese Lesson Study concept.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1. Background of Islamic Private Schools in Thailand

Islamic private schools in Thailand, particularly in the southern provinces, are essential pillars of education and cultural preservation for the Muslim community. These schools have evolved from traditional educational institutions known as 'pondoks', which historically played a significant role in Southeast Asia's Islamic education system [27–30]. Originally, pondoks operated independently, focusing on providing religious education aimed at producing knowledgeable and virtuous Muslims who could practice their faith correctly. This historical foundation is deeply embedded in the local culture and religion, making these institutions integral to the community. However, the rise of Islamic schools in Thailand should also be understood within a broader global context. Across the world, there has been a significant increase in the establishment of Islamic schools, including in countries like the United States, Australia, Europe, and others, where Muslim communities seek to balance the integration of Islamic values with mainstream education [31]. These schools provide an environment where students can grow academically while maintaining a strong connection to their religious identity. This global trend mirrors the growth of Islamic schools in Thailand, where parents and communities similarly seek to provide an education that aligns with both religious and academic goals. The transformation of these traditional schools began in 1961 [1,5,32] when the Thai government mandated their registration, leading to significant changes between 1965 and 1968 as they were restructured into private Islamic schools. The Private Schools Act of 1983 further formalized their status, offering financial support to institutions that provided both general and Islamic religious education. This dual curriculum approach made these schools highly attractive to Muslim parents who sought a comprehensive education for their children, blending secular and religious studies. Today, there are 218 private Islamic schools in Thailand's five southern provinces, serving 176,421 students [15]. These schools offer a dual curriculum that includes subjects such as Quran, Hadith, Al-Aqeedah (Principles of Faith), Al-Fiqh (Religious Law), Attarik (Religious History), Al-Akhlaq (Ethics), Arabic, and Malay/Additional Arabic [33], alongside general education subjects including mathematics, science, Thai Language, Social Studies, English Language, Physical Education, and Arts. These subjects are designed to ensure that students meet the national educational standards and are adequately prepared for higher education and professional careers.

2.2. Islamic Education

Islamic education plays a critical role in shaping the moral, spiritual, and academic development of students in Thailand. As one of the primary vehicles for imparting religious values and ethical standards, Islamic education aims to foster students' understanding of Islamic principles, guiding them to live righteous lives based on these teachings. The Islamic Studies curriculum in Thailand's private schools adheres to the principles of the Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551 and incorporates additional guidelines to enhance religious education [34]. Islamic Studies teachers in Thailand are entrusted with the task of cultivating an in-depth understanding of Islamic teachings in their students. This includes fostering an adherence to Islamic principles as a framework for ethical decision-making, social interactions, and personal development [35]. However, many of these educators have been educated abroad in places such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. While these international experiences offer teachers deep religious insights, they may not adequately prepare them for the specific challenges of teaching in the Thai educational context, which emphasizes not only religious knowledge but also pedagogical skills tailored to diverse learning environments [8,36,37]. This gap can result in teaching practices that fail to engage students effectively or meet their diverse learning needs. Moreover, a considerable number of these teachers lack formal teaching qualifications and have limited access to ongoing professional development opportunities [37].

2.3. Teacher Professional Development

Teacher professional development (TPD) is a critical component in improving education quality, especially in contexts where there is a gap between pedagogical skills and subject knowledge, such as Islamic Studies in private schools in Thailand. A significant number of Islamic Studies teachers possess deep religious knowledge but may not have access to modern pedagogical techniques, which can limit classroom effectiveness in certain cases [8,36]. Additionally, some private Islamic schools face financial constraints that reduce access to continuous professional development opportunities, a challenge noted in specific regions like Southern Thailand [37]. To bridge these gaps, innovative approaches such as participatory action research (PAR) empower teachers to become active researchers in their own practice, enhancing their understanding of classroom dynamics and student needs [38]. Lesson Study (LS), which promotes collaboration among teachers who jointly plan, observe, and analyze lessons, leads to refined teaching strategies and fosters a culture of shared learning. Professional learning communities (PLCs), which foster collaboration and reflective practice among teachers, help them address challenges related to integrating religious content with contemporary educational methods. These approaches have been shown to enhance teacher competencies by fostering collaboration, reflection, and continuous improvement. These models focus on collaboration, technology integration, and reflective teaching practices, empowering teachers to improve both instruction and content delivery. Lesson Study [20,39], in particular, involves teachers collaboratively planning, observing, and analyzing classroom lessons, promoting continuous improvement through peer feedback and reflection. By adopting this model, Islamic schools can foster a culture of shared learning, where teachers refine their practices and better integrate Islamic values with modern pedagogy. Lesson Study's focus on collaborative learning leads into the next section, Lesson Study and Open Approach, where these methods will be explored further in the context of Islamic education to enhance both teacher effectiveness and student outcomes [40].

This pedagogical shift aligns with the current literature on professional development (PD), which emphasizes the need to equip teachers with strategies that help them transition from delivering content to fostering 21st-century skills in their students. According to Christopher, D. [41], professional development that focuses on competency-based education improves teachers' ability to engage students in meaningful learning experiences. Similarly, Darling-Hammond [42] argues that teacher professional development should focus on creating an environment where students take ownership of their learning, apply critical

thinking, and develop lifelong learning skills. These competencies are increasingly essential in modern education, especially with the rise of technology and digital learning platforms.

2.4. Lesson Study and Open Approach

Lesson Study (LS) has a rich historical background dating back to the Meiji Era (1868–1912), a period marked by Japan's modernization and educational reforms [43,44]. This era saw the fusion of Western educational practices with traditional Japanese pedagogy, leading to the development of LS as a structured approach to enhancing teaching and learning [45]. Over the decades, particularly in the mid-20th century, LS became more formalized, with educators documenting and sharing their experiences. This collaborative professional development practice involves teachers systematically examining their instructional methods to improve student learning outcomes. The approach has since become a cornerstone of Japanese educational practices and has been adopted by various countries seeking to improve their educational systems [23,46]. The process of LS is comprehensive and iterative, beginning with goal setting, where teachers identify specific teaching and learning objectives. This is followed by collaborative planning, where a group of teachers design a detailed lesson plan aimed at achieving these goals. One teacher then teaches the planned lesson while others observe, focusing on student engagement and understanding rather than the teacher's performance. Post-lesson, the teachers engage in reflective discussions to analyze the lesson's effectiveness, discuss student responses, and identify areas for improvement. The final step involves documenting and sharing the findings to contribute to the professional knowledge base. This structured yet flexible process emphasizes continuous improvement through collaboration, observation, and reflection, ensuring that teaching practices are continually refined to meet student needs [20,39,47]. The significance of LS lies in its ability to enhance teaching practices, foster professional collaboration, and maintain a student-centered focus [21]. By engaging in detailed planning, observation, and reflection, teachers develop more effective instructional strategies tailored to their students' needs [22]. However, successful implementation of LS requires strong school leadership support, a collaborative culture, ongoing professional development, sufficient time allocation, a focus on student learning, thorough documentation, and possibly external expertise [48–50]. When these factors are in place, LS can significantly enhance the quality of education, benefiting both teachers and students by creating a dynamic and supportive learning environment.

The Open Approach closely aligns with Lesson Study. In Lesson Study, teachers apply Open Approach methods in research lessons, gather data on student learning, and refine their teaching strategies based on observations and reflections [40]. The Open Approach teaching methods focus on creating a student-centered environment that encourages active participation, critical thinking, and creativity [51]. Key features include inquiry-based and collaborative learning, flexible adaptation to student needs, and reflective practice. Methods involve project-based learning, where students engage in interdisciplinary projects, and problem-based learning, which emphasizes real-world problem-solving. Hands-on activities, differentiated instruction, and the use of technology enhance learning by making it practical and tailored to individual needs. Experiential learning through field trips and simulations connects classroom lessons to real life. This approach boosts engagement, motivation, critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills [52].

2.5. The Historical Implementation of Lesson Study in Islamic Schools in Southern Thailand

The historical implementation of Lesson Study in Islamic schools in Southern Thailand reflects the gradual adoption of a Japanese pedagogical approach within the region's educational framework. This method, introduced to Thailand in 2002 by Dr. Maitree Inprasitha [17,53], initially aimed to enhance mathematics education by shifting from traditional teacher-centered instruction to more collaborative and student-centered learning environments. The success of Lesson Study in improving mathematics teaching set the stage for its expansion to other subjects [20]. In 2004, the first open class for mathematics

teachers was held at the Pattani Majlis Agama Islam meeting hall, marking the introduction of Lesson Study to Southern Thailand. This was followed by workshops and additional open classes in subsequent years, including a significant event in 2015 that focused on empowering education in the southern border provinces through workshops targeting mathematics and science teachers at the College of Islamic Studies (CIS), Prince of Songkla University. The momentum continued to build, and by 2018 and 2019, open classes began to include science subjects as well [18]. However, it was not until 2023 that Lesson Study was officially extended to Islamic Studies, with an open class at Khampi Wittaya School in Yala Province and later at Hatyai Wittayakarn in Songkhla Province, signaling a major milestone in the application of this approach to religious education. The culmination of these efforts occurred in 2024 with the first official open class for Islamic Studies teachers at the Islamic Science Demonstration School, Prince of Songkla University, Pattani. This landmark event saw participation from over 200 Islamic Studies teachers from 50 schools, demonstrating the widespread acceptance and significance of this pedagogical approach [54]. This historical context underpins the current research, which aims to further explore and refine the application of Lesson Study in Islamic Studies. By addressing the unique challenges faced by Islamic Studies teachers, particularly their lack of formal pedagogical training, this research seeks to adapt the successful strategies used in mathematics and science education to the context of Islamic Studies. The goal is to create a more student-centered, collaborative learning environment that aligns with both religious and academic objectives, ensuring that students receive a comprehensive education that prepares them for future success. Table 1 highlights key events in the historical implementation of Lesson Study in Islamic schools in Southern Thailand.

Table 1. Key events in the historical implementation of Lesson Study in Islamic schools in Southern Thailand.

Year	Event	Description
2002	Introduction of Lesson Study in Thailand	Dr. Maitree Inprasitha introduced the Lesson Study method in the northeastern region of Thailand, initially focusing on improving mathematics education.
2004	First Open Class in Southern Thailand	The first open class for mathematics teachers was held at the Pattani Majlis Agama Islam meeting hall, marking the introduction of Lesson Study to Southern Thailand.
2015	Empowerment Workshops for Southern Border Education	Workshops were held at the College of Islamic Studies (CIS), targeting mathematics and science teachers in the southern border provinces to enhance education.
2018	Expansion of Lesson Study to Science Subjects	Open classes began to include science subjects, reflecting the growing application of Lesson Study beyond mathematics in Southern Thailand.
2019	Continued Expansion of Lesson Study	Further open classes were held, continuing the expansion of Lesson Study to additional subjects, including science.
2023	Extension of Lesson Study to Islamic Studies	The first open class for Islamic Studies was held at Khampi Wittaya School in Yala Province and later at Hatyai Wittayakarn in Songkhla Province.
2024	First Official Open Class for Islamic Studies Teachers	A landmark event at the Islamic Science Demonstration School, Prince of Songkla University, Pattani, where over 200 Islamic Studies teachers from 50 schools participated.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

This research used participatory action research (PAR) divided into four phases [55,56]: (1) establishing relationships and shared goals, (2) designing the research collaboratively, (3) implementing the plan through Lesson Study and Open Approach methods, and

(4) assessing and revising the action plan. Data collection involved focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, capturing teachers' reflections throughout the process. This approach ensured active participation, continuous feedback, and iterative improvements, leading to a nuanced understanding of effective professional development practices for Islamic Studies teachers. Both emic (insider) and etic (outsider) perspectives were integrated. The emic perspective was reflected in the researchers' close collaboration with teachers, gaining insights into their cultural and educational context. The etic perspective was applied through the use of structured models like Lesson Study, providing an external framework for professional development. This dual approach ensured a deeper understanding of both the specific challenges of Islamic education and broader educational theories [57]. Table 2 illustrates the research process.

Table 2. Research process.

Process	Action	Data Collection	Reflection
1. Establishing Relationships and Shared Goals	The first step involves building strong relationships between researchers and participants, ensuring a foundation of trust and collaboration.	Focus group discussions capture teachers' initial reflections and expectations.	Participants reflect on the clarity of roles, the degree of shared understanding, and the effectiveness of communication in establishing trust. Adjustments are made to ensure alignment and commitment.
2. Designing the Research Collaboratively	Teachers work together to develop a year-long collaborative plan based on Lesson Study guidelines. The collaborative planning process also involves reaching an agreement on the research approach, timelines, and roles. Teachers receive training on effective observation techniques, ensuring a focus on student engagement and learning outcomes throughout the year.	Focus group discussions capture insights into the collaborative planning process, agreement on objectives, and teachers' expectations for the year-long plan.	Reflection focuses on the effectiveness of collaboration during the planning phase, the alignment of lesson plans with identified goals, and any challenges faced in agreeing on the year-long plan.
3. Implementing the Plan Through Lesson Study and Open Approach Methods	The implementation follows four steps: (1) planning: teachers collaboratively create detailed lesson plans; (2) teaching: one teacher teaches while others observe; (3) observing: observers focus on student engagement and learning; (4) reflecting: teachers discuss the lesson's effectiveness and revise the plan as needed. Re-teaching occurs to refine the approach	Focus group discussions gather detailed reflections from teachers on the implementation, including observed challenges and successes during lessons.	Reflection centers on the effectiveness of the lesson delivery, the accuracy of observations, the impact on student engagement, and the success of any revisions made to lesson plans.
4. Assessing and Revising the Action Plan	Comprehensive reflection sessions evaluate the Lesson Study process. Teachers discuss strategies, challenges, and improvements.	In-depth interviews and focus group discussions assess the overall effectiveness of the action plan and gather suggestions for future improvements.	Reflection includes evaluating the overall success of the Lesson Study, identifying best practices and areas for improvement, and considering how the findings can be applied to future professional development.

3.2. Participants

The research participants comprised 32 Islamic Studies teachers from 10 private Islamic schools in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat Provinces in Southern Thailand; they all taught in the academic year 2022 (Semester 1: May–October 2022 and Semester 2: November–March 2023). Purposeful sampling [58,59] was used to select participants who met specific inclusion criteria: each teacher had more than three years of teaching experience, taught at least 10 periods per week, had a Bachelor's degree in Islamic Studies, and demonstrated a willingness to engage in the Lesson Study process. The group included

6 teachers from small schools (less than 499 students), 16 teachers from medium schools (500–1499 students), and 10 teachers from large schools (1500–2499 students) according to the school size as defined by the Ministry of Education [60]. Additionally, the participants were categorized by teaching level, with 15 teachers at the lower Islamic level (Ibtida'i), 8 at the middle Islamic level (Mutawassit), and 9 at the upper Islamic level (Sanawi). All participants held a bachelor's degree in Islamic Studies and had been teaching for 5 to 22 years. The exclusion criterion for the study was the voluntary withdrawal of participants from the research process. Table 3 provides an overview of the primary research participants.

Table 3. Primary research participants.

Category	Type	Count
School Size	Small (less than 499 students)	6
School Size	Medium (500–1499 students)	16
School Size	Large (1500–2499 students)	10
Islamic Level	Lower Islamic level (Ibtida'i)	15
Islamic Level	Middle Islamic level (Mutawassit)	8
Islamic Level	Upper Islamic level (Sanawi)	9
Teaching Experiences	3–5 Years	9
Teaching Experiences	6–10 Years	12
Teaching Experiences	Above 10 Years	11
Qualification	Bachelor's degree in Islamic Studies	32

3.3. Instruments and Analysis

The questions in the study were divided into two main categories. The first category focused on evaluating the outcomes and effectiveness of implementing Lesson Study in the schools, while the second category addressed the proposed process for developing a learner-centered professional development framework. This framework refers to a structured approach aimed at continuously enhancing teachers' pedagogical skills and reflective teaching practices through collaboration, observation, and iterative improvement, centered around student learning needs. The framework was designed to ensure that teachers receive ongoing support and are equipped to integrate Islamic values into modern educational practices, fostering a more learner-centered approach in the classroom.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, which provided comprehensive insights into teachers' experiences, professional growth, strategies for continuous improvement, and recommendations for enhancing professional development processes. This qualitative approach enabled researchers to gather detailed information directly from teachers, ensuring a thorough understanding of the implementation and its overall impact.

The study utilized Leonard's method, integrating Heideggerian Hermeneutic Phenomenology [61,62]. This methodical approach ensured a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the teachers' experiences and practices. Initially, the recorded data were transcribed verbatim and rigorously checked against the original recordings multiple times to identify preliminary issues. This step was crucial for maintaining data integrity and ensuring that the transcription accurately reflected the teachers' narratives and interactions during their implementation of Lesson Study and the Open Approach.

In the next step, the researcher immersed themselves in the transcribed data, reviewing them multiple times to gain a deep understanding of their meaning. Thematic analysis was applied to identify patterns and themes within the data that were directly related to the study's objectives. This process involved coding the data to identify recurring themes, such as teachers' attitudes toward professional development, the effectiveness of collaborative teaching practices, and challenges in implementing learner-centered approaches. These themes were derived from recurring patterns and key statements made by participants, reflecting their perspectives on Lesson Study and Open Approach practices. This thematic

analysis facilitated the structured organization of data, making it easier to draw meaningful insights and connections. The study was conducted in Thai, and the quotations presented here are paraphrased translations rather than direct quotes to preserve the meaning while adapting the language for clarity.

Triangulation was employed by comparing multiple data sources, including interview transcripts, focus group discussions, and classroom observations, to ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings [63]. This method of triangulation helped to cross-verify the data and provided a more comprehensive understanding of how the professional development framework was implemented in different contexts and by various teachers.

The subsequent steps involved a detailed examination of each identified issue, considering the specific meanings of words and phrases used by the participants. This phase aimed to uncover the underlying behaviors and attitudes of the teachers toward the professional development processes. By classifying the data according to the meanings that explained specific behaviors, the researcher gained a comprehensive understanding of the contextual factors influencing the teachers' implementation of Lesson Study and the Open Approach.

This rigorous analytical process highlighted both challenges and successes, as well as potential areas for improvement in the professional development of Islamic Studies teachers in Thailand. Ultimately, the study provided valuable insights into developing a learner-centered professional development process, emphasizing collaborative and reflective teaching practices that enhance the effectiveness of Islamic Studies education.

3.4. Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research findings, several strategies were employed. Triangulation was used by collecting data from multiple sources (interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations) to cross-verify the information. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participants to confirm the accuracy and authenticity of the data. Additionally, a detailed audit trail was maintained to document the research process, including decisions made and actions taken during the study. These measures enhanced the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the research [64].

3.5. Ethics in Human Research

The research adhered to strict ethical considerations throughout the process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they were fully aware of the research objectives, procedures, potential risks, and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning codes to participants, with pseudonyms used to represent schools and teachers (e.g., S1 for School 1, T1 for Teacher 1). The study was conducted in full compliance with ethical guidelines as set forth by the Research Ethics Committee for Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education at Prince of Songkla University, Pattani campus, in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and the Belmont Report (REC Number: psu.pn2-038/65). Any potential conflicts of interest or biases were disclosed, and efforts were made to minimize any potential harm to participants. These measures ensured the protection of participants' rights and well-being, upholding the integrity and ethical responsibility of the research.

4. Results

4.1. Evaluation of the PAR Process

This table aligns the research results with the four research processes, and providing a timeline for the activities, particularly in the implementation phase. The reflections in each phase highlight the continuous process of action and reflection that is central to the research methodology. Table 4 presents the PAR process and reflections for each phase.

Table 4. The PAR process and the reflection.

Process	Action	Reflection	Timeline
1. Establishing Relationships and Shared Goals	The first step involved building strong relationships between researchers and participants, ensuring a foundation of trust and collaboration.	(1) Creating a mutual understanding of shared goals: The study found that all Islamic Studies teachers agreed on the importance of changing teaching methods but were unsure how to proceed. They recognized the need to improve teaching methods and were willing to participate in the research process. (2) Making agreements on research objectives, methodologies, and expected outcomes: All schools agreed on two research goals: (1) apply the concepts of Lesson Study and Open Approach to develop Islamic education teachers and study the impact; (2) propose a Lesson Study model appropriate for Islamic education teachers in Southern Thailand.	July 2023 (Initial meetings and agreements)
2. Designing the Research Collaboratively	Teachers worked together to develop a year-long collaborative plan based on Lesson Study guidelines.	The participants collaboratively proposed a year-long development plan, which included (1) activities to provide knowledge and create understanding of Lesson Study and Open Approach concepts; (2) activities for joint teaching plan development, teaching trials, observing joint teaching, and reflecting at 7 volunteer schools; (3) reflection on joint activities throughout the year; (4) a national classroom opening activity to share results with a broader audience.	July 2023–May 2024 (Year-long collaborative design, including joint planning and reflection activities)
3. Implementing the Plan Through Lesson Study and Open Approach Methods	The implementation followed four steps: (1) planning: teachers collaboratively created detailed lesson plans; (2) teaching: one teacher taught while others observed; (3) observing: observers focused on student engagement and learning; (4) reflecting: teachers discussed the lesson's effectiveness and revised the plan as needed. Re-teaching occurred to refine the approach.	The planned activities were implemented as follows: (1) activities to provide knowledge and understanding of Lesson Study and Open Approach concepts were conducted on 23–24 July 2023; (2) joint teaching design activities took place 7 times online before observing teaching in volunteer schools; (3) Islamic Studies classes were opened in 7 schools on specific dates; (4) summary and reflection on all work results were conducted on 9–10 January 2024; (5) a national Islamic Studies classroom opening activity is scheduled for 5 May 2024.	July 2023–May 2024 (Implementation across multiple schools on specified dates: 24 July, 23 September, 16 November, 23 November, 30 November, 6 December, 14 December 2023; 9–10 January 2024; 5 May 2024)
4. Assessing and Revising the Action Plan	Comprehensive reflection sessions evaluated the Lesson Study process. Teachers discussed strategies, challenges, and improvements. Findings were documented and shared, establishing a feedback loop for ongoing improvements.	The overall reflection highlighted key areas of development among teachers: (1) focus on learners' competence; (2) reduced learning content; (3) connection to real situations; (4) utilizing diverse Islamic principles; (5) enhanced ICT skills; (6) learner-centered focus. The study also proposed five processes for using the Lesson Study model to develop Islamic Studies teachers: (1) creating awareness of the importance of collaboration; (2) designing joint teaching; (3) teaching and observing together; (4) reflecting together; (5) improving the learning plan collaboratively.	January 2024 (Final reflection and assessment of the action plan; proposed model for future use)

4.2. The Outcomes and Effectiveness of Implementing Lesson Study and Open Approach Practices in Islamic Studies Classrooms

Implementing Lesson Study has demonstrated potential in transforming Islamic Studies education, moving the focus from traditional teaching methods to learner-centered approaches that emphasize critical thinking and self-directed learning in the classrooms studied. This shift has brought about several key lessons and changes in teaching practices, as elucidated by the experiences and perspectives of Islamic Studies teachers.

4.2.1. Focus on Learners' Competence

One of the primary outcomes of implementing the Lesson Study and Open Approach is the transformation from knowledge-centric teaching, where teachers primarily deliver content, to an emphasis on developing learners' competencies. Knowledge-centric teaching is a traditional approach in which the teacher is viewed as the primary source of knowledge, with students absorbing information through passive learning. Learner-centered teaching,

by contrast, encourages students to become active participants in their learning process, fostering critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and self-directed learning.

Participants noted that adopting active learning techniques required teachers to develop new skills, particularly in guiding students to reliable resources and filtering information online. However, some teachers expressed initial discomfort with this transition, as it demanded more time for preparation and a deeper understanding of digital tools and resources. They highlighted the challenge of balancing traditional teaching methods with these new approaches, especially when students struggled to adapt to self-directed learning. This approach has created a more engaging learning environment, as noted by Participant S5T5: "*It is a teaching that increases students' self-learning channels. Children can search for answers to questions or interests, resulting in a more learning atmosphere. From having to find information from thick, boring books, making them sleepy, it has changed from asking teachers in school to having teachers from all over the world, with many books or articles on the internet. These learning processes allow students to develop critical thinking skills, analytical thinking, and finding reasons to support various issues in an interesting way, which is a new role that challenges teachers' potential*". Similarly, Participant S3T25 observed that "*Previously, when organizing Islamic studies learning, the teacher will teach the content according to the book and let the students start practicing. During the period when the students try to practice by themselves, it takes a lot of time to teach them because when we teach the content of the various steps, the students do not really understand. But when we change the teaching method by giving the students the opportunity to study from various video clips and sit and discuss in groups, it turns out that the students understand and practice more easily*".

Moreover, this learner-centered approach has spurred creativity in teaching methods. As described by Participant S8T2, "*Organizing teaching and learning according to this concept allows me to think of various teaching methods that are not boring. I have changed from the original teaching that focuses on lecturing to changing to letting the students bring various ideas and activities by themselves. Sometimes I have the students make Islamic studies infographics and present them in front of the class, which the students do very well. From organizing activities in this manner, the students can practice their skills in using technology in a more useful way*".

4.2.2. Reduced Learning Content

Another significant lesson learned is the benefit of reducing the emphasis on learning content to make room for more student-centered activities. This shift has allowed teachers to focus more on preparing stimulating and contextually relevant materials rather than extensive lesson plans. Teachers observed that reducing the emphasis on extensive lesson planning provided more time to focus on preparing relevant, engaging materials for students. Nonetheless, some teachers felt challenged by this reduction in content, fearing that they might not cover the curriculum comprehensively. There were concerns that simplifying lesson plans could compromise the depth of students' learning, especially for more complex Islamic concepts.

The reduced content has also provided students with more opportunities for self-directed learning and exploration. As Participant S7T25 explained, "*In the past, I taught both mathematics and science, but when there is a science and mathematics subject, in addition to the teacher's workload being reduced, it also reduces the number of class periods for students, giving them more time to play and learn by themselves. Teachers must try to integrate content by using learning resources and media. Sometimes, students are designed to make their own media*". This method has proved effective in maintaining student interest and participation, as illustrated by Participant S4T7: "*Now, the beginning of class often starts with picking up the current situation and having students discuss various issues together. Previously, when teaching, we would teach each topic until it was finished, so when exam time came, we had to rush through the content. Sometimes, we couldn't teach it all. But when the teaching method was changed, everything was able to be taught smoothly and completely according to the indicators of each subject*".

Furthermore, Participant S7T15 highlighted that students retained knowledge better when they actively participated in group processes and self-researched information, com-

pared to the traditional lecture-based approach: "*In the past, I liked teaching by lecturing a lot because I thought that students would gain a lot of knowledge. But when I tried testing through an interview about the content of the previous lesson, what did they learn? It turned out that most students could not answer. But when I tried changing the teaching method, emphasizing group processes and having them search for information by themselves and come to discuss in front of the class, it turned out that most students were able to remember the content that they had done in the previous lesson*". This finding underscores the value of creating a learning environment where students take an active role in their education, fostering a deeper understanding and long-term retention of knowledge.

4.2.3. Connection to Real Situations

The integration of real-life situations and current events into the curriculum has emerged as another crucial lesson from implementing Lesson Study and open teaching. By using news stories, social media trends, and other current issues as teaching tools, teachers have made learning more relevant and engaging for students. Teachers integrated current events and news stories into lessons to make them more engaging and relatable. However, some participants struggled to find appropriate contemporary examples that aligned with Islamic principles without oversimplifying religious teachings. Additionally, some students showed reluctance to engage with real-world issues, preferring traditional textbook learning, which made it harder for teachers to consistently maintain interest in the material.

This approach has also helped students develop a better understanding of how Islamic principles apply to contemporary issues. Participant S6T2 emphasized the importance of addressing students' behaviors and understanding by discussing popular culture and societal trends, thereby helping students navigate and critically assess their environment: "*Students these days tend to have words, sentences, or popular songs, both good and bad. Students' imitative behavior, especially young children, they do it without even knowing or understanding. As teachers, we must update to keep up with the current trends, we bring up current issues to discuss and ask questions for students to think about, such as meaning, origin, benefits, and disadvantages, in order to create understanding and adjust students' behaviors in the future*". Additionally, Participant S3T26 noted that learning from current situations has enabled students to integrate Islamic teachings into various disciplines more effectively, making the content more applicable and meaningful: "*In the past, Islamic studies teaching was mainly based on books and taught according to the content in the books. Sometimes the content or examples that were picked from the books were so old that students could not apply them. But when we changed the teaching to learning from various current situations, students understood the content and were able to integrate it into various disciplines more*".

Moreover, this method has increased student interest in Islamic Studies. Participant S8T15 observed a noticeable change in student behavior, with students showing more enthusiasm and attentiveness in class when lessons involved current issues and interactive activities: "*Students are more interested in Islamic studies. This can be clearly seen from the original classroom where students would sometimes fall asleep or chat with their friends. Now they want to study Islamic studies more and pay more attention because during class there are fun activities for students to participate in. They can also use their phones to search for various current information to discuss with their friends*". The use of technology and social media as part of the learning process has further engaged students, allowing them to research and discuss contemporary topics with their peers.

4.2.4. Utilizing Diverse Islamic Principles

Teachers have also learned the value of allowing students to explore Islamic principles from various sources. This approach has broadened students' understanding and appreciation of different religious perspectives. Teachers observed that students are increasingly using digital resources to explore diverse Islamic perspectives. Access to a wide range of

religious references has broadened students' understanding, allowing them to engage more critically with the material.

Easy access to religious references has empowered students to ask challenging questions and seek deeper understanding, as noted by Participant S6T20: "*Currently, things are happening very quickly, and modern students are brave enough to express themselves and dare to ask questions about challenging issues in society. Fortunately, access to religious references is easy and diverse. Teachers can recommend reliable websites, suggest channels and methods to obtain evidence from the Quran, Hadith, and the views of each madhhab on related issues*". Teachers play a crucial role in guiding students to reliable sources and helping them interpret information accurately. This shift from teacher-led to student-driven exploration has made the learning process more dynamic and engaging, fostering a more profound comprehension of Islamic teachings.

Additionally, Participant S3T22 highlighted that this method has not only made Islamic Studies more interesting but also allowed students to learn from a variety of sources, enhancing their research skills and broadening their knowledge base: "*Previously, we tended to focus on teaching by lecturing. The teacher would prepare the content by himself and let the students only listen and memorize the contents as assigned. However, recently, the teaching method has been changed to let the students search for information by themselves. In the beginning, the teacher would introduce reliable sources of information to the students first. The students were able to search for information from a variety of sources*". By becoming active participants in their learning journey, students are better equipped to understand and apply Islamic principles in their daily lives.

4.2.5. Enhanced ICT Skills

The implementation of Lesson Study and open teaching has also necessitated the development of higher skills in information and communication technology (ICT) among both teachers and students. Teachers have had to upgrade their ICT skills to effectively guide and support students in their use of technology for learning. With the integration of information and communication technology (ICT), teachers have shifted from traditional lectures to more interactive lessons using digital tools. However, many teachers admitted facing difficulties in adapting to new technology. Some lacked the necessary training and support to fully utilize ICT tools, which caused delays in lesson preparation and delivery. The reliance on technology also introduced issues such as technical difficulties in classrooms, which disrupted the flow of teaching and learning.

Self-directed professional development has become essential for teachers to stay updated with the latest technological trends and tools. Participant S6T13 emphasized the importance of continuous learning and skill enhancement through online resources, such as YouTube and Facebook: "*I will study and develop myself in basic technology skills from YouTube and from short clips on Facebook. Simply put, teachers must develop and update their skills all the time because students these days are very fast. Especially the use of social media*". Additionally, Participant S5T21 mentioned the need for collaboration with IT specialists and computer teachers to create a technologically enriched learning environment: "*When using this teaching method that emphasizes the use of technology in teaching and learning, I am the one who is not very good at using various technology tools, so I have to attend some training. Sometimes I have new teachers and teachers who teach computers help me teach, so that I can create an Islamic study class that makes students more interested*".

Students, on the other hand, have benefited from producing their own learning materials, such as infographics and video clips, which has not only enhanced their ICT skills but also made learning more creative and enjoyable. Participant S1T19 described how students have taken on the role of content creators, using social media in constructive ways to share their work and ideas, thereby fostering a more interactive and collaborative classroom culture: "*In the past, I focused on having students learn Islamic studies through various media, but now I have students become producers of various Islamic studies media themselves. Sometimes I have students make Islamic study infographics and have students edit videos through*

various programs, which the students do very well. As for the work that the students produce, the teacher also lets them share it, which is another way for students to use social media in a creative way".

4.2.6. Learner-Centered Focus

Finally, the shift to a learner-centered focus has transformed the role of teachers from being the central figures in the classroom to facilitators and guides. Teachers now emphasize student participation, critical thinking, and collaborative learning. Active learning approaches were seen to enhance student participation, with each student taking on specific roles and responsibilities. However, several teachers noted that not all students adapted well to this learner-centered model. Some students, particularly those used to more structured, lecture-based methods, struggled to manage their own learning effectively. Teachers had to invest extra time in helping these students adjust, which was a significant challenge, particularly in larger classrooms

This approach has also allowed teachers to better understand and address the individual needs and strengths of their students. Informant S8T1 noted that analyzing students individually has enabled teachers to design more effective learning activities and roles, helping students reach their full potential: "*Teaching focuses on the learner. Teachers must analyze students individually, allowing them to see and understand the strengths and points that students should develop. When using this information to design learning activities, assign duties, and create appropriate roles for students, they will work and show their full potential. The informant who used to be quiet and calm is proud of himself. His friends also get to know him better. It creates something new in the classroom atmosphere*". This shift has created a more inclusive and supportive classroom environment, where even previously quiet students feel valued and confident to participate.

By starting lessons with questions and encouraging students to explore and discuss, as highlighted by Informant S1T5, teachers have made learning more interactive and thought-provoking: "*When using this teaching method, I had to change from the traditional teaching method where I was usually the main character in the classroom and let the students listen to what I taught. I changed to letting the students be the main characters instead, while I would just be an observer and support myself. This teaching method makes the classroom more colorful, and the students participate more in organizing the teaching*". This method not only enhances students' understanding of the material but also develops their critical thinking and problem-solving skills, preparing them for future academic and personal challenges.

4.3. Proposed Professional Development Process That Emphasizes Learner-Centered Development

The synthesis of the Islamic Studies teacher development process identified five critical steps: creating awareness of the importance of collaboration, designing joint teaching, teaching and observing together, reflecting together, and improving the learning plan collaboratively. These steps, alongside reflections from Islamic Studies teachers, illuminate the transformative impact of Lesson Study and open teaching methodologies.

4.3.1. Creating Awareness of the Importance of Collaboration

Creating awareness of and understanding the importance of collaboration is foundational for initiating change in teaching practices. This process involves engaging teachers in discussions about the benefits of collaborative teaching and the necessity of modernizing their approaches to align with 21st-century educational standards. It requires a shift in mindset from traditional, isolated teaching methods to more dynamic, cooperative strategies that emphasize student engagement and the use of educational technology.

As highlighted by Informant S7T1, "Islamic studies teachers must change their thinking and understanding first because they still have the same old thinking, sticking to the old teaching style. They must see the importance of new teaching methods, giving importance to the learner's thinking process, and using educational technology in teaching". This reflection underscores the necessity for teachers to shift from traditional pedagogies to

innovative, learner-centered approaches that leverage educational technology. Informant S2T3 added, "If they don't see the importance, it will be difficult to change. How can we make teachers see that teaching that focuses on learners is a method that Islam uses as well? The education system must support and develop teachers to be ready to fully apply the concept of teaching in the 21st century to teaching and learning". This highlights the need for systemic support to foster a culture of modern, student-focused education that aligns with both contemporary and Islamic educational values.

4.3.2. Designing Joint Teaching

The collaborative instructional design process involves teachers working together to plan their teaching strategies. This step emphasizes the importance of cooperative planning sessions where teachers can share ideas, resources, and insights to develop more effective lesson plans. The goal is to create a cohesive and well-rounded educational experience that benefits from the diverse expertise of multiple educators.

Informant S8T11 emphasized the benefits of this approach: "I strongly agree that teachers should come together to plan teaching together. It is definitely better than working alone. Islam also promotes collaboration, and we have seen the perspectives and weaknesses of teaching methods that can be designed and planned together". This collaborative effort allows for diverse perspectives and collective problem-solving, enhancing the quality of teaching. Participant S4T20 also noted, "The design of teaching may not be teachers in the same subject group. Teachers from other subject groups can be invited. Come and share your opinions and exchange ideas about teaching together". This interdisciplinary approach not only enriches the teaching design but also fosters a more holistic educational experience for students.

4.3.3. Teaching and Observing Together

Co-teaching and observation involve teachers partnering to deliver lessons and observe each other's teaching practices. Peer feedback allowed for reflections that led to significant improvements in teaching practices. However, the process of co-teaching and observation was not without its difficulties. Some teachers felt uncomfortable being observed by their peers, especially those with more experience or seniority. This hesitation created a barrier to open and honest reflection in the early stages of implementation, with some teachers feeling judged rather than supported. Overcoming this mindset required considerable effort and trust-building among colleagues.

Participant S8T10 shared, "*Observing the classroom together is very important. We don't often see this culture in Islamic studies groups. Most of them are worried when others come to observe teaching in the classroom. But after we opened our minds and saw its importance, we saw that it was something that helped us teach more and made our teaching better from the reflections of other teachers*". This practice promotes a culture of openness and continuous improvement. Participant S1T2 also reflected on the value of this step: "*This step is very important for Islamic studies teachers. Sometimes we need others to come and share their opinions on our teaching. In a classroom with many students, we cannot observe all the students' behaviors. Having others to help observe allows us to gain points for improving teaching and learning*". The insights gained from peer observations can significantly enhance teaching effectiveness and student engagement.

4.3.4. Reflecting Together

The co-reflection process involves teachers and students analyzing and reflecting on learning outcomes together. This collaborative reflection helps identify successes, challenges, and areas for improvement, fostering a culture of continuous learning and development. It encourages open dialog and mutual support, allowing teachers to refine their practices based on constructive feedback.

Participant S5T5 shared a transformative experience: "*My experience listening to teachers reflect at first made me worried and uncomfortable because I saw many problems in my teaching. After that, I thought back and realized that if no one came to talk to me and advise me like this, I*

would not have seen my mistakes by myself and they would have been flaws in my teaching forever, because I did not solve the problems. Today, I am very proud that my classroom problems have been improved by myself. But there are fellow teachers who help me with advice and look at my problems". This reflection process not only helps teachers recognize and rectify their mistakes but also fosters a supportive community where they can share and receive constructive feedback. Participant S1T24 further emphasized, *"I would like this step to be practiced more often in the classroom. It is like a professional learning community. We feel the sincerity of the reflector. And when we open our minds, we accept what needs to be improved and corrected. And we are happy with our outstandingness that has been reflected as well"*. Such reflections are crucial for continuous professional development and creating a positive, collaborative teaching environment.

4.3.5. Improving the Learning Plan Collaboratively

The final step is the iterative process of reviewing and improving the learning plan based on collective experiences and reflections. This involves regular analysis and evaluation of teaching strategies, incorporating feedback from teachers and students to enhance the effectiveness of the learning plan. Continuous improvement ensures that educational practices remain relevant and responsive to student needs.

Participant S1T2 noted, *"This step is another important step. The school should have activities where everyone brings the results of the reflection to improve and develop the learning management plan. It may be a joint learning plan again. So that what we have learned together in the classroom can be extended and developed for better teaching"*. The continuous improvement cycle ensures that teaching practices remain relevant and effective, addressing the evolving needs of students. However, this collaborative improvement process posed challenges, particularly when teachers disagreed on the best strategies for student engagement or curriculum adaptation. Some participants felt that the collaborative planning sessions were time-consuming and occasionally unproductive, especially when consensus was hard to reach. In these instances, maintaining focus on the shared goal of student-centered learning became difficult. Participant S8T15 added, *"Teachers' work always needs to be reviewed and improved. We Islamic studies teachers often lack activities to review and develop together from what we have done before. Joint planning again from experience and joint reflection helps develop quality Islamic studies teaching and has a good effect on students in the future"*. By incorporating feedback and experiences into the learning plan, teachers can develop more effective and engaging educational experiences for their students.

In conclusion, the implementation of Lesson Study and open teaching in Islamic Studies has led to significant improvements in teaching practices and student learning outcomes. The five critical processes—creating awareness of collaboration, joint instructional design, co-teaching and observation, collective reflection, and iterative improvement of learning plans—highlight the transformative potential of these methodologies. By fostering a culture of collaboration, openness, and continuous improvement, Islamic Studies teachers can significantly enhance their professional development and provide a more engaging and effective learning experience for their students.

5. Discussion

The findings of the participatory action research (PAR) process, as outlined in this study, demonstrate a well-structured and collaborative approach to developing Islamic Studies teachers in Southern Thailand. The emphasis on establishing relationships, designing the research collaboratively, implementing the plan through the Lesson Study and Open Approach, and continually assessing and revising the action plan aligns closely with the core principles of PAR. These principles include collective inquiry, reflection, and action, which are essential for fostering meaningful change in educational settings. The active involvement of teachers in every phase of the research process, from goal-setting to final reflection, highlights the empowering nature of PAR, where participants are co-researchers

rather than subjects, thus ensuring that the interventions are contextually relevant and sustainable [65].

In terms of teacher professional development, the study's findings reflect key aspects of effective professional learning communities (PLCs), which emphasize collaboration, continuous reflection, and a focus on student outcomes [66]. The integration of Lesson Study and Open Approach within the PAR framework provided teachers with opportunities to observe, reflect, and improve their teaching practices in real time, which is consistent with the theory of situated learning and professional growth [67]. However, it is important to note that while the reflective nature of these models is praised, the time demands of continuous observation and collaboration were noted as a challenge by some participants. Teachers reported that balancing these activities with their existing workload was sometimes difficult, reflecting a limitation in the broader application of such professional development models.

This iterative process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting allowed for the development of teaching strategies that were both innovative and grounded in the local educational context, addressing the specific needs of Islamic education. When compared to other recent PAR studies, such as those conducted in multicultural educational settings, the current research demonstrates the adaptability and effectiveness of PAR in diverse contexts. For instance, a study by Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon [56] on PAR in Australian schools similarly highlighted the importance of collaborative reflection and action in teacher development, leading to significant improvements in teaching practices and student engagement. However, the context of Islamic education in Thailand presents unique challenges, particularly in balancing religious content with contemporary teaching methods. This balancing act was a recurring challenge for teachers, as they expressed concern over ensuring the Islamic values were not diluted in the process of integrating modern educational practices.

The implementation of Lesson Study and Open Approach has significantly transformed the teaching of Islamic Studies, promoting a shift from traditional, teacher-centered methods to learner-centered approaches [18,68]. This transformation has emphasized critical thinking, self-directed learning, and the integration of information and communication technology (ICT). However, both internal and external factors have influenced the effectiveness of these changes, and while there are consistencies with previous Japanese lesson studies, the unique context of Islamic Studies offers distinct strengths and challenges.

Internally, the shift from knowledge-centric teaching to a focus on developing learners' competencies has required teachers to develop new skills, particularly in guiding students to reliable sources and filtering information. This has been highlighted in the experiences shared by Islamic Studies teachers. For instance, teachers have noted the need to help students navigate the vast information available online, ensuring they can discern reliable references. This internal factor underscores the necessity for continuous professional development [69].

Externally, the broader educational environment and societal attitudes towards technology and modern teaching methods significantly impact the adoption of these methodologies. Support from the education system and school administration is crucial. As noted by Informant S2T3, the education system must support and develop teachers to fully apply 21st-century teaching concepts. Without systemic support, it can be challenging for teachers to sustain these new practices [70,71]. Additionally, the socio-cultural context of Islamic Studies, which traditionally emphasizes textual learning and memorization, can present external challenges to implementing more dynamic and interactive teaching methods [72,73]. Some teachers expressed concerns that the focus on interactive and learner-centered methods could undermine the depth of religious knowledge transmission, which remains a core goal of Islamic education.

Comparing the findings from Islamic Studies classrooms with Japanese lesson studies reveals both consistencies and differences. Japanese lesson studies emphasize collaborative lesson planning, peer observation, and reflective practice, which are also integral to the pro-

fessional development of Islamic Studies teachers. The focus on collaborative instructional design, as discussed by Informant S8T11, aligns with the Japanese model where teachers jointly plan and refine their lessons [20,47]. This approach allows for diverse perspectives and collective problem-solving, enhancing the overall quality of teaching. However, the cultural and religious specificities of Islamic Studies make the application of these models more complex, as teachers must carefully navigate the integration of Islamic principles within a modern pedagogical framework.

However, there are notable differences due to the specific context of Islamic Studies. The integration of real-life situations and current events into the curriculum, as emphasized by Participant S9T10, reflects a unique adaptation to make the content more relevant and engaging for students [74]. This practice is less emphasized in traditional Japanese lesson studies, which often focus on subject-specific pedagogical strategies. The use of current events helps students connect Islamic principles to contemporary issues, fostering a deeper understanding and practical application of their learning [68,75]. Islamic Studies, when taught using Lesson Study and Open Approach, offers several strengths compared to other subjects. One key strength is the holistic integration of ethical and moral education with academic learning. This integration is particularly evident in the learner-centered focus, where teachers emphasize not only cognitive skills but also the development of character and values. This is highlighted by Informant S8T1, who noted the importance of understanding individual student needs and fostering a supportive classroom environment.

Moreover, the emphasis on utilizing diverse Islamic principles allows students to explore a wide range of religious perspectives, enhancing their critical thinking and analytical skills. This approach, as discussed by Participant S6T20, empowers students to ask challenging questions and seek deeper understanding, which is less commonly emphasized in other subjects that may focus more narrowly on specific content areas [72,76]. Additionally, the implementation of ICT skills in Islamic Studies, as noted by Participant S1T19, provides students with valuable digital literacy skills that are essential in the modern world. By producing their own learning materials and engaging with technology, students develop practical skills that enhance their overall educational experience [77,78]. This integration of technology in teaching Islamic Studies not only makes learning more engaging but also prepares students for future academic and professional challenges.

The professional development process emphasizing learner-centered development in Islamic Studies involves creating awareness of the importance of collaboration, designing joint teaching, teaching and observing together, reflecting together, and improving the learning plan collaboratively [79,80]. These steps mirror the principles of professional learning communities (PLCs) and provide a foundation for discussing the success factors of PLCs, cross-cultural factors affecting Islamic Studies teaching, and the consistency with or differences from Japanese lesson studies. Additionally, we will explore the strengths of Islamic Studies professional development compared to other commonly used processes.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) have been widely recognized for their effectiveness in fostering collaborative professional development among teachers. The success of PLCs hinges on several factors, including shared values and vision, collective responsibility, and reflective professional inquiry [81,82]. In the context of Islamic Studies, creating awareness of the importance of collaboration is foundational. As Informant S7T1 noted, teachers need to shift from traditional, isolated teaching methods to more dynamic, cooperative strategies. This aligns with the core principles of PLCs, where collaboration and shared goals are essential for success [83]. Moreover, the systemic support highlighted by Informant S2T3 is crucial, as it provides the necessary infrastructure and resources for sustained professional development. Without such support, the collaborative efforts might falter, reflecting the need for a conducive environment that supports PLC activities [84].

Cross-cultural factors significantly influence the teaching of Islamic Studies. The educational philosophies and practices in predominantly Islamic contexts often differ from those in non-Islamic regions, affecting the implementation of collaborative and learner-centered approaches. For instance, the integration of ICT tools, as emphasized by Informant

S7T1, may face resistance due to traditional pedagogical norms that prioritize rote learning and memorization [85]. Additionally, the socio-cultural context, which often upholds a hierarchical teacher–student relationship, may challenge the shift towards more egalitarian and interactive teaching methods. This is where the PLC model can play a transformative role by gradually introducing and normalizing these innovative practices within a supportive community. The success of cross-cultural adaptation relies on the flexibility and responsiveness of the professional development process to local cultural contexts, ensuring that new methodologies are respectful and inclusive of traditional values [86].

Japanese lesson studies share several similarities with the professional development process observed in Islamic Studies, particularly in the emphasis on collaborative planning, peer observation, and reflective practice [51,53]. Both approaches prioritize joint teaching and observing together, as highlighted by Informant S8T10, who noted the importance of opening minds to peer observation. This practice mirrors the Japanese model, where teachers collaboratively plan, observe, and discuss lessons to improve teaching effectiveness [47]. However, a notable difference lies in the contextual adaptation required for Islamic Studies. While Japanese lesson studies are deeply rooted in a specific cultural and educational context, Islamic Studies professional development must navigate a broader range of cultural influences and educational expectations. The integration of real-life situations and current events into the curriculum, as emphasized by Participant S9T10, is an adaptation that reflects the need to make Islamic teachings more relevant and engaging for students in a modern context. This contextual adaptation underscores the importance of flexibility in applying Lesson Study principles across different cultural and educational settings [23].

The professional development process in Islamic Studies, with its emphasis on collaboration and learner-centered approaches, offers several strengths compared to other commonly used processes. One significant strength is the holistic integration of ethical and moral education with academic learning [87]. Islamic Studies inherently combines spiritual, ethical, and intellectual development, providing a comprehensive educational experience. This integration is particularly beneficial in fostering students' moral and ethical reasoning, which is less emphasized in other subjects. The co-reflection process, as described by Participant S5T5, highlights the collaborative and supportive nature of professional development in Islamic Studies. This reflective practice not only helps teachers identify and address their weaknesses but also fosters a sense of community and mutual support, which is a hallmark of effective PLCs [88].

Additionally, the iterative process of improving the learning plan collaboratively ensures that teaching practices remain relevant and responsive to student needs. This continuous improvement cycle, emphasized by Participant S1T2 and S8T15, mirrors the principles of action research and reflective practice, which are central to effective professional development [89]. By incorporating feedback and experiences into the learning plan, teachers can create more engaging and effective educational experiences, which is a strength not always present in other professional development models that may rely more on top-down, prescriptive approaches.

6. Conclusions

The implementation of the Lesson Study and Open Approach in enhancing Islamic Studies teachers in Thailand has proven to be transformative, shifting from traditional teacher-centered methods to learner-centered approaches that foster critical thinking, self-directed learning, and the integration of information and communication technology (ICT). However, this study extends beyond just teaching strategies; it emphasizes the significance of teachers' professional development (TPD) in Islamic education. Professional development models, such as Lesson Study (LS) and professional learning communities (PLCs), have empowered teachers to take ownership of their growth, allowing them to integrate religious and pedagogical knowledge effectively. This shift has led to significant improvements in teaching practices and student learning outcomes. Teachers have developed

new skills in guiding students to reliable sources and filtering information, creating more engaging learning environments.

This study also makes a notable contribution by providing a framework for sustainable professional development specifically tailored for Islamic Studies teachers, who often lack access to formal pedagogical training. By engaging in reflective practices through TPD models like PAR (participatory action research) and LS, teachers are better equipped to align Islamic values with modern educational demands. This marks a vital contribution to the body of research on Islamic education, as it directly addresses the gap between religious knowledge and pedagogical expertise in private Islamic schools.

The collaborative nature of these methodologies has also fostered a supportive professional community among teachers, allowing for continuous improvement and innovation in teaching strategies. The focus on learner-centered development has helped students become more active participants in their education, enhancing their critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills. The integration of real-life situations and current events into the curriculum has made learning more relevant and engaging for students, helping them connect Islamic principles to contemporary issues. Additionally, the emphasis on utilizing diverse Islamic principles has broadened students' understanding and appreciation of different religious perspectives, further enhancing their analytical skills. The research demonstrates that teacher professional development plays a pivotal role in not only improving instructional techniques but also elevating the quality of Islamic education. This provides schools with a comprehensive model for fostering both religious adherence and academic excellence.

However, despite these positive outcomes, several challenges emerged during the study. One of the key challenges presented by the participants was the initial resistance to the collaborative nature of Lesson Study. Some teachers were uncomfortable with peer observation and found it difficult to openly accept feedback from colleagues. Participants also highlighted the time constraints involved in planning, observing, and reflecting together, as many teachers struggled to balance these activities with their existing teaching workload. Additionally, the socio-cultural context of Islamic Studies, which often prioritizes textual learning and memorization, sometimes conflicted with the dynamic, interactive nature of Lesson Study and Open Approach. Teachers found it challenging to balance the need for students to memorize religious texts with the push for critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

In conclusion, while the application of Lesson Study and Open Approach in Islamic education contexts showed significant promise, it also highlighted the need for ongoing support, training, and adaptation to overcome the challenges presented by traditional pedagogical practices and resource limitations. This study contributes to the field of Islamic education by offering a detailed, learner-centered professional development process that emphasizes reflective teaching and collaborative learning, while also addressing the professional challenges faced by Islamic Studies teachers.

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MDPI

Case Report

Preparing Teachers for the 'Ummah': A Case Study of Hayat Foundation

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Abstract: This preliminary study initiates an exploration into a novel informal Islamic teacher education programme developed by a community organisation. The presented case study explores the Afghan Muslim inspired Hayat Foundation's communal educational initiative, the Marefat programme. The programme, derived from Islamic educational theoriesis 'imbued with notions of reflective, critical, and reflexive thinking', which are designed to recognise the individual levels of development for every educator and simultaneously elevate their efficacy, agency, and person. Adopting an interpretivist-narrative methodology conveyed through a dialogical approach, this study focuses on the lived experiences of this social-welfare organisation by seeking to decipher the teleological nature of the programme. This examination is guided by three questions which seek to identify its intended audience, the specificity of the issue it attempts to address, and the approaches it has adapted to implement its programme. The findings suggest that the overarching purpose of this educational initiative is to foster empowering liberatory pedagogical responses to counter oppressive narratives in the reading of the Islamic tradition.

Keywords: Islamic teacher education; theology of liberation; Afghanistan

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Be not forgetful of prayer. Every time you pray, if your prayer is sincere, there will be new feeling and new meaning in it, which will give you fresh courage, and you will understand that prayer is an education. [1]

1. Introduction

A cursory review of the literature reveals that despite the status of Islam as one of the 'six major universal religions' and receiving coverage on the English national curriculum, there exists a significant gap in the research on the training, education, and teaching of Islam in both schools and private institutions in England [2–4] Scholars argue that this directly contributes to the vacuous appreciation of Islamic thought, which is reflected in the curriculum-specific publications issued on Islam. These eventually contribute to the training of religious studies teachers and consequently their disengagement and misinformed analysis on the role and place of Islam in society [5]. Therefore, in discussions pertaining to the extrinsic societal dimensions, Islam is mostly framed within problematic dialogues to such issues as extremism, counter terrorism, gender, and sexual discrimination alongside the more recent recognition of Islamophobia [6] The remit of these discussions confines and marginalises the broad nature of Islamic thought as it is framed in the teaching materials as a homogenous, theological monolith defined through its articles of faith [5] and functional existence confined to a bygone historical era), thereby echoing Wilfred Cantwell Smith's assertion that Islam cannot be defined in accordance with the understanding of 'religion' within religious studies, as it fails to grasp the plurality and vitality of historical and contemporary Muslim cultural civilisations and communities [7]. Islam, as per Cantwell Smith's (1991) contention, is prismed within the bounds of 'religiosity' with its approval dependent upon its rigid compliance within this framework [8,9]. Thereby, there exists an 'ontological conformity' that decrees a homogenised decontextualised interpretation of Islamic thought which excludes other perspectives and expressions [10]. Therefore,

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educators and teachers are presented with set narratives through their course materials that ultimately shape their understanding of Islam both as a faith and a lived practise [11,12].

This study aims to address the response to this reductionist, monolithic staging of Islam through the examination of Hayat Foundation's Marefat programme, specifically, to garner an appreciation for its purpose or teleology.

Thinking teleologically implies that you holistically perceive varying factors as a single object belonging to a definitive category due to the apparent purpose it serves. For example, in attaching a purpose to a piece of metal and a piece of wood, they could be taken as a single object which belongs to the category of hammers. However, a distinction should be made between perspectives that simply attribute a specific purpose to an object ('*mere teleology*') and "*. . .thinking that the object's telos actually explains why the object is the way it is*" *(teleological explanation)* [13]. This is a poignant observation that recognises the existence of a delicate boundary between the perceived functionality of a thing as contrasted with its intended purpose by its original creator. The attribution of a '*telos*' to a thing provides it with a *teleological explanation*; thereby, a thing may be thought of as being for a specific *telos* if the thing is explicated by that *telos*. Studies constantly demonstrate that the original creator's purpose is readily identified by observers in their interaction or utilisation of a particular thing even if the thing in question is being utilised for an alternative purpose to that intended by its creator or designer. Further, it recognises that functionality (*mere teleology*) may be the consequential trait of change or transformation, as illustrated through the following analogy of an outdated dictionary being utilised as a doorstop:

> "*. . .Nobody ever uses the dictionary as it was originally intended (to look up definitions of words), and in fact everyone thinks that it should be used exclusively for holding open the door. Given that everyone in the relevant community currently sees the object as a doorstop and uses it as a doorstop, might an observer judge that its telos has changed from looking up words to holding open doors?. . . in other words, we might say that the current purpose of the object is something other than the purpose that explains its existence.*" (Ibid.)

The utilisation of the outdated dictionary example demonstrates the '*relational-deictic*' thinking on teleology, whereby the use of the dictionary serves a function which appears to be totally disentangled from the original creator's purpose. Alternatively, it also highlights the variations and perceptions of the thing in question as individual agents and sources interact with it on their own terms and understanding.

Thereby, this case study examination through an inductive interpretative-narrative approach attempted to explore and examine the teleological being of Hayat Foundation's Marefat programme and uncovered the reasons for that given purpose.

Thus, the core question postulated by the study was, what is the purpose of Hayat Foundation's Marefat programme? This was then supplemented by three guiding questions, which eventually contributed to the unveiling of key thematic discussions points alongside presenting a holistic perspective on the purpose. Henceforth, the first question pertained to the following: (1) who is this programme designed for? This entailed the identification of its potential audience, members, and students. The second question then moved to investigate (2) what concern was this programme addressing? This was to uncover the issues, challenges, or even opportunities that Hayat Foundation had identified in establishing this programme, thus leading to the final guiding question with regard to (3) how the programme was designed? This was to build on the previous two responses to gain an appreciation for the eventual orientation of the programme and the influences that contributed to that philosophical approach.

This study thereby begins with a discussion on the adopted interpretative-narrative case study approach before introducing Hayat Foundation as a case study, which is followed by the discussion on findings, before reflecting on these and concluding the study.

2. Interpretative-Narrative Case Study Approach

This study adopts an interpretative-narrative case study methodology to examine the central objectives of the study.

Case study research is defined to be an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident [14]. This is particularly applicable to "...*those areas of research that are new and for which existing theory seems inadequate*" [15]. The definitive framing of these phenomena, analysed through the prism of the interpretivist lens implies "...*that social reality is something that is constructed and interpreted by people rather than something that exists objectively out there.*" [16]. Thus, with consideration to the overarching objective of this study, the pertinence of encapsulating the "lived experience" [17] of Hayat Foundation members, teachers, and students forming and attending the educational programme is essential. These case study participants constitute the social actors parlaying their experiences and understanding of the teacher education programme and its relevance and usefulness to their understanding and teaching of Islam within a broader educational environment. Thereby, this lens allows this study to garner the reality experienced by the study participants, whereby "*the details of the situation to understand the reality or perhaps a reality working behind them*" can be deciphered, [18] thus allowing for a concentrated focus upon the social context to which these social actors have been exposed. As there are no predefined independent/dependent variables, the onus is on gaining an appreciation for the participant's experience. This requires an investigation into the cultural narrative, the "socio- cultural process" [19] of the entire organisation in order to interpret their life-experience and underlying motivations [20].

The process by which this transpires is that individuals engage in meaning and sense-making through the construction of narratives to interpret and share their experienced phenomena. The linguistic structures and terms utilised to develop narratives are insightful as they reveal their worldview perspectives and depth of engagement they possess in its formation, for the discussion concurs that "...*the limits of my language are the limits of my world*..." [21].

Thereby, in seeking to discuss narratives concerning pedagogical approaches adopted to teach educational topics from an Islamic perspective, a definitive appreciation of the Islamic Weltanschauung (worldview) is imperative. The ontological veracity of Islam, as encapsulated in the notion of *tawhid* (unity), is derived from a universal perception of life which originates from a single definitive source, the Creator (Rabb). Conversely, however, in order to conceptualise this reality, the concept of knowledge ('ilm') and its epistemological foundation are comprehended within a dualistic structure. This implies that rational-logico-scientific knowledge formulates an aspect of the Islamic epistemological foundation, the secular, mundane, whilst the other half is informed by the divine, revealed knowledge, which interacts with the secular through a dialectical process that is mutual, reciprocal, balanced, and harmonious to arrive at a holistic and comprehensive understanding, *tawhid* [22,23]. Consequently, any methodologies that segregate or isolate phenomena into a sequence of independent methods contravene the Islamic worldview as they are perceived to be partial as opposed to being holistic.

Thus, Islamic educators are advised to embrace a critically reflective approach, which can be compared to the Islamic notions of education or *tarbiya* [3,24]. This can be gleamed from an application of Rahman's "double hermeneutical" method to the contemporary notion of critical pedagogy, which translates to the ideal of the classical Islamic conception of tarbiya [3]. A further examination of this pedagogical approach can be derived from the readings of classical Islamic educational literature and educationalists (Ibn Abd Al-Bur, d. 1044; Al-Mawerdi, d. 1058; Al-Baghdadi, d. 1070; Al-Ghazali, d. 1111; Al-Zarnugi, d. 1194; Ibn Jamaa'h, d. 1241), who argue that the educational process is a reflection of the practitioners.

The critically reflective approach is a viable strategy for the teaching of educational subjects from the Islamic worldview as it seeks to liberate individuals from indoctrinating

banking models of education as per the prophetic model. Freire's proclamations on the purpose of pedagogy for humanisation over dehumanisation resounds deeply with the ethos of Islamic pedagogical practise. His definition of violence as "…any situation in which some individuals prevent other from engaging in the process of inquiry…" [25] also speaks to the concept of justice in Islamic education. Freire, in pursuing liberation for the oppressed, also advocates liberation for the oppressor, as it is a dialectical corelation between two parties, which are mutually related.

Henceforth, educators as reflective practitioners engage in a perpetual dialogue with their students and themselves with reference to their pedagogical practise and the students' experiences of learning. This is further corroborated by the educator's comprehensive theoretical and practical knowledge, which implies that the concept of reflection also entails the educators to be cognisant of the extensive array of pedagogical approaches to adopt with regard to the context.

Thereby, educators develop a holistic picture of their teaching practise, which is not based simply on quantifiable processes such as exam or assessment results, but from the processes leading to these ends. This encompasses a process of self-reflective examination or reflexive practise. This implies that both teachers and learners are perceived as reflexive practitioners, with aims of assessing how their personal conduct can be analysed, thus asking initial questions such as, "What did I do that was right or wrong, that worked or did not work?" These are then further developed to query, "How did my past and current experience of life and work influence me in behaving in the particular way I did or in suggesting the particular courses of action I took?" [3,22].

3. Methods

The research design entailed a sample population that was exclusive and specialised; therefore, this study utilised purposive or judgmental sampling to select participants that were directly associated with the objectives and purpose of the research question. Consequently, the sample is homogeneous as it focuses on a specific community in which all the sample members share common identities and values, assisting the researcher to explore and analyse the holistic nature of the group. However, it also presents an opportunity to examine the complexity of interpretation found amongst a group of people with shared ideals, norms, and careers.

The participants engaged in this study and selected for the in-depth interviews or non-standardised, "qualitative research interviews" [26] were the chairman and seven board members of Hayat Foundation. The interviews were conducted in two separate schedules, whereby in schedule 1, the researcher met with the chairman of Hayat Foundation and a board member in a private residence and schedule 2 was undertaken at a national educational event organised by the foundation (Hayat Foundation National Annual Training Weekend: 3–5 May 2024—Held at the Markfield Conference Centre, Leicester, UK). In addition to the SSI at this event (See Table 1), two focus groups (FG) were also undertaken with twenty (20) regular members for FG 1 and twenty (20) students for FG 2 (See Table 2). These data collection techniques were also supplemented with the review of the literature, documentary analysis, and observation methods. This consisted of examining the physical and virtual records, curriculums, syllabus, lesson plans, assessments, evaluations, and feedback material of Hayat Foundation, alongside adopting ethnographic approaches to 'observe' rather than influence the environment. The researcher was therefore invited to observe two national events (Hayat Foundation Ramadan Conference, 1 April 2024, Harrow, London; Hayat Foundation National Training Weekend: 3–5 May 2024. Held at the Markfield Conference Centre, Leicester, UK) and participate in an online session with the global youth Marefat programme.

The data derived from the SSI, FGs, literature review, documentary analysis, and observations were captured through a dialogical process before being analysed through an inductive approach, which was guided by the research questions to gather data and then explore and identify the emergent themes derived from the analysis. Due to the sensitive

socio-political associations of the case study subject with the contemporary context of both Afghanistan and the UK, all names have been altered and aliases adopted for the purposes of anonymity and confidentiality in accordance with ethical guidelines provided by BERA (2024). Thereby, the interviewed board members have been allocated random names in alphabetical order, as per Table 1 below.

Table 1. Sample aliases for Hayat Foundation board members.

Board Members	Alias
Chairman	Mr Ali
1	Mr Bader
2	Mr Can
3	Mr Dar
4	Mr Emir
5	Mr Falah
6	Mr Ghazi
7	Mr Hafiz

Table 2. Focus group participants including Hayat Foundation members and non-members.

Focus Groups	Member Participants
FG 1	Regular Members, Professionals, Teachers [*20]
FG 2	Students, Individuals (non-members) [*20]

4. Data Analysis

The data analysis process derived data from the seven interviews, focus groups (*2 with 20 participants in each FG), observations, and documentary analysis, which were captured through a dialogical process. The subsequent analysis of these data was undertaken through an inductive approach, whereby the gathered data were examined and analysed to derive and identify the themes. However, the process was initially informed by Yin's [14] recommendation to examine existing theories, the literature, and initial contact with the target sample to further aid the formulation of initial research objectives and questions. Therefore, the adopted inductive approach was based upon a "two-stage data analysis" procedure, whereby the first stage entailed a process of 'categorisation' and the second stage, 'summarising'.

The first stage entails the categorisation (grouping) of meanings: this comprised developing categories and associating specific bits of data to them as relationships.

Developing Categories: Derived from initial contact and meetings with the study participants, alongside a review of the literature, these category nouns identify the highlighted themes detailed in Table 3 below. The study identified three themes from these initial meetings around which the open-ended interview questions were formulated during the course of the individual interviews and FGs. The use of probing questions allowed for more variable data to be examined as the interviewed participants became accustomed and comfortable with the interview process.

Unitising data: At this stage the relevant 'bits' of data, ('units' of data) gathered from the interviews, FGs, observations, and documentary analysis were classified under the relevant category.

The second stage entailed summarising (condensation) of meanings or purpose. After the data were collected through the interview process, a summary of the key points and factors were explicitly identified and recorded. This stage, therefore, condensed substantial proportions of the dialogical narrative into a meaningful summary.

Table 3. Emergence of themes.

Identified Theme	Emergence of Themes
[What is the purpose of Hayat Foundation's Marefat programme?] **Purpose**	This theme was identified during the initial discussions about Hayat Foundation's programme and formulates one of the core objectives of this study. It was derived from Hayat Foundation's members repeatedly seeking to garner a sense of validation and purpose for their endeavours as can be witnessed from the brief yet comprehensive discussion on teleology in the introduction. As the programme is still in its early stages of development and implementation, its design and subsequent practise is based upon its overarching purpose.
[What is it addressing?] **Focus**	The emergence of this theme can be evinced from the preceding theme in that it was identified during the conduct of this study and visitations to the national events and study circles. During these events and classes, the purpose of the programme and what it was attempting to address became more apparent as these discussions were focused upon a recognition that the Marefat programme was still in its infancy and therefore was designed to address preliminary issues relating to creating an appreciation and awareness of the epistemological dimension in the formation of knowledge and its subsequent adoption for teacher education.
[How is it addressing that?] **Practice**	The final theme was identified and emerged from the researchers' direct interactions with group members and observations of the educational practise in implementing the programme. Thereby, this theme follows in sequential order from the previous themes in highlighting the practise and what that effectively entails.

Structuring (ordering) of meanings using narrative: Coffey and Atkinson defined the narrative to encompass a broad account of the experience in a sequential format [27]. Thus, the data categorised in the second stage were arranged in a relative fashion so as to provide a continuous flow or narrative of the experience. Saunders et al. [18] observed that narrative analysis, as the final stage of the analysis phase, allows the construction of a dialogue that demonstrates the

> "*Participants' engagement, the actions that they took, the consequences of these and the relationship events that followed to be retained within the narrative flow of the account without losing the significance of the social or organisational context within which these events occurred*" [18].

5. Hayat Foundation

Hayat Foundation was established in England as a charitable community organisation in 2012 by a group of devoted professionals originally hailing from Afghanistan. This group formulated the first board of governors to oversee its formative development and evolution. Although the leadership group has changed over the course of time, the current board is headed by Mr Ali, a highly qualified MBA graduate from a leading business school in the UK with over two decades of corporate business developmental experience at the highest levels. Having formerly served as the chief executive officer for an investment firm and as a chief operating officer for a teleco, he also functions as a non-executive director for a number of charitable and social organisations both in the UK and in Afghanistan. He is supported by seven board members as listed with their aliases above in Table 1.

A cursory observation of the credentials of the board members suggests that this is a highly educated, qualified, and experienced group of individuals. Thereby, Mr Ali shares that Hayat Foundation's vision and purpose is best expressed through their mission statement: "To empower targeted communities, through education, economic growth, and social change, fostering sustainable development and creating opportunities for a brighter future" (See Hayat Foundation website: https://hayatfoundation.uk/about-us/ accessed on 17 April 2024). He further states that "*. . .this mission statement is also encoded into our core values as key conceptual terms: Comprehensiveness; Diversity; Community Outreach; Relief*

and Welfare Campaigns; Access to Education and Empowerment of Women, therefore reminding us of what we are working towards". These, according to Mr Ali, are their efforts towards fostering and cultivating an environment for the Afghan community to grow and develop both here in the UK and in Afghanistan. Therefore, the organisation is dictated by four clear objectives which entail that Hayat Foundation (1) meets the dynamic needs of the communities including social, spiritual, and developmental needs; (2) reflects the diversity of the Muslim community in the UK and the pluralistic message of Islam; (3) develops a constructive and mutually beneficial relationship with the wider Muslim and non-Muslim communities; and (4) supports educational programmes and charitable relief endeavours both locally and overseas.

Mr Bader, an original founder, and board member, observes that in its formative period the organisation was established on the premises of community development. The explicit aim from that stage has been to develop educational programmes for the Afghan community in the UK in order to preserve its cultural and religious values as derived from an Islamic ethos. This also includes contributing to charity work and emergency relief initiatives arising periodically due to natural or man-made disasters in Afghanistan. Mr Ali notes that since that time, Hayat Foundation has increased its capacity as a service provider to provide medical care through its network of doctors and medical facilities in Afghanistan. This also includes providing facilities for poor widows, orphans, disabled war veterans, and the homeless in dignified rehabilitation centres, camps, housing, and other sheltered accommodation. Mr Bader reveals that Hayat Foundation has recently altered its strategy towards both community and relief work by working on long-term development programmes. These have the unequivocal aim of tackling the root causes of disengagement in the UK through educational programmes and poverty through relief work. Mr Bader states that "*this has become even more imperative in recent years due to the increasing number of Afghan migrants and refugees coming to the UK*". For instance, the UK experienced a twofold increase in migrants from 13,800 in 2013 to 23,300 in 2014, which subsequently quadrupled to 96,000 by 2015 [28]. The alarming nature of this statistic for Hayat Foundation was that 39% of these migrants were from Afghanistan and under the age of 16, thereby becoming a liability of the state as "looked-after children", or now termed Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) until they reach the age of eighteen [28]. Thereby, an aspect of the literature argues that the UK government has relocated and granted asylum status to these young refugees in accordance with internationally mandated treatises on the right for education for all [29]. It argues that the experience of primary and secondary schooling scaffolds the development of these young migrants towards integration and eventual citizenship into their adopted nations. They are able to learn and appreciate the customs, culture, norms, and language of a new society through the embedded process of schooling. Consequently, they are also presented with the opportunity to develop their academic and professional skills, so as to become self-empowered and eventually contribute to the social and economic welfare of their broader communities through a sense of belonging, responsibility, and accountability [30–32].

However, the experienced, lived reality presents a slightly more sombre analysis. Since 2007, some 2018 care leavers, i.e., formerly classified as Afghan UASC granted temporary or discretionary leave to remain [33], have been forcibly deported to Afghanistan and many thousands remain in an ambiguous void after being refused asylum and exhausting their rights to appeal [28]. Mr Ali argues that "*...even as asylum seekers in the UK, these young Afghans do not have the right to work, unless highly skilled and that after a qualifying period*". The literature contends with this observation, as those afforded a refugee status and accordingly the privilege to work actually encounter many barriers and obstacles in prevailing these opportunities in the labour market, as they lack the requisite experience alongside the practical and linguistic skills [34,35].

This situation even extends to those with higher qualifications from Afghan universities with a perplexing double-barrel conundrum of often being deemed over-qualified or their qualifications being abjectly refused and unrecognised. Therefore, many highly

skilled Afghan migrants experience a downturn in their socio-economic and professional status upon arriving in the UK as they are engaged in lower-skilled labour and living conditions [28,35] Mr Bader, currently undertaking a PhD in the broad field of educational policymaking shares that "... *when I was doing my post-graduate degree in Education, I propositioned to the board that we begin our own teacher training program for these highly qualified Afghans and therefore orientate Hayat Foundation towards the direction of becoming a non-profit educational institution for the development of teachers, especially those teaching in Islamic or faith schools. However, after doing the research and examining the process, I realised this was an almost impossible task and so we decided instead to focus on identifying and working with these educated individuals to prepare them for possible careers in mainstream teaching and to work independently as tutors to create avenues of revenue and income whilst gaining invaluable experience*".

Furthermore, Mr Ali adds that from his own experience and research into the field, he has personally had to address an increasing number of mental health issues within the migrant Afghan community and the possibilities of impressionable, desperate youngsters being lured into nefarious underworld activities or recruitment targets for radical extremist groups.

Therefore, "...*we have sought to counter this threat before it takes any roots in our community... being from Afghanistan we know the truth of the pain and destruction it causes... so as we have already done in the past and are continuing to do... by actively addressing this issue through the organising of informational and topical seminars, conferences and workshops by inviting renowned and respected scholars and personalities from both within the Muslim and non-Muslim world to address our community across the UK*".

Mr Ali contends that the measure of migrant Afghan communities' intellectual and social development can be witnessed through their active engagement and participation in these debates, which have until the recent past been considered taboo in a very conservative society.

According to Mr Bader, Hayat Foundation has inadvertently, without definitive purpose, begun to occupy an emerging social space, which makes them incumbents and a gateway to an insular community. Although Afghans are amongst the top ten asylum applicants to the UK for the last five yearsthe population has been "...*under-researched, with many gaps in knowledge*" [28]. This is exemplified by the UK Census data which is constrained to the top ten non-UK countries of birth for UK inhabitants, which does not include Afghanistan (Ibid). Furthermore, apart from small-scale qualitative studies on Afghan migrants in the UK, authored by charities, government, and community organisations [36], studies are mostly focused on their integration and performance in schools [37–39] or their engagement with local authority [40–42]. Therefore, Mr Bader concurs with the findings of this study's review of the literature through a relation with his own doctoral research, in that "...*a significant gap exists in the research addressing the inner workings of the Afghan communities in the UK and those incumbents like Hayat Foundation responsible for its welfare*".

Henceforth, Mr Bader was encouraged to revisit his original idea of a teacher education programme by his fellow board members prior to his commencement of his doctorate programme in the summer of 2022. However, Mr Bader reveals that in consultation with his academic supervisors and experts from the field, he proposed a reformulated framework with a two-pronged objective. Firstly, Hayat Foundation would develop and prepare their own teachers through a process of education, which Mr Bader describes as "*an entire developmental cycle, as opposed to just training teachers to become instructors as you see in corporations, where someone is simply trained to deliver a set of instructions...*". Secondly, "*the Foundation would provide those members of the community that are qualified and interested in teaching careers especially from their youngsters and women to undertake the program to learn about the faith through a critically engaged lens as opposed to the mainstream teaching of Islam or the so-called traditional approaches...*". This is also highlighted by the aforementioned review of the literature which perceives the conception, formation, and dissemination of Islamic knowledge as a broad overarching challenge [3,24,43,44].

6. Marefat Programme

Mr Bader, with the majority consensus of Hayat Foundation's chairman and board, began work on the development of an intramural programme aimed at preparing their members for one of the aforementioned two objectives.

This initially entailed the adoption of a broad framework based upon classical '*Marefat*' (methods of learning through experiential knowledge) curriculums in Dari and Pashto. These were mainly derived from the pedagogical approaches of the various schools and '*tariqas*' (ways) of '*tasawwuf*' (Sufism) that had influenced the development of the Islamic-socio-cultural identity of the Afghans. Therefore, these pedagogies became an instrument of self-exploration, development, and meaning-making as they championed the *kashf al mahjub* (unveiling the veiled) of *Haqiqah* (spiritual truth) through lived experiences.

Mr Ali contends that this "*adoption of the classical methodology is a guiding post that reflects our deep connection to our tribal heritage, our Sunni-Hanafi Islamic beliefs and cultural values, therefore the process and sources we use are already familiar to our members*". Mr Bader explains that "*. . .the organisation has thirty-nine full time volunteer members that support the organisation in all of its activities and undertake many of the programs being designed or implemented*". Thereby, the Marefat programme was initially aimed to educate these volunteer members as a first cadre and then to utilise their combined learned and lived experiences to both refine the course and introduce them to active classroom teaching. Mr Bader relays that "*. . .the sessions are all held online. . . having learnt to work throughout the pandemic lockdown experience online we realised that not everyone could physically attend in one location, so it made sense to bring everyone together on a virtual platform and also taught us to adapt and utilise new forms of technology. . . for our students who would be interacting with the world. . . it would be great for them to get familiar with the tools in a safe and caring environment.*" This highlights a progressive attitude and counters the notion of Islamic educators as antiquated luddites, as they not only integrated the use of technology into the sessions but essentially made it a central component of the experience.

Therefore, introducing the methodologies required interaction with the technological infrastructure for the senior and less familiar students, whilst allowing the more integrated and experientially rich younger generations to adopt the role of guides and teachers. Mr Ali explains both with excitement and caution that "*. . .this process has actually allowed channels of communication to open between sometimes very senior and respected members and junior members, as they have helped them navigate this new landscape and terrain. . . So, I guess it's like the community has gone online but it's important to note that this is not an online community*". This is an extremely pertinent point, which attempts to dispel any notion that Hayat Foundation operates and exists simply on a virtual platform. Mr Bader diligently observes that "*. . . we fully appreciate the value of this technology but know that it cannot replace the human-face to face connection, as we realised during the lockdown. . . So periodically, every 6 weeks we organise a large gathering, hosted like a conference, activity day or celebration to bring all the members and their families together. . . this not only preserves our human relations but strengthens them and allows for new members to be introduced into the community. . . especially like our refugee brothers and sisters*".

It is clear that a great amount of time and effort has been invested into the research and impact of this programme with regard to its human dimensions. This is evident from the design of the course, which has been structured in hierarchical order inspired by the developmental stages of the Marefat programme, akin to but not the same as the psycho-social developmental models of Piaget or Erickson. These entail that students start the programme as 'seeds' or beginners before proceeding to the stage of 'ishq or lovers of knowledge', whereby students demonstrate their active learning through informed contributions to discussions, debates, and presentations. Students deemed to have grasped this stage are deemed to be *da'is* or devotees of knowledge, as they are able to now produce new knowledge and lead discussions, debates, and presentations before graduating to and being honoured as the 'imams', leaders of the organisation. This entails the coordination and facilitation of the educational sessions, programmes, and all extracurricular activities

of the organisation, thus acting both in a teaching and administrative capacity. This also includes hosting separate sessions for youngsters between the ages of fourteen to eighteen, including participants from the UK alongside Asia (Afghanistan, Malaysia, Qatar, and Pakistan), continental Europe (Germany, Netherlands, and Turkey) and North America (USA and Canada).

This reveals an albeit niche yet emerging global presence of Hayat Foundation as a voice and medium for Afghan communities, migrant, or otherwise.

Thereby, there exists a reciprocal understanding of mutual beneficence and assistance, whereby Hayat Foundation works to fulfil the needs of its members through its educational programme and in return the members work towards achieving the aims and objectives of this developmental project through their commitment.

Mr Bader states that "...*the demands of the course are such that it requires the mandatory attendance of each member and board member in all of the sessions... as each stage of the program from beginner to leader is covered by 52 sessions; whereby each session lasts for 90 min and is conducted through a halaqa format*". This implies that even board members are students at lower stages than certain ordinary members, thus exemplifying the meritocratic and honourable nature of the individuals and the ethos of the organisation. In a unique practise derived from the Islamic tradition and cultural Afghan practises, these public sessions are attended by all of the students regardless of their designated status. A summary outline of the sessions is replicated in Table 4.

Table 4. Hayat Foundation Marefat session schedule.

Subject Activity	Description	Teacher/Student(s) Lead
Quranic Recitation and Reflection [20 min]	Sessions are started with recitation of the Quran. Beginners are taught the pronunciation (tajweed) of the words through separate sessions, whilst advanced students engage in discussing the various interpretations and commentaries (tafsir) and relating them to present day contextual challenges and opportunities.	Teacher led with student participation
Reflection on Current Affair [10 min]	Students are expected to be informed of the daily current affairs and so will come to sessions prepared to discuss the major events of the day. Students are expected to lead the session with students selected to lead prior to sessions.	Student(s)
Topic Lecture [20 min]	The teacher of the session, appointed from the leadership group selects a designated topic of discussion related to the Islamic tradition and worldview. This includes a systematic series of lectures on topics relating to *aqeeda* (faith); *seera* (biographical account of the Prophet's life); *fiqh* (Jurisprudence); *akhlaq* (morals and norms); and *um'ran* (civilisation) with regard to their contextual translation in the 21st century.	Teacher
Islamic Tradition [15 min]	Designated students present their responses to previous topical lectures by the teachers with class discussion and debate on the topic.	Teacher led with student presentations
Book Review [15 min]	Teachers begin by introducing the literature for review with students following in presenting their reviews on previously assigned readings.	Teacher led with student presentations
Individual Dialogue [10 min]	An individual student is randomly selected to present a personal perspective and feedback on the current session. This is followed with a brief class discussion and feedback.	Student(s)

The outline in Table 4 demonstrates that each ninety-minute session consisted of five major elements designated as the subject activity. These are then allocated a specific time of discussion, which entails that either the subject activity is teacher-led, or the platform is afforded to the students to lead. Therefore, the students are both taught and evaluated by

their fellow community members, with their progress actively dictated and demonstrated by their own contributions to the advancement of the sessions and the learning experience of their fellow students. Mr Ali observes that "...*at the end of each fifty-two-week session cycle the decision to promote a student is taken by their overall performances... this includes their attendance to sessions, behaviour, contributions to discussions, attitude to learning and engagement with the course material and broader knowledge, as well as their character and personality traits*".

This is a cyclical programme with incremental stages of learning and growth, whereby students at the beginner levels are introduced to the concepts and regularly engaged with regard to their understanding and informed perspective on a topic. Over time they are scaffolded and through notions such as Vygotsky's [45] zones of proximal development, students are progressively introduced and expected to either participate or begin to contribute to the formation of knowledge in leading discussions, debates, or presentations.

The ensuing section therefore presents the findings of the study's discussion through the identified emergent themes to present an in-depth analysis of the programme from the perspective of the members and students.

7. Discussion and Findings

The inductive analysis of data guided by the research questions revealed three emergent themes, whereby each question uncovered its own emergent theme, therefore providing a holistic set of data to address the central research questions:

What is the purpose of Hayat Foundation's Marefat programme?
What is it addressing?
How is it addressing that?

This section is structured to address the guiding research questions and discuss the identified emergent theme as a definitive finding of the question.

7.1. [Emergent Theme 1] Purpose

Mr Ali states that "*the notion of 'community' effectively answers your entire study as Hayat foundation through its role in developing an exclusive educational program for a specific 'community' forms its purpose and tells you who it's for*". It could be argued that this qualifies to a degree as a summary conclusion to the study and effectively addresses one of the central concerns of this study.

However, Mr Ali is also quick to point out that "...*in speaking about community what do we mean by community... so that is something we must try and understand first*". He demonstrates his depth of understanding by recognising the contested nature of this concept and explains that although they understand the general notion of community, it is not so easily defined. He is supported by Mr Can in his assertion, as he explains that "...*communities are not just when people live in the same place with a common culture or ethnic identity they could also be identified through their communal activities or interests not just where they live... because most communities were established before most people were born and still exist after they die*". The other board members also concur that the notion of a specific community is not necessarily dependent on the living individual constituents, as it emerged and was established prior to their parturitions and endures subsequent to their quietus.

Further arguments by participants in both the FG 1 and FG 2 groups identified the definitional liquidity of the term "community" alongside the technical issues relating to its parameters, boundaries, identity, hierarchy, and criteria for inclusion and exclusion.

FG 1 concluded that most definitions of community were "*naïve*", as "...*community was a socially intangible construct and open to interpretation*".

Meanwhile, FG 2, recognising the contextual caveat from which they were speaking, sought to define "community" within the terms of "*a social and cultural organisation bounded by shared norms and ideals that were transmitted through systems of learning*".

These intricate discussions revealed a broad consensual understanding, which implied that although a community was a construct of its individual constituents, it could be construed as a network of pluralistic and multipolar relationships woven into a harmonious

fabric through mutually accepted beliefs and behaviours. Mr Dar recognises that "...*any human being you know is not born with their social cultural identity, it is slowly taught to them not through just schools and colleges but actually in the home by the families and the community around them... in the modern world they don't necessarily have to be living in the same village, town or city to be part of that community but could be thousands of miles apart like we are from our communities but we all have things which are more in common than not*".

He highlights a pertinent perspective supported by the broad review of the literature on the topic. These learned comportments are imparted through a process of enculturation or socialisation, as a "...*collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others*" [46]. Mr Emir concurs and states that "*the worldview developed by that group is their 'culture', which basically defines their community...it doesn't mean just because we are all part of the same country or even religion that we have the same culture, there are differences between the languages of the people and how they live...sometimes these government policies whether it's in Afghanistan or even UK doesn't really think about these things they have their own agenda to just make everyone the same*". The reading of the literature on communities and cultures can be crudely summarised to reflect Mr Falah's contention. The literature categorises and makes distinctions between pluralistic and monistic communities or horizontal and vertical relationships; the pluralistic viewpoint conceives of forming vertical societal relationships, thus encompassing and engaging the broad spectrum of society into their ideal of community, whereas the notion of a monistic community is generally concentrated upon horizontal relationships and focused on countering actual conflict and narratives of socio-economic disparity, political marginalisation, and the dearth of power [28].

According to Mr Ghazi, "*Hayat Foundation is a community based upon religious, cultural and tribal values, which means we have even as a community our own unique national identity, that doesn't mean that we are representatives of the whole of Afghanistan or Muslim world but that we are small unique part of those bigger communities but importantly we are unique as we have a history, our own culture, language, generation of family relationships through marriages and such things... but we are migrants so now we have to look at our cultural world and it will either grow if we become open or probably die out if we stay closed...like every small community in the world*".

His theoretical conceptualisations of Hayat Foundation places it within the framework of a horizontal relationship more so than monistic framework narratives on communities. He clearly identifies the complexities and challenges Hayat Foundation, as an organisation servicing a predominantly migrant population, is already attempting to engage. Notions of identity, belonging, and acceptance, as captured through Appadurai's "five dimensions of global cultural flows", demonstrate the subjective, irrational, and dynamic nature of cultures [47]. A significant impact of globalisation has been the fluidity with which cultures have traversed political borders and social boundaries thereby altering landscapes and creating new contested spaces, be they physical or increasingly intellectual and virtual. This thereby creates what Crane [48] had identified as invisible colleges, or Anderson's "imagined communities" [49], which were modified from Appadurai's to "imagined worlds", implying that communities consisting of people with shared values and heritage occupied "...*multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe...*" [47].

The advent of an increasingly interconnected and integrated world, shaped by an apparently omnipresent mass media and technological apparatus facilitating the liberal flow of finance, ideas, and people has provided a global dimension to community that cannot be simply reduced to socio-linguistic or cultural factors. Appadurai argues that "...*part of what the mass media make possible, because of the conditions of collective reading, criticism, and pleasure, is... a 'community of sentiment'*" [47]. This implies that communities are manufactured or altered through generic reading that fosters and creates an artificial life world whereby the group "...*begins to imagine and feel things together*" (Ibid). Benedict Anderson [50] had identified this as "print capitalism" in action, which moulded the nationalistic feelings of being, for example, Indonesian or Malaysian, despite many of

these tribes on either side of the border sharing common ancestry, language, and cultures. This can also work conversely to create communities with no previous social or traditional heritage or connection arising from collective experiences undertaken through the mediums of theatre, films, entertainment, sports, and now the online virtual world.

Speaking from the experience of his own relief work with Muslim communities across the world and his current doctorate research, Mr Bader argues that "*it is vital that we realise that although we can speak about communities and what they mean in the 21st century to many different people, to us as Tajiks, Pashtuns, Uzbeks or Afghan now even being classified as British, or even as community of football fans or scholars or whatever . . . it is actually really superficial because we are ultimately defined by one thing and that cannot be defined by this English term of community*".

He is not alone in highlighting this point, as it was made apparent in all of the discussions with the board members and a major point of note from both of the focus groups. This was also substantiated with reference to it in the speeches and presentations made during the annual Hayat Foundation Conference in 2024 and is discussed in their online literature and videos. The argument presented by all those associated with the foundation was that its application of a faith-based educational approach behoves them to correspondingly garner an appreciation of the notion of community from the perspective of the 'Islamic *weltanschauung*' (the term worldview, a calque of the German term 'weltanschauung', [world ('welt') view 'anschauung'] implies the "study of the world; a view of life" [51], denoted by the Arabic term *tasawur*. This infers that individuals ultimately interpret their reality and construct their value narratives through a synthesis of religious, philosophical, historical, and personal experiences [52,53]. As Mr Can observes, "*individuals in a society always have their own principles, thinking and ideas but their standard behaviour is always in line with the norms that have been agreed in a social way, this gives the order and identity to a society and community*".

From a literary perspective, Izutsu [54] argued that these norms were embedded into the semantic structure of the language, the '*sprachliche weltanschuuangslehre*' (linguistic worldview), whereby "*a given language not only contains the ideas and concepts of its users, but it also excludes other ideas from being expressed*" [55]. Thus, certain particularities, conceptualisations, and discernments comprised within the body of a language, may not be translatable into another due to its specific nuances and peculiarities. Mr Hafiz clarifies this point through linguistic examples before noting that "*we should be careful in how we use the language. . . it reveals a lot about the thinking of the people. . .we don't really speak of community actually, what we speak of is Ummah. . .*" Therefore, he defines the notion of community through the term *Ummah* from the Arabic Islamic worldview and cautions to recognise the term's own uniqueness with premises peculiar to its own heritage. He is supported in his assertions by Mr Ghazi in that he observes "*the idea of Islam and Muslim is only possible you know by one thing and that was Ummah, until then the Prophet and his people were just a small band of people with some values but when they became an Ummah, then they had gained an identity that no one could take from them. . .*".

His contention presents a salient point in that at the inception of Islamic thought, the norms substantiated through its core terms such as the *ummah muslimah* signified a seismic transformation in socio-political, cultural thought and practise. Societies organised upon hierarchical tribal ties of kinship were challenged and eventually substituted by the Quranic notion of '*ummah*' to bind a multicultural, pluralistic society through a collective faith identity. This implied that Muslims regardless of their majority–minority status in a particular society were inherently part of a universal brotherhood that superseded any secular notion of community based upon locale or shared history.

Mr Can impresses the point by defining Hayat Foundation as "*. . .the effort of the Ummah to do Gods work. . .we are the first to recognise and submit to the sharia, the way Allah sbt has proscribed for us to live our lives because in that is the guidance and the success we need to complete this journey. . . Hayat Foundation is a representation of us the people so we as the people are the Ummah that has a duty to undertake the obligations given to us by Allah. . . if we were not capable*

than He wouldn't have selected us for sure but Alhumdulilah He has deemed us worthy we are therefore attempting to do our best. . .".

This entails the explicit recognition, identified by Izutsu as a "positive response" towards the first ontological relation in ". . .*acknowledging God as their Creator, i.e., One who has conferred upon man as an extraordinary favour his very existence and being, and, having given him life, takes care of his destiny*" [54]. Thereby, Hayat Foundation, as a representative of the Islamic parlance, is constituted of individuals acting through personal and collective agency to imbue and uphold this premise. The consequential sacrifices required to sustain and propagate this idealism is a commitment to fulfilling the needs of the individuals comprising this community.

A summary response to the posed question regarding who the Marefat programme was designed for was recorded during the discussions with the FG 2 participants. A young imam and teacher opined that ". . . *Although, we could say that we are a religious' community, we are not! Firstly, Islam is not a religion, because it has been clearly defined in the Qur'an as a 'din', which means that this is much bigger than what religion means. . . din mean the idea of a building a civilisation; secondly the notion of the Ummah, is the collective that works for building this civilisation and ultimately for all of humanity. . . we can't just look at Islam as a set of religious or legal laws. . . So as the ummah muslimah, we are 'a people from across the world, from all walks of life and classes, who have submitted themselves before Allah', therefore we are more like a nation than a community. . .So our work is for the Muslim nation and humanity as a whole. . .".*

The young scholar speaks with great vigour as he effectively seeks to define Islam as a civilisational endeavour and the notion of *ummah muslimah* as its pluralistic framework akin to that of a nation. He moves on to make a further crucial observation, "*unfortunately today we are promoting a massive contradiction and we don't even know it ourselves. . . the Quran says we are Ummah Muslimah and yet we call ours ourselves a Muslim community, which basically means we are just one of many faith based communities. . . but that's not what we are. . . this is a capitalistic label that basically turns us into a product that you can easily market, define and read about. . .".*

In concluding on this discussion of this finding, the scholar identifies a pertinent fissure and point of contention which actually leads to the identification of the subsequent emerging thematic finding. This is the idea that the current expression in vogue, 'Muslim community' is a contradistinction born from the ideals of secular economics and specifically Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. Framed within the considerations of the economics of religion [49,56], the 'Muslim community' is a reduced conceptualisation of the Islamic worldview as just another cultural lifestyle faith-centred product and its adherents as its consumers (see arguments by [57,58]. Therefore, the question of who is being spoken to by the educational programme has been addressed through the notion of 'Ummah', whilst what it is addressing is the next theme of discussion.

7.2. [Emergent Theme 2] Focus

A major theme of discussion noted during the observations at the Hayat Foundation National Conference 2024 was the 'state of the ummah', made especially apparent with regard to the ongoing genocide against the Palestinians. A young student from the FG 2 discussions reflected rather sombrely how ". . .*this conflict shows one thing, we Muslims have no voice or influence in the world, they are literally bombing the Palestinians into dust and their showing it on TV like it's the UFC or the world cup because they know what are the Muslims going do? The leaders are too busy beating up their own people. . . and the rich ones just want to keep shut so their businesses or jobs don't get impacted. . .".* This feeling speaks volumes about the complexities of Appadurai's "imagined worlds" and "communities of sentiments", as a British born Muslim of Afghan descent expresses his frustrations at the treatment of Arab Palestinians due to the human condition rather than human socio-political constructs. This was the very 'dilemma plaguing the Muslim ummah', as identified by the late distinguished Palestinian Professor [Shaheed] (the honorific title 'Shaheed' is conferred upon Muslims that have been martyred in upholding their Islamic

beliefs or actions) Ismail Raji Al Faruqi (d.1986) at the 1977 Mecca Education Conference some forty-seven years ago. He had identified a historical crisis in the Muslim mind which had effectively transferred into the contemporary understanding and practise of the Islamic educational tradition, thereby rendering it ineffectual in producing the calibre of individuals required to answer back to power and establish their own foundational institutions of power, influence, and authority [58].

Respondents from the FG 1 group consisting of several academic and medical doctors, alongside a specialist in the area of psychiatry, undertook the discussion on the condition of traditional education, as a process of diagnosis. They concurred that "*...actually without being critical of the content, which is another point, the actual educational teaching practices of Muslim educators in the reading and practice of traditional Islamic education creates a sort of internalised oppression within Muslim students...*".

They explain that the notion of internalised oppression, as a state of being, has been derived from the general notion of oppression as a causal state of being oppressed by an oppressor through forms of coercion, which could entail legitimate use of violence, penal consequences, and socio-psychological engineering. A medical doctor from the FG 1 articulated that "*...the guise of oppression is transformative and manifests initially as overt physical domination and culminates in the self-regulated compliance by the oppressed...*" Thus, individuals and communities are characterised by their myopic existence that leads them to refute the truth of their situation as being oppressive. This contradictory existence eventually leads to an internal fragmentation of the self, as the oppressed contribute towards their own oppression through abuse, derogation, and violence against the self. Another senior medical doctor from the FG 1 group added to his colleague's perspective by arguing that "*...the implication of this on a societal scale translates to oppressed individuals and communities conspiring against and prejudicing each other's causes and affairs, which invariably leads to intragroup fragmentation and conflict...*". He observed from personal experience in Afghanistan during the time of the Soviet invasion how fellow oppressed members of society had considered others, once their neighbours or colleagues and even family members, to be inferior to them as they were in a position to present threats of the legitimate use of violence and legal recourse due to carrying favour with the oppressors. The eventual impact of this was relayed by a much respected senior participant and student from the FG 2 discussion, who shared his experience from a similar context: "*...During the time of the soviets, the kanzir... the pigs of the soviets were ordinary Afghans like us, oppressed and humiliated but they wanted to imitate and recognise themselves like the atheist soviets...what their behaviour did was to reduce the value and worth of our communities...by just throwing away thousands of years' worth of history and culture for what? A few rubels more than the common farmer and some vodka from Moscow...*". The arguments presented from both focus groups recognised the oppressed to be consistently, aggressively, and systematically devalued and dehumanised as the oppressor became the model of acceptable humanity. Mr Bader, speaking as a researcher in the field, observed that "*...oppressors ensure that by upholding and preserving their existing power structures, they will sustain and further expand their power, authority, and influence over both the individual and society...*". The literature identifies the consequences of the experiences of the oppressed as an inexorably desolate reality of the world, characterised by such statements as "*that's just the way we are*" so that "*...oppression becomes a cultural norm and transmitted across generations*" [59]. The transference of these cultural norms, according to Mr Can, can be attributed to the role of colonisation in forming the contemporary practises of socio-cultural norms and normative readings of history, which effectively relegate traditional Islamic education to an antiquated relic of the medieval empire. This is also voiced by Mr Dar in arguing that "*...we no longer really control even how our education is being taught...*", and Mr Falah who stated that "*...there is an issue as to why we are not seeing the same results as our forefathers when we are supposedly following same education...*". They recognise that a significant factor contributing to the irrelevance of Islamic education is the inherent epistemological bias [60] woven into the fabric of informing and constructing the Islamic worldview and the comprehension of the

notion of traditional education. Mr Hafiz questioned the notion of the traditional itself, "…*when we say traditional education and modern education are we not discriminating between them? I never understood this difference other than that traditional means somehow backwards or out of date, whilst modern is always good and progressive…*".

He presents a worthy point of contention and reflection, as the very notion of the traditional implies the existence of a contrair, the modern as a unique definitional category in the reading of history. Mr Bader explains that "… *this was actually a pioneering approach developed through the European self-realisation and self-consciousness process… we can say that this is what made modern European identity…so through these historic phases referred to as the renaissance, reformation, and enlightenment periods… European thinkers of the time thought Europe should be the model for the new world…*". This assertion was further supported by participants from the focus groups, as a current teacher from FG 1 noted that "…*European enlightenment was based on the premise of using reason and rationality as the ultimate judge in deciding the fate of individuals and civil society…*", whilst a university-attending student from FG 2 observed that "…*you can see this through the I think therefore I am statement…*".

He identifies European thought to be encapsulated and embodied through the Cartesian philosophy of '*cogito, ergo sum*', which infers that the subject and object exist independently of each another. Therefore, for the subject to know the object in and of itself, it had to do so without prejudice and bias, which encompassed the subject's own judgements and experience.

The result of this, according to Mr Ali, is that "…*the modern is seen as just the use of your reason and rationality has become the measure of truth…everything else is just treated like stories or old history…*". He argues that the European secular perspective discarded traditional notions such as faith and divinity as mythological and superstitious encumbrances inherited and maintained from ancient primitive cultures. Several doctors from the FG 1 discussion presented a unique narrative in questioning the paradoxical deification of the intellect, as a participant dwelled, "…*it was always interesting to me that especially during my studies and training that European thinkers of the period were seeking inspiration from classical Greek thought to join Europe and the 'modern' world rather than its own Christian history or even Islamic because until the 18th or 19th century European doctors were still being taught Ibn Rushd's al-Kulliyat fi al-Tibb…*". The FG 1 group concurred that in developing this association with classical Greek scholarship and civil society, a discretionary normative bias was infused into the classification of knowledge. This perceived the 'modern' to personify developmental progression in human affairs, whilst the 'traditional' was castigated as being antiquated, recessive, and antithetical to the evolution of humanity. Their argument contended that this was an attempt to script universal historical norms in accordance with the European realisation of enlightenment. The subsequent adoption of this dichotomous classification by the post-colonial world to understand their own histories and lived experiences transformed it into an axiomatic methodology. Mr Emir, speaking from his own experience, shared that "…*when I look back to my own education and the sort of ambitions and dreams, we had and our parents had for us, they were all about a way of life that was to get away from what we had and were… they were to be like Europeans, then Russians, then Arabs but never Afghans…so I never accepted that an education that drove me away from my identity, heritage and culture could ever benefit me…*". He revealed that the underlying factors leading to the embracing of the European enlightenment worldview manifested a furtive form of internalised psychological oppression in him as an example of the colonised under the garb of the 'modern'. Thereby, the literature recognises that there was a systematic process of "…*social, psychological, and infrastructural work in producing the colonized person…*" [61]. The repercussions of this unrelenting deprecation and prejudice of the colonised individual and society was, according to Mr Bader, "… *the instillation of a sense of inferiority and confusion into their identities, where the oppressed Afghans took ownership of their own inferiority and then were seeking to imitate the Russians … because their approaches were now seen to be more beneficial and distinguished, like respected by everyone in society…*". He concluded that this "…*created a feeling of appreciation and obligation towards the Russians within the Afghans…because of their assistance in enlight-*

ening and providing them with a civilised perspective and approach to worldly affairs...". The argument contends that internalised oppression is an uninformed, unconscious reaction to oppression in which the oppressed assume the undesirable roles and characteristics of them as delineated by the oppressor to further propagate the oppression [62].

Therefore, the majority voice from the interviews, focus groups, and observations of conversations concurred that in classifying Islamic education as being traditional, an inference was being made to the European colonial understanding of the normative 'traditional'.

Mr Bader argues that "*...the influence and impact of this on the colonised Muslims is their adoption of the colonisers approach, which implies that they just resort to literalist readings of the faith especially within our so called traditional Muslim educational institutions such as Madrasas and Dar-al-Ulum's making them redundant in the modern world...*".

He recognised further that the notion of 'traditional' now entailed a specific juncture in an idealised past without correlation to the present. This effectively severed the bond between the lived experience of humanity in the past with the present. Although he did not agree, he understood "*...why the teaching and practice of Islamic education as being traditional is usually seen as a repetition of normative literalism, which has no value within a secularist post-modern world...*".

Therefore, in designing the Marefat curriculum, he appreciated the critique of Islamic education as a guide and understood that "*... we had to make the teaching of Islam education relevant outside of the branch of Islamic history... we couldn't just keep translating the present challenges through the lens of medieval Arabia as it reduced its meaning and relevance to today's situations...*".

Thereby, he acknowledged that the current practise of teaching Islamic education as a traditional practise was curtailing opportunity for critical reflection and reading of the Islamic tradition and its texts. Mr Ali also agrees that the current practise of Islamic teaching has negated the development of intellectual creativity, noting that "*...we as Muslim intellectuals and scholars are not really producing anything to shape the world or even our own scholarly research...*", whilst Mr Can foresaw this as an early requirement of their educational programme, "*...we always knew that our educational program must yield results by translating the knowledge we teach into real life actions and contributions to society...*".

Therefore, Hayat Foundation had consciously arrived at a position which dictated that the 'normative' understanding of the 'traditional' in Islamic education must be capable of generating dialogue and original narratives to critically evaluate its own historical lived experience and its meaning within the present modern world. The consensus from both focus groups also suggested that whilst they appreciated the opportunity to engage with traditional Islamic education, it was failing to translate into actionable practise in the real world and address the pertinent and onerous issues concerning Muslims in the twenty-first century. This was summarised by a passionate contribution from a young university student from the FG 2 discussions: "*...where are our conversations about the economic differences between the rich and poor? What about the role of these so called fundamentalist Islamic groups which are supported by neo-liberal capitalist policies...i.e., America to basically change and shape the politics and societies of Muslim nations and communities...just look at what's going on in Palestine, what they did in Iraq, Syria, Libya, in our own Afghanistan, across the border in Pakistan... Kashmir... there's so much to talk about I don't think I have enough time...but what I do know is that sitting around just making duas is nice and good but it's only a small part... what about our actual work to remedy these situations? Allah says in the Quran he made us accountable for our actions and so we ask ourselves what are we doing and is it working...?*".

Therefore, the reading of the 'traditional' as an isolated object in time implies that Islamic education is both perceived and has simply become in practise a medium for the transmission of rigorous morality and individualistic piety. Muslim students are thereby imbued consciously or unconsciously with an inherent scepticism towards critical engagement with their own tradition, thereby internalising a sense of self-doubt and cynicism with regard to their own individual agency and its efficacy in upholding and

maintaining the tradition. It is this aspect of 'self-doubt' that Hayat Foundation identifies as the 'internalised oppression'.

Therefore, the question of who is being spoken to by the educational programme has been addressed through the notion of 'Ummah', whilst what it is addressing has been identified through the notion of 'internalised oppression'. Thereby, the concluding questions seek to decipher how Hayat Foundation has attempted to address that challenge, which formulates the basis of the final theme of discussion.

7.3. [Emergent Theme 3] Practice

The notion of liberation, according to Mr Bader, formulates the rejoinder to the detached and disengaged approach to the 'traditional' in Islamic education, which has fashioned a disempowered and disinformed society imbuing a form of internalised psychological oppression. He states that "*. . . in doing my research I was reading on the European colonial subjugation of the peoples in South America and came across the writings of Roman Catholic theologians in Latin America as a theology of liberation. . .*".

The theory Mr Bader expounds upon is derived from the work of a Peruvian Catholic priest Gustavo Gutiérrez, who "*. . . articulated a theological vision that espoused a prophetic Biblical tradition as symbolised in the personhood of Esa aly a salaam (Jesus) and encapsulated in the institution of the church to be based upon the struggle for human values and dignity.*" [3]. He appealed to Christians from across the social spectrum to uphold the Gospel traditions to abolish repressive societal class structures and seek a "*. . . a preferential option for the poor. . .*" [63], as the role of the church was to be actively involved in striving for economic and socio-political justice. Gutiérrez argued that this was God actively revealing Himself through the "*concrete historical context of liberation of the poor and oppressed. . .*" (Ibid). Thus, the concept of liberation became a remedying antidote to oppressive practises, as the struggle for liberation became a semiotic indicator for attaining eschatological salvation through a "*critical reflection on praxis in the light of the word of God. . .*" [64]. Mr Bader argues that "*. . .that's why the theology of liberation became a real narrative to attain liberation and freedom from colonial and post-colonial policies, positions, and power structures of authority and influence. . .*" Gutierrez had sought the authority of the Gospels to deliver epistemic rights to the oppressed, for instance, Jesus (Esa) declares that "*He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives.*" (Bible, Luke 4:18–19). thereby speaking to those "*who have not yet named the world, the marginal, the silenced, the defeated.*" [65]. Mr Bader argues that the reading of the Gospels from the lens of liberation theology presents theological conviction to be based on the objective will of the human being to "*basically work with God to build a world that is both just and free. . .so this message resonates with the Islamic message around justice and freedom as essential human rights given by God. . .but we are not seeing the same type of dialogues and narratives like the theology of liberation created. . .*".

This implies that the existing socio-political expressions as witnessed through various Islamic movements and groups are unable to engage with the issues of injustice and internalised oppression as they were essentially conceived from a reactionary traditional normative response to western imperialism and capitalist hegemony, whereas Mr Bader argues that "*. . .liberation theology was conceived as a systematic framework to remedy the rights of the oppressed. . .*". Its methodological approach was to analyse the correlation between theology and political engagement through a renewed reading of revelation and understanding that the process of re-reading in and for the present time contributed to the historical formation of tradition. Therefore, liberation theology was explicitly and implicitly articulated to address issues related to justice, destitution, and human liberty. In order for it to emerge, the oppressed must undergo a process of *Conscientização* (conscientization) so as to become conscious about their situation and then due to this new awareness seek transformation within themselves. This was "*. . .a pedagogy to animate a new theology. . .*" [66] as it coalesced theory and practise to focus on praxis as both action and reflection. This is exemplified through Freire's writing on critical pedagogy, "*. . .as praxis in the form of problem- posing education, which responds to the essence of consciousness of individuals as conscious beings. This*

forces individuals to think critically about their role in the world. They learn to perceive the world as a transformational rather than a stagnant predictable phenomenon. . ." [3].

In order to attain this conscientization, the notion of literacy becomes the methodological gateway to liberation, as the oppressed have to learn literally and figuratively to read in order to engage and dialogue with the scriptures to validate their humanity. Mr Ali, having been introduced to the theory through Mr Bader's work, contends that "*. . .this idea actually is not just confined to Christian thought but can be found in other faiths, because surely wherever there is oppression. . . liberation theology should exist. . .and I can't see where in the world oppression doesn't exist. . .".* Thus, Mr Ali accepts *". . .the need to reinterpret their own religion or din from the perspective of the poor so we work towards liberating them from poverty through their own self-agency. . .so dignifying them in the process. . .".*

Notable Muslim responses supporting Hayat Foundation's adoption of liberatory practises can be gleamed from the work of Ali Asghar Engineer [67], who became an early pioneer in the contemporary development of the Islamic theology of liberation. His response was to the oppression propagated by the colonial experience: the lived reality of the caste system and the interminable political tension between Hindu–Muslim communities in post-colonial India. He contended that the rationale for his response was grounded in the lived reality of Islamic thought having become insular and diffident to the concerns of the marginalised elements of mainstream society. Mr Bader observes that *". . . He realised the orthodoxy Muslim scholars were ill-equipped to address the colonial powers and instead engaged in reactionary dialogues, which basically shows all the characteristics of having internalised the colonial oppression. . .so they didn't demand power in their own land. . . but were asking for some of it from outsiders. . .".*

This observation is also shared by Farid Esack, the prominent South African anti-apartheid activist and liberation theologian. Esack's response through his conception of liberation theology from the perspective of Islam sought to critically reflect upon the sacred canonical texts from the lens of the oppressed, thereby becoming an avenue for *". . .liberatory praxis based on a non-elitist approach to theology making"* [68]. This implies that in contexts of oppression, the oppressed should be able to derive their theology as a consequence of their situation. However, this should not lead to absolutist convictions for only God possesses such quality and so methodologically this can be ascertained to a limited degree through the hermeneutical approach. Hassan Hanafi, an Egyptian philosopher, argues that theology is hermeneutics and should therefore be reflective of the socio-economic and political contexts in which it is interpreted. This entails the tradition to be revived (*turath*) through the *"liberating role of Scripture"* [69] which implies a continual reflection upon its ethical and moral values with consideration to the predicaments of society and specifically the oppressed. Hanafi's perspective, as per Freire, demands a critical framework to initially identify and then to expunge all elements of internalised oppression, whereby *"a pedagogy through which the oppressed can learn how to interpret the world, since interpretation is an act of liberation"* (Ibid).

Mr Can reflects that his attempts at an authentic reading of the Islamic tradition through the lens of liberation revealed the Quranic notion of 'justice' in both societal and individual terms. He observes that *". . .For example, the Qur'anic message informs the reader that, 'We sent previously our messengers with clear signs and sent down with them the Book and the Balance, that men may stand forth in justice' (Qur'an: 57:25), which basically means as told to us by another Quranic dialogue or narrative that: 'O ye who believe! stand out firmly for Allah, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice'. . . (Qur'an: 5:8)".*

Mr Dar observes that *". . .the world could exist with justice and unbelief, but not with injustice and Islam. . . in truth the situation is that if there is Islam there is justice and if there is no justice there is no Islam. . . now you decide which is which. . .?".*

In examining the Quranic discussion, it explicitly addresses the individual believer to uphold justice even against oneself, thus becoming incumbent to the divine decree and honouring the *sifat* or attribute of Allah as 'al-adl', 'The Just'. Mr Dar identifies that *". . .these*

are the types of individuals that you can say are the true believers, the mu'min. . .because they engage in a form of self-sacrifice and struggle to change the life of those suffering. . .because the Qur'an keeps on focusing on the poor, powerless and voiceless people, which basically are the focus of our Hayat Foundation. . .".

This can be précised as an attempt to respond to the lived reality of economic disparity between the *mustad'ifin* (weak) and the *mustakbirin* (dominant), which inexorably manifests into injustice and oppression. In engaging with such oppressive contexts, Mr Emir observes that "*. . .the upholding and even safeguarding of justice as a virtue becomes the highest form of worship one can think of. . .".*

An Islamic scholar from FG 1 shares that "*. . .we need to also look at notion of justice as being both fixed and then changing as well. . . because some people do change their ways and the notion of tauba, repentance means we can't just condemn people forever after they have paid their dues and are trying to become better. . .".*

He argues that the Quranic notion of justice could be read from both absolute and relative perspectives as authentic interpretations of specific space-time historical realities that have been shaped by antecedent experiences, whilst Mr Bader argues that "*. . .it should always be remembered that the readings are an expression of human reasoning and inevitably fallible. . .".* This is a solid observation as readings, translations, or interpretations conducted under and within oppressive environments may be subject to both extremes of objectivity and subjectivity. In Freirean notions, this approach engendered conscientization within practitioners and activists to educate, prepare, and organise their communities to work alongside all others in confronting oppression and injustice [70]. For instance, Esack's theology of "religious pluralism for liberation" was adopted by all oppressed communities in South Africa to effectively become a unifying instrument for anti-apartheid activities and campaigns. Mr Bader shares that "*. . .Esack recognised that at the core of the injustice and poverty plaguing South African society was the role of imperialistic neo-liberal capitalist policies in shaping the socio-political and economic culture of the nation and subsequently upholding the apartheid governance structure. . .".* Mr Ali concurs that by developing an Islamic perspective on liberation theology, Muslims are "*speaking truth to power. . . a relentless self-critique that enables. . .Muslim thought to be true to the ideals of a just society in a way that also prevents. . . co-optation by those who have their own agendas. . .".* Mr Ghazi furthers Mr Ali's contention by arguing the charge of Islamic thought harbouring political ambitions by taking ownership of the accusation and justifying it within the Islamic worldview. "*Muhammad (s) recognized power as part of the religious arsenal in a world where wickedness shamelessly took on militant forms. . . so he was enabled and inspired by the Quran to address these dialogues . . .".* Mr Ghazi defines the Prophet's political approach to have been centred on the rational ethical–moral utilisation of power to uphold the virtue of justice within society, although this also encompassed the deployment of incremental and proportional violence as a last resort to protect his community as the oppressed from the existential threats of the oppressors. Mr Hafiz therefore perceives only one recourse, "*. . .we as Muslims are tasked with upholding justice and harmony on the earth, as the Khalifa on the earth it's our duty. . .we must take ownership. . .every Muslim has this duty. . .".* The Islamic realisation of the political seeks to negate the Burkean maxim of evil triumphing due to the reticence of good men by centralising the role and status of justice as the essence of the Quranic weltanschauung. The Qur'an even harangues and chides those who simply profess and demonstrate their belief through rituals yet ignore the plight of the oppressed (Qur'an: 74:42–4; 107), thereby, a young student from the FG 2 discussion relates with aplomb, "*. . .the God of the Qur'an is biased to justice over injustice, as He sides with those who are of His party, the 'Hizb'Allah' (Qur'an: 58:22). . .".*

8. Reflections on Findings

The dialogical narrative unveiled through the educational lens spoke with forlorn grief at the current pedagogical dimensions of the Islamic educational tradition. Instead of shaping the worldview and guiding the practise of its students, it had become a relegated science, and its teachers dejected. Thus, imbuing a form of internalised oppression, they

were incapable of addressing the contemporary challenges encountered by Muslims in the twenty-first century.

Board members with extensive professional and academic experience in Afghanistan and across the world reflected with insight into the oppressive frameworks responsible for engendering this passivity. Under the leadership of Mr Ali and educational counsel of Mr Bader, they identified the issue and challenges before embarking upon their programme. Thus, they decided that they had to address the traditional use of teacher-centred pedagogical models, whereby teaching is conducted didactically under the authority of a single teacher embodying the literalist reading of traditional Islamic education.

The issue they identified was that Muslim educational institutions responsible for disseminating this form of Islamic thought practise were perceived by the majority to be 'gatekeepers' to the authentic Islamic tradition.

Participants from the focus groups contributed from personal experiences and reflected that those afforded responsibility for the instruction of this tradition were often held in high esteem and revered in deferential tones. However, students with intimate knowledge through tutelage under such educators suggested that their experiences revealed "...*no distinctions in their abilities, learning styles, or the consequential impact upon them as learners, in terms of their understanding or application of the learnt knowledge*". This behaviourist approach to learning under the guise of the traditional teacher-centred pedagogy is passive by design. The learners, in not being able to engage with the presented knowledge, are not able to develop their higher cognitive processes. A trainee medical doctor from the FG 1 group articulates that they are denied "...*the capacity to reflect on the learning experience and integrate new knowledge with existing knowledge*". Therefore, it is argued that teacher-centric methods experienced by these students of traditional Islamic education were bereft of authentic narrative or dialogical approaches, which are essential in establishing relationships between the learner and the Islamic tradition. According to Freire, the teacher-centric approach impedes the "existential development and agency of learners" as the teacher embodies the principal role in the learning process instead of the student. It can be argued that "...*learners in such instrumental learning milieus are treated as objects of functional literacy rather than subjects, who could speak and reason through dialogue.*" [3]. This personifies the Freirean "*banking concept of education*" [70] or the 'Mug and Jug approach' of Bowles and Gintis (1976), whereby the learner is perceived as an empty vessel or a passive receptacle, the 'Mug' to be filled by the depositor, or the proverbial 'Jug', the teacher, with their knowledge and content.

Furthermore, it was intriguing to note that many of the participants from the focus groups alongside all of the interviews associated the Qur'anic concept of 'Jāhiliyyah' to speak to the situation of the students and the psycho-social state of the teacher-centric models. This term signifies not just the pre-Islamic period of ignorance, as the common definitions often suggest, but speaks to the personal characteristics of people and individuals. It describes the conflictual attitude towards the unconditional compliance and self-effacement before God. This entails an unbridled form of pride and haughtiness alongside unbounded self-assurance and independence in their supremacy, which leads to a state of unwavering belief in their own authority and rectitude [71].

The response presented by Hayat Foundation to this conundrum is founded on the reading of traditional Islamic education through the lens of Islamic liberation theology and informed by the Freirean notion of 'conscientization'. This interpretation can be appreciated as a form of expunging and release from the besmirched conditioned learning and proclivities of the internalised oppression they identified. Thereby, the foundations for the programme were derived from the Islamic weltanschauung, which provided the teleological explanation for the Marefat programme, encapsulated within the notion of 'justice'. Mr Bader reflects that *Muhammad (s) inspired by the commandment to read, was transformed from the ordinary... to the supreme... by the virtues of his struggle....*". Accordingly, a perceptible critical educational pedagogy can be adduced from the canonical Islamic text, whereby personalities in the guise of Prophets (nabi) and Messengers (rasul) exemplify the

purpose of humanity (Qur'an: 51:56) through teaching their societies to uphold truth and justice (Qur'an: 2:109; 2:213; 2:252; 4:170).

This demonstrates the transformative aspect of Islamic liberation theology to imbue the values of justice through pedagogical practise. Therefore, the Marefat programme is not simply concerned with disseminating critical information but to meet the higher needs of the students such as those explicated to engage the full person in terms of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (actualisation) or Bloom's Taxonomy (evaluation).

Thus, Mr Ali concludes that "*...our ethos has been developed so that our teachers become individuals who are able to identify the needs of potential students, try to elevate them to realise their full potentials...*". Henceforth, Hayat Foundation perceives itself as community of educator's incumbent to the heirship of the prophets, therefore pursuing the notion of justice through the transformation of their students by working to satisfy the higher needs of the 'self'.

9. Critique

In critiquing this study and the Marefat programme, the discussion attempts to provide critical feedback to Hayat Foundation with regard to its findings and overarching experience of the phenomenon. The study itself was broadly focused on the area of Muslim teacher education and its expressions and forms in contemporary society. Thereby, this study chose to examine the purpose or teleological orientation of Hayat Foundation's Marefat programme through the guiding questions acting as thematic signposts for developing the data collection and review of the literature. This study did not set out to explicitly discuss pedagogical strategies or approaches, neither was it concerned with analysing the curriculums or syllabus in-depth. The raison d'ētre for the study was to explore the 'what', 'for whom', and 'how' of the programme as an initial examination to focus light on alternative educational practises within pluralistic globalised Muslim communities. Thereby, this study is limited yet engaging and focused on the teleological and epistemological dimensions to garner the intimate perspectives of a marginalised and underexamined community in the UK.

The preliminary reflection centres around the calibre of the personnel associated with the organisation and the tremendous level of professionalism witnessed throughout the organisation of their national and local events. The board members are all highly qualified and respected business and academic personalities within the Afghan communities both in the UK and in Afghanistan. The participants comprising the FG 1 were majority medical and academic doctors alongside senior members of Hayat Foundation and leaders from the Marefat programme. Thereby, they provided a thoroughly engaging and highly informative session, whilst the participants in FG 2 were mostly younger members, junior imams, and students of the Marefat programme at various stages. Thus, this study was able to garner the perspectives of the full spectrum of the organisation.

However, an initial critique of Hayat Foundation is centred on this exclusivity and calibre of individuals. Although its members are representative of the ethnic diversity of Afghanistan, it appears to be exclusive, as all its members are highly educated and in professional careers. Thereby, it does not appear to be reflective of the broad spectrum of the Afghan society in the UK, which includes refugees, asylum seekers, and low-skilled workers [28]. This is not to pour unnecessary scorn on the organisation, as the aim of all their educational and charitable relief work is to remedy the rights and empower these vulnerable individuals or communities through the Marefat programme that could be represented in a more formal capacity within the organisation.

This also leads to the concern of uniformity, as 'no dissenting voices' were recorded during the data collection phases and observations. There seems to be a consistent level of agreeance on issues and members and participants were only motivated to speak and highlight the 'good work Hayat Foundation was doing' rather than critiquing its approaches or even finding concerns with its purpose, targeted communities, and eventual resolution

through their liberatory pedagogical approaches. Thereby, the organisation can be accused of cocooning itself and engaging in practises of 'self-validation' to justify its actions.

In presenting these legitimate concerns to the chairman, Mr Ali, he responded by stating that "*. . .Hayat Foundation does value critique from within the organisation and the communities we serve. . .Internally, we have a standard accountability, decision making and responsibilities that is strictly followed. . .*". He then cited the national events that had been observed and used for the interviews and the focus groups as evidence for the opportunity for every individual associated with the organisation, from the chairman to the ordinary member to contribute and shape the organisation without impediment. This was a factually accurate claim as this study observed and recorded active participation from both men and women of all ages in organising and undertaking activities and workshops and providing feedback throughout the event. Mr Ali concluded by reflecting that "*. . .We are constrained by the limited human capital to cover more segments of our communities. . .In addition, the objective of the organisation is on training teachers who then can be effective in the communities in a later stage. Nevertheless, there are seminars and other services that continues to serve other segments such as asylum seekers, and low skilled workers within our limited capacity. . .*".

Thereby, it can be argued that despite the observed legitimate concerns, Hayat Foundation is a learning organisation and has already adapted and adopted new ways and perspectives to guide its functionalities. The permission and access granted for the undertaking of this study is evidence of its approach to learning and transparency, as Mr Ali shares that Hayat Foundation is now "*. . .seeking to produce its own in-house critical studies, as we have a highly qualified and educated cadre of members to evaluate and analyse our own performances and approaches. . .*".

10. Conclusions

In conclusion, it can be stated that this paper was focused exclusively on the conception of Hayat Foundation's intramural teacher educational programme, thereby formulating an initial empirical study of a nascent educational programme designed to address the needs of an extremely closed, marginalised, and niche community. This study unveiled a unique and novel approach towards the design of a distinctly Islamically informed teacher education programme, substantiated by an Islamic educational ethos that entailed notions of reflection alongside critical, and reflexive thinking in developing the educator's efficacy, agency, and person. The case study endeavoured to explore and examine the teleological being of Hayat Foundation's Marefat programme and uncovered the reasons for that given purpose. The emergence of the first theme, 'Purpose', was derived from the first research question and objective, 'What is the purpose of Hayat Foundation's Marefat program?' which emerged from the preliminary discussions with Hayat Foundation's board and general members prior to the commencement of the study. Thereby, the adoption of an interpretivist-narrative methodology conveyed through a dialogical approach unveiled the motivation of undertaking this educational project, which was an attempt to provide an informal community educational service to the Ummah and more specifically for their own Afghan community in the UK. This consequently provided a recourse for the second core question of the study, in terms of 'What was the program addressing?' In engaging with this study objective, the inductive process disclosed the second theme highlighting the notion of 'Focus', which emerged during the undertaking of the study and specifically during the observation phases at the national events, study circles, and the analysis of the organisation's documents and educational material. The events and classes became a gateway towards garnering an appreciation for not only the purpose of the programme but what it was attempting to address. This became more apparent through the structured interview schedules and focus group discussions, whereby participants, although recognising the limitations of the Marefat programme, perceived it as an initiator to engage and address the identified issues, which they considered of profound relevance. These were directly related to the establishment of a systematic process to develop an appreciation and awareness of the epistemological dimension in the formation of knowledge and its

subsequent adoption for teacher education. The significant reason for this was to rectify what members of Hayat Foundation identified as 'internalised oppression', the inability to engage with their own Islamic worldview and tradition in a meaningful functional capacity in the modern world. In order to rectify and remedy this condition, the third question, 'How is it addressing that?', revealed the final theme of 'Practice'. This final theme was identified and emerged from the researchers' direct interactions with group members and observations of the educational practise in implementing the programme. Thereby, this theme follows in sequential order from the previous themes in highlighting the practise and what that effectively entails. Hayat Foundation has begun to adopt critical liberatory approaches derived from the writings on the *Theology of Liberation* to re-read classical Islamic sources and tradition as a lived tradition, as opposed to a historical perspective to provide an Islamic response to the contemporary challenges encountered by Afghan Muslims in the context of the UK.

Thereby, this study formulates an initial inquiry and examination into the development of an informal, unaccredited intramural programme by a community organisation for its own members. The researcher was granted unprecedented levels of access into an extremely intimate group and thus the initial research questions and objectives alongside the emergent themes reflect this preliminary stage, which is to be developed and expanded upon in further studies in the future.

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Examining the Implications of Islamic Teacher Education and Professional Learning: Towards Professional Identity Renewal in Islamic Schools

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Abstract: Teachers in Islamic schools are often required to navigate complex identities. They balance personal and/or school-based religious obligations with contemporary secular-based commitments to meet organisational demands for institutional compliance. Behaviourally, the motivations and attitudes of teachers play a vital role in shaping a learning environment that fosters a sense of community and caters to the needs of students. However, recent studies on Islamic education suggest a real struggle in managing such complexities. Consequently, scholars have called for specialized programs to counter such issues, focusing on the need for schools to renew their commitment to promoting educational values, principles and practices that are rooted in the Islamic tradition. Several higher education institutions have responded to this call by establishing programs in Islamic studies and Islamic education. Nevertheless, there is limited knowledge of the organisational and behavioural significance of such programs on the professional identity of teachers. Using semi-structured interviews, this article presents findings from four teachers who had completed a postgraduate qualification in Islamic education at an Australian university. The six-phase thematic data analysis, informed by Muslim identity and an Islamic worldview, revealed that secular teacher education provided participants with 'a license to teach' but lacked in 'nurturing a purpose for teaching'. The findings also revealed a distinct connection between Islamic teacher education, professional learning and professional identity, whereby Islamic-based pedagogies 'enlightened and empowered' teachers toward becoming 'faith-centred' in their professional practice. While the study was limited to four teachers, it contributes knowledge to the Islamic education, organizational and behavioural fields of inquiry in two ways, by underlining that (i) the professional identities of Muslim teachers are shaped by a knowledge-seeking mindset, and (ii) Islamic teacher education and professional learning create pathways towards the renewal of teachers' professional identities in Islamic schools.

Keywords: professional identity; teacher professionalism; Islamic teacher education; Muslim identity; Islamic worldview; teacher education; professional learning; Islamic schools

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, scholars and practitioners in the field of education have investigated methods to reconfigure teacher education and professional learning, to enhance teaching standards, theory and practice [1–4]. Within the Australian context, there is a notable emphasis on the relationship between teacher education and teacher professionalism, accompanied by expectations that both education providers and educators comply with the Australian Professional Standards [5]. The primary objective of the professional standards is to ensure that teacher education programs produce "classroom ready teachers" [6] (p. 49), and that educators develop and maintain the technical skills needed to positively impact student learning [5]. Scholarly consensus suggests that effective teacher education programs incorporate "connected course work and clinical experiences" to address the diverse needs of learners [7] (p. 69). Furthermore, the flexibility inherent in the professional

standards allows higher education providers to tailor their courses to the specific needs of individual teachers, including specialized teaching methodologies and subjects related to religious and cultural studies. However, teacher professionalism is often examined against traditional secular-based teacher education programs, which tend to prioritise knowledge-based skills [8,9]. Scholars contend that these programs are often shaped by government policies driven by evidence-based large-scale data, which may overlook the unique needs of individual teachers, particularly in relation to sociocultural, demographic and geographic contexts [10,11]. Indeed, the transformative efforts of teachers in enhancing student learning underlines the specialized nature of the teaching profession, reinforcing the notion of teacher professionalism. Nevertheless, teacher education continues to undergo significant changes, largely influenced by "socio-political climates and contexts" [12] (p. 4), particularly in Western jurisdictions.

In the extant literature, professional learning—often used interchangeably with professional development—emerges as a progression of teacher education [3]. This is described as a practical learning process aimed at improving teaching and enhancing student outcomes [13]. Scholars have critiqued professional learning mechanisms as a "one size fits all approach" [3] (p. 169), often arguing that they do not meet the individual and collective needs of teachers [13]. Evans [14] highlighted that while most studies on professional learning concentrated on "the explicit end of the learning continuum" (p. 13) they failed to emphasize the necessity of employing a micro lens to address the inherent components of this phenomenon [14]. In examining the sociocultural dynamics of schooling, Nganga and Kambutu [2] proposed that culturally specific schools required tailored professional learning programs that addressed the needs of their respective communities. This viewpoint was echoed in Oggunaike's [15] discussion on postcolonial education, where he argues that Western-centric education systems, which dominate the discourse on professional learning, present significant challenges for culturally and religiously embedded communities. This is particularly relevant to Islamic schools, which are characterized by cultural and religious complexities that distinguish them from most secular institutions. Drawing on Oggunaike's insights, Memon, Chown and Alkouatli [16] asserted that the development of distinctly Islamic teacher education and professional learning pedagogies could effectively address these challenges by anchoring learning in Islamic traditions which fosters a holistic educational environment. Such pedagogies are anticipated to help Islamic schools meet the needs of educators who struggle to navigate between religious and secular commitments.

Against this backdrop, teachers' professional identities are influenced by their personal and professional experiences which shape their beliefs about their roles [17–19]. Typically, teacher professional identity is explored through its stages of formation, construction and development [17,20,21]. While some argue that these stages create a sense of teacher professionalism, the extant literature tends to present generic meanings and behaviours, often constrained by Western-centric perspectives. Consequently, scholars agree that definitions of teacher professional identity are highly contested [22,23]. Given the substantial growth of faith-based and cultural-based schools globally, there is a pressing need to develop a sociocultural informed understanding of teachers' professional identities. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate (1) how secular teacher education and professional learning pedagogies influence the roles of teachers in Islamic schools and (2) how Islamic teacher education and professional learning pedagogies shape the professional identities of teachers in these institutions.

This study was inspired by the preliminary findings of a research project examining the effectiveness of a faith-based governance framework in Islamic schools, where teacher education and professional learning emerged as salient elements of governance warranting further investigation. The study adopts organizational and behavioural frameworks, with Muslim teachers in Islamic schools serving as the unit of analysis. The study is informed by Muslim identity and an Islamic worldview. Following this introduction, this article will present a literature review. Subsequently, the methodology utilized in this study will

be detailed, followed by a presentation of the findings in Section 4. A discussion of these findings will be provided in Section 5, with concluding remarks provided in Section 6.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1. Conceptualising Teachers' Professional Identity

Professionals are often described as individuals who possess specialized knowledge and skills acquired from formal education and training. They engage in tasks within their occupations aimed at adding societal value and are associated with institutions of specialized work, thereby fostering a sense of professionalism [24]. Within the careers literature, scholars argue that ones' profession becomes a symbolic component of their identity, contributing to their sense of self [23,25–27]. This notion is particularly significant in the context of teaching and professional learning, where researchers emphasize the importance of exploring professional identity due to the substantial contributions teachers make to the profession [18,19].

More broadly, professional identity is frequently defined as encompassing an individuals' values, attributes, beliefs, motives, experiences and skills [28–30]. This aligns with Alvesson et al. [31] who conceptualized that professional identity was a process of finding out 'who I want to become' when asking oneself 'Who am I?' (p. 6). Specifically concerning the teaching profession, Suarez and McGrath [17] asserted that professional identity was shaped by "perceptions, views, beliefs, emotions, motivations, and attitudes that teachers have about their own role" (p. 8) drawing from earlier work by Cordingley [28], Karousiou, Zhao [32,33]. Consequently, scholars generally agree that teachers' professional identity is often evaluated through dimensions such as "self-efficacy, resilience and wellbeing" [28] (p. 15). This perspective resonates with Beijaard et al. [34], who, in their seminal work, noted that teachers engaged in ongoing reflection to understand their individual experiences and aspirations [18,19,35]. Despite this, there is prevailing consensus among scholars that professional identity remains a contested and inadequately defined phenomenon, particularly within the teaching profession [3,19,22,23].

Notwithstanding these complexities, scholars employ professional identity as a theoretical tool to analyse teachers' behaviours, often interpreting these behaviours as a process of self-development and social interaction. Much of the literature focuses on the interconnected concepts such as formation, construction and development. For instance, Tomlinson and Jackson [20] examined the professional identity formation of higher education students, revealing that familiarity with the profession and the interplay between educational and workplace experiences significantly contributed to their professional identity formation (p. 896). Similarly, Amorim and Ribeiro-Silva [1] investigated how cooperating teachers in Portugal perceived their roles in shaping preservice teachers' professional identities. Using interviews and thematic analysis they found that personal socialization, career cycles and perceptions were integral to this process.

Studies exploring professional identity construction further underscored the critical role of agency throughout various stages of the teaching lifecycle. For example, research on language teachers' professional identity construction highlighted participants' requests for in-service training and concerns regarding "professional legitimacy" as significant barriers [21]. In terms of development, a report by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) indicated that teachers' professional identity was shaped by the institutional and sociocultural contexts of education systems. The report stated that self-perceptions, behaviours, and interactions significantly influenced teachers' beliefs about their roles [17]. Thus, in addition to initial teacher education, teachers actively seek support from mentors and supervisors and engaged in continuous professional learning. This shapes their professional identities and influences their commitment to the profession [17].

Further conceptualizations of teachers' professional identity in the Australian literature revealed a strong consensus around the notions of formation, construction and development of teacher professionalism [3]. Additionally, there was notable scepticism toward neoliberal arguments advocating for incessant reforms of government policies aimed

at enhancing secular-based teaching standards and pedagogies [3,6]. Scholars argued that such reforms detract from personal narratives surrounding teachers' developmental needs, shifting focus towards alignment with neoliberal frameworks for teacher education and professional learning. This places considerable pressure on educators to continuously meet evolving professional standards. Consequently, it was evident that teacher education and professional learning were critical factors in understanding what influenced a teachers' professional identity. The following section will discuss the characteristics of teacher education and professional learning in the Australian context.

2.2. Teacher Education and Professional Learning

In the context of postcolonial education, Oggunaike's [15] examination of the generational constraints imposed by neoliberal, Western-centric epistemologies revealed a critical challenge within educational frameworks. Memon, Chown and Alkouatli [16] responded to this challenge, advocating for the establishment of teacher education programs that are distinctly rooted in Islamic traditions. Their arguments seek to counteract the pervasive neoliberal and secular influences that dominate educational discourse, particularly within Islamic schools. Against this backdrop, individuals aspiring to become teachers are required to complete secular-based university degrees, including a four-year bachelor's degree in teaching, a combined specialization with a teaching pathway, or an accredited graduate entry degree (Masters) in Education or Teaching [5]. These teacher education programs are guided by eight national accreditation principles, including impact, evidence-based, rigour, continuous improvement, flexibility, diversity and innovation, partnerships, transparency and research [5].

Over the past two decades, federal government policies have increasingly regulated teacher education in Australia, introducing various frameworks, guidelines and standards to ensure that graduates are "classroom ready teachers" and possess the skills necessary to enhance student learning [5] (p. 49). However, scholars have expressed concerns regarding the reliance of 'evidence-based large-scale data' to justify these policy reiterations, arguing that such justifications often reflect governmental control that is politically motivated [10,11] (p. 90). This critique highlights the need for teacher education programs that integrate theory and practice, aligning preservice learning with the actualities of teaching.

Beyond initial teacher education, there is an expectation for educators to engage in continuous professional learning pedagogies designed to maintain the teaching quality beyond formal qualifications [36]. The literature indicates that these professional learning frameworks frequently emphasize outcomes-based learning, focusing on improving student outcomes through the categorization of teacher–student interactions and achievements according to professional standards [3]. Connell [37] critiqued these traditional outcomes-based models as mechanisms of measurable competencies that arose from a "neoliberal cascade" (p. 220), wherein educational practices were driven by the social and economic transformation agenda characteristics of a free market economy. Consequently, Connell argued that such frameworks led to restrictive and potentially arbitrary limitations on educational practices [37] (p. 220).

The Australian professional standards are pivotal in this neoliberal discourse, fostering an auditable, point-based approach to professional learning. However, the literature increasingly advocates for a shift from outcomes-based to process-based learning, promoting frameworks that empower teachers to identify their own learning and development needs [38]. Nevertheless, Mockler [3] pointed out inherent challenges with process-based professional learning, noting that these programs were often designed for homogeneous public-school systems, adopting a 'one size fits all' methodology. Such designs were typically implemented by practitioners who misunderstood individual teacher needs, resulting in professional learning that merely aligned with the professional standards without addressing the nuanced contexts in which teachers operated. This concern is particularly prevalent for teachers in Islamic schools, where there is an expectation to embrace a shared vision of an Islamic ethos that supports the schools' mission of cultivating

learning embedded in Islamic values, principles and practices [16]. This underlines the need to rethink professional learning pedagogies, especially considering ongoing discussions about enhancing educational quality and methodology within Australia's diverse schooling landscape.

3. Methodology

The aim of this research was to understand how teachers in Islamic schools perceive their professional identities, teacher education, professional learning and Islamic education. To effectively capture both behavioural and religious perspectives, an unconventional qualitative approach to organizational research was employed. This approach incorporates behavioural fields of inquiry that are informed by Muslim identity and an Islamic worldview to address the following research questions:

- How does secular teacher education and professional learning pedagogies influence the roles of teachers in Islamic schools?
- How does Islamic teacher education and professional learning pedagogies shape the professional identities of teachers in Islamic schools?

The methodological framework was informed by previous research examining the relationship between professional identity and governance in Islamic schools. The research involved four Muslim teachers selected from a sample cohort of fourteen educators who had completed a postgraduate qualification in Islamic Education at an Australian university. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews featuring open-ended questions, followed by a six-phase thematic analysis to identify key themes. The author's role as an organizational Muslim researcher is pertinent to this research and is further elaborated in the subsequent section.

3.1. The Insider Perspective

The insider perspective in research involving cultural and religious groups, such as Muslim communities, has sparked debate regarding authentic access and data quality. [39]. Insiders are often recognized by their cultural background and religious beliefs [40]. While insider researchers can foster trust and equality in participation, they may also elicit guarded responses due to their relationships with participants [41]. Participants may fear judgement, leading to self-censorship and affecting data integrity, particularly in Muslim communities where negative media portrayals contribute to feelings of "differentiation and otherness" [39,42] (p. 5). To navigate these challenges, a reflexive approach can help researchers evaluate their insider status and mitigate risks [40,43].

As an organisational Muslim researcher, the author of this article reflected on the cultural and religious ties to participants, identifying potential power imbalances. Recognizing the risk of eliciting guarded responses due to demographic connections to Islamic school communities enabled an emphasis on the importance of privacy and ethical assurances throughout the research process. As a Muslim researcher, avoiding self-censorship assisted in maintaining data rigor. This reflexivity facilitated informal, semi-structured dialogues with participants, guided by open-ended questions on professional identity, teacher education, professional learning and Islamic teacher education. Also, in being cognisant of the postcolonial/decolonial debates that emerge in research and often guide a researchers' beliefs about the world [44–46], an Islamic worldview shaped the research approach, viewing the empirical world through a lens of divine knowledge [47,48]. Given the significant role of Muslim identity in shaping professional identity [49], this phenomenon is methodologically important for understanding the professional identities on Muslim teachers in Islamic schools. The next section will elaborate on these insights.

3.2. Islamic Worldview and Muslim Identity

A worldview constitutes a conceptual framework through which scholars interpret and make sense of their surroundings [50]. It encompasses an individuals' unique set of values, beliefs and assumptions regarding fundamental aspects of reality, decision making and human interactions [46]. However, these conventional explanations of worldview appear constrained to human interpretations of the physical world, complicating the consideration of both the divine and mutual interconnectedness of human interactions [51]. This limitation presents challenges for research within Islamic school communities, particularly concerning the Islamically embedded pedagogies prevalent amongst Muslim participants in these settings [16]. To address these challenges, the present study is informed by an Islamic worldview, which posits that God has granted humanity knowledge of life realities through divine revelation. This revelation establishes a covenant that defines individuals' purpose, attitudes and actions [48]. Within Islam, the meaning of life is framed as submission to God and adherence to His divine instruction. This submission entails recognizing ones' role as a servant of God on earth, thereby imposing a considerable obligation of trust and responsibility to act according to Gods' will.

Al-Attas [47] emphasizes that followers of Islam are not bound by a social contract to ensure trust and responsibility; rather, these values are underpinned by ones' individual agreement that reflects the covenant sealed by God. Consequently, one's Muslim identity is determined by a reflection of the individual's purpose, attitudes and actions rather than by the social category to which they belong. Al-Attas [47] articulates this as a means of embedding the overarching Islamic principles of equality and justice. To fulfil the individual contract sealed by God, one's purpose, attitudes and actions must be informed by divine revelation in the Holy Qur'an [52], which instructs believers to "fulfil all obligations" both divine and mutual (Chapter 5, Verse 1, p. 110). Achieving this requires adopting Islamic values and principles rooted in divine revelation and the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) [53]. Thus, Islamic beliefs are integral to one's spiritual obligations, and their implementation reflects, in part, one's mutual obligations. Consequently, the Muslim identity becomes a reflective process focused on an individual's purpose, attitudes and actions.

3.3. Participants in the Study

This study employed purposeful sampling to identify potential participants [50] who had completed a postgraduate qualification in Islamic education at an Australian University. The selected participants were part of a broader study examining the effectiveness of faith-based governance frameworks in Islamic schools, of which ethics approval was granted by the Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). Fourteen participants were invited via email to take part in a face to face or online interviews (via zoom). Despite anticipating challenges in accessing participants, only three female and one male teacher expressed interest in the research. Before the interviews, participants received a consent form, which they signed, scanned and returned via email. As presented in Table 1, all participants were formally qualified teachers across various subjects, including mathematics, science, primary education and Islamic studies. Among the middle and senior leaders, Sarah served as a wellbeing coordinator, Mariam was a year advisor, Ali as head of department, and Julie was a deputy principal, most of whom were also actively teaching in Australian Islamic schools. To develop an empirical understanding of participants, Table 1 outlines the elements of professional identity they articulated, offering insights into the values, attributes, beliefs, skills and experiences they integrated into their professional roles.

Table 1. Participants in the study.

Pseudonym	Teacher Education	Position Held	Elements of Professional Identity Described by Participants
1. Sarah	Undergraduate and Accredited Graduate Entry Postgraduate Qualifications	Teacher Coordinator	Character, values, passion, context and settings, people, professional experience, education, active agency, intention, Muslim identity.
2. Julie	4-year Teaching Degree Multiple Postgraduate Qualifications	Deputy Principal	Confidence, learning, dedication, context and setting, knowledge, Muslim identity, open-minded, community, feedback, respect.
3. Mariam	4-year Teaching Degree Postgraduate Qualifications	Teacher Year Advisor	Authentic, genuine, professionalism, values, beliefs, accountable, open-minded, tolerable, patient, vision, Muslim identity.
4. Ali	Undergraduate and Accredited Graduate Entry Postgraduate Qualifications PhD Candidate	Head of Department	Authentic, ambitious, dedicated, culture, environment, self-development, learning, humility, justice, respect, Muslim identity.

3.4. Limitations

The sample size of this study was relatively small, comprising a cohort of four educators who had completed a postgraduate qualification in Islamic education at an Australian university. This program was quite new, resulting in a limited number of alumni. Participants were purposefully selected based on their secular qualifications, their role as Muslim educators in Islamic schools and their recent completion of a qualification in Islamic education. This selection facilitated data collection aimed at understanding how secular teacher education and professional learning influenced their roles as teachers; also, how Islamic teacher education and professional learning shaped their professional identities. While the study offers several nuances in professional identity and Islamic education, the limitations of the sample underscore the need for further research. Further studies should aim to recruit a larger cohort of educators working in Islamic schools. Such research would provide opportunities to analyse the implications of Islamic teacher education and professional learning pedagogies on the professional identity of teachers in these settings.

3.5. Thematic Analysis Informed by Muslim Identity and an Islamic Worldview

This study utilized Braun and Clarke's [54] six phases of thematic analysis, which provided a flexible framework for interpreting qualitative data and identifying patterns and themes [50]. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, the author's position as an insider organisational Muslim researcher necessitated a critical reflection on the Islamic relevance of this study, especially that teacher education and professional learning were recognized as critical elements of governance in Islamic schooling. Engaging with the organizational implications of Islamic schooling renewal required an informed analysis through an Islamic lens (as presented in Section 3.2). Consequently, the data analysis involved a robust and rigour interrogation of the emerging patterns and meanings. Notably, several unanticipated findings emerged, contributing to the discourse on professional identity research and the evolving nature of Islamic education systems in Islamic schools.

The six-phase thematic analysis conducted for this research is detailed in Table 2 and includes the following phases of analysis: the first phase required manually transcribing the four interviews verbatim, which was accompanied by initial reflections and observations documented in a comparative matrix. In the second phase, initial codes were generated through iterative readings of the transcripts, focusing on identifying relevant patterns and meanings linked to the primary themes of the research. The third phase adopted a deductive approach, interrogating the data against pre-established themes derived from existing literature on teacher education and professional learning. During the fourth phase, the preliminary themes were refined to incorporate any emerging themes not previously

identified in the literature. The revision highlighted the need for an inductive analysis to uncover unanticipated themes, which was executed in the fifth phase. Finally, in the sixth phase, themes from both deductive and inductive analyses were compared to determine the salient and compelling insights.

Table 2. Generating compelling themes through six phases of analysis.

Phase 1	Understanding the background of participants in the study—Table 1	Researchers' initial reflections: *School environment* *professional identity* *Muslim identity*	*teacher education and professional learning* *Islamic-based teacher pedagogies*
Phase 2	*School environment*	Family, Islam, community, ethos	
	Professional Journey	Education, university degree, teaching, Muslim, Islamic school, Western/secular pedagogy, motivation, growth	
	Elements of professional identity	Refer to Table 1.	
	Muslim identity	Holistic, authentic, purpose, knowledge, environment, intentions	
	Teacher education	Professional standards, secular/Western pedagogy, university degree, qualified, individual learning	
	Professional learning	Improving practice, organizational, upskilling, quality teaching	
	Islamic teacher education and professional learning	Islamic worldview, confidence, purpose and alignment, humility and responsibility, personal and professional practice, imposter syndrome	
Phase 3	Teachers' professional identity	Based on teachers' perceptions, views, beliefs, emotions, motivations, attitudes towards as a teacher professional	
	Teacher education	Secular-based university degrees, compliance with professional standards, skill development, classroom ready teachers, neoliberal policy	
	Professional learning	Upskilling, organizational professional development, independent learning	
	Islamic teacher education	Islamic worldview, curriculum integration, purpose and intention	
Preliminary themes	*Experiences as a graduate teacher and professional journey* *Professional identity and Muslim identity*	*Teacher education versus professional learning* *Relationship between Islamic education pedagogy and professional identity*	
Phase 4	Learning experiences from Islamic teacher education pedagogy Professional identity, Islamic teacher education and professional learning		
Phase 5	Muslim identity as a precursor of behaviour The professional Muslim identity		
Phase 6	Stories about the professional journey	*Sarah's Story—A Passion for Teaching Muslim Children* *Julie's Story—Teaching and Leading with Purpose* *Mariam's Story—Building Courage and Resilience through Personal Growth* *Ali's Story—Becoming a Holistic Learner*	
	The Muslim professional	*Muslim Identity as a Precursor of Behaviour* *The Authentic Muslim Being* *Context and Setting*	
	Connecting professional identity and Islamic education	*Teacher Education versus Professional Learning* *Reflections about a course in Islamic Education* *Learning Experiences as a Muslim Educator*	

4. Findings

The semi-structured interview questions were organized around four areas of interest: professional identity, teacher education, professional learning and Islamic teacher education. The guided semi-structured approach aimed to facilitate participants' natural transitions among these areas while encouraging reflection on their interconnections and significance. This approach enabled participants to distinguish between teacher education and professional learning, as well as to explore the relationship between professional and Muslim identities. Following the six phases of thematic analysis, three primary themes emerged, along with their sub-themes. The first theme, 'Stories about the Professional Journey', presents narratives of the four participating teachers (see Table 1). Pseudonyms were utilized to protect the identities of the participants. These narratives illustrate their experiences as graduate teachers, the Islamic school environment and the transitions in teaching philosophy and professional learning. The second theme, 'The Muslim Professional', reflects participants' insights regarding their Muslim identities as a foundation of behaviour and authenticity. The data presented in Table 3 describe participants' reflections on their Muslim identity as a precursor of behaviour, the authentic Muslim being, and context and setting. The final theme, 'Connecting Professional Identity and Islamic Education', offers an empirical understanding of the relationship between teacher education and professional learning. The final theme also highlights reflections about Islamic education and learning experiences of Muslim educators. The following subsequent sections will provide a detailed analysis of these main themes.

Table 3. Sub-themes of the Muslim professional.

Sub-Theme	Extracted Quotes
Muslim identity as a precursor of behaviour	In terms of my Islamic values and practices, they stuck. . .but there were things that I could do in science that I could not do as a teacher, for example there was a lot of patient contact with consent, but at the same time I did not have to transfer my beliefs to the patient, that was two separate things. Whereas in educational practice and because I work at a Muslim school and am of the same faith, I feel like I can or I think it is important that I make that connection of Islamic values with them in order to make them feel like they belong or we share the same common language and once I have achieved that with them, I feel like we have that connection and I am able to actually teach them and they are able to respond (Sarah).
	Connecting Islamic tradition to my professional identity through knowledge development (Julie)
	Islam is definitely the core of who I am, I won't shy away from that, even when I call up students or parents it is an integral part of who I am (Mariam).
The authentic Muslim being	When you are holding your tongue in front of children but when you go home you don't act the same way, I feel like there is some sort of dissonance somewhere in the that process and that fails to allow you to be authentic and sincere in your identity. I would say for me it is more of an inward journey to make sure you are very sincere, and your sincerity allows you to behave in ways, socially and culturally that promotes an authentic way of the self. For me it is about living in the tradition of the Holy Prophet. The dissonance is what worries me actually and the lack of language use in these social and cultural interactions (Ali).
	I am I think a genuine person, I don't have to wear different hats and try to be different. I am at times self-conscious but am open to criticism and feedback even when colleagues come across as abrupt. What you see with me at home is the exact same thing you see in the staffroom or classroom. But I might just cater according to age and context (Mariam).

Table 3. *Cont.*

Sub-Theme	Extracted Quotes
Context and setting	I think my professional identity as a teacher is more personal because of my Islamic values. Whereas as a science professional my Islamic identity was just for me, and work was separate (Sarah)
	Being in a setting where everyone is putting on their professional cap and everyone is functioning in that environment—using the synonym culture—that a good culture and environment is created at school, maintaining a level of professionalism and promoting growth helps support different parts of my identity, functioning in a way that helps me achieve personal goals and organizational goals as well (Ali).
	You definitely have to be more open-minded, tolerable, patient…dealing with parents, students do require a thick skin sometimes…what I do always is put myself in the lens of others, we are community-based so we need to keep that in mind [context and setting], there is a greater purpose than my thoughts and beliefs (Mariam).

4.1. Stories About the Professional Journey

As an organisational Muslim researcher, it was methodologically essential to gather insights from participants regarding their professional background because the aim was to empirically investigate the professional identity of teachers. This approach facilitated the collection of data related to their education, knowledge, skills and experiences. Participants detailed the types of teacher education and professional learning opportunities they had undertaken, the positions they held and the duration of their careers in teaching. Throughout the thematic analysis conducted in phase two, a pattern emerged in the data that illustrated a story of their professional journeys. These stories reflected meanings about the purpose of teaching, attitudes toward the profession and behaviours influencing their role as educators. The findings are organized under four sub-sections.

4.1.1. Sarah's Story—A Passion for Teaching Muslim Children

Sarah began her professional journey after completing an undergraduate degree in the sciences. While she had always showed interest in teaching, her initial entry into the profession was constrained by cultural expectations related to personality perceptions and academic achievements. In her words:

> To be honest I have always wanted to become a teacher, but during my secondary years as a student there was a particular teacher at my school who discouraged me from being a teacher. She said at that time—'you are very soft spoken, you are very quiet, you need to have a very strong character to be a teacher, or you will not last, you are going to get really high marks so don't be a teacher'. I ended up doing very well in my HSC and ended up completing a degree in the science field. But even after I finished my heart was still in teaching. So, I went back and never regret the decision. I think it is the decision I should have made in the beginning. But Alhamdillah [praise be to God] all these experiences shape you to who you are today, so it was a good learning experience for me as well. I think now looking back, I think it upset me because I think there is nothing wrong with being nice and still being able to teach and having compassion and care. I think that was regarded as a weakness in terms of being a teacher. You know you had to be firm and not show your teeth, so that was interesting (Sarah).

In reflecting on her teaching journey, Sarah described her struggles as a graduate teacher, revealing the way mentorship, as a form of professional learning, created critical implications for young teachers. Sarah shared her struggle with cognitive dissonance caused by a misalignment with her cognition and action.

> In my first year of teaching, you always end up having a mentor and so I was told, you can't smile, you have to be firm, you have to be strict. I did that sadly,

and it's something that I regret and then two three years, you feel like something is not right, you feel like this is not why I came here. It took me time to build my own professional identity (Sarah).

In overcoming these struggles, Sarah remained focused and dedicated by applying a teaching philosophy that she described as her "authentic self:. After nine years of teaching, she ventured into middle leadership roles, where she was able to interact more with a wider cohort of students. She spoke often about the rewarding experience in mentoring students, particularly Muslim children.

When I speak to my students, my intention is…I am doing this for the sake of Allah Subhanna Wa Ta'allah [God, most gracious, most high], I often say to students that I intend to come teach at this school…I could have taught at any other school, but I chose a Muslim school because the students are our future Ummah [community], and if I can give you something that I have learnt in relation to our Islamic teaching and plant something in your hearts and you leave school and remember what you have learned, that is a Sadaqah Jariyah [continuous charity] for me (Sarah).

Sarah's story revealed dedication and resilience as additional elements of identity that guided her professional practice. Furthermore, Muslim identity, which was determined by ones' individual agreement to lead according to the divine commandments of God, appeared strongly in the data. This was evident in Sarah's story which indicated an awareness of her divine and mutual obligations as a Muslim educator when she said, "I am doing this for the sake of Allah Subhanna Wa Ta'allah (Sarah)".

4.1.2. Julie's Story—Teaching and Leading with Purpose

After completing a degree in teaching, Julie began her teaching career in the "public system (Julie)". As a graduate teacher, she struggled to connect with students and the school community. Julie felt there were gaps in her "skill set (Julie)", which were influenced by the lack of training she received in becoming a teacher. She felt "thrown in the deep end as a teacher (Julie)".

I was often given the most challenging classes and did not feel like I was prepared for fulltime teaching. I did not last long in the public system, after two terms I could not teach anymore. In fact, I left the teaching profession and went to work in a financial institution for three years (Julie).

Following her experience in the corporate sector, Julie decided to re-enter the teaching profession. Her choice was influenced by collegial discussions about a new local Islamic school that appeared to connect with her values and beliefs regarding teaching.

When I heard about this Islamic school, I thought this might be a place where kids go who wanted to learn. Parents might actually care, and I started and have not looked back (Julie).

Julie's reflections about her decision to join the school were supported by her description of the school environment when she said: "…the school has helped me understand Islam better. The school's community is one family (Julie)". Shortly after, Julie ventured into middle leadership roles, and is serving as a deputy principal at the school. Julie sought further study because she felt compelled to strengthen her qualifications. However, she continued to struggle connecting the learning from her qualifications with her professional practice.

When I finished my Masters, I felt like it really did not help me in my profession. It was more like a tick a box. It did not make me grow, which is what I was really hoping for. Yes, it was a nice expensive and time-consuming degree, but to me it did not really satisfy to nurture my growths (Julie).

Throughout Julie's professional journey she expressed her innate need to teach and lead with purpose, through role modelling and confidence building. This was evident when she said, "I have always been keen on furthering my education and seeking knowledge to become better at what I do (Julie)". In her ambition toward purpose, she was compelled to complete a postgraduate qualification in Islamic Education, which she believed changed her teaching philosophy.

> In the past my teaching philosophy, which was guided by the schools' philosophy was that students had to achieve a 'magic 80' in year 10 and those who did not were asked to leave. The course changed that, I now think about the needs of individual students and people in my team—my philosophy is about being inclusive and collective. As a leader, completing the course has helped me understand the purpose, coherence and alignment of my role. It made me understand the purpose of teaching. As leaders our decisions impact students more than the decisions of classroom teachers. I learned humility and responsibility in being a lifelong learner. The [course] enable a continuous process of professional learning, reflection and reflexivity to emerge (Julie).

In the framework of teacher professional identity, Suarez and McGrath [17] illustrated that educators were influenced by educational systems and school contexts. Within these environments, structures and support, that include personal and professional experiences, as well as teacher behaviours and attitudes played a role in professional identity development. While Julie's professional journey resembled components of this framework, three additional behavioural components emerged. The first pertains to a pattern of 'belonging' which was evident when describing her decision to re-enter the teaching profession, her thoughts about the school environment and her experiences in completing further study. The second is related to Julie's 'lived experiences' in completing a course in Islamic education, which highlighted 'confidence' and 'purpose' as motivators to teach and lead. Muslim identity emerged as the third component which indicates the prevalence of fulfilling divine and mutual obligations.

4.1.3. Mariam's Story—Building Courage and Resilience Through Personal Growth

Mariam was always passionate about teaching Muslim children, a commitment shaped by her strong connection to her Muslim identity. Her professional journey commenced after she completed a degree in education and remained in the same Islamic school throughout her career. A striking aspect of Mariam's story was her courage and resilience in navigating personal growth, particularly considering her perceptions regarding opportunities for promotion within the school. She articulated her journey in the following way:

> Education was my first degree and the only pathway I have completed; I have enjoyed what I have done. Although I went back and completed postgraduate study. I have always remained in education because that's where I feel like I belonged. Although I am a qualified science teacher, I was hired to teach Mathematics. I am also a year advisor. I've never felt there was an opportunity for growth, so I never bothered to apply for promotions. I thought why put myself through an emotional rollercoaster, if it is meant to be it will come to me. In my own personal journey, I do my own professional growth, I know I am good at what I do, I understand as a Muslim you are encouraged to grow, you are encouraged to learn, and I do that with my class, but I have no interest anymore in applying for higher positions (Mariam).

Mariam's story regarding growth promoted a question about the school environment where she responded in the following way:

> The school has become family, I have seen it grow, develop, change, transpire, inspire, I have seen it all. The school has gone through a lot changes, sometimes change is good, change is confronting, but I just kept focusing on the students and

> I think that is kind of what got me through. I thought, a school is a community-based centre, and we are all in this together and there is one purpose only and that is the students. But sometimes it is just too difficult to apply for particular positions, especially when you see others less experienced are placed into leadership positions created especially for them, that is what discouraged me to apply (Mariam).

Personal growth emerged as a central theme in Mariam's interview. She articulated her experiences of personal growth through teaching and navigating the complexities of organizational change. Similar to Julie, Mariam shared various personal and professional experiences that shaped her understanding of growth. Notably, elements of dissonance arose, influenced by organizational and behavioural complexities within the school environment. This highlighted the internal challenges that could affect a teachers' professional identity. Despite these obstacles, Mariam's ambition for personal growth reflects a knowledge-seeking mindset. This resonates with the findings in Memon, Chown and Alkouatli [16] where the enactments of Islamic pedagogy were perceived as an "introspective practice" (p. 641). This form of practice involved educators utilizing the learning they gained from a course in Islamic education in their professional practice.

4.1.4. Ali's Story—Becoming a Holistic Learner

Ali commenced his professional journey working in business and construction. He had completed degrees in business and engineering and described his journey as "a different calling (Ali)", which led him to pursue further study in Islamic education. When asked to elaborate on this, he responded in the following way:

> It is difficult to say because I colour it with the lens I have now. Let's take it with the bias I have now, I might not have been aware of faith being so holistic, me as an engineer at the time—that was faith—that is the dichotomy I held onto at the time during my transition, at the time that is how I saw it. Now I see it as the barber is practicing his faith by making people look fresh, the pizzamaker, the engineer, the doctor, it is all faith-based if you like. That journey of going into the faith, it was interesting, it was just another step in my journey, nothing too revolutionary but I think those steps make me who I am today. I think of myself as a learner, and sometimes we are forced to take the title—head teacher, educator, etc. If I am honest and raw, that can also limit a lot of growth (Ali).

Ali's story regarding his professional journey, promoted an understanding of becoming a holistic learner, particularly when he shared his experience as a graduate teacher who was still working towards completing secular teaching qualifications.

> When I first pivoted into education, I said to myself I have to understand and I used these words exactly— 'Western Pedagogical Methods', and I need to see how Islamic fits within that (Ali).

Ali's motivation in becoming a holistic learner appeared to be influenced by several components, which included his experiences with secular-based and faith-based learning and the context and setting of the school environment. Ali's story resembles the common theme of a knowledge-seeking mindset, whereby his professional identity is influenced by his learning journey. Regarding the context and setting of the school environment, he said "the school's philosophy is built on a holistic Islamic identity framework with micro components specific to Islamic studies (Ali)", the school environment provides opportunities for him to enact his ambition of becoming a holistic learner, which reflects much of his decisions in professional practice.

4.2. The Muslim Professional

Participants were invited to articulate their understanding of professional identity while reflecting on their experiences in the field. In the initial phases of data analysis, several key words emerged that highlighted perceptual emphasis [55], forming additional

behavioural elements of the teachers' professional identity—as presented in Table 1. During phase four, distinct descriptions of professional identity were identified, with self-awareness and self-efficacy emerging as salient elements of professional identity. Participants demonstrated a commitment to their values and beliefs while effectively distinguishing between their personal and professional roles. For instance, Sarah stated, "my character is the same, my values are the same, but my professional experience is very different (Sarah)", and when Mariam said, "is your genuine identity, it shouldn't be two different things (Mariam)". Ali further emphasized self-awareness when he states, "my identity is holistic. . .it is whatever is authentic to myself (Ali)". These insights align with Cordingley et al. [28] who measured teachers professional identities based on elements like self-efficacy, resilience and wellbeing.

The inductive analysis conducted in phases five and six revealed several unanticipated sub-themes that created an understanding of 'The Muslim Professional'. Teachers perceived their professional identity through an Islamic lens, incorporating both behavioural and contextual dimensions. These findings are categorized into three sub-themes in Table 3: Muslim identity as a precursor of behaviour, the authentic Muslim being and context and setting. A discussion of these findings is provided in Section 5.

4.3. Connecting Professional Identity and Islamic Education

The study aimed to explore the implications of Islamic teacher education and professional learning within Islamic schools. To facilitate this, teachers were invited to share their perspectives on these topics. These open-ended questions stimulated a meaningful discussion regarding their personal learning experiences as Muslim educators, along with their reflections on a course in Islamic education. These insights contribute to the three sub-themes presented in Table 4. The data summarized in Table 4 are further discussed in Section 5.

Table 4. Sub-themes of connecting professional identity and Islamic education.

Sub-Theme	Extracted Quotes
Teacher education versus professional learning	**Teacher education:** I don't think they are necessarily the same, but they do go hand in hand. In order to be an educator, you also need to have some professional learning. But teacher education is the qualification you get on your certificate (Sarah). Initially and during your teaching career, teacher education courses miss a lot of things that you need to know when you commence working as a teacher. There is a lack of practice (Julie). Teacher education is what you have been teaching or have been taught (Mariam). The colonial degree supports your identity to do whatever, but I will be honest with you the Master of Teaching I completed was not revolutionary in my opinion. Like I have read the pedagogy of the oppressed when I was 17 and I have read all of Gonski's frameworks, but they are old—what is the new stuff.? Teacher education is the individual learning that happens at all places, at all times (Ali). **Professional learning:** If I am straight out of uni and have a degree in education that doesn't automatically mean I am an educator, it doesn't mean I have learnt everything. I think as teachers we are constantly learning and that is professional learning in itself. Professional learning can be a form of upskilling as an educator (Sarah). Professional learning should be learning that improves your practice. So, it should be targeted and self-identified by the teacher. It should follow some sort of goal setting (Julie). Professional learning is when you go out of your way to read, do workshop and learn new things (Mariam). Professional learning is more organizational decision to help with key qualities that they are trying to get from their teachers, and they are making those decisions to nurture those qualities (Ali).

Table 4. *Cont.*

Sub-Theme	Extracted Quotes
Reflections about a course in Islamic education	When someone wants to ask me about the course, I think I enjoyed it that much that I don't know how to explain it that well because to me, when I started the course, it was my ninth year of teaching. When I did the course, I actually felt embarrassed of the nine years that went past...I don't know how to explain how...but I felt like what was I teaching and how was I teaching...I felt like it was almost like a transaction. Even thinking about my relationship with Allah (SWT) and my purpose of why I chose to be an educator and I found that in those nine years there must have been a lot of gaps...how many kids did I miss in terms of what their educational needs were because I was so worried about ticking a box of outcomes and assessments because that is what the school wanted. Making sure students go 80s or 90s (Sarah).
	When I was offered to complete the [course]. I did not know that Islamic Pedagogy was a thing. It was new, it was powerful, and it was actually something I thought about every day in my practice. It is not like any other degree or course I've done. It is really life changing. It gives me goosebumps thinking about it. It makes you more confident as a leader, knowing that your direction is now very clear, and your purpose is clear. I developed confidence in aligning my purpose with the schools' vision for Islamic education. The course has allowed me to rethink and shift the way that I think education is (Julie).
	What else was available? [She thought deeply about her purpose and asked herself:] "is that your purpose?". Then when I first joined the [course] I thought, what am I even doing here, and then when I went on I saw principals, deputy principals and I thought no one is going to listen to me [imposter syndrome] you are not in a leadership position, what change are you going to bring about and I thought who cares what change you make, the change is within yourself, start with yourself, so I think that is what kept me pushing and I saw the growth throughout the course (Mariam).
	The [course] leave a mark on your spiritual journey. It requires a lot of openness and humility to understand how to deal with the experiences it throws in your way. I think that will help in terms of how it is connected to our identity, otherwise it is just another tick box qualification that we do (Ali).
Learning experiences as a Muslim educator	The [course] was more of a push as to how to teach, they make you critically think—why are you doing what you are doing, what are the critical practices you have and actually putting meaning to what you are preaching [Islamically]. In terms of me being more bold in exercising my [Muslim] identity, it gave me that push...like why am I shying away from talking about it [Muslim identity], the intention is or our Niyah [intention] is to do this, Inshallah [God willing] this...ok so why was I just jumping in and saying 'ok we need to discuss Newton's laws, 1,2,3,4,5 done. Why didn't I pause and think about [in the classroom to her students] have any of you ever wondered about how Allah (SWT) done this and making that connection with the divine. Before doing the course, it is something we just don't think about, I think we just take everything for granted. So, in terms of professional identity, it made me stronger as a Muslim educator in the Muslim sector (Sarah).
	More confidence in my work and the course gave me that confidence. Knowing that I have deeper knowledge and toward continuous learning because you can always do better (Julie).
	When I did the [course], it definitely opened me up to something called an Islamic worldview, I originally thought you are Muslim why would you and then I think having the qualities was a good think but implementing that and living by it just took everything else to another level. You know who cares about student marks, they are growing, they are happy, they are trying, so you definitely change your way of teaching, looking and thinking. Looking with the eyes of compassion, when they hurt you hurt (Mariam).
	As I grew and learned a lot more and read into this space a bit more. With the help of the [course] and indeed my other qualifications in Islamic Studies, to realize that the positive discourse, the dominant voice, the dominant worldview that has encroached everything has encroached me too and I am operating within a colonial framework within a framework that has presuppositions, that are rooted in ontology, epistemology and even anthropologies that are very different to what Islam is trying to bring about, at least my limited understanding at the time (Ali).

Table 4. *Cont.*

Sub-Theme	Extracted Quotes
Learning experiences as a Muslim educator	Teacher learning is a process of continued learning—why does it have to be in a classroom or to obtain a particular qualification or certificate or institution. In east Africa that call it— 'campfire learning'. I always try to ensure I am on a continuous learning journey. Learning teaches your own ignorance, once you reach a stage of wonder and you realise that you do not really know enough, and that comes after the stage where you learn a little bit and think you are an expert, and then you go deep down and realize how big the ocean is, so I think a level of humility is part of that. It is also an innate drive to reach ones' own perfection, I feel like there is that sort of disposition to constantly strive for more, strive for perfection. That quality, when coupled with humility and respect for your own self and others, I think these sorts of things are important. Also, justice, in the sense that if you are given a role as a faith-leader or teacher you have a responsibility to ensure you are completing your role to the best of your ability, otherwise you should give that role to someone else. Respect, humility and justice (Ali).

5. Discussion

In the extant teacher professional identity literature, scholars frequently employed qualitative methodologies, often grounded in postcolonial paradigms, to explore how teachers form, construct and develop their professional selves [1,17,19,20,22]. Similar methodologies were evident in research on teacher education and professional learning pedagogies [3,10,14,36], highlighting recurring constraints related to the universality of teacher education standards and prominent cycles of outward-based/process-based professional learning. This is problematic in two ways. First, by confining professional identity to a process of formation, construction and development, studies tend to generate repetitive patterns and meanings, thereby limiting the exploration of nuanced attitudes and behaviours toward the profession. Second, research involving Muslim communities that utilize postcolonial frameworks render limitations in broadening the scope of inquiry within these communities [16]. To address these concerns, the current study adopted an unconventional approach in organizational research, informed by Muslim identity and an Islamic worldview. This approach revealed that, in contrast to the professional identity framework illustrated by Suarez and McGrath [17], personal experiences took precedence over educational and school settings. The data analysis indicated that the professional identities of Muslim teachers were shaped by a knowledge-seeking mindset. This insight emerged from the first theme, "The Stories about their Professional Journeys", where themes of belonging, personal growth, the interconnectedness of mutual and divine obligations and lived experiences elucidated their professional practices.

The second theme, "The Muslim Professional", highlighted a distinctive identity for Muslim teachers, illustrating that Muslim identity served as a precursor of behaviour. Participants articulated an understanding that being Muslim entailed authenticity, and that their professional identity was influenced by contexts and settings, such as their workplace settings. The final theme, "Connecting Professional Identity and Islamic Education" revealed the relationship between Muslim teachers' professional identities and Islamic education. This relationship was derived from participants' perspectives on teacher education and professional learning, as well as their reflections on Islamic education programs and their learning experiences as Muslim educators working in Islamic schools.

This study was guided by two research questions: (1) How does secular teacher education and professional learning pedagogies influence the roles of teachers in Islamic schools? and (2) How does Islamic education and professional learning pedagogies shape the professional identities of teachers in Islamic schools? The findings respond to these questions in three ways. First, in response to research question (1), all participants had completed secular-based teacher education programs, qualifying them to teach in alignment with the Australian Professional Standards [5]. They were experienced educators, taking on additional roles in middle and senior leadership. A striking aspect of the data was in their experiences as graduate teachers. For instance, Julie faced considerable challenges

working in public schools due to inadequate training as a new teacher. Sarah displayed cognitive dissonance when speaking about her professional learning experience with the mentor at her school. Their stories reflect critical concerns raised in the literature about the effectiveness and efficiency of standardized teacher education and professional learning [6,10,11]. This reveals the need for more tailored support and development in the field.

The data also highlight a lack of fulfilment amongst participants regarding their secular degrees. Julie, for instance, felt her master's in educational leadership fell short in enhancing her professional skills. Participants also expressed a desire beyond their qualifications to integrate faith into their teaching practices and foster a sense of belonging with the school community. Mariam articulated this sentiment by describing her school as a "community-based centre (Mariam)". As a Muslim educator, she sought personal and professional growth while feeling connected to her community. Similarly, Ali shared his aspiration to become a holistic learner. He stated, "I have to understand western pedagogical methods and I need to see how Islamic fits with that (Ali)". However, his journey illustrates two critical challenges: the assumption that Islamic principles should conform to Western pedagogies, and the overshadowing influence of Western perspectives on his journey of holistic learning as an Islamic studies educator. These concerns echo the urgent call from Memon, Chown and Alkouatli [16] for enhanced learner engagement in Islamic education. Central to these discussions were Sarah's insightful reflections about completing the Islamic education program, which revealed a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities teachers experienced in Islamic schools.

> ...my purpose of why I chose to be an educator and I found that in those nine years there must have been a lot of gaps...how many kids did I miss in terms of what their educational needs were because I was so worried about ticking a box of outcomes and assessments because that is what the school wanted. Making sure students got 80s or 90s (Sarah).

Sarah's reflection identified two critical concerns. First, her emphasis on "box ticking" supported Mayer and Mills' [6] argument regarding the need to address the problems with standardized teacher education. Second, Sarah's observation that certain practices were implemented "because that is what the school wanted" underscored a troubling trend of organizational compliance which is critical for accreditation and funding continuity in Islamic schools. As highlighted by Succarie [49], compliance-focused practices failed to address additional components of governance such as Islamic education and academic achievement, raising concerns about meeting the needs of Islamic school communities.

Second, in response to research question (2), the findings in Table 3 revealed the emergence of "The Muslim Professional" as a distinct identity for Muslim educators. The findings elaborate on the scholarly discourse surrounding teacher professionalism, as articulated by Mockler [3]. For instance, participants said, "my character is the same, my values are the same, but my professional experience is very different (Sarah)"; "confidence in myself that I know that I am always trying to do the right thing (Julie)"; "I would say is your genuine identity, it shouldn't be two different things (Mariam)"; and "I guess it is just whatever is authentic to myself that could be seen in other spaces as well (Ali)". In aligning with the concept of Muslim identity as a reflective process regarding ones' purpose, attitudes and actions [48] the data illustrate how the Muslim professional emerges from sustained connections between their roles as Muslim educators and professional practice. For example, Mariam described Islam as "the core of who I am (Mariam)", and Julie connected Islamic tradition through knowledge and development. Likewise, Sarah felt connected to her profession because she worked in an Islamic school. Also, using terms like 'genuine and authentic' reinforced the theme, Muslim professional, as 'the authentic Muslim being'. Ali's story captured this when he said "it is an inward journey to make sure you are very sincere...that promotes an authentic way of the self (Ali)". The OECD illustrated that teachers' professional identities were shaped by institutional and sociocultural contexts [17]. The findings revealed context and setting were important

considerations for participants, particularly given they worked in Islamic schools. For example, Mariam believed working at an Islamic school required patience and tolerance because she felt "there is a greater purpose than my thoughts and beliefs (Mariam)". Ali emphasized that a positive culture and environment nurtured personal growth; and Sarah believed her professional identity as a teacher was "more personal" than her identity as a science professional.

Third, this section expands on the response to question (2) by aligning with the findings of Memon, Chown and Alkouatli regarding Islamic pedagogy [16]. The data presented in Table 4 indicate that participants engaged in critical reflections on teacher education and professional learning. For instance, Ali described his teacher education as "the colonial degree" and believed that most of his "colonial learning" was not "revolutionary". He viewed professional learning as primarily an "organizational decision" aimed at cultivating specific qualities in teachers (Ali)". Reflections on a course in Islamic education highlighted various benefits: Sarah noted it "helped improve critical practices (Sarah)"; Julie felt it "developed confidence in my work (Julie)"; Mariam emphasized the importance of "looking with the eyes of compassion (Mariam)"; Ali expressed "an innate drive to reach ones' own perfection (Ali)". The overarching perspective in the data indicates that Islamic teacher education and professional learning pedagogies enlighten and empower Muslim teachers toward becoming faith-centred in their professional practice. Moreover, this study uncovers a unique connection between professional identity and Islamic education that carries significant implications for organisational behaviour and practice in Islamic schools.

6. Conclusions

Muslim teachers in Australian Islamic schools frequently face the challenge of reconciling their religious obligations with secular commitments. They must align their attitudes and behaviours with an Islamic ethos while also obtaining qualifications that meet the Australian professional standards. To ensure institutional compliance, educators engage in ongoing professional learning initiatives, often grounded in traditional secular pedagogies, which can complicate an understanding of their professional identities. Scholars have advocated for the development of teacher education and professional learning pedagogies tailored to the unique needs of diverse teaching groups, particularly in multicultural contexts [10,16]. Indeed, the transformative efforts of higher education institutions and education practitioners to enhance the teaching profession has played a significant role in improving the quality of teaching. Nevertheless, teacher education and professional learning continues to experience major changes, largely influenced by socio-political climates [3,6,16]. This study aimed to explore how secular-based teacher education and professional learning impact the roles of teachers in Islamic schools. It focused on how Islamic-based pedagogies shaped their professional identities amidst the tension between religious and secular commitments.

Employing an unconventional approach to organisational research, informed by Muslim identity and an Islamic worldview, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with four teachers who had completed a qualification in Islamic education at an Australian university. The findings revealed three compelling themes discussed in Sections 4 and 5. In sharing stories about their professional journeys, the first theme showed that belonging, personal growth, the interconnectedness of mutual and divine obligations and lived experiences shaped much of teachers' professional practices. The second theme highlighted a distinctive identity for Muslim teachers which was shaped by a knowledge-seeking mindset. Participants' perspectives on teacher education, professional learning and their reflections on completing a course in Islamic education revealed Islamic teacher education and professional learning pedagogies 'enlightened and empowered' Muslim teachers, shaping their professional identities toward becoming faith-centred in their professional practice. These insights underscore the necessity for integrating such pedagogies for the renewal of teachers' professional identities in Islamic schools.

The findings in this study contribute to the growing discourse on Islamic school renewal. The findings also contribute to the organisational and behavioural fields by underlining that personal experiences dominate teachers' perceptions about their professional identities. A paucity of research in the organisational and behavioural fields exploring the relationship between Islamic education and professional identity underlines the need for further research which could provide deeper insights into the complexities impacting the teaching profession. Despite the limited sample size, this research has opened opportunities to conduct such studies. Essentially, further research may lead to developing faith-centred organisational frameworks that could enhance the teacher education and the professional learning experiences of teachers in Islamic schools and beyond.

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Article

The Impact of In-Service Teacher Education Program on Competency Improvement Among Islamic Religious Education Teachers Using Self-Assessment

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Abstract: Participation in PPG Daljab is essential for improving the performance of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers and promoting internal quality assurance within teacher training institutes (LPTKs). However, how can we effectively assess participation, particularly for individual teachers? This quantitative study investigates the impact of in-service teacher education programs on PAI teachers' competencies using individual self-assessment. This study involved 255 PAI teachers from three LPTKs under the Ministry of Religious Affairs: UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, and UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta. Teachers' competencies were measured across four dimensions: pedagogical, personality, social, and professional competence. The findings indicate that the PPG program effectively supported the self-development of PAI teachers who have obtained professional certification. The PPG program enhanced teachers' competencies across all dimensions, with the most significant improvement in personality competence. However, in the professional dimension, areas such as learning evaluation and the use of technology and digital learning require further strengthening post-PPG program. This article provides recommendations for stakeholders to develop continuing professional education programs following the PPG program, taking into consideration PAI teachers' lack of competence.

Keywords: competence; PPG; in-service teacher education program; self-assessment

1. Introduction

Qualified and professional teachers are essential for an educational institution to achieve excellence [1,2]. Thus, enhancing teachers' quality is both critical and urgent in the educational sector [3]. Professional teachers are those who not only have the ability to deliver learning materials but also have a strong desire to learn, skills in various fields, broad insights, skills in using technology, the ability to creatively design teaching methods, and leadership qualities [4,5]. Such educators are pivotal in preparing generations capable of facing global challenges. Teachers must continuously develop these various abilities to contribute to Indonesia's vision for its golden era in 2045 [6,7].

In this context, the fundamental duty and functions of teachers are to obtain sufficient knowledge to formulate learning objectives and experience to achieve the objectives through learning activities in the classroom and school environment. As Lauermann [8] stated, a teacher's primary professional responsibilities include managing learning processes; demonstrating good organizational skills, perseverance, time management, and adherence to regulations and ethical standards; and promoting unity and integrity. In

addition, professional teachers are also expected to engage in collaborative tasks and active learning, maintain a focus on content [9], and possess professional expertise and knowledge [10]. In Islamic Religious Education (*Pendidikan Agama Islam*/PAI), teachers are expected not only to uphold their professional responsibilities but also serve as exemplars of faith and religious commitment [11]. Additionally, the Islamic education concept views and respects teachers as custodians of extensive knowledge, whereas secular education views teachers as knowledgeable guides and learning partners [12].

The mastery of competencies such as discipline and professionalism is crucial for supporting the work of professional PAI teachers. These competencies develop systematically rather than appearing suddenly. Therefore, providing teachers with high-quality education and ongoing support is essential. In response, the government is enhancing teacher professionalism through an in-service teacher education program [13] for Islamic school (madrassah) and PAI teachers. This mandatory program, implemented in 48 teacher training institutes (*Lembaga Pendidikan Tenaga Kependidikan*/LPTK) under the Ministry of Religious Affairs since 2024, has enrolled 13,409 teachers from various education levels [14].

In the Indonesian context, numerous studies have analyzed the benefits of the in-service teacher education program (*Program Pendidikan Profesi Guru Dalam Jabatan*/PPG Daljab or PPG program) in enhancing teacher competence and quality. For instance, research has revealed that the PPG program effectively improves teacher quality [15]. In addition, Putri and Fatimah [16] found that self-assessment enhances teacher pedagogical competence. Thus, the PPG program aligns with the government's plan to improve teacher qualities. However, this research emphasizes four key indicators for a successful program: teacher readiness, teacher support, excellent time allocation, and government policy. The findings also highlight the significant impact of teacher relationships on the program's success.

But unfortunately, the implementation of the program faces several challenges. A study by Syafitri et al. [17] revealed several obstacles that prevent PPG students from fully obtaining the benefits of the program, including time limitations, understanding the learning material, the environment, and technical issues. Previous research also identified another challenge during the PPG program assessment, noting that social skills, one of the four indicators created by the teacher and lecturers, influence the achievement of the expected competencies [18].

Researchers from different countries have employed various methods. For instance, research by João et al. [19] utilizing an educational design research approach explored the design and assessment of the PPG program, aiming to enhance teachers' ability to operationalize science teaching. Research on the impact of in-service education and training for foreign language teachers found that it effectively influenced teachers' subject knowledge, general knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge related to competency-based language teaching [20], preparing lessons and materials, using technology in teaching, and providing timely feedback to students [21]. Further, a systematic review evaluating professional programs using the classroom assessment system approach revealed positive results in improving the quality of teacher–student interaction and pedagogical quality [22].

Research on the impact of PPG programs on improving teachers' competence and self-development post-PPG is limited, particularly regarding reflective self-assessments by teachers themselves. These self-assessments encourage critical reflection by prompting teachers to explore personal experiences through probing questions, thereby enhancing the understanding of each teaching event [23]. This is crucial for assessing the continuous and sustainable quality improvement in PAI teachers in schools. In this research, teacher competence is evaluated based on the indicators outlined in Indonesian teacher regulations: pedagogical, personal, social, and professional competencies [24–27].

Based on this background, this research aims to describe the effect of the in-service teacher education program on the competence of PAI teachers using the individual self-assessment method. Teacher competence is measured across four dimensions: pedagogical, personal, social, and professional. Spiritual and leadership competencies were not in-

cluded in this research work. This research aims to contribute to the science of continuing professional training programs for teachers. Additionally, it offers practical benefits to education stakeholders by enabling data-based decision-making in the design of more effective policies, curriculum development, and sustainable teacher professional development training materials.

2. Literature Review

2.1. In-Service Teacher Education Program (PPG Daljab) in Indonesia

Programs, as the driving force of the modern society, have been widely applied in various fields, including education [28]. The PPG program aims to enhance teachers' competence, professionalism, and prosperity. It fosters teachers as independent learners, innovative agents of change, and leaders in professional education at the national and international levels [29]. Improving teachers' professional competence aligns with the competency needs of the 21st century, which include two dimensions: information and communication (effective communication ethics and social impact) [30].

The in-service PPG program equips teachers with the four competencies stated in the Teacher and Lecture Law [24] and the Regulation of The Standards of Academic Qualifications and Teacher Competencies [27]. In addition, the Regulation of Professional Teacher Education Programs addresses pedagogical competencies for teachers in the PPG program [26]. These teacher competencies include pedagogical, personal, social, and professional competencies. According to the Decree of Guidelines for the Development of National Standards for Islamic Religious Education in Schools, PAI teachers should incorporate two new competencies: spirituality and leadership [25].

Research on the competencies of primary school teachers in Indonesia highlights several key areas. Pedagogical competence equips teachers to effectively and efficiently conduct teaching and learning activities based on educational standards. Professional competence ensures that teachers act responsibly and effectively, adhering to performance standards. Personal competence is reflected in attitudes and behaviors that align with ethical standards in the classroom and school environment. Social competence relates to the ability to interact effectively with others [31]. Professional teachers also engage in collaborative tasks, actively learn, focus on content [9], and possess professional expertise and knowledge [10,32]. The attitude and behavior of open-mindedness and readiness to change are important aspects of becoming a professional teacher [33].

In Indonesia, the PPG program for PAI teachers in schools and Islamic schools (madrassahs) is delivered online, ensuring broad and equitable access, even in remote areas [34]. Teachers who meet the requirements, regardless of their location, have equal opportunities to participate in the PPG program. Upon graduation, teachers are expected to continuously enhance their competence and perform self-development. Improving teacher competency is essential for creating effective learning at all educational levels.

To enhance the professionalism of teachers within the Ministry of Religious Affairs, including PAI teachers, the government launched a PPG program. PAI teachers are education professionals who impart Islamic religious knowledge to students and the community. The madrassah curriculum includes PAI subjects such as Qur'an and Hadith, Faith, and Character (*Aqidah Akhlak*); Islamic Law (Fiqh), History of Islamic Culture; and Arabic. PAI teachers can also lead local religious content learning programs, such as *Qiro'ah* of the Qur'an; *Tahfidz* of the Qur'an; Science of *Tajwid*, *Imla*; Science of *Faraidl, Nahwu, Shorof, Balaghah, Qira'atul Kutub, Khat*; and reading and writing of the Qur'an literacy [35]. This aligns with the PAI curriculum in Muslim-majority countries worldwide, designed for students who identify as Muslims [36]. In Indonesia, religion teachers, both civil and non-civil servants, work in education units organized by local governments, other ministries, and community organizations [37].

As of 24 August 2022, the Ministry of Religious Affairs reported 223,209 PAI teachers in Indonesia with undergraduate qualifications [38]. Given this number, it is challenging for LPTKs within the Ministry to organize undergraduate or professional education programs

for teachers. Currently, there are 48 LPTK state Islamic higher education institutions spread across all provinces in Indonesia mandated to conduct ongoing training programs for PAI teachers.

2.2. Teacher Self-Assessment

In this study, self-improvement dimensions were measured through individual self-assessments conducted by teachers, offering an overview of their competency progress towards becoming professional PAI teachers. Self-assessment allows teachers to evaluate and reflect on their own work or learning to determine whether their achievements align with required standards. Self-assessment is widely used in the field of education to assess learners' academic performance by reflecting on their achievements in developing professional knowledge [39].

According to teacher change theory, self-assessment is a technique for improving teachers' professional performance or achievement. It helps define excellence, improve teaching practice based on experience, facilitate communication with peers, and increase the influence of external change agents on teacher practice [40]. For instance, research by Zhang et al. [41] developed a self-assessment model based on professional competency standards for teachers. Teacher self-assessment, as an internal quality management mechanism in quality management, positively influences teachers' professional performance [42]. It enables teachers to self-reflect, identify strengths, and recognize weaknesses, thereby improving their achievement of professional competencies.

Teachers can use self-assessment results to identify their development needs based on the challenges or requirements they have identified. This result will certainly be effective when teachers conduct an honest and open assessment of their performance, including strengths, and identify areas that need improvement [43]. Furthermore, this study outlines several strategies for teacher self-assessment, including individual, feedback, and interactive assessment. It employed an individual assessment checklist to help teachers evaluate their various responsibilities as educators. By asking probing questions about each teaching event, individual assessment also serves as a form of critical reflection [23].

3. Materials and Methods

This study employed a quantitative approach [44,45] to examine the impact of the PPG program on the pedagogical, personal, social, and professional competence of participating PAI teachers. The following sections discuss the respondents, as well as data collection and analysis procedures.

3.1. Respondents

The study population included teachers participating in the in-service teacher education program in Java, selected through purposive sampling based on their participation in the PPG program. This population consisted of a total of 255 teachers from three LPTKs with the highest PPG enrollment: UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, and UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta (LPTKs UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung (https://ppg.uinsgd.ac.id/, accessed on 13 November 2024), UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta (https://ppg.uin-suka.ac.id/, accessed on 13 November 2024), and UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta (https://fitk.uinjkt.ac.id/id/pendidikan-profesi-guru) accessed on 15 August 2024) were sampled. Table 1 presents the distribution of the respondents.

The gender distribution of the respondents was nearly balanced, with 50.2% female teachers and 49.8% male teachers. This balance suggests that both genders similarly perceive the impact of the PPG program on their pedagogical and professional development. Respondents' age ranged from 26 to over 50 years, with the largest group (61.6%) aged between 36 and 50 years old. This distribution suggests that mid-career teachers are the most represented, likely due to the critical nature of professional development. The majority of respondents (57.3%) have 11–20 years of teaching experience, indicating that

experienced teachers are actively participating in the PPG program to further enhance their competencies.

Table 1. Demographic information of respondents.

LPTK	Gender		Age (Years)				Length of Employment (Years)			
	Male	Female	<26	26–35	36–50	>50	<5	5–10	11–20	>20
UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung	77	78	5	14	94	42	5	34	95	21
UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta	33	29	-	18	42	2	5	20	36	1
UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta	17	21	-	13	21	4	4	17	15	2
Frequency	127	128	5	45	157	48	14	71	146	24
Relative frequency (%)	49.8%	50.2%	2.0%	17.6%	61.6%	18.8%	5.5%	27.8%	57.3%	9.4%

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

The questionnaire used in this study was carefully designed by the first and second authors, experts in the in-service PPG program, to gather relevant information and align it with the research objectives. Validity and reliability tests were conducted to ensure that the instruments used had good internal consistency [45]. Developed in Bahasa Indonesia, the questionnaire was based on the indicators of pedagogical competence outlined in the Regulation of the Minister of National Education Number 16 of 2007 concerning The Standards of Academic Qualifications and Teacher Competencies [27]. In addition, the Regulation of The Minister of Education and Culture Number 87 of 2013 Concerning Professional Teacher Education Programs discuss pedagogical competencies for teachers in the PPG program [26], along with the Decree of the Minister of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia Number 211 of 2011 Concerning Guidelines for the Development of National Standards for Islamic Religious Education in Schools [25]. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions, with a five-point Likert scale [46], ranging from "never" to "always". It was distributed to 255 PPG teachers via Google Forms [47]. Google Forms is an online survey platform offering free tools for survey creation, response collection, and data analysis services. Online surveys enable researchers to collect data from different parts of the world [48], which, in this study, include respondents from different provinces: Bandung, West Java; Yogyakarta, Special Region of Yogyakarta; and Jakarta, Special Capital Region of Jakarta. The questionnaire used in this study is available at the following link https://tinyurl.com/4wc65s7y (from 6 September 2023 to 10 October 2023, respondents accessed this questionnaire).

Respondents completed the questionnaire independently, providing self-assessments of their pedagogical, personal, social, and professional competences. Each dimension was measured using several relevant indicators. Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed using Excel Spreadsheet software. Descriptive analysis was conducted to describe the distribution of the respondents and calculate the mean scores for each indicator. The results of the descriptive analysis are presented in tables and narratives.

4. Results

The results of the individual self-assessment on pedagogical, personal, and social competency dimensions are presented in Table 2.

The pedagogical competence dimension was measured using seven indicators: mastery of students' characteristics (C1), theories and principles of learning (C2), curriculum (C3), understanding educational learning activities (C4), development of students' potential (C5), effective communications with students (C6), and evaluation (C7). These dimensions were developed into 41 indicators. Among these, over half of the PAI teachers who participated in PPG (52.58%) consistently applied their pedagogical competence. This

suggests that teachers who participate in PPG have good knowledge and awareness of pedagogical principles.

Table 2. Pedagogical, personality, and social competency dimensions.

Dimension	Sub-Dimension	Frequency					Relative Frequency (%)				
		Always	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never	Always	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
Pedagogical competence	C1	836	584	98	5	7	54.64	38.17	6.41	0.33	0.46
	C2	781	634	109	5	1	51.05	41.44	7.12	0.33	0.07
	C3	413	282	61	7	2	53.99	36.86	7.97	0.92	0.26
	C4	1218	922	140	7	8	53.07	40.17	6.10	0.31	0.35
	C5	877	748	154	4	2	49.13	41.90	8.63	0.22	0.11
	C6	862	601	62	3	2	56.34	39.28	4.05	0.20	0.13
	C7	510	424	80	5	1	50.00	41.57	7.84	0.49	0.10
	Mean						52.58	40.12	6.73	0.34	0.22
Personality competence	C8	931	309	30	2	3	73.02	24.24	2.35	0.16	0.24
	C9	852	351	62	6	4	66.82	27.53	4.86	0.47	0.31
	C10	1168	531	78	3	5	65.43	29.75	4.37	0.17	0.28
	Mean						68.07	27.47	3.92	0.25	0.28
Social competence	C11	590	165	6	1	3	77.12	21.57	0.78	0.13	0.39
	C12	432	288	44	1	0	56.47	37.65	5.75	0.13	0.00
	Mean						66.80	29.61	3.27	0.13	0.20

Personal competence represents a personal skill that reflects a steady, stable, mature, wise, authoritative, and noble character. This competence encompasses three sub-dimensions: adhering to norms (C8), demonstrating maturity (C9), and maintaining a high work ethic (C10). These sub-competencies were developed into seventeen (17) indicators. Based on the questionnaire responses, personal competence scored a high index of 68.07%. This indicates that PAI teachers who graduated from PPG have a very high self-perception, consistently applying their personal competence.

Social competence reflects educators' ability to communicate and interact effectively with students, colleagues, teaching staff, parents, and the broader community. Teachers, as social beings, engage daily in social interactions at school and within the community. Therefore, they must possess adequate social skills. Social competence includes two sub-competencies, inclusivity and effective communication, developed into six indicators. In this study, PAI teachers have a perception index of approximately 66.80%, indicating that PPG graduates consistently exhibit strong social competence.

The data presented highlight teachers' self-perceptions regarding professional competencies, including sub-dimensions and measured indicators: learning planning (I-14), implementation (I-17), evaluation (I-42), and the use of ICT media for learning (I-27). Professional competence includes the mastery of material, structure, concepts, scientific reasoning, and reflective activities. Teachers are responsible for developing materials, planning and implementing learning, conducting evaluations and assessments, and utilizing information technology in education. Table 3 provides an overview of the self-assessment findings on professional competence.

Table 3. Professional competence dimension.

Indicator	Frequency					Relative Frequency (%)				
	Always	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never	Always	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
I-14	158	85	11	1	0	61.96	33.33	4.31	0.39	0
I-17	142	99	14	0	0	55.69	38.82	5.49	0	0
I-42	127	103	25	0	0	49.80	40.39	9.80	0	0
I-27	113	107	34	1	0	44.31	41.96	13.33	0.39	0

The data indicate that professional competence remains below optimal levels. While more than half of the respondents frequently implement professional practices, consistency is lacking. Specifically, 41.96% of teachers often use ICT-based learning media, while 13.33% sometimes use it. Similarly, evaluation competence is underutilized, with only 40.39% frequently conducting evaluations. Despite these gaps, many teachers consistently apply planning and implementation strategies to facilitate learning. These data suggest

that teachers recognize the need for further improvement in evaluation and the use of technology in learning after graduating from the PPG program.

5. Discussion

The pedagogical competence dimension is crucial for teachers as it encompasses understanding and guiding students' learning processes. Pedagogical competence is a distinctive competence that distinguishes teachers from other professions and determines the success of the process and outcomes of students' learning. Understanding and directing students' pedagogical and dialogical learning are a part of pedagogical competence. They include the abilities to understand students, plan and implement learning, assess learning outcomes, and develop students' various potentials [49]. Teachers' competencies can be measured effectively through self-assessment, which, as noted by Hašková et al. [42], Iwanicki and Mceachern [43], and Ross and Bruce [40], encourages reflective practice and self-monitoring, promotes academic integrity, develops self-directed learning, increases student motivation, and helps students develop a range of personal transferrable skills. Through self-assessment, PAI teachers in the PPG program can identify their strengths and weaknesses, enhancing their self-awareness to reflect on their teaching method, classroom management, and student engagement. This process involves determining and applying assessment criteria or indicators for each competency, combined with self-reflection and the calibration of self-assessment.

This study found that PAI teachers participating in the PPG program have a moderate perception of their pedagogical competence, with an average of always applying these skills competencies at around 52.58%. This aligns with previous research by Putri and Fatimah [16], which demonstrated an improvement in teachers' pedagogical skills post-PPG program. However, opportunity for growth remains, particularly in the areas of student engagement and adopting innovative teaching strategies.

The role of teachers in today's learning environment extends beyond merely employing traditional methods. Instead, teachers must be able to create smart teaching as an essential skill to create an active learning environment in their classroom. To be able to realize smart teaching, they must have special abilities to implement approaches that integrate pedagogy, technology, and classroom management [50]. In relation to technology, research indicates that a significant number of teachers still utilize Information and communication technology (ICT) for learning frequently (41.96%), while the rest only occasionally use it (13.33%). ICT has become increasingly important both in everyday life and in the education system. ICT has an increasingly important role in education, whether in the classroom, administration, online learning, or other activities [51]. However, in practice, many teachers still have problems with technological and digital literacy in education [52]. In this scientific era and with technological development, teachers face such challenges of guiding students who are generally literate in digital technology. This problem also becomes the focus of Islamic education, especially in PAI subjects, aimed to equip teachers with abilities to use digital technology [53].

As explained by Kiryakova and Kozhuharova [47], education systems must reflect and adapt to the new digital reality to effectively engage and prepare students for the future, and teachers must have digital competencies in order to support their teaching practices using digital tools and technologies. As the research findings demonstrated, teachers argued the importance of specific digital competencies. However, the findings indicated that the teachers have been actively using digital technology in their daily teaching activities (84.8%) to create and provide learning content; encourage learners' active participation; evaluate students' knowledge and skills; and deliver effective feedback.

In addition, Orakova et al. [54] explained that the use of technology in education and the integration of digital literacy and technological skills with pedagogy are some of the important competencies that teachers should possess. The research results align with this study, indicating a moderate level of digital literacy and technology proficiency. Teachers' digital literacy reflects their pedagogical and technological competencies.

In several examples of PAI learning in Indonesia, technology and digitally literate teachers developed their learning materials that align with the characteristics of students of the post-millennial Generation Z. For instance, the thematic learning of the digital Qur'an can improve students' religious dimension [55]. However, research also revealed that the use of ICT in PAI learning remained restricted to internet-sourced information materials and presentation media [56].

Personality competence, reflecting a teacher's maturity, stability, wisdom, and role model characteristics, received a high self-perception index of 68.07%. This indicates that PAI teachers perceive themselves to be capable of embodying the ethical and moral standards expected in their profession. The results support the claim by Andina [57] that communities view PAI teachers as role models who uphold high ethical standards. This view aligns with Grande et al. [58], who claim that teachers have an ethical obligation to serve as role models for their students, as explored in studies on the ethical theories of virtue, care, freedom, and exemplary ethics.

Since the characteristics of Islamic education differ from those of Western education, which often emphasizes materialistic and market-driven perspectives, PAI teachers must embrace ethics as a crucial pillar. Islamic education emphasizes spiritual, moral, and holistic orientations [12]. Therefore, the teacher's role extends beyond merely teaching material and methods. It involves fostering moral interaction with students by imparting sound ethical principles [59].

Social competence involves effective communication and interaction within the school environment and community. This study indicates that PAI teachers have a high perception of their social competence, with a mean score of approximately 66.80%. This suggests that PPG participants are proficient in maintaining positive relationships with students, parents, and colleagues. This finding contrasts with previous research that highlighted social issues among teachers during the PPG program [18] but aligns with studies showing that teachers supported each other, thereby enhancing their social skills [60].

The individual self-assessment results offer stakeholders a clear understanding of the competence gap among PAI teachers who participated in the PPG program. Consequently, this self-assessment serves as a tool for evaluating needs and developing ongoing professional education for madrasah teachers that aligns with Indonesia's demands [37]. Designing professional development programs tailored to teachers' specific requirements can enhance their ability to deliver excellent instruction and improve students' achievement [61].

This study's limitations lie in focusing solely on measuring the impact after implementing the PPG program. The results do not provide a comprehensive picture due to teachers' pre-existing positive perceptions of the competencies acquired. In the context of the 21st century and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, there is governmental concern about the impact of educational research, particularly the PPG program, on teachers' abilities and professionalism in Indonesia [13]. Therefore, to assess changes in PAI teachers' competencies, future researchers should measure perceptions both before and after the program.

In addition to the individual assessments used in this study, self-assessment strategies can also be employed. Future research can incorporate feedback and interactive assessment strategies, involving input from various parties, such as students, peers, educational staff, principals, and school supervisors [43]. Furthermore, integrating video recording for teacher self-assessment could be advantageous, as demonstrated by studies where teachers aim to showcase their performance [62].

6. Conclusions

In general, the self-assessment technique serves as an effective tool for teachers to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses, thereby supporting their professional tasks. The graduate teachers in the PPG program exhibited a wide range of self-perceptions, ranging from the lowest on the use of digital technology-based learning media to the highest on

the personal competence dimension. Professional competence is the focal point of the moderate perception index, while the four pedagogical competencies tend to score lower. Notably, the professional competence index stands apart from weaker indicators, albeit remaining at a moderately low level. Teachers acknowledge that their abilities in planning and utilizing learning technology have not significantly improved since graduating from the PPG program. PAI teachers continue to perceive limited progress in learning evaluation, the integration of technology, and digital learning tools.

While the PPG program has positively influenced teachers' perceptions of their competencies, continuous support and targeted interventions are necessary to address the areas of professional competence and career planning. Educational stakeholders should focus on enhancing technology integration skills in learning and providing clear career development pathways to maximize the program's benefits. The PPG program has effectively accelerated the self-growth of certified teachers, highlighting the need for stakeholders to prioritize the career path and status of PAI teachers in schools. Our research's limitations prevent us from measuring the spiritual and leadership competencies required of a PAI teacher in Indonesia. These limitations suggest that further research is needed to measure the competencies of PAI teachers, including six dimensions: pedagogical, personality, social, professional, spiritual, and leadership.

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Article

An Autoethnography of an Islamic Teacher Education Programme

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Abstract: This article explores Islamic Teacher Education through an autoethnographic account of the author's experience with the Graduate Certificate of Education (Islamic Pedagogy) at the University of South Australia. It addresses the lack of research on how Islamic Pedagogy is taught, contributing to the growing scholarship on faith-based teacher education. Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that combines autobiography and ethnography, emphasising personal experiences to explore cultural communities. It is especially useful in studying emerging concepts like Islamic Pedagogy and faithful praxis. This approach challenges Western positivism, promoting epistemic reflexivity, and offering critical insights into marginalised perspectives and educational practices. This paper employs autoethnography to present the author's faithful praxis journey as a transformative pedagogical shift, shaped by their experiences with Western and Islamic epistemologies, aiming to empower Muslim voices in education and challenge marginalisation, with the Graduate Certificate fostering epistemic reflexivity and providing a platform to reconcile Islamic and Western knowledge in the classroom. This paper also clarifies the distinction between Islamic Pedagogy and Islamic integration through autoethnography by highlighting their complementary nature as opposed to the author's initial assumptions around their interchangeability. Whilst this article contributes to the growing Islamic Teacher Education scholarship through an autoethnographic perspective, further research to assess broader program efficacy is still needed.

Keywords: Islamic Pedagogy; autoethnography; faithful praxis; epistemic reflexivity; faith-based teacher education; Islamic worldview; Western Epistemology; curriculum renewal

1. Introduction

This article contributes to the emerging scholarship exploring how Islamic teacher education programmes are delivered through an autoethnography of the author's experiences completing the Graduate Certificate of Education (Islamic Education) at the University of South Australia, herein referred to as the 'Grad Cert'. The flourishing body of Islamic Pedagogy scholarship thus far has focused on a philosophical grounding within, amongst other theoretical approaches, faithful praxis (Memon et al., 2024b), curriculum renewal (Memon et al., 2021), Islamic Pedagogy (Memon, 2021), learner development from an Islamic perspective (Alkouatli, 2021), and the centrality of a Muslim ethos within Muslim schools (Trevathan, 2018). This proliferation of scholarship emphasises just how much has been written about *what* Islamic teacher education programmes in the West should deliver, whilst underscoring the ongoing need to synthesise a greater depth and nuance in Islamic Pedagogy as a philosophy of faith-based education that is grounded in an Islamic worldview (Memon et al., 2024a). However, little has been written on *how* Islamic Pedagogy is taught within Islamic teacher education programmes. Memon et al.'s (2024a) introduction for this Special Issue on Islamically grounded teacher education foregrounds the need to

address this paucity in the scholarship on Islamic teacher education programmes, where 'the journey of Islamic school educators grappling with what it means to carve out a distinct identity and sense of self-efficacy requires ongoing research.'(Memon et al., 2024a, p. 18) This paper's contribution to this ongoing research is marked by an autoethnographic focus on the formative process of achieving faithful praxis within the Grad Cert.

2. Theoretical Framework

The autoethnography is a form of qualitative and ethnographic research that seeks to understand a specific cultural community. As an emerging research methodology, there is a growing body of literature seeking to assess autoethnography (Herrmann & Adams, 2024). It involves the researcher drawing on their own experiences, even employing poetic performance (Yan, 2025), as the primary source of qualitative data. It can be considered a combination of autobiography and ethnography that 'emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between the interpersonal and the intrapersonal via writing, leading to the discovery of the relevancy of one's personal life to their professional role(s) (and vice versa)' (Hibbs, 2024, pp. 425–426). Its ability to emancipate marginalised voices from the Global South is showcased in Wayfinding and Critical Autoethnography in the way (Iosefo, 2021), which uncovers the way diverse voices expand understandings of autoethnography as a critical, creative methodology that represents a versatility that is useful in exploring faithful praxis, which is itself an emerging concept that similarly adopts a critical approach from a marginalised perspective.

The autoethnography naturally lends itself to exploring the Grad Cert's ability to inculcate faithful praxis through a number of key strengths. One of these strengths is its ability to qualitatively capture the rich nuances of faithful praxis by capturing its practical manifestation within the educator experience of understanding, internalising, reflecting upon, embodying, and implementing Islamic Pedagogy. The emergent nature of Islamic Pedagogy gives it a limited pool of research participants. This lends itself to explicating my distinct identity and sense of self-efficacy as a Muslim secondary English educator in the Australian (NSW) education system, whilst the paucity of extensive studies with larger samples justifies an autoethnographic focus that addresses the 'absence of literature from a student's perspective on the experience of online education' (Lovegrove, 2020, p. 225). There is also a synergy between autoethnographic research and Islamic Pedagogy, derived from their common approach of challenging the epistemic normativity of Western positivism. Cremin (2018) notes how autoethnographies have been overlooked within academic scholarship due to the positivistic premium placed on quantitative research methods, asserting the value of a 'qualitative enquiry…that is existential, autoethnographic, vulnerable, performative, and critical' (Cremin, 2018, p. 1). This critically performative role also materialises in Islamic Pedagogy's pursuit of 'epistemic reflexivity', which seeks to achieve epistemic confidence and sovereignty, establish the ontologically anchored role of the educator within an Islamic worldview, and mount a challenge to Western, colonial understandings of education (Memon et al., 2024a). 'Epistemic reflexivity' is thus a cornerstone of the Grad Cert as it is a primary means of achieving the Grad Cert's end goal of inculcating 'faithful praxis' within educators. Its criticality towards the normative market-driven, secular, and positivistic assumptions within Western education positions epistemic reflexivity as the vehicle through which the Grad Cert achieves its end goal of inculcating faithful praxis.

There are, however, limitations to an autoethnography in the long term within a dynamic and growing online education space. For instance, how will the efficacy of engaging educators in faithful praxis completing the Grad Cert be longitudinally tracked amongst a large cohort of students? Additionally, as an online course, the Grad Cert faces unique

challenges within online education that arise when tried and true pedagogical approaches need to be modified for online delivery as they were developed and tested for smaller, face-to-face settings (Broadbent, 2020). My sole appraisal within an autoethnography holds minimal weight for a course-wide strategy, which is where quantitative methodologies, particularly longitudinal studies, are better suited to exploring individual views amongst a large cohort. Nonetheless, the purpose of the autoethnography as a 'dialogic quest to understand the world' (Cremin, 2018, p. 1) positions it as an ideal empirical starting point.

The sequential structure of subjects within the Grad Cert also aligns with the autoethnographic propensity for dialogical inquiry. As epistemic reflectivity is developed progressively within these four subjects, the educator's unique experience can powerfully reveal the emergence of faithful praxis in a way that 'attempts to integrate body, emotion and autobiography with aesthetics and ethnographic research' (Cremin, 2018, p. 1). The first subject, 'Principles and Praxis', lays the foundational theoretical underpinnings of an Islamic worldview within Islamic Pedagogy, positioning educators to familiarise themselves with and/or rediscover the rich Muslim tradition within education that recognises the nurturing of the soul and the importance of good morals and character. The second subject, 'Quality Teaching and Learning', seeks to deepen the understanding of Islamic Pedagogy by applying it to both broad educational theories and specific instructional practices. The educator's principled approach is developed within Islamic theory to reflect their faithful praxis. This is achieved by encouraging epistemic reflexivity by facilitating Islamic Pedagogy's potential to shape instructional practices and promote pedagogical renewal. The third subject, 'Managing Learning Environments', explores the impact of learning environment management on students' growth, development, wellbeing, and safety to emphasise student-centred priorities in schools with a focus on a more holistic, proactive approach. Faithful practice emerges through a recognition of the intersection between issues of behaviour and discipline with values, morals, faith, and spirituality within Islamic schooling. The capstone subject 'Critical Perspectives on Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment' aims to reconnect purpose, coherence, and alignment across curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment in schools by exploring curriculum models in Islamic schools that promote faithful praxis. Educators embark on an action research approach to actively engage in shaping the course content to address educational challenges and aspirations relevant to the educator's context.

It becomes clear that measuring the achievement of educator faithful praxis is the key benchmark to measuring *how* the Grad Cert is delivered. For the purpose of this paper, the tangible manifestations of epistemic reflexivity within the Grad Cert, which materialise through assessment deliverables, attest to the 'coherence between faith inspired beliefs about education and challenging realities within contemporary Islamic schools'. (Memon et al., 2024a, p. 13) The next section will outline how 'key turns' within the educator provide cohesive milestones representing epistemic reflexivity within the educator.

3. Method

Memon et al. (2024a) describe the advancement of the Grad Cert curriculum through five 'key turns', which represent milestones representing epistemic reflexivity within the educator. It is these key turns that will methodologically guide this autoethnography and act as a productive lens with which to chart the achievement of faithful praxis. These are (1) the 'inward turn'; (2) the 'critical turn'; (3) the 'reflexive turn'; (4) the 'turn back'; and (5) the 'pedagogical turn'. Acting as milestones of epistemic reflexivity, these turns are intended to challenge the bifurcation facing Islamic school educators, which becomes evident when there is a clash between the desire to nurture the soul of Muslim learners through education grounded in an Islamic worldview, and the entrenched normativity positioning

educators to deliver a curriculum rooted in Western, neoliberal, secular, positivistic, and market-driven expectations. My decision to embark upon the Grad Cert is rooted in my long-held personal motivation as a Muslim learner seeking an empowered Muslim voice, which acts as a countervailing force that challenges the othering of Muslims. As such, the beginning of the 'inward turn' began much earlier than my enrolment in the Grad Cert and in fact began in high school. To illustrate why I chose to undertake Grad Cert, I need to chart my progressive development as a learner by explaining why I became a teacher who values an education from an Islamic worldview. And to do that, I need to take you all the way back to my experiences at Granville Boys High School.

4. Analysis

4.1. Prologue (To the 'Inward Turn'): 'The Turbaned Turk'

It was 2005 and I was sitting in the back right corner of the room with my mates Burak and Şahin. We were studying Shakespeare's Othello, where insults like 'turbaned Turk' seemed personal, as we were the sons of Turkish immigrants to Australia. Classroom discussions in Year 11 English, contextualising the historical and political milieu of Shakespeare's time, placated any deep sense of offense from this insult through an expectation we remain stoic under the assumption that 'She'll be right mate'. Trying to navigate our identity as Australian or Türk or Muslim was not something new. Around the same time in high school, we were watching a scene from Peter Weir's 1981 film Gallipoli in Year 10 history class. An ANZAC soldier throws a grenade towards the Turks whilst shouting 'Good morning, Abdul!', which had me standing up from my chair in a 'What the...' moment. This moment was quickly diffused by my down-to-earth history teacher, who smoothed it over with playful banter. You cannot help but take your hat off to Mr Baker, a resolute teacher who was able engage chest-beating, hot-headed, and testosterone-filled 15-year-old boys. Not only did we feel the need to articulate our Muslim identity, but we needed to be taught how to do so positively and productively.

There was another epithet back in Year 11 English class that really jolted me. These rabid words mauled themselves into my long-term memory: 'circumcised dog'. Circumcision is a religious obligation for all Muslim males that bestows a sense of pride and honour. I had never viewed it in a negative light until that point, apart perhaps from considerations of the pain threshold of young boys. However, in this instance, it was being used in a clearly derogatory manner. My 'What the...?' reaction was followed by a simple yet profound question, "Why?".

Grappling with our Muslim identity in a secular state school was not something new. The students at Granville Boys High School would themselves organise the Friday congregational prayer (Juma) at lunchtime in the gym and sometimes be chastised by teachers for returning late to class following prayer. Our response would involve apologetically placating our teachers out of respect, although the prospect of missing out on 10 min of period 5 business studies on a Friday afternoon was not altogether unwelcomed. One Friday, one of the deputy principals at the time came to the gym to find a boy that was meant to serve a lunch detention. The deputy, seemingly unaware of Juma's significance and the emphasis placed upon its obligatory nature, approached the boy and addressed him *during* the congregational prayer. The boy did not respond. The deputy then proceeded to pull the boy up from his position of prostration, I guess because he thought the boy was conveniently ignoring him and trying to get out of detention. The boy simply pulled free of the deputy's hold to return to prostration. The events that followed the conclusion of that Juma prayer are seared into my mind, and it seemed as though the entire congregation moved as one solid structure from the gym to outside that deputy principal's room. The deputy principal had locked himself inside his room, whilst a lively protest unfolded just

outside his door. Whilst the actions of the deputy clearly came from a place of ignorance, they nonetheless sparked an energetic response that showed me just how resolute and empowered high school Muslims can be.

These memories acted as flickers of candlelight that illuminated my Muslim identity at the time, anecdotes that explain my impetus for empowering the Muslim voice. The "Why?" for the 'circumcised dog' epithet was momentary, yet emblematic of how the Muslim identity and voice of learners were subject to throw-away comments and casually downplayed as a geopolitical oddity. The power of language to perpetuate the idea of 'turbaned Turks' and 'circumcised dogs' remains today, as does the importance of developing Muslim identity and a (counter) voice. I left the school feeling that I needed to continue to develop a strong Muslim voice, both mine and that of the collective, in whatever way I could. This feeling would drive a deep desire to uncover and amplify an empowered Muslim voice within my high school English lessons as an educator.

4.2. The 'Inward Turn'

Enrolment in EDUC 5262: Principles and Praxis helped to clarify my pedagogical challenge to empower Muslim learners receiving an education dominated by Western epistemologies. I saw firsthand how a Western education, particularly in Australia, pre-dominantly emphasises positivist, empirical, and secular knowledge derived from the European Enlightenment in a way that marginalises Muslim epistemologies, limiting Muslim students' ability to critique the dominant paradigms and understand their heritage. My pedagogical challenge was articulated by a desire to integrate both Western and Muslim epistemologies to empower Muslim students to succeed academically while critically engaging with societal issues, for example, studying texts like Othello in a way where Muslim students critically engage with racial and religious othering through Orientalism (Said, 1979). To do so critically and effectively, there is a benefit in drawing on both Western and Muslim scholarship through an interdisciplinary approach inspired by the German theologian Daniel Friedrich Schleiermacher.

Zimmermann's Hermeneutics: A Very Short Introduction (2015) outlines Schleiermacher's interdisciplinary approach as a 'hermeneutic conversation' (Zimmermann, 2015, p. 24). The hermeneutic conversation aims to mediate conflicts between religion and science by focusing on universal conditions for understanding across various fields like theology, law, and history to defend religion against Enlightenment ideas that sought to reduce it to morality, aesthetics, or reason. Schleiermacher argued that both scientific and religious knowledge contribute to a holistic understanding of reality, leading to a deeper "God-consciousness", where a "holistic view of reality would mean, for example, that unified field theory in physics, Jesus's command to love one's enemy, and Shakespeare's warning against the destructive power of jealousy in Othello all contribute to our knowledge of reality" (Zimmermann, 2015, p. 27). Leaning into a hermeneutic conversation has many benefits for secondary school English which is mandated to teach the literary cannon. As Muslims seeking excellence in what we do (ihsan), we must capitalise on teaching the canon, including Shakespeare, which is explicitly mandated in the NSW English syllabus, in ways that still draw on Islamic Pedagogy. This will enable students to make meaningful connections between their studies in English and their wider identity as Muslims and the geopolitical realities of the world. By doing so, students' own voices are empowered as they too deepen their ontological consciousness to challenge prevailing worldviews with a more nuanced understanding rooted in Islamic principles.

Studying Othello in high school was thus crucial for driving my 'inward turn' to 'articulate a clear and compelling pedagogical challenge within [my] practice' (Memon et al., 2024a, p. 13) of empowering the Muslim voice through English. My enrolment in

EDUC 5262: Principles and Praxis reinforced the idea that teaching practice in the English classroom reflects Islamic Pedagogy, deepens ontological consciousness, is dialogical, and is ethical and justice-oriented (Memon, 2021). By this time, I had been teaching English for six years. Four of these were at a small Islamic school in Western Sydney, Irfan College (IC), where Islamic Pedagogy was embraced and progressively implemented. This context was conducive to my inward turn, which did not occur without initial scepticism. At the time, I applied Islamic Pedagogy in a piecemeal fashion with the planning and delivery of my lessons. I was struggling with the question, at that time, of how to apply Islamic pedagogy that was not superficial by "sprinkling" Islamic ideas and principles onto a lesson or programme. In my prototypical attempts to infuse Islamic Pedagogy, this involved taking a typical English lesson analysing language forms and features within texts and conducting a guided analysis of 'Surah al Fil' ('The Elephant'), the 105th chapter of the *Quran*.

4.3. The 'Critical Turn'

My enrolment in EDUC 5280—Managing Learning Environments, which was also during my employment at IC, provided the opportunity to critique a traditionally focused school 'Behaviour Management Guide' by exploring the potential integration of the 'Tarbiya' framework (Tauhidi, 2001), which emphasises holistic development, into teaching practices to foster moral literacy and a noble character in students. By doing so, a 'critical turn' seeking to 'reconnect Islamic school educators to a critical archive' (Memon et al., 2024a, p. 14) was realised. Whilst it sought to manage student behaviour through positive reinforcement to foster a safe and productive learning environment, the 'Behaviour Management Guide' at IC was nonetheless initially grounded in a functional, control-based approach to behaviour management. Whilst functional behaviour management approaches have their place, they are a blunt tool within Islamic schools when rooted solely within a Western paradigm (Charles & Barr, 2011; Richmond, 2007) as opposed to grounding student wellbeing within an Islamic worldview (Alkouatli, 2021; Rothman & Coyle, 2018). The inability of a classical behaviour management approach to fully consider the complex nuances of student behaviour means it ultimately fails in the goals of empowering students and treating them with dignity. The introduction of Islamic Pedagogy in IC resulted in a faith-based focus that proved effective in promoting positive reinforcement in the approach towards student behaviour. IC was pioneering at the time in minimising reliance only upon punitive methods such as detentions and monitoring cards, and instead focusing on strategies like nurturing emotional intelligence, applying logical consequences, and motivating students through self-reflection and ownership of their behaviour.

This subject also consolidated my faithful practice with respect to empowering the Muslim voice within high school English by implementing Islamic Pedagogy in a Year 9 English class at IC. Using the school's 'Philosophy of Assessment' document developed by Samah Taki and a 'Project Planner' to integrate Islamic principles into mainstream lessons, the goal was to enhance student engagement and manage classroom behaviour through Islamic Pedagogy, fostering a positive and respectful learning environment. The lessons focused on understanding cultural difference and racism, using the Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) 'Last Sermon' as a model for discussion and critical reflection. This approach successfully engaged students, with active participation in speeches and discussions on social justice, demonstrating the effectiveness of Islamic Pedagogy in enhancing academic and social outcomes.

4.4. The 'Reflexive Turn'

My enrolment in EDUC 5263—Islamic Pedagogy: Quality Teaching and Learning was marked by a critical time of transition within my career. The timing of this move serendipi-

tously supported a deep 'reflexive' turn that allowed me to be 'inspired to think anew...[to] find contextually relevant ways of responding to their practice realities' (Memon et al., 2024a, p. 15). My transition between three Islamic schools when completing this subject revealed the importance of 'epistemic multicentricity'(Memon et al., 2024b), helping to explain why Islamic Pedagogy was embraced or not in each of these three Islamic schools. A progressive shift away in my understanding of Islamic Pedagogy emerged at this time, as I moved away from merely appending Islam to a subject when redesigning programs as I did early in my career. I had been guided my assumption that Islamic Pedagogy was synonymous with embedding an Ayat or hadith within a lesson. This was an assumption that I would gradually dispel as I progressed through the Grad Cert and I slowly realised that Islamic Pedagogy was something not necessarily defined by its reference to Islamic ideals and principles, but nonetheless enhanced by them—which the course would refer to as the centrality of an Islamic worldview within Islamic Pedagogy. Most of my time as an educator in Islamic schools was spent at IC, amongst youngest and smallest in size of Islamic schools in Sydney. IC has pursued Islamic Pedagogy with enthusiasm and rigour since 2017, having signed a Memorandum of Understanding to collaborate with CITE in 2023. It is here that I developed a deep appreciation for my respected colleagues who were heavily involved with spearheading Islamic Pedagogy at IC, an appreciation that was nurtured through the brotherhood so powerfully represented through my attendance to my first CITE annual conference at Mt. Lofty in 2017. Sharing a Turkish breakfast in our heritage cottages in the mornings before grappling with the formative concepts of Islamic Pedagogy during the day continued to speak to the close bond and camaraderie I shared with dear colleagues from IC.

From IC, I transitioned to pursue a middle leadership opportunity at School X (I have chosen to anonymise its name in a manner not too dissimilar to Malcolm X's decision to change his surname). School X does not embrace Islamic Pedagogy and is amongst the largest and best academically performing Islamic schools in the state. My tenure of two weeks at School X was marked by a swift decision to cut my losses and transition to MFIS largely because there was no intention at School X to pursue Islamic Pedagogy in the slightest. My very brief time there confirmed their choice not to pursue Islamic Pedagogy as a reflection of a neoliberal, market-driven view of education that saw the choice to adopt Islamic Pedagogy as a mutually exclusive with attaining academic excellence. For School X, pursuing Islamic Pedagogy was incongruous with the pursuit of academic excellence. Reflecting a neoliberal view of education that emphasises the economics and technicisation of teaching, School X continues to accommodate for a market-oriented view of education, privileging academic performance for university entry, reflecting how the 'interplay between pressures of performativity while nurturing faith is an on-going struggle in faith-based schools' (Memon et al., 2024b, p. 2). I completed part of EDUC 5263 'Quality Teaching and Learning' whilst at School X, redesigning a Year 10 English boys class, where classes are academically streamed to prioritise academic achievement, with this being the 'lowest' academic class. The lesson focused on making the study of The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini more engaging by shifting away from the traditional teacher-centred reading approach to a more student-centred, inquiry-based learning model. The redesign aimed to foster critical reflection and active learning through minimal formal instruction, encouraging students to explore perspectives and analyse the text. It incorporated Islamic pedagogical principles, including relational pedagogy and mutual engagement, while allowing students to collaborate, reflect, and critically examine Islamic representations in the text. The lesson's success was measured by the extent to which it nurtured reflection and evoked awe and wonder. The process led to a deeper understanding of Islamic Pedagogy, distinguishing it from Islamic integration and emphasising its critical, dialogical, and

transformative nature. Whilst this experience reinforced the significance of an Islamic worldview in guiding pedagogy regardless of academic ability, it also crucially showed that Islamic Pedagogy can have a positive impact whether the school executive back it or not.

4.5. The 'Turn Back'

My turn 'back' towards an Islamic worldview was fully realised by the time I joined my current school, the largest and oldest Islamic school in Sydney, Malek Fahd Islamic School (MFIS). MFIS has been systematically pursuing Islamic Pedagogy in partnership with the Niyyah project since November 2020 in the pursuit of a process of renewal at MFIS in partnership with CITE. My turn 'back' culminated during my initial time at MFIS from September 2024, and was reflected in the opportunity to contribute to a debrief session that embodied my epistemic reflexivity. At this point of my faithful praxis journey, I had become more cognisant of the difference between Islamic Integration and Islamic Pedagogy. The conflation between Islamic Integration and Islamic Pedagogy was perhaps the largest hurdle for me to fully realising the value of the latter. My reflexive realisation was recognised in CITE's MFIS School Review Report Year 3,

> Educators in the debrief session revealed a greater understanding of the distinction between Islamic integration and Islamic Pedagogy. One educator explained his initial assumption that, 'Islamic pedagogy was potentially just like Islamic integration whereby, you sprinkle some terms or concepts and voila, you have an engaging lesson. But going through the course [Graduate Certificate], I found that by implementing relational pedagogies or the [Islamic pedagogical] principles of practice, you can see that it actually has a lot of value and that sets it apart from [other pedagogy].' He was able to discern a key point which it would seem thus far only the Graduate Certificate educators on this campus have gleaned, that engaging and enacting Islamic Pedagogy (as philosophy for *practice*) and experimenting with principled *practice* (Islamic pedagogical principles) for redesign of instruction, not only holds tremendous value, but more impactfully engages Islamic integration, as well as being 'enhanced by'. (Centre for Islamic Thought and Education, 2023, p. 39)

Just as it was for me, recognising the complementary nature of Islamic integration and Islamic Pedagogy perhaps represents a key hurdle for many if not most people initially encountering Islamic Pedagogy. The report extract above recognises that only Grad Cert educators made the same realisation, and these were the minority of MFIS educators at the time the report was written. This point is gradually being realised by a greater number of educators as school-wide professional development at MFIS seeks to clarify their complementary nature. The report extract above also serves as a critical manifestation of my faithful praxis. Unlike my initial attempts at Islamic Pedagogy in English all those years ago, in presenting a lesson sprinkling an exegesis of Surah Fil within a standalone textual analysis lesson within English, I had come to realise that Islamic Pedagogy was so much more. My capstone project for the final Grad Cert subject 'Critical Perspectives on Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment' critically reflected on the misunderstanding that Islamic Pedagogy was simply integrating Islamic teachings (like Qur'an verses and hadith) into education, which characterised much of my early efforts to implementing Islamic Pedagogy. After experiencing Islamic Pedagogy in practice, I realised that it goes beyond just integration, fostering critical, dialogical, and transformative learning that addresses both spiritual and academic development in a balanced approach. By addressing both academic and spiritual development, even within subjects like HSC English, the Grad Cert

challenges the misconception that academic rigour undermines spiritual growth, which is reiterated in the discussion of my pedagogical turn.

4.6. The 'Pedagogical Turn'

The capstone subject for the Grad Cert, EDUC 5279 Critical Perspectives on Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment, is pivotal in enabling the 'pedagogical turn' that 're-establishes educators over top-down policy as the drivers of pedagogical-driven school renewal' (Memon et al., 2024a, p. 16). This involved a collaborative effort on the redesign of a Year 10 English unit on Macbeth with teachers who are accustomed to implementing Western and secular teaching and learning activities. This was a collaborative process seeking to not only acclimatise English educators unfamiliar with Islamic Pedagogy, but also to build awareness of and advocacy for Islamic Pedagogy and teacher confidence in the implementation of an Islamic worldview within teaching. The unit redesign process helped to develop broader awareness about Islamic Pedagogy within the faculty by advocating for its benefits within a Macbeth programme for Islamic Pedagogy.

My faithful praxis portfolio represented my pedagogical turn, explicating my understanding of Islamic Pedagogy as critical, dialogical, and transformative learning that engages Muslim learners in ways that Western pedagogies might never be able to. As a clear manifestation of this pedagogical turn, I had the opportunity to present with the Head of English, Fatima Jalloul, at the 2024 CITE conference on a similar project entitled 'Transformation and Redesign: Teaching English through an Islamic Worldview'. Whist Fatima Jalloul presented on the development of the English Framework in a way that sought to implement an Islamic worldview at MFIS, my presentation explored the practical application of this framework through a redesign of a Year 11 English unit on Othello to interrogate the othering of Islam within Othello through an Orientalist lens. I feel as though the following spoken word poem delivered, during the presentation, succinctly embodies my pedagogical turn:

> Rocks
>
> Rabbish rahli sadri wa yassirli amri wah lul uqdatan min lisaani, yaf kahu kauli
>
> This is a brief poem about Islamic Pedagogy
>
> Now, I don't want this to be some long vociferation
>
> But a rumination on a simple question:
>
> What is Islamic Pedagogy?
>
> Is it an effort to break the mould?
>
> Like tawaf not everything's clockwise
>
> Or the Qur'an and Hadith worldview as centrefold?
>
> To have all of the above, in our lessons, crystallise?
>
> For me, it is the foundation,
>
> for students of this generation
>
> to see that English is more than memorisation
>
> of quotes, 'show don't tell' and equivocation
>
> It's like a rock
>
> Rocks have many uses.
>
> They grind flour
>
> Purify water

Mixed them together you get the bread

That Palestians long for

Ping

Did you hear that?

That's the sound of a scrap of rubble

Hurled against IDF oppression

Ricocheting off Merkava Main Battle Tank Armour

Rocks broken off from walls of dispossession

In a world of suppression and obfuscation

Remnants of concrete apartments

Pulverised like ground flour

Pink in colour

So next time we read or write a text in English

I would like Islamic Pedagogy to show students that

Our words can be rocks

that make fortresses

from the river to the sea

The first line of the poem was a supplication by the Prophet Moses regarding his speaking ability, seeking confidence and success. This was intentionally included within the poem's rhyme scheme to immediately ground it within an Islamic worldview. It forms the first rhyming couplet, which involves another focus of the poem and indeed this paper, Islamic Pedagogy. What follows is a poem that performatively and dialogically represents the essence of both epistemic reflexivity and faithful praxis. The poem draws on the Muslim collective consciousness of the Ummah, grounding the dialogical and performative opportunity of spoken word poetry to critique the injustices of the genocide in Gaza in order to reflect on the importance of sacred activism, engaging 'Young Muslims [who] need educational experiences where Islam is presented in a manner that is critical, dialogical, and transformative. . .to foster a mature sense of belonging in the modern world' (Memon, 2021, p. 9). For Muslims guided by the metaphor that the Ummah is one body, wherein an injury to one limb impacts the whole body, why can a study of poetry not both consider its rhythm and metre, whilst also empowering a Muslim voice the defends the honour of Palestinians?

5. Discussion

The key focus of the paper was to trace the development of faithful praxis to evaluate how the Grad Cert is delivered, manifesting through the key 'turns' upon which the Grad Cert is structured with the aim to encourage epistemic reflexivity within the educator. As such, a key benchmark of *how* well the Grad Cert encouraged my faithful praxis is reflected within the Grad Cert's ability to encourage epistemic reflexivity with respect to my educational beliefs and practice.

My faithful praxis journey represents a profound pedagogical transformation, shaped by a deep engagement with both Western and Islamic epistemologies. From my early experiences of grappling with religious insults in the classroom to the realisation of how deeply rooted these issues are in societal structures, my journey has been defined by a desire to empower Muslim voices through education. My experiences as a learner in English

grappling with Orientalist marginalisation, whitewashed as throwaway comments like 'turbaned Turk and 'circumcised dog', highlights how my marginalised Muslim identity was shaped within a subaltern context that was counterbalanced by the empowerment I felt at Granville Boys High Schools, where Muslim identity was not as easily othered as it was within Othello. In one respect, the epistemic reflexivity that the Grad Cert encouraged was already sparked within me from these high school experiences that emphasised the power of language in shaping perceptions of Islam, underscoring my commitment to developing and amplifying a strong Muslim voice as a high school English teacher. The challenges of reconciling Islamic and Western knowledge within the classroom, especially in a context where Muslim epistemologies are marginalised, shaped my teaching philosophy and are evident within the Grad Cert deliverables, whether it is the reconceptualised approach to The Kite Runner or taking a new approach to the Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) 'Last Sermon'. In this regard, autoethnography was selected as a research method with which to effectively explore epistemic reflexivity's highly personal and critical nature, aided by the Grad Cert's sequential structure, with an aim to foster dialogical inquiry and develop epistemic reflexivity. Adopting an autoethnography thus allowed me to trace the origins of my decision to pursue the Grad Cert as a manifestation of epistemic reflexivity, driven by a long-standing desire as a Muslim learner to empower Muslim voices and challenge the marginalisation of Muslims.

Autoethnography also captured my important realisation that Islamic Pedagogy should not be conflated with Islamic integration. Whilst understanding the distinction between them is a challenge for many educators, my journey of understanding their complementarity may hopefully provide greater clarity to enable the development of a more profound approach that balances academic and spiritual growth, moving from the mere integration of Islamic values into lessons to a more holistic, critical, and transformative approach that engages students in a meaningful dialogue with the content, allowing them to, for example, explore texts like Othello through the lens of Orientalism and Islamophobia.

The autoethnography also clarified my nuanced journey of coming to the understanding that Islamic Pedagogy is not about simply embedding Qur'anic verses or hadiths into lessons; rather, it is about fostering a learning environment that respects and nurtures the spiritual and intellectual growth of Muslim students, guiding them to critically examine the world around them. This is performatively evident through my poem *Rocks*, that seeks to integrate Islamic notions, like a supplication of the Prophet Moses at the beginning, but does so to ground the poem in an emancipatory opening that encourages the criticality and performativity demanded by Islamic Pedagogy. There is an added performative layer of an English teacher enacting Islamic Pedagogy through one of the very text types we are mandated to teach throughout secondary English.

While an autoethnography offers valuable personal insights, it has limited impact for course-wide strategies. Quantitative methods, such as longitudinal studies, are better suited for exploring individual views across a large cohort. Nevertheless, the autoethnography provided in this paper is a strong starting point for empirical exploration, as it serves as a "dialogic quest to understand the world". My experiences across various Islamic schools reinforce the significance of epistemic reflexivity and the necessity of a pedagogy that balances academic excellence with spiritual development. At the Malek Fahd Islamic School, where Islamic Pedagogy is a core focus, I have witnessed firsthand the impact of this approach in fostering critical reflection and social justice among students. Through the redesign of lessons, collaboration with colleagues, and participation in professional development, I developed a deeper understanding of the value of integrating an Islamic worldview into teaching practice.

This article thus makes a significant contribution to the emerging scholarship on Islamic teacher education programmes by offering an autoethnographic perspective on my journey through the Grad Cert. Through the lens of faithful praxis, this paper illuminates the complexities and nuances of integrating Islamic Pedagogy into the professional development of educators within Western educational contexts. By foregrounding the importance of epistemic reflexivity and the progressive, dialogical structure of the Grad Cert, this article highlights how this programme nurtures a deeper understanding of an Islamic worldview and shapes educators' pedagogical practices. Although autoethnography offers valuable insight into individual experiences, the limitations of this method, particularly in a growing online education landscape, point to the need for further research, particularly longitudinal studies, to assess the broader efficacy of these programs. Nonetheless, the findings underscore the importance of embedding faithful praxis within teacher education and point to the transformative potential of Islamic Pedagogy for Muslim learners in Western education.

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Examining the Potential of a University-Accredited Islamic Education Teacher Training Program: A Conceptual Exploration

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Abstract: Public schools (K-12) are experiencing a remarkable decline in enrollment across Canada. More and more parents are choosing independent schools for their children's education. Muslim parents, in particular, are transferring their children to Islamic schools as they are increasingly losing faith in public schools. Muslim students in the public school systems, wherever they are on the continuum of practice—from secular to orthodox—do not perceive their schools to be responsive to their religious beliefs, values, behaviours, and practices. However, Islamic schools are stuck in normative, secular, and reductive pedagogies, with most, if not all, Islamic teachers lacking training in Islamic pedagogy. This article is a conceptual exploration of various approaches to offering an Islamic teacher training program in Canada by an accredited university, including reintroducing the Islamic Teacher Education Programme (ITEP), which offered a one-year professional learning certificate. Another approach is establishing a stream in teacher education programs similar to the Catholic stream. The article serves as a stepping stone to initiate dialogue and collaborative efforts toward creating a comprehensive approach that includes all stakeholders tailored to the unique needs of Islamic school teachers in Ontario, Canada.

Keywords: Muslim; Islamophobia; teacher education; Islamic schools; Islamic Pedagogy; Islamic worldview

1. Introduction

Public schools (k-12) are experiencing a remarkable decline in enrollment across Canada (Fraser Institute, 2021). More and more parents are choosing independent schools for their children's education. Muslim parents, in particular, are transferring their children to Islamic schools as they are increasingly losing faith in public schools. Muslim students in the public school systems, wherever they are on the continuum of practice, from secular to orthodox, do not perceive their schools to be responsive to their religious beliefs, values, behaviours and practices (Elnour & Bashir-Ali, 2003; Collet, 2007; Sarroub, 2005; Zine, 2008). Data from the Islamic Schools Association of Canada (ISAC) shows that enrollment in Islamic schools is rising.

Furthermore, the rise in documented incidences of Islamophobia does not help the Muslim community feel a sense of belonging and safety in their community public schools. For example, a 2020 ministry review of the Peel District School Board, where approximately 25% of the students identify as Muslim, revealed that Islamophobia is prevalent both in the curriculum and among teachers (Chadha et al., 2020). The 2021 Integrity Commissioner's report demonstrated that the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), one of Canada's largest district school boards, had significant learning when it comes to Islamophobia (Brown, 2021). Granted, the rise of Islamophobia is part and parcel of a bigger issue in Canadian society. A recent study from the Angus Reid Institute (2024) found that 39% of Canadians

hold views that are negative about Islam, and in Quebec, the numbers are higher, at 52%. Islamophobia has been on the rise, despite Islam reportedly being the second-largest religion in Canada as of 2021. Muslims are the fastest-growing religious group in Canada (Stewart, 2022). In the past 20 years, the Muslim population of Canada has more than doubled, from two percent in 2001 to 4.9 percent in 2021, now totalling nearly 1.8 million Muslims (Statistics Canada, 2022). Muslims are the fastest-growing religious minority in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2022)—for example, 20% of students in Ontario are reported to be Muslim (Logan, 2022). Muslim youth do not feel a deep sense of belonging in their public schools (National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM), 2021; Amjad, 2018; A. Ahmed, 2021). Therefore, parents take an active role in their children's education to cultivate a strong Islamic identity and preserve their religious values (Berglund, 2019). Building schools that are a safe haven for Muslims, away from discrimination and the experiences of being "othered", has become a priority for the Muslim community.

Although Islamic schools are witnessing a spike in demand, with many schools in Canada having significant waiting lists of over three years for admission (OGS Olive Grove Elementary School, 2023), they are encountering their own challenges. Muslim youth may experience an absence of Islamophobia from their teachers and in the curriculum; however, these schools are failing to provide a holistic and immersive Islamic experience (A. Ahmed & Choudhary, 2024). A perennial question asked by Islamic school leaders and educators is: What makes an Islamic school "Islamic"? Indeed, it is not the absence of Islamophobia or merely the predominant presence of Muslim educators and teachers. Mabud (2018) suggests that Islamic schools are spaces "where all subjects are taught from an Islamic perspective and where an organically developed, unified system of Islamic education operates at all levels of the educational structure" (p. 12).

Currently, schools are stuck in normative, secular, and reductive pedagogies, with most, if not all, of the Islamic teachers lacking training in Islamic pedagogy. The renewal of Islamic schools begins with incorporating Islamic pedagogy—a philosophy of education that transcends normative instructional methods (Brifkani, 2021). This journal is an attempt to conceptually explore this shortcoming by providing some approaches to offering an Islamic teacher training program by an accredited university, including the reintroduction of the Islamic Teacher Education Programme (ITEP), which offered a one-year professional learning certificate. Another approach is the establishment of a stream in teacher education programs similar to the Catholic stream. It serves as a stepping stone to initiate dialogue and collaborative efforts toward creating a comprehensive approach including all stakeholders tailored to the unique needs of Islamic school teachers in Ontario, Canada.

2. Beyond Islamophobia: Challenges Faced by Muslim Students in Public Schools

While Islamophobia was outlined earlier, this section discusses additional challenges faced by Muslim students: the disparities in funding across Canadian provinces and the complexities surrounding the secular nature of public schools. In Canada, education is the responsibility designated to each province. Although "secular" public schools are provided for free to all residents of Canada, funding for non-public or independent schools varies from province to province. For instance, Alberta is the only province that funds Catholic education and charter schools free of any tuition, providing them with the freedom to operate while offering some guidelines (Fraser Institute, 2021). Other provinces provide some financial support to independent schools. Quebec and Western Canada provide at least 50% of the operating expenses per student (Van Pelt, 2016). Conversely, Ontario funds separate Roman Catholic schools but does not extend such funding to other faith-based schools. Ontario's inequitable funding policy was deemed discriminatory by the UN

Human Rights Committee in 1999 (CBC News, 1999). While "secular" and Catholic schools in Ontario are tuition-free, Islamic schools charge $450 to $850 per month for grades 1 to 8. Kindergarten and high school tuition fees are much higher. Tax-paying parents who choose to enroll their children in Islamic schools feel the burden of the additional financial strain of having to pay for tuition. Moreover, Islamic schools are typically not within walking distance for most Muslim parents, necessitating them to drive far to and from the school, which further exacerbates the disparities and privileges between families of different faiths.

There is a common belief that public schools are secular spaces, understood as places without religion (Keddie, 2018). However, such a "secular" definition may not apply to public schools as it violates one's constitutional rights. Ontario schools must have policies or guidelines relating to religious accommodation (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 9). With respect to Muslim students, for instance, some schools have created schedules to facilitate the noon prayers of Muslim students, while others are still struggling to provide prayers or allow class time for students to perform their obligatory prayers. There is often a wide gap between policy rhetoric and implementation (Morrison et al., 2019). Another understanding of secularity implies that no one religion is privileged over another (Berglund, 2015). The enactment of this secular definition is also not the reality for schools in Canada, as school systems and calendars are mapped out according to Christian holy days and celebrations, with holidays aligned with Christian Holy days.

While there is a scholarly shift in defining secularism not as the absence of religion but as the inclusion of both religious and non-religious identities and knowledge (Chown et al., 2024), the provision of multi-faith calendars on school websites does not mean that other religious groups' holy days become holidays. Muslim students still miss instructional time during their two Eid holidays if they can afford to take the day off. One aspect of a strong public education system is to work toward supporting all students, including Muslim students, regardless of personal circumstances, background, and religious affiliation (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). However, there is a gap between policy rhetoric and the lived experiences of Muslim students.

Public schools vary in their responsiveness to their Muslim students. As Muslim parents become more outspoken and advocate for their children, there have been some changes in the schools to accommodate their needs. However, Muslim students continue to yearn for spaces where they can practice their beliefs without the need for additional efforts to go through the lengthy process of requesting accommodations and potentially facing systemic or instructional repercussions. Consequently, Muslim parents and children are choosing to enroll their children in Islamic schools, where they are able to practice their faith and live by their ethos. Islamic schools are increasingly seen as a solution that provides a safe haven for Muslim students. Below is a brief exploration of how Islamic education within institutions evolved over the past five decades.

3. Current Landscape of Islamic Education in Canada

Muslim parents seeking supplementary and alternative educational options for their children engaged in discussions to establish and teach in such capacities due to a dire need. Islamic education in Canada started as one-room basement spaces in mosques or community centres. Arabic and Islamic studies classes were held for children on weekends, evenings, and during the summer (Haddad et al., 2009; Merry, 2005; Zine, 2008). At the time, funds were awarded to new immigrants in Canada through the Canadian Multiculturalism Policy to establish cultural programs such as heritage language programs (A. Ahmed & Memon, 2023). Muslims utilized such funds to promote the teaching and learning of Arabic and Islamic studies. One of the mosques known for establishing such programs was the Jami Mosque in Toronto. Sheikh Abdalla Idris, a resident of the Greater Toronto Area and

one of the pioneers of Islamic schools in North America, led learning spaces outside of school hours at the Jami mosque. The demand for these programs grew unprecedentedly, contributing to the establishment of the first Islamic school in Canada, now known as the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) Elementary School. Founded in Mississauga, Ontario, in 1982 (ISNA Schools, n.d.). The school secured an actual building three years later (Memon, 2021). ISNA became an exemplar for the inception of other Islamic schools in Canada.

Thereafter, Islamic schools began to spread across Canada. According to documents from the Islamic Schools Association of Canada (ISAC), there are 139 schools in Canada as of 2022. These schools vary in affiliations, with some associated with mosques or Islamic organizations, while others are family-run establishments. The requirements for opening a school differ in each province. In Ontario, a Notice of Intention (NOI) must be completed to establish a private school, and a non-refundable fee of $300 is required (Ministry of Education, n.d.). Schools are then required to provide certain materials, such as pre-inspection reports, an eight-page template with information on policies and procedures, and management of the Ontario Student Record (OSR), as well as school course calendars and weekly timetables. After its inception, every year, an NOI is expected to be completed, with members from the Ministry visiting the premises to review teachers' day plans, long-range plans, and assessments and meet teachers and students. All independent schools, including Islamic schools, across the country are mandated to follow the curriculum of their respective province with the addition of extra subjects. Islamic schools typically teach three extra subjects: Arabic, Quran, and Islamic studies. Most Islamic schools have teachers who are certified by the province's college of teachers. The non-provincial extra subjects are taught by experts within the field, not necessarily certified by the respective province.

Teachers in Islamic schools across various subjects face challenges in teaching from an Islamic worldview. Each tradition has its own epistemology, which in turn necessitates a unique pedagogy (Ogunnaike, 2018). Many of these educators have been trained in normative and reductive pedagogies within the secular framework during their teacher education programs. Hence, they encounter difficulties in providing a holistic and immersive Islamic educational experience in their classrooms (A. Ahmed & Choudhary, 2024). Finding educators trained in Islamic education or Islamic pedagogy is very rare.

4. Significance of Islamic Pedagogy in Islamic Schools

Islamic schools struggle to provide Islamic pedagogy that illustrates to Muslim youth how to "live Islam" (F. Ahmed, 2014) in the modern era. Enrolled in Islamic schools but taught subjects from a secular perspective, students face confusion regarding their Muslim identity. Traditional teaching and learning in Islamic schools often lack relevance to the real-life experiences of youth, leaving them ill-prepared to navigate the complexities of the modern world. While Islamic schools have made great progress in constructing facilities and recruiting qualified teachers, teaching from an Islamic worldview using Islamic pedagogy is still a significant challenge (Abdalla et al., 2018). Most subjects are taught identically to the provincial curriculum. Although there have been attempts to "Islamicize" the dominant curriculum, integrating Islamic concepts into the secular curriculum, such an approach is not sufficient (Qureshi, 2021). Students are stuck between the confessional Islamic rote memorization of Islamic concepts and the liberal/constructivist approaches of the curriculum, leading to a troubling identity crisis in Muslim learners. Islamic education from the ground up is required to support Muslim youth living in liberal and secular societies.

Islamic education has been a widely contested, controversial, and misunderstood topic in the West. Modern perceptions in the West characterize Islamic education as backward,

traditionalist, and in direct contrast to Western values of democratization, freedom, and autonomy (Halstead, 2004; Boyle, 2006). Muslim-majority countries have also internalized pejorative perspectives on Islamic education. In the past few decades, however, Muslim educators and scholars worldwide have taken it upon themselves to reclaim the conceptualization of Islamic education, moving away from Islamophobic, colonial, and neoliberal narratives and centering the Islamic worldview. The most noteworthy and significant endeavor was at the first World Conference on Muslim Education (WCOME), held in Mecca in 1977. The conference's main objective was to define the principles, aims, and methodology of the Islamic concept of education (Mabud, 2018). The other eight subsequent WCOME conferences held between 1980 and 2009 in different Muslim-majority countries, such as Indonesia, Egypt, Pakistan, and Malaysia, continued to affirm an understanding of Islamic education based on the Quran and the life (sunnah) of Prophet Muhammad.

Islamic education and pedagogy are used interchangeably in common parlance. "Islamic pedagogy" has become a widely used phrase among leading scholars in Islamic education and Islamic schooling (Memon, 2011; Alkouatli, 2018; Memon & Alhashmi, 2018). Pedagogy is usually associated with methods of instruction, teaching strategies, and the "how" of teaching, whereas education is attributed to the "what" of education, mainly referring to content. Recent discourse about Islamic pedagogy has moved beyond the "how", referring to it as an "educational philosophy" (Memon et al., 2021). In another scholarly work, Memon and Ajem assert that "every approach to teaching is influenced by a worldview or an orientation, perspective, or philosophy of education" (p. 1). A growing body of literature recognizes Islamic pedagogy as a broad overarching term defined as "the educational values, concepts, and perspectives rooted in the Islamic tradition that inform educational praxis for Muslim educators" (Memon et al., 2021, p. 634).

Scholars view pedagogy's "Islamic" aspect as including moral and spiritual development (Tauhidi, 2001; Trevathan, 2018). Prophet Muhammad summed up his message of Islam as the "elevation of character and morality". But which morality? And who decides the expectations of morality? The Prophet Muhammad said, "My Lord educated me and perfected my education". He is seen by Muslims as a role model (qudwa). The Quran and Hadith provide the authoritative body of knowledge on "what is moral" and "what is right and what is wrong" in different aspects of life. Memon et al. (2021) emphasize that Islamic pedagogy is not seen as imparting knowledge exclusively; it requires the enactment of prophetic behavior. Who the educator is and how the educator conducts themselves both during school hours and outside of those hours are essential to the development of the learner (Mabud, 2018; Memon & Alhashmi, 2018). Neoliberal education views focus on an individual's cognitive and intellectual development (Entwistle, 1997). Islamic pedagogy focuses on the whole-child education model, involving a more holistic upbringing of the learner (Al-Attas, 1979; Mabud, 2018; Sahin, 2018; Brifkani, 2021), who sees in their educators a model they can follow.

4.1. Islamic Pedagogy: Tarbiyah, Ta'aleem, and Ta'adeeb

Current Islamic education discourses around the world are centered on renewal and the continuation of empirical research on Islamic pedagogy aligned with the Islamic vision of education (Abdalla et al., 2018). The essence of this renewal is captured in three interrelated and intertwined concepts of Islamic education: *tarbiyah*, ta'aleem, and *ta'adeeb*. Tauhidi (2001) defines *tarbiyah* as causing "something to develop from stage to stage until reaching its completion" (referring to full potential). He also provides synonyms for the Arabic word *tarbiyah* as "increase, elevation, growth, development, nurture, and upbringing" (p. 6). Some refer to it as a transformative process (Sahin, 2021). Ta'aleem mainly relates to the acquisition of knowledge as the building block for growth (*tarbiyah*)

(Hassan et al., 2010). Ta'adeeb is the manifestation of ta'aleem that "guides all thoughts, sayings, and actions of a human being" (Memon & Alhashmi, 2018, p. 171). These three overlapping spheres of Islamic education are rooted in a theocentric worldview and the building of human beings' capacities to fulfill their covenant with God (Iqbal, 2013).

4.2. Storytelling in Islamic Pedagogy

Trevathan (2018) posits that "Muslim educationalists need to venture out of current educational models to create a pedagogy that is more inherently reflective of classical Muslim thought and culture, including approaches to the spiritual" (p. 129). Islam originated in an oral society, and storytelling is a fundamental dimension of the Islamic pedagogy used in the Quran and by Prophet Muhammad (F. Ahmed, 2014; Sahin, 2021). Stories of the prophets in the Quran are deemed as "the best way to calm and keep the human heart steadfast" (The Quran, n.d.). Half of the Quran consists of a series of stories (Sinaga et al., 2020), and some say there are over twenty stories in the Quran. Storytelling of the Prophet's way of life helps provide a vision of morality and high character.

Prophet Muhammad was known to use past or future stories, like those of the Day of Judgment, as opportunities to inculcate *tarbiyah*, *ta'aleem*, and *ta'adeeb*. His stories were a means for holistic education that transformed hearts, minds, and souls. Storytelling, in liberal and neoliberal school contexts, is underutilized and underrecognized. Islamic school teachers are no different in their lack of storytelling usage due to colonial and imperial influences.

After exploring the concept of Islamic pedagogy and the challenges Islamic schools face in its absence, it is clear that Islamic pedagogy is a complex philosophy of education that requires training from experts well-versed in theory and practice. Despite the growth and challenges of Islamic schools in Canada, there are no provincially accredited courses for teachers. Currently, Islamic schools often rely on brief workshops or professional learning communities (PLC) to assist teachers in implementing teaching from an Islamic worldview. The following segment begins by highlighting successful programs from other Western countries that have addressed the aforementioned predicament, then proceeds with examples from Canada.

5. Approaches to Establishing University-Accredited Islamic Education Teacher Training Programs in Canadian Institutions

Other nations worldwide demonstrate various examples of establishing accredited programs or institutions to enhance Islamic pedagogy and teaching from an Islamic worldview. In the West, three post-secondary institutions offer Islamic education programs: (1) The University of South Australia (UniSA) has its Centre for Islamic Thought and Education (CITE), which offers the first graduate certificates in Islamic education globally (CITE, n.d.). This certification, similar to those offered by Catholic schools in Ontario, was launched in 2018 by Dr. Nadeem Memon, Dylan Chown, and Professor Mohamad Abdalla. It is a one-year online program that attracts Islamic school educators from across the world. Dr. Nadeem Memon was also one of the founders of the ITEP program, which will be discussed in this section (CITE, n.d.). (2) The University of Warwick, UK, offers a course that bridges the gap between dominant cultures and Islamic education, recognized as an interdisciplinary field of research, scholarly study, and professional development (Sahin, 2018, p. 20). This one-term graduate studies course integrates the theory and practice of education. (3) Bayan Islamic Graduate School offers accredited master's degrees in Islamic education. Based in Orange, California, with a campus in Chicago, Illinois (Bayan Islamic Graduate School, n.d.), the concentration focuses on classroom dynamics, student assessment, and curriculum design.

Despite being from the past, another notable effort that was considered a post-secondary institution was the Muslim Teachers College, established over 30 years ago. Although no longer in operation, it was under the jurisdiction of the Clara Muhammad School System in America in the mid-1980s (Memon, 2011). The Clara Muhammad Schools were initially founded within the framework of black nationalism before transitioning to an Islamic ideology. They aimed to provide degrees for pre-service teachers and training in Arabic and Islamic Studies for in-service teachers (Rashid & Muhammad, 1992).

Unlike the other major Western countries, such as the US, Australia, and the UK, Canada has no programs or courses affiliated with universities or operating as standalone accredited educational institutions for Islamic education. The following segment discusses four approaches that were either offered in the past and discontinued or should be offered in the future to provide Islamic pedagogy at accredited institutions:

1. Additional Qualification (AQ) Courses: A One-Semester Online Course Offered to Those with a Bachelor of Education

An Additional Qualification (AQ) course, also known as professional learning, is provided by provincial colleges of teachers to certify teachers who hold Bachelor of Education degrees from accredited universities. These courses aim to furnish qualifications in specific subject areas or teaching divisions (primary, junior, intermediate, and senior). While this model may not prioritize research or scholarly study, it offers practical theories that teachers can promptly implement in their classrooms. These courses may be offered by colleges, universities, teacher or principal associations, school boards, subject organizations, or community organizations (Ontario College of Teachers, n.d.). They vary in duration, ranging from one session to three sessions or honors specializations. Typically, courses are scheduled three times a year, aligning with the fall, spring, and summer semesters.

AQs are typically developed by teachers and reflect the expertise and pedagogy characteristic of the profession. In Ontario, Canada, AQs serve as a pathway to prepare for leadership roles or to progress on the pay scale. One of the commonly offered courses in most continuing education departments of faculties of education is "Religious Education in Catholic Schools.

2. A Continuing Education Certificate: A One-Year Online Teacher Education Program:

Similar to the graduate certificate model at the University of South Australia, Canada used to have a one-year high-calibre online professional learning program developed in collaboration with Razi Education and the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE/UT) Department of Continuing Education. The Islamic Teacher Education Program (ITEP) was a successful educator preparation initiative that aided Islamic school teachers in implementing Islamic pedagogy in their schools. ITEP was the program that provided a framework rooted in the objectives of education within the Islamic tradition (Memon et al., 2021). ITEP helped teachers understand their roles as educators within the broader context of Islamic pedagogy. However, ITEP had a short lifespan. The program began in 2010, with 300 graduates recorded over its six years of operation until 2017. The program facilitated educators globally in implementing teaching and learning through Islamic pedagogy.

ITEP was locally and globally recognized as a certificate program that equips Islamic school teachers with the preparation they need to align their philosophies and pedagogies with Islamic principles. Graduates of ITEP also benefited from the extensive network established through the program. Even the founders, such as Dr. Nadeem Memon, connected with colleagues at universities that would consider offering similar certificates at the graduate level for Islamic school educators. A year after the closing of ITEP, in 2018,

a similar program was co-founded by the founder of ITEP at UniSA's CITE department called the Graduate Certificates in Islamic Education.

One-year certificate programs are not uncommon in Canada, with provinces like Alberta offering a certificate in Catholic education with the University of Alberta. The certificate is offered to in-service and preservice teachers who are interested in working in Alberta's Catholic school districts. It constitutes 150 h of instruction on religious education courses, teaching religion to K-12 cohorts, including the basics of catechetics (University of Alberta, n.d.).

3. A B.Ed. Stream: Islamic Education Stream within Bachelor of Education Programs

Teacher education programs in Canada have a unique approach, embedding certain ideologies and faith-based education within mainstream, publicly funded bachelor of education programs affiliated with universities. Roman Catholic and Jewish teacher training are two examples of faith-based education acquired by preservice teacher candidates. Furthermore, alternative programs, such as indigenous education, are also offered.

Catholics in Canada have a constitutional right to found a separate Catholic school system in some provinces. The Catholic stream is sometimes condensed into a course with varying titles, such as "Religious Education: Teaching in Catholic Schools". Teacher candidates can enroll if they are interested in applying to the Catholic School Boards (CSB). The course prepares students to understand what they need to know to teach in Catholic schools. Often, there is a requirement that teacher candidates be practicing Roman Catholics.

Some Bachelor of Education programs in Canada also provide streams and pathways for Jewish education. The two universities offering Jewish Teacher Education programs are York University (JTE) and McGill University (JTTP), located in Ontario, Canada. The courses offered focus on pedagogy, Hebrew, and Jewish studies. The Jewish Teacher Education program at York University began by offering a variety of Hebrew courses in 1968 and subsequently established a Jewish Studies Center in 1989 (Kirshner, 2001). The Jewish Teacher Training Program (JTTP) at McGill University was established in 1973 and has since produced over 200 graduates (McGill University, n.d.). These training programs prepare educators for Jewish schools, summer programs, and youth groups.

Universities across Canada have institutes of Islamic studies, such as McGill (Montreal) and the University of Toronto (Toronto), with undergraduate and graduate programs offering programs on Islamic studies. However, no programs focused on teacher education or teacher training.

4. A Program within a Muslim Post-Secondary Institution: Islamic College

Recently, Canada established its first Islamic college called the Canadian Islamic College (CIC), owned by one of the grassroots Muslim organizations, the Muslim Association of Canada (MAC), which is accredited by the Ministry of Colleges and Universities. MAC owns 28 Islamic day schools and weekend schools across the country. In Fall 2024, CIC will provide a four-year honors Bachelor of Arts in Islamic Studies with five potential minors. As it stands, none of those minors are focused on teacher training. The college advertises its courses as "epistemological foundations in the Islamic primary sources of the Qur'an and Sunnah" (MAC, 2024).

Similar to the US model of Bayan Islamic Graduate School discussed above, there could be potential for this college in the future to provide a master's degree in Islamic education. Furthermore, akin to the "Muslim Teachers College", the college can utilize another approach by providing teacher education training to support Islamic schools nationwide. The program can become a significant asset to Islamic education in Canada.

6. Conclusions

While Muslims are the fastest-growing religious minority in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2022)—for example, 20% of students in Ontario are reported to be Muslim (Logan, 2022)—Canada lacks strong support systems to help build a robust Muslim identity. With the rise of Islamophobia and the support for Muslim students being confined to religious accommodations rather than nurturing their religious identities, public schools are not meeting the demands of Muslim parents and students. On the other hand, enrollment in Islamic schools is soaring (A. Ahmed & Choudhary, 2024).

However, Islamic schools are also struggling to meet the complex needs of Muslim students. In the past forty years, Islamic schools have shifted from treating Islamic identity as an add-on to their non-religious subjects to Islamicizing the secular curriculum and, in the past decade, a strong commitment to teaching from an Islamic worldview. Islamic school teachers are not trained to teach or provide Islamic pedagogy for their students. Currently, Islamic pedagogy is provided in workshops and PLCs, in fragmented silos, for those schools that can afford it.

This paper is a conceptual exploration of offering an Islamic teacher education program in accredited universities in Canada. The approaches highlighted in this journal include: (a) an Additional Qualification course following teachers' graduation from their Bachelor of Education program; (b) a continuing education certificate; (c) a Bachelor of Education stream within an established teacher education program; (d) a teacher education program within a Muslim context college/university.

It proposes establishing a more comprehensive program that is recognized by universities as a legitimate teacher education program, using the respective curriculum in each province to train teachers on how to establish a fully immersive education experience for Muslim students.

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