An exploration of the religious nature of Islamic private schools: What makes a school 'Islamic' and why does it matter?

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the courageous girls and women of Afghanistan, whose dreams of education persist despite the darkness around them. While I honour this achievement with humility, my heart breaks knowing that countless numbers of you are denied the tools to write your stories. Your strength and unwavering fight for education are beacons of hope and reminders of the power of the human spirit.

This work carries the weight of your dreams and the echoes of your silenced voices. May it honour your resilience and your right to rise above oppression. I dedicate this to your strength and dreams—for a future where no girl is denied knowledge and no woman is denied the light of learning. May one day every barrier fall, every school gate open, and your voices fill the air. May the world see you, fight for you, and allow you to stand in the fullness of your rightful place in the light.

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ABSTRACT

The rise of Islamic private schools in the United Kingdom has generated considerable debate, raising crucial questions about the intersection of religion, identity, and education in a multicultural society. These schools function as spaces where educational, religious, ethno-cultural, and political values intersect, shaping the identities of Muslim pupils and their communities. This study explores what defines an "Islamic" school, why it matters to Muslims and the overall educational landscape in the United Kingdom, and how these schools navigate competing priorities and socio-political dynamics.

Using a qualitative ethnographic approach, this research examines two Islamic private schools—one primary and one secondary—through in-depth fieldwork. Semi-structured interviews with school officials, parents, and students offer insights into stakeholder motivations and expectations. Focus group discussions with primary-level students, along with participant observations of classrooms, prayer venues, and playgrounds, enrich the analysis of how the Islamic ethos and pupils' identities are shaped and nurtured in practice.

The findings reveal three critical dimensions. First, they demonstrate how stakeholders influence the curriculum and school environment, resulting in an "Islamised" educational framework that integrates spiritual, moral, and academic development. However, the absence of a standardised Islamised curriculum emerges as a significant challenge. Second, this research builds on earlier studies by exploring four dimensions of identity formation—religious, ethno-cultural, political, and multi-dimensional. It uncovers how Islamic schools serve as sites for resisting and (re)negotiating identity politics, engaging with questions of citizenship, Britishness, and belonging, while hybridising Muslimness with British values to counter Islamophobia and far-right rhetoric. Finally, the study highlights the multi-faceted nature of parental expectations, revealing how these shape the curriculum, school environment, and ultimately, the identities of Muslim pupils. By examining the religious nature of these schools and its implications, this research addresses a critical gap in understanding the evolving role of Islamic education within contemporary Britain.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1. Abstract

Chapter one introduces the topic of my thesis, which is titled “An exploration of the religious nature of Islamic private schools: What makes a school ‘Islamic,’ and why does it matter?” It discusses the rationale and context for the study, which involves a qualitative ethnography within two Islamic private schools. It aims to conceptualise the discourses of secularism and relativism in multicultural theory by linking them to ideas of identity and exploring how minority Muslim identities are articulated in multicultural Britain through Islamic private schools. Furthermore, I explore issues related to the Prevent policy, Islamophobia, and multicultural education. Additionally, I examine the colonial roots of stereotypical conceptions of Muslims and Muslimness, particularly the politicisation and pathologisation of Islamic identities and discourse. Finally, I critically assess claims that British values and democracy are inherently unique to Britain and explore the limitations of multicultural policies in addressing these complex issues. My study, conducted from 2020 to 2024, is an important and timely endeavour to raise understanding and awareness regarding the position of Muslim private schools, how such schools align with Muslim parents' expectations and values, and how they shape the identity of Muslim pupils.

1.1 Introduction

The intersection of religion and education remains a highly contested and debated discourse, with educational institutions—particularly schools—playing a significant role in this dynamic interplay (Jackson, 2014). Schools are instrumental in fostering and nurturing various dimensions of their pupils' identities, encompassing religious, cultural, political, and multi-dimensional aspects. These schools are far from neutral sites of knowledge transmission; rather, they function as arenas for identity construction, aligned with specific cultural capital, subjectification, and ideological contestation among various stakeholders and power dynamics (Apple et al., 2018). Furthermore, schools are spaces where power relations are continuously negotiated. Education is, therefore, not neutral, as it reflects the dominant ideologies of society; however, schools also hold the potential to be spaces for resistance and change (Giroux,

2021). Consequently, examining the role of faith and religion is crucial for understanding how faith schools in general, and Islamic private schools in particular, contribute to shaping identity, resistance, agency, and power relations among Muslims in the United Kingdom.

The increasing presence of Islamic private schools in the UK presents a complex and contested educational development that warrants critical scholarly attention. This phenomenon is situated within wider debates on multiculturalism, social cohesion, and the role of religion in public life. Islamic schools are frequently positioned at the intersection of competing discourses—between claims of social integration and accusations of self-segregation, between parental rights and state regulation, and between faith-based moral education and secular liberal values. Proponents of Islamic schooling often emphasise the importance of religious literacy, moral and spiritual development, and culturally responsive curriculum within these settings. They argue that such schools provide safe, affirming environments in which Muslim students can cultivate a sense of identity and belonging (Zine, 2008). In contrast, critics have raised concerns about the potential for these institutions to contribute to social isolation, to undermine common national values, or to fail in meeting educational standards (Halstead 2004; Cantle, 2001). These divergent positions highlights the need to avoid reductive interpretations and instead understand Islamic schools as dynamic spaces of negotiation—sites where religious identity, cultural citizenship, and national belonging are continuously mediated.

By foregrounding the voices of stakeholders within Islamic private schools, this study seeks to critically interrogate the assumptions surrounding these institutions and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of their social, cultural, and political significance in contemporary Britain.

Despite the increasing public interest and policy scrutiny surrounding Islamic private schools, there remains a noticeable gap in empirical scholarship that explores how these institutions function in practice—particularly in relation to curriculum implementation, identity formation, and school envirnoment. Much of the existing discourse on Islamic schooling is dominated by policy rhetoric or

media representations that often frame these institutions through the lens of securitisation or cultural deviance.

This study addresses these gaps by focusing on the lived experiences and perspectives of Muslim pupils, educators, school leaders, and stakeholders within Islamic private schools. It explores how these actors navigate the dual pressures of regulatory compliance and religious authenticity, and how they interpret and implement the national curriculum alongside Islamic principles. Given the growing number of Muslim families choosing faith-based schooling for reasons ranging from religious obligation to dissatisfaction with mainstream provision, this research is both timely and necessary. It provides an empirically grounded account of a sector that is expanding but remains under-researched and frequently misunderstood.

This research makes original contributions across several interrelated domains, notably curriculum design and development, school environment, and parental choices. In terms of curriculum, the research offers a critical examination of how Islamic private schools integrate the national curriculum with Islamic studies. It illuminates the teaching strategies and curricular adaptations that reflect efforts to reconcile state-mandated educational standards with faith-based values. In doing so, the study contributes to current understandings of Islamic private schools, their curricular activities and their religious nature. From a managerial perspective, the study explores various administrative and operational issues faced by Islamic schools, such as leadership practices, teacher recruitment, funding approaches, and engagement with inspection frameworks. These findings advance knowledge about how faith-based schools balance internal institutional demands with external regulatory frameworks. Ultimately, the research situates Islamic private schools as complex and contested educational spaces that illuminate broader societal questions about identity, inclusion, and the evolving role of education in a pluralistic society.

The overall aim of this research is to explore and unpack the religious nature of Islamic private schools. It seeks to examine what constitutes them as Islamic, why they hold significance, and how they engage with various stakeholders within the educational system of multicultural Britain, the broader secular

society, parents, and Muslim communities. Additionally, the study examines the role and dynamics of Islamic private education within the wider discourse on multiculturalism. Furthermore, it considers the broader implications of these schools in shaping religious and other identities, particularly within the context of modern, multicultural societies. An in-depth discussion of multicultural theories and identity perspectives is included in the literature review chapter.

To achieve this aim, the study has three research questions as follow:

1. What constitutes the curriculum and environment of private Islamic schools in England, and how are these shaped and delivered?
2. What religious and other identities are promoted and nurtured by private Islamic schools?
3. What are the parental values and expectations, and how do they influence students' religious identities in private Islamic schools?

Firstly, to study and analyse the context of the two schools under investigation, with a particular focus on their curriculum and environment. This will involve exploring and examining what constitutes the curriculum and environment of an Islamic school, and how they are shaped and delivered. Secondly, to analyse and explore the religious and other identities promoted and nurtured within these schools. Thirdly, to investigate the values and expectations that Muslim parents hold regarding these schools, and how those expectations influence and shape the religious and other identities of Muslim pupils.

This research focuses specifically on two Islamic private schools: one primary, coeducational school and one secondary, single-sex school (girls only). The methodological approach is based on qualitative ethnography. For further conceptualisation and the rationale behind the choice of ethnography, as well as the research methods and methodology, please refer to Chapter 3, page 65.

In contemporary multicultural Britain, multiculturalism plays a significant role in shaping policies aimed at enhancing social cohesion (Modood, 2018a, Taylor, 1994). Moreover, it serves as a critical framework for analysing the intersection

of minority groups and their faith-related demands in Western societies. This framework guides a state's approach to its "ethno-religious mix" (Modood, 2007: 8). Another important concept in this discourse is "democratic citizenship," which emphasises universal human rights and challenges cultural relativism. This notion encompasses the civil, political, and social rights of citizens (Piper, 2022).

Building on these ideas, it is essential to recognise that multiculturalism addresses not only religious identity but also encompasses various cultural and political identities, which are fundamental to minority communities in the United Kingdom and across Europe (Barker & Weller, 2021). Islamic schools, in particular, play a crucial role in nurturing these identities, which in turn impact broader social cohesion and the integration of Muslim communities (Bates, 2019). For instance, the United Kingdom and France have distinct positions in the debates surrounding multiculturalism, cultural relativism, and secularism, influencing how minority identities are recognised and supported (Modood et al., 2006). However, in the UK, the dynamics of multicultural agendas and pluralism are increasingly shifting toward what some term “aggressive secularism” (Ratzinger, 2012). This shift has been driven by factors such as the rise of far-right populism, Brexit, and global terrorist incidents like 9/11 and the 7/7 London bombing, which have reshaped public discourse and policy regarding cultural integration. In recent years, there has also been a sharp increase in the number of people in the UK identifying as non-religious, a trend that intersects with the growing prominence of secularism. According to the 2021 Census for England and Wales, nearly 37% of the population identified as having no religion, up from 25% in 2011 (Office for National Statistics, 2021). This group encompasses a broad spectrum, including agnostics (who claim neither faith nor disbelief in a deity) and atheists (who actively reject belief in deities). The non-religious demographic includes people from all political persuasions, including those who voted both for and against Brexit. While secularism in this context can be a response to the perceived challenges of religious diversity, it is important to recognise that this rise in non-religious identification also reflects shifting attitudes towards religion in the UK, where a growing number of individuals feel disconnected from traditional religious

institutions and practices (Levey & Modood, 2009). This demographic shift has implications for cultural and political debates, particularly as secularism becomes a more dominant feature of the public discourse on national identity, immigration, and integration (ibid).

However, aggressive secularism is conceptualised as a movement that seeks to exclude religion from public life, characterising this form of secularism as not neutral but adversarial to religious expression (Taylor, 2011; Ratzinger, 2012). Evidence indicates that Muslim minority communities are resisting aggressive secularism by fostering strong religious and cultural identities through multicultural policies that enable them to establish their own faith-based schools (Walford, 2008). Such resistance poses a challenge to the further secularisation of the United Kingdom and the securitisation of Muslim communities (ibid). Moreover, such transformations significantly impact issues of identity, belonging, and integration for Muslim minorities in the United Kingdom and beyond.

Multiculturalism is often criticised for falling short in providing fair and just treatment across all minority communities. While these policies aim to recognise and respect cultural diversity, they may unintentionally prioritise certain groups over others, particularly those who are more visible or politically recognised. This can leave smaller or less politically influential groups marginalised. Additionally, multiculturalism often focuses on cultural recognition without adequately addressing deeper structural inequalities related to race, class, or gender (Taylor, 2012). As a result, minority groups may continue to face unequal access to resources and political representation, perpetuating systemic inequalities (Taylor, 2004; Lentin & Titley, 2011).

This disparity becomes evident when looking at the representation of religious schools. For instance, in 2011, there were 38 state-funded Jewish schools in the UK compared to only 11 Muslim state-funded schools (DfE, 2012). However, according to the 2021 census, Muslims now comprise 6.5% of the UK population, while Jews constitute 0.5% (ONS, 2021; CAFOD, 2016). These figures suggest that the state's ethno-religious mix was not neutral. As Kymlicka

(1995: 108) argues, “the state unavoidably promotes certain cultural identities, and thereby disadvantages others.”

The absence of equitable multicultural approaches can lead to increased "political contestation" by minorities seeking respect and recognition through their "dietary habits, or independent schools" (Benhabib, 2006: 385). This may be a significant factor underlying the demands of Muslim communities to establish private Islamic schools in the United Kingdom. Therefore, it is crucial to analyse the correlations and dynamics of various discourses, such as history, race, gender, human rights, secularism, and multiculturalism, as faith-based schools are situated within this complex matrix (Parker-Jenkins et al., 2005; Grace, 2005). For an in-depth review of these discourses, please refer to Chapter 2, Sections 2.4, pages 34-40.

Islam occupies a significant yet complex position in contemporary British society. With approximately 3.9 million Muslims contributing to various sectors such as education, healthcare, business, and the arts, their presence enriches the social fabric of the UK (ONS, 2021). Despite these contributions, British Muslims face considerable challenges, including Islamophobia, social exclusion, and negative media portrayals (Runnymede Trust, 2018). These issues complicate their integration and foster stereotypes.

Muslim minorities in the United Kingdom seek to articulate their identity through various means and processes, including religious institutions, community centres, schools, madrassas, cultural events and festivals, as well as political and civic engagements. Although the UK’s multicultural approach aims to accommodate cultural and religious diversity, it is crucial to examine how Islamic educational infrastructures, particularly Islamic private schools, nurture non-dominant identities and how these schools fit into, or struggle within, the broader multicultural and pluralistic society.

While government policies on multiculturalism and integration significantly impact how Islam is perceived, Islamic private schools play a crucial role in negotiating or resisting these policies through formal and informal curricula and shaping identities rooted in Islamic traditions (Miah, 2016). Some Muslim

parents choose to send their children to private Islamic schools because they believe that the UK's claims of multiculturalism and secularism are biased and feel that mainstream schools fail to cater adequately to the religious, moral, and cultural needs of Muslim communities (Grace, 2005). Other Muslim parents, despite recognising that state schools are liberal and secular, express concerns about the potential loss of their children's religious identity due to secularism (Almakkawi, 2017). The issues surrounding multiculturalism and secularism, and their potential for bias, further justify the demand for various faith-based schools, particularly Islamic ones. Therefore, it is crucial to unpack the dynamics of Islamic private schools' intentions, values, and ambitions in nurturing diverse identities. In the subsequent sections, I begin with an overview of faith schooling in the UK, with a particular focus on the historical development of Muslim communities and their schools within the United Kingdom.

1.2 A historical overview of faith schools in the United Kingdom

Faith schools in the UK have historical roots dating back to medieval times, with Church of England and Roman Catholic schools being the most established (Nordin, 2010). Over time, other religious communities—including Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, Hindus, and Greek Orthodox—have also developed their own faith-based schools (ibid). While many faith schools now receive state funding, a significant number operate independently, particularly within minority communities (Teece, 2010; Cush, 2005).

The 1944 Education Act categorised faith schools into voluntary, voluntary-controlled, and voluntary-aided models, reflecting varying levels of state involvement and religious autonomy (King, 2010; Cush, 2005). Despite ongoing criticisms about their role in a secular society, faith schools continue to grow. By 2019, they made up 34% of all state-funded mainstream schools in England (House of Commons, 2019), indicating their ongoing appeal to families seeking identity-based and values-oriented education (Judge, 2013).

Against this backdrop, this research narrows its focus to Islamic private schools, which are independently funded or managed by Muslim organisations. These schools are not bound by national curriculum constraints to the same degree as state schools, allowing for greater autonomy in shaping Islamic religious curricula and school envirnoment. They serve as vital spaces for constructing faith-based identities, fostering a sense of moral purpose, and maintaining community and cultural values, although they often face financial and regulatory pressures.

This chapter sets the stage for that inquiry by clarifying key terms (faith schools, private schools, and Islamic schools), exploring the historical presence of Muslim communities in the UK, and situating Islamic private schools within the broader educational and sociocultural landscape.

1.3 Conceptualisation of key terms

The terms *faith schools* and *faith-based schools* are used interchangeably in this thesis to refer to schools founded on the values and teachings of a specific religion or sect. The inclusion of *sect* recognises intra-faith diversity, whereby schools may be religiously motivated but not universally accepted by co-religionists. For instance, many Muslims would not recognise an Ahmadiyya Islamic school as authentically Islamic due to doctrinal differences. This highlights the contested nature of religious legitimacy in faith-based education. As Berkeley (2008: 4) notes, faith-based schools are often state-funded institutions that educate pupils within a particular religious or denominational framework—a definition equally applicable to independent schools grounded in religious ethos.

In England, private or independent schools are legally defined as institutions providing full-time education to children of compulsory school age, outside the remit of local authority control (DfE, 2019a: 6). While these schools must comply with the Independent School Standards (ISS) under the Education and Skills Act 2008 (ibid: 4), they enjoy greater autonomy in governance and

curriculum. This autonomy allows Islamic private schools to integrate faith-based content more thoroughly into their educational offerings.

Although the independent school sector contributes significantly to the national education system and economy (Read & Bick, 2014; Oxford Economics, 2018), this study is concerned less with its economic role and more with the religious nature of Islamic private schools. Some of these, such as the Institute of Islamic Education and Darul Uloom Islamic High School, are affiliated with the Independent Schools Council (ISC, 2020), yet operate primarily as religious spaces for identity formation, moral instruction, and cultural preservation.

By situating Islamic private schools within the independent school sector and clarifying their religious basis, this section lays the conceptual groundwork for understanding how Islamic education functions within the UK's pluralistic educational landscape.

1.4 A historical trace of Muslim communities and their educational institutions in the United Kingdom

To better grasp the dynamics of Muslim minorities and their educational institutions in particular, "it is better to explore history rather than to repress or deny it" (Said, 1994: xxx). Through historical analysis, we can establish a rationale for analysing the current state of this social phenomenon.

It would therefore not be possible to explore different aspects of private Islamic schools in the UK without examining the historical dimensions of Muslims in Britain. According to Ansari (2004: 36), Muslims first came to Britain in the sixteenth century as sailors and travellers. They settled predominantly in port cities such as Glasgow, Cardiff, and Liverpool. This pattern continued from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, with sailors mainly from the Indian subcontinent and Muslims from other parts of Asia and Africa arriving in Britain (Al-Jeran, 1998: 44). The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 was another significant event that brought Somali and Yemeni merchants and businessmen

to port cities such as Liverpool, Cardiff, and South Shields (Al-Jeran, 1998; Lewis, 1994).

Moreover, the postcolonial era and the two World Wars were crucial periods for the establishment of Muslim communities, during which 'over twenty million' Muslims settled in Europe (Nielsen, 2004: 161). In the post-war era, migrant workers were needed for the reconstruction of Europe, attracting migrants from the Indian subcontinent to the UK, Algerians to France, and Turks to Germany (ibid). Initially arriving as single individuals, these migrants were later joined by their wives and children in a process that continued until the 1980s (Lewis, 1994: 37), leading Muslims to view themselves as settlers rather than temporary workers (ibid). Many Muslims held British passports due to their former colonial citizenship in countries once part of the British Empire, now part of the British Commonwealth.

After World War II, Britain pursued a policy of decolonisation, leaving many Muslim-majority countries to establish their own governments, often leading to unrest. In response, many colonial Muslim citizens moved to the UK during the 1960s and 70s to start new lives. However, inherent racism and prejudice within British society at the time hindered full integration, and many immigrants chose to maintain their distinct cultural identities, with religion becoming a central anchor for Muslim communities in their new host country.

Initially small in number, Muslim communities grew over time through assimilation, fostering 'ethnic and sectarian affinity' (Bayram, 2013: 53). Several key factors contributed to their social cohesion and communitarianism. For instance, their shared religion, Islam, motivated them to establish religious institutions such as mosques, community centres, libraries, and Islamic schools to assert their agency and voice.

Religion has played a crucial role in the social cohesion of Muslims and other minority communities in the UK. However, the scope and dynamics of this role have shifted from one Muslim generation to the next. This transition has also led to tensions between the first generation of Muslims, for whom Islam was a crucial aspect of their identity, and second-generation Muslims, who feel a

stronger pull towards British identity due to factors such as birth and socialisation (Bayram, 2013). While religion has not led to the homogeneity of all Muslim minorities, it has provided 'additional cement' for the preservation of social cohesion among them (Cohen, 1997: 187).

It was essential for Muslim communities to institutionalise spaces where their religious practices could take place and their religious identity could be preserved. After the first group of Muslim migrants was joined by their families, their initial move was towards establishing their own religious spaces by 'converting houses to mosques', although the first purpose-built place of worship was constructed in Woking as long ago as 1889 (Bayram, 2013: 54). The number of mosques was limited during the early settlement era, and Muslims had to share them (ibid). Mosques not only played a major role in religious purposes but also served as libraries and 'supplementary schools for both children and adults' (ibid: 55). The number of mosques grew rapidly through the post-war decades. By 1985, there were 314 registered mosques in the UK, a number that rose to 452 by 1990 (Nielsen, 2004: 46). This increase in mosques signalled the Muslims' need to preserve their religious identity and values, and the demand for religious venues paralleled a growing need for educational spaces through the establishment of Islamic schools. Such a demand correlates with the establishment of immigrant communities dating back to the 1970s – a time when they gained sufficient confidence to assert their ideological and religious norms (Saifullah-Khan, 1977). Zine (2008) argues that the demand for Islamic schools was also linked to cultural assimilation and the increasing prominence of the religious identity of Muslim communities.

According to recent figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2021), Muslims constituted 6.5% of the population of England and Wales in the 2021 Census. Demographically, there was a notable growth in the Muslim population, with an increase of 28% from 2.7 million in 2011 to 3.9 million in 2021. Muslims made up 4.8% of the population in the 2011 Census, but this recent growth has reinforced their status as the largest religious minority group in the UK, surpassing all other non-Christian faiths combined.

Figure 1 below demonstrates the rise in the Muslim population in the United Kingdom—an upward trend that has become particularly notable over recent decades. This growth has been influenced by several factors, including sustained immigration from Muslim-majority countries, higher birth rates within Muslim communities, and an increasing willingness to self-identify as Muslim (Ansari, 2018). The overview highlights the scale of this demographic shift, particularly over the past few decades. This rise directly correlates with the increasing number of Muslim pupils entering the British education system, which has contributed to a growing demand for educational provision that reflects Islamic values and culturally specific needs.

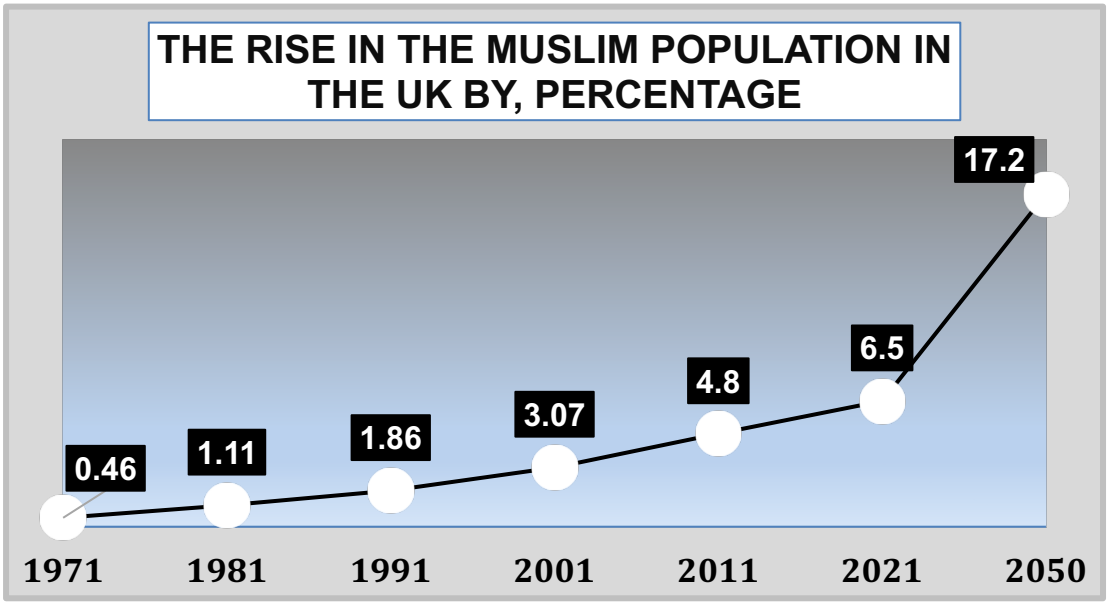


Figure 1: The rise in the Muslim population in the UK, by percentage

Prior to 2001, the UK census did not include a question on religion, leaving gaps in official data on the Muslim population for 1971, 1981, and 1991. Estimates for these years—approximately 0.46% in 1971, 1.11% in 1981, and 1.86% in 1991 (Peach, 2006; Ansari, 2018)—are based on academic analyses drawing from ethnic origin, immigration trends, and community surveys. While these figures indicate a steady increase driven by post-war immigration and natural population growth, they remain methodologically limited due to the absence of direct religious data. The 2001 census marked the first official inclusion of religious affiliation, offering a more reliable foundation for tracking demographic trends (ONS, 2021). Consequently, this demand has led to the

emergence and expansion of Islamic schools across the UK—a trend clearly illustrated in the figure below.

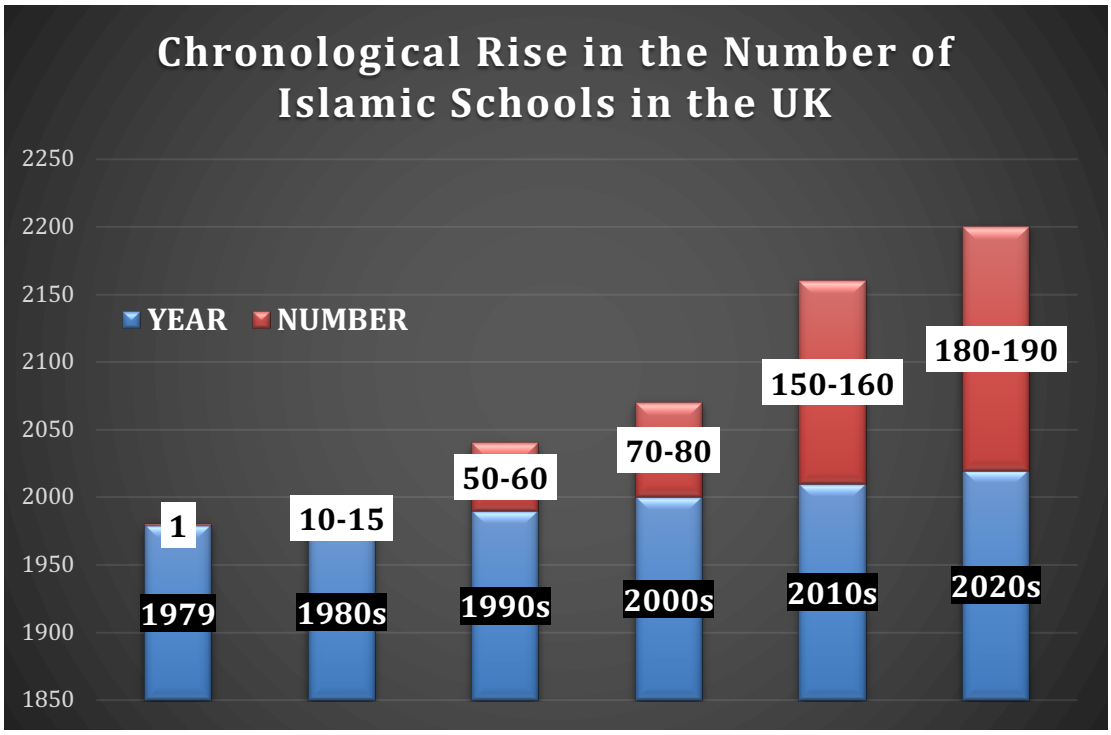


Figure 2: Chronological rise in the Number of Islamic Schools in the UK

Moreover, the above figure illustrates the chronological rise in the number of Islamic schools in the United Kingdom, highlighting the rapid expansion of these institutions over recent decades. The data, derived from the AMS-UK (2019) report, clearly demonstrates the increasing demand for Islamic schools as the Muslim population in the UK has grown. The first officially registered Islamic school in the UK was established in 1979, and since then, the number of such schools has rapidly increased, with a particularly notable surge in recent decades. This growth reflects the rising need for educational settings that align with Islamic values and cater to the specific cultural and religious needs of Muslim pupils. The chart shows how Islamic schools have become an increasingly prominent part of the UK's educational landscape, highlighting the strong demand for these schools as Muslim communities seek more opportunities for their children to receive an education that is both academically rigorous and spiritually and religiously fulfilling.

According to the Muslim Council of Britain's report (MCB, 2015: 24), the Muslim population comprises various ethnic backgrounds, including Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi, Arabic, and other Asian ethnicities. This diversity has led to increased multiculturalism within Muslim communities in the UK. These communities are not homogeneous; rather, religious values and ethos are the primary commonalities linking the diverse ethnic backgrounds. In light of these demographic shifts and cultural dynamics, the subsequent part contextualises Islamic Schools in the UK from a contemporary perspective.

1.5 Islamic schools in the UK

The presence of Islamic schools in the United Kingdom is not a new phenomenon, yet systematic research into their structures, purposes, and socio-political implications remains limited (Breen, 2017; Grace, 2005). To contextualise these schools, it is necessary to clarify their definitions, types, and educational functions, while also exploring how themes such as gender, demography, and identity intersect with the broader landscape of Islamic education.

Islamic schools can broadly be divided into two categories: supplementary (or mosque) schools**,** and full-time Islamic day schools**.** Supplementary schools typically operate outside regular school hours, providing Qur'anic instruction, religious studies, and sometimes ethnic language teaching in mosques, community centres, or private homes (Rosowsky, 2008). With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, many families turned to online one-to-one Qur'an tuition via platforms like Zoom, Skype, and WhatsApp.

The primary focus of this study is on full-time Islamic private schools. These are independent, fee-paying institutions that incorporate Islamic teachings alongside a secular academic curriculum. Funded through tuition fees, charitable donations, and community support, they aim to provide holistic education that fosters academic achievement, religious literacy, and moral development (Parker-Jenkins, 2002; Halstead, 2009). The curriculum usually

includes Qur'anic studies, Arabic, Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), and moral education, integrated with national curriculum subjects such as English, mathematics, and science (Mogra, 2010).

Islamic schools vary significantly in theological orientation—Sunni, Shi'a, or specific Islamic movements—and pedagogical approach, reflecting the ethnic and cultural diversity of British Muslim communities, including Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Arab, Somali, and other groups (Hussain, 2004; Meer, 2009). Despite these differences, they share a commitment to fostering an Islamic ethos that affirms religious identity within the broader framework of British society.

Definitions of Islamic schools differ in scope and emphasis. According to the Association of Muslim Schools UK (AMS-UK), a Muslim school is one with a religious designation rooted in Islam, which shapes its values and ethos. However, this label can be overly broad. For instance, a school operated by an Afghan community that teaches the National Curriculum alongside Persian or Dari and limited Islamic content might be classified as a Muslim school, but not necessarily an Islamic one. In contrast, Tan (2011: 5) defines an Islamic school as "any educational institution that emphasises the transmission of Islamic knowledge and inculcation of Islamic values and ethos." This study adopts a similar definition, viewing Islamic schools as institutions that aim to cultivate an Islamic identity and respond to the moral and religious expectations of Muslim parents and communities.

Since the establishment of Darul Uloom Al-Arabiya Al Islamia in Bury in 1979—the first full-time Islamic school in the UK—the number of such institutions has grown significantly. By the late 1990s, there were around 60 Islamic schools; by 2013, the number had reached 156. As of 2019, AMS-UK listed 187 Islamic schools, including 15 state-funded Free Schools and 172 independent schools (AMS-UK, 2019). This growth reflects several dynamics: rising demand from Muslim parents, increased community capacity to mobilise around educational needs, and a broader assertion of religious identity and agency in British public life (Miah, 2016; Breen, 2017).

Despite this growth, challenges remain. Efforts to secure state funding have often been met with resistance. Islamia Primary School, for example, underwent a protracted legal battle before becoming the first Islamic school to receive voluntary-aided status (Parker-Jenkins, 1998). Even today, many Islamic schools struggle to gain public funding, facing political and bureaucratic hurdles (TES, 1998). These difficulties must be viewed within a wider policy context shaped by multiculturalism, secularism, and national security discourses (Modood, 2018b; Lentin & Titley, 2011).

Public debate often questions whether Islamic schools align with 'fundamental British values,' particularly regarding gender equality, individual autonomy, and democratic citizenship. While Islamic private schools are inspected by Ofsted and must meet the Independent School Standards—including the promotion of these values—critics argue that some institutions fall short. Indeed, Ofsted figures indicate that, as of 2017, 81 out of 139 Muslim schools were rated below 'Good', with 39 deemed inadequate (Weale, 2017). However, such critiques must be balanced against the schools' roles in promoting social inclusion, religious education, and academic and spiritual achievements for historically marginalised communities.

In the United Kingdom, educational authorities and accreditation bodies play a vital role in ensuring that all schools, including Islamic private schools, maintain high standards of education and adhere to national regulations. The regulatory framework for education in England is comprehensive, involving several key organisations responsible for overseeing both state and independent schools, including faith-based institutions such as Islamic schools. In the UK, the creation and delivery of educational modules, including religious studies in Islamic private schools, are subject to regulatory oversight to ensure compliance with national standards. While Islamic private schools have the flexibility to design their curriculum, including Islamic studies, they must ensure that it is balanced with other subjects such as English, mathematics, and science, as required by the Department for Education (DfE). These schools are expected to provide a broad and balanced education that meets the legal

curriculum requirements and fosters students' spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development (Department for Education, 2016).

One of the primary bodies overseeing educational standards in the UK is Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills). Ofsted conducts inspections to assess the quality of education, leadership, and safeguarding within schools, including private and faith-based institutions. The inspection process ensures that schools, including Islamic private schools, comply with national regulations, including the provision of a broad and balanced education (Ofsted, 2019). Ofsted's regulatory remit covers a range of aspects, including curriculum delivery, teaching quality, pupil welfare, and the promotion of British values, which must be incorporated into the school's ethos (Ofsted, 2020). Islamic private schools must also adhere to regulatory frameworks set by Ofsted and the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI). Ofsted inspections assess whether the school's curriculum is effective, safe, and aligned with national standards, while the ISI ensures that schools meet accreditation criteria. Additionally, Islamic private schools must promote British values such as tolerance and respect for diversity, in line with safeguarding policies. These regulations help ensure that religious modules are taught in a manner consistent with both academic standards and national values, preventing extremism and promoting a well-rounded education (Ofsted, 2020).

The Department for Education (DfE) also plays a central role in regulating private schools in the UK, including Islamic institutions. The DfE sets out the statutory requirements that all independent schools, including Islamic schools, must follow. These include requirements for the curriculum, safeguarding, and the overall welfare of students. Islamic private schools are expected to deliver a curriculum that aligns with national educational standards, while also incorporating religious studies that reflect the values and teachings of Islam (Department for Education, 2016). This regulatory framework ensures that Islamic private schools provide students with a well-rounded education, balancing national requirements with religious instruction. In addition to Ofsted and the DfE, the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) is responsible for accrediting independent schools, including Islamic private schools. The ISI

conducts rigorous inspections to ensure that independent schools meet the required standards in terms of educational quality, leadership, pupil welfare, and overall institutional governance (Independent Schools Inspectorate, 2019). Accreditation by the ISI is a significant process for Islamic private schools, as it serves as formal recognition that the institution meets both the legal and educational standards expected in the UK. The ISI's inspection framework ensures that schools maintain high educational standards while upholding their religious and cultural values.

Islamic private schools in the UK must also comply with the legal process of registration, which requires them to meet specific criteria set out by the DfE. The registration process involves ensuring that the school delivers a balanced curriculum that includes both national education standards and Islamic teachings. Islamic private schools must also adhere to the National Curriculum where applicable, particularly in subjects such as English, mathematics, and science, while simultaneously offering religious education that is consistent with Islamic principles (Department for Education, 2016). This dual requirement presents a unique challenge for Islamic private schools, as they are tasked with maintaining the integrity of their religious curriculum while ensuring compliance with national educational standards. This institutional background is crucial to understanding the complexities faced by these schools in balancing religious education with the legal and academic requirements set by UK educational authorities. It also highlights the ways in which Islamic private schools navigate the regulatory landscape to offer an education that meets both national standards and the expectations of the Muslim parents and community

In sum, Islamic private schools in the UK occupy a complex and contested space. They aim to nurture religious identity within a secular-liberal framework, negotiating tensions between faith, citizenship, policy, and public perception (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). This nuanced positioning highlights the need for a more contextually grounded and critically engaged understanding of Islamic education and schooling in Britain.

1.6 The intersection of gender within the context of Islam

The intersections of gender and masculinity within the context of faith, particularly in Islamic education, are vital aspects to consider. Gender-based segregation has a long history in Islamic discourse, where Islam deliberately separates men and women in various contexts. Social interaction between genders is limited, except in the context of close relatives, and men and women do not mix during prayers. Physical contact such as handshakes, hugging, kissing, or other forms of interaction between men and women is not allowed. However, there are some modernist views and fatwas (religious decrees or orders) that allow the mixing of men and women in Islam, as long as it does not lead to inappropriate touching, secret meetings, flirting, or any other interactions based on sexual aspects (Nasab, 2021).

Educational platforms have also been predominantly segregated in Islamic countries in the Global South and Islamic communities in the Global North. Some Muslim parents wish to segregate their children from exposure to the opposite sex to fulfill their religious and moral values (Miah, 2016). Such forms of segregation take place either by sending their children to single-sex schools or through home-schooling. Under Section 36 of the Education Act (1994), it is the parents' duty to ensure that their school-age children attend some type of mainstream or private school or receive tuition at home. However, there have been cases in which Muslim parents have failed to ensure educational provision for their daughters due to their ideological opposition to co-educational schooling, and court proceedings have occasionally been initiated (Barrell & Partington, 1985).

In the UK, most independent Islamic schools are primarily co-educational at the primary level, but some are single-sex. However, at the secondary level, Islamic schools are mainly single-sex, with fewer co-educational classes (El-Aswed, 2014: 60). The target schools for this research are primary (co-educational) and secondary (single-sex) full-time day schools. Apart from Muslim communities, other traditional conservative institutions also uphold the value of single-sex segregation over co-educational systems. However, on political and ideological levels, arguments from both teachers and pupils challenge the effectiveness of

single-sex schooling and advocate for co-education (Mediha, 2017; Lee et al., 2014; Levit, 2006). These arguments emphasise the importance of co-educational environments for students' social development, their interactions with the real world, and integration into society (Dale, 1971, 1974). It is also argued that co-education can help reduce gender stereotyping (Pahl, 1999).

While this research does not aim to provide a comprehensive review and analysis of single-sex Muslim schools, the provision of single-sex education is important in undrestanding the presence, and value of single-sex Islamic schools within the contemporary Islamophobic context of the UK. According to the database of Islamic schools registered with AMS-UK, out of 172 independent schools, 88 (51%) are single-sex.

There is evidence indicating that Muslim masculinities have been associated with “global terrorism, fundamentalism, and urban unrest” (Archer, 2003:1). Muslim boys in mainstream schools are also referred to as “problematic pupils, under-achievers, and sufferers of high rates of school exclusion and low rates of post-16 progression” (ibid). Although such problems do exist among Muslim boys, it is vital to study the underlying factors, which often relate to their socio-economic status, where they live, and issues related to their language skills and childhood histories. There are also issues around racism and Islamophobia within mainstream schools targeting Muslim students, leading to increased demands for their own schools (O’Brien, 2016). This was investigated by Merry (2018: 173), who concluded that Islamic schools could represent an alternative to mitigate the harm done to Muslim communities and minimise risks of exposure to de-Islamising forces in mainstream schools (Zine, 2008).

While much of the literature on Muslim pupils in UK schools has focused on Muslim masculinities, this section shifts attention to Muslim femininities, highlighting the gendered educational experiences of Muslim girls. It explores how socio-cultural expectations, family dynamics, and religious identity shape their academic engagement, aspirations, and outcomes, offering a more nuanced understanding of intra-group variation and gendered patterns of attainment.

Khattab and Modood (2018) provide a valuable contribution to debates on ethnic and religious minority attainment by focusing on British Muslim students and highlighting the gendered differences in educational expectations and outcomes. Using nationally representative data, their study challenges deficit-based narratives that often portray Muslim students—particularly girls—as passive or constrained by cultural norms. Instead, they find that Muslim girls frequently demonstrate high levels of aspiration and motivation, even in the face of socio-economic disadvantage and structural discrimination.

A key finding is that Muslim girls outperform their male peers in educational attainment, a trend attributed to a greater internalisation of cultural and religious values that promote discipline and perseverance, as well as stronger parental influence and higher educational expectations. Rather than attributing success to cultural conservatism or religiosity per se, Khattab and Modood (2018) argue that aspirational attitudes are central to explaining this gendered pattern of achievement. These insights provide a more nuanced understanding of Muslim youth by emphasising agency and intra-group variation, thereby expanding a literature that has often homogenised Muslim communities or focused primarily on obstacles to achievement (Archer, 2003; Shain, 2010).

Complementing this, Dwyer (2000) explores the complex and sometimes conflicting expectations faced by Muslim girls, who often navigate tensions between academic ambition and cultural or familial roles. This dual positioning—between the mainstream education system and community expectations—can create emotional and practical challenges that affect their engagement with schooling. However, rather than deterring achievement, this negotiation can also act as a catalyst for motivation, particularly when familial expectations include academic success as a marker of respectability and future security.

Research also highlights how the visibility of Muslim identity plays a significant role in shaping the experiences of Muslim girls within educational institutions. Uddin et al. (2022) examine the relationship between visible markers of Muslim identity—such as wearing the hijab—and experiences of discrimination in UK universities. Their findings indicate that visibly Muslim students are more likely

to face prejudice and psychological distress, underlining the emotional toll of navigating higher education while carrying the burden of hyper-visibility. This aligns with Mirza's (2024) qualitative work, which documents the need for visibly Muslim girls to continually 'prove' their academic legitimacy in environments where they are frequently othered. These studies emphasise the need for culturally responsive mental health provision and institutional reforms that acknowledge and address these identity-based stressors.

Moreover, the literature suggests that the academic success of Muslim girls in secondary education is often supported—and sometimes driven—by gendered familial expectations. Holmwood and O'Toole (2018) argue that Muslim girls are often encouraged, and at times pressured, to excel academically as a means of achieving social mobility and securing future autonomy. In contrast, Muslim boys may face less academic pressure and may be expected to contribute to household income at an earlier age (Ahmad, 2007). This dynamic complicates simplistic understandings of gender roles within Muslim communities and points to the need for analyses that consider how gender, class, and religion intersect in shaping educational trajectories.

Together, these studies provide an essential corrective to literature that has traditionally focused on Muslim masculinities—often through discourses of failure or radicalisation—by highlighting the distinct yet equally complex experiences of Muslim femininities. The findings underscore the importance of disaggregating gendered experiences in order to fully understand the educational outcomes and aspirations of Muslim pupils. They also point to the necessity of policies and practices that address gender-specific challenges and promote equity within and beyond the classroom.

Moreover, Educational policies from the 1970s and 1980s, such as the Race Relations Act (1976) and the Education Reform Act (1988), played a significant role in promoting discourses of multiculturalism and anti-racism (Archer, 2003). These policies encouraged the inclusion of diverse cultural perspectives in school curricula, raising awareness of racism and its impacts while validating minority voices. For a discussion of secularism and multicultural theory, please see Chapter 2, section 2.4, page 34. While multiculturalism aims to celebrate

diversity and promote equality among ethnic communities in the UK, it often fails to address internal power dynamics and inequalities (ibid). This oversight can lead to the marginalisation of certain voices within these communities, perpetuating existing hierarchies and failing to ensure equal representation and support for all sub-groups. Hence, the British model of multiculturalism is regarded as a failure by other Western European countries, which argue that it has fostered separation rather than promoting a cohesive shared secular culture (Modood, 2018b). The Trojan Horse Affairs had a great impact on the further securitisation of Muslim communities and led to increased demand for private Islamic schools (Miah, 2016). Hence, it is vital to explore its dynamics in relation to the position of Muslims in educational and social policies.

1.7 The Trojan Horse Affair and its implications on PREVENT strategies and social cohesion

In late November 2013, Birmingham City Council received an anonymous letter alleging a plot to Islamise several schools by imposing a conservative Islamic ethos and appointing Sunni-Salafist governing bodies (Clarke, 2014: 5). By March 2014, these claims gained traction in the media and among government bodies, prompting an investigation into twenty-one Birmingham schools, particularly those in areas with high Muslim populations. This targeted approach had significant repercussions for the affected schools, their teachers, and pupils, and the broader Muslim communities, impacting social cohesion, as discussed further below.

After detailed scrutiny, two fundamental reports were produced. The first, the Kershaw Report, was published by Birmingham City Council in 2014, and the second, the Clarke Report, was carried out by the Department for Education (DfE) in the same year. While both studies were conducted independently, they came to similar conclusions. The Kershaw Report (2014: 4) concluded that “there is no evidence of conspiracy to promote an anti-British agenda, violent extremism, or radicalisation in schools in East Birmingham.” Meanwhile, the Clarke Report (2014: 95) stated that there was no evidence of “terrorism,

radicalisation, or violent extremism in the school; rather, religious conservatism or a hard-line strand of Sunni Islam." Such religious motives would be in contrast to liberal and "fundamental British values" (Holmwood & O'Toole, 2018: 56) and would therefore require the investigation of various causative factors. However, there is no evidence of any such thoughts or motivations directly leading to a "propensity to engage in terrorism" (ibid). Both reports were studied by the Parliamentary Select Committee, which also concluded that:

"we note once again that no evidence of extremism or radicalisation, apart from a single isolated incident, was found and that there is no evidence of a sustained plot nor of a familiar situation pertaining elsewhere in the country" (Holmwood & O'Toole. 2018: 2-3).

The Trojan Horse affair marked the blueprint for a shift in counter-terrorism strategies towards prevention in Muslim communities. The 'Prevent' initiative was a counter-terrorism policy and agenda initially developed through CONTEST, the UK government's counter-terrorism strategy in 2008, in order to "stop people from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism" (HM Government, 2011: 23). After the Trojan Horse affair, Prevent became a statutory duty in all schools, but it was linked more overtly with Islamic schools, mainstream schools with a high proportion of Muslim pupils, and schools located in areas with high Muslim populations (Danvers, 2021).

Despite the lack of evidence, the Trojan Horse scandal created a regime of credibility about the existence of an organised plot to Islamise British schools (Miah, 2016: 140). It could be argued that Prevent was instrumentalised as a "tool to collect intelligence" (Dawson, 2016: 6) predominantly from specifically targeted Muslim communities and schools. The process of school identification for Ofsted inspections and the measurement of their success through the Prevent policy first assumed that radicalisation and extremism would be more likely to occur within such schools and second that Muslim communities in general, and Muslim pupils in particular, might be more vulnerable to radicalisation. Such policies, agendas, and assumptions are not only "discriminatory, disproportionate and counterproductive" (Elahi & Khan, 2017:

3) but also help create gaps in social cohesion and community integration, from a multicultural discursive perspective.

As a policy discourse, the selection of schools for rapid Ofsted inspection immediately following the Trojan Horse affair—which involved “90-100% of pupils from ethnic minority communities in highly populated Muslim localities” (Holmwood & O’Toole, 2018: 58)—contributed to categorising Muslims as security threats and “folk-devils” (Shain, 2010). In terms of quality assurance, schools received a one-hour training exercise related to Prevent, provided by a private company (Ward, 2017). This not only failed to equip teachers with sufficient knowledge to make rational judgments regarding their students’ views but also placed them in a professional dilemma concerning their personal observations, commitments to students, duties and responsibilities, and their schools’ expectations (Miah, 2016).

This atmosphere of suspicion and oversight resulted in a significant increase in referrals of Muslim pupils to the Channel programme, highlighting the heightened scrutiny faced by these communities. From 2014 to 2016, the referral of Muslim pupils to the Channel programme was six times higher than for other pupils. However, 80% of the referrals to Channel did not progress beyond the 'de-radicalisation' or 'support' stages (ibid: 44).

A study commissioned by the DfE concluded that “most schools in England did not even conduct training, with the majority of schools indicating a lack of staff and teachers” who could be linked to Prevent-related training (cited in Holmwood & O’Toole, 2018: 80). Even in the health sector, which also required Prevent implementation, a BMJ survey indicated that “94% of NHS staff had received basic level one Prevent training, which consisted of information leaflets supported by a quiz” (Gulland, 2017).

The Trojan Horse affair, along with other counter-terrorism policies in schools via Prevent, had several fundamental consequences. First of all, the crystallisation of the Trojan Horse affair by the media and politicians, and the extension of the Prevent policy to predominantly target Muslim communities, increased societal polarisation and divisions between Muslim and non-Muslim

communities (Miah, 2016). Such events are key elements of a particular form of knowledge production and identity politics within a specific “colonial agenda” (Danvers, 2021: 1). If the process of Orientalism was the creation of attitudes on behalf of the global North towards the Orient and the global South (Said, 1978), then the deliberate marginalisation of ethnic communities through such events and policies could be seen as a process of internal othering of Muslim communities. This process not only produces an image of the “radicalized outsider” (Virdee, 2014) but also increases societal “fear, hatred, disgust, and resurgent self-pride and arrogance, much of it to do with Islam” and Westerners (Said, 2003: x-xi). Such elements also lead to the production of social division rather than cohesion, thereby paving the way for minority communities to “self-segregate, self-isolate,” or to develop “parallel lives” (Hussain & Meer, 2017: 46).

The formation and implementation of the Prevent strategy are crucial for this study, as they affect the religious character of Islamic private schools, highlight the broader implications of securitisation through “counter-terrorism” policies on Muslim communities, and demonstrate the necessity of critically examining how such initiatives can perpetuate social division and marginalisation. In summary, the Trojan Horse affair, as outlined above, has left a bitter legacy, paving the way for institutional monopolisation and the further marginalisation of Muslim communities (Miah, 2016).

1.8 Conclusion

This chapter introduced the aims, rationale, background, and intentions of the thesis. It explored the position of Islamic private schools specifically, and Muslims more broadly, in the United Kingdom from both historical and contemporary perspectives. Through an introduction and evaluation of secularism, relativism, and multiculturalism, the chapter connected these concepts to Muslim identity formation within a society shaped by the Prevent policy, Islamophobia, and colonial-era stereotypes of Muslims. Furthermore, it explored the consequences of the Trojan Horse affair on the Prevent policy and

on Muslim pupils in mainstream schools, examining the limitations of multicultural policy in addressing these complex identity issues.

Chapter Two critically reviews the relevant literature to identify gaps and justify the rationale for this research. It particularly explores scholarly work related to various discourses, including multiculturalism, secularism, identity, minority identities, the curriculum, Muslim parental choices and values, and theories of the Islamisation of knowledge. *Chapter Three* outlines the rationale for adopting a qualitative ethnographic approach to studying two private Islamic schools in the UK. It discusses the methods employed for data collection and analysis, alongside ethical considerations and issues of data credibility. In addition, it examines matters of positionality and reflexivity, highlighting their implications for the research process. *Chapters Four and Five* present the research findings, establish connections between these findings and the existing literature. In *Chapter Six*, I address the research questions and discuss the findings in relation to the literature reviewed and explain how they address gaps within the literature and expand on the key findings of this study. The concluding chapter also includes reflections on the study' original contirbutions to the field and provide suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2. Abstract

The aim of this chapter is to present and critically engage with the primary body of literature on Islamic education, with a focus on Islamic schools. The broader focus of this research is to explore, unpack, and analyse the religious nature of Islamic private schools in the United Kingdom, exploring what constitutes an 'Islamic' school and why it holds significance. Studies highlight a lack of systematic, UK-specific literature on Islamic private schools (Shakeel, 2018; Musharraf & Nabeel, 2015). Research on three interconnected themes—curriculum and environment, identity formation, and parental choice—is reviewed, and existing gaps are identified. The chapter unpacks and critically explores the theories of Islamisation of knowledge and integrated curricula in the context of Islamic education. It also reviews studies on how curricula and educational environments contribute to the development of Muslim students' multifaceted identities. Literature on Identity formation is further reviewed across political, religious, cultural, and overlapping dimensions. Additionally, studies on Muslim parents' motivations for selecting Islamic schools are analysed, providing insight into the values and expectations that shape educational choices and pupils' identity development. The chapter concludes by discussing identified gaps in the literature, establishing the rationale for this research's contribution towards addressing these gaps.

2.1 Introduction

The trend of Islamic private schooling in the United Kingdom has consistently risen over the past few decades (Musharraf & Nabeel, 2015). According to the Association of Muslim Schools in the United Kingdom (AMS-UK) in 2013, 5 per cent of Muslim children attended Islamic schools. Of these, 77 per cent were enrolled in Islamic private schools. By 2017, a total of 139 Islamic private schools were registered in the UK (Weale, 2017). While recent official data on the number of Islamic schools is limited, there are currently 184 Islamic schools listed in the Association of Muslim Schools directory (AMS-UK, 2013). The demand for Islamic schooling has increased rapidly since 2013, largely due to the preferences of Muslim parents and communities.

This growing demand highlights the need for further systematic studies addressing Islamic education and private schooling from various perspectives, including curriculum, environment, identity, and parental choice (Shakeel, 2018). The rapid changes in both the quantity and quality of Islamic schools in the United Kingdom also necessitate up-to-date research (ibid). Notably, Badawi (2006: 1) argues that 'one form of schooling, however, that has not been investigated by researchers is the full-time Islamic school'. This observation highlights the aim of this research to explore the religious character of Islamic private schools in the United Kingdom.

This chapter is organised according to a thematic literature review framework. Through this approach, the most relevant themes corresponding to the fundamental research questions have been selected, reviewed, and analysed. Firstly, it presents a theoretical overview of Islamic education by reviewing its curricula, concepts, and purpose within multicultural contexts. In doing so, it explores and critically analyses the work of two prominent scholars, Al-Attas (1977) and Al-Faruqi (1983), who pioneered the theories of the Islamisation of Knowledge and the Integrated Curriculum approach.

Secondly, literature on various aspects of identity, with a particular focus on diasporic, cultural, and minority identities, is reviewed, explored, and unpacked. Thirdly, the chapter surveys a broad range of literature regarding Muslim parents' rationale and reasons for choosing Islamic schools for their children. Finally, the conclusion identifies key gaps in the literature and considers how this research transitions from the literature review to the methodological chapter.

2.2 A critical exploration of literature on British Values

The promotion of Fundamental British Values (FBVs) in mainstream schools in England has sparked extensive critical inquiry, particularly in relation to the experiences of Muslim pupils. Revell and Bryan (2018) offer a foundational critique, arguing that FBVs function as a policy response to fears of

radicalisation and terrorism, framing Muslim identities as potential threats to national unity. They highlight how the discourse surrounding FBVs often constructs a normative, secular, and racialised idea of "Britishness," positioning Muslim pupils as cultural outsiders. Rather than fostering inclusive citizenship, the policy risks deepening exclusion and reinforcing the very social divisions it claims to address.

Farrell (2016) extends this critique by exploring how student teachers, particularly in Religious Education, are positioned within this values agenda. She finds that FBVs are less about cultivating democratic participation or critical thought, and more about discipline, surveillance, and control—especially of those perceived as 'Other.' Muslim educators and pupils are caught in a tension between their own religious or cultural values and the state-sanctioned values they are expected to promote or embody. This can generate a sense of moral conflict or alienation, as teachers and students alike struggle with the implicit message that Muslim values are incompatible with being British.

Although Saba Hussain's (2019) work is based in India, her analysis of how Muslim girls in Assam navigate their identities within a hostile socio-political environment offers valuable parallels. Hussain explores how Muslim girls construct agency and negotiate their subjectivities amidst institutional and societal structures that seek to define and contain them. Her multi-dimensional lens—considering gender, ethnicity, religion, and class—provides an important framework for understanding the experience of Muslim pupils in British schools. Like the girls in Assam, Muslim pupils in the UK must perform complex negotiations between state-imposed identities and their lived realities, often resisting or reinterpreting dominant discourses like FBVs to assert their own place in the educational landscape.

Together, these researches highlight a critical tension: policies like FBVs, while appearing neutral or universal, are embedded in racialised and securitised narratives that disproportionately impact Muslim communities. Rather than affirming pluralism, they often serve to police it. When viewed through Hussain's feminist and postcolonial framework, the lived experiences of Muslim pupils can be understood as active sites of resistance, where young people

exercise agency in defining their own value systems and asserting belonging within exclusionary educational spaces. This interconnected critique calls for a reimagining of values education—one that moves beyond assimilation and towards genuine intercultural dialogue and justice.

2.3 Curricula of faith schools

Faith schools, which integrate religious beliefs and values into their educational curricula, hold a significant place in discussions on educational policy, pedagogy, and sociology (Walford, 2019; Cooling, 2016). Such schools aim to deliver a values-based education by merging faith traditions with academic content, though they operate within a broader educational context where secular and multicultural values are increasingly emphasised (Jackson, 2014). This review examines the literature on faith school curricula, focusing on the extent to which these curricula align with or diverge from mainstream educational agendas (Francis, 2018).

Proponents of faith-based education argue that these schools, by virtue of their religious ethos and curricula, play an essential role in fostering moral and spiritual development (Arthur, 2015). However, critics suggest that faith schools may foster exclusivity and limit critical thinking by prioritising a single worldview in their curricula (Hand, 2012). Consequently, these schools raise important questions regarding identity formation among pupils, particularly in terms of the extent to which this identity aligns with religious values as opposed to broader societal norms (Bailey, 2020).

Faith schools are often sponsored by specific religious organisations; thus, the ethos, principles, values, educational aims, and religious education (RE) curricula they adopt are closely linked to the beliefs and traditions of their supporting religious communities (King, 2010). Typically, the RE curriculum is shaped by school governors in collaboration with religious leaders, with each institution’s mission statement rooted in the "ideals, values, and attitudes" of its faith community (McGettrick, 2005: 106). This raises critical questions about

whether religious education promotes openness to diversity or instead reinforces a particular belief system, potentially discouraging the exploration of alternative viewpoints.

An additional and often under-explored critique of faith-based curricula concerns the notion that "nurturing faith is not an educational task" (Pring, 2005: 55). Critics argue that education should be directed towards promoting learning valued by society at large, rather than advancing the interests of a particular faith (Pring, 2005). Thus, education should refer to "activities that promote the kind of learning that is picked out by society as worthwhile" (Pring, 2005: 56). However, this raises questions about what is considered "worthwhile" within a society, who defines "worthwhile," and the degree of consensus on what is deemed valuable for a multicultural society, including for minority groups and parents.

There is evidence that faith schools are increasingly attempting to incorporate a "plurality of knowledge and understanding" that accommodates diverse faith perspectives, thereby promoting shared spirituality among various groups (McGettrick, 2005: 109). Christian faith-based schools, in particular, are demonstrating a growing commitment to addressing the "spiritual needs of all those admitted" (Murphy, 2005: 114), signalling a shift towards a more inclusive approach to religious education.

Despite these developments, much of the existing literature remains focused on faith schools associated with dominant religious and cultural groups, with limited research dedicated to minority faith-based schools, which are underrepresented in the literature (Parker-Jenkins et al., 2005). This gap highlights a critical need for further examination of how minority or Muslim faith schools operate within multicultural societies, potentially offering alternative models of integration between faith and diversity. Such research could provide valuable insights into how faith-based education might more effectively serve a diverse student population, fostering a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of the role of faith schools within the educational landscape. In the subsequent sections, I will therefore explore the curricula of Islamic private schools in the context of the global West.

2.4 Islamic education in Multicultural contexts

This section begins by examining the responses and behaviours of several European states toward Islamic education and schooling more broadly. A review of the literature indicates that Islamic schools are experiencing a "rapid rise in European and other Western societies" (Musharraf & Nabeel, 2015: 40). However, there is a notable lack of a standardised approach within European contexts regarding policies and adaptations towards Islamic schools and Islamic education. Some European countries, despite being universalistic and making few adjustments for diverse groups, particularly Muslims, still include and offer religious education in various forms—such as confessional, non-confessional, publicly funded, and private Islamic schools—as part of their educational policies (Jackson, 2014). For example, France does not provide religious instruction in its public schools (Wolf & Macedo, 2004). In contrast, very few private Islamic schools exist in Germany due to the country's limited tradition of private schooling (Fuess, 2007). Furthermore, Germany requires private Islamic schools to affiliate with an officially recognised religious body, a stipulation that is absent in Britain, the Netherlands, and several Scandinavian countries (Shakeel, 2018).

Studies have also highlighted several factors contributing to the growing demand for, and the development of, private Islamic schools in the United Kingdom. The cautious and restrictive measures taken by states regarding public funding for Islamic schools have been identified as a major factor influencing this trend (Halstead, 2004). According to Breen (2013), transitioning private schools to publicly funded schemes could lead to further professionalisation and stability; however, the legal requirements may also necessitate reducing the religious dimension of the curriculum to meet funding criteria (ibid). Consequently, state funding may represent both a privilege and a challenge, potentially encouraging stakeholders in private schools to remain within the private sector. For instance, limited state funding for Islamic faith schools may result in financial instability and reduced teacher quality within private Islamic schools (Musharraf & Nabeel, 2015). Private schools, however, enjoy greater freedom in developing their curricula based on specific

requirements (Everett, 2012). This was evident in the two private schools I studied for this research, where one headteacher noted, “We are not big fans of government funding, as with funding comes control” (B-01-Headteacher-Female).

Studies also suggest that some countries are working to integrate religious schools, particularly Islamic schools, into mainstream educational infrastructures. According to Sahadid and Van Koningsveld (2006), state funding for Islamic schools in the Netherlands has increased since 1987, with 41 Islamic primary schools in place by 2005. State support for Islamic schooling directly influences the demand for private Islamic schools. For example, Medeni (2013) found that Austria’s extensive support for Islamic education within public schools led to a reduced demand for private Islamic schools, demonstrating a clear correlation between state support for Islamic education and private school demand. However, Medeni’s study is now outdated, and the situation in Austria may have changed with the significant rise of far-right groups. Conversely, some countries provide minimal support for Islamic education. France, for example, had only two private Islamic schools as of 2005, serving a limited number of pupils (Jozsa, 2007: 74). Italy maintains a zero-tolerance stance toward Islamic schools, offering no support within its public education system (Fuess, 2007). This policy led to the closure of a private Islamic school in Milan by local authorities in 2005 (ibid).

Demographically, the Muslim populations in each country vary, influencing the specific educational needs within each context. Nevertheless, the discourse around Islamic schooling and state policies regarding their funding has become highly politicised in the West, particularly after 9/11 (Sirin & Fine, 2008). National security concerns and fears of radicalisation have led to heightened scrutiny of Islamic schools, with critics questioning their role in promoting social cohesion (Mansouri & Wood, 2008). In countries like the UK, policies have been introduced to monitor faith schools more closely, while in France, strict secularism challenges any state support for religious schools (Baubérot, 2011). The debate is also framed by broader tensions between multiculturalism and integration, with some arguing that Islamic schools hinder integration, while

others see them as vital for accommodating religious diversity (Modood, 2007). Rising Islamophobia has further complicated public opinion, with Islamic schools often perceived as reinforcing segregation (Cantle, 2013). However, this politicisation varies across Western countries, with nations like Canada being more accepting of Islamic education compared to others, where far-right movements have influenced anti-Islamic school sentiments (Sirin & Fine, 2008).

The positions of Britain, the United States, and Canada towards Islamic schools share several similarities. All three countries provide limited state funding for Islamic schools, incorporating Islamic education mainly as a non-confessional subject within their public schooling systems. This has, in part, contributed to the growth of private Islamic schools (Zine, 2006). In Canada, the number of Islamic schools reached 55 by 2005 (Memoon, 2010), while the United States had approximately 235 private Islamic schools by 2009 (Berglund, 2015). In the UK, there were 139 private Islamic schools by 2017 (Weale, 2017). However, these numbers may have risen substantially since then.

The statistics presented indicate a correlation between state agendas regarding multiculturalism and the social integration of minority communities. A key reason frequently cited by Muslim parents (as detailed in the parental choice section) is the limited support from the United Kingdom for state-funded Islamic schools. Additionally, the perceived inability of mainstream schools to adequately meet the educational needs of Muslim pupils has often been highlighted (Shakeel, 2018). In contrast, the case of Austria demonstrates that demand for private Islamic schools declined when the state effectively addressed the educational needs of Muslim pupils within the mainstream education system (Medeni, 2013).

According to Abdl El Hafez (2015: 10), a primary reason for the establishment of private Islamic schools in the United States is to address the specific needs and demands of Muslim pupils that are unmet by mainstream public schools. The study further identifies several key factors contributing to the rise of private Islamic schools, including:

> "(a) a struggle in negotiating their multiple identities; (b) challenges facing Muslim students in public schools; (c) prejudice against Muslims in public schools; (d) concerns of Muslim parents about public schools; and (e) the Islamic theological point of view" (2015: 10).

While Abdl El Hafez's study focuses on the United States, similar factors may also apply to the United Kingdom. A major challenge faced by Muslim minorities in non-Muslim countries is the provision of Islamic education for their children (Maimuna, 2015). Demographic projections indicate that the Muslim population in the UK is expected to grow from 4.8 percent to 11.3 percent by 2050 (Gledhill, 2015), potentially intensifying the educational and infrastructural needs of this community. For many Muslims, the establishment of full-time private Islamic schools serves as a means to address these needs (Merry, 2007). However, numerous other factors may also contribute to the demand for full-time private schools.

Several studies suggest that Islamic schools play a crucial role in providing a secure environment for Muslim pupils and alleviating their challenges (Glenn et al., 2018; Zine, 2006). Such environments are argued to shield Muslim pupils from bullying and discrimination often encountered in mainstream schools (Al Hashimi, 2007; Van Driel, 2004). Sirin and Fine (2008) also identified multiple instances of religious discrimination and harassment in mainstream schools, particularly in the post-9/11 context.

Parker-Jenkins (2002) found that numerous Muslim pupils in state-funded or mainstream British schools faced religious discrimination and racism. Consequently, many British Muslims view Islamic schools as safe spaces that offer protection against racism and Islamophobia within mainstream education (Shah, 2012). Furthermore, the lack of curricular and pedagogical approaches tailored to meet the needs of Muslim students in mainstream schools has been widely recognised (Elannani, 2007). These pedagogical gaps include the absence of culturally responsive teaching methods that validate and incorporate students' religious and cultural backgrounds, a lack of sensitivity to Islamic values in classroom interactions, and minimal opportunities for students

to engage critically with curriculum content from diverse perspectives (Gay, 2010; Halstead, 2009; Shah, 2012). Research also highlights how inclusive pedagogies—such as dialogic teaching, critical multicultural education, and reflexive curriculum design—can help create more equitable learning environments for Muslim students and other minoritised groups (Bamber, 2014; Arshad et al., 2010).

Through a qualitative survey of 87 Islamic schools in the United States, Abdus-Sabur (1995) found that rates of issues such as drugs and alcohol abuse, premarital sex, and violence were significantly lower in Islamic schools compared to public schools. From a parental and community perspective, Islamic schools are valued for fostering religious identity, which is a crucial factor contributing to their establishment. They are seen as essential for nurturing religious identity (Molook, 1990), transmitting religious knowledge (Smith, 2012), and preserving cultural values and norms (Zine, 2007).

The Qur'an and the Sunnah describe the purpose of Islamic education as two-fold. Without using specific terminology, these dual purposes are represented in Islam by the Arabic terms tarbiyah and taʿlim. Tarbiyah (تربية) indicates that the first purpose of Islamic education is to care for and nurture the child (i.e., as a mother cares for her child), aiming to train the whole person. Taʿlim (تعليم) refers to the second purpose, which is knowledge transmission. Thus, the goal of Islamic education encompasses not only the training of the mind but also the holistic development of the individual (Hussain, 2004; Nasr, 2010). Consequently, Islamic education focuses on a holistic approach to educational processes by shaping or nurturing the religious identity of pupils.

Furthermore, Islamic education emphasises the spiritual and moral development of the individual. In contrast, secular or modern Western forms of education primarily focus on reason and rational thinking (Yasin & Jani, 2013). From an Islamic perspective, spirituality, which is tied to a divine essence (Al Zeera, 2001), further distinguishes Islamic education from secular models. However, several aspects of Islamic education overlap with other forms of religious education, such as those associated with Christianity, Judaism, and Sikhism. Freire (1997) also describes spirituality as a liberating action from

forms of oppression, linking it to morality, love, unity, and respect (cited in Elbih, 2012: 157). Thus, the emphasis of Islamic education on morality and spirituality, grounded in religious knowledge and identity, is a vital characteristic when compared to secular education, which predominantly focuses on reason, intelligence, and long-term competence and employability.

Bell Hooks, a prominent feminist scholar, highlights the transformative power of love as essential for social justice and personal liberation, advocating for a comprehensive understanding of love that encompasses care, empathy, and mutual respect (Hooks, 2000). Islamic education emphasises spirituality and moral development through a holistic approach and fosters compassion, devotional love, and justice. Both Hooks and proponents of Islamic education recognise that cultivating moral character is crucial for resilience against societal injustices and for building inclusive communities. By integrating the values of love central to both feminist thought and Islamic education, educators can promote personal development that prioritises not only intellectual achievement but also ethical responsibilities towards others (Ramadan, 2009; Nasr, 1987). Therefore, it is vital to explore how Islamic education, in particular, and Islamic schools, in general, can influence the moral and spiritual development of Muslim pupils in the United Kingdom.

Moreover, Muslim communities in Western societies face challenges due to racial prejudice, Islamophobia, and aggressive secularism (Shakeel, 2018). Evidence indicates that many Muslim American pupils in mainstream schools experience bullying and lack adequate support in addressing "Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiments" (Elbih, 2012: 160). Conversely, more detailed studies suggest that Islamic schools, through their curricula and environments, can foster social cohesion and tolerance across various European contexts. For instance, Mohme (2017) examined a Somali Islamic school in Sweden and found that Islamic schooling can aid integration within a largely secular society.

However, other studies, such as those by Elbih (2012) and Van Driel (2004), critique the role of Islamic schools in relation to tolerance and social cohesion. Elbih (2012: 157), for example, argues that because Islamic schools present alternative discourses, they can be perceived as a “threat to the dominant

society's discourse." Conversely, Merry (2007), Al-Hashimi (2007), and Zine (2006) argue for the case of Islamic schools from a perspective of spiritual and social integration. These authors contend that Islamic schools safeguard and protect Muslim pupils from Islamophobia, racism, and religious discrimination that they may encounter in public schools. Despite mainstream stereotypes about the incompatibility of Islam with local communities, researchers in the American context have found that Islamic schools play a significant role in fostering "civic-mindedness and integration" (Grewal & Coolidge, 2013: 252). Overall, the relationship between Islamic schools and broader society requires systematic studies of their curricula and environments to establish correlational and causal factors leading to negative or positive effects on social integration and community cohesion.

In addition to several challenges associated with Islamic schools, such as a lack of resources and financial instability, Badawi (2006) identified the absence of a standardised curriculum as a significant issue. overall, Therefore, Islamic education lacks a homogenous curriculum and pedagogy (Molook, 1990), particularly in the context of Islamic schools in the West due to the heterogeneity among Muslim populations. This absence of a unified Islamic curriculum further complicates methodological challenges regarding the incorporation of Islamic and secular education within Western Islamic schools.

2.5 The theory of 'Islamisation of Knowledge': a critical overview

The fundamental theorisation of Islamic education and curricula in Islamic schools can be traced back to the influential work of two prominent scholars: Syed Muhammad Al Naquib Al-Attas, particularly through his thesis, *The Concept of Education in Islam* (Al-Attas, 1980), and Ismail Raji Al-Farouqi (1983). As a contemporary scholar, Al-Attas is noted for inspiring the first attempt to develop an Islamic philosophy of education during the first World Conference on Muslim Education held in Mecca in 1977 (Bocca-Aldaqre, 2019: 2). A significant outcome of this conference was the development of a theory referred to as the "Islamisation of Knowledge" (Abaza, 2002: 358).

As a prominent theory of Islamic education, the overarching objective of the Islamisation of Knowledge centres on the concept of Tawhid (Al-Ahad – God is One), which posits God as the origin of knowledge and the foundation for good deeds. Islamic education is distinct from secular forms due to several unique characteristics. Firstly, a primary epistemological difference arises from the fact that Islamic education is grounded in Islamic epistemology, which is based on the divine revelations of the Quran and the Sunnah (the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Mohammed) (Al Zeera, 2001). The concept of Tawhid places Allah at the centre of education (Merry, 2007). According to Al-Ghazali (2003), knowledge comes from Allah, and its purpose is to learn and reflect upon his attributes, ultimately leading individuals to become true worshippers. Consequently, the purpose of Islamic education is to equip Muslims with the knowledge required to strengthen their faith and enable them to take transformative actions that align with Allah's prescribed teachings, serving as both an act of worship and a demonstration of their faith (Elbih, 2012: 166).

Al-Attas's philosophical argument advocates for the Islamisation of the mind, body, and soul, and its effects on individuals and societies (Mansor et al., 2017, p. 532). He strongly asserts that faith, knowledge, and belief must be accompanied by action. Thus, he posits that "there is no useful knowledge without action, and there is no action without knowledge" (ibid: 535). Therefore, it can be argued that the Islamisation of knowledge is not merely an abstract educational concept; rather, it constitutes a holistic process of transforming the soul, body, and mind through the intake of Islamic knowledge and its practical application in daily actions.

Moreover, Al-Attas (1980: 43) discusses the process of the Islamisation of knowledge as the “deliverance of knowledge from its interpretations based on secular ideology, and from meanings and expressions of the secular.” Additionally, other scholars, such as Bennett (2005) and Abu Sulayman (1994), contend that the educative dimension (Taʿlim) of Islamic education can be realised through the Islamisation of Knowledge. Specifically concerning Islamic schools, Husain and Ashraf (1979) argue that these institutions can nurture a strong Muslim identity by incorporating the Islamisation of Knowledge across

all subjects. This reinforces the necessity of the sub-questions in this thesis, which aim to explore what constitutes the curriculum and environment of Islamic schools and how these elements are shaped and delivered.

Al-Faruqi is also pivotal in theorising the Islamisation of Knowledge through the concept of Al-Tawhid (God's oneness). He asserts that “Al-Tawhid is the recognition of truth, reality, destiny, and knowledge” (Al-Faruqi, 1983: 45). He further explains that due to the centrality of the principle of Al-Tawhid, Muslims perceive the presence of God throughout their lives and in the universe (Dzilo, 2012: 225). Furthermore, he argues that Western or secular education is often detached from moral responsibility (ibid). Consequently, both scholars advocate for the ‘de-Westernising of knowledge’ through the Islamisation process (ibid: 251).

Overall, the theory of the Islamisation of Knowledge promotes two key principles: first, it aims to shape an Islamic identity through Islamic education, and second, it emphasises moral, spiritual, and holistic development through the Islamisation of Knowledge. While these principles reaffirm the religious nature of Islamic education, the theory of the Islamisation of Knowledge poses certain contextual, epistemological, and methodological limitations, which will be explored and unpacked subsequently.

Firstly, from a contextual perspective, scholars primarily focus on the philosophical aspects of Islamic education, which are based on the metaphysical premise that God is the source of knowledge. Consequently, this theory is predominantly applicable in Islamic contexts. However, the discourse on the Islamisation of Knowledge raises questions regarding its relevance and compatibility within Western secular societies. The applicability of this theory to Islamic countries can be attributed to their legal, social, political, and religious regulations and measures, which often reject teachings that contradict Islamic doctrines and values. For instance, it is nearly impossible to teach human evolutionary theories as part of the science curriculum in Islamic countries such as Egypt, Malaysia, Syria, and Turkey (Asghar et al., 2014). Thus, the teaching of evolutionary theories presents serious epistemological constraints for Islamic schools in Western societies, as they conflict with Islamic values and beliefs.

Moreover, another reason the Islamisation of Knowledge has not fully addressed the challenges of Muslim education in Western contexts may be linked to the timeframe of Al-Attas's theorisation in 1980, when Islamic schools in the West were just beginning to evolve (Merry, 2007). Consequently, Al-Attas and Al-Farouqi may not have considered the applicability of their theories in Western societies at that time.

These contextual limitations restrict the options for Islamic schools in the West to implement the Islamisation of Knowledge by: (a) removing discourses that contradict Islamic values from their teaching materials; (b) partially Islamising the curriculum; and (c) offering Islamised education as a supplementary subject alongside the mainstream curriculum. Thus, the theory poses contextual limitations, and the discourse on the Islamisation of Knowledge varies locally (Abaza, 2002: 356). Therefore, it is essential for this research to examine the extent to which Islamisation theories can be applied in Islamic private schools in the UK and how such theories influence the religious nature of these institutions.

Secondly, the theories of Islamisation of Knowledge may exacerbate the divide between Islam and the West, rather than fostering compatibility and reducing the disparities surrounding difference and othering (Saada & Magadlah, 2021). This raises questions about the coexistence of Islamic and secular education within Islamic schools in the UK. As mentioned earlier, the objective of both theorists has been to Islamise knowledge within Muslim communities. However, this ambition does not adequately address the epistemological conflicts between revealed religious knowledge (Islamic) and knowledge based on empiricism and reason (secular) (Sardar, 1988).

Another constraint of the Islamisation theory stems from Al-Attas's assertion (1980: 39) that the purpose of education in Islam is to produce a "good man," rather than a good citizen of a secular state. While Al-Attas's use of "man" is intended to be inclusive of both genders, employing "man" as a default term, this conceptualisation has its limitations and creates a binary distinction between the religious identity of Muslims and their discourses on citizenship in the United Kingdom (Wan Daud, 1998). First, Al-Attas does not provide a clear

methodological or pedagogical approach for achieving this purpose. Second, his assertion contradicts the notion of what it means to be a good secular citizen, particularly for Muslim pupils in Western societies. Furthermore, Al-Attas's argument raises epistemological issues regarding the moral and philosophical relationship between the concepts of a “good man” and citizenship. For instance, does it imply that a good secular citizen cannot also be a good man? Is it not the case that a good man should aspire to be a good citizen? Does one need to receive Islamic education to be deemed a “good man”? Can a “good man” only be nurtured through Islamic education?

The conceptualisation of a “good man” in Al-Attas’s framework remains abstract, as he politicises the notion of a “good citizen” in relation to the secular agendas of Western countries while depoliticising the concept of a “good man” as merely a servant of God and a true believer (Al-Attas, 1980: 39). Moreover, this conceptualisation can lead to further complications within Muslim communities, particularly in Islamic schools in Western societies, by creating a dichotomy between their religious identity as a "good man" and their civil status as a "good citizen." According to Al-Attas’ conceptualisation of a good man, Islamic schools may prioritise the production of good individuals through Islamic education, which does not necessarily equate to fostering good secular citizens due to perceived clashes in values. This reinforces the potential for ideological control, as it proposes that knowledge should align solely with a particular Islamic worldview (Sardar, 1988; Waghid, 2014). It is essential to explore how this emphasis may impact the social integration of Muslim pupils within the broader discourse of citizenship and their specific identity as British Muslims. Hence, this research aims to explore the religious nature of Islamic schools and to what extent Islamic education promotes the concept of a “good citizen,” rather than solely a “good man,” and how this influences the identity formation and social integration of Muslim pupils.

Thirdly, neither of the two theorists presents a clear practical approach for the Islamisation of knowledge (Wan Daud, 1998). Their theories directly influence the (re)articulation of the curriculum within Islamic schools. According to Zine (2006), the Islamisation of knowledge in the United States faces methodological

constraints. Therefore, as a vital theory, it is necessary to establish a clear methodological framework for implementing the Islamisation of knowledge. Both Al-Attas (1980) and Al-Faruqi (1983) provide philosophical insights but lack concrete methodological guidelines.

In summary, due to the identified limitations—contextual (the geographical divide between Western secular societies and Islamic countries), knowledge-related (the contradictions regarding sources of truth and reality that create dichotomies), and practical (the absence of a clear method for Islamising all knowledge)—I will discuss an alternative theory: the 'integrated curriculum' proposed by Al-Faruqi (1982).

2.6 Integrated Curriculum

Al-Faruqi (1982), a prominent scholar of Islamic education and a theorist of the Islamisation of knowledge, advocates for a complete rejection of the coexistence of secular and Islamic education in Islamic schools. Like Al-Attas (1980), Al-Faruqi argues that the entire curriculum should be Islamised, meaning it must be integrated with Islamic principles. However, due to the pragmatic obstacles associated with the Islamisation of knowledge discussed earlier, several Muslim scholars and curriculum developers have proposed an 'Integrated Curriculum.' This approach aims to harmonise both divine and worldly knowledge (Yaacob et al., 2014). The rationale for an integrated curriculum is to foster critical, innovative, and scholarly thinking among students through the integration of Islamic and secular curricula (ibid).

One notable example is IQRA, an International Educational Foundation based in the United States, which has sought to develop an integrated curriculum that harmonises both religious (Islamic) and secular forms of education (Yaacob et al., 2014). However, there remains a lack of clear conceptualisation regarding 'how to effectively integrate Islamic curricula with secular education' (ibid: 7). Additionally, the absence of a defined conceptual and methodological approach for integrated curricula complicates efforts to distinguish Islamic schools from

mainstream institutions, as there is often a disconnect between national curricula and religious inputs (ibid). As Zine (2006) argues, if curricula are not integrated, “Islamic knowledge remains an addition to the Eurocentric curriculum” (cited in Elbih, 2012: 167). Therefore, it is vital for this paper to examine the extent to which Islamic schools in the UK have incorporated Islamic education within secular forms of education.

Overall, providing a balanced and sophisticated Islamic education for Muslim children in minority communities remains a significant challenge (Maimuna, 2015). The curriculum in private Islamic schools is neither homogenised nor uniform across different contexts. In many instances, alongside core subjects, schools include supplementary courses in Quran recitation and memorisation, basic beliefs and practices, as well as minority language instruction in Arabic, Farsi, or Urdu (Douglass & Shaikh, 2004). The inclusion of minority language courses in Islamic schools reinforces Merry’s (2007: 63) assertion that these institutions offer “education for cultural coherence.” Thus, the inconsistency in Islamic education curricula highlights that while these schools are religiously oriented, they vary significantly from their secular counterparts due to different religious motives, ethos, and environmental factors. Overall, it indicates that Islamic schools do not possess a homogenous religious nature; rather, it varies across schools and contexts. However, their fundamental goal remains unified: nurturing religious and other identities, as explored below (Zine, 2006).

2.7 Identities

The discourse surrounding identity is of significant importance in the study of faith schools, particularly Islamic private schools that aim to nurture a specific religious identity (Merry, 2007). Drawing on Hall’s (1990) theorisation of identity from a postcolonial and diasporic perspective, as well as the reviewed literature, identities are discussed and explored as fluid, contextual, relational, hybrid, and heavily influenced by power relations, as well as historical and socio-political contexts (Hall, 1990).

The primary aim of Islamic education is to impart Islamic knowledge to Muslim pupils in order to shape their religious identity and personality (Elbih, 2012). This objective can be achieved through two Arabic concepts that are recognised as fundamental principles of Islamic education: Tarbyah (تربية) and Ta'lim (تعليم) (Shakeel, 2018). The former refers to the behavioural dimension of "nurturing the child" or "training the whole person," while the latter pertains to the "transmission of knowledge" (Shakeel, 2018; Nasr, 2010; Yasin & Jani, 2013). This aim is rooted in the provision and teaching of the Qur'anic text and Sunnah (the deeds and sayings of Prophet Muhammad) through the concept of tawhid (the oneness of God), which places Allah at the centre of education (Merry, 2007; Al-Ghazali, 2003).

To conceptualise Muslim identity, it is beneficial to examine it across multiple dimensions, each reflecting different facets of the construct. Religious identity, as one dimension, encompasses the core beliefs, practices, and values central to Islam (Peek, 2005; Mogahed & Chouhoud, 2017). Cultural identity, another dimension, includes a diverse array of customs and traditions shared within Muslim communities worldwide, shaped by both religious teachings and cultural diversity (Rashid, 2014). Political identity forms a third dimension, reflecting how Islam influences political views and activism, particularly in contexts where religious beliefs intersect with socio-political concerns (Cesari, 2013). Islam plays a foundational role in shaping Muslim identity by providing a cohesive framework for religious, cultural, and social practices. This integration of various dimensions fosters a shared sense of self and community among Muslims (Esposito, 2011).

Moreover, “religious identity is closely intertwined with cultural identity” (Milligan, 2003: 476). In *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Hall (1990) argues that cultural identity is not a fixed essence but an evolving process shaped by history, culture, and personal experience. He describes two approaches to identity: the "being" of shared cultural heritage and the "becoming" that is formed through hybridity and change—concepts particularly relevant to diasporic communities (Hall, 1990). For Muslim pupils in Islamic schools, this framework emphasises how their identities develop within the dynamic interplay

between religious heritage and the broader cultural environment they navigate. Islamic schools provide a setting that reinforces the "being" of Muslim identity by focusing on shared faith and values (Sahin et al., 2019). At the same time, students engage in a "becoming" process as they negotiate their identities within a multicultural society. Hall's insights help illuminate how Muslim pupils perceive themselves as part of both a stable tradition and a continually evolving community, reconciling their cultural origins with the realities of their diasporic experiences (Hall, 1990). Thus, cultural and religious identities overlap, with the balance between the two not being fixed. In some instances, individuals may prioritise cultural aspects of their identity, while in others, greater emphasis may be placed on nurturing their religious identity.

The discourses of citizenship and belonging are increasingly relevant in contemporary discussions about multiculturalism and identity, particularly in the context of Islam in Britain. For many individuals, embracing a "sanitised" version of Islam can serve as a means to navigate the perceived incompatibility between their faith and broader British society (Shah, 2012). This adaptation not only facilitates the construction of a "good Muslim" identity but also aligns with progressive, Westernised values, allowing individuals to claim their place within the national narrative (Medeni, 2013). However, these values are not without contestation; critics argue that their application can sometimes marginalise non-Western perspectives and impose a singular cultural narrative (Modood, 2007). Such identity negotiations reflect a desire for acceptance and belonging while simultaneously addressing the challenges of cultural integration and societal expectations.

Critical literature on identity often engages with themes of citizenship and belonging, examining how individuals reconcile their cultural backgrounds with dominant societal narratives. The notion of "othering" plays a significant role in this discourse, as it highlights the marginalisation of those who do not conform to the mainstream identity (Said, 1978). Moreover, Hall (1990) and Bhabha (1994) have explored the complexities of identity formation in hybrid contexts, suggesting that identities are not fixed but rather fluid and shaped by ongoing interactions with societal norms. This literature highlights the importance of

acknowledging the multifaceted nature of citizenship, as it encompasses both the rights and responsibilities of individuals within a society while also recognising the unique challenges faced by those who navigate multiple identities (Hall, 1990; Bhabha, 1994). By critically examining these dynamics, we can gain a deeper understanding of how individuals negotiate belonging and citizenship in increasingly diverse societies.

Moreover, in *Space, Place, and Gender* (1994), Doreen Massey explores the dynamics of spatial organisation in relation to identity formation, arguing that places and spaces should be viewed as "open and porous networks of social relations" (ibid: 121) rather than fixed sites of stable and exclusionary identities. More specifically, Massey rightly critiques the interconnectedness of fixed identities and a sense of belonging tied to static places, stating that "the search for identity, for a sense of meaning, and the need for a sense of belonging, are often focused on the construction of singular, fixed and enclosed identities of place" (ibid: 151). Massey's theorisation of space and its interconnectedness with discourses of identity and belonging is fundamental to this study, as later, in Chapter 4, Section 4.1, we examine how the space of Islamic private schools is understood as a site for reinforcing Muslim social relations and a sense of belonging.

Several studies explored below highlight the role of Islamic private schools as spaces for the formation, negotiation, resistance, and transformation of Muslim pupils' identities, which are marked by religious, social, cultural, and political motives. Through their ethos and curricula, Islamic private schools aim to cultivate a religious identity grounded in Islamic traditions, humility, and moral integrity (Sahin, 2013). Zine (2008) examined Canadian Islamic schools, revealing that they serve not only as sites for educational and socio-political ambitions but also as spaces where pupils resist mainstream, often Eurocentric norms and values. While Zine's study emphasises the empowering aspects of Islamic private schools, it is crucial to consider the extent to which this empowerment might lead to further isolation of Muslim pupils, complicating their identities within a multicultural society (Niyozov & Pluim, 2009). Such isolation may hinder ongoing efforts to decolonise curricula in mainstream schools and

highlights the need for greater recognition and accommodation of minority needs within educational spaces.

Several scholars researching Islamic identity argue that Muslim youths in the Global West manifest, negotiate, and express their identities in a specific form referred to as “hyphenated identities” or “hybrid identities” (Tsouroufli, 2015; Ferri, 2018; Sirin & Fine, 2008; Duderija, 2008). The term "hyphenated identities" is described as “keeping a foot in … two worlds” (Tindongan, 2011: 74). These scholars also contend that hyphenated identities serve as a coping mechanism for Muslim youths in the West (ibid). However, associating identities solely with geographical spaces is reductive because it oversimplifies the complex and multifaceted nature of identity formation (King, 2010). This perspective overlooks critical overlapping factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status that significantly shape individual experiences (Crenshaw, 1989). By reducing identity to geography, we neglect the diversity within regions, and the dynamic nature of identity over time, (Castells, 1996). Ultimately, this narrow view fails to capture the richness of human identities and can reinforce stereotypes or power imbalances (Said, 1978).

Moreover, Sirin and Fine (2008) studied Muslim American youth, exploring how they negotiate and resist hybrid forms of both religious and national identities. While their work is significant, it lacks an examination of the various external pressures and forces that influence the maintenance and negotiation of these hybrid identities. For instance, factors such as Islamophobia, racism, and prejudice against Muslims, particularly in the aftermath of the 9/11 events, compel Muslim youths to navigate the visibility and invisibility of their identities based on their socio-political contexts (Awad, 2010).

Several studies have examined how Muslim pupils resist dominant religious narratives within Islamic schools, particularly those who feel constrained by rigid interpretations of Islam and identity markers (Niyozov & Pluim, 2009; Elbih, 2012). Niyozov and Pluim (2009) found that Muslim pupils in Canadian Islamic schools often challenged the prescribed cultural and religious ethos within their school environment. Their study highlighted how students engaged in identity

negotiations, symbolic acts, and dialogue as forms of resistance. While significant research has been conducted in the context of the United States and Canada, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding various aspects of identity formation within Islamic private schools in the United Kingdom (Shakeel, 2018; Meer, 2010).

The intersection of gender and identity is crucial in studying the processes of Muslim identity formation. Studies such as those by Zine (2006) and Dwyer (1999) focus on how Islamic schools serve as spaces where the gender identities of female pupils are formed, negotiated, and resisted. For instance, Zine (2006) examined Canadian Islamic schools as sites for gender identity relations, exploring how Muslim pupils practice veiling and negotiate gender relations. Her research highlights how these students (re)claim the veil as an empowering personal and spiritual choice, rather than viewing it as a forced obligation.

Hassen (2013) conducted a narrative-based study to analyse the complex interplay between Islamic identity formation and Islamic schooling in Victoria, Australia. The study involved interviews with ten participants who were graduates of Islamic schools in Victoria, aged between 18 and 30. The findings indicated the validity and importance of Islamic schooling in the context of Victorian Islamic schools and highlighted the influence of Islamic education on the religious identity formation of their pupils. It was revealed that students in these schools were actively engaged in the "(re)construction, (re)interpretation, and expression of their religious identities" within an Islamic school environment (Khan, 2009: 32).

While Hassen's (2013) study focused on the lived experiences of students in Victorian Islamic schools, it has certain limitations. Firstly, by focusing solely on graduates, the study may overlook the evolving nature of identity. Identities are not fixed and can change over time. The gap between the students' experiences in Islamic schools and the time of the interviews may have affected their perceptions of religious identity. For instance, their religious identities may have been (re)constructed and (re)interpreted after graduation as they transitioned into non-Islamic environments, such as universities or the public

workforce. As Meer (2009: 379) argues, “very little research has explicitly investigated how increasingly salient articulations of Muslim identities connect with the issue of Muslim schooling.” Therefore, ethnographic research is needed to understand how various factors—such as curriculum, school ethos, the environment of Islamic schools, and parental choices—shape the formation of religious identity among Muslim pupils.

2.8 The experiences of Muslim pupils in mainstream UK schools

A substantial and growing body of literature has documented the complex and often challenging experiences of Muslim pupils in UK mainstream education. At the heart of these studies lies a persistent concern with how Islamophobia—both overt and subtle—shapes the academic, psychological, and social outcomes of Muslim students. One of the most significant recent contributions is the systematic review by Abu Khalaf et al. (2023), which synthesises findings from 44 studies on Muslim learners aged 4 to 25. This review positions Islamophobia not merely as an interpersonal issue but as a structural and systemic barrier to educational equity.

The review identifies widespread experiences of religiously motivated bullying, microaggressions, and exclusion, which manifest through both peer interactions and institutional practices. Notably, Muslim students are often subjected to a curriculum that either omits or misrepresents their identities—frequently framing Islam within the narrow confines of extremism or terrorism. These findings are consistent with earlier critiques from Abbas (2017) and Miah (2016), who argue that British schools frequently operate through a monocultural lens that hyper-visibilises Muslim students while simultaneously marginalising them. This dual dynamic of visibility and exclusion fosters alienation, contributing to a sense of not belonging within the educational environment.

Importantly, the effects of this climate are not only social but also measurable in terms of academic performance and mental health. Abu Khalaf et al. (2023)

detail how Islamophobia is associated with increased levels of anxiety, depression, and school disengagement among Muslim students. These findings are echoed in Mirza's (2024) work, which highlights the burden Muslim girls in higher education carry in having to 'prove' their legitimacy and worth in academic spaces. Rather than viewing these issues as isolated psychological responses, the review highlights their systemic roots—calling for educational institutions to reckon with policies and practices that tacitly sustain religious discrimination.

However, the review does not present a wholly bleak picture. It also emphasises the role of protective factors such as inclusive pedagogy, culturally responsive curricula, and the presence of supportive educators. These mitigating elements suggest that schools, while often complicit in reproducing Islamophobia, can also be transformative spaces for fostering equity and belonging. This insight aligns with Gillborn's (2008) call for embedding anti-racism in education and reinforces the need to incorporate anti-Islamophobia measures into teacher training, curriculum design, and governance structures.

Complementing this analysis, Bi (2020) offers a useful child-centred perspective on the "Trojan Horse Affair," exploring how Muslim pupils experienced their schools as "double-edged panopticons." Using Foucault's theory of surveillance, Bi examines how counter-extremism policies like Prevent have turned schools into spaces of constant monitoring and surveillance. These practices not only surveil Muslim children but also impose subtle forms of emotional and identity regulation, often leading to heightened anxiety and the erosion of Islamic identities. Bi's study deepens the critique of how securitisation in education disproportionately affects Muslim students, framing them as subjects of suspicion rather than learners with equal rights to safety and expression.

When exploring educational attainment, national statistics further illuminate the disparities Muslim pupils face. According to the Department for Education (DfE, 2018), students from Muslim backgrounds—particularly Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Somali—consistently underperform in secondary education assessments compared to their White British peers. These patterns reflect a

confluence of factors, including socio-economic inequality, school-level discrimination, and limited access to academic support resources. However, while these trends highlight structural disadvantages, they should not be interpreted through a deficit lens.

Modood (2007) critically challenges deficit narratives that associate Muslim communities, especially young men, with academic failure. He argues for a more nuanced reading of ethnic minority educational trajectories—pointing out that British Muslims, along with other ethnic minorities, have been entering higher education at rates that often surpass those of White students. For example, by the early 2000s, the university entry rate for White students (38%) lagged behind that of Indian, Black African, and other minority groups. This observation not only disrupts prevailing assumptions of underachievement but also highlights the educational resilience and aspirations of Muslim communities despite systemic barriers.

Yet, Modood (2007) cautions that these aggregate trends mask important intra-group differences. For instance, Muslim students from Indian backgrounds tend to perform better than their Pakistani or Bangladeshi counterparts, a variation linked to factors such as parental education, socio-economic status, and access to cultural and academic resources.

Despite these challenges, research indicates that some Muslim students benefit from the establishment of mentorship programs and student societies that provide a sense of community and support. These initiatives help Muslim students feel more connected to their educational institutions and can improve their chances of academic success and progression (Mirza, 2024). Such support systems are essential in addressing the barriers that Muslim students face and promoting their engagement with higher education.

Nevertheless, the presence of mentorship programs, student societies, and culturally affirming spaces has been shown to foster belonging and resilience. Mirza (2024) finds that such support networks play a critical role in improving educational outcomes for Muslim students, helping them navigate institutional barriers and build confidence. These findings reinforce the call for more

inclusive educational environments that recognise and actively support the diverse identities of students.

The literature reveals that Muslim pupils in the UK face a multifaceted and intersecting set of challenges within the educational system—ranging from Islamophobia and socio-economic disadvantage to curricular misrepresentation and institutional surveillance. Yet, it also illustrates the agency and resilience of Muslim learners and communities. Scholars such as Abu Khalaf et al. (2023), Bi (2020), Miah (2016) and Modood (2007) collectively challenge reductive narratives and advocate for systemic reform grounded in equality, diversity and inclusion. For researchers, educators, and policymakers, these insights highlight the importance of centring Muslim voices and experiences in any meaningful effort to create more just and responsive educational spaces.

2.9 Muslim parents' school choice

Muslim parents in the United Kingdom often choose Islamic schools to provide their children with an education system that aligns closely with religious and cultural values, creating an environment where Islamic beliefs, practices, and traditions form an integral part of students' daily experiences and identity, including aspects of religion, race, and ethnicity' (Parker-Jenkins et al., 2005: 71). This choice is further supported by the Human Rights Act of 1998, which affirms parents' right to choose their children's school and stipulates that the state "shall respect the rights of parents to ensure such education and teaching is in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions" (Article 1).

Overall, since the New Labour government, the notion of parental choice has become a central tenet of education policy in the UK, underpinned by neoliberal principles that prioritise market competition among schools (Ball, 2011). This framework, as Diane Reay (2020) argues, has led to the normalisation of the "marketplace of education", where parental choice is positioned as an inherent

right, framing education as a commodity. For Muslim parents, while they engage in strategic school choices, their decisions are shaped within a context of structural inequalities, such as socio-economic status, ethnicity, and geographical location, which limit the scope of "choice" (Modood, 2005; Reay, 2020). Although the rhetoric of choice implies empowerment, it often privileges middle-class parents who possess the resources and cultural capital to navigate the education system effectively (Ball, 2021; Gillborn, 2008). Consequently, the normalisation of parental choice, while seemingly empowering, reinforces existing educational inequalities, as it operates within a framework that disproportionately benefits more advantaged groups (Reay, 2020).

Morespecifically, the current literature suggests that there is an overemphasis on identity politics, safety and environment, cultural preservation, and socio-religious dimensions as primary indicators distinguishing Islamic schools from mainstream schools (Shakeel, 2018). However, there remains a need for further qualitative research to incorporate parents' perspectives and perceptions to better understand behind Muslim school choice. Therefore, this research aims to address this gap by including the voices and perceptions of Muslim parents in the analysis.

Many Muslim parents view Islamic schools as environments that provide both religious education and academic learning, enabling children to develop a strong sense of identity within a supportive community (Burgess, 2010; Shah, 2012). This preference is partly motivated by concerns over the limited integration of Islamic values in mainstream schools, where parents may worry that their children will encounter difficulties in practicing their faith or face discrimination (Mogra, 2010). Brighouse (2005) defends parents' right to choose a faith-based education, noting that "parents fear that schools which do not incorporate strong moral values, and which treat spirituality as just another lifestyle option ... endanger their children's prospects for a well-balanced and satisfying life."

Research suggests that Islamic schools provide a protective space where the curriculum and school ethos support religious observance alongside moral and

spiritual education—factors that are increasingly attractive to Muslim families navigating a multicultural yet secular educational landscape (Shah, 2006). For some parents, Islamic schools also offer a counter-narrative to perceived cultural marginalisation, affirming their children's faith and cultural identity within an education system that might otherwise feel disconnected from their values (Scourfield et al., 2013). Consequently, the appeal of Islamic schools is multifaceted, rooted in both educational and sociocultural concerns that reflect broader issues of identity, integration, and belonging within British society.

The preference of Muslim parents for Islamic schools is regarded as a primary factor driving the growth of Islamic schooling (Merry, 2007). Nyman (2005: 151) reports that approximately half of Muslim parents would prefer Islamic schooling for their children. Shakeel (2018) and Fox and Buchanan (2017) suggest that Muslim parents' motivations for choosing Islamic schools align with broader parental preferences in school choice. However, other studies indicate that these choices are distinctive within Muslim communities, regardless of geographic context (Zine, 2006).

McCreery et al. (2007) conducted a study in two primary Islamic schools in the UK to explore both parental and practitioners' motivations for choosing Islamic schools. This qualitative study found that several key factors were primary motivators for selecting Islamic schools over mainstream public schools, including identity and belonging, discrimination in public schools, values and attitudes, and Islamic education. While these themes were identified and analysed, the authors did not expand in detail on the environmental aspects that make Islamic schools religious in nature. Additionally, no analysis of cultural factors and values influencing Muslim school choices was undertaken, possibly because no interview questions directly addressed cultural values, which may have limited findings in this area.

Overall, McCreery's (2007) study poses epistemological and methodological constraints. Although it claims to examine the perspectives of both parents and "practitioners," only two headteachers were interviewed, each for only half an hour (ibid: 205). Consequently, the voices of teachers and pupils—fundamental to understanding the motivations behind school choice—are notably absent

(Niyozov & Pluim, 2009). Additionally, the study does not address the range of potential factors that might drive or motivate Muslim parents to select Islamic schools over mainstream schools.

Several studies suggest that a primary reason for parental choice of Islamic schools is the desire to preserve cultural values and norms (Zine, 2007). Muslim parents often prioritise cultural preservation over strictly religious values, viewing Islamic schools as environments where community culture is affirmed rather than where “the majority’s culture is imposed” (Shakeel, 2018: 19). Additionally, Grewal and Coolidge (2013: 246) found that "second language instruction" was an appealing factor for parents choosing Islamic schools. Kelly (1999) identified a combination of factors—such as Arabic language courses, academic standards, and behavioural norms—as key motivators for parents selecting Islamic schools in the United States, England, and Canada. Islamic schools are also argued to provide continuity with home values, fostering an environment aligned with family identity, beliefs and practices (Glenn et al., 2018; Mohave, 2017).

Gender-based segregation through single-sex Islamic schools is a fundamental reason for school choice among Muslim parents (Sedgwick, 2014). Dress codes reflecting Islamic modesty, particularly in light of instances where mainstream schools in France, Quebec, and Turkey expelled Muslim girls for wearing the hijab, serve as another motivating factor for parents (Zine, 2006). Existing literature on education and types of schooling has often concentrated on comparisons between single-sex and co-educational settings, emphasising pedagogical differences and gender-based learning approaches. However, gender segregation grounded in religious beliefs presents a different dimension. A study in Turkey found that the majority of secular teachers favoured co-education, while religious teachers opposed it, preferring a single-sex education system (Mediha, 2017).

This difference in demand can be analysed by examining the number of single-sex secondary schools compared to primary schools listed in the AMS-UK Islamic schools directory. Out of 88 single-sex schools, 63 (72%) are secondary schools, indicating a significant demand for single-sex Islamic education that

aligns with the ethos and values of Islam while satisfying the moral expectations of Muslim parents. Nevertheless, further studies are needed to explore the social and academic consequences of single-sex schooling on the students involved (Shaw, 1980).

Conversely, an ethnographic case study of six single-sex Muslim schools in Britain conducted by Parker-Jenkins and Haw (1996) presents contradictory findings. The authors interviewed school staff, teachers, students, and parents to understand the relationship between single-sex schools and the status of women in Islam. Their findings indicate that staff exercised patriarchal and authoritarian rules to discipline female students, although the students consistently challenged this behaviour (ibid). While this research may be outdated, and such behaviours might not be as prevalent in contemporary Islamic schools due to regulatory frameworks and state inspections, it remains crucial to study the environment of Islamic single-sex private schools. This includes comparing and contrasting the aspects of gender identity within Islamic private schools. Therefore, my research focuses on this dimension by incorporating participants from a single-sex (girls-only) secondary school.

High academic attainment through Islamic private schools may be a significant reason for parents choosing this educational option (Ameli et al., 2006). Like any other parents, Muslim parents seek the best education for their children (King, 2010). Indeed, research conducted by Schagen et al., (2002: 18) found that faith schools, across all categories, achieved significantly higher GCSE results than community schools. It is important to note that Islamic schools' pursuit of academic excellence is driven not only by the desire for student and parent satisfaction but also by political considerations. This political ambition may stem from a need to counter allegations regarding their educational quality, demonstrating that students can achieve higher academic success compared to those in public schools (Driessen & Valkenberg, 2000). A notable example of this can be seen in Al-Ghazali schools in the United States, whose alumni include graduates from prestigious universities such as Harvard, Yale, Cornell, and Columbia (Grewal & Coolidge, 2013: 252).

Conversely, other studies have identified low academic attainment in Islamic schools as a "weakness" or challenge (Musharraf & Nabeel, 2015: 39). However, it is essential to distinguish between the positions of private and public Islamic schools regarding academic achievement. Breen (2013) suggests that due to increased bureaucratisation and professionalisation, state-funded Islamic schools demonstrate higher academic performance among their pupils compared to private Islamic schools, which are often in a nascent stage and face managerial and financial challenges.

Overall, causal factors influencing school choice may overlap in certain instances and may not be universally applicable. For example, the bullying of Muslim pupils in mainstream schools may not directly affect a primary Islamic school student who has never experienced bullying or attended a mainstream institution. However, accounts of bullying faced by other children may impact parents' decisions to choose Islamic schools over mainstream options. Although research indicates that the majority of the Muslim population in the UK (Merry, 2007) and the United States (O'Neill, 2010: 5) do not send their children to Muslim schools, this does not necessarily reflect the relative quality of one type of school over another.

Parents who do not opt for Islamic schools may be motivated by a range of factors, including geographical distance (Molook, 1990), financial constraints, concerns about curriculum and academic performance, or issues such as long waiting lists at Islamic schools (Musharraf & Nabeel, 2015: 41). Moreover, the limitations and challenges faced by Islamic private schools may drive Muslim parents to seek alternative educational options for their children. These alternatives can include home-schooling or sending their children abroad for religious education (Timani, 2006), private instruction in addition to mainstream schooling (Moreras, 2005), or weekend/Sunday schooling (Musharraf & Nabeel, 2015). Thus, this thesis aims to analyse and explore the rationale behind Muslim parents' school choice.

2.10 Conclusion

The reviewed studies suggest that Islamic private schools actively contribute to the formation of Muslim pupils' religious, cultural, political, and multi-dimensional identities. Through this process, students navigate complex identity dynamics and engage with racial discourses as minorities in multicultural contexts. Additionally, Islamic schools serve as spaces for resisting dominant cultural and socio-political pressures, such as Islamophobia, racism, and bullying, which may be present in mainstream schools. They also provide settings for challenging traditional religious and cultural norms within Islamic contexts (Niyozov & Pluim, 2009). This highlights the complex, fluid, contextual, temporal, and contingent nature of identity. Religious identity intertwines with other cultural and political identities, as well as various overlapping dimensions. While the foundations of identity are rooted in family traditions and community culture, they are also shaped by personal understandings and experiences of "religion, race, or ethnicity" (Parker-Jenkins et al., 2005: 71).

While studies suggest that faith schools are significant to minority communities within secularised and multicultural contexts to "avoid domination by the cultural majority" (Pring, 2005: 53), fewer studies have examined how these identities are shaped by the school environment and curriculum designed by curriculum developers, community members, and parents (Shakeel, 2018). Additionally, limited research has addressed the correlation and causation between curriculum, environment, and the nurturing of pupil identity, as well as how parental choices within Islamic private schools influence identity formation (Meer, 2010). This study aims to contribute value to the literature by addressing these gaps through ethnographic research.

The reviewed studies highlight the necessity for an ethnographic, multi-dimensional investigation to uncover and examine the religious nature of Islamic private schools (Breen, 2013; Meer, 2010; Grewal & Coolidge, 2013). There is a pressing need for an in-depth analysis of the curriculum in Islamic schools, examining not only its content but also its underlying intentions and impact on identity formation (Shakeel, 2018). This research, therefore,

highlights the importance of exploring parental motivations in school choice, particularly regarding curriculum, environment, identity and broader social considerations (Shakeel, 2018). Building on these identified gaps in the existing literature, the following chapter will outline the methodological approach for studying these themes.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3. Abstract

This chapter examines the rationale for employing a qualitative ethnographic approach. It begins with a conceptualisation and an explanation of why ethnography was chosen in the first place, emphasising the validity and reliability of the chosen methodology, as well as the methods used for data collection. The data were collected through 20 semi-structured interviews with school officials, 9 interviews with pupils, and 9 with parents; 21 hours of participant observation; and 2 focus group discussions with junior pupils across two Islamic private schools. The research topic, questions, and sub-questions are thoroughly explored. Additionally, the chapter investigates themes such as reflexivity, positionality, and sampling. It critically evaluates the mainstream conceptualisation of insider versus outsider roles within educational research and discusses the processes of negotiating access to schools. Furthermore, it outlines how I, as a male researcher, entered, collected data, and exited the selected schools. The process of data analysis and the construction of themes are examined in detail. Finally, the chapter addresses ethical considerations surrounding participants' confidentiality, anonymity, and data preservation.

3.1 The research paradigm and design

A research paradigm is vital in order to understand and clarify how reality is formed and how we perceive that particular form of knowledge and reality that we intend to investigate. As a philosophical framework, it also clarifies the ontological as well as epistemological viewpoints of the researcher. By ontology, I refer to "the nature of our beliefs about reality" (Richards, 2003: 33). Due to the diversity, fluidity, and un-monolithic scope of Islamic private schools, my ontological stand about their reality is that they are "socially constructed" (Patton, 2002: 134) and highly politicised.

Conversely, epistemology is concerned with the nature and forms of knowledge — "how it can be acquired and how it is communicated to other humans" (Cohen et al., 2007: 7). As an active part of the research process, it is also vital to consider how my understanding, perception, and epistemological standpoint

about the environments of Islamic private schools shape and evolve throughout the project. My epistemological stance regarding the nature of Islamic private schools is subjective, as I believe that their reality is socially constructed and contextualised. I also hold the belief that studying the nature of Islamic private schools requires a subjective approach. Conversely, they should not be studied as static objects in natural sciences (Rehman & Alharthi, 2006), as their characteristics vary across contexts.

As a result, the research paradigm used for this study is based on interpretivism. Unlike positivism, which assumes that reality exists independently of humans (Rehman & Alharthi, 2006: 53), interpretivism argues that truth is context-dependent and socially constructed. Therefore, it is essential for the purpose of this study to explore how the religious nature of Islamic private schools is understood and experienced by the participants (pupils, teachers, officials, and parents). Islamic private schools are not generalisable, and their nature varies across different contexts. What constitutes the nature of an Islamic private school depends not only on its context but also on various factors such as its locality and the religious and political standpoints of key stakeholders such as trustees, headteachers, and curriculum designers. It also depends on the level of parental expectation for promoting religious and other forms of identities.

Moreover, the Islamic nature of the school is also shaped by a common perception articulated collectively by its stakeholders and participants. As Flick argues, "perception is seen not as a massive-receptive process of representation but as an active, constructive process of production" (2004: 89). Therefore, perceptions can consistently change due to interaction in a collective environment such as schools, and such changes can take on new meanings depending on their context.

Through an interpretivist stance, I do not intend to discover static, universal knowledge and truth about the nature of Islamic private schools, but rather to observe and analyse the epistemological understandings and interpretations that teachers, students, parents, and school authorities form or hold regarding the Islamic private school’s environment. The interpretivist stance also follows

a subjective approach to discovering the realities of the subject (Islamic schools) and expanding knowledge in a broader sense. As Garrick (1999: 148) rightly argues, it is through the interpretative approach that the "understanding of lived experience derives from the participants themselves." Therefore, such an approach based on ethnography will yield rich data and enable me to unpack the contextual elements, analyse, and understand the lived experiences of participants within these schools.

Additionally, it is vital to explore and conceptualise what is meant by method and methodology and their usefulness for the purpose of this research. Spivak (1981) defines methodology as the way in which the researcher goes about studying a phenomenon. It refers to the choices that the researcher makes about the processes of data collection and forms of data analysis (ibid). Moreover, Crotty (2005: 7) conceptualises methodology as "the strategy, plan of action, process, or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods". Methods are specific approaches to data collection, such as participant observation, interviews, and focused group discussions, through which the ethnographer gathers data and learns "about the meanings that people assign to their thoughts and actions" (Martinez, 2012: 55). Furthermore, before explaining the rationale behind the choices for data collection, I aim to crystallise the research question, the sub-questions I intend to ask, and how the methods for data collection would potentially enable me to gather the required data.

This study employs a qualitative ethnographic approach. The primary aim of the research is to explore, unpack, and analyse the religious nature of Islamic private schools in the United Kingdom. Consequently, Table 3.1, located on page 98, provides a detailed overview of the data collection conducted across two schools in the south-eastern region of England and one in London. For simplicity and anonymity, I have used initials for each school, referring to the school located in the south-eastern region of England as School A and the one in London as School B. Both institutions are Islamic private schools associated with a charitable trust; School B is a co-educational primary school, while School A is a girls-only secondary school.

The fundamental research method employed here is qualitative ethnography, which is conceptualised in various ways. Denzin (1978) characterises ethnography as a tool for theory testing, contrasting with Walker's (1981) portrayal of it as narrative storytelling. Ethnography is typically understood as a research approach involving daily observations and informal interactions to explore participants' words, actions, and attitudes (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). This definition closely aligns with the objectives of this research.

The significance of ethnography in this research stems from a common belief among Muslims that the word "religion," or "Din" or "Deen" in Arabic, denotes simply a way of life. Such a way of life encompasses a range of identity markers, ideas, characteristics, and actions, which Islamic schools aim to instil in their students. To investigate the multifaceted characteristics of such a setting, it is necessary to observe and witness the lived experiences of pupils and other stakeholders. I chose to adopt an ethnographic approach to comprehend, analyse, and unpack what constitutes the environment of an Islamic school and how such educational environments predominantly shape, form, or reshape the identity and personality of their pupils from a religious perspective. This includes exploring how these identities are negotiated, resisted, and interacted with other forms of identity.

In line with the interpretivist paradigm underpinning this research, a qualitative ethnographic approach was selected. Ethnography is especially well-suited to exploring the cultural and religious complexities of Islamic schools, as it enables the researcher to observe, participate in, and document the everyday practices, symbols, and discourses that constitute the school environment. Although a case study approach could provide valuable insights into the structural and contextual features of a specific institutional setting (Yin, 2014), ethnography was deemed more appropriate due to its emphasis on prolonged immersion, participant observation, and the capture of routine and ritual behaviours—elements that are central to understanding religion as a lived and embodied experience (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

Ethnography facilitates deeper engagement with the symbolic and social worlds of participants, moving beyond surface-level description toward interpretation

and meaning-making. It allows for a nuanced analysis of how religious values are enacted, negotiated, and internalised within the everyday life of the school. While case studies may foreground institutional dynamics and measurable outcomes, ethnography provided the means to examine how Islamic values and identities are performed through daily practices, spatial arrangements, and interpersonal relationships. Within this context, ethnography enabled the collection of rich, situated data that would not have been accessible through interviews or documentary analysis alone.

I immerse myself in the school environment through ethnography in order to understand, observe, and analyse the curriculum, its intended and unintended consequences, the attitudes and behaviour of the students and stakeholders, and the ways in which the curriculum is shaped and delivered. Moreover, I analyse what constitutes the religious nature of an Islamic private school's environment and how the environment shapes or reshapes the identity of its pupils. This approach helps unpack what forms of religious and other identities are shaped, nurtured and negotiated in these school contexts and how such identities are further promoted. In addition, it is vital to analyse how parental values and expectations are met, and how such expectations shape or nurture the religious identities of pupils at both the primary and secondary levels. Such discoveries can be made through observing, documenting, and experiencing the participants' lived experiences and their interactions in the school environment; they cannot be achieved solely through interviews and/or questionnaires. Hence, in the following parts, I explore why I chose ethnography and what research questions and sub-questions I intend to answer through ethnography.

Ethnography faces some criticism for being a descriptive and autobiographical account of a specific human community. However, through observations and storylines, I intend to unpack and discover how religious education and the environment shape and form students' religious identities and how a collective identity leads to the formation of a religious educational space. Issues around identity, attitude, and perception require such observations and cannot be addressed solely through interviews. For example, the religious symbols,

banners, and materials in the school corridors, classrooms, and venues have an impact on students' religious identity formation and on the school environment. Therefore, it would not be possible to systematically study an environment without accessing it and analysing all the relevant factors that led to its formation, functionality, and progress. Thus, the ethnographic approach is useful in analysing multiple factors that lead to shaping individuals and their collective identities, "beliefs and behaviours" (Martinez, 2012: 55). Although I intend to avoid any form of generalisation, such an approach will enable me to "contextualise" my findings and observations within a larger framework and system of schooling (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999).

More specifically, the ethnography conducted in Islamic private schools is described as "teacher-, parent-, and administrator-centred" (Martinez, 2012: 34). Therefore, in addition to observing and witnessing the lived experiences of pupils, teachers, and administrators, I also conducted semi-structured interviews in both Islamic private schools. In the subsequent sections, I intend to conceptualise and rationalise the choice of the relevant components of a research paradigm, such as methods for data collection, overall methodology, ontology, and epistemology (Rehman & Alharthi, 2006). By doing so, I explain why an interpretivist stance suits the chosen method and methodology and how this correlates with the qualitative research of the phenomenon under investigation—in this case, the nature of Islamic private schools. Thus, in the subsequent sub-sections, I will explore the research paradigm and elaborate on the rationale for the choice of targeted methods for data collection.

3.2 Research topic, questions and sub-questions

The central point of inquiry for this research is to address the following question or title:

"An exploration of the religious nature of Islamic private schools: What makes a school 'Islamic' and why does it matter?"

It would not be possible to find a reliable answer to the question "What makes a school Islamic?" without accessing Islamic schools and conducting qualitative ethnographic research. Ethnography not only allows me to conduct observations but also enables me to keenly observe the lived experiences of Muslim pupils and school officials, uncovering the unspoken aspects of Islamic private schools that form and shape their nature.

To unpack and analyse the aforementioned topic, I intend to focus on three fundamental aspects to explore further sub-questions within each. Firstly, through studying the curriculum of private Islamic schools, I aim to understand and explore how their curricula are shaped and delivered. Specifically, I will explore what is taught in these schools and how these teaching processes—both implicitly and explicitly—shape the religious nature of the school environment.

Secondly, I aim to explore and analyse what forms of religious and other identities are shaped or nurtured within the school environment, and how such identities are negotiated, resisted, and promoted by all stakeholders. Thirdly, I will examine parental values and expectations and their influence on students' identities across various educational levels, including primary and secondary. Through systematic thematic analysis of these themes, my aim is to not only answer the following sub-questions but also provide a holistic understanding of what defines an Islamic school and why it holds significance. Consequently, the sub-questions are structured as follows:

1. What constitutes the curriculum and environment of private Islamic schools in England, and how are these shaped and delivered?
2. What religious and other identities are promoted and nurtured by private Islamic schools?
3. What are the parental values and expectations, and how do they influence students' religious identities in private Islamic schools?

In the following section, I elaborate on how I negotiated access to the schools and planned data collection to answer the above questions.

3.3 Sampling procedures

This study employed a purposive sampling strategy, commonly used in qualitative research to identify participants or sites that are particularly relevant to the research objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015; Ritchie et al., 2014). The selected schools met specific criteria, including their status as Islamic private schools associated with charitable trusts, their regional variation, and their accessibility. Although schools were approached and engaged on a first-come, first-served basis, the selection process was guided by the relevance of each school to the study's focus, rather than by random allocation. This approach allowed for the inclusion of schools that could meaningfully contribute to the exploration of the research questions.

Previous ethnographic studies of Islamic private schools have sometimes been conducted by researchers with existing connections to the institutions under study, which can introduce research bias (Zine, 2008; Almakkawi, 2017). Therefore, employing random purposive sampling allowed me to access schools with which I had no prior affiliation or familiarity. This approach helps mitigate potential preconceived beliefs or biases about the schools in question.

Secondly, through such a sampling procedure, I could strategically select schools based on specific criteria. For example, demographic, gender, and

generational characteristics of the schools were crucial in determining the sample. The geographical location of the schools also played a significant role in this research, allowing me to explore variations in the nature of Islamic schools based on locality and population demographics.

School A is situated in the south-eastern region of England, where Muslims now constitute 30.3% of the population according to the 2021 census. School B, on the other hand, is located in East London's Mile End district within the Tower Hamlets borough, where Muslims make up 50.9% of the population, as per the same census.

Furthermore, School A predominantly comprises second-generation Muslim pupils, whereas School B has a majority of first-generation Muslim students. It is crucial to investigate how demographic and generational characteristics among Muslims influence the religious nature of Islamic schools. Additionally, understanding the extent to which specific Islamic ethos and values are transmitted across different generations is essential.

The potential disadvantage of random selection, at least within the context of sample selection for this study, is that schools showing interest and willingness to participate may tend to be more professionalised, bureaucratised, and established. Both selected schools appear to be confident and well-organised. This presents a challenge because if all participating schools are similarly professionalised, they may not accurately represent or reflect the conditions found in other Islamic private schools. Similarly, if all selected schools were boys-only single-sex institutions, the sample would not adequately represent the diversity of Islamic private schools, particularly in terms of gender-related features, without access to co-educational or girls-only single-sex Islamic schools.

However, the random selection process can mitigate these risks due to its predefined purpose. For example, if two boys-only schools express interest, the researcher may select one to balance the gender dimension and then actively seek access to a girls-only school to address this gap. Therefore, I chose one of the two Muslim schools that showed interest because they are both located

in the same geographic region (East London), ensuring geographic diversity within the overall sample.

Initially, I gained access to a database containing data on all 'Islamic' or 'Muslim' schools registered with the Association of Muslim Schools in the United Kingdom (AMS-UK). The database provides information on 184 schools categorised as "Islamic" in the United Kingdom. The majority of schools included in this database are independent or private; however, all public Islamic faith schools are also covered. The directory was an invaluable resource for this study since it contained contact information (name, phone, email, website), type (i.e., independent or funded), boarding, tier (primary or secondary), and location (region). Other "Islamic" schools not affiliated with the AMS-UK but classed or labelled as Islamic are also included. I next defined the sample group's initial goal in terms of the social phenomena being studied, in this case, "private Islamic schools." Hence, schools were selected based on the criteria of being Islamic, private, full-time, and having a high proportion of Muslim pupils.

As a result, I extracted data from the directory using specific criteria such as region, gender, and tier. This meant that, first and foremost, state schools were omitted from the list. Secondly, schools outside the London metropolitan area were excluded, as conducting research for an extended period outside of London would be impractical. Consequently, private and independent schools in and around London were selected at random and contacted via email and phone calls. A total of 39 schools were contacted out of a possible 42. However, my request for access was either rejected or ignored by half of the schools contacted, either orally or by email. The majority of rejections lacked a rational justification. However, several applications were denied due to concerns about COVID-19, a lack of staff and resources, Ofsted inspections, and a desire to minimise traffic. In most cases, they did not respond to the emails at all.

As a consequence, I selected four schools. Three schools provided both verbal and written approval for my access, while one provided only verbal confirmation. However, the school that had only given verbal commitment withdrew due to a COVID-19 outbreak and a lack of sufficient space for me.

They had initially planned to conduct my interviews in their small library. Following several COVID-19 cases at their school, they began using the library to isolate pupils with COVID-19 until their parents could collect them.

Finally, three schools were shortlisted. I still had to narrow it down and choose two out of the three. Two schools had several similarities as they were both located in London and were coeducational primary schools, while the third was located in south-eastern region of England and was a single-sex secondary school. Hence, I chose the two schools: School B, located in East London with a coeducational primary level, and School A, a single-sex (girls only) school up to the secondary level.

There were several key considerations for the choice of the two researched schools. Demographics, gender, tier, and multi-dimensional variations were key elements for the intersectional analysis of the data. For instance, the demographics of School B consisted of a high percentage of first-generation pupils, while School A had a higher percentage of first- and second-generation Muslim pupils. Similar to their parental composition, School B had many first-generation and some second-generation parents, while School A's parents were mainly second- and third-generation Muslims. It would be beneficial to observe and analyse the similarities, as well as the differences and continuity, of discourses, attitudes, and beliefs between two generations educated in very similar educational settings.

Although "Islamic" schools are not homogeneous in character due to the diversity, mix, and geographic dispersion of Muslim people in the United Kingdom, there are certain similarities in their ethos and ideals, as well as in the type of education they provide. For example, gender-based segregation is based on similar religious and cultural rationales at Muslim schools in both London and Birmingham. As a result, I believe that my selected sample size is appropriate for this ethnographic study, as it targets varied age groups (primary and secondary), gender clusters, and generational disparities (first- and second-generation Muslim pupils). I will describe the process of negotiating access to the three shortlisted institutions in the next section.

3.4 The process of negotiating access

Negotiating access to Islamic private schools was a difficult journey filled with ups and downs. The primary reason for the complications was that I had no prior contact with any of the schools. However, the lack of such a relationship contributes to the data's viability, as studies conducted by insiders (individuals who work for or are affiliated with an institution and study the same entity) can sometimes be biased because the researchers already have multiple perceptions, knowledge, and understanding about the subject of their research. It was a difficult choice for the schools to trust me and offer me access at the same time. After multiple conversations through emails and phone calls, I was able to request a time and day to meet with the head -teachers of five schools to discuss my study in further detail. I visited five schools and spoke with the principals. They were all kind but dubious of my motivation for conducting this investigation. There was a brief pause in two of the interviews when I mentioned that my study was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). They believed that because my research was funded and sponsored by a reputable research centre, my analysis would have to be critical of Islamic schooling, which would reflect poorly on their Islamic private school. Following that, I attempted to convey that I was not evaluating their school in terms of teaching or quality assurance, but rather aiming to discover and explore their religious nature.

Consequently, the two headteachers who initially indicated interest in my research, and later picked up on my source of sponsorship, rejected my access on the basis of risks involved with COVID-19 and limited resources. These concerns were not explored in our initial communications. Moreover, while reviewing the information sheet, one of the two headteachers inquired whether I was conducting research for the Department for Education (DfE). I checked and reconfirmed that it was written that I was a member of Brunel University's Department of Education, not the state's DfE. All of these episodes demonstrated that they would not have been willing to allow researchers for the DfE or any other large research centre to conduct ethnographic studies in their school.

Securing entry to the remaining three schools has proven considerably more challenging. However, strategically, I decided to adjust the tone of my written communications with the schools. For instance, all of my emails begin with "Dear Sister or Brother (name of the head teacher)". This indicates that the writer is Muslim, as all followers (Ummah) in Islam are considered brothers and sisters. The second line includes an Islamic greeting: "As-Salamu Alikum wa Rahmatullah," which translates to "may you be protected from evil and may God's mercy be upon you." I concluded meetings with another Islamic expression of gratitude: "may God bless you with goodness." This tactical approach in my interactions proved beneficial, as I received more responses and the head teachers used similar terminology. Thus, based on the outcomes of my encounters with gatekeepers, it seems that disclosing my religious identity facilitated future dialogue and built trust.

Additionally, during the early stages of my research, I was questioned about the motivations behind this study. In response, I explained that my interest in this research stems from my experience tutoring Muslim students privately and from being the father of two girls for whom I am considering education in Islamic private schools. I expressed that, as a curious Muslim father, I am genuinely interested in understanding the nature of Islamic private schools. Given the scarcity of research on this subject, I decided to undertake this study myself.

During one conversation, a head teacher expressed appreciation for my curiosity about Islamic schools for my daughters and my intention to conduct research as a Muslim father before deciding about their education. She also noted that some Muslim parents enrol their children in Islamic schools primarily for the rote memorisation of the Quran, despite this not being the school's primary objective. This observation was crucial for my later comparisons and analyses.

Following the in-person meetings, the next step was to obtain a written access letter for my ethical application. This was the most challenging part of the process, as many of the headteachers were extremely busy and hesitant to provide me with a written letter, interpreting it as a legal agreement granting me complete access. I intended to simultaneously gain access and approval for

three schools, in case one dropped out, so that I would have two secured. Hence, the schools were anonymised as A, B, and C. Despite specifically stating that I needed the letter for ethical approval purposes only, School B agreed to send the letter following their next Ofsted inspection in a month. This posed a barrier since I required the letter to submit for ethical approval and stay on track with my research schedule. I followed up with two further emails and three text messages to the head of School B, explaining the necessity of the access letter and clarifying that I would not begin my research until their Ofsted inspections were completed. However, I was careful not to impose excessive pressure, which might have resulted in undesirable consequences and rejection.

Thus, the aforementioned emails and SMS messages were sent at regular intervals. I eventually received official confirmation letters from all three schools regarding my access. After receiving my DBS certificate and approval of my ethical application, I contacted School B again to schedule a time and date for the start of fieldwork. However, the headteacher suggested that we meet one last time to discuss the terms and conditions and to create a timetable. I scheduled this final meeting before the commencement of fieldwork, during which I met the headteacher at School B. Following our agreement and discussion with the headteacher, I was directed to the deputy headteacher to discuss the timetable for my visits. She was very helpful in arranging the days of my visits.

In the cases of Schools A and C, I met individually with both headteachers. We had lengthy discussions regarding my study and ethical concerns. I initially met the head of School C and then arranged to see the head of School A through email. Following my face-to-face meeting, I requested the headteacher at School C, who was quite helpful, to provide me with a single letter explaining my access to both schools. However, once I obtained the DBS certificate and ethical approval, I contacted them to arrange the commencement of my research. I was informed that both schools were now undergoing an Ofsted inspection. As a result, I was instructed to approach them again by the end of April 2022, following the end of the holy month of Ramadan.

Although the headteachers came from different ethnic backgrounds and lived in various locations, their communications followed a similar pattern. For instance, when I talked to them about participants' anonymity and safeguarding, I also inquired whether they would be reluctant to have me mention their school's name in my research. According to one of the school's heads, she preferred that I not include the school's name in my study, despite stating that she is open to any study or research. I took note of her request and had no intention of inquiring about her reasons. However, in the other two cases, both headteachers stated reasons why they did not want their schools' names revealed. Interestingly, their justifications were extremely similar: "Because of the increase in Islamophobia, Islamic private schools have become a target for the greater British community, and so mentioning the schools' names may pose harm to their staff and reputation.

The similarity of reasoning between two people from two distinct schools drew my attention and would be critical in subsequent phases of my analysis. As a result, I agreed not to use the school's name and to maintain all other forms of anonymity throughout and after my studies. However, I explained that it would be impossible to ensure the complete confidentiality of schools. Furthermore, I contended that, in this day and age of fast internet and algorithms, anyone wishing to reveal an anonymous school could do so by simply posting their purpose, aims, and goals on the internet. Fortunately, the school principals agreed on the possibility of finding a school and admired my honesty.

Another barrier that I noticed was that the head of School B highlighted that teachers might be unable to perform face-to-face interviews due to their workload covering lessons throughout the entire school day. They may be able to do the interview over the phone upon their return home or over the weekend. As I indicated, telephone interviews were not included in my research design. However, the headteacher stated that school staff were aware of my studies and presence and that I was able to approach teachers individually if I wished. This was an excellent opportunity for me since I could focus on developing relationships with the teachers based on my observations in class and at other times around the school.

I approached all of the teachers and numerous teaching assistants at School B in a systematic manner, and they were very supportive and eager to conduct interviews in the school during their lunch break or after school ended. I began conducting afternoon prayers in the hall, and when we prayed together, I approached two male teachers, introduced myself, talked about my research, and asked if I could interview them. As we had just concluded afternoon prayers and they were certain that I was a Muslim researcher, it significantly aided and facilitated the trust process.

Overall, the process of negotiating access was thorough. However, I managed to manoeuvre and succeed by adapting my means and approaches of communication, considering strategies for gaining trust and so forth. In the following sections, I explain the rationale for the choice of instruments for data collection. The primary method of data gathering in School B was semi-structured interviews with teachers, administrators, and parents. Securing interviews with parents was particularly challenging because most parents were working and only visited the school to drop off and pick up their children. Additionally, the structural architecture of School B did not permit a suitable location for conducting parent interviews, and entry required logging their details in the school's visitors' logbook, which some hesitated to do. Despite these challenges, a few of the parents I interviewed were either volunteers or were involved in some capacity with their children's school.

3.5 Data collection methods: semi-structured interviews, focused group discussions, and participant observations

A total of 38 semi-structured interviews were conducted across two schools: 26 in School A and 12 in School B. As detailed in Table 3.1 on page 98, 20 of these interviews were with stakeholders (teachers, teaching assistants, headteachers, and deputy headteachers), 9 were with students from Year 7 to Year 11 in School A, and 9 were with parents (4 from School A and 5 from School B). The interviews varied in length, lasting around one hour for senior leadership and 30-45 minutes for others. All interviews were conducted face-

to-face in various settings, including classrooms, corridors, and, in one instance, a mosque for a parent.

The semi-structured interview method was beneficial for exploring participants' views on Islamic schools, as it allowed for diverse and often contrasting responses overlook (Cohen et al., 2018). This approach provided flexibility, enabling adaptation of questions while maintaining focus on key topics such as gender segregation and Islamic ethos(Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). It also allowed participants to discuss sensitive themes like religion and identity in detail without peer influence, in contrast to group discussions.

Interview guidelines were developed to align with the research goals. Teachers were approached through the headteacher, and interviews were scheduled using Microsoft Excel to avoid conflicts. Cultural and ethical considerations, particularly with female participants, were addressed, and interviews began with Islamic greetings. Three pilot interviews, including one with a headteacher and two classroom teachers, were conducted to refine the interview process and ensure clarity of questions. At School B, focused group discussions were chosen for junior students instead of individual interviews, based on discussions with the headteacher and deputy head.

Two focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with junior students at School B on 28 March 2022 and 16 June 2022, involving 7 and 8 pupils from grades 1 to 3, respectively. The sessions took place in familiar and comfortable settings—the headteacher’s office and school prayer rooms—to create a relaxed environment conducive to open dialogue. The decision to use FGDs, rather than individual interviews, was informed by both ethical and methodological considerations. Ethically, headteachers advised that one-on-one interviews with young children would necessitate additional parental consent and could potentially raise concerns about safeguarding and participant anxiety.

Methodologically, FGDs are particularly effective with younger participants, as they foster natural peer interaction, reduce the pressure associated with direct adult questioning, and allow children to co-construct meanings and reflect on

shared experiences (Hennessy & Heary, 2005; Krueger & Casey, 2014). This method enabled the exploration of group norms, collective understandings, and the negotiation of identity within the school setting. Additionally, FGDs are well suited to capturing the social context of meaning-making, particularly in educational research focused on sensitive topics such as religious identity and cultural belonging (Barbour, 2007). Reflexively, I recognised that my presence as a researcher might influence responses, but the group format encouraged participants to speak more freely among peers, facilitating richer, more authentic insights than might be achievable in individual interviews. This approach aligned with the interpretivist paradigm guiding the study and supported the research aim of understanding how young pupils collectively experience and make sense of their educational and religious environments.

The first FGD also served as a pilot, with students providing feedback on the questions. They particularly enjoyed discussing their favourite subjects, their parents, and Islamic education. School officials noted that FGDs encouraged greater participation compared to individual interviews, with students being more engaged and relaxed during the discussions (Hennessy & Heary, 2005).

FGDs offered several advantages. Conducting them face-to-face allowed for observation of students' emotional and physical responses, providing richer data than surveys or questionnaires (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The group setting also made the process more time-efficient and minimally disruptive, addressing school administration concerns. Furthermore, FGDs helped engage less active students and provided an opportunity for diverse responses, although a drawback was the risk of groupthink (Smithson, 2000). To counter this, I encouraged quieter participants by asking them to raise their hands before responding. Overall, FGDs proved an effective method for engaging younger students and observing their interactions, contributing to the research's goals of understanding the school environment and identity formation.

A total of 21 hours of participant observation were conducted: 16 hours at School B and 5 hours at School A. Each session lasted about one hour and took place during national curriculum and Islamic education classes, as well as in prayer rooms, playgrounds, and assemblies. The primary focus was on

observing regular classrooms to understand classroom dynamics, teacher-student interactions, and pupil routines, providing a rich, detailed understanding of the educational environment (Spradley, 1980).

No pre-constructed observation guidelines were used, allowing for flexibility and openness to unexpected events, which facilitated a more authentic representation of classroom dynamics (Walford, 2008). This open-ended approach enabled a deeper exploration of the setting, uncovering insights that structured observation might miss. Observation is key in ethnographic research, providing context for understanding cultural and social processes (Yin, 2003; Spindler & Spindler, 1997; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Field notes were recorded to document aspects related to the religious nature of the schools, such as the use of Quranic recitations in class to influence students' mental states, which highlighted how religious identity is shaped.

Field notes were initially handwritten and later transcribed digitally using Scrivener 3.2 to enhance backup and transcription efficiency. Ethical procedures were carefully followed, including securing permission from school gatekeepers, maintaining participant anonymity, and coordinating observation sessions with the headteacher in advance. As focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted in the presence of a staff member and focused on group interaction rather than individual disclosures, gatekeeper consent was deemed sufficient, and parental consent was not required in accordance with the school's ethical guidelines. However, for one-to-one interviews with pupils, either parental consent or gatekeeper consent was obtained to ensure compliance with ethical standards. The observations prioritised collective practices, school ethos, and group behaviours over individual profiling, offering a broader understanding of how the Islamic school environment shapes students' religious identities (Breen, 2009).

3.6 Data management, analysis and ensuring credibility and transferability

The data handling and analysis processes involved several stages to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the environment and religious nature of the two Islamic private schools under study. The first stage involved organising all the collected data in digital format, including transcribing interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observations.

The second stage focused on data management. All audio recordings were captured using a professional Zoom H4NPro recorder and stored on a password-protected desktop. While some researchers use smartphones for recordings, I preferred the Zoom H4NPro for its superior quality, offering stereo audio at up to 24-bit/96 kHz and a low-noise preamp, making it ideal for noisy environments like schools. It also allowed for close interaction with participants, ensuring clear communication on how to operate the device. Once recorded, the audio files were digitised using Scrivener 3.2, the same software used for digitising participant observations. Rather than relying on qualitative data analysis software like NVivo, I used a manual coding approach—digitising transcriptions and field notes, printing them out, and manually identifying emerging themes. NVivo is limited in its ability to search for themes with comparable meanings, despite its capability to code distinct themes under specific nodes (Welsh, 2002). I ensured proper data tracking by assigning customised codes to each transcript, such as (A-01-Governor-M), which indicated the school, interview number, participant's designation, and gender.

Once the data was digitised, I printed the interview transcripts to identify and categorise the themes. Using colour-coding in both Scrivener and on hard copies, I followed a hierarchy to examine the data thoroughly. The coding process was iterative, with themes being continuously refined and reworded based on evolving insights. Once the themes were classified, I set up specific projects in Scrivener according to their hierarchy and began coding them in detail (Saldana, 2016).

The third stage was familiarising myself with the data. I read through the transcriptions multiple times, identifying errors and inconsistencies while writing reflective notes on initial impressions and potential patterns. This helped inform the next steps of data analysis.

In the fourth stage, I applied a thematic analysis approach to the data to identify patterns of meaning across the two research sites. Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and suitability for analysing large qualitative datasets across multiple contexts, allowing both shared patterns and site-specific nuances to emerge (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This approach supported comparative analysis while preserving the unique educational, cultural, and religious dynamics of each school. The analysis began with open coding, where significant excerpts from transcripts and fieldnotes were labelled with descriptive codes (Nowell et al., 2017), followed by axial coding to cluster related codes and identify underlying relationships (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019). For instance, references to the school environment were initially coded as "environment," encompassing linked aspects such as curriculum, ethos, and spatial arrangements. Selective coding was then used to integrate and refine categories into broader analytical themes.

While themes such as "Islamising knowledge" and "moral cultivation" emerged across both schools, thematic analysis enabled attention to the context-specific expressions of these ideas. The approach did not flatten the particularities of each site; rather, it facilitated an understanding of both commonalities and divergences in how Islamic education was interpreted and practised. Throughout, data were compared within and between sites and across methods—including interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observations—allowing for triangulation and enhancing the credibility of findings (Flick, 2018). This cross-verification ensured that themes were robust, grounded in the voices of diverse stakeholders, and sensitive to the interpretive nature of qualitative inquiry.

The final stage of data analysis involved transferring the transcriptions to Delvetool, a qualitative analysis software. Each transcript and observation report was read and coded according to emerging patterns. For instance,

extracts were associated with codes like "safe environment," "school ethos," and "parental expectations."

In the fifth stage, I developed and refined recurring themes that emerged from the coded data. These were reviewed for relevance to the research questions. For example, the theme of "Islamic schools as safe environments and inclusive spaces" emerged from multiple references to the school's environment and inclusivity. These themes were then analysed within the broader context of Islamic schools, mainstream schools, societal influences, and the religious and political aspects of the school environment.

Credibility and transferability were key considerations throughout my research, from the methodological design to data collection, analysis, and dissemination. To ensure data credibility, I employed several strategies, including prolonged engagement, member checking, and triangulation. Prolonged engagement enabled me to develop a deep understanding of the research context and build trust with participants, while member checking involved returning to participants with preliminary findings to verify accuracy and interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Birt et al., 2016).

Triangulation was achieved by drawing on multiple data sources and methods—namely, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and participant observations. For example, themes such as the integration of Islamic values into school envirnoment or parental expectations were cross-verified through insights gathered from teacher interviews, pupil FGDs, parents, and observational fieldnotes. This multi-method approach allowed for comparing and contrasting perspectives across different stakeholders and settings, thereby enhancing the credibility and depth of the findings (Flick, 2018; Tracy, 2010).

Transferability refers to the extent to which research findings can be applied to other contexts. Although this study is situated within two specific schools, the findings may resonate with similar educational settings. To support transferability, I provided detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and methodological processes—commonly referred to as "thick

description"—enabling readers to make informed judgments about the relevance of the findings in their own contexts (Tracy, 2010; Nowell et al., 2017).

Throughout the research, I sought feedback from my supervisory team to ensure credibility and transferability. For example, I asked my supervisors to review the interview guides to ensure clarity. Despite occasional clashes during meetings, the overall aim was to maintain high professional standards in the research.

Conflicts in supervision, often due to differing perspectives or methodological preferences, can impact the research process (Jorgensen, 2008). These tensions can lead to critical revisions that strengthen the study, but if persistent, they may cause stress and hinder progress (Thompson & Walker, 1998; Carter & Little, 2007). In my case, the support of my supervisors, who provided constructive feedback, positively influenced the research.

I also involved my daughter and her cousin in reviewing the pupil interview and focus group guidelines to ensure they were child-friendly. Testing the questions with them helped confirm their clarity. During interviews at School B, participants had no issues with the questions. When a parent struggled with English, I paraphrased the questions and used synonyms to ensure understanding.

3.7 Positionality and reflexivity

In conducting my ethnographic study in two Islamic private schools, my positionality played a crucial role in shaping the research process and outcomes. As a researcher, my identity, experiences, and perspectives inevitably influenced how I engaged with participants, interpreted data, and presented findings. My positionality is multi-faceted, encompassing my background, values, and the social and cultural lenses through which I approached the research (Holmes, 2020).

Firstly, as an outsider to the communities I studied, I approached the research with an awareness of the potential for misunderstandings. My background and cultural context differed to some extent from those of the participants in the Islamic private schools, which necessitated a conscious effort to understand and respect their perspectives and practices (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). This outsider status allowed me to bring a fresh perspective to the research, but it also required me to navigate carefully to avoid imposing my own views on the data collected (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Additionally, my positionality as a researcher interested in the education of Muslim and diaspora communities significantly influenced both the focus and methodology of the study. My commitment to understanding the religious nature of Islamic private schools, along with their environment and curriculum, was driven by an awareness of the intricate interplay between religion, culture, and education in shaping students' identities (Anthias, 2002). This commitment stemmed from a recognition of the need to explore how educational settings contribute to the formation of Muslim and other identities within the UK context, and how these identities may overlap or come into conflict with one another. This approach was underpinned by a belief in the importance of understanding the nuanced ways in which educational environments impact the development of personal and collective identities (Anthias, 2008; Hall, 1990).

It is crucial to reflect on my positionality as a researcher who has experienced both Islamic education in mainstream schools and supplementary Quranic lessons at a local mosque outside the United Kingdom. This background profoundly shapes my ontological and epistemological understanding of knowledge related to Islamic private schools. I identify as a middle-class, male, Asian individual, predominantly Muslim, born and raised in Afghanistan. From an early age, I questioned the religious nature and pedagogical approach of my supplementary classes. For instance, I grappled with the rationale behind attending Quranic classes where texts were presented solely in Arabic without translation or interpretation, and where the focus at advanced levels was on the rote memorisation of Quranic verses. Despite these challenges, such education significantly enhanced my memorisation skills and proficiency in Arabic and

Persian, both of which share a linguistic heritage (Said, 1978). This educational background also played a substantial role in shaping my identity, influencing both my personal and academic perspectives (Geertz, 1973; Hall, 1990). These experiences inform my research approach, providing a critical lens through which I examine the dynamics of Islamic private schools and their impact on students' identities within the UK context. Consequently, it shaped my understanding that all knowledge is political, as its production, transmission, and utilisation are imbued with various political ambitions (Foucault, 1980; Harding, 1991). This perspective aligns with the view that knowledge is not merely an objective reflection of reality but is influenced by power relations and social contexts (Connell, 2014).

To further reflect on my background, when the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan, my family and I were compelled to migrate to Pakistan. There, I attended secondary and high school at a private institution where Islamic education was offered as a supplementary subject. Upon settling in the United Kingdom in adulthood, I began teaching Persian/Dari and supporting Muslim pupils among our relatives through private tutoring. Over time, my interest in conducting research in the UK grew, driven by a desire to explore what defines an Islamic school and why it is significant.

In addition to my childhood and adulthood teaching experiences in the UK, my interest in this research was further motivated by my role as a Muslim father of two daughters. As a Muslim parent, my curiosity about the religious nature of Islamic schools intensified. Thus, all my experiences of receiving and teaching Islamic education have significantly shaped my perception and understanding of the political nature of what constitutes an Islamic school.

Overall, my positionality as a non-white Muslim researcher provided me with greater confidence in building trust with participants, as I possessed a deeper understanding of Islam, Islamic values, and cultural codes. For example, my ability to participate in afternoon prayers and greet individuals in appropriate Islamic manners facilitated rapport and engagement with the participants. Additionally, my Asian ethnicity proved advantageous in terms of gaining access and trust. According to Bhopal (2000:74), "Commonality between the

researcher and the informants makes it easier to identify with each other and assists in establishing a rapport." Drawing from her own experiences, Bhopal argues that her shared ethnicity with her informants was beneficial for her research.

Moreover, during my research, I observed that some informants were curious about my background. When I disclosed my Afghan origin, the responses I received were notably more positive. For instance, when I mentioned my Afghan background to a male teacher and a teaching assistant on separate occasions, they responded with "Mashallah" (an Arabic expression meaning "What God has willed") and acknowledged me as their Muslim brother. Additionally, a headteacher shared her thoughts and innovations regarding the education of recent Afghan refugees. Although I initially assumed that my ethnicity, religious identity, and spoken languages (Dari, Pashto, and Urdu), along with my skin colour, would significantly facilitate my access to Islamic private schools, this assumption did not hold true. This discrepancy is further explored in the section on gaining access to Islamic schools.

Gilgun (2010) suggests that researchers should engage in reflexivity in three key areas: the topics they wish to investigate; the perspectives and experiences of the individuals with whom they conduct the research; and the audiences to whom the research findings will be communicated. Therefore, "reflexivity in this sense makes the researcher as subject to scrutiny and critical analysis as the topic under study itself" (Carolan, 2003: 6).

Hence, a fundamental reflexive aspect of my research has been shaped by the influence of my supervisory team, which consists of two distinguished female feminist academicians. Over the course of four years, they encouraged me to reflect critically on stereotypical ideas and ideals of Islam. I was advised to avoid creating unintentional binaries and categorisations of Muslim womanhood or identity markers. For instance, during a supervisory meeting, I expressed concern that a Muslim female interviewee might feel uncomfortable with a male researcher in close proximity. I was advised that such discomfort might also be felt by non-Muslim women and encouraged to broaden my perspective to avoid the unintended othering of Muslim women.

Furthermore, looking back at the minutes of our supervisory meetings, I noted an occasion where we discussed a student's removal of her hijab upon entering the school. I was guided to consider that this action might represent resistance to family authority rather than a rejection of Islam or Islamic identity, suggesting that using the hijab as the sole marker of Muslim identity could be controversial. These discussions with my supervisory team enabled me to broaden my understanding, recognising that knowledge is not an objective reality but is constructed through social interactions and cultural contexts (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). From this perspective, the knowledge produced through my study is seen as a product of the interactions between myself and the participants, influenced by the social, cultural, and political contexts in which the research occurs (Ravitch & Carl, 2019).

For the purpose of this study, gender played a crucial role and this consideration extends not only from an analytical perspective—to evaluate the relationship between Islam and the Islamic curriculum within the gender dimensions of the targeted schools—but also in terms of my engagement as a male researcher within a faith-based educational setting (Al-Makhamreh &Lewando-Hundt, 2008). As Scott and Morrison (2006: 116) note, "Gender takes centre stage in educational research," and my positionality as a self-identified male feminist is evident, as I consistently advocate for equal access to resources, particularly education, for both boys and girls. My epistemological stance on mainstreaming gender equality emphasises the importance of gender-sensitive education, especially in male-dominated societies.

Despite my well-defined stance on gender issues within educational settings, my position as a male researcher introduces certain limitations. Male researchers engaging with Muslim women may encounter gender-related challenges. For example, some Muslim women may feel uneasy interacting with male researchers, and one-on-one interviews can be particularly uncomfortable, especially when direct eye contact is involved. It is important to acknowledge that these gender-related limitations are not exclusive to Muslim women but can also occur in non-Muslim contexts. Nevertheless, after several days of engagement and presence in the school environment, female

participants expressed their willingness to participate in the research and appreciated the study. In only two instances, participants wore complete face masks and sat at an angle to avoid direct eye contact. I respected their sensitivity by avoiding direct eye contact. My professional experience with the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) in Afghanistan has equipped me with specific techniques for interviewing Muslim women, making me aware that gestures such as shaking hands, sitting too close, or maintaining continuous eye contact can cause discomfort and irritation.

Therefore, I consciously avoided certain behaviours to build trust and demonstrate my understanding of the cultural and religious norms governing interactions with female Muslim participants. For instance, there was a female teacher at the school who wore a niqab (a full face covering with only the eyes visible). Initially, I refrained from approaching her, allowing her to observe me around the school over a few days. Eventually, as we were heading to the park for playtime, I greeted her in an Islamic manner, addressed her as "Sister" followed by her name (which I had learned from the headteacher), and explained the purpose of my research. This was the first time she spoke to me, expressing her support for the research and agreeing to participate in an interview. My knowledge of Islam and Muslim womanhood, combined with my prior experience conducting research with Muslim women, proved crucial in securing more interviews and gaining participants' trust.

3.8 The insider/outsider dilemma

The duality of being both an insider and an outsider in research is particularly nuanced in studies involving religious and cultural contexts, such as my research into Islamic private schools (Al-Makhamreh, 2020). As a Muslim male researcher, my religious identity provided a degree of insider status, facilitating access and rapport with participants due to shared beliefs and practices. This aligns with the argument made by Al-Makhamreh (2020), who highlights that researchers who share religious or cultural backgrounds with their subjects often benefit from an enhanced level of trust and understanding. My ability to

participate in Islamic practices such as fasting and praying allowed me to resonate with participants on a deeper level, as these shared practices can bridge gaps in understanding and foster a sense of commonality. On occasions when I prayed, fasted, and took part in the religious activities within the school, I felt like an insider. However, I recognise that this feeling was primarily based on my own perception.

The insider-outsider distinction is largely shaped by the researcher's subjective experience, as perceptions of belonging can fluctuate depending on context. For instance, in the initial stages of the research, while negotiating access to the Islamic private schools, I believed that my identity as a Muslim and a member of the minority community would facilitate easier access. However, as time passed, I realised that my gender posed a significant challenge, marking me as an outsider in certain situations. This reflects how different aspects of identity—such as religion and gender—interact to produce different experiences of insider and outsider status.

Despite my shared religious identity, my status as a male researcher created barriers, particularly in interactions with female participants. This aligns with Bhopal's (2000) discussion on how gender can impact a researcher's ability to access and engage with certain groups. Female participants may have perceived my presence differently due to gender norms and expectations within Islamic contexts, leading to occasional feelings of being an outsider. Bhopal (2000) notes that while commonality between the researcher and informants can enhance rapport, it does not negate the significant influence of gender in shaping the research dynamic. This experience crystallises the fluidity of insider and outsider statuses, as they are constantly negotiated and redefined throughout the research process.

Hence, the demarcation of insider and outsider statuses in research is complex and multifaceted, raising important questions about who has the authority to define these boundaries. For instance, while I might perceive myself as an insider due to shared religious beliefs and cultural practices, participants may view me as an outsider based on other factors such as gender or social positioning. Conversely, I might perceive myself as an outsider, yet participants

may hold mixed views, with some identifying with me while others do not. This illustrates that the labels of "insider" and "outsider" are not fixed; rather, they depend on the specific context and the nature of the researcher-participant relationship. As argued by Hellawell (2006), the insider-outsider continuum reflects the extent of commonalities or differences the researcher shares with their informants, rather than a strict binary classification.

In this light, it is reductive to categorise myself definitively as either an insider or an outsider. My role as a researcher is more accurately described as fluid, navigating between these identities depending on the circumstances of the research encounter. For example, while gaining access to an Islamic school and conducting ethnographic research over an extended period can help build trust and rapport with informants, it does not automatically confer insider status. Rather, as noted by Dwyer and Buckle (2009), researchers often occupy a "space between," where they engage with both insider and outsider perspectives.

Therefore, I do not categorise myself strictly as an insider or an outsider. Instead, I see myself as a professional researcher committed to conducting research with a strong adherence to ethical, moral, and legal standards. This commitment is central to my approach, ensuring that my positionality does not compromise the integrity of the research process or the trust placed in me by participants.

3.9 Ethical considerations

When researching the Islamic nature of Islamic private schools, ethical considerations are paramount, particularly given the sensitive and deeply rooted religious and cultural contexts involved. The need to respect and understand the religious beliefs and practices of the participants is crucial in ensuring the integrity and ethical soundness of the research. Al-Makhamreh and Lewando-Hundt (2008) highlight the complexity of conducting research within one's own culture, especially when balancing insider and outsider

perspectives. Hence, navigating these roles requires a deep sensitivity to the cultural and religious norms that govern the lives of the participants (ibid).

In my research, one of the primary ethical considerations was the need to maintain respect for the religious practices and beliefs of the participants. This involved being mindful of how Islamic teachings and practices influence the daily lives of those within the school environment. For instance, when conducting interviews or observations during times of prayer, I ensured that I did not interrupt these practices, recognising their central importance in the participants' lives. By this approach I could ensure the importance of cultural competence and respect when researching within a familiar cultural context (Al-Makhamreh & Lewando-Hundt (2008).

Negotiating informed consent is a crucial ethical consideration, especially when conducting research in settings where cultural and religious norms significantly influence participants' perceptions and interactions with the research process. In Islamic educational settings, it is vital to ensure that the research objectives, processes, and potential impacts are communicated in a culturally sensitive and respectful manner, aligned with Islamic values. This approach not only facilitates clear communication but also demonstrates an understanding of the participants' perspectives on research and its broader implications for their community (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

In my study, informed consent was carefully obtained at every stage of data collection where required, recognising the importance of cultural and religious sensitivities. For instance, consent for Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) was secured from both students and their parents, as well as from their teachers, with the help of gatekeepers who were trusted figures within the school community. Similarly, when conducting interviews with secondary pupils, consent was obtained either directly from the parents or through the school's safeguarding and wellbeing officer, ensuring that ethical protocols were strictly followed and that all parties were fully informed (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012).

Participants were made aware of the research process, including data collection, analysis, and dissemination, to build trust and ensure transparency. This comprehensive approach to informed consent helped reassure participants that their involvement in the study was voluntary and ethically protected, fostering a research environment that was respectful of their values and conducive to meaningful participation (Bryman, 2016).

Moreover, conducting research with Muslim women required careful attention to specific ethical considerations, particularly related to cultural and religious sensitivities. One of the primary concerns is respecting Islamic guidelines on gender interactions, which often include norms of modesty and privacy. These norms may require researchers to maintain appropriate physical distance, avoid direct eye contact, and respect dress codes such as the hijab or niqab (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Dwyer, 2000). When scheduling interviews, I considered prayer times and ensured the environment is comfortable and culturally appropriate, which might include the presence of a female chaperone if needed (Afshar, 1998).

Overall, these ethical considerations were not static but required ongoing negotiation throughout the research process. By remaining reflexive and responsive to the cultural and religious context of the Islamic private schools, I aimed to conduct my research in a manner that was ethically sound and respectful of the participants' values and beliefs. This approach reflects the broader ethical imperative to ensure that research, particularly in sensitive cultural contexts, is conducted with the highest standards of integrity and respect for the communities involved.

Furthermore, I employed relevant frameworks for ethical consideration throughout my research. For example, I utilised the *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* produced by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018, 4th edition). Additionally, I completed the Research Integrity 2 module during the first year of my PhD, which equipped me with foundational knowledge on ethical issues in educational research. I also drew upon my experience working in educational research with UNIFEM and other NGOs, continually reflecting on the ethical implications of researching Muslim

children and women. Lastly, I conducted a thorough review of the literature on ethics in educational research. Throughout the research process, my supervisors served as a primary point of contact for guidance on any ethical concerns.

3.10 Anonymity and confidentiality

There are two aspects of anonymity to consider in this research: the anonymity of the research sites (Islamic private schools) and that of the research participants. Concerning the anonymity of the sites, I firmly believe that it is morally and ethically questionable to promise full anonymity in ethnographic research. As Walford (2018: 516) observes, "it is never actually fully possible to offer anonymity in ethnography." Ensuring the anonymity of sites is common practice in qualitative educational research as a means of facilitating access. However, I contend that it is unethical to promise something that cannot be entirely guaranteed. For example, while a pseudonym can be used for an Islamic private school, this does not ensure that the school's identity cannot be discovered. Given today's technological capabilities, anyone could potentially identify the school by using Google to search for similar descriptions of its locality, aims, objectives, or mission statements.

Therefore, I believe it is more ethical to reassure school officials that all possible measures will be taken to minimise the exposure of the school's identity and location. These measures include the use of pseudonyms and other strategies to mitigate the risk of compromising the school's reputation and to protect school officials from potential harm. This approach acknowledges the limitations of anonymity in ethnographic research while upholding ethical standards. Consequently, I used the labels "School A" and "School B" to refer to the research sites, and employed a coding system for participants, rather than full pseudonyms, to further reduce the risk of identity exposure.

To track data and ensure participants' anonymity, I developed a coding system that includes the serial number of the data tool, the letter identifying the site,

the participant's designation, and their gender. For example, (B-05-Teacher-F) refers to the fifth interview conducted at School B with a female teacher. However, as with the sites, I believe that promising full anonymity to participants is not entirely ethical, as the researcher cannot guarantee complete protection against exposure at all times. For instance, a headteacher may be aware of those involved in the research study, complicating internal anonymity. Similarly, in group discussions, participants who contribute more may be easily identified by others if necessary. It is important to convey to school officials, as well as to teachers and parents, that the intention of this ethnography is not to scrutinise individual participants' behaviour or attitudes, but to provide a holistic picture of the Islamic private schools (Walford, 2018).

The primary ethical concern in maintaining participant anonymity is to minimise any potential harm. While the proposed coding system provides a level of protection, it cannot fully guarantee complete anonymity. Ethical considerations require the researcher’s experience and value judgment to avoid inadvertently exposing individuals. Initially, I considered using pseudonyms throughout the research. However, as the study progressed, I decided to implement the aforementioned coding system for all interviews, focus group discussions, and observations, which significantly reduced the risk of identity exposure. For instance, if a participant is the only person of Pakistani descent in a class, describing their unique characteristics could unintentionally reveal their identity. In such cases, pseudonyms alone are insufficient. Therefore, I took care to exclude any distinguishing features that might compromise a participant's anonymity. App communicated in the information letters or emails sent to the schools, which are included in the Appendices section as Appendix D and Appendix E.

Nonetheless, I ensured that all ethical considerations were thoroughly addressed and managed appropriately, primarily by anticipating potential issues. Obtaining consent at all levels was essential. For instance, in participant observation within a classroom, if the majority of pupils did not consent to participate, I refrained from studying that particular class and instead focused on another. Additionally, I took care to avoid describing any individual's

attitudes or characteristics in a way that might reveal their identity and cause potential harm.

3.11 Conclusion

In this chapter, I discuss my ethnographic approach to exploring three key research questions, focusing on the curriculum and environment of Islamic schools, the schools' intentions for identity formation, and parental values and expectations, and how these influence pupils' religious or other identities at the primary and secondary levels. By addressing these topics, I aim to answer the central question of this research: exploring the religious nature of Islamic private schools. I provide a detailed explanation of the data collection methods, including semi-structured interviews with pupils, teachers, head teachers, and parents. I also explain and justify the use of focus groups for interviewing younger pupils at the primary level. Additionally, I describe how participant observations were utilised as part of the ethnographic approach in this study.

Moreover, I detail the process of selecting research sites (schools) for my ethnographic study and negotiating access to them. A coherent plan for data handling and analysis is presented, including considerations of data credibility and transferability as well as management. I also provide a critical analysis of my positionality and reflexivity, along with the discourse of insider versus outsider perspectives. The research paradigm, grounded in an interpretivist approach, is explored with a clear rationale for this choice. Additionally, I examine my epistemological and ontological perspectives relevant to the research. Detailed ethical considerations are discussed, covering the anonymity and confidentiality of sites and participants.

Building on these methodological foundations, the following section introduces the empirical data collected from the field. Table 3.1 below outlines the details of data gathered from the two selected schools. Contextual information regarding site selection, access negotiations, and school characteristics is further elaborated on pages 70-78. The entire data collection process occurred

between 03 March 2022 and 15 June 2022 in School B, and between 20 January 2023 and 22 March 2023 in School A.

Table 3.1 Summary of Data Collection

School	Methods	Stakeholders*	Students	Parents	Total
A **Between 20 Jan 2023 and 22 Mar 2023**	Semi-structured interview	13	9	4	26
	Focused Group discussions				
	Class/other observations in Hours*		5-H		5
B **Between 03 March 2022 and 15 June 2022**	Semi-structured interview	7		5	12
	Focused Group discussions		2		2
	Class/other observations in Hours		16-H		16
	GRAND TOTAL	**20**	**21-H**	**9**	

*Interviews with school stakeholders encompassed mainly teachers, head teacher, deputy head, governor, admin and welfare officers.

*Observations were mainly in actual classroom of different subjects, including religious studies, math, science as well as prayer venues and assemblies.

The findings of this research will be discussed in the subsequent two chapters, titled Chapter Four: Islamic Private Schools as Safe Spaces for Identity Formation and Resistance and Chapter Five: Islamising Curriculum for Holistic Education and Spiritual Development.

CHAPTER FOUR: ISLAMIC PRIVATE SCHOOLS AS SAFE SPACES FOR IDENTITY FORMATION AND RESISTANCE

4. Abstract

This chapter presents findings derived from 7 semi-structured interviews with school officials, 5 interviews with parents, 2 focused group discussions with pupils, and 16 hours of observation within classrooms and prayer venues at School (B). Furthermore, it incorporates data obtained from 13 semi-structured interviews with school officials, 9 interviews with pupils spanning from Year 7 to Year 11, 4 parents, and 5 hours of classroom observation at School (A).
Drawing upon this data, the chapter explores several key themes. Firstly, it examines how Islamic private schools are constituted and utilised as safe spaces not only for the identity formation of Muslim pupils but also as sites for resistance against Islamophobia, racial segregation, marginalisation, and bullying. Secondly, it demonstrates how such spaces are also used for the formation of a political identity that requires the sanitisation of Islam and Islamic traditions to mitigate societal pressures and challenges faced by Muslim communities in the West. Thirdly, the findings suggest how both Islamic private schools intend to nurture good Muslims and human beings that ultimately contribute positively to broader society. Lastly, it unpacks the role of such schools in maintaining and nurturing a religious identity that is compatible with British society, supporting the integration and assimilation of Muslim pupils as British citizens.

4.1 Islamic schools as safe environments and inclusive spaces

Prior to discussing the findings, it is important to contextualise the curriculum and the quality of education in the two Islamic private schools examined—School A and School B. Gaining insight into the educational ethos, curricular structures, and institutional settings of these schools is essential for a meaningful interpretation of the data. I began with School B, outlining both the structure of its educational provision and the contextual factors that shape its delivery. School B is an independent Islamic primary school located in East London, catering to children aged 3 to 11. It integrates the National Curriculum with a strong focus on Islamic studies, aiming to nurture pupils who are

academically capable while also being rooted in moral and spiritual values based on Islamic principles (O1: Morning Worship/field notes).

School B follows a thematic and cross-curricular approach, integrating core subjects such as English, mathematics, and science with thematic units that also cover history, geography, and PSHE. This approach allows for a more holistic educational experience and is intended to support the development of critical thinking and real-world application. The curriculum is enriched with cultural and faith-based events including Black History Month, Science Week, and Islamic festivals, reflecting the school's commitment to multiculturalism and religious identity (O3: Class Observation-English).

While School B aims to offer a broad and inclusive curriculum, inspection reports have indicated that there are areas requiring improvement. The most recent Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) report rated the school as “Requires Improvement,” highlighting concerns around teaching consistency and the measurement of pupil progress. These findings align with the broader concerns about educational quality noted in the literature, particularly in the context of smaller, faith-based independent schools where resources and oversight may be more limited than in state-funded institutions (O18: Class Observations).

Despite these challenges, parental feedback suggests a generally positive perception of the school’s ethos, pastoral care, and dedication to pupil wellbeing. The school’s recent accreditation as a 5D school in 2024 signals an intention to enhance its educational standards through innovation and self-evaluation. However, given the school’s limited facilities and urban constraints, further investment and policy support may be necessary to sustain improvements in educational quality.

This more detailed profile of School B helps situate its curriculum and performance within the broader discourse on educational standards, particularly in the context of minority faith schools in urban settings, and underscores the importance of targeted strategies for quality assurance in such environments.

While, School A is a single-sex Islamic primary school for girls, located in south-eastern region of England. As an independent (private) faith-based institution, it is not directly maintained by the local authority but is registered with the Department for Education. The school delivers the national curriculum alongside Islamic studies, Qur'anic education, and Arabic language instruction, with an emphasis on cultivating both academic achievement and moral-spiritual development grounded in Islamic values.

The most recent Ofsted inspection rated School A as "Good," acknowledging its effective leadership, safe and orderly learning environment, and pupils' respectful behaviour and engagement with learning. However, the report also identified areas for development, particularly around enhancing teaching consistency and further developing pupils' critical thinking skills within both secular and religious subjects.

These aspects are particularly relevant to ongoing debates in the literature regarding the quality and regulation of education in faith-based and independent schooling contexts. By including this level of detail, I aim to better contextualise the curriculum and priorities of both School A and B and offer a more grounded understanding of the learning environment in which participants' views and experiences were shaped. This strengthens the thesis's engagement with concerns about educational quality, as highlighted in the literature reviewed.

The data derived from the semi-structured interviews with parents, school officials, and pupils, as well as noted observations across both settings, demonstrated that Islamic schools are perceived as safe environments for Muslim pupils as well as teachers. Participants emphasised the significance of the environment of Islamic private schools in fostering inclusivity, religious practice, and nurturing a sense of belonging in a secure environment. The data discussed below also suggests that the environment of Islamic private schools is multifaceted and dynamic. Participants associated themselves with the environment of Islamic schools not only based on their religious identity but also through their social relations and configurations. For example, a teacher argued as follows:

> "I find teaching in an Islamic school comforting. As I mentioned, being able to greet in an Islamic manner, having a workplace where I can pray, share concerns, seek guidance, and offer guidance to students and other staff members, is significant. In this environment, we are able to practice and teach our faith, and also earn deeds." (A-07-Teacher-F).

The above argument associates the teacher's comfort with her ability to perform through her social relations, such as being able to greet in an Islamic manner, pray, share concerns, and interact with other colleagues and pupils. Participant's arguments demonstrated that the ability to perform religious acts, such as praying on time, other prayers, fasting, and attending Friday prayers, were significant in shaping the environment of Islamic private schools and the association of the environment or the space of Islamic schools with their identity, pride, and moral satisfaction. This demonstrates that the space of Islamic private schools fostered not only the identity aspects of the participants but also nurtured a sense of belonging to a space. For example, a Year Ten pupil argued as follows:

> "I like my school because everyone feels it's like a community. So you can easily confide in others about your faith and it's a comfortable environment." (A-20-Student-Y10-F)

Here, again, the pupil argues for her comfort within the space or environment of the school, highlighting her ability to confide about her religious identity or faith with her counterparts. Interestingly, across both settings, there was a direct overlap and similarities in the conception of participants' arguments regarding the role of Islamic private schools in providing a safe environment for their pupils and stakeholders. Even the parents across both settings had similar thoughts about how Islamic private schools provide a safe space. For instance, a parent in the primary school mentioned that:

> "School provide good values and morals, a feeling of belonging for the child, and a feeling at ease for us that our child is in a safe place, learning about the deen (religion)." (B-13-Parent-F)

Other parents from the same school setting argued for the role of the Islamic private school environment as follows:

> "It has a big role to play. It gives them a sense of belonging and of importance in a more secure and non-judgemental setting where children are allowed to be their own individual without the pressures of being like somebody else." (B-15-Parent-M)

On the other hand, a parent from the secondary school referred to Islamic schools as:

> "A better environment with Islamic ethos and also you know that the child will be in a safe and well controlled environment inshaAllah (God willing)" (A-24-Parent-M)

Equally, there is a similarity in thought processing between the perception of Senior Leadership Team (SLT) officials across both settings. They all referred to the merits of Islamic private schools in terms of providing an environment that is not only safe but also enables students to nurture their identity and sense of belonging, which eventually helps them psychologically and spiritually. This is evident in Appendix H on page 249. For instance, the Headteacher in the primary school mentioned as follows:

> "For this school, it's obviously giving a safe place to our children to be educated and to have those moral grounds, so that they can later on become those kinds of confident, independent British Muslims in England. It has been though for a lot because obviously some have come from the state sector where they have not really felt comfortable in their own skin being Muslim. It has been a secondary thing, or it's been really look down on. So here they feel they actually get to flourish their identity and getting those confidence in their skins." (B-01-Headteacher-F)

The above quote crystallises several aspects of Islamic schools that resonate not only with a geographical space but also with a specific time (current or

contemporary), hence demonstrating the temporality of the construction of Muslim identities and their interdependency on external forces, in this case, the state schools, and how Muslim pupils feel within them. Hence, she argues that the school provides a safe place from the pressures that Muslim pupils feel in terms of how they are perceived as minorities within mainstream schools. Moreover, she highlights the impact and significance of the provision of such safe places for Muslim pupils, which not only nurture their identity but also affect their confidence, self-esteem, and social status as 'confident British Muslims.'

Overall, the above extracts from the data demonstrate that the initial aim of Islamic private schools is to provide a safe environment through which they can nurture an Islamic identity but also foster a sense of belonging and safety. However, it is important to explore and unpack what constitutes a Muslim identity and what it means to be Muslim, specifically within the framework of Islamic private schools. Islamic private schools nurture a religious identity among their students by providing an education that integrates Islamic teachings with the standard curriculum, fostering a sense of belonging to the Muslim community. This religious identity is often particular in its emphasis on Islamic values and practices. The rationale behind this formation is to ensure that students maintain their faith and cultural heritage while navigating broader societal contexts. These schools also address intersections between Muslim identity and other identities, such as Britishness, sexual orientation, and citizenship, exploring both overlaps and potential contradictions to help students harmonize their multifaceted identities.

The data from both researched settings demonstrate that the ‘environment’ of Islamic schools is constituted through three overlapping and interconnected dynamics: space, time, and social relations—including gender and other contextual factors—which I unpack in subsequent sections when discussing identity. Firstly, the above extracts from the data demonstrate the significance of spatial aspects of Islamic private schools. The participants refer to the physical environment of the school or a particular ‘space’ through which identities are formed and shaped within a safe and secure environment. Such space is constituted through physical infrastructures such as school buildings,

prayer venues, playgrounds, classrooms, and sports facilities. Moreover, the data suggests how the space within the school settings affects the comfort, safety, and identity of the participants. For example, a year eight student mentioned as follows:

> "I really like that we can basically eat on the floor, which is basically what the Prophet ﷺ did. And I really enjoy sitting on the floor because this way I can relax more. And I also find it easier to eat on the floor because I don't have to worry about my chair tripping anyone else or anything like that. And we all do it together, which is also a good part about this school. Many of the things we do here, we do together as a whole." (A-17-Student-Y8-F).

Even teachers referred to the significance of the spatial aspect of Islamic schools' environment, such as facilities for prayer venues, ablution-specific washrooms, and Qur'anic quotes and banners within the school environment. For instance, a teacher argued as follows:

> "There are so many good things in this school, for example, maybe it won't sound good to you, but in the state school where I was teaching, the dress code was so strict. They told me I couldn't wear comfortable shoes, and I had to be properly dressed up. If it's summer, I have to wear a blazer, but here I'm allowed to move more flexibly. It's carpeted, and I can walk around with my socks on. When I was teaching at the state school, I had to go for foot reflexology or a massage every two weeks because my feet were really hurting. Once I asked a teacher at the state school, if I could wear my joggers because I didn't have any lessons. She said, 'No, you're not allowed to wear any kind of joggers here." (A-08-Teacher-F)

In reference to the above quote from the teacher, the head teacher of the same school mentioned that:

> "Things that they are not allowed are things like not wearing their shoes in the building because we pray in all parts of the building." (A-02-Head Teacher-F)

Secondly, the data mentioned below from both school settings crystallises the importance of the 'temporal' dimension that constitutes the environment of Islamic private schools. The majority of the participants not only argued for the importance of having physical aspects within Islamic private schools, as mentioned above, but also explained and argued for the importance of the schools' flexibility and configuration in adjusting to various time-related needs. Punctuality in prayers at specific times of the day is very important for practicing Muslims. Practicing Muslims pray five times a day, with a few falling within school hours, and Friday prayers are usually longer than other daily prayers. The timing of prayers also shifts and changes with the sunrise and sunset. Hence, Islamic private schools not only provide facilities for prayers but also adjust their curricular activities in relation to prayer times. A teacher refers to the importance of time flexibility in relation to meeting and understanding religious needs as follows:

> "About Salah (prayers), punctuality is very important for Muslims, and this is the advantage. I would say that because my priority was being able to pray Salah on time. That was the most important thing. I was looking for employment where I would be able to pray Salah on time, and it wouldn't be an issue. For me, it was easy because it was only a girls' school. There was a lot of punctuality and flexibility; for example, during Ramadan, we could start a bit late, and we could have the last 10 days off without it affecting our main ibadah (worship) as well." (A-05-Admin officer-F).

Interestingly, a teacher from the primary setting made a similar argument, stating as follows:

> "I pray five times a day, so in a mainstream school where I was working, if I have a meeting at 4:00 PM, maybe it is Maghrib time (sunset prayer's time), and no one is going for Maghrib, so I cannot

> go for Maghrib prayers. Especially in the winter, at that particular time, for several weeks, you cannot just leave the meeting all the time. I mean, sometimes you can say you are going to the toilet, but you cannot be doing that. I am sure you can say you're going to pray, but because no one else is going, if you feel uncomfortable and you feel that people will look at you, you don't want that awkwardness. You know what I mean?" (B-040Teacher-F)

The data suggests that the temporal adjustment of the school not only enables Muslim pupils and teachers to fulfil moral and religious acts on time, but also leads to the constitution of the environment of Islamic private schools. Moreover, a teacher mentioned as follows:

> "Prayer times change every week, so our timetable gets updated accordingly every week or after every two weeks. Our lesson sequence and everything else remain the same, but our prayer timing is kept updated. So I don't think that kind of thing the state school would ever do for Muslim students." (A-08-Teacher-F)

The data suggests that the temporal configuration is not only important for the participants in terms of moral and religious satisfaction, but also provides comfort and facilitates identity as well as professional development within a workplace. As a result, a teacher mentioned as follows:

> "You can see I'm a Muslim, so it allows me to be free in that as well, whereas that might be restricted in other schools. I've been in other schools and have felt restricted. Just for example, the timetabling of the prayer allows me to keep to that without compromising my teaching or students being compromised in their learning, which isn't necessarily provided in other schools." (A-06-Teacher-F)

Hence, the aforementioned data crystallizes the importance and interconnectedness of the temporal and spatial dimensions of the environment constructed within Islamic private schools, which shape the identity of Muslim pupils and stakeholders. It also shows the interdependency of the two aspects.

For example, having prayer facilities without being able to pray on time, or having the time to pray without having the venue and the right facility, is not sufficient.

Thirdly, there are other intersections of gender and context that shape the environment of Islamic schools and contribute to shaping the identity and creating a safe space for Muslim pupils and teachers. Therefore, in the subsequent parts, I discuss the data in conjunction with space and gender, and space and context.

The data from both settings, but particularly in the case of single-sex schools, suggests that the environment of the Islamic private school is also shaped by specific gender relations and status. The evidence below suggests that safety, morality, and identity of both teachers and pupils are protected in a sexually segregated environment. In the case of the primary school, data suggests that female Muslim teachers and officials feel safe and comfortable being in an Islamic private school environment. An environment in which they can wear their desired clothes; women wearing scarves and Niqabs (face coverings) and men wearing Jubbas (long traditional clothes) and feeling proud and comfortable with it. For instance, a male teacher mentioned that:

> "How to dress as a Muslim? Of course, not to say that there is a specific way you have to dress as a Muslim. For example, Alhamdulillah (praise be to God), I do tend to wear the Jubbah (thobe), which of course you don't have to wear. But I read Hadith, that the Prophet (PBUH) dressed in a specific way, so I tend to hold on to that aspect of how he dressed." (B-07-Teacher Assistant-M)

Moreover, a male parent referred to his daughter's ability to dress modestly and comfortably, as well as her ability to maintain her social relations within the school environment. Hence, he said:

> "The advantage is that it makes a good characteristic and personality for my children and a strong foundation. Our children are the future of the Muslim Ummah in the UK, so we need to continue supporting

> Muslim schools. As all students are Muslim, they play together, support each other, and understand as well. They study together, pray, and play together. They even wear scarves without any problem." (B-14-Parent-M).

In the primary setting, through observations of classes and prayer venues, it was noted that the pupils enjoyed freedom of choice regarding wearing their veils and scarves. To some extent, in some cases, they resisted parental pressures to wear scarves by removing them within the school environment. Wearing a scarf or Hijab might be considered emblematic of a gendered Muslim identity, and data indicates how it is negotiated or rejected in the school context. For instance, a male teacher critically observed parental choice and considered it a challenge. He mentioned an interesting case in which a student resisted her parents' choice within the school compound. He therefore argued that:

> "It's quite difficult. I'd say some students say this is a bit of a tough one. I say why? Because it's an Islamic school. I think some girls or some boys, they have a really strict Islamic upbringing at home. So sometimes it could be a challenge. I'll give an example: one girl, she takes her hijab off when she gets inside the school. When she leaves, she puts it on because she's scared of her parents." (B-06-Teacher-M)

In the single-sex school, a teacher argued that due to the sexually segregated nature of her school, she is able to remove her Niqab (face covering) and comfortably deliver her lessons. She therefore mentioned that:

> "I did study in a mainstream school. The difference is that, let's say I wear a niqab. To be wearing a niqab in a mainstream setting is difficult, and I wouldn't think that teaching while wearing a niqab would be easy, especially in regards to safety issues. But working in an Islamic school will enable me to take off my veil when there are no men around, and I'll be comfortably teaching without feeling foreign in a place." (A-07-Teacher-F)

The above quotes demonstrate that Islamic private schools not only create a space where Muslim identities are formed but also enable individuals to exercise their freedom of choice and resist familial or societal pressure in order to feel comfortable. In other words, a pupil's ability to not wear the Hijab may not indicate a rejection of Islam or religion per se, but rather a rejection of a particular gender-based identity marker or a particular religious identity expected by the parents. It also shows that the gender dimension of the space fosters a sense of belonging, as the teacher referred to her comfort as a sense of belonging to the space by not "feeling foreign in a place."

Furthermore, in the secondary schools, the majority of participants referred to their school environment as safe and protective due to its gender-segregated nature. The voices of pupils clearly resonated with this argument, stating that they felt comfortable within their school compound, being in single-sex, girls-only schools. For example, a year seven female student said:

> “The strength of our school is that we have the national curriculum that we can learn, and we can help people in the future. I can wear hijab comfortably and wear our clothes and not just get discriminated for it.”(A-15-Student-Y7-F)

Moreover, the extracts below also demonstrate that this argument, that their space or the environment of their school, is not only shaped by temporal and spatial dimensions but also influenced by the intersection of their gender-based segregation, but also gender-based social relations and collective identities. A teacher mentioned that:

> “I've enjoyed working here. Because it's an all-female environment, we get to pray our Salah (prayers) together.” (A-05-Admin officer-F)

Overall, the data suggests that the ability to wear specific clothing as identity markers not only associates with the comfort and safety of Muslim females, but it also fosters a sense of identity and nurtures a sense of belonging.

Last but not least, the context of Islamic schools, which encompasses a combination of formal and informal curriculum, including a particular set of religious and traditional ethos, values, and rituals, aims to instil a specific form of Muslim identity. Both the formal curriculum and informal aspects of the curriculum are fundamental in nurturing specific aspects of identity and shaping the school environment, as well as in setting and achieving learning objectives and educational standards. The data suggests that the environment of Islamic schools is constituted through different interrelated dynamics and intersections. Hence, the context not only affects the identity formation of the participants but also influences how the environment of Islamic private schools is constituted. In addition to parents, teachers, and stakeholders, the data suggests that pupils refer to Islamic schools due to their context and provision of Islamic education. As a junior student in year five mentioned in a focused group discussion:

> "I really like my private Islamic school. I feel studying is good here because it doesn't only teach us Maths and English and other subjects, but it teaches us about Islam and our Dean (Religion)." (B-09-FGD-Boy)

Moreover, the following extract demostrates various aspects of identity including gender, social relations, ethnicity, and space. As articulated by a teacher:

> "I'm from Pakistan so I was missing saying things like MashaAllah, InshaAllah that really matters to me. I can wear whatever I'm comfortable with and people are really supportive because they think in Islam you should be supportive but in state school it's completely different, so I have experience in teaching state schools. Here I really like it. Even though they're not paying me that much but it's really good for my mental health" (A-08-Teacher-F)

This not only clarifies a strong sense of identity and belonging within a particular space, but also resonates with Doreen Massey (1994) 's conceptualisation of space, identity, and their spatial interconnectedness with the discourse of nostalgia as discussed in (chapter 2, section 2.7 identity). The teacher

mentioned firstly that she is from Pakistan; secondly, she expressed a sense of nostalgia by describing her feeling of 'missing'; and thirdly, she associated the school environment with her imaginative space and social relations. Therefore, it is important to understand that such "arguments draw upon the association of a 'sense of place' with memory, stasis, and nostalgia" (Massey, 1994: 119). It also demonstrates the interconnectedness of discourses such as 'identity vs place', which are always constructed by reference to the past (ibid: 8). This not only associates place with 'home', but also imbues place with inevitable characteristics of nostalgia or 'a place called home' (ibid: 10).

Therefore, to summarise, based on the aforementioned data, the term ‘environment’ and the role of Islamic private schools in providing a safe and inclusive environment for Muslim pupils and staff were significant identity markers of the religious nature of the Islamic private schools. The data suggested that the environment or the ‘space’ of the school not only referred to physical space, but it also depended on various temporal, spatial, and overlapping dimensions that eventually constituted the environment. Hence, through the construction of a particular ‘space’, the Islamic private schools not only increase a sense of belonging but also foster identity. It crystallizes the importance of place in shaping not only identities but also social relations. It also shows how identities are shaped, reshaped, and negotiated through intersections of gender, age, ethnicity, and religion. Moreover, the intersection of gender with space also demonstrates that space matters in the construction of gender and in the production of gender relations and gender-based social relations. Overall, it shows that identities are unfixed and fluid and are formed through various spatial, temporal, and overlapping dimensions within a specific time-space called an ‘environment’.

More specifically, the findings suggest that various factors are fundamental in shaping the spatial and religious nature of Islamic private schools. Such factors include Islamic values, attitudes, and ethos; the Islamic curriculum; the provision of prayer and worship facilities at particular times of the school day; the Islamic dress code; sexual segregation based on religion; the provision of Halal food and acts; high academic standards; Islamic holidays, traditions, and

festivities; family and community integration; Quranic and Arabic language development; and Islamic morality and spirituality.

Moreover, a wide range of adjectives and prefixes were used for the conceptualization and construction of the concept of the environment, each explaining an intersection of Islamic schools' environments. Prefixes were interchangeably used across both the primary (co-educational) and secondary (single-sex girls only) settings. The common concepts were as follows: safe environment, secure environment, well-controlled environment, good environment, female environment, closed-off environment, best environment, comfortable environment, Islamic environment, family environment, faith environment, cultural environment, Halal (permitted) environment, and loving environment. Except for 'the female environment', which was used only in the context of single-sex girls only school, the rest were used across both settings. Although the used prefixes are self-explanatory, the raised concept poses serious questions about mainstream schools and how the needs of Muslim pupils are met or not met in public schools. Furthermore, it explores the reasons why such environments are considered safe, examining what they are safe from, whom they are safe from, and why this safety is necessary. This leads to the second theme constructed through the data: bullying against Muslim students and, in some cases, Muslim teachers.

4.2 Bullying and peer pressures against Muslim students

The discussion surrounding bullying in educational settings is a significant concern within academic circles. Analysis of data from both school environments indicates that students and teachers from Muslim minority groups face various forms of bullying, including religious, cultural, and linguistic aspects, in mainstream schools. Despite the diverse and multicultural nature of British society, data below demonstrates the persistence of bullying and religious discrimination in mainstream educational institutions. These incidents often involve mockery of religious attire, dietary choices, cultural practices, and festive traditions, as well as instances of peer pressure, leading to prejudiced

attitudes, stereotype formation, misunderstandings, and the marginalisation of Muslim students and Teachers. Moreover, studies suggest that Muslim pupils in mainstream schools are bullied and harassed with names such as ‘bombers’ or ‘terrorists,’ or are told to ‘go back to where (they) came from’ (MEND, 2017:17). This demonstrates the scope of the problem that persists, predominantly in areas where Muslim pupils constitute a much smaller number.

This issue requires serious scholarly attention and may contribute to the motivation among Muslim communities to establish their own Islamic private schools. Conversely, an analysis of data from both schools reveals a notable absence of severe bullying cases within private Islamic schools. This can be attributed to their strict anti-bullying policies and the moral, ethical, and religious education provided to students, which emphasizes the harmful nature of bullying and its connection to negative behaviour. Furthermore, observations, including classroom and playgrounds, highlight that despite the diverse ethnic backgrounds of students, the shared religious identity as 'Muslims' fosters an environment of fairness, equality and inclusivity among pupils. The statement provided by a teacher in a secondary school further illustrates this discussion.

> “I believe it's been about six or seven months now, yet I haven't seen an issue of severe bullying. It's not like state schools. Even minor arguments seem to become rear. Also, the teachers' approach of handling such situations from an Islamic perspective also benefits the students.” (A-07-Teacher-F-)

Furthermore, it was also observed through interviews with parents that one of the fundamental reasons for their choice of school was to protect their children from the risks associated with bullying and peer pressure in mainstream schools. Consequently, one parent stated as follows:

> “To be honest, I like the school because it's Islamic, and they learn a lot, especially Quran in the morning. That is why I like it, and it's protective and safe. Safe from bullies, from discrimination.” (B-12-Parent-F)

Several parents identified the school environment as akin to a family setting. This observation was further supported by the familial vibe observed in both schools. There was a strong sense of community; everyone knew one another, and teachers were familiar with nearly all pupils by name. Additionally, there was a notable increase in communication between parents and school officials. Furthermore, another parent articulated their perspective on the protective nature of the school for their child as follows:

> “this environment protects our children from lots of problems out there. All students have similar background and understand each other and there is no bullying the same as in public schools. It is a safe environment. The school safe our children and our culture. The teachers are like family.” (B-14-Parent-M)

The data indicates that Muslim pupils are also aware of the challenges present in mainstream schools and understand why their parents seek to protect them from such environments. For instance, when asked about the school environment and their parents' decision to choose an Islamic private school, a Year 10 female student responded as follows:

> “I think it's a more closed-off environment compared to what happens outside of private schools. And I think they wanted to protect me a bit more and didn't want to expose me to the rest of the stuff. And they wanted me to learn about my religion.” (A-19-Student-Y 10)

Here, the participant is attempting to assert that her school is regulated and insulated from the issues that may be widespread in mainstream schools. She also indicates that her parents aim to shield her from exposure to the occurrences in mainstream educational settings, particularly concerning issues such as bullying, drug and alcohol misuse, and peer pressure.

Moreover, a Year Nine female pupil at the secondary level, who had experienced mainstream education during her primary years, also expressed her views about the existence of bullying and discrimination in mainstream

schools and how Islamic private schools protect students from such issues. Therefore, she mentioned the following:

> “I like it because you get to learn about your religion without being bothered by controversies or anything. It's just that you're learning what your religion is about without anyone questioning or bullying you about it so much.” (A-18-Student-Y9-F)

The above quotes demonstrate the perception of Muslim pupils based on their experiences of attending mainstream schools, where they often feel subjected to religious mockery and bullying. Furthermore, the quote below from a teacher also echoes the voices of Muslim pupils who have experienced bullying in mainstream schools.

> “I have never seen any school as safe for students and teachers as I see this. Yeah, it's really safe. Even girls talk to each other that bullying happens in state schools, but here it doesn’t happen. Not like pushing, rolling, or anything like in state schools. So it's really safe to work.” (A-08-Teacher-F)

The scope of bullying against Muslims in mainstream schools not only affects Muslim pupils but also Muslim teachers who work there. The quote below crystallises the extent and unintended consequences of a female Muslim teacher's experience of being bullied in a mainstream school.

> "When you work as a teacher in a state school, it really affects your mental health. When I was teaching in a state school, I worked for about four months, and I felt so depressed and shattered because the staff weren't as cooperative as they are here. I don't know why; maybe because I was an outsider or for some other reason, but they weren't as cooperative. They didn't talk to you about your problems or issues. If students bullied you, I talked to the management. I've suffered not just one incident, but many incidents while teaching in the state school. From the management to the students, I was subjected to bullying, and it was so depressing. I literally took a six-

> month break because I was mentally shattered. Once, while teaching in the school, the girls started using really foul language with me, and I left that class. I talked to the management, and they said, 'Oh, we will talk to her parents, and we will give her detention.' They were literally throwing stuff at me and abusing me, and I was the only teacher in that class.". (A-08-Teacher-F)

The aforementioned quote from the teacher's interview discusses her experience of teaching in a mainstream school. It not only reveals instances of bullying and a lack of respect from students and management, but also highlights her struggles in connecting with the school environment, resulting in her feeling like an 'outsider.' This highlights the concern that Muslim pupils and teachers not only seek a sense of belonging within a mainstream school environment but also often experience discrimination and marginalisation.

Furthermore, additional data from both settings highlights parental and stakeholder concerns regarding the prevalence of peer pressure and the risks associated with drug and alcohol abuse in mainstream schools. The data indicates that these concerns encompass not only bullying and discrimination but also the peer pressures faced by Muslim pupils within mainstream schools. However, Islamic private schools not only offer a safe environment but also serve as a coping and resistance mechanism to mitigate such issues. That's why a female teacher argued as follows:

> "I think being a Muslim in this school, compared to being a Muslim in a mainstream school, is different. Many Muslim students in mainstream schools don't have a deep understanding of their religion unless they go to a mosque or somewhere similar later to learn. They often feel under peer pressure to fit in with everyone else and may not fully understand how they are meant to carry themselves according to their religion. However, the girls who come here talk about their religion, discuss why they do things in a certain way, and it makes them feel more proud to be Muslim." (A-10-Teacher-F)

More specifically, a head teacher referred not only to concerns about peer pressure but also expressed concerns about the way Muslim girls may be perceived in mainstream schools and how they may feel different due to wearing their hijabs or scarves.

> "When students attend mainstream schools, they have to deal with peer pressure regarding their appearance and social media, which often leads to mental health issues and the pressure to meet certain expectations. Then, on top of that, if you're a Muslim student, you also have to deal with not wearing makeup, wearing a hijab, and refraining from certain behaviours due to religious beliefs. By the end of the term, you're often seen as different. Additionally, there's also a clear agenda by social media and film industry to showcase the hijab as a sign of being oppressed and showing the characters who remove their hijab as a symbol of freedom from oppression." (A-02-Head Teacher-F)

The aforementioned quote from the head teacher not only shows that Muslim pupils face peer pressure and religious discrimination based on their appearance and clothing, but it also refers to a broader societal problem regarding how the Muslim veil or scarf is symbolised as oppressive and backward through Eurocentric viewpoints. Furthermore, it demonstrates how Western societies perpetuate a prevalent narrative in the media that portrays the hijab as oppressive and associates its removal with freedom and liberty. Hence, Islamic private schools not only provide a safe and protective environment but also enable their pupils to feel secure and proud of their clothing, empowering them to resist societal pressures and gain confidence.

In line with these research findings, studies suggest that there are numerous cases of bullying, discrimination, peer pressure, and exclusivity among minorities, particularly Muslim pupils, within mainstream schooling systems (Parker-Jenkins, 2002; Ahmad, 2002; Coles, 2004). Similar challenges for Muslim pupils have been observed in other Western contexts. For example, Zine (2007) and Merry (2005) argue that Muslim pupils face various religious or cultural challenges concerning their modest clothing or hijab, the provision

of halal food, prayer venues, and religious education within the context of Canadian mainstream schools. Such challenges and issues cause harm to Muslim pupils, thereby instilling not only fear within them but also leading to concerns among Muslim parents and communities regarding their children's safety and well-being. However, similarly to the Canadian context, Muslim communities establish their own Islamic private schools to mitigate issues with the dominant culture, Islamophobia, and bullying (Zine, 2007). This illustrates that similar issues persist in Western societies and how Muslim minorities in both the contexts of Canada and the United Kingdom rationalise and utilise Islamic private schools as a form of resistance and coping.

More specifically, in the case of the United Kingdom, the Department of Education (2017) provided a document for preventing and tackling bullying: advice for headteachers, staff, and governing bodies. Although the paper discusses cyberbullying and bullying of pupils with SEND and the vulnerable, there is no specific reference to religious bullying or the causal factors for Islamophobia or the bullying of Muslim pupils in mainstream schools. This, in a way, shows that the institutional framework does not acknowledge the existence of religious bullying, particularly against Muslim pupils, within the mainstream educational infrastructure.

The data across both settings suggests that alongside bullying against Muslim students, there are also significant concerns and challenges regarding peer pressure on issues of safety and well-being. Additionally, some studies and statistics suggest that drug abuse and alcohol misuse are alarming issues prevalent in mainstream schools (SAMHSA, 2020). While any parent may have concerns about such challenges, it is particularly worrying for Muslim parents for several reasons. Firstly, drinking alcohol is prohibited in Islam and is considered a major sin. The majority of Muslim parents feel morally and ethically obligated to prevent any opportunity for their children to become involved in or exposed to alcohol and drug abuse. Secondly, as Muslim pupils constitute minorities in the majority of mainstream schools, their vulnerability to drug abuse and alcohol is higher due to peer pressure. Peer pressure to conform to secular norms can lead to feelings of alienation (Khan & Lewis,

2016). McCabe (2019) argues that vulnerable students are often pressured to experiment with alcohol and drugs as a means of fitting in or gaining acceptance. Hence, parents play a major role in monitoring their children's activities and preventing drug and alcohol abuse (Arria et al., 2017). Therefore, Muslim parents interviewed for this study clearly raised concerns about the existing challenges within mainstream schools. That is why they argue that Muslim schools are immune from such major concerns. One of the parents sending his three children to the secondary Islamic private school argued as follows:

> "What I like the most is knowing that when they go there, it's probably the most secure environment for them to be in, as opposed to some of the other schools within our region, which may have bigger issues related to bullying, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, and so on. For me, it's the peace of mind I feel when they're at school. It's knowing that they're in a safe, secure environment." (A-25-Parent-M)

His major concern is associated with the issues within the mainstream school environment, which make it unsafe for his children. Several other parents, pupils, and teachers expressed similar concerns about issues such as peer pressure, bullying, and drug abuse in mainstream schools. One of the female teachers in the secondary school mentioned that:

> “I have never seen any safe school for students or for teachers as I see here. Yeah, it’s really safe. Even girls tell each other that bullying happened in other schools.” (A-08-Teacher-F)

Therefore, the teacher is referring to the discussions of the students about bullying in mainstream schools and how it can make it an unsafe environment for Muslim pupils. The data suggests that Muslim pupils also have a clear understanding of such challenges within mainstream schools and the reasons why their parents want to protect them from such environments. It is therefore a fundamental factor that Muslim parents, students, and stakeholders feel that Islamic schools are safe, secure, and comfortable environments. In the

meantime, “there is a great need to understand what is going on in these independent Muslim faith-based schools” (Almakawi, 2017: 14).

4.3 Islamic Schools: from cultivating to practicing Muslim identities

The analysis of the data obtained across two Islamic private schools indicates, firstly, that Muslim identities are a multifaceted construct overlapping with religious, cultural, ethnic, and social dimensions. Secondly, Islamic private schools play a significant role not only in shaping but also in reinforcing and stabilizing Muslim identity among their students. Therefore, based on quotes from school officials, parents, and pupils, I analyse the role of Islamic private schools in terms of cultivating, practicing, and resisting Muslim identities.

Drawing from the presented data, all officials of the Islamic private schools, including teachers, curriculum designers, and senior leadership teams, intend to cultivate a particular religious identity. This identity is not only based on Islamic ethos, values, and beliefs but also on cultural, ethnic traditions, and social relations. Across both settings, but more prominently at the primary level, there is a moral and religious commitment to nurturing a strong religious identity among the pupils. For instance, a teacher mentioned the following:

> "I think they need that support. They need to know their identity properly. They need to be able to understand why they do things. That's our job as educators: to make them understand. You know, Islam doesn't say just do whatever you want. It says teach, learn about it, and then do it." (A-09-Teacher-F)

The above quotes show how the teacher intends to rationalize her efforts for nurturing her pupils' identity. Moreover, the deputy head teacher of the primary school also argued as follows:

> “For me the main thing is the children leave the school with a broad and balanced idea and identity about the Islam. They can be whatever they want but still know their routes and know that they can

> be proud Muslims. That you can leave in a society mixed with everyone and have respect for everyone and achieve your goals. Your religion or background should never prohibit you or stop you from achieving those goals."(B-02-DHT-F)

The above argument not only emphasises understanding their pupils' identity but also crystallises the importance of knowing their roots, ultimately leading to their pride. Similarly, the extract below shows that Tarbiyah, Ta'lim, and Adab are all simultaneously taught throughout the life of the school, both through the curriculum and other forms of education such as prophetic storytelling, role modelling, and hidden curriculum. Although the promotion of Islamic education and Islamic ethos was observed in both settings, there was a greater emphasis on the primary level, as nurturing Islamic values as early as possible was key for all stakeholders and referred to building the right foundations. She further expands on how the identity is formed and shaped through the school by saying:

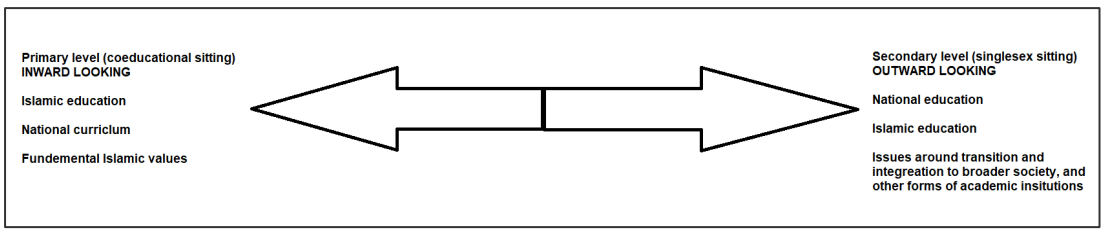
> "I think Islam isn't just a lesson; it's embedded in the whole school. It's the way the students behave, their mannerism - so adab, akhlaq - it's all part of who they are. So their whole identity is Islam. It's not just wearing a hijab or just wearing a jilbab or wearing a niqab. It's actually more than that. And it's in their mannerism as well - the way they speak to people, their etiquette - everything is linked back to Islam." (A-02-Head teacher-F).

Above, the headteacher intends to clarify that Islamic or Muslim identity is not based solely on visual identity markers such as wearing a scarf, face cover, or modest Islamic/traditional clothing. Rather, it is more about specific aspects of mannerism, etiquette, and ethos. In other words, she is arguing for a holistic nature of Muslim identity, which encompasses not only religious practices and appearance, but also behavioural norms and ethical values embedded in every aspect of the school environment, including students' behaviour, mannerisms, and interactions with others. This argument is significant because Muslim identities are typically perceived or judged based on factors like having a beard, wearing a scarf, or using a face cover; however, it is more complex and dynamic

than that. Hence, a combination of curricular activities, hidden curriculum, ethos, and etiquette provides the grounding for nurturing a religious identity aligned with the expectations of the Muslim community and parents in particular. This is why a teacher argued as follows:

> "All parents here expect their child to have a solid foundation in Islam, as that's one of the main reasons they send their child to this school rather than other schools, especially state-funded or government-funded ones. In those schools, they will receive the same education in terms of other subjects or general knowledge, but what they'll receive here is more crucial—Islam. So parents' expectation is that their child will grasp Islam from this school; they will understand who Allah is, why they've been created, and why they're Muslims. They won't receive that in other schools. Hence, parents anticipate that their child will not only learn mathematics, English, and science here but also religion." (B-03-Teacher-M).

Overall, the data show that parents and stakeholders emphasise instilling Islamic ethos at the primary level, through which their identity, personality, and characters are built. Several other parents and stakeholders emphasised the importance of Islamic education and ethos at the primary level. However, in the context of secondary education, all stakeholders, including parents, were focusing on a balance between the NC (national curriculum) and IC (Islamic curriculum). Through the chart below, I would like to explore the transitional gap between the two settings:



Illustrative chart: demonstrating the trends between the two-school settings

Based on the data, at the primary level, the focus was more on Islamic education and nurturing Islamic identity through a particular set of ethos, values, and ethics. Hence, this leads to what I call inward-looking development

through the three fundamental principles of Islamic education: Ta'lim (seeking knowledge), Tarbiyah (upbringing), and Adab (mannerism). It was observed that at the primary level, there was a supremacy of Islamic education over the national curriculum or secular education. However, at the secondary level, identity formation through Islamic education remained vital, but the focus was more outward-looking, emphasizing achieving high academic attainment in the national curriculum GCSE and finding ways to prepare pupils for what they referred to as the "outside world" or non-Islamic educational settings such as sixth forms, colleges, and universities. Apparently, there was a generational or age-related gap, meaning that Islamic education and identity were instilled at the primary level, while pupils at the secondary level had to deal more with academic attainments, mental well-being, confidence building, and preparing to move on to other forms of education.

Moreover, the data suggests that identities are not only nurtured through the provision of Islamic education and values, but they are more fostered through performative religious practices such as collective worship, congregational prayers, and other religious and spiritual acts. According to a female teacher:

> "The main thing that distinguishes us, the Islamic private school, is the Islamic curriculum, which is not found in state schools or any other secular school. Another difference lies in our practice of it in our day-to-day lives or in our school lives."

This argument indicates that there is a practical or performative aspect to education within Islamic private schools. Identity is not only shaped through the school curriculum or Islamic education but is also performed in the day-to-day life of the school. The performativity of religious acts within the school environment not only supports the religious nurturing of the students but also shapes the identity of the school in comparison to others. Hence, such performativity of religious acts is fundamental to individuals as well as to group identity. In a focused group discussion with younger pupils (years 1 to 5), a female student mentioned the following:

"The best thing in the school is praying Salah (prayers), because in other schools we may not have that chance". (B-08-FDG-Mixed-pupil)

Moreover, a male parent discussed the provision of prayer facilities as well as the school's temporal flexibility in meeting the religious needs of Muslim pupils. It was also mentioned as follows:

"The main advantages are, as I said, the facilitation of Salah/prayers, which is especially important during the winter months when the prayers are closer together. Two, maybe three of them fall within school hours." (A-25- Parent- M)

The performance of religious acts and worship is not only fundamental to students but also to the school staff. In several semi-structured interviews and observations, teachers and school officials expressed their gratitude for being able to pray during school hours and to take days off during their religious holidays and specific times, such as Eid holidays, or during the month of Ramadan. This aspect of religious identity even helps teachers be morally satisfied by working in an Islamic private school. An administrative assistant mentioned as follows:

"I would say because my priority was that I could pray Salah (prayers) on time. That was the most important. I was looking for employment where I would be able to pray Salah on time. And it wouldn't be an issue. About the Salah (prayers), punctuality is very important for the Muslims, and this is an advantage." (A-05-Admin Assistant-F)

Two factors are very fundamental for nurturing the religious identity of Muslim pupils. Firstly, nurturing religious identity at an early age in order to stabilize identity issues in adulthood, and secondly, the understanding that the process of religious identity formation is evolving and constantly changing, just like other aspects of identity development. This reinstates the argument of Hall (1990) that identities are not static and fixed but are consistently evolving or becoming.

In other words, Hall refers to the process of identity formation as ‘becoming’ rather than ‘being’. Of course, such a process does not happen in a vacuum, and there are influencing factors that I will unpack in subsequent parts. Several aspects of the data suggest that the school's emphasis is on nurturing religious identity through performance at an early childhood level, as it would stabilise their identity in adulthood. For example, a female teacher who was a student of School ‘B’ (primary school) previously argued that because she engaged in performing religious acts, she had a stable religious identity through her adulthood, stating:

> “I think, because even like when I was a student in this Islamic school, when I left the school, I ended up going to a mixed college, because I got to the routine of praying every day together, it was just a natural thing for me to go and find a prayer room to go and pray, and so it was something that was like instilled in me, and I had the confidence to do it.” (A-10-Teacher-F)

This shows that not only did it stabilize her religious identity, but it also built her confidence that she could perform her prayers and aspects of her religious identity in adulthood.

Moreover, a male teacher also emphasized the role of identity stabilization from an early age, arguing as follows:

> "So imagine a child goes on to become a doctor or an engineer, so not only do they become just experts in doctoring or engineering, they also have that balance; they have Islam with them, which has moulded them from a young age in school. So they have that with them, and, you know, they won't get lost in the path. Because sometimes what happens is that with children who don’t have that fundamental, strong foundation from the start and then go on to become teachers, doctors, or whatever, they sort of lose the path slightly and forget about the Deen (religion) side. So I think having that Deen (religion) from a young age from the school will actually enhance them as a person." (B-03-Teacher-M)

The above argument also relates the formation of religious identity of Muslim pupils to a mechanism for avoiding identity crises or confusion in later stages of life. The data across the two school settings (one primary, one secondary girls-only) also demonstrates an interesting pattern. Through my observations and interviews, I realized that there is more focus on Islamic education and the formation of religious identity at the primary level. At the secondary level, there was a sense of stability with their religious identity, and the focus from religious education was diverting to mainstream education. One of the reasons would be the grounding of the religious aspects of their identity; however, it was also felt that pupils in upper grades were more focused on performing well academically in their GCSEs and preparing for better colleges and universities.

The data across both settings suggests that Islamic private schools not only intend to foster religious identity in the pupils but also play a significant role in maintaining and establishing those aspects of identity among their pupils. Data from both parents, stakeholders, and pupils suggests that they believe the provision of religious identity protects individuals from being lost or confused within societies where Muslims are minorities. For instance, a parent expressed the following:

> "If we don't keep our tradition and background, our children will be confused and face problems in the Western society they live in. They won't know where they belong. It is also important, as it is necessary for young Muslims to know their religion and culture, and this happens through Islamic schools that provide Islamic education." (B-14-Parent-M).

The above quote shows that Muslim parents are not solely concerned about religious identity, but they also focus on the cultural and ethnic dimensions of identity, hence using religion and culture interchangeably. Furthermore, school officials have concerns about the lack of identity maintainance. That is why a teacher assistant argued as follows:

> "It is very important that we grow up knowing who we are and understanding our identity as Muslims. So, I'll give you an example.

> If they don’t go to an Islamic school, they mix and mingle with ordinary people, which is nothing wrong with it. But what tends to happen is they tend to lose their identity as Muslims. They are not being taught what to do as Muslims from waking up in the morning, doing their Azkar, reciting their Surahs (chapters), and praying their Salawat (salutations)." (B-07-Teacher Assistant-M)

Overall, based on the data, Islamic private schools tend to create an inclusive environment for Muslim pupils from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. It was noticed through classroom and prayer venue observations that schools enrolled students from different South Asian and African Muslim populations. Hence, a collective religious identity is shaped through observing religious conventions and celebrating Islam collectively. Therefore, the school paves the way for fostering religious identity as a site for bonding, community development, and belonging for Muslims from different backgrounds, genders, ethnicities, and nationalities. Such diversity in the school was argued by a primary school teacher as follows:

> "I think the identity is being a Muslim; coming to school because all the students are Muslim. In Islam, we have a lot of sects. We have Hanafi, Shafi'i, and many more. So, in our school, we have students from various backgrounds. But they all come as Muslims, and Ramadan is celebrated in a month. Eid comes after Ramadan, Hajj (pilgrimage), Prophet Muhammad as the last Prophet, so they all have the same values and a mutual understanding. They have that baseline which is the same, and having that baseline makes a big effect. Because the students then don't differentiate as 'I'm different from you, you are different from me'; instead, they say that we're both Muslims, and they're proud to be Muslims and be at a school.” (B-06-Teacher-F)

The above quotes demonstrate that there is not a homogenous and fixed form of Islamic or Muslim identity. It is a combination of several political, social, and religious factors that shape and reshape a Muslim's identity. Identities are contingent upon space, time, and multi-dimensional classification. The sense

of belonging and association is also contingent upon various temporal and spatial dimensions. This was surprisingly well noted through a class observation episode that I discuss here. I observed an English evaluation class for year three and four (O3: Class Observation - English- Year 3 & 4). The class began with the teacher reciting prayers of Bismillah, which translates as follows: 'I begin by the name of God who is most merciful and compassionate.' The English evaluation session followed with a broadcast of news on a projector for pupils to hear English and analyze the news. There was a news segment about the return of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, a British-Iranian hostage from Iran. A student said, 'Wow, it's great that a British mom is returning to her home to her child' (O-3: class observation). Next, a TV news presenter was talking about Saint Patrick's Day and mentioned 'Happy Saint Patrick's Day.' He continued to introduce Saint Patrick's Day as a cultural and religious celebration held on the 17th of March, which marks the traditional death of Saint Patrick. The reporter added more about the importance of Saint Patrick's Day to the Catholic Church, the Anglican communion, and the Church of Ireland, linking it to Christianity in the United Kingdom. The reporter once again said 'Happy Saint Patrick's Day.' A student beside me gently whispered 'No.' I quietly asked him why? He replied, 'Because it's not for Muslims to celebrate.' The last news segment was about sport highlights, talking about the British Paralympics champions. Here, a student loudly said 'Yes, we made it' (ibid). And all other students reacted to Liverpool's team victory in a positive way, saying 'Yes, great (ibid).

This episode was significant in several ways, demonstrating that identities are relational, contextual, and contingent, and how they can shape or form through relations to others or different situations. Moreover, it showed that the 'identities of places are inevitably unfixed. They are unfixed in part precisely because the social relations out of which they are constructed are themselves by their very nature dynamic and changing' (Massey, 1994:169). This also demonstrates that places or spaces are also not static; they are shaped by various power dynamics, social relations and hegemonic forces. Firstly, how a student associated Nazanin with British society. Secondly, how the second news about Saint Patrick was perceived by the student and how he identified himself as

Muslim, understanding the event but not willing to associate himself directly with it, and thirdly, how sport achievements were perceived by the pupils by mentioning ‘yes we made it’. Here, the students felt proud and associated their identity with their Muslim Britishness. Overall, showing how ‘identities of place are always unfixed, contested, and multiple. And the particularity of any place is, in these terms, constructed not by placing boundaries around it and defining its identity through counter position to the other which lies beyond, but precisely (in part) through the specificity of the mix of links and interconnections to that 'beyond'. Places viewed this way are open and porous’ (Massey, 1994: 7). Hence, such identity formation and stabilization lead to further analysis of questioning the outcome of such an effort. In the subsequent part, I argue that Muslim identities are not merely religious; they have a strong political nature, predominantly to resist the societal pressures coming from aggressive secularist, Islamophobic, anti-Islamic rhetoric, and anti-migrant far-right political movements.

Based on the data collected from both sites, it was noticed that the formation of Islamic or Muslim identity was not solely a spiritual or religious act, but it was highly political. Political in the sense of equipping pupils and other stakeholders with knowledge for discursive narrative and strategies in order to challenge and contest oppressive norms and threats. There was a direct correlation observed between identity formation and political resistance, not only for challenging oppressive norms but also for contesting dominant power structures. Such a purpose is not only vital for political recognition and respect but also significant for the survival of a group’s cultural and religious identity. Hence, the scope of self-identification is contingent upon external forces. These struggles for recognition and respect are also temporal, going back to the era of colonialism when oppressed people reclaimed their agency through acts of self-affirmation and resistance (Fanon, 1952). Moreover, the dynamics of the securitization of Muslim identity have been significantly affected by global events such as 9/11 and 7/7. Therefore, across both settings, the data below demonstrates that the ultimate objective of nurturing Muslim identities through Islamic education, value systems, and tradition is to empower them to defend themselves against societal threats to their identity and survival as minoritized communities. For

example, a teacher in the secondary school raised her concern about the lack or loss of Muslim identity and the potential consequences it may pose. Hence, she said the following:

> "At the bottom line of what I am trying to say is that you tend to lose your identity as a Muslim. You don't learn the values of being a Muslim, and when a non-Muslim might approach you, especially in these times, you know people are Islamophobic; they will throw all sorts of stuff out there. For example, they might say, 'Your religion prohibits gay people, so gay people do not deserve to live.' Another example is when they bring up that Prophet Muhammad's wife was not of the right age. They throw stuff like this at you, and when you haven't been taught in an Islamic school, you don't know how to respond to these accusations. So, what tends to happen is you just stay quiet because you don't want to embarrass yourself or your religion." (A-08-Teacher-F)

The above quote addresses several key issues, referring to the risks associated with the loss of identity. If this happens, there is a risk of feeling helpless when facing Islamophobic individuals. Hence, the teacher is highlighting the role of Islamic schools and education in empowering pupils to be strong and confident in resisting and challenging such rhetoric. The threats of Islamophobic ideals were also mentioned in the other school. For instance, a teacher assistant raised a similar concern about accusations towards Islam and emphasized the importance of Muslim pupils being ready and equipped with the right knowledge to react and defend themselves, as well as their religion. He therefore said the following:

> "We do live in a society where there are Islamophobes, people who have a negative opinion towards our religion, and they will throw accusations towards us. For example, 'Your prophet couldn't even read or write', 'If the man couldn't read and write, how did he start an entire requisite?' So, when they throw stuff like this, we don't want them (Muslim students) to setback and say, 'Oh, I don't know what to say.' No, the reason why they (Muslim students) come here is

> because we want to prepare them for those situations. They need to learn how to defend themselves in regard to these comments if they don't go to Islamic schools they will lose that identity needed" (B-07-Teacher Assistant-M)

This also highlights concerns and political ambitions that overlap across both settings in relation to nurturing identity as a form of resistance. By mentioning, 'prepare them for those situations,' it is clearly indicated that neither the school stakeholders, nor parents or pupils are neutral in this objective, and all intend to take a defensive position in order to contest external challenges and threats. Similar arguments were made by several parents about the role of Islamic schools in preparing pupils to defend and resist identity politics. For instance, a parent mentioned:

> "Islamic education and Islamic schools are very important because they give students a sense of identity. They don't always need to prove themselves to critics around them, and they can practice their faith as well as excel academically." (B-15-Parent-M).

Furthermore, similar concerns were also raised by other Muslim parents not only in relation to the identity formation of pupils per se, but also for the survival of collective Muslim minorities' identity and Islamic schools as a site for resistance. For example, a parent mentioned the following:

> "There are lots of rumours and negative issues about Islamic schools in the UK. We see that they don't receive enough help and support from the community. We really need to work together as a Muslim community to stop these things and we need to help and support Islamic schools so they can do their best." (B-14-Parent-M)

The overlapping and interrelated aspects of knowledge with power relations, resistance, and identity were even crystallized by junior pupils. In one of the focused group discussions, a pupil appreciated and admired the knowledge of his Islamic education teacher and how he predicted that his teacher could challenge anti-Islamic rhetoric and viewpoints, by saying:

> "Our Ustad (religious teacher) is the best Ustad I have ever known. His knowledge is amazing. He is the best Islamic teacher. He can beat many people. If there are a hundred people in a row trying to debate him, he will finish them in a snap or a second." (B-08-FGD-Boy)

This resonates that even pupils understand the importance of being able to defend and resist threats and challenges. From this pupil's perspective, they are in a battle and struggle for identity politics, survival, and recognition; hence, he refers to his teacher's ability to be able to 'beat' people who challenge him in any contestation. Moreover, the data suggests that such aspects of resistance also extend to mitigating the challenges associated with secularism in society in general and the promotion of secular agendas within mainstream schools in particular. An aggressive form of secularism poses a threat to any belief system. Hence, counter-narratives and discourses are required to mitigate and contest those challenges. That is why a teacher raised concerns about mainstream schools and how Islamic private schools, in particular, and other faith schools, in general, can mitigate that, by arguing:

> "All I will say is this: Muslim schools are now a part of schooling in Britain, and I think they should definitely grow because we need them. We need alternative ideas, especially because I feel like state schools are currently pushing more towards other ideas. There is a space and a need for Islamic schools. So, I am not saying only Muslim schools should be growing. I am saying all faith schools should be growing now, simply because state schools are going further crazy ideas. You know what I mean? Yeah." (B-04-Teacher-F)

Overall, the above quotes demonstrate how minority groups associate with other groups, developing counter-narratives to resist and contest dominant culture and threats (Hall, 1990). This is in line with Sara Ahmed's concept of 'Strategic essentialism,' through which marginalised groups strategically develop essentialist narratives to mobilise political solidarity and challenge oppressions (Ahmed, 2000). However, such an ability requires discursive

practices through which Muslims negotiate their sense of self within broader socio-cultural relations (Hall, 1990). Moreover, the data suggests that through Islamic education and its curriculum, Islamic schools serve as a site for nurturing political identity as well as empowerment for identity politics and recognition. Additionally, drawn from the data, it was analysed that Islamic private schools treat knowledge or education from a Foucauldian perspective, associating it with power and power relations. Hence, Muslim minority communities in the Western context utilize counter-narratives and alternative discourses to resist hegemonic ideologies (Hook, 1990). As a result, the above-discussed data also shows that identities are not fixed and are contingent upon power relations and the 'performance of social norms and discourses' (Butler, 1990).

Hence, religion or religious identity is used as a causal factor in identity politics. By identity politics, I mean the lived experiences, struggles, and concerns of minority or marginalized groups of society through which they seek to address issues such as social injustices, inequalities, and discriminations based on their identities (Hayward and Watson, 2010). While minorities come from different ethnic, gender, and sectarian backgrounds, religion becomes an umbrella through which they can assimilate and fight for political recognition. This is a political act in nature due to several reasons. Firstly, it is difficult for minorities to fight for their collective recognition through their ethnicities. For example, the Afghan community in Britain lives in different localities, making it much harder for them to advocate for recognition based on being Afghan. Similar situations apply to Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, or other ethnic minorities. However, religion is a strong commonality among different Muslim ethnic groups, which is why it can bring them together to fight for their political recognition and struggle over their identity politics. Although the majority of Muslims know that Islam and Muslims are not homogenous forms of religion and identity, they strongly believe in the concept of a global Muslim ummah (community) that transcends national, cultural, and linguistic boundaries (Esack, 2011). Therefore, their religious identity is not only vital and necessary for their self-identity but also for their socio-political recognition and respect.

As a result, I argue that religious identity is associated with issues around power and agency. Therefore, they are contingent on context, history, culture, and power dynamics. Through religious identity, minorities intend to demand what Hall (1990) refers to as claims for respect and recognition. Portes and Rumbaut (2001, 1996) developed the term 'reactive ethnicity' in reference to defensive forms of identity to confront native mainstream forms of identity. Expanding on their concept, I would argue that through Islamic schools, mosques, and other community entities, Muslim minorities in the West are actively nurturing and maintaining Muslim identities that are in line with identity politics or identity-resistance dynamics. An identity that is 'fluid, multiple, contingent, and contextual, and always embedded within the wider context of power/resistance relations' (Thomas, 2009). However, another dimension of such an identity overlaps with the subsequent theme of 'becoming a good Muslim,' which I discuss below.

4.4 Becoming a good Muslim

Another theme constructed through the data analysis was associated with ‘becoming a good Muslim’. In a way, this theme overlapped with the entire environment of the Islamic school, through which identities are formed. Participants argued that one of the outcomes of being or attending an Islamic school was associated with becoming a good Muslim. There is no homogeneous definition of a ‘good Muslim’ or a good person; however, it is obvious that the respondent referred to such an adjective as someone who is a practicing Muslim, spiritually and morally devout, knowledgeable about and adherent to religious codes and norms, and who self-identifies as Muslim. The term 'Good Muslim' was interchangeably used with 'good human being' by the participants. However, a teacher associated goodness with the teachings within their schools by saying, “What we teach inspires and helps the girls to become better Muslims and better people (A-09-Teacher-F)

The concept of goodness, or being a good Muslim, was predominantly mentioned during parents’ interviews, reflecting their expectations from the

school in fostering such qualities. For instance, a male parent at School B also mentioned that “besides Islamic education, Islamic schools make our children religious but also good Muslim people" (B-14- Parent-M). Similarly, another parent elaborated on their choice of school as follows:

> “We are very happy with our decision, as the school helps our children to have a strong Muslim identity and also become good human beings”. (B-14-Parent-M)

Moreover, a female parent associated 'goodness' not only with practicing but also with preaching Islam. Hence, she not only self-identifies as Muslim but also deems it necessary for her son to promote the concept of Da’wah in his future encounters. Da’wah means preaching for Islam, issuing an invitation to Islam, or issuing a summons. Hence, she argued as follows:

> Even a sixth-grade female student in a focused group discussion said “Our parents want us to become good Muslims”. (B-09-FGD-Mixed-pupils)

On the other hand, a teacher considered that task of instilling goodness on pupil as a challenge due to how the society function. Hence, he said:

> "At the end of the day, we have to understand that our children are growing up in a Western society. So, to bring them up as good Muslims in a Western society, that is one of the big challenges." (B-07-Teacher Assistant-M)

The above discussed data aligns with the views of Al-Attas, a distinguished scholar of Islamic education, who explicitly stresses the cultivation of goodness through Islamic education rather than merely the creation of good citizens. He argues:

> “The end of education in Islam is to produce a good man, and not, as in the case of Western civilization, to produce a good citizen. By ‘good’ in the concept of good man is meant precisely the man of

> adab in the sense here explained as encompassing the spiritual and material life of man." (Al-Attas, 1980).

At the core of Al-Attas' conceptualisation of good muslimness, the notion is presented that cultivating a good man or woman inherently leads to the development of a good citizen. While a good citizen may adhere to legal obligations, contribute to national wealth through taxation and productivity, this does not guarantee the embodiment of a good person or human being. From an Islamic philosophical standpoint, individuals grounded in the foundational principles of Islamic education—Adab, Talim, and Tarbiyah—gradually comprehend their position and responsibility within the spheres of family, community, environment, occupation, and social justice (Waghid, 2014).

The concept of 'goodness' or 'good Muslim' also overlaps with an intentional process of sanitizing Islam. Based on the data, it was observed that all participants, including stakeholders, teachers, pupils, and parents, are actively involved in a process to sanitize the image of Islam and argue for its compatibility with British society, a concept that I discuss in the subsequent part. Many participants argued that Islam in the Western context is often portrayed based on narratives of violence, extremism, fundamentalism, and hatred. Therefore, almost all participants somehow intended to sanitize the image of Islam by emphasizing and correlating its core values and principles with peace, beauty, humanity, and spirituality. Through such a process, they intended to counter negative stereotypes and present Islam as a religion of peace, beauty, and tranquillity. This viewpoint was mainly argued by the SLT across both settings. For example, the governor at the secondary school mentioned the following:

> "I think having our own private Islamic school ensures that not only are they getting Islamic education, but they are also learning the etiquettes, principles, ethics, and morality of a Muslim, which is to be a good human being, to spread peace, to be kind and compassionate. Here we turn them to be spiritual with moral character and good behaviour". (A-01-Governor-M)

Similarly, the headteacher of the other school holds a similar viewpoint, stating as follows:

> "When you learn about Islam from an Islamic viewpoint, the Quran tells you there is compassion in religion, and there is no force. You respect your neighbour, even if your neighbour is an align per se, even an atheist with no religion, or maybe someone from the LGBT community, for example, You have a duty to take care of your neighbour. If your neighbour sleeps hungry, you are accountable. Look at how tolerance is taught. Look at the love that the Quran teaches." (B-01-Headteacher-F)

There were various approaches by the participants to sanitize the image of Islam. This was achieved not only through portraying it as a religion of peace and tolerance but also by disassociating it from radical views and interpretations propagated by Eurocentric and anti-Islamic rhetoric, and by raising concerns about the risk of Islam being associated with radicalization. That is why a headteacher argued as follows:

> "It is so important for our children not to be misled. With social media and all forms of media, you don't know who is there giving the wrong information about Islam. So, there is a bigger risk of being groomed. All those people that you see being radicalized and then suddenly in the media they classify them as Muslims, they are not Muslims, and it doesn't come from Islam. So the correct ideas about what Islam is have to be taught to the children. The values of Islam, the correct ideas, that information, the identity has to be clarified, has to be taught. Because the risk of the children getting the wrong education about Islam is there." (B-01-Headteacher-F)

Several parents shared a similar perception, understanding, and approach to sanitizing Islam. For example, a female parent mentioned the following:

> "Islam is a complete code of life. If anybody knows Islam and the Quran, all life solutions are there. If he understands this, then he will

benefit, and he will be able to help other people to benefit.” (B-13-Parent-F)

Moreover, a teacher refers to how Islam is portrayed in contemporary narratives and the role that Islamic private schools play in countering and presenting a different image. Hence, she argued as follows:

> "Especially in today's time where Islam is highly misunderstood, students here are able to learn Islam better, to know the rules of Islam, to be able to respect others, and to learn and teach students more truly about what Islam really is. Islam teaches us to speak kindly, to be kind to people, to be nice to our neighbours, whether they are Muslim or non-Muslim, to respect others, and to hold ourselves back from doing wrong and to reflect on our behaviours. This is what Islam gives us—the opportunity to improve ourselves as a person and it's a rule to reflect on our actions, what we have done, the wrongs we have done to improve ourselves. So, it allows these students to do well by learning their true Islam, so they are able to love their faith, express it, and share it with others." (A-07-Teacher-F).

Overall, the above data suggests that the portrayal of Islam in contemporary discourse is often marred by misunderstanding, misrepresentation, and prejudice. From sensationalized media coverage to political rhetoric, Islam is frequently depicted as a monolithic entity synonymous with violence, extremism, and backwardness. However, such portrayals fail to capture the nuanced and diverse nature of Islam, which encompasses a rich tapestry of beliefs, practices, and cultures.

In response to these misconceptions, there has been a growing activity within Muslim communities to sanitize the image of Islam, presenting it in a manner that reflects its core principles of peace, compassion, and justice. Moreover, the data also suggests that Islamic private schools not only act as sites for nurturing identities that can resist challenges by anti-Islamic rhetoric but also intend to contest other discourses that challenge and contradict some aspects

of Muslim identity. For instance, media, social media tools, aggressive secularism, westernisation, and liberal modernisation can be mentioned.

That is why a teacher actively intends to sanitize Islam by mentioning how the school plays roles in correcting the rhetoric presented by the media, arguing as follows:

> "The advantages are that they are rich in an Islamic school. They are well aware from a very young age of how to live a meaningful Islamic life, not being misguided by the media, because we are always correcting what the media is portraying." (B-05-Teacher-F)

Hence, she referred to how Islamic schools protect pupils from being misguided by the media, which relates back to previous arguments about the stabilization of identity and protecting them from identity crises and confusion. However, she also referred to the role of Islamic private schools in correcting the portrayal presented by the media. In a way, all the participants used this research as an opportunity to raise their voices and, in some manner, sanitise Islam, expressing that it is misunderstood and not accurately portrayed. A teacher, for instance, mentioned the following:

> "My teaching experience shows that we are very much misunderstood. That's the word. What the media says and how it is portrayed are completely opposite. We don't have an agenda; we are just here to integrate, mix, and live a safe, comfortable, healthy life like everyone else, and teach our children to be the best human beings apart from being Muslim." (B-07-Teacher-F).

Moreover, Islamic private schools intend to sanitize Islam by correcting misconceptions, countering stereotypes, and presenting Islam in its true light. Overall, sanitization seeks to dispel myths and falsehoods surrounding Islam, replacing them with accurate and nuanced portrayals that reflect the diversity and complexity of the Muslim faith. Motivated by a desire to foster understanding and promote harmony, the sanitization of Islam encompasses a range of strategies and approaches aimed at challenging negative narratives

and building bridges of communication and dialogue, ultimately leading to gaining the desired respect and recognition.

Education plays a crucial role in the sanitization of Islam, empowering individuals with knowledge and understanding. Muslim communities, therefore, establish educational institutions such as Islamic schools, mosques, and cultural centres to provide comprehensive Islamic education and promote positive values and ethics. By educating both Muslims and non-Muslims about the true teachings of Islam, these institutions play a vital role in countering ignorance and prejudice.

Another approach to sanitizing Islam is to argue for its compatibility and suitability with British values in general and British value systems in particular. Consequently, another overarching theme developed through the data was regarding how Islamic schools intend to nurture good citizens and encourage Muslim-British citizens to integrate into broader society, a topic discussed and analysed in the subsequent part.

4.5 Becoming and integrating as a good citizen in British society

The evidence from the data suggests that across both settings, there are efforts to nurture good human beings and good Muslims, ultimately leading to good citizens. However, the discourse of Muslim-British citizenship is more complex than that. Overall, the majority of participants strongly associated Islamic values with British values, arguing that the ultimate objective of Islamic private schools is to nurture an identity that produces good human beings and Muslims who obey and respect the civic rules of citizenship. The concept of a good citizen was interchangeably used with that of a good Muslim and British citizen, suggesting overlap rather than contradictions. This argument was predominantly made by the Senior Leadership Team across both schools. For instance, the governor of the secondary school mentioned the following:

> “We want to create good citizens, good Muslims, and good British citizens who are working in schools or in professional fields such as accounting, among others. They should have the upbringing, background, and foundation of a good Islamic upbringing, coupled with excellence in their academic pursuits. Obviously, we aim to be an outstanding school, and we want our students to achieve the best both academically and Islamically.” (A-01-Governor-M).

Similarly, the Deputy Head Teacher at the primary school argued along the same lines, stating:

> "Islamic education prepares our students to integrate into broader society by instilling in them the best values and nurturing their true identity. The Islamic curriculum prepares them to be good British Muslims, good citizens, and good human beings. By becoming good British Muslims, they can contribute to society's well-being as they grow up." (B-02-DHT-F)

The overlap and interconnectedness of Islamic education, particularly Islamic mannerisms, with the discourse of citizenship was mentioned by several other parents and stakeholders. For example, the Headteacher at the secondary school argued as follows:

> “There are significantly more resources available today for Islamic curriculum than there were five years ago. And we do Tarbiyah as well in the Islamic curriculum, which links in with our protective characteristics. So, we have Tarbiyah, which is the Islamic take, and then we have citizenship, which is the British take. However, citizenship teaches you that if you do this, you may be arrested. You know? And Tarbiyah reinforces that. Yeah, it's more about the morality behind the law. So instead of saying, okay, you know what, don't do that or else you'll get arrested, which is what they say for citizenship. In Tarbiya, it would be like, if you do this, this will be the impact of it. And it's more like morality and to do with your character.

So, can you see how both of the curriculums are quite interlinked?" (A-02-F-Headteacher)

Reporting from the data, it was obvious that Islamic private schools promote British values in line with the values of Britain. There was emphasis across both settings on promoting a sense of citizenship, fostering a sense of belonging, and encouraging their pupils to further integrate into British society. This was also observed through the promotion of a political identity in the multicultural context of Britain, which was seen as an act not only to give students a voice and agency but also to contribute to democratic processes. Schools were observed to promote civic education for electoral processes within the classroom, from nomination to voting and the selection of class representatives and school mental health and well-being counsellors. Additionally, one of the themes for collective workshops and assemblies was 'Democracy, British values, and the rule of law' (O-05-B). Such exercises provide pupils with confidence, a voice, agency, and representation.

Overall, two different interpretations of the discourse of citizenship and Muslims' integration emerge. Firstly, across both settings, it was evident that stakeholders as well as parents wished for their pupils and children to fully integrate into broader society, feeling that they are part of British society despite their religious and cultural identifications. Secondly, on the contrary, the majority of the participants discussed their perception of how they are viewed by others as Muslim British population. Most argued that they are seen as minoritized and marginalized communities who are racially segregated and feel like second-class citizens. This perception is rooted in issues around Islamophobia, far-right anti-migrant rhetoric, and global terrorism, and its perceived association with Muslims. Hence, this somehow has reverse effects on Muslims, mobilizing through identity politics to assert their agency, voice, respect, and recognition as 'British Muslims' who can be important parts of society and obey the civic rules of citizenship. The headteacher at the primary school critiqued the double standards around Muslim citizenship by arguing as follows:

“Right now, Muslims in the UK are facing a lot of hardship because we are looked down upon as second-class citizens. Even till now, if you look at how fast everyone has gone to help Ukraine, those refugees are welcomed back to the UK. The government is paying £350 per household. And yet, the Muslim community in the UK hasn’t been able to think twice about helping their fellow Muslims abroad, or donating abroad. You are allowed to trust the least, as an MP has openly said she supports British citizens going down there to fight, to become freedom fighters. What is the Muslim community going to think? They're going to think there is a racial agenda. What is the formula to help humanity? Aren’t all civilian casualties of war innocent? Shouldn’t they be acknowledged? So, the idea of working in Britain for Muslims is important because we need to keep working to help Muslims understand. Look, even though Britain is quite behind in this subconscious racism, you don’t let go of your values. Patience is fundamental; the Quran talks about patience, and this is part of your patience. Two wrongs don’t make a right. Yes, you can see evidence, but you continue to be patient and be there for those who are going through oppression, even if it is recognized by the British counterpart. You know one oppression, and if the other oppression is not recognized, just have patience, and this is part of your test. We have to still keep them composed, not getting angry and not getting upset. We work as the bridge, counselling people in their spirituality. Because it is quite upsetting when you hear about those kinds of elements, like when you see the Syrian refugees who were drowning, turned back. The whole point of Brexit was all about immigration. The Afghans who just came, nobody wanted them. Those children were looked down upon as second-class citizens. Where was the £350 a month to open up the door and say bring them in, bring them in? So many more are suffering. They went through conflict for twenty years. So, the Muslim community in Britain would naturally get upset. Nobody is addressing the elephant in the room, but the educational system, the Islamic community in those institutions are there to bridge those gaps, continuing to work

> with Muslim families and saying, 'Look, just be patient and do what you can. We are here to help control their emotions because the reality is seriously racist. Whether they believe it or not, it is, you know."(B-01-Headteacher-F)

The participant above articulates several crucial political elements regarding how Muslims are perceived in the United Kingdom and how they feel. Firstly, in her capacity as someone in charge of the school and involved in senior decision-making processes, dealing with Muslim parents and communities, she argues that Muslims are viewed as second-class citizens. While this assertion may be subject to critical scrutiny for its generalization, other participants have expressed similar concerns. She also discusses the issue of double standards in the government's approach to multicultural social policies, contrasting the responses to Ukrainian migration with those to Afghan and Syrian refugee reception.

Secondly, she mentions selective activism based on racial agendas and subconscious racism in the government's perception of British citizens' involvement in other conflicts and wars. Additionally, she highlights the consequences of this subconscious racism and Islamophobia, which include frustration and anger among the British Muslim population. However, through the process of sanitizing Islam, she argues that the school plays a crucial role in encouraging patience among Muslims. The school functions as a bonding mechanism and bridge between the Muslim community and the broader society by regulating and monitoring emotions and providing counselling. While such arguments highlight the failures of multiculturalism in Britain, Muslims are considered to be better off compared to secularist societies such as France.

The data suggests that cultural and religious identity significantly influence the lives, survival, and integration of Muslims, and any attempt to securitize and domesticate these identities has adverse effects on their integration. The following excerpt presents the argument of a Muslim mother who chose the United Kingdom over France based on the following rationale:

> “I like it here, because I come from another country where they don’t accept Islam. That is why I came to this country where they accept Islam. I came from France, and there they don’t accept Islam. It's very important for our kids because when they grow up, they can teach their children as well, and it's good for their future."

For her, 'accepting Islam' entails the freedom to practice her religious and cultural traditions publicly, as well as the availability of Islamic private education for her children, and the acknowledgment and respect of Muslims' religious and cultural needs. However, achieving these aspects was not easily feasible in secularist France. This indicates that the perception of integration and citizenship among Muslim individuals is also influenced by their experiences of migration to other parts of the West and how they were treated in those societies.

Overall, it was observed that Islamic private schools play a crucial role in maintaining and bonding Muslim communities within their capacity, particularly through their communication with parent groups. Despite the schools' efforts to nurture Muslim British citizens, there was evidence that Muslims feel like second-class citizens, at least among the participants in this research. Moreover, schools serve as venues to amplify their political rights and voice. Political participation is another crucial aspect of Muslim integration and citizenship in the UK. As argued by Jorgen Nielsen (2013), a scholar in Islamic studies, meaningful engagement in the political process enables Muslims to voice their concerns, advocate for their rights, and contribute to decision-making processes. However, barriers to political participation, including voter disenfranchisement, underrepresentation in elected bodies, and Islamophobic rhetoric, pose significant challenges to full citizenship for Muslims.

Moreover, almost all participants strongly believed that Islam, in general, and Islamic education, in particular, is compatible with British values, thereby fostering a specific identity that not only admires but also nurtures civic participation and citizenship. There are even efforts to sanitize Islamic values and argue that all aspects of British values have Islamic roots. For instance, a

parent argued for the compatibility of Islamic schooling with British society as follows:

> "Islam actually promotes equality, fairness, justice, the rule of law, and many other qualities which are now being promoted as British Values in schools. These were Islamic values long before they became known as British values, so yes, Islamic education is compatible with British society." (B-15-Parent-M).

The compatibility of Islam with British values and discourses of integration, multiculturalism and citizenship is also a political approach, through which participants for this research intended to sanitise Islam and Islamic or Muslim identity by presenting them compatible with the 'British identity'. Hence, the whole concept of good Muslim, intentionally overlaps with good citizen in an attempt to show integration and belonging of British Muslim in the broader British society.

4.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this chapter demonstrate that several key themes were constructed from the discussions and analysis of the data. The primary theme drawn from the data pertained to the environment of Islamic schools. Drawing upon data from parents, teachers, stakeholders, and students, the environment of the Islamic private school was depicted as being safe and inclusive. Participants showed a strong connection and association to the environment, influenced by various factors such as their cultural, traditional, and political identities, as well as their social relations and configurations. Furthermore, the findings suggest that the environment of Islamic private schools is not narrowly constituted and defined as exclusive physical entities, but rather highlights their interconnectedness with the formation of particular Muslim identities across spaces, times, social relations, and overlapping factors such as gender and ethnicity.

Moreover, the aim of establishing a safe and inclusive environment gave rise to another theme highlighted in the data: the prevalence of bullying and peer pressure faced by Muslim students in mainstream schools. The data indicated numerous instances of bullying and peer pressure not only targeting Muslim pupils, but also affecting Muslim teachers and staff. Consequently, Islamic private schools are viewed as safe and welcoming environments due to the absence or minimal occurrence of such negative behaviours. Students share similar backgrounds, fostering increased camaraderie and mutual understanding among peers and educators.

Concerns regarding bullying of Muslim students were evident in both school settings, with pupils, staff, and parents expressing concerns about pressure to conform to the dominant culture and secular values. However, these challenges were not solely addressed by attending Muslim schools; rather, they also involved fostering a strong, confident British Muslim identity to resist such pressures in wider society. This aspect leads to the development of another theme, as detailed below.

The overarching result of establishing the environment of an Islamic private school is not only the cultivation and practice, but also the stabilisation of Muslim identities. Drawing from the data, Muslim identities were examined and analysed as a multifaceted concept intertwined with religious, cultural, ethnic, and political dimensions. Specifically, Muslim identities were explored as relational, fluid, and subject to fluidity and change based on the temporality of time and space.

Islamic private schools played a pivotal role in nurturing Muslim identities to withstand the societal pressures and challenges encountered by Muslim pupils in mainstream educational settings. Furthermore, these schools not only foster Islamic or Muslim identities but also consolidate them, empowering pupils to leverage their identity as a means of resistance against Islamophobia and anti-immigrant rhetoric.

Furthermore, by fostering and solidifying a Muslim identity that is influenced by time, space, and social interactions, Islamic private schools also aimed to instil

qualities of being upright Muslims and exemplary individuals. This, in turn, contributes to the development of responsible citizens who are mindful of their civic duties and responsibilities. In both contexts, the data indicates a prevalent aspiration for the sanitisation of Islam and Islamic values. Participants utilised this research as an opportunity to sanitise Islam and advocate for its compatibility with British society.

In summary, the research indicates that Islamic private schools play a crucial role in nurturing, shaping, and reinforcing the identity of Muslim students. This not only serves the interests of their families but also strengthens the cohesion of the Muslim community, fostering collective efforts towards recognition, respect, and integration as British Muslim citizens in the United Kingdom.

CHAPTER FIVE: ISLAMISING CURRICULUM FOR HOLISTIC EDUCATION AND SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

5. Abstract

This chapter draws on data derived from two Islamic private schools, specifically focusing on both the formal and informal aspects of the curriculum. The formal curriculum encompasses both the National Curriculum (NC) and the Islamic Curriculum (IC), addressing challenges encountered by Muslim students in mainstream schools across institutional, cultural, and religious dimensions. The overarching findings, such as holistic and spiritual education, Islamisation of knowledge, continuity of home vs. school values, and fostering cultural identity for cultural preservation, were developed as the main themes from the data. The data discussed in this chapter are based on 7 semi-structured interviews with school officials, 5 interviews with parents, 2 focused group discussions with pupils, and 16 hours of observation in classes and prayer venues at School (B). Additionally, it includes 13 semi-structured interviews with school officials, 9 interviews with pupils ranging from year 7 to year 11, 4 parents, and 5 hours of class observation at School (A). Drawing insights from this data, it explores how the curricula are Islamized to meet the needs and demands of Muslim pupils and parents. It reinforces how Islamic private schools serve as safe and secure spaces for Muslims to celebrate their cultural, ethnic, and religious identities.

5.1 Formal curriculum

In both schools, the mandated national curriculum is implemented across primary education's key stages one to two and secondary education's key stages three to four. At the culmination of each key stage, teachers and stakeholders evaluate the academic progress of students. Nevertheless, the data showed that the researched Islamic private schools incorporated modifications to or omitted from the national curriculum within their pedagogical structure. Additionally, the participants across both setting expressed that the challenges posed by the national curriculum serve as impetuses for them to establish Islamic private schools, a topic elaborated upon in the subsequent discussion.

5.2 The challenges that Muslim pupils face with the national curriculum

The collected data from participants, including parents and stakeholders of both Islamic private schools, aligned with existing literature and previous research, shows that Muslim parents and stakeholders emphasize several challenges associated with the national curriculum in mainstream schools. The national curriculum in British mainstream schools fundamentally aligns with Christian and European epistemological frameworks, reflecting corresponding ideals and values. Despite assertions of secularism in certain mainstream schools, various components of both the informal and formal curriculum contribute to the promotion of a distinct form of values, culture, and mainstream ideals. This raises concerns among Muslim parents regarding the perceived lack of neutrality in the British curriculum, prompting apprehensions on multiple fronts. Moreover, this situation places Muslim pupils at a disadvantage. These challenges propel Muslim parents towards choosing private Islamic schooling for their children. A thorough analysis of these concerns reveals three overarching aspects: institutional, cultural, and religious challenges.

The data from both school settings suggest that the challenges encountered by Muslim pupils concerning the national curriculum primarily stem from its contextual aspects, design, and objectives. For example, some interviewed teachers, grappling with moral qualms associated with certain elements of the national curriculum, have opted to transition from mainstream teaching careers to join Islamic private schools. One such instance is a female teacher with extensive experience in mainstream schools who ultimately chose to leave, citing her reasons for departure as follows:

> “That was a very personal decision; I just wanted to make a change. When my son was going to year 2 in the mainstream school, and this was many years ago, the Relationship and Sex education (RSE) was introduced, and I wasn’t happy about the contents. When I looked at it, I thought, No, I don’t want my children learning all that, but financially, I wasn’t able to send my children to Islamic school. Then I thought, I want to make a difference, so I decided to get into

> Islamic school teaching as opposed to secular school, so that I can enrol my own children too here." (B-05-Teacher-F)

The data from the stakeholders of both Islamic private schools demonstrate their capacity to modify and reshape specific components of the national curriculum in alignment with Islamic values and ethos. This flexibility not only allows these schools to fulfil their obligation in delivering the mandated aspects of the national curriculum but also serves to appease the religious and cultural principles of Muslim parents. This is particularly pertinent when addressing segments of the national curriculum that may conflict with Islamic beliefs and ethos. However, this adaptive capability places Islamic private schools in a position of advantage. To illustrate this point, one headteacher asserted,

> "We do not really want the government funding, as with the funding comes control, and we do not want those extreme restrictions. We prefer the ability to choose the contents of our curriculum or to alter the national curriculum according to our pupils needs and parents demands as we go along". (B-01-Headteacher-F)

Additionally, a deputy headteacher conveyed appreciation for the private nature of Islamic schools, stating:

> "The fact that we can manipulate the curriculum, and we have the choice of what we want to keep and what we don't want to teach; the values that we want to add to the curriculum, is not restrictive. So all these ideas that we have, the Islamic values, or the Islamic links that we make, we can freely make. We are allowed to do that, so why not? If we think it can enrich the curriculum, we would do that so that our children can get the best of both worlds. Some of the things that we teach here, you will never hear about in the state schools or in mainstream schools. I have been a mainstream schoolteacher, so I know. The curriculum there is very strict, and it's exactly what you need to teach. But here, we can look at that and say we can teach that, but we can add this viewpoint to it. So that the children get a far

better and deeper understanding of what they are being taught."(B-02-Deputy Headteacher-F)

Similar concerns were noted among stakeholders of the secondary school, situated at a considerable geographic distance from the primary setting. The governor of the secondary school explicitly expressed apprehension regarding Relationships and Sex Education (RSE), stating:

> “It has become more challenging, definitely, because the curriculum is always changing, and more and more the focus on things like the RSE is making that more of a challenge because not all schools can teach that. Obviously, some schools are following the council guidance and other schools are following through consultation with parents a slightly softer approach, and I think when it comes to the issue of RSE, there is definitely a bit more of a concern amongst Muslim parents around how each school reacts, and because each school is slightly different in how they will approach it, there is definitely a difference in the approach of how they teach the RSE curriculum and to what level they promote those values.” (A-01-Governor-M)

The aforementioned data across both settings indicates a commonality of concern around the context of the national curriculum, despite their geographical distance. This demonstrates the importance for mainstream curriculum designers to not only consider the cultural and religious sensitivities of subjects but also to engage in consultation with parents and stakeholders from diverse minority groups. Such inclusive collaboration is crucial for ensuring that the national curriculum is applicable and accommodating to all pupils. Moreover, it is essential to recognise and clarify that all Islamic private schools are not uniform due to the diverse nature of Islam as a religion. They also cannot be generalised based on the data collected from the two settings. However, several studies, including those by Ahmed (2019) and Halstead (1997), found that Muslim parents express concerns about the context of sex education. While similar concerns may be voiced by parents of other faiths,

private Islamic schools have the autonomy to exercise judgment in the implementation of the national curriculum.

The data revealed a second point of concern, shared not only by Muslim parents but also by Muslim teachers who had previously worked in mainstream schools: cultural heritage. A headteacher raised concerns about the perceived double standards in mainstream schools regarding cultural events and festive times, arguing:

> “In mainstream schools, celebrating Eid as per se, it is only one day allocated, whereas if you are living in a secular country and a state school is supposed to be non-faith-manipulated, then you get two weeks off for Easter and two weeks off for Christmas, so it is very double standard; the Muslim child gets one twenty-four hour in that instance. So, the Muslim pupils’ needs aren’t met per se in mainstream schools.” (B-01-headteacher-F)

Similar to teachers grappling with their moral values in the promotion of specific curriculum contexts, some participants, particularly teachers, expressed concern about the promotion of certain cultural or mainstream values in public schools, as it contradicts their beliefs and moral grounds. For example, a female teacher mentioned the following:

> “The advantages for me as a teacher are that I don't have to worry about the subjects I am teaching potentially conflicting with my faith. If I were working in a mainstream school, during Christmas time, I would be expected to promote Christmas, prepare the children to learn Christmas songs, and participate in performances that might involve statements like 'Jesus is our Lord.' As a teacher, that doesn't align with my beliefs in terms of faith and morals. So, the benefit in a Muslim school is that when I am teaching, I am not concerned about inadvertently going against my beliefs or committing any sins. I don't have to worry about engaging in 'Shirk' (idolatry or polytheism). Especially as a practicing Muslim teacher, I am conscious of these considerations. Obviously, if you are working in

> a mainstream school, conforming to such practices is part of your role." (B-04-Teacher-F)

The above-mentioned quote demonstrates that some aspects of the context and ethos promoted in mainstream schools not only contradict the educational needs of Muslim pupils but can also contradict the moral satisfaction of Muslim teachers. Hence, placing Muslim teachers who work in private Islamic schools in a position of advantage as it not only supports Muslim pupils but also leads to their moral satisfaction. Several studies have highlighted apprehensions about the mainstream curriculum, citing its tendency to endorse the dominant English culture and Europeanism (Elbih, 2012). Moreover, Muslim parents interviewed in this research critiqued mainstream schools for fostering a blend of secular and Christian ethos within the school environment, a stance deemed incongruent with Islamic values. For example, a mother expressed concern as follows:

> "In public schools, our children learn lots of non-Islamic things, which are not helpful for them. We want them to learn Islamic stuff and become good Muslims." (A-26-Parent-F)

This indicates that the parent is worried about the cultural and ideals being promoted in the mainstream school, referring to them as 'non-Islamic things' as they perceive it to be contradictory to their belief system. She suggests that the outcomes of such ideals would be unhelpful for her children, potentially causing issues related to identity and cultural confusion. Moreover, certain studies crystalise the importance of integrating cultural values and sensitivities into the mainstream curriculum to address, acknowledge, and recognise the specific needs of diverse communities and students (Smith, 2012).

The third area of concern voiced by most participants pertains to religious education and the nature of Religious Education (RE) in mainstream schools. This particular concern was underscored in an interview with a headteacher who emphasised the imperative to integrate scholarly achievements by Muslim civilizations into the formal curriculum. She articulated her viewpoint as follows:

> "We are a thematic school. Every week we have themes alongside the secular subjects like book week, math week, and science week, and we bring lots of Islamic values. In science week, we bring out this great scientist of Islam. We inform our children that algebra is not something secular; it is Al-Jabr, by the Khwarizmi, the mathematician. So all these people, like Ibn-Sirin, were the great pioneers that western scientists took on. The Wright brothers took on Ibn Abbas' work on aerodynamics. So things that children should not feel secondary; they should feel proud. It builds on their social identity that, oh my goodness, we are very important. We were the pioneers, but it got lost because it wasn't showcased. So we showcase a lot of Islamic values and who these characteristics were. Characters like Ibn-Sirin or Ibn-Sina were people who were so scholarly." (B-01- Headteacher-F)

This approach not only safeguards the historical contributions of Muslim scholars and civilizations but also cultivates a heightened sense of identity among Muslim pupils, subsequently influencing their confidence, sense of pride and honour as well as their psychosocial stability. It also shows that through selection of particular themes, the school intend to celebrate the scholarly work of Muslim scholars and expand the students' knowledge beyond eurocentric understanding of scientific achievement. Moreover, a study conducted by Hewer (2001), found out that the Muslim people also expressed reservations and challenges regarding various components of the national curriculum, including the instruction of concepts like evolutionary theories, the use of exclusively European languages instead of Arabic, and the Eurocentric perspective applied to teaching history subjects.

In addition, research conducted by Meer (2009) and Douglass and Shaikh (2004) revealed that the portrayal of Islam in mainstream schools does not align with the authentic representation desired by Muslims. Their findings indicate that ethnocentric perspectives held by editors, who tailor their content to appeal to textbook adoption committees, significantly shape the depiction of Islam in mainstream textbooks, deviating from how its followers perceive it. Common

instances of these misrepresentations include portraying Prophet Muhammad as the "founder or inventor" of Islam rather than as a prophet or messenger, and artificially isolating Islam from other monotheistic religions. The below data from the participants in this study, including parents and stakeholders, echoed these concerns, strengthening their arguments for the necessity and demand for Islamic private schools. Consequently, a majority of participants in this study asserted that Islamic schools mitigate the risks and challenges associated with mainstream schooling by providing a balanced curriculum and ethos. While some religious needs of Muslim teachers and students are acknowledged by mainstream schools, they are not consistently fulfilled as required. As an example, the practice of praying five times a day holds considerable significance in defining an individual's Muslim identity. Despite the existence of prayer venues in mainstream schools, if the prayer time conflicts with classroom schedules, Muslim pupils may miss their prayers.

From a comparative perspective, it was observed that there is a greater emphasis on the Islamic Curriculum (IC) than the National Curriculum (NC) at the primary school level. This emphasis is primarily driven by parental expectations. Muslim parents interviewed at the primary school emphasized the importance of fostering religious identity in their children from an early age. For instance, one parent mentioned the following:

> It is very important to teach religion to our children from very early age, so that they do not change or get lost when they grow up." (B-16-Parent-M)

The above quote indicates the importance of an early start of religious education for Muslim pupils. Moreover, it indicates the risk for a late start that the identity formation process of the Muslim pupils might be affected with the secular and western ideals that may led to behavioural changes in their children. In other word the parent associates the risk of late start up with issues around identity crisis and confusion by mentioning the concept of being changed or being lost when they grow up'. These findings and conclusions align with a central critique articulated by Muslim parents and teachers concerning the Eurocentric aspects of mainstream curricula. In a study by Ansari (2002:

22), Muslim parents and teachers argued that the mainstream curricula not only mislead Muslim pupils with Eurocentric epistemological objectives but also have a potentially negative impact, potentially lowering or damaging the self-esteem of Muslim pupils.

Hence, the data suggest that at the primary level, the National Curriculum is acknowledged, however, the primary focus lies on the development and cultivation of the pupils' religious identity. Conversely, at the secondary level, particularly in Key Stage 4, there is a heightened focus on the national curriculum to prepare students for assessments, GCSEs, and transitions to higher educational platforms. A teacher at the secondary school articulated:

> "We have IC and NC curriculum; here we don't only teach an IC curriculum that used to be the case in the past in Islamic schools. Here we also emphasise the national curriculum; for example, if we have exams or mock exams in year 11, and they don't need IC lessons that much, they need NC lessons. So, management is going to change the timetable for that week or on forward so that they will provide them more NC lessons." (A-08-Teacher-F)

These arguments dispel a prevalent misconception about Islamic private schools, challenging the notion that they solely offer Islamic education. Instead, they crystalise the equal importance accorded to the National Curriculum (NC). The participant at both setting contend that the outdated tradition of exclusively teaching the Islamic Curriculum (IC) has evolved, marking the transition of Islamic private schools from the conventional South Asian madrasa system to a more professionally oriented educational environment. This shift not only highlights the school's commitment to preparing students for higher education but also emphasizes the significance of the NC in facilitating the transition to non-Islamic educational frameworks. For instance, the headteacher of the school mentioned their adaptation to change in order to meet the educational demands of their pupils by arguing:

> "I think Islamic schools are stereotyped in the broader society. They're sometimes seen as similar to madrasas, but that's not true.

> We really focus on important values like respect, tolerance, and democracy, just like other schools do. We're always trying to get better and change things to help our students. Three years ago, we realized we were only teaching knowledge and not paying enough attention to the spiritual side. So, we started making sure students really understand and connect with the spiritual parts of each lesson and activity." (A-01-Governor-M)

In summary, the challenges and concerns raised by participants in both settings articulate that Muslim needs are not adequately addressed in mainstream schools, encompassing not only curriculum aspects but also institutional and cultural dimensions. This underscores the imperative for the establishment of Islamic private schools, reiterating their core aim and objective: providing a well-rounded curriculum that encompasses both the National Curriculum and the Islamic Curriculum. This holistic approach aims to nurture Muslim children academically and religiously. Subsequent sections will explore the dynamics of Holistic education and spiritual development, elucidating how Islamic private schools endeavour to provide a holistic education, why it's vital and how that holistic education shape the spiritual development of the Muslim pupils.

5.3 Holistic education

There was a common believe among all participants in this study that all knowledge is divinely revealed by God. This includes even the natural sciences, which are perceived to be connected to revealed knowledge. Hence, participants including teachers and parents were referring to the ability of the Islamic private schools in terms of providing a holistic education. For them any education which is not inclusive of the idea that all knowledge is revealed by God is potentially not holistic. For instance, a teacher argued as follows:

> “In an Islamic school, we look in the Islamic school ‘s curriculum holistically so we want to build our student holistically, we don’t wanna give them only a secular education, but we wanna give holistic knowledge, holistic education”. (B-04-Teacher-F).

The above quote expresses the need for a holistic education where students develop not only academically, but also it aims to develop them emotionally, physically, and spiritually. In a way it resonates with the fundamental aim of the Islamic education which is the development of individuals mind, soul and body. Moreover, by mentioning ‘we do not give them only a secular education’, she is referring to the mainstream education where she find it un-holistic and free from any religious influence. An aim for holistic education also stemmed by the Muslim parents where they strongly believe that all knowledge is revealed by god and its important for their children to develop holistically from all mentioned aspects. A parent argued that..

> “Islam teaches us how to live our lives well. When we understand Islam and the Quran, then we have no problems. Everything goes back to Quran, even science. That's why I want my kids to learn the Quran and Islamic education” (A-24-Parent-M)

This argument introduces three pivotal points. Firstly, the majority of Muslims contend that the Quran, being the revelation of God, serves as a comprehensive code of conduct for humanity. Secondly, the assertion is made that all knowledge originates from revelation and is encompassed within the religion. Lastly, it crystallises the necessity of providing Islamic education for Muslim children for their holistic development. Most of the Muslim parents interviewed for this study, like any other parents, seek a high-quality education for their children. Through observations, I noticed that the balance between secular and religious education is influenced by their individual levels of spirituality, traditionalism, and conservatism. Hence, it was revealed that younger, second-generation parents prioritise achieving a balance between secular and religious education. Conversely, first-generation and older parents emphasize the importance of Islamic holistic education over secular education. This distinction is exemplified by a male parent who argued:

> “Islamic curriculum is obviously very important for Muslims, and you know, as a Muslim parent, my belief is that Islamic knowledge is more important than secular knowledge because Islamic knowledge is not just dealing with the life of this world; it's dealing with the hereafter as well, and we believe obviously as Muslims that it's your salvation in the next life, right?” (A-11-Parent-F).

Through class observations, I noticed that the teachers in Islamic education classes, were emphasising on student’s understanding of the belief in life after death. For example, I noted the below in my observation diary:

> “Teacher further more explain the other verses of declaration of faith, which is the believe in the prophet Mohamad as the last messenger and the day of judgement and the live after death.” (B-21-Obsv-05).

Hence, for participants of this study across the both schools setting, understanding and believing in declaration of faith and life after death is associated to holistic education where their spirituality and faith is developed through. Consequently, numerous participants including parents and stakeholders contend that mainstream secular education adequately prepares students for life in this world (Dunya), whereas Islamic education uniquely equips individuals for both life in this world and the afterlife (Akhirah). This specific focus underscores the particular emphasis placed on the provision of Islamic holistic education for Muslim children.

Even, in a focused group discussion, junior pupils from grade three and four were emphasising on the significance of a holistic education. For instance, a year four female pupil mentioned as follows: “Islamic education is very good for us it makes as very good people” (B-09-FGD-Mixed-pupil).

Additionally, the outcome of holistic education also overlapped with arguments by the participants in terms of producing a good Muslim, a theme discussed in detail in Chapter 4.5. It was observed through a class observation on the school (B) that the teacher associated good Muslim with Good human being, good

citizen, as well as good family and community member (B-34-Obsv-18). From a comparative point of view, there was a commonality of potential correlation between the views of participants across both setting in relation to their interpretation of good Muslimness and its association with good citizen. Consequently, the resulting holistic identity of individuals educated within such a holistic educational system can significantly impact their relationships across various societal levels—be it in schools, homes, communities, or broader society.

In summary, as highlighted in the preceding section, the challenge within the mainstream British curriculum prompts Muslim parents and relevant stakeholders to advocate for a holistic educational approach. This approach aims not only to foster academic excellence but also to stabilise the mental, spiritual, and identity development processes of students. The British national curriculum has faced considerable scrutiny and critique for its narrow emphasis on academic components and exam preparation at the expense of holistic development. Studies indicate that both students and teachers feel pressured to meet assessment criteria, raising concerns about the curriculum's efficacy in nurturing well-rounded individuals (Nuttall & Goldstein, 2017; Black & William, 2009).

This critique reinforces the argument for the provision of the Islamic Curriculum (IC), which asserts its capacity to develop individuals across various dimensions. Consequently, the data suggests that the provision and access to holistic education are deemed crucial not only for Muslim pupils and parents but also for filling the gaps left by the national curriculum. However, Islam, or the concept of Deen (religion), is conceptualised as a way of life. Therefore, Islamic holistic education not only addresses gaps but also aims to cultivate holistic individuals who integrate religious principles into their daily lives. The subsequent part explores more in detail the spiritual and personality development of the pupils, a theme emerged out of the data.

5.4 The development of Islamic personality and spirituality

Data drown across the both settings present a case for the significance of the concept of personality and spirituality in Islamic schools. It was quite alarming how the Senior staff across both school settings critiqued and argued that there is a lack of spiritual development within the context of the mainstream schools. As presented below, both senior officials across two distanced and separate academic entities crystallised the importance of spiritual development as part of a holistic development of the individuals. That is why the governor of the School (A) argued as follows:

> "In the current state school system, they don't actually have a space for spirituality and morality, even if they have a PSHE (personal, social, health and economic) curriculum, it's very much geared towards healthy eating, tackling the current issues, and SRE (Sex and relationship education) rather than spiritual and moral character building." (A-01-Governor-M)

Moreover, the Headteacher of the School (B), was having a similar opinion about the lack of spirituality within the context of the mainstream school and argued for the significance of spiritual development through Islamic private schools by saying as follows:

> "You see mainstream catholic schools have lost down on spirituality side. Because you know there is a push on the academia. It is a race against who does well statistic, data and all of that, and head teachers and leaders are quiet. Our fundamental aim is to ensure that alongside academic education, they develop spiritually, they develop a sense of awareness, humanity, feelings, emotions, that those strengths are given so that they are building those kinds of holistic skills and know." (B-01-Headteacher-F)

Through class and prayer venues observations, it was obvious that spiritual and moral development was a vital aspect of the school aims and objectives. Their Islamic curriculum on both schools had specific modules for spiritual and moral

development. More specifically, teachings of Islamic educations were often linked to aspects of moral and spiritual development. In one of the class observation, I noted that ‘the teacher was teaching pupils specific duas (prayers) for success in exams, interviews, learning and other difficult tasks’ (B-21-Obsev-05), and hence the teacher was associating those particular prayers to spiritual and moral wellbeing and development.

Hence, the collected data and the emphasise of the participants for crystallising the importance of spiritual and moral education across both settings are aligned with the finding of numerous studies that underscore the significance of fostering spirituality in children and adolescents (Hart, 2003; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). John Bradford (1995) specifically contends that nurturing and affirming spirituality across all aspects of children's and adolescents' lives is essential for a full quality of life.

Consequently, spiritual and moral development permeate the everyday lives of students in the researched Islamic private schools. They are not only conveyed through the Islamic curriculum and the Islamisation of other forms of curricula but also through informal avenues like communication, storytelling, role modelling, and the acts of praying and worshiping within the school setting. The trajectory of Islamic personality development aligns with spirituality, ultimately contributing to the cultivation of a virtuous personality. In Islam, the emphasis is on establishing deep roots and connections between the individual and the divine. Thus, directing attention to the 'self' or individual self is seen as a pathway to enhancing and bettering the broader society (Al-Attas, 1978).

More specifically, derived from the data obtained from both school settings, there has been a notable emphasis on the principles of Adab, mannerism, and spiritualism. Interestingly, there was a convergence of opinions among stakeholders regarding secular, or more specifically mainstream education, citing its limitations in addressing personality development, mental well-being, and spiritual education associated with pupils' sense of identity, well-being, and happiness. For example, a headteacher strongly criticised mainstream education based on her own experience of attending a mainstream school, expressing:

> "The Western way of live though me to be selfish, thought me that its about me, myself and I. Get rich, die trying. This is what the western ideas promote. You know, it is all about you. Live your live to the max. Don't think of someone else. You are number. You see, even if you get there, the richest person, they are still not happy. People on the top list, they are committing suicide, Why? Because their soul is empty. They have got the money, what do they do with it? They have got palace, but that palace doesn't become a home. Whereas Islam teaches you when you give, or when you follow the Quran in its entirety properly, you feel contained. The art of contentment is there. Whether you are rich, or whether you are poor, that is applied. You feel happy because your relationship is far more-greater than your materialistic needs." (B-01-Headteacher-F)

Therefore, this argument is foundational in shaping the curriculum, values and ethos of the school to develop and nurture a well-rounded pupil who can excel both academically and spiritually in life. Similar affirmations were articulated by the governor of the secondary school, highlighting the similarities in their thought processes and emphasizing the importance of mannerism, spiritualism, and personality development. This solidifies the significance of Islamic private schools and underscores the fundamental differences in comparison to the mainstream schooling system. As a result, the governor of the School (A) argued as follows:

> "The focus on Tarbiyah which is upbringing; the focus on morality that's very unique; the way we can incorporate all the lessons back to the scriptures, back to the Quran which is a source of all wisdom for us all knowledge is where the real difference is. Our spiritual side, the moral side that trying to connect each student with their conscience and it's not just about information overload, it's about the application of the information or the knowledge that we're imparting and how it looks and affects their daily life". (A-01-Governor-M)

Therefore the above data, suggests that Islamic schools align with the demands and expectations of Muslim parents provide a holistic education by creating an

Islamic environment that instil, nurture, and promote values and ethos that stabilize the identity, personality, and spirituality of their pupils. Conversely, the deficiency or inadequacy of pedagogical endeavours aimed at spirituality and personality development constitutes a notable concern within the context of Western educational paradigms. Lickona (1991) not only elucidates the critical significance of spirituality and personality education but also underscores the integration of values and virtues, encompassing attributes such as honesty, compassion, respect, fairness, among others. Furthermore, his theoretical framework transcends the exclusive concentration on academic achievement and skills enhancement, emphasizing the pivotal role that schools assume in moulding the identity and personality of students.

Through the interviews and more specifically through the classrooms and prayer venue's observation, it was found out that the intertwining of spirituality and mental health was fostered through practices that cultivate trust in a superior/divine power (God), provide meaning to life, enhance gratitude and appreciation, and establish a balance between contentment and mental tranquillity through the power of Duas or prayers. Multiple participants asserted that the Islamic environment and ethos significantly influence their sense of self, identity and community as well as their mental health. For instance, a student articulated the following:

> "Being in an Islamic setting really shapes who we are and how we feel. It's not just about learning, it's about feeling like we belong and feeling good inside. Like one of my teachers said, being here helps us understand ourselves better and makes us feel happy and connected" (A-20-Student-F)

Similar to the aforementioned argument, several other teachers and stakeholders associate with the ethos and the values, particularly the ability to work and study in an Islamic setting where there is a collective sense of identity, the opportunity to pray, engage in religious recitals, and participate in festivities such as Ramadan (Fasting) and Eid celebrations. This connection is perceived to contribute significantly to their moral satisfaction, personality, and mental well-being. Overall, the above data suggests that the participants particularly

the teachers feel more comfortable and at ease being in an Islamic context, that ultimately increase their sense of identity and community.

In summary, aligning with previous studies like Bradford (1995) and Roehlkepartain et al. (2006), which highlight the positive impact of spirituality on the morality, behaviour, and personality of children, this research reveals that Islamic private schools nurture and develop a strong sense of spirituality and personality through a holistic approach encompassing Islamic ethos, etiquette, and recitals. The ultimate outcome of such development shapes Muslim pupils to possess a strong sense of identity, along with competency, confidence, stability, and connectedness, influencing their behavioural, moral, and spiritual aspects (Lerner et al., 2006: 70-71). However, the goal of Islamic private schools to foster a religious, spiritual, and academic individual does not occur in isolation; it is deeply rooted in the values and merits not only expected by Muslim parents but also strongly encouraged within their households. Moreover, the researched Islamic private schools intended to increase such spirituality, morality and meaning through Islamising their National curriculum. Therefore, in the following section, I unpack and analyse the concept of Islamisation of knowledge and explore how Islamic private schools intend to address this aspect.

5.5 Islamisation of contemporary knowledge: an Islamic perspective

Data drawn from both settings suggests that there is an intentional process of islamisation of knowledge. By Islamisation I mean the process through which all the aspects of national curriculum, academic topics and discourses are linked back to Islam. This was observed through class observations as well as found out through the semi structured interviews with the participants across both settings. For example, a teacher clearly associated her school's objective with islamisation of knowledge by arguing the followings:

> "I think our students needs are met very well here, because we Islamacize all topics. We definitely do I know for a fact because when

> we have our staff trainings, the deputy teacher, head teacher and the school leaders, they emphasise on these things a lot to Islamacize the whole curriculum and put Islamic links, not just in Islamic studies, by all the topics. I've seen with my own eyes, how teachers implement the Islamic links by bringing links of Islam in all topics." (B-03-Teacher-M)

It was also observed through classroom observations that I attended that there was a clear intention of Islamisation of knowledge even in national curriculum classes. For example, in one of the class observations the teacher was talking about the role of sun or light in the development of a plant. Hence, she was adding religious or Islamic view points about plants development and how Allah created plants from a seed. She therefore concluded by saying; "it's an Islamic school, we need to incorporate Islamic values through even English and science classes." (B-10-Obsv-03).

As a result, this study reveals a clear indication in both school settings to Islamize the mainstream curriculum through diverse formal and informal means. Observations and other data from the interviews demonstrated that there was an intentional process of Islamisation of knowledge in both settings, however it was more obvious in the primary level as discussed by the teachers and stakeholders and noticed through class observation. The primary reason for this emphasis is that Muslim pupils at an early age are required to become acquainted with the Islamic value system, primarily for the purposes of cultural, ethnic, and religious rejuvenation. Additionally, there is a lack of uniformity from a pedagogical standpoint in both settings. While the two settings were not directly comparable due to their educational levels (primary versus secondary), the absence of a uniform approach to the Islamisation of knowledge was evident. This reinforces a mainstream criticism and challenge that the theory of Islamisation of knowledge faces due to the various interpretations and diversifications within Islamic schools of thought (Al-Faruqi, 1982). Moreover, the process of islamisation was even extended to mainstream scientific curricula, discussed in the subsequent sections.

5.5.1 The Islamisation of scientific curricula

From a pedagogical standpoint, Islamic private schools aim to Islamize knowledge through the implementation of various approaches. Firstly, they may eliminate content that they consider unnecessary and incompatible with Islamic principles and values, as discussed in detail in part 5.1 of this chapter. Secondly, they can present contemporary knowledge by incorporating an Islamic perspective alongside its modern viewpoint. Thirdly, they have the option to replace contemporary knowledge with an Islamic perspective altogether. Consequently, the privatisation of schools grants stakeholders the freedom to design, add, remove, or alter their curricular activities. It was evident that these stakeholders highly value this autonomy and are unwilling to compromise it, even at the potential expense of receiving state funding. As articulated by one head teacher, "We are not really fan of state funding because with money comes control". (B-01-Headteacher-F) When asked to elaborate on the notion of control, she emphasised, "the freedom to Islamize the national curriculum" (ibid). The process of Islamisation extends to various fields of knowledge such as science, math, history, and English. This freedom of choice was also acknowledged and emphasized by a deputy head teacher who stated:

> “The fact that we can manipulate the curriculum, and we have got the choice of what we want to keep and what we don’t want to teach and the values that we want to add to the curriculum, is not restrictive. So all these ideas that we have or the Islamic values or the Islamic links that we make, we can freely make those. Because we are allowed to do that and why not. If we think it can enrich the curriculum, we would do that so that our children can get the best of both worlds. Some of the things that we teach here, you will never get to hear them in the state schools, in the mainstream schools. I have been a mainstream schoolteacher, so I know. The curriculum there is very strict, and its exactly what you need to teach. But here, we can look at that, and say we can teach that, but we can add this viewpoint to it. So that the children get a far better and deeper

> understanding of what they are being thought." (B-02-deputy headteacher-F)

Furthermore, the headteacher at the primary setting explicitly emphasised the centrality of the primary sources of knowledge, namely the revealed text, which is the Quran, and advocated for adjusting the curriculum accordingly. She articulated her perspective as follows:

> "If we look at the empirical evidence that is from the Quran, Science is there as it is. We can stretch our children to however much we want, or however less, or whatever medium we feel is best fit to the child. There is no pressure as such to the child that you have to do this or that or knowledge ends at the certain age range." (B-01-Headteacher-F)

In general, there is an oral integration of Islamic thoughts, values, principles, and philosophy while delivering the mainstream curriculum. The incorporation of Islamic knowledge into mainstream knowledge was not only mentioned by the participants but was also observed during class observations. For instance, during a math class, a teacher connected addition and subtraction to the concept of daily rewards. The teacher illustrated the example of good deeds versus bad deeds, explaining that if a person performs 5 good deeds and 2 bad deeds in a day, they will be left with a certain number of good deeds. The lesson emphasised the importance of minimizing bad deeds and maximizing good deeds, as Allah calculates deeds on a daily basis. This episode was documented during an observation session (B-21-Obsrv-05).

The recognition for the Islamisation of knowledge and the incorporation of Islamic value systems is acknowledged by all stakeholders at both settings. Interestingly, similar sentiments were expressed by participants in the secondary Islamic schools, particularly at the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) level. The governor of the secondary level school highlighted a comparable approach of linking Islam to the national curriculum topics, stating:

> “Obviously even with the national curriculum, it's closely tied into our Islamic ethos and part of the new framework is linking it to cultural capital and with that includes the fact that all of our students are Muslims. So we do all of our national curriculum lessons, we do try to link it back to not only our community but also our religion. Even science a lot of it is linked back to Hayas (verses) of the Quran and Hadith (saying & actions of prophet Mohammad) So wherever possible which is most areas because all knowledge is from Allah we do find ways to link it back. So that’s how we make the national curriculum relevant and link back to the religion and integrate religion as part of cultural capital.” (A-01-Governors-M)

The aforementioned argument not only reaffirms the necessity for the Islamisation of knowledge but also advocates for the centrality of knowledge derived from the Quran and Sunnah in Islamic principles. Furthermore, the participant not only connects the Islamisation of knowledge to the community but also to the broader concept of religion and cultural capital. For them, cultural capital encompasses not only issues related to the provision of quality education but also the preservation of values associated with identity, culture, and ethnicity. While the Islamisation of knowledge is crucial for cultural and religious rejuvenation, it also contributes to the process of identity formation and stabilisation.

Additionally, there are political incentives for the participant to discuss and expand on the concept of 'cultural capital' as an outcome of Islamisation of knowledge, given that Ofsted included the term 'cultural capital' in their inspection handbook in 2019. Hence, linking the Islamisation of knowledge to the concept of cultural capital serves as a favourable aspect during Ofsted inspections.

Overall, there is an ongoing process of Islamisation of knowledge applied to nearly all forms of curriculum, both formal and informal, within private Islamic schools. From basic principles at the primary level to advanced scientific lessons at the secondary level, teachers feel a duty to incorporate Islamic perspectives in every feasible manner into the subjects they teach. One

approach is to identify similarities, correlations, or even contradictions between scientific concepts and the revealed text, as expressed by the teacher in the following quote:

> "We Islamify the sector, for example, the sun, ok? If you are taking the sun, that is a science subject, because of the description of the sun, the distance, blah, blah, blah. But at the same time, the sun is mentioned in the Quran. So that is to Islamify it, like what does the Quran and Allah telling us about the sun? And the discoveries made in the Quran were made prior to the discoveries that the scientists made. So we give our analogies and we give our comparisons to the students so they can then think that what is the right thing and they make up their decisions then." (A-03-SLT/Safeguarding Officer-F)

The commitment to this duty of care was evident in both school settings. The process of Islamisation doesn't solely take place through its integration into mainstream schools; it is also actively contemplated in all aspects of the informal curriculum within both school settings. Furthermore, in both settings, the schools aimed to integrate Islamic values and Islamize other discourses and values promoted through their informal curriculum, which will be further explored in the subsequent sections.

5.5.2 The Islamisation of value systems and promotion of Islamic ethos

The data collected from the two Islamic schools reports that both schools not only promote the Islamic values, but also intend to islamize the mainstream value systems and correlate it to Islam as discussed below. There is a deliberate process of Islamizing values, even incorporating aspects of British fundamental values. Several participants in this research referenced 'British fundamental values' that they identified as having Islamic roots and affiliations. For example, a female teacher argued that:

> “When you look at the British fundamental values, its Islam, respect, law. Our children they are part of this society, so we want them to be the best human beings, when they are adult. It is never us and them, we are part of this. I think they should embrace it. I think the Muslim community in Britain is doing very well. So, why not. We are part of the British society; we are not separate” (B-04-Teacher-F).

Furthermore, a head teacher aligns the entire school curriculum and British fundamental values with Islam, expressing the following viewpoint:

> “The whole curriculum is integrated with the foundation that god exists, with the values that Islam has brought in of tolerance, of respect, and all those grounding that are supposed to be there in the state sector for example the Fundamental British values and all that, are there form the beginning in an Islamic school” (B-01-Headteacher-F).

Interestingly, drawing parallels between British fundamental values and Islamic values was a shared perspective not only within both school environments but also among the parents. Evidently, the majority of Senior Leadership Team (SLT) members in both school settings, as well as parents from both schools, acknowledge the convergence between 'British' and 'Islamic' values. For instance, the Governor at the secondary girls-only school stated:

> “we've always believed that our religion is compatible with everything because there's no hardship in it. And I believe the core British values are the same as Islamic values. There is no difference. You know all good education is trying to create aspiring motivational good human beings. Human beings that do know the right and wrong between respect and appreciate difference of opinion and understand how to have good mutual relation, good communication so I think the core values always overlap between Islam and British values” (A-01-Governor-M).

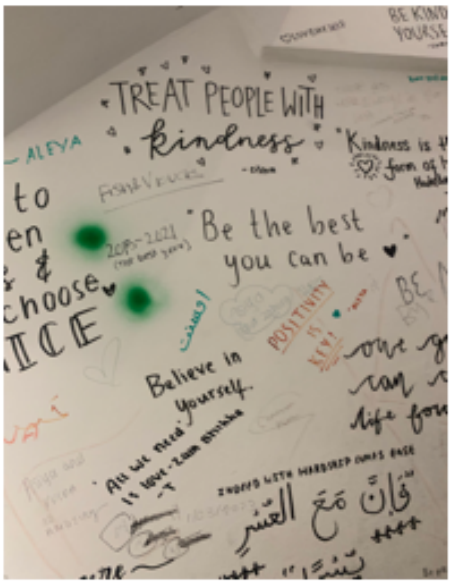
Criticism from several participants suggests that the vernacular construction of 'British values' results in essentialist 'binary pairings' (Marsden, et al., 2023: 229-230). Some argue that the mainstream school and broader society promote 'British fundamental values' as progressive, liberal, secular, and modern, while simultaneously portraying Islam as traditional, conservative, pious, and outdated (ibid). As a response, participants and stakeholders drew connections between concepts of British fundamental values and their affiliations with Islamic values and ethos.

The vernacular discourse surrounding British values is seen as contradictory, leading to epistemological faults. Claiming values like 'the rule of law' or democracy as exclusively 'British' severs ties with their origins, which trace back to ancient Greek political philosophy. Moreover, the notion of 'individual liberty' contradicts and overlooks the history of British imperialism, colonialism, especially the era of slavery and the slave trade. Sociologically, it is argued that we cannot divorce a value system from its historical heritage and origins. Warsi (2017:44) succinctly summarizes this argument, stating:

> “The British Values debate has two major flaws. Firstly, there is a suggestion that the list of values is exceptionally and exclusively British, and secondly, our history does not always support an adherence to these values”.

Therefore, the extension and promotion of values labelled as 'British' within the mainstream educational system not only generate binaries but also widen the gap between Islam and Islamic values and those termed as British values by "positioning radical Islam as a threat to liberal democracy" (Revell & Bryan, 2018: 8). This positioning has implications for the identity politics of Muslims, impacting issues related to integration, citizenship, and tolerance, ultimately contributing to the further marginalisation and 'othering' of Muslim communities. Consequently, there is an intentional process of Islamizing these value systems within Islamic schools, not only connecting them to Islamic civilization but also fostering the stabilisation of identity, pride, and confidence among Muslim pupils.

The school environment also reinforces these values through signage, banners, and Quranic verses displayed throughout the school premises, as depicted in the images below:



A- Corridor observation (wall of kindness)

B- Corridor observation (ethos board)

There are numerous similarities in the values promoted by both schools, evident not only in the curriculum and educational materials but also in the cultivation of these values among their students. Consequently, these shared values contribute significantly to shaping the personality and identity of the pupils. The subsequent part explores the dynamics and continuity of home verses school values across both settings.

5.6 The continuity of home versus school values and parental choices

It was evident in the data from both settings and interviews conducted with parents from both settings that there is a continuity between home verses school values. The values that are promoted in the school are an extension of the values promoted in the pupil's household.

Like any other parents, Muslim parents interviewed for this study aspire to provide their children with a quality education, viewing it as a crucial factor for the advancement of Muslim communities (Parker-Jenkins, 2002: 287). However, the preservation of religious, cultural, and ethnic values and the continuity of these values between the home and school environments are of utmost importance. This significance was evident through observations and interviews with teachers, stakeholders, and parents in both settings. The primary distinction lay in the intergenerational gaps, reflecting differences in parents' experiences and concerns.

In the case of School 'A,' which primarily consisted of first-generation parents, there was a pronounced sense of worry and anxiety about the mainstream schools as well as the broader societal issues. These parents expressed concerns about safeguarding their children from issues such as premarital sex, drug abuse, racism, bullying, and Islamophobia that may be prevalent in mainstream schools. Consequently, they opted for Islamic private schools to preserve their religious, cultural, and ethnic values and ethos. The school aimed to provide the desired sense of security for these parents through its informal curriculum and ethos, leading to the continuity of the values across the home verses school. For instance, a teacher highlighted the expectations of parents in the following manner:

> “Based on my experience on state school, when we used to call their parents either they won't care that much, or they were on benefits or drunk, but here it's completely different. Every parent is really worried about their daughters. They teach them how to respect their teacher. And that makes really a big difference to me. It gives me more peace of mind and affects my mental health”. (A-08-Teacher-F)

Conversely, parents associated with School 'B' primarily represented second-generation Muslims. Their perspective on Islamic schools was shaped by their own experiences attending mainstream schools during their childhood. Parents and a few teachers in School 'B' discussed how their encounters and work in mainstream schools influenced their understanding of the challenges faced by

Muslim pupils. Consequently, based on their experiences and the lessons they learned, they advocated for Islamic private schools, primarily to prevent identity confusion and to preserve the alignment of home and school values, which plays a crucial role in various aspects of a child's psychological development. One parent shared her personal struggle with identity crisis during her childhood while attending a state school, expressing the following sentiments:

> "I was a rebel when I was in state school. I was a rebel and I made my mom and dad's live a nightmare. So, I don't want the same for my children. I went through a wrong path at that time when I was younger. Purely, because I believe I didn't have that guidance. Islam wasn't there, we weren't thought about Islam. Yes, we went to Madrasah, but we learned the basic how to recite the Quran and that was it. We didn't understand it, we didn't understand the speech of Allah, what Allah was telling us and how we should live our lives. So, what I felt and experienced as a student, I don't want my children to experience that. Alhamdulillah, Allah has guided me and obviously, I want the best for my children and I want them to stay in the right path and they don't stray from the path. I want the best for them. I want to be successful academically as well as Islamically." (B-10-Parent-F)

The perspectives of not just parents and teachers but also curriculum designers and headteachers were significantly influenced by their personal experiences and encounters as Muslim migrants in the broader society and as Muslim pupils in mainstream schools. In light of these experiences, one headteacher articulated her views as follows:

> "I designed the entire curriculum. And that is because I didn't come from a very religious background. Yes, we knew we are Muslim, but I went through a lot in live that I questioned my own identity. Because, you going to a state school, you have an identity crisis. Because one I was Asian, so I never fitted in. You always see the Western way of live portrayed in media and you are trying to immolate that. Number two, growing up as a Muslim was not the right

> thing in the 80s and then 90s and then you see the 9/11 and all that. and then you somehow think, Gosh, you don't wanna be this align that the community is portraying and you trying to scream out it is not. So, I started studying it, oh God, this is a complete different set of ideas. Not just idea, it's a must. The world would be a happier place if they actually follow Islam." (B-01-Headteacher-F)

In making decisions about school choices, parents are influenced by various factors, while teachers' perceptions are shaped by their experiences in the broader society and their own memories of childhood education. The decisions made by stakeholders and curriculum designers regarding both formal and informal curriculum components are not only rooted in their experiences and perceptions of mainstream schools but also aim to align with the intentions and values of parents. Consequently, this promotes a specific set of ethos, etiquette, and values that play a crucial role in stabilising the identity formation process of the pupils. Furthermore, it serves the purpose of bridging the gap between home and school values, not only in the immediate context but also contributing to the broader community by preserving values, maintaining group identities, and fostering a sense of community for future generations.

The gathered data suggests that the academic and religious needs of the Muslim pupils not only acknowledged by stakeholders but are predominantly influenced by parental desires and expectations. Various factors contribute to parental choices for Islamic private schools. These factors encompass identity formation, cultural preservation, the promotion of Islamic values, and fostering a sense of belonging. Additionally, as discussed in chapter four, issues like discrimination, racism, Islamophobia, and the marginalization of Muslim students in mainstream schools and society may further drive the demand for Islamic private schools as a preferred educational choice for their children. Research by Nyman (2005:151) indicates that about half of Muslim parents prefer Islamic schooling for their children, yet only a minority of Muslim students attend Islamic state or private schools in the UK. The lack of state funding for Islamic schools and affordability concerns contribute to the limited enrolment of Muslim students in such institutions. Moreover, studies suggest that Muslim

children often encounter discrimination and racism within mainstream British schools (Coles, 2004; Ahmad, 2002). Short (2002) argues that faith schools, including Islamic schools, may shield pupils from both individual and institutional racism, and increase continuity of home vs school values that potentially enhancing their educational success an stabilise their identity formation.

These challenges not only marginalize Muslim students but also influence the schooling choices made by their parents. Mainstream schools tend to promote either the dominant culture, often associated with Eurocentric Western ideals, or a specific form of secularism, which can be aggressive. In both cases, pupils from minority groups and migrant backgrounds face significant challenges presented by the prevailing school culture (Koh, et al., 2020). This underscores the disparity and lack of consistency between mainstream school values and the values and ethos upheld at home by Muslim parents.

Overall, the researched Islamic private schools demonstrated to play a crucial role in bridging this gap and ensuring continuity between home and school values. Based on the data, both schools actively work to facilitate this continuity through their informal curriculum. This not only assists Muslim parents in instilling morals, ethics, and religious values in their children but also contributes to the identity formation of students by fostering a robust family-school partnership. For instance, practicing Muslim parents feel a religious and moral obligation to encourage their children to perform daily prayers at specific times. While in school, teachers and peers collaborate to support and motivate each other in conducting prayers, emphasising teamwork and positive peer influence. Overall, the continuity of home and school values is not predominantly based on religious aspects of identity but also cultural. Hence, it leads to the construction of another theme as below.

5.7 Cultural identity for cultural preservation:

Analysis of the gathered data reveals a notable interchangeability of terms such as Islam, religion, and culture among the participants, suggesting a direct overlap between these concepts. This indicates that, for parents as well, the educational focus extends beyond religious instruction and the cultivation of religious identity in their children. Instead, it encompasses the production and preservation of cultural identity, nurturing values that intertwine with their ethnic and religious identities. One parent expressed this perspective by stating, "Islamic education also helps Muslim Ummah to pass their cultures and values to their children" (B-14-Parent-M). This aligns with Hall's (1990) forward-looking conceptualization of cultural identity, prompting questions about the extent and direction in which cultural values should endure.

The researched Islamic private schools not only impart a specific form of cultural identity to their students through formal and informal curricula but also actively strive to preserve these cultural identities by actively managing the school environment, identity, and reputation. This proactive approach aims to counteract external forces that may negatively impact the identity or identity-related aspects of Muslims, such as Islamophobia, racism, and marginalization. As one parent argued:

> “The school save our children and our culture. The teachers are like family. If we don’t keep our tradition and background, our children will be confused, and face problems in the western society they live”. (B-14-Parent-M)

Even the junior pupils expressed their view about their culture in a focused group discussion. A year 5 male student expressed his view about his school as follows:

> “It is good as most of the people have the same culture and it brings everyone together so that no-one is odd for us. Since we all Muslim, we get to do the same things like fasting only on year 5 and 6, and

then we pray, and then we study the same things in our Islamic studies." (B-08-FGD-Mixed-pupil)

Hence, as per the aforementioned assertion, schools fulfil a dual role in shaping cultural identity—they not only generate a specific form of cultural identity but also serve as its preservers, transmitting it to subsequent generations. Moreover, these dynamic highlights a pattern of continuity between the cultural practices observed by Muslim parents within the home environment and those within the school setting. This continuity is not solely rooted in tradition but is intricately linked to their ethnicity, a factor of paramount importance in the process of identity formation and stabilisation. Additionally, the argument underscores the repercussions of the failure to produce and safeguard cultural identity, as this deficiency may lead to challenges, problems, and a sense of confusion among Muslim students navigating the broader Western society in which they reside. In both educational environments, an ongoing process was observed whereby a distinct set of values and ethos, acting as fundamental markers of identity, is systematically generated, safeguarded, and communicated through the formal, and informal curriculum.

Cultural identity serves as a foundational element for religious identity, encompassing shared historical narratives, values, language, ancestry, customs, and traditions. Analysis of the gathered data indicates that Islamic private schools actively shape their students' personality by emphasising the understanding, absorption, and preservation of a specific cultural identity associated with their religion (Islam) and ethnicity. This study categorises the preservation of cultural identity through the informal curriculum, reflecting intentional efforts by the schools to instil particular behaviours.

Firstly, these efforts are integral to fostering a holistic or group identity among pupils, emphasising their roles as Muslims, minorities, members of the diaspora, and individuals of South Asian descent, particularly Bangladeshi and Pakistani. Secondly, it is crucial for these schools to impart knowledge about cultural values, their origins, and additional dimensions to their students. Thirdly, this educational process not only nurtures a specific cultural identity but

also strives to promote and perpetuate it across future generations, aligning with parents' aspirations.

Referring to Hall's argument, it becomes apparent that an ongoing process of cultural identity production exists, consistently shaped from within representation rather than external factors (Hall, 1990: 222). Hall's conceptualisation holds significance in this study for multiple reasons. Beyond defining 'cultural identity' in terms of shared history and ancestry, Hall connects the concept to a forward-looking perspective, considering who one aspires to become alongside understanding one's current self. This inclusive approach acknowledges the dynamic nature of diasporic and minority identities, susceptible to rapid transformations influenced by historical and contemporary events. For example, the cultural identity of Muslims, closely intertwined with their religious identity, has undergone significant changes since the events of 9/11. Consequently, the preservation and manifestation of this identity constitute an informal curriculum within Islamic private schools. This aspect of their informal curriculum is not characterised by short-term objectives but rather serves as a foundation for producing, maintaining, and preserving a specific overlapping form of cultural identity among both pupils and staff. This aspect is crucial, distinguishing the identity of Islamic schools from mainstream educational institutions.

Studies indicate that Muslim students often encounter difficulties in maintaining a balanced cultural identity and assimilating into mainstream schools, negatively affecting their self-esteem (Brown & Green, 2020). These challenges are not isolated incidents; rather, they are primarily rooted in the absence of culturally sensitive curricula, presenting significant obstacles to their identity, self-esteem, and identity formation (Meer, 2015). These challenges highlight systemic barriers within the broader educational policy framework. The issue extends beyond the lack of culturally sensitive teaching materials to encompass a deficiency in cultural competence training for educators (Smith & Brown, 2022), underscoring the pivotal role of cultural competence in the identity formation and stabilisation of diasporic and minoritised students.

5.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, a comprehensive analysis of Islamic schools was undertaken, with a focus on curriculum within the context of two private Islamic schools—one at the mixed primary level and the other at the secondary single-sex level. Various interconnected aspects of the curriculum were unpacked, explored, and discussed based on data collected from participant interviews, documentary analysis, and observations in classrooms and other venues. Through the discussion of each theme, I have explained the similarities and differences across both school settings.

The initial section of the chapter explored into the formal aspect of the curriculum, where Islamic schools deliver both the mandatory National Curriculum (NC) and their independently designed Islamic Curriculum (IC). It began by addressing the challenges faced by Muslim pupils in mainstream schools, categorising them into institutional, cultural, and religious dimensions. Through this exploration, and the process of spiritual and personality development of the Muslim pupils, the chapter elucidated the gaps created by these challenges and analysed how Islamic private schools bridge these gaps by providing a holistic education, by explore they dynamics of their aim for provision of a comprehensive education that moulds the identity, personality, and spirituality of Muslim pupils.

The second part of this chapter discussed the dynamics of the Islamisation of knowledge, a process through which the researched Islamic private schools aim not only to infuse Islamic perspectives into the mainstream curriculum but also to establish an Islamized ethos and values. Exploring their goal in fostering a holistic development in students—mind, body, and spirit—to achieve the fundamental objectives of Islamic education. This ethos seeks to shape well-rounded individuals while nurturing specific aspects of their personality and spiritual development. The overarching aim of these endeavours is to establish continuity and consistency between home and school values and intentions, ultimately stabilising the identity formation process and preventing identity confusion and crisis among Muslim pupils.

Furthermore, the cultural identity for cultural preservation was explored and discussed through the data. The suggested findings indicated that the Islamic private schools, along with mosques and other venues, actively contribute to the creation, shaping, and reshaping of group, community, and cultural identities. Their fundamental aim is to safeguard cultural values, amplify voices, empower agency, and present collective representations.

In summary, the studied Islamic private schools aspire to mould, uphold, and stabilise the ideal identity and spirituality of Muslim pupils through a holistic, integrated, and balanced curriculum that aligns with Islamic educational principles and meets parental expectations. Furthermore, as discussed in detail in chapter 4, these schools, operating at the margins, serve as a safe and secure spaces for Muslims to embrace Islamic values and construct celebratory religious, cultural, and ethnic identities.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

6. Abstract

This ethnographic study of two Islamic private schools in England reveals three key findings. First, it explores how stakeholders shape the curriculum and school environment to meet their educational, religious, and ethno-cultural needs. Both schools implemented an Islamised curriculum that balanced spiritual, moral, and academic development, although the lack of a standardised Islamised curriculum emerged as a limitation. The study also highlights how school environments are multifaceted, encompassing physical spaces as well as ethno-cultural, socio-relational, and overlapping dimensions that evolve over time (Massey, 1994). Second, unlike previous studies that focus on singular aspects of identity formation, such as religious identity (Elbih, 2012), cultural identity (Rashid, 2014), or political identity (Cesari, 2013), this research examines four dimensions: religious, ethno-cultural, political, and multi-dimensional. It finds that Islamic schools serve as sites for resisting and negotiating identity politics related to citizenship, Britishness, belonging, and ethno-religious traditions. The study also highlights the hybridisation of Muslimness with Britishness and the deliberate sanitisation of Islam within these schools to align with dominant narratives and counter Islamophobia, anti-migrant, and far-right rhetoric. Finally, the study reveals the multi-dimensional nature of parents' expectations, showing how these values influence the curriculum and school environment, ultimately shaping the identities of Muslim pupils.

6.1. Introduction

The Muslim population in the United Kingdom is increasing, making the educational needs of their children and their schooling a fundamental aspect of their lives and integration into British society. It is therefore important to examine the religious nature of Islamic private schools to understand and explore their role within the educational system, as well as their contribution to social cohesion and integration (Shakeel, 2018). Islamic private schools form a crucial part of the United Kingdom’s educational infrastructure, contributing not

only to educational diversity but also to meeting the unique needs of Muslim pupils and their parents.

Despite the growing demand for, and increasing number of, Islamic private schools, significant gaps remain in the literature concerning these institutions. Most studies have concentrated on public perceptions, their transition to state funding, and issues of segregation, while neglecting an examination of internal dynamics, curriculum, environment, identity formation, parental motivations, and the lived experiences of Muslim pupils (Shakeel, 2018; Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015; Meer, 2009). Furthermore, although broader discussions on multiculturalism and education frequently reference Islamic schools, they rarely investigate how these schools navigate identity formation, offer alternative discourses for addressing Muslim pupils' educational needs, and balance the mainstream curriculum with Islamic education (Berglund, 2014). While some studies have addressed these dimensions in other Western contexts, such as the United States (Glenn et al., 2019; Khan & Siddiqui, 2018), Australia (Abdalla et al., 2020), Canada (Zine, 2008), and Sweden (Berglund, 2009), fewer studies have examined Islamic private schools in the United Kingdom, particularly in relation to these aspects (Shakeel, 2018). Notably, several studies have emphasised the need for ethnographic research on Islamic private schools within the UK context to enhance understanding of their religious character (Gilliat-Ray, 2010; Kabir, 2010; Modood, 2007).

Through an ethnographic qualitative approach, this research examined the religious nature of Islamic private schools in the United Kingdom, with a focus on what defines a school as "Islamic" and why this is significant for Muslim communities, parents, stakeholders, and the broader educational infrastructure. The primary aim of this thesis was to address the central research question: "An exploration of the religious nature of Islamic private schools in the United Kingdom: What makes a school 'Islamic,' and why does it matter?"

By doing so, this research aimed to unpack how the environment and curriculum of such schools shape the religious and broader identities of their pupils, while also examining Muslim parental values and expectations and their

influence on pupils' identity formation. Below, I reiterate the key findings of this research, highlighting their original contributions and implications, as well as how they address gaps in the existing literature. I then discuss the strengths and limitations of the study, followed by further major contributions of the research to the field. Finally, I present my concluding remarks, followed by suggestions for future research.

6.2 Islamic Curriculum and Environment

The curriculum and environment are key aspects in shaping the religious nature of Islamic private schools, and they are fundamental to understanding this interplay. Therefore, I formulated the following research sub-question to explore and analyse what constitutes the curricula and environment of Islamic schools, as well as how these are shaped and delivered:

1. *What constitutes the curricula and environment of private Islamic schools in England, and how are these shaped and delivered?*

The data suggest that a fundamental factor contributing to the development of the Islamic curriculum is the autonomy and freedom afforded to curriculum designers and stakeholders in shaping its content, as discussed in Chapter 5 (pages 159–162). Such autonomy may enable Islamic curriculum designers and stakeholders to navigate challenges in balancing Islamic education in multicultural settings. This finding aligns with Everett's (2012) study; however, its original contribution lies in examining how and why mainstream school subjects are Islamised within Islamic private schools. Many participants expressed concerns about the insufficient accommodation of Muslim educational needs in mainstream schools' curricula, highlighting a gap in addressing their cultural and religious backgrounds within broader educational frameworks. The ethnographic findings from the two Islamic private schools emphasise the significant demand for and importance of Islamising knowledge, a necessity articulated by all stakeholders involved. Stakeholders not only incorporate an Islamic perspective into the teaching of mainstream subjects but

also exclude aspects of the curriculum deemed contradictory or irrelevant to a Muslim pupil's education.

While Zine (2008) explored the ability of Canadian Islamic schools to create spaces where Muslim pupils and stakeholders resisted mainstream and Eurocentric values, the research did not address how these schools navigate their role within the broader educational context, leaving a gap in understanding their role in this interplay. Therefore, the added value of this research lies in examining how Islamic private schools mediate between Eurocentric values and mainstream education through their curricular activities, while addressing the specific needs of Muslim pupils.

The findings reveal that the curricula in both schools were profoundly influenced by the theories of the Islamisation of knowledge, as proposed by Al-Attas (1980). This process involves embedding Islamic principles, ethos, and values into various aspects of school life, including mainstream subjects and curricula. Through the Islamisation of knowledge, these schools aim to cultivate an understanding of the harmony between faith (*iman*), reason, and science, while maintaining a strong connection to Islamic principles and traditions. The need for the Islamisation of contemporary knowledge primarily arose from parental choices and expectations, which significantly shaped the intentions and decisions of curriculum designers and school stakeholders. Both stakeholders and Muslim parents strongly advocated for and prioritised the Islamisation of knowledge for their children, driven by several key factors discussed in Chapter 5. These factors include avoiding identity crises and confusion, ensuring continuity between home and school values, preserving cultural and religious identities and value systems, and, crucially, mitigating societal pressures stemming from aggressive secularism.

Moreover, the Islamisation of knowledge within these schools aims to preserve the cultural, political, historical, and heritage components of Islamic civilisation, ensuring that students develop an awareness of their identity and heritage while engaging with contemporary knowledge frameworks. This approach seeks to produce well-rounded and confident individuals equipped with both religious and democratic values, aligning with the findings of Glenn et al. (2019), Mohme

(2017), and Elbih (2012). Such integration demonstrates a dual focus on safeguarding Islamic traditions and history while preparing pupils to actively participate in broader societal structures. Consequently, Islamic education and curricula were designed and delivered not only to foster an Islamic environment but also to cultivate specific identities among pupils, as discussed in the subsequent section. However, this study also highlights a lack of standardisation in Islamic education curricula across both schools, a finding consistent with Keyworth's (2006) research on the absence of uniformity in Islamic educational practices.

The findings across both settings suggest that the absence of a standardised framework for the Islamisation of knowledge presents a significant methodological challenge. This ambiguity arises in determining the extent to which curricula should be Islamised and the mechanisms by which this process should occur. Questions such as *"How much Islamisation is sufficient?"* and *"Who should have the authority to oversee these processes?"* remain unresolved. This lack of clarity can result in inconsistencies in application across schools, as stakeholders may hold differing interpretations of what constitutes an adequately Islamised curriculum. Addressing these questions is essential for establishing a cohesive approach to integrating Islamic principles within contemporary discourses, particularly issues surrounding integration, citizenship, and co-existence (Ramadan, 2004).

The data reveals that the overarching goal across both settings was to provide a holistic education prioritising the religious, spiritual, and moral development of pupils (Yasin & Jani, 2013). This approach emphasises linking and attributing all forms of knowledge to the divine as the ultimate source of knowledge creation. The schools under study prioritised a holistic education aimed at nurturing students academically, spiritually, emotionally, and physically. This reflects the core objective of Islamic education, which focuses on the integrated development of the mind, soul, and body (Al-Attas, 1980). Both schools implemented a balanced curriculum and environment designed to shape pupils' spirituality, emotions, and personalities, although differences were observed between the primary and secondary schools.

A significant aspect of the schools' approach to holistic education encompassed not only formal curriculum integration but also informal practices. These included storytelling, daily prayers, weekly assemblies, and role-modelling inspired by prophetic teachings. Such practices fostered qualities such as patience, resilience, and perseverance in students, while nurturing a profound sense of spirituality and morality. Informal approaches to cultivating a strong religious identity were more commonly observed in the primary school. Overall, the findings suggest that this integrative and holistic educational approach strengthens faith (*iman*), shapes pupils' behaviour and character, and fosters a confident and grounded sense of identity among Muslim pupils.

Moreover, the multi-dimensional nature of the Islamic schools' environment emerged as a key finding in exploring their religious character. The data suggests that the environment of the studied school encompassed not only the physical space but also ethno-cultural, socio-relational, and overlapping dimensions through which students and other stakeholders could resonate, belong, and feel safe. These environments were shaped by three interconnected and overlapping dynamics: space, time, and social relations—including gender and other contextual factors (Massey, 1994).

The data reveals that several key terms were used interchangeably to describe the environment of the Islamic private schools, including "safe environment," "secure environment," "family environment," "cultural environment," "Halal environment," "Islamic environment," "comfortable environment," and "female environment." This terminology reflects the multi-dimensional nature of these schools, where various elements combine to create a supportive and nurturing atmosphere for pupils. This finding aligns with Zine's (2006) study on Islamic schools in the Canadian context, which also highlighted the significance of a safe and supportive school environment.

Additionally, the findings suggest that pupils and other stakeholders experience a strong sense of belonging within the school environment, which mirrors their home or "back home" environment. In particular, the girls-only secondary school was often described as a "safe female environment" or a "Halal environment," highlighting the gendered nature of the space. This environment

provided a sense of comfort and familiarity, closely aligned with their home culture. This finding aligns with Massey's (1994) argument that spaces are shaped by social relations and influenced by both temporal and spatial factors. Consequently, the gendered and culturally significant nature of the school environment highlights the importance of understanding space and identity as dynamic and relational constructs, rather than static or fixed (Tsouroufli, 2015).

The data from the secondary (single-sex, girls-only) school further revealed that the school's environment was shaped by specific gender relations and norms. Both female students and teachers reported feeling safe and empowered in a sexually segregated space. Such an environment allowed them to practise values and etiquette drawn from their home culture, including clothing, modesty, and religious rituals during school hours. The ability to express gender relations and identity markers, such as clothing choices, wearing the veil, or using make-up, was empowering. It also represented an act of resistance against both the dominant culture (Elbih, 2012) and their own traditional values. Thus, the ethos, values, and etiquette—along with the provision of Islamic education and prayer facilities—were identified as central components defining the environment of Islamic private schools. These environments were shaped and reshaped through the influence of diverse stakeholders, including curriculum designers, school officials, teachers, parents, extended religious communities such as mosques, and pupils.

In line with studies conducted by Glenn et al. (2018), Merry (2018), Zine (2008), and Abd El Hafez (2015), the findings of this research suggest that Islamic private schools are regarded as alternative spaces that not only foster specific identities and a sense of belonging but also mitigate the harm experienced by Muslim pupils in mainstream schools. These schools cater to the religious and ethno-cultural needs of their pupils, providing an environment that protects them from challenges such as Islamophobia, bullying, peer pressure, and de-Islamising influences often present in mainstream settings, including drug and alcohol abuse and premarital sex (Abdus-Sabur, 1995). More specifically, the research further reveals that participants felt safe and secure within the environment of Islamic private schools, which offered protection from bullying,

racism, and Islamophobia encountered in mainstream schools (Shah, 2012). This environment was viewed as a space of belonging and cultural preservation, aligning with the findings of several studies (Shakeel, 2018; Mohme, 2017; Al-Hashimi, 2007; Zine, 2006).

More specifically, the findings further reveal that Islamic private schools are regarded as safe and inclusive spaces by Muslim parents, teachers and other stakeholders. The perspectives of several participants, including parents and teachers with prior experience in mainstream schools, align with studies such as Miah (2013) and Meer (2013). These studies highlight the concerns of Muslim parents regarding their children from minority communities, who are seen as being more vulnerable to peer pressure. Such pressures can lead to behaviours such as drug and alcohol abuse, often as a means of assimilating into the dominant culture or avoiding marginalisation (Al-Hashimi, 2007).

An original contribution of this research lies in examining the role of the school tier (primary vs secondary) in shaping religious and cultural identity formation. While the ethos and environment in both primary and secondary settings shared many similarities, the focus varied between the two. At the primary school level, there was a stronger emphasis on cultivating Islam as a way of life, with a holistic approach prioritising the spiritual and moral development of pupils. The primary school (School-B) went beyond its educational role, functioning also as a caregiver by providing a second or extended family environment, offering parental care to the pupils. This model was shaped by fundamental parental choices and a heightened sense of responsibility among school stakeholders for character and identity building from an early age.

In contrast, at the girls-only secondary school, the environment emphasised academic achievement and preparing students for further education, with a particular focus on GCSEs, academic attainment, and successful transitions to non-Islamic educational platforms. Additionally, there was a greater emphasis on addressing broader developmental issues, such as mental health, hormonal changes, and pastoral care. This approach aligns with research that highlights the importance of preparing students for life beyond school while balancing religious and academic priorities (Panjwani & Moulin-Stozek, 2017; Zine, 2006).

Furthermore, the secondary school's emphasis on non-religious educational goals reflects a practical response to the demands of transitioning to higher education and navigating the secular aspects of society (Miah, 2016).

Another original contribution of this research lies in its exploration of the dynamics that shape and constitute the curriculum and environment of Islamic private schools**.** Two key factors were identified as central to shaping and delivering the curriculum and environment of the studied schools. The first factor was the perceived failure of mainstream schools to meet the academic needs and requirements of Muslim pupils. The lack of adequate provision in mainstream education for the specific needs of Muslim pupils has thus been a significant factor in the demand for and establishment of Islamic private schools. This finding aligns with research by Abd El Hafez (2015), who identified similar unmet needs in the United States as a primary driver for the creation of Islamic schools.

Moreover, the analysis of the findings suggests that, according to the perspectives of stakeholders interviewed, mainstream schools may not always be culturally neutral. Participants perceived that these schools often promote particular values that tend to reflect the norms and priorities of the majority (Modood, 2023). Some felt that this can lead to a misalignment with the religious and cultural beliefs of minority groups, such as Muslim pupils, potentially contributing to experiences of marginalisation and identity conflict. While these views provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of minority communities, it is important to note that they represent one perspective in a broader, ongoing debate about the role of British values and cultural inclusivity in education. Furthermore, as this research did not involve visits to mainstream schools, the conclusions drawn here are based solely on stakeholder perceptions and should therefore be interpreted with appropriate caution.

A second factor was found that such environments also serve as sites of resistance—particularly against the dominant culture of the broader society, or even against certain aspects of home culture and traditions. This counters argument suggesting that Islamic private schools lead to indoctrination and

religious extremism. My research demonstrates the empowering aspects of these schools, where pupils are provided with the space to resist specific elements of Islamic tradition and culture when they deem it necessary. This finding is significant, as my ethnographic methodology allowed me to observe and identify instances where students exercised such agency and resistance in their daily school lives. Previous studies have similarly suggested that Islamic schools do not necessarily enhance religiosity among Muslim youths (Hussain & Meer, 2017; Zine, 2007), reinforcing the notion that Islamic private schools can offer spaces for personal agency and resistance, rather than merely reinforcing a rigid religious or other identity, as further explored below (Panjwani & Moulin-Stozek, 2017).

Based on the data, the Islamic schools fostered a sense of safety, identity, security, and comfort through the creation of a familial, cultural, and ethnic environment among pupils and all stakeholders. However, such environments are socially constructed and are not solely based on religious narratives; they also encompass ethnic, cultural, and overlapping dimensions. The curriculum and environment of the Islamic private schools served as a means to an end—the formation and nurturing of pupils' identities. While critics argue that the environment and curriculum of Islamic private schools contribute to the segregation and marginalisation of Muslim pupils (Hand, 2012), the findings of this research suggest that these schools not only protect Muslim pupils but also empower them emotionally, spiritually, and educationally. Moreover, they play a crucial role in fostering and shaping a multidimensional identity that integrates socio-political, religious, and overlapping aspects, as explored in the following section.

6.3 Identity Formation in Islamic Private Schools: Bridging Religious, Cultural, and Political Roles

The second research sub-question focused on the issues surrounding identities, aiming to explore what particular identities are promotes and nurtured in the two Islamic private schools that I researched.

> 2. *What religious and other identities are promoted and nurturued by private Islamic schools?*

The discourse of identity is fundamental to a study like this. There is a notable gap in the literature, as limited research has focused on the in-depth formation of identity within the context of Islamic private schools. As Meer (2009: 379) argues, 'very little research has explicitly investigated how increasingly salient articulations of Muslim identities connect with the issue of Muslim schooling.

Therefore, the finding of this research reveal that Islamic private schools studied for this research played a fundamental role in formation of a multi-dimensional identity that is contextual, relational, hybrid and fluid, influenced by power relations, and socio-political contexts (Hall, 1990). The original contribution of this research to the knowledge is based on exploring such an identity formation from multiple dimensions. Unlike previous studies that primarily associated Islamic schools in general and Islamic educations in particular to religious identity (Elbih, 2013; Hassen; 2013); or cultural identity (Rashid, 2014); or Political identity (Cesari, 2013), my research found and explored 4 fundamental overlapping aspects of identity formation through Islamic schools, such as a) religious identity, b) Ethno-cultural identity c) Political identity d) multi-dimensional identity. That I unpack in the subsequent parts.

The fundamental issue and challenge posed by the previous studies focusing on one or two dimension of identity formation is that they neglect the political and ideological subjectivity of the Islamic private schools portraying them as neutral. My argument is that as any other educational institution, Islamic schools are not neutral and they promote a particular set of ideals, values,

politics and ethos (Apple, et al., 2018) that are in lined with Muslim parents' expectations as well as the broader Muslim community and Islamic traditions. By no means I am suggesting that Islam or Muslim are a monolithic. Hence, that also means that I do not argue that Islamic schools are homogeneous entities. However, the ethnographic research across both setting revealed that both schools were proactively engaged in formation of mentioned dimensions of Muslim identity, however the focused varied across the two, explored below.

6.3.1 Religious Identity

The findings suggest that there is no homogeneous form of Islamic identity; rather, Islamic identity is shaped and reshaped through overlapping intersections of religious, cultural, historical, ethnic, and socio-political values and ethos. Thus, through their environment, ethos, curriculum, and overarching ideological foundations, Islamic schools nurture and transmit an 'Islamic religious identity' to their pupils.

The findings reveal that school officials intentionally undertake a duty of care to cultivate a particular form of religious identity, primarily based on Muslim parents' expectations and demands, elaborated further in the subsequent section 6.3. Three key aspects underpin this process of identity formation. *Firstly*, the schools aim to cultivate ideological underpinnings that promote a specific way of life—*deen* (religion)—an Islamic way of life or identity rooted in religious values and ethos, alongside other cultural, ethnic, and political dimensions. Both schools intended to promote and foster Islam "as a lived way of life" (Hussain, 2004: 322) through their entire environment, ethos, and curriculum of the school. The outcome of this approach has been instrumental not only in the formation but also in the continued evolution of Muslim pupils' identity, confidence, and well-being.

Secondly, the data suggested that schools establish consistency in religious performativity through daily worship, prayer assemblies, Friday prayers, and oral prayers integrated into the school day. *Thirdly*, this regularity in religious

practice not only reinforces pupils' sense of identity but also influences their behaviour and personality, fostering a stronger sense of belonging to a religious and cultural community. In both school settings, the process of religious identity formation was evident; however, the emphasis varied significantly between the primary and secondary levels. At the primary level, there was a stronger focus on instilling and nurturing the foundations of religious identity, laying the groundwork for pupils to internalise key beliefs, traditions, values, and practices. In contrast, the secondary level concentrated more on consolidating and sustaining this identity, ensuring its hybridity amidst the increasing complexities and challenges that pupils might encounter as they transition into adolescence and engage with a broader social context. This demonstrates that identities are not static; they are fluid and contextual, with the process of identity formation being one of continuous transformation and evolution.

6.3.2 Ethno-cultural Identity

Moreover, through the findings and observations, it was revealed that the studied Islamic private schools played a significant role in nurturing cultural identity by promoting ethnic and cultural values, such as cultural festivals, norms, etiquettes and traditions (Hall, 1990; Rashid, 2014), as well as historicization of Islamic civilisation. This finding aligns with previous studies (Benhabib, 2006; Glenn et al., 2019; Merry, 2007; Mohme, 2017), which highlight the correlational role of Islamic private schools in the cultural identity formation of their pupils. In this context, culture and religion were often used interchangeably, with parents particularly emphasising their expectations for schools to teach and promote cultural values. As Hall (1996:4) contends, Islamic schools' function as "specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices." In both schools, the majority of pupils were of South Asian descent, particularly Bangladeshi, which contributed to shared cultural values. Consequently, the formation and preservation of cultural identity were identified as mechanisms to avoid identity crises and confusion, ensuring continuity between home and school values.

The findings suggest that Islamic schools play the role of an ethno-cultural hub and space, through which not only cultural values and traditions are nurtured to their pupil, but also preserved cultural codes as identity marker of minority groups, through which they demand the diversification and differences to be recognised and respected in a multicultural context (Taylor, 1992). This dynamic is vital to the identity politics of minorities versus the majority, as dominant cultural groups wield disproportionate power to define, shape, and reinterpret cultural codes of conduct and discourses (Modood, 2023). These codes establish the normative frameworks within which minority groups must navigate, often dictating the terms of belonging, inclusion, and visibility. Consequently, these structures profoundly affect the identity formation processes of minority groups, influencing not only their sense of agency and positionality but also the broader socio-political discourse surrounding identity.

The research highlights that, for many British Muslims, *Muslimness* is often intertwined with notions of cultural and ethnic belonging. Muslim identity is shaped by ethnic backgrounds, with diverse communities within the broader Muslim population drawing on different cultural and historical legacies. As such, *Muslimness* cannot be detached from ethno-cultural identities, as these intersect to form a complex understanding of belonging. For example, British Muslims of Pakistani heritage may have a different experience of *Muslimness* compared to those of Somali or Turkish descent, as each group navigates its own ethnic and cultural affiliations alongside religious identity (Amin, 2015). However, the evidence of this research suggested that despite ethnocultural divergence, religion become a solid identity marker where all Muslim can resonate with each other and belong to the Muslim Ummah- Community.

6.3.3 Political identity

The research findings suggest that Islamic private schools serve as hubs for nurturing not only religious, ethno-cultural and multi-dimensional identities, but also political identity. The studied schools were utilised as sites for the exercise of agency and resistance by Muslim communities, facilitating the formation of a

political identity to challenge and resist the influence of dominant discourses (Miah, 2016). The findings across both settings suggest that a passive Muslim/Islamic identity was not only in the process of formation, but that students and stakeholders were also actively encouraged to engage in refining and defending a specific British Muslim identity within socio-political and multi-dimensional contexts.

Although previous studies (Cesari, 2013; Zine, 2008) focused on political aspects of identity formation in Islamic schools, the value added by this research findings and its original contribution to the field lies in exploring how and why such a political identity is nurtured and utilised across these schools. Zine (2008) study revealed that Islamic schools in Canadian contexts served as spaces where pupils revisited mainstream, often Eurocentric ideals. My research revealed that Islamic schools cultivates a particular political identity that contributed not only in resisting the dominant culture, but also such an identity was essential for sanitising Islam by (re)defining it as a religion of peace, love and goodness.

A negative depiction of Islam and Muslims has deep historical roots in Western discourse, often shaped by colonial and orientalist narratives (Said, 1978). In more recent decades, public and media portrayals have contributed to the construction of Muslims as 'others' within national imaginaries, often framing them in terms of security and cultural difference (Shah, 2012). Such portrayals have been amplified in response to global and domestic events, contributing to a climate in which Muslim identities are viewed with suspicion. In response, many Muslims in the West have actively sought to challenge these narratives by engaging in public discourse, education, and community outreach to foster more accurate and nuanced understandings of Islam within wider society.

Thus, the finding suggests that for its participants, the formation and development of terminologies such as *Islamic identity*, *Muslim identity*, or *British-Muslim identity or British Muslim citizens* represent more than simple acts of self-definition. These terminologies become tools for resisting cultural erasure and asserting agency within a hegemonic context. By articulating alternative narratives, Muslim communities actively challenge and disrupt

dominant narratives that often marginalise or homogenise their identities (Miah, 2016). In this sense, the discourse of identity functions as a contested space where cultural, social, and political struggles converge. The act of framing and reclaiming identity thus becomes a deliberate strategy to demand political recognition, assert representation, and challenge exclusionary practices (Taylor, 1994). It reflects a broader effort to reposition minority identities not as subordinate or secondary but as autonomous and integral to the fabric of the society in which they exist. Through this ongoing negotiation, Muslim communities engage in a dynamic and multifaceted struggle for dignity, equality, and the redefinition of their role within the socio-political hierarchy.

More specifically, the findings suggest that various stakeholders, such as parents, school officials, and pupils, strive to present Islam in a more positive light and counter negative perceptions and stereotypes. This is typically achieved by defending Islam as a religion of peace, tolerance, acceptance, and appreciation Overall, the desire to sanitize Islam is heavily influenced by perceptions shaped by Western policies, negative stereotypes, securitization of Muslims, Islamophobia, and stereotypical depictions. A particular value added of this research is that it revealed that due to the mentioned driving forces, the schools created an underpinning political identity to not only defend Islam's fair representation but also associate 'becoming a good Muslim' or 'becoming and integrating as a good citizen in British society' to the wider discourses of citizenship and belonging.

While, the act of sanitization is inherently political, however, the intended and unintended consequence of sanitization, depoliticise Islam by disconnecting it from its historical, political and cultural ties and portray it as a sanitized faith (Modood, 2007). Moreover such an act will pressurise Muslims to conform to a sanitized version of Islam and Muslim identity in order to be accepted in Public life (Warsi, 2017), and fit in the dominant narratives (Meer, 2014).

This further exacerbate the effort found by this study that participants intentionally tried to enhance the entanglement of Muslim identities and values to Britishness more specifically to the discourse of British fundamental values. Several of the participants referred to British fundamental values as inherently

Islamic and emphasised over their overlaps. Overall, the findings crystallise the complex entanglement of Muslimness with British citizenship and ethno-culture, revealing that Muslim identity is not only shaped by religious affiliation but is also inextricably linked to broader socio-political constructs. As the research findings show, Muslimness is not a singular, static category but a dynamic hybrid identity that interacts with the socio-cultural and political realities of being British. Across both settings, data highlights that the negotiation of Muslim identity within the British context is characterised by both a desire to assert distinctiveness and the need to engage with mainstream British identity. This dual process of differentiation and integration is critical to understanding the role of Muslim schools in the UK, particularly in the context of their relationship with national identity and citizenship discourses.

Furthermore, data highlighted that the entanglement of Muslimness with British citizenship reveals a tension between inclusion and exclusion within the national framework. While Muslims in the UK are officially recognised as citizens, they often self-proclaimed and identified themselves as British Muslim citizens, however, the political discourse often casts them as "other," questioning their full integration into British society (Modood, 2007). This marginalisation is exacerbated by the rise of Islamophobia, the contemporary rise of far-right rhetoric and the construction of Muslims as a "threat" to national security and social cohesion. However, as the research illustrates, many Muslims actively engage with and contribute to British civic life, using their Muslim identity as both a source of solidarity and a tool for political and social integration (Modood, 2020). Thus, demonstrating that Muslim identity is a lot more than adhering to a religious identity, navigating various socio-political, cultural and multi-dimensional dynamics.

Hence, based on the findings of this research, Islamic schools can serve as sites for nurturing political identities, where students navigate and negotiate multiple dimensions of identity—such as being Muslim, British, and part of a global Muslim community—often challenging traditional boundaries within and outside the Muslim community (Zine, 2007). Recognising this heterogeneity provides a more nuanced understanding of Islamic schools, not merely as sites

of religious education but as spaces for cultural and socio-political negotiations. These schools contribute to diverse forms of community cohesion and engagement, enabling Muslim pupils to celebrate the multi-dimensional aspects of Muslimness that overlap with their ethno-cultural, political, and overlapping identities.

Research further demonstrates that while Islamic schools are often perceived as reinforcing Muslim identity, they can also function as spaces of negotiation, where students reconcile their place within both Muslim and British contexts. Far from being sites of cultural insularity, these schools foster the exploration and hybridisation of identities, producing forms of Muslimness simultaneously anchored in Islamic values and British citizenship (Choudhury, 2017). This process of identity formation among British Muslims is thus marked by an ongoing negotiation of their position within a national framework, accommodating their religious and ethnic affiliations while navigating the complexities of belonging to a multi-ethnic society.

6.3.4 Multi-dimensional Identities

Lastly, the findings also revealed that the schools studied promote and nurture multi-dimensional identities that intersect with both ethnic and gender dimensions. The formation of gender identity encompasses aspects of dress modesty, including the hijab, jilbab, thobe, veil, and scarf, as well as adherence to halal dietary practices. These multi-dimensional aspects further encompass issues related to ethnicity, family expectations, intergenerational gaps, social class, language, and migration status.

Although this finding aligns with the work of scholars such as Hussain (2007) and Gilliat-Ray (2010) from the perspective of race, gender, and class, fewer studies have explored identity formation through the lens of age and intergenerational gaps (Shakeel, 2018). The added value of this research, and its original contribution to theorising identity formation in Islamic schools from an multifacated dimension, lies in three aspects: (a) student age or school tier,

(b) parental intergenerational gaps, and (c) pupils' resistance to family expectations.

Firstly, the findings across one primary and one secondary school revealed that age plays a crucial role in the formation of multi-dimensional identities. While the primary level focused predominantly on grounding religious identity, the secondary school addressed gender relations, pupils' hormonal changes, and broader academic concerns, including their transition to non-Islamic or higher educational settings.

Secondly, the findings revealed that the intergenerational gap between first-generation and second-generation parents influenced the values and expectations they set, which ultimately shaped the nurturing of their children's religious and other identities. More specifically, the findings suggested that first-generation parents placed greater emphasis on religious and ethnocultural values, whereas second-generation parents sought a more balanced educational provision, with an equal focus on ethnocultural aspects. This is further elaborated in the following section.

Thirdly, the research found that Islamic private schools were also utilised as hubs to resist the intersection of traditional Islamic interpretations and traditionalism versus personal choice or modern values (Panjwani, 2013). While some studies, such as those by Niyozov and Pluim (2009), examined the Canadian context, exploring how Muslim pupils in Islamic schools negotiated, resisted, and sometimes challenged their prescribed cultural and religious values, Zine (2008) more specifically highlighted how Muslim pupils used school spaces to resist veiling practices and negotiate gender relations. However, fewer studies have addressed this multi-dimensional aspect in the context of the United Kingdom (Meer, 2010).

6.4 Parental values and expectations

The significant role of parents as key stakeholders in this dynamic is evident throughout the research findings and interviews. Muslim parents played a pivotal role in shaping and sustaining the ethos and environment of the schools. Consequently, their values and expectations are fundamental not only to understanding the religious nature of these schools but also to the nurturing of Muslim identities. As a result, the following sub-questions were formulated to explore and unpack this interconnectedness.

> 3. *What are the parental values and expectations, and how do they influence students' religious identities in private Islamic schools?*

While some argue that Muslim parents' choice of school aligns with general parental considerations, such as academic attainment and a safe, inclusive environment, additional factors uniquely influence the school choices of Muslim parents. Their expectations often centre on the provision of religious, moral, and spiritual education grounded in Islamic tradition and ethos (Almakkawi, 2017). These values and expectations significantly shape the schools' environments and profoundly affect Muslim pupils' identities, influencing their sense of belonging, self-concept, and relationships with both their immediate community (fellow Muslims) and the broader society.

In England, a study revealed that approximately half of Muslim parents prefer Islamic schooling for their children (Nyman, 2005). However, only a small percentage of Muslim pupils actually attend Islamic schools. This discrepancy can be attributed to several factors, including limited access to and proximity of Islamic schools, concerns about the quality of education provided by Islamic private schools, and financial or logistical challenges (ibid).

According to the findings of this research, the majority of Muslim parents felt a moral and religious obligation to nurture a religious identity in their children. The findings further indicate that it is essential for Muslim parents to preserve their culture and customs and pass these on to future generations. This aligns with their expectations of schools, which correspond to the schools' objectives: to

provide a balanced, integrated, and holistic education that fosters both the moral and spiritual development of pupils while nurturing a multi-dimensional identity encompassing religious, cultural, ethnic, and political dimensions.

More specifically, the findings revealed that Muslim parents choose schools to safeguard aspects of their cultural identity and its markers, such as cultural symbolism, festivals, and events. These findings resonate with previous studies, reinforcing their conclusions and arguments (McCreery et al., 2007; Zine, 2007).

A particular dimension of my findings—the continuity of home versus school values—represents an original contribution to the field. In the Australian context, a study indicated that Muslim parents valued a strong home-school partnership, but such a study was absent in the context of the United Kingdom (Almakkawi, 2017). The findings across both contexts suggest that Muslim parents view Islamic private schools as an extension of home or domestic values. Participant parents argued that mainstream schools do not accommodate the values of Muslim parents and, at times, contradict their moral and religious beliefs and value systems. Consequently, this continuity between home and school values can contribute to nurturing independent, strong British Muslims and citizens, potentially strengthening their identity formation process. However, in contrast to El-Aswed's (2014) research findings, the parents interviewed at the primary school level advocated for Islamic schooling from an early age rather than at secondary level, as they believe this is the appropriate time to lay the foundation for a child's personality.

A striking finding of the research was that all parents, teachers, stakeholders, and senior pupils shared a common perception regarding sexual segregation in schools. Almost all participants believed that it is better for Muslim pupils to be segregated at the secondary level, while co-education is acceptable at the primary level. This finding aligns with previous studies that have explored how Muslim parental expectations not only aim to preserve Islamic values of modesty and gender norms but also seek to protect pupils from de-Islamising forces in mainstream schools, such as pre-marital sex, up skirting, sexual abuse, and peer pressure (Zine, 2007; Parker-Jenkins, 2006). It also highlights

how the gender classification in Islamic schools is shaped by such parental expectations, as the majority of single-sex schools are at the secondary level (AMS-UK, 2019).

Moreover, Muslim parents' school choice is also influenced by external factors that may be prevalent in mainstream schools, such as drug and alcohol abuse, bullying, Islamophobia, and inappropriate sexual activities (Badawi, 2006). As a result, strong social relationships among Muslim parents, teachers, and other stakeholders help address these concerns, ultimately shaping the identity of Muslim pupils and fostering social cohesion within Muslim communities. This, in turn, facilitates their integration into broader society (Meer, 2010).

For Muslims, religion (deen) is a way of life, encompassing certain acts of worship such as prayers, Qur'anic recitation, fasting, and other religious rituals. Therefore, the timing and provision of facilities for conducting religious activities are of significant importance to many practising Muslims (Zine, 2008). The findings of this research also revealed that Muslim parents were satisfied with their school choice, as their children were able to engage in these activities during school hours.

Overall, the answers to the three sub-questions above contribute to the formation of an answer to the central question of this thesis: *'An exploration of the religious nature of Islamic private schools: What makes a school 'Islamic,' and why does it matter?'*

The findings indicate that Islamic private schools play multifaceted roles. Based on Muslim parental values and expectations, the curriculum and environments of the studied schools were designed as spaces and hubs that facilitate the formation of various religious, cultural, political, and multi-dimensional identities, which is what makes a school 'Islamic.' Therefore, the environment and curriculum are utilised as means to an end—the formation of multi-dimensional identities in Muslim pupils. Muslim parents, stakeholders, teachers, and the broader Muslim community are the driving forces behind this interplay. The schools provide a safe and inclusive environment that boosts pupils' confidence, nurtures different aspects of their identities, and enhances

their sense of belonging. The findings also suggest that the schools function as spaces where Muslim pupils preserve their cultural and religious values and ethos, exercise their agency, resist, and negotiate to navigate societal pressures, family expectations, gender relations, and Islamic traditions when necessary. Furthermore, the findings indicate that these schools serve as sites for 'sanitising' Islam and positively influencing the general, often stereotypical, understanding of Islam and Muslims in Western contexts, aiming to foster a greater sense of societal belonging, cohesion, and inclusivity.

6.5 Strength and Limitations

Overall, this research had several strengths and limitations. The key strengths of the research can be attributed to three main aspects: the methodological approach, demographic considerations, and the educational tiers of the settings. Firstly, the ethnographic qualitative approach, which incorporated observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs) with minor students, provided a robust framework for comprehensive research. Direct observation of behaviours and interactions in natural school settings, combined with semi-structured interviews, allowed for deeper insights into participants' perspectives, behaviours, and experiences. FGDs with minor students facilitated peer interaction and discussion, enabling the exploration of both similarities and diversity of viewpoints within the junior pupils' group. Involving minor students in FGDs empowered them to share their perspectives and contribute to the research process, fostering a sense of ownership and agency. This approach enabled a contextual understanding of the cultural, social, and environmental factors influencing participants' behaviours and attitudes. Furthermore, the use of multiple data collection methods led to triangulation, enhancing the credibility and reliability of the findings by cross-validating themes and concepts across different sources (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Ethical considerations, such as informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for participants' autonomy, were prioritised throughout the research.

Secondly, from a demographic composition standpoint, the research targeted two schools in distinct and diverse areas, which contributed to the richness and diversity of the collected data. On the one hand, the secondary all-girls school (A), located in a town in the south-eastern region of England with a large Muslim population, faced several tensions and challenges across different segments of its population. These tensions, arising from the ideological positions of far-right groups, as well as political controversies and religious extremism, directly impacted Muslim, minority, and migrant communities, affecting their sense of identity and agency. On the other hand, the primary school (B) was situated in the multicultural and diverse locality of East London. Although Muslim communities in East London are well-established and integrated, challenges such as limited access to educational infrastructure, discrimination, Islamophobia, and socio-economic disparities continue to pose difficulties for these communities. Overall, the two distinct demographics enhance the diversity and cross-validation of the data, providing a more nuanced understanding of the similarities and differences between the two settings.

Thirdly, the research covers a sufficient range of educational tiers by focusing on one primary and one secondary setting. This approach enabled the analysis of pupils' behaviours, experiences, perceptions, and personalities, alongside an exploration of the cross-generational gaps and similarities with their parents. This multi-tiered approach enriched the collected data, adding depth and vigour to the overall findings, as discussed above.

A key limitation of the research was related to issues surrounding access, not only due to the lack of prior relationships between the researcher and the settings but also because of the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this challenge was mitigated through the development of a comprehensive plan for negotiating access, as fully described in Chapter 3.5 of the methodology.

6.6 Concluding remarks and further major contributions

This research offers original contributions to the discourse on Islamic schools, which I summarise below from three overlapping aspects. Based on the ethnographic research findings across the two Islamic private schools, this study found that these schools play a crucial role in providing an inclusive space for both pupils and staff, offering protection and mitigating the pressures and challenges faced by Muslims and minorities in mainstream schools. Through their curriculum and school environment, they not only nurture and promote a multi-dimensional identity but also preserve their ethno-cultural values and ethos. Unlike some studies that suggest such schools promote exclusivity and limit critical thinking (Hand, 2012), these schools, through the provision of a holistic education, promote both educational values and spiritual and moral development within a multicultural setting.

There was evidence of managerial, financial, logistical, and professional issues and challenges across both settings. As such, these schools are in the process of evolving, and over time, they have the potential to mature, professionalise, and overcome these challenges. The Islamisation of Knowledge was found to be an important theory for achieving the aims of an Islamic private school. On the other hand, the lack of a standardised Islamised curriculum was a fundamental issue identified by this research, which requires further attention and debate from curriculum designers and stakeholders. Similar findings have been noted in other studies, such as those conducted in the United States (Elbih, 2012).

This study makes a significant and original contribution by offering a refined conceptual framework for understanding Islamic private schools, parental decision-making, and the construction of Muslim identity within the broader context of British education. While previous scholarship has often addressed Muslim identity in abstract or generalised terms, this research provides a more nuanced account of how identity is actively shaped and negotiated at the intersection of educational practice, cultural values, and both parental and societal expectations. A central contribution lies in the analysis of how British values are interpreted, internalised, or resisted by students and educators

within Islamic schooling environments. The study demonstrates that Islamic schools function not only as educational institutions but also as complex sites of agency, resistance, and the rearticulation—or sanitisation—of Islamic traditions and representations. By foregrounding both internal dynamics (such as religious curriculum and cultural transmission) and external pressures (including state policies and public discourses around integration and national identity), the research offers a detailed exploration of how Muslim identities are constructed, negotiated, and at times contested within educational settings. This multifaceted approach advances existing literature by bridging theoretical and empirical gaps, and by highlighting the lived experiences of Muslim communities navigating the tensions between faith-based education and broader societal expectations in contemporary Britain.

Unlike Merry (2007)'s study, an additional value added by this research lies in the argument that, as stated by opponents of Islamic schools, these schools do not solely promote and nurture an Islamic identity but also foster a social, political, and ethno-religious identity that is fundamental to their pupils' well-being, pride, development, and social cohesion (Mahmood, 2009; Modood, 2007). Muslim British students and teachers often expressed a sense of national identity and citizenship in Islamic schools, where they could take pride in their cultural and religious heritage. In contrast, in mainstream schools, Islamophobic rhetoric and bullying often suppress and marginalise such expressions of pride (Meer, 2013).

The findings of this research suggest that Islamic private schools studied are not neutral; rather, they are actively used as cultural, political, and sociological hubs for shaping, reshaping, and maintaining a strong multi-dimensional identity for Muslims, while crafting positive narratives about Islam. While previous studies referred to Muslim hyphenated identities as coping mechanisms for Muslim youths in the West (Sirin & Fine, 2008; Duderija, 2008), this research found that such hybrid and fluid identities are not only used as coping and protective mechanisms against anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant forces within mainstream schools and broader societies, but they are also

embraced as celebratory and empowering, associated with a sense of pride, confidence, and belonging.

Furthermore, the data revealed that Islamic schools are also utilised as spaces for the formation and exercise of identity politics, agency, negotiation, and resistance—not only towards the dominant narrative but also towards Islamic and cultural traditions, as well as family expectations and gender relations.

Overall, This research offers a new conceptual and empirical framework for understanding Muslim private schools, parental decision-making, and the construction of Muslim identity within the context of British education. While existing literature has acknowledged the diversity of Muslim identities in Britain (e.g., Meer, 2010; Hopkins, 2011), much of this work approaches identity formation in broad socio-political terms. My study departs from this trend by focusing on the educational space and environment as a crucial site where Muslim identities are actively constructed, contested, and negotiated.

Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasise identity as a response to Islamophobia or multicultural policy (Shain, 2011; Hussain & Bagguley, 2012), my research offers a micro-sociological lens that highlights the intersection of educational practices, cultural and religious values, and parental and societal expectations. Drawing on qualitative data from Islamic schools, the study unpacks how British values are interpreted, internalised, resisted, or reframed by Muslim students and educators. In doing so, it provides original insights into the day-to-day practices within these schools that contribute to the shaping of various aspect of identities.

This research also foregrounds the role of Muslim private schools not merely as passive transmitters of religious knowledge, but as active sites of agency, resistance, and cultural negotiation (Miah, 2016; Dwyer & Parutis, 2013). I show how these schools are used by parents and educators as spaces to counteract negative media representations and securitised narratives surrounding Islam, while also engaging in processes of internal reform, cultural and religious sanitisation, and moral boundary-making. This dual function—resistance and self-regulation—marks a critical departure from earlier studies that have often

depicted faith schools as socially insular or politically disengaged (Baker & Glasser, 2007; Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2017).

Furthermore, by exploring both internal dynamics (e.g., religious curricula, sectarian affiliations, cultural heritage) and external pressures (e.g., national educational policy, the Prevent agenda, social integration discourses), my research offers a more nuanced understanding of identity as relational, contextual, and processual. This theoretical framing contributes to contemporary debates in the sociology of education and identity politics, and speaks to broader questions about multiculturalism, belonging, and the negotiation of citizenship in neoliberal, postcolonial Britain (Yuval-Davis, 2011; Modood, 2019).

Overall, this study enriches the literature by moving beyond static or oppositional models of Muslim identity to offer a context-sensitive analysis that accounts for the multi-layered and sometimes contradictory ways in which Muslim identity is lived and shaped in educational spaces. It responds to calls for more grounded, empirical research on the lived experiences of Muslims in Britain (Archer, 2010; Gholami, 2015), and provides a valuable resource for educators, policymakers, and scholars interested in inclusive education, minority schooling, and the politics of recognition.

6.7 Perspective for future research

Further studies in the field of Islamic private schools could explore several promising directions. There is a need for additional research into the ways in which Islamic private schools evolve and develop, and how they contribute to the holistic development of Muslim pupils. Furthermore, comparative research is needed to examine the similarities and differences between Islamic private schools and other types of faith-based or secular educational institutions. Such studies could offer insights into the unique contributions and challenges faced by faith schools in general, and Islamic schools in particular, within the broader educational landscape.

Additionally, future research could explore the various aspects of identities within Islamic private schools, considering factors such as gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and religious adherence. Understanding how these intersecting identities shape educational experiences and outcomes could provide valuable insights for developing strategies to promote inclusivity and equity within Islamic schools.

Lastly, as societal debates surrounding multiculturalism, secularism, and religious freedoms continue to evolve, there is a need for ongoing research that critically engages with these discourses in the context of Muslims' educational needs in general, and Islamic private schools in particular. This could involve interdisciplinary studies drawing on insights from sociology, education, law, and religious studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics at play.

By addressing these avenues for future research, scholars can contribute to a deeper understanding of the religious nature of Islamic private schools in the United Kingdom, their significance for Muslim communities, and their implications for educational policy and broader societal debates.

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Appendix A: Letter/email for requesting access to conduct research

To: [redacted]
From: Sulaiman Haqpana, Doctoral researcher, Department of Education, Brunel University of London
Date: 8th November 2021
Re: Requesting permission to conduct a PhD research in your school

Dear sister, Asalamualikom.

I am Sulaiman Haqpana, a postgraduate student at Brunel University of London, where I am pursuing a PhD in the department of Education. My research is part of the Grand Union Doctoral Partnership (GUDTP), a collaboration between Oxford, Brunel, and the Open Universities. I'd like to respectfully request your permission to conduct my research at your institution.

The title of my research is: "'An exploration of the religious nature of Islamic private schools.' 'What makes a school "Islamic" and why does it matter?'
My research's main goal is to study the religious nature of Islamic private schools and determine their significance to Muslim parents, communities and stakeholders. The research will take place Between February 2022 until July 2022. This study employs a qualitative ethnographic approach. Through observations, documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews, and focused group discussions, I intend to visit your school and spend some time there in order to understand and analyse the culture and environment of your school and to find out what makes your school Islamic and why does it matter. Observations of the participant in various settings such as classrooms, playgrounds, and prayer venues are critical for this ethnographic research, which cannot be done remotely. For an ethnographic research, I need to experience and witness the participants' lived experiences, their interactions and communication, as well as the unspoken/untold aspects of the curriculum and pedagogy. Documentary analysis includes hanging materials, curricular guidelines, and other educational objects in classrooms, staffrooms, and corridors, and requires physical presence inside the school to observe and analyse. I intend to conduct face-to-face interviews with officials, teachers, pupils and parents while taking into account all COVID-19 safety protocols and measures. I also plan to hold focused group discussions with minors and have them either to draw pictures of what they like and dislike about their school, what they enjoy the most and what is their favourite subject, or to discuss it orally. This exercise will be conducted with minors in year 1-2 (5-6 years old). As your students are familiar with Halaqa (Circle) system, focused group discussions will be conducted in a similar to Halaqa sitting to create a child-friendly environment in the presence of a class teacher for safe-guarding reasons. Interviews will be conducted with mature pupils who are older than 6 years old.

Parents' consent will be sought from students who wish to participate. In addition, children consent will also be obtained for pupils who wish to participate in interviews. Through safeguarding, ethical, and data protection measures, the schools' and all participants' identities will be protected. Participants will be given the interview transcripts to examine and (re)confirm before they are used. The findings of the research will be shared with you, Association for Muslim Schools in the United Kingdom (AMS-UK), Muslim parents, Mosques and other relevant communities. I hope that the findings of this study will provide a clear image of the goals, purposes, and nature of Islamic private schools. It shall also benefit educationalists, researchers and policy makers at some point in the future.

It would be great to meet you and discuss my study in greater detail. I respectfully request that you grant me with the opportunity to meet.

Looking forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes,

Sulaiman Haqpana
Doctoral Researcher
Department of Education
College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences
Brunel University London

Appendix B: Letter of approval from Schools to conduct research

[redacted]

Permission letter for ethical research

Dear Sulaiman,

We would like to confirm our permission for you to conduct your ethical research with[redacted]. We will be happy to assist you by making the necessary staff and students available. Please let us know of dates in advance and if there is anything else you need.

Kind regards,

[redacted]

[redacted]

From: [redacted]
Date: Monday, 6 December 2021 at 10:19
To: "Sulaiman Haqpana (Doctoral Researcher)" <Sulaiman.Haqpana@brunel.ac.uk>
Subject: RE: Request for Access letter,

Wa alaikum assalaam,

Pray this email reaches you in good health and emaan.

We give permission for you to conduct your research at our school.

We are privileged you selected our school for you research.

Kind regards,

Appendix C: Approval for Ethical Application from BREO

College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
Brunel University London
Kingston Lane
Uxbridge
UB8 3PH
United Kingdom

www.brunel.ac.uk

17 February 2022

LETTER OF APPROVAL

APPROVAL HAS BEEN GRANTED FOR THIS STUDY TO BE CARRIED OUT BETWEEN 17/02/2022 AND 30/09/2023

Applicant (s): Mr Sulaiman Haqpana

Project Title: 'An exploration of the religious nature of Islamic private schools.' 'What makes a school "Islamic" and why does it matter?'

Reference: 33116-MHR-Feb/2022- 37929-2

Dear Mr Sulaiman Haqpana

The Research Ethics Committee has considered the above application recently submitted by you.

The Chair, acting under delegated authority has agreed that there is no objection on ethical grounds to the proposed study. Approval is given on the understanding that the conditions of approval set out below are followed:

- **The agreed protocol must be followed. Any changes to the protocol will require prior approval from the Committee by way of an application for an amendment.**
- **Please ensure that you monitor and adhere to all up-to-date local and national Government health advice for the duration of your project.**

Please note that:

- Research Participant Information Sheets and (where relevant) flyers, posters, and consent forms should include a clear statement that research ethics approval has been obtained from the relevant Research Ethics Committee.
- The Research Participant Information Sheets should include a clear statement that queries should be directed, in the first instance, to the Supervisor (where relevant), or the researcher. Complaints, on the other hand, should be directed, in the first instance, to the Chair of the relevant Research Ethics Committee.
- Approval to proceed with the study is granted subject to receipt by the Committee of satisfactory responses to any conditions that may appear above, in addition to any subsequent changes to the protocol.
- The Research Ethics Committee reserves the right to sample and review documentation, including raw data, relevant to the study.
- If your project has been approved to run for a duration longer than 12 months, you will be required to submit an annual progress report to the Research Ethics Committee. You will be contacted about submission of this report before it becomes due.
- You may not undertake any research activity if you are not a registered student of Brunel University or if you cease to become registered, including abeyance or temporary withdrawal. As a deregistered student you would not be insured to undertake research activity. Research activity includes the recruitment of participants, undertaking consent procedures and collection of data. Breach of this requirement constitutes research misconduct and is a disciplinary offence.

Professor David Gallear

Chair of the College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Brunel University London

Appendix D: Participant information Sheet

“'An exploration of the religious nature of Islamic private schools.'
'What makes a school "Islamic" and why does it matter?'

You are invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to listen the following information carefully. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.’
This research is for a PhD programme at Brunel University of London's Department of Education. The research will last from February 2022 through December 2023. The main purpose of this research is to explore, unpack and analyse the religious nature of Islamic private schools in the United Kingdom. In a way to explore what makes a school Islamic and why does it matter both for the Muslim community and for the British educational system. Curriculum and Pedagogy; Parents' and school authorities' intentions and ideals; and the outcome and consequences of Islamic curriculum and Islamic schooling in general are three interconnected subjects that I aim to study.
Your inclusion in this study is based on your voluntary participation. Other participants will be involved, such as (5-10 teachers), (10-15 parents), or (15-25 pupils). All participants must be active Islamic private school teachers, officials, students, or pupil's parents. The age range of the participants is from 5 years old to older parents/teachers.

As participation is entirely voluntary, it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and you may be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time up until [16/12/2023] and without having to give a reason.
Teachers, officials (head teachers, deputy head teachers, principals, curriculum designers), and parents will be interviewed for up to one hour, while pupils will be interviewed for 25 to 40 minutes. Interviews will be used to conduct the study. I'll ask you a few questions about the ethos, curriculum, principles, and aims of the Islamic private school, and I expect you to give me honest and clear answers. The interviews will be audio recorded using a digital recorder, and I will show you how to pause or stop the recorder at any moment throughout the interview if necessary.
This study does not impose any restrictions on your daily activity. Despite the time you devote to this interview, there are no other disadvantages or risks associated with this study. As with any other face-to-face interaction, there is a risk of COVID-19 transmission. However, before to, during, and after the interviews, I aim to comply with Covid-19 secure measures. To reduce the risk of Covid transmission, I have received two vaccines with booster, and I also do a Covid-19 test before to each visit to the school.

There are no immediate benefits to participating in this study. The findings of this study will help you, your child/family, or other Muslim parents who send their children to Islamic private schools gain a better understanding of the religious nature, ethos, and environment of Islamic private schools. Educators, academics, and educational policymakers at Islamic private schools will

benefit greatly from the findings. It will also explore a better understanding of the significance, ethos and values of Islamic private schools.

If something goes wrong or you don't want to continue the interview, you have the full right to withdraw or not continue. During the interview, you can always stop/pause the recorder. You have until 16th December 2022 to withdraw your answers after the study. If you have any further concerns or complaints, please contact Professor Maria Tsouroufli at Maria.Tsouroufli@brunel.ac.uk or Professor David Gallear, Chair of the Brunel Ethics Committee, at David.Gallear@brunel.ac.uk.
The researcher will keep all of your responses and data confidential. Your identity or name will not be revealed or utilised in any way. If necessary, pseudonym will be used. All of the data (audio and transcripts) will be kept on a password-protected computer and kept totally confidential for the next 5 years following the study's completion. All data will be erased after 5 years. If during the course of the research evidence of harm or misconduct come to light, then it may be necessary to break confidentiality. We will tell you at the time if we think we need to do this, and let you know what will happen next.

All the interviews will be recorded by a Zoom H4nPro audio recorder. The audio formats of the interviews will be safely stored in a password-protected desktop computer located at my home and a copy will be saved in a protected external hard drive. All the transcriptions of the interview will also be stored in the same password protected computer as well as external hard drive.
The findings of the study will be compiled into a PhD dissertation. At a later stage, portions of the research findings may be used in publications such as journal articles or conferences. I intend to submit my dissertation by 30th September 2023. If you wish to receive a copy, you should be able to download it from Brunel University research archive (BURA) at: https://bura.brunel.ac.uk/handle/2438/8587/simple-search?

This researched is sponsored by Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) through Grand Union Doctoral Training Partnership (GUDTP). However, Brunel University London provides appropriate insurance cover for research which has received ethical approval. This research has been reviewed and approved by the Brunel University London Research Ethics Committee for the College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee Chair – Professor David Gallear (David.Gallear@brunel.ac.uk)

Brunel University London is committed to compliance with the Universities UK Research Integrity Concordat. You are entitled to expect the highest level of integrity from the researchers during the course of this research.
For further information please contact me (Sulaiman Haqpana) at Sulaiman.haqpana@brunel.ac.uk or my Supervisor: Professor Maria T Tsouroufli at Maria.Tsouroufli@brunel.ac.uk

Appendix E: Children information Sheet

Hello, my name is Sulaiman Haqpana. I am a university student. I want to learn new things and I want to know about your school and find out why it is called……. Islamic private school. I also want to learn what you like and what you don't like about your school, what is your favourite subject in the school and what you enjoy the most in the class and also in your school.

I want to collect information called research. I want to invite you to take part in my research. You can talk to someone you trust about this if you wish.

You do not have to take part. If you say 'No' then that is OK. It is your choice.

If you say 'Yes' then I will meet you with your Mum/Dad or your teacher. I will chat to you about my research and you can ask me more questions if you wish.

If you tell me 'Yes' and then change your mind and don't want to take part at any time, that is OK too. You don't have to tell me why you changed your mind.

You can also draw pictures and talk to me about it, if you don't want to answer directly.

I will not ask or use your real name. I write notes and then lock whatever you tell me in a computer which has a password, so that no one else can see or read that information.

I will use a recorder machine (which can record our voice only) so that I can remember what you tell me, when we talk.

Taking part in my research will help people to know what makes a school Islamic, and why it is important to study in these schools. You can ask me questions, stop me, and you can also tell me you don't want to take part anytime you wish.

I will then write about what I learned and tell my teacher, who is also called a supervisor. I can also send you information about what I learned from you and your friends but, you will not know who said what and your friends will not know what you told me.

People from my University which is called Brunel, looked into this paper to make sure it is safe for me to chat to you and get information from you. If you feel there is a problem, you can ask me questions or talk to your teacher about it.

Do you understand everything or no. Circle one.

👍**YES……** 👎 **NO……..**

IF you circled NO, please show me which part you didn't understand, and I explain again

Appendix F: Adult particpants' CONSENT FORM

"'An exploration of the religious nature of Islamic private schools.' 'What makes a school "Islamic" and why does it matter?'
Sulaiman Haqpana
APPROVAL HAS BEEN GRANTED FOR THIS STUDY TO BE CARRIED OUT BETWEEN 21/02/2022 AND 16/12/2022

The participant (or their legal representative) should complete the whole of this sheet.		
	YES	NO
Have you read the Participant Information Sheet?	☐	☐
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study? (via email/phone for electronic surveys)	☐	☐
Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions? (via email/phone for electronic surveys)	☐	☐
Who have you spoken to about the study?		
Do you understand that you will not be referred to by name in any report concerning this study?	☐	☐
Do you understand that:		
• You are free to withdraw from this study at any time	☐	☐
• You don't have to give any reason for withdrawing	☐	☐
• Choosing not to participate or withdrawing will not affect your access to services?	☐	☐
• You can withdraw your data any time up to 16/12/2022	☐	☐
I agree to my interview being audio recorded	☐	☐
I agree to the use of non-attributable quotes when the study is written up or published	☐	☐
The procedures regarding confidentiality have been explained to me	☐	☐
I agree that my anonymised data can be stored and shared with other researchers for use in future projects.	☐	☐
I agree to take part in this study.	☐	☐

Signature of research participant:	
Print name:	Date:

Appendix G: Children participant's CONSENT FORM

"'An exploration of the religious nature of Islamic private schools.' 'What makes a school "Islamic" and why does it matter?' Sulaiman Haqpana
APPROVAL HAS BEEN GRANTED FOR THIS STUDY TO BE CARRIED OUT BETWEEN 21/02/2022 16/12/2022

The participant (or their legal representative) should complete the whole of this sheet.		
	YES	NO
Have you read the Participant Information Sheet?	☐	☐
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study? (via email/phone for electronic surveys)	☐	☐
Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions? (via email/phone for electronic surveys)	☐	☐
Who have you spoken to about the study?		
Do you understand that you will not be referred to by name in any report concerning this study?	☐	☐
Do you understand that:		
• You are free to withdraw from this study at any time	☐	☐
• You don't have to give any reason for withdrawing	☐	☐
• Choosing not to participate or withdrawing will not affect your access to services?	☐	☐
• You can withdraw your data any time up to 16/12/2022	☐	☐
I agree to my interview being audio recorded	☐	☐
I agree to the use of non-attributable quotes when the study is written up or published	☐	☐
The procedures regarding confidentiality have been explained to me	☐	☐
I agree that my anonymised data can be stored and shared with other researchers for use in future projects.	☐	☐
I agree to take part in this study.	☐	☐

Signature of research participant:	
Print name:	Date:
Witness Statement	
I am satisfied that the above-named has given informed consent.	
Witness signature:	
Print name:	Date:

Appendix H: Head/deputy Head teacher, curriculum designer- Interview guide

About the nature, aims and ethos of Islamic private schools:

1. What makes a school 'Islamic' and Why does it matter?
2. As the principal/headteacher/deputy head teacher of this school, what are your mission, vision, and goals?
3. How do you think 'Islamic' private schools differ from mainstream schools in general? What distinguishes your school from others?
4. What are some of the major advantages and challenges you believe your pupils face at your school? Please provide some specific examples.
5. What do you think the needs of Muslim students are, and how well are they met at your school?
6. What are your thoughts on mainstream public schools? Do you believe they will be able to meet the demands of their Muslim students? If so, how so, and if not, why not?
7. Do you believe the goal of 'Islamic' education, and Islamic schooling in general, is sufficient or should be revised?
8. What kind of activities are your students allowed, and what activities are not permitted in your school?
9. What are your thoughts on gender-based segregation in Islamic schools? Do you segregate your students based on gender?
10. What are Muslim parents' most fundamental expectations of your school, and specifically of you?

Do you have any specific financial, leadership, or management challenges at your school that you'd want to share?

About the 'Islamic' education curriculum

11. How does your curriculum differ from that of a mainstream school? And, Is there anything distinctive and unique about your 'Islamic' education curriculum?
12. Who designed your 'Islamic' education curriculum and how?
13. What intentions and values inform your choice of curriculum, and how it is justified?
14. How does your school nurtures an Islamic identity in its everyday activities outside of lesson times?
15. What methods are used to assess students in 'Islamic' education curriculum?
16. What suggestions do you have for improving or expanding the 'Islamic' education curriculum?

About the effect/impact of Islamic school and Islamic education in particular?

17. Is Islamic education, in particular, and Islamic schooling in general, in your opinion, compatible with British society?
18. How do you correlate Islamic schooling with the broader society? Do you think the Islamic curriculum are relevant to the lives of Muslims in the United Kingdom?
19. How your school prepare Muslim pupils to transmit to other forms of non-religious educational spaces such as secondary, college or university?
20. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix I: Teacher's interview guide

About the nature, aims and ethos of Islamic private schools:

1. What makes a school 'Islamic' and Why does it matter?
2. How do you think 'Islamic' private schools differ from mainstream schools in general? What distinguishes your school from others?
3. What are some of the major advantages and challenges you face at your school? Please provide some specific examples.
4. What factors influenced your decision to teach at an Islamic private school?
5. What do you think the needs of Muslim students are, and how well are they met at your school?
6. What are your thoughts on gender-based segregation in Islamic schools? Do you segregate your students based on gender?
7. What are Muslim parents' most fundamental expectations of your school, and specifically of you?

About the 'Islamic' education curriculum

8. What would be the best teaching strategy for your subject? What do you think your approach's strengths are, as well as any potential weakness?
9. What method do you use for your student's assessment?
10. What are some of the major advantages and challenges you believe your pupils face in the classroom? Please provide some specific examples.
11. What recommendations do you have for improving the Islamic education curriculum or pedagogy?
12. How does your curriculum differ from that of a mainstream school? And How does Islamic education, in particular, and Islamic schooling in general, influence and shape the religious identity of students?

About the effect/impact of Islamic school and Islamic education in particular?

13. How do you believe Islamic education prepares students to integrate in the broader society? Please provide some examples.
14. How your school prepare Muslim pupils to transmit to other forms of non-religious educational spaces such as secondary, college or university?
15. Is there anything else you would like to say about your teaching experience that could help with this study?

Appendix J: Students' interview or FGD guide

About the nature, aims and ethos of Islamic private schools:

1. How do you feel about studying in a private Islamic school? Do you like it?
2. What is your opinion on the overall school environment?
3. Why do you think your parents choose the school you attend? Which reasons do you think are the most important for them?
4. What aspects of your school have you learned to enjoy and value? And is there any challenge you face?
5. What do you like the most about your school? And is there anything you don't like about it?

About the 'Islamic' education curriculum

6. What is your favourite subject? And why is that?
7. What do you think about Islamic education subject?
8. What do you think about the way your teachers teach you?
9. What is your favourite activity in the school or in the classroom?
10. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Appendix K: Parents Interview guide

1. What factors influenced your decision to send your child(ren) to an Islamic private school, and what are the most essential ones?
2. Do all of your children currently attend an Islamic private school, or do you intend for them to do so in the future? Why? Please elaborate.
3. What is your opinion on the overall school environment?
4. Are you satisfied with the choice you made for your child(ren)? Please explain how and why?
5. How important do you think Islamic education is for young people today? Why?
6. What are the advantages and disadvantages of sending your child(ren) to an Islamic private school?
7. What do you like the most about your child(ren) ‘s school? And is there anything you believe could be better?
8. Do you believe that Islamic schooling is compatible with the British society? If yes, how, and if not, why not?
9. What role do you believe the school has in the formation of your child's religious identity?
10. Is there anything else about Islamic private schools that you'd like to say?

Appendix L: Transcription of an Adult participant (02 Deputy Head teacher)

About the nature, aims and ethos of Islamic private schools:

Q1. What makes a school 'Islamic' and why does it matter?

A1. What makes a school is the fact that our whole curriculum, we try and make as many links as we can to Islam, so the children get a balanced viewpoint about whatever their main thoughts. Where we can make a link, the children will be thought obviously will be based on the national curriculum, but we also add in the Quran about that topic or any values that we can make. Islamic values we can add to that topic. We also make sure the children understand the Islamic point of view of it as well as knowing the standard national curriculum point of view.

Q2. As the deputy head teacher at this school, what are your mission, vision, and goals?

A2. For me the main thing is the children leave the school with a broad and balanced idea and identity about the Islam. They can be whatever they want but still know their routes and know that they can be proud Muslims. That you can leave in a society mixed with everyone and have respect for everyone and achieve your goals. Your religion or background should never prohibit you or stop you from achieving those goals.

Q3. How do you think 'Islamic' private schools differ from mainstream schools in general? What distinguishes your school from others?

A3. The fact that we can manipulate the curriculum, and we have got the choice of what we want to keep and what we don't want to teach; the values that we wanna add to the curriculum, is not restrictive. so, all these ideas that we have or the Islamic values or the Islamic links that we make, we can freely make those. Because we are allowed to do that and why not. If we think it can enrich the curriculum, we would do that so that our children can get the best of both worlds. Some of the things that we teach here, you will never get to hear them in the state schools, in the mainstream schools. I have been a mainstream schoolteacher, so I know. The curriculum there is very strict, and its exactly what you need to teach. But here, we can look at that, and say we can teach that, but we can add this viewpoint to it. So that the children get a far better and deeper understanding of what they are being thought.

Q4. What are some of the major advantages and challenges you believe your pupils face at your school? Please provide some specific examples.

A4. The advantage is that they can freely be Muslim here and be proud of that, the fact that they can talk about their religion, not just their religion, other religions, cause again the whole in our curriculum is all about respect that we respect all religions. That is something that is always thought and reminded and the fact that we make links to other religions that we are very similar as well in certain things but there are some differences, but those differences are beautiful, and we respect those. So the advantage is that we can open doors and open their minds to so much more than just small ideas, if you know what I mean. We can relate to what's happening around the world and talk about those things, so the children would understand about the outside world and not just what it is in the school building.

Q4.1 And are there challenges that your student face in their school?

A4. Maybe the class size and their resources could be a challenge or something that hinder, because we don't have huge classes. The classes size are bigger than the normal, but we try to compensate that with adding and extra adult (teacher assistant) there. Because they are big classes, maybe their voice is not always heard because of the size of the class. We try to meet all their needs, but again, I would be honest, because some children are quiet, they get over shadowed and maybe their needs are not always met, unless something happens for us to then notice it.

Q5. What do you think the needs of Muslim students are, and how well are they met at your school?

A5. Again because we know the class size are bigger, by having extra adults we take on students, we take on volunteers, purely so that we can place them with the children that we recognise and identity who may have certain needs. We make sure that when we take people on, we interview the volunteers and students that we know what their strengths are and then we match their strengths with the needs of our children. So if there are certain students volunteer who are really good at maths, we would try and get them to work with children in maths intervention groups, identity children who are struggling in maths so that we can provide that support. Again, the same thing with English and other subjects.

Q6. What are your thoughts on mainstream public schools? Do you believe they will be able to meet the demands of their Muslim students? If so, how so, and if not, why not?

A6. From my experience, I worked in a mainstream school that was ninety nine percent Muslim and I have been teaching for twenty years, first I want to say ten years of my teaching carrier, it was very celebrated, and all religions were celebrated, but when it came to Muslim celebrations, it was a big thing because the school's majority were Muslims. Therefore, it was natural to do the big celebrations and assemblies. But then over time, I would say after ten years, when new head came in with new ideas, things changed. I felt that, that aspect was taken out, as they didn't wanna add any religion to the school, and celebrations were very minimal. Things like Eid was not a big deal as it would have been before.

Q6.1 And was that due to the change of leadership, from Muslim to non-Muslim?

A6.1 The leadership was always non-Muslim, but it was the changes that were made over time, and we saw that things were declining. Eid was non-existent, Eid assemblies were non-existent, but they still have Christmas assemblies, cause that was the norm to have Christmas. So, I did see a big change over time, where slowly things were taken out and become less and less.

Q7. Do you believe the goal of 'Islamic' education, and Islamic schooling in general, is sufficient or should be revised?

A7. What we are doing at the moment, I think it is a great start, but we can always improve it better, but the fact that we are looking into our curriculum in detail and try our very best to find ways of bringing Islam into our curriculum. I think it is a great start, and from what I have seen over time, I have been 7 years I have been here, it is just getting better and better. Because our knowledge is getting better, our experiences are getting better way we can then evaluate what went well, and what is

not going well. I would say it could only get better and there is always room for improvement.

Q8. What kind of activities are your students allowed, and what activities are not permitted in your school?

A8. I mean all activities we do and everything that you would see and children at state schools do, but there are differences would be for example, we wouldn't play music and instruments and that is not something that we encourage, so things will be done through vocals, we still do lots of singing is part of our school practice so things like that, but we do out instruments and that is one of thing that we don't allow. Apart from that, I mean all kinds of expressive arts, we do everything in the most Halal (allowed) way we can so children are not missing out on key skills and experiences, but we just make sure that whatever we doing, we are not sending out a wrong message.

Q9. What are your thoughts on gender-based segregation in Islamic schools? Do you segregate your students based on gender?

A9. No, we don't, they are too young for that. That is not needed at this moment. This moment is all about socialising and learning how to interact with each other. That will come later on when they have the understanding of things, when they can reach the age of puberty, when they will then have to think about those kinds of issues about their feelings toward opposite sex, so but not in primary school.

Q9.1 So, if this was a secondary school, would you segregate based on gender?

A9.1 I personally wouldn't, because I feel the more you segregate, the more they want to know about it, even more. They become more curious. But when its mixed and they know their boundaries, I think it is better, because that is when they don't miss something that is restrictive for them. That is my personal thinking. Yeah, the curiosity kills the cat, because when they walk out of school, they gonna be in that environment. So, its still the same and social media now, even if they don't mix in school, they can mix and meet in social media so how much restriction can you put. I would say that as long as they are thought about the reasons why we do certain things, if they could understand, hopefully Inshallah (gods' willing), with time, they would understand what it means to keep lower your gaze, the respect, it will come naturally to them.

Q10. What are Muslim parents' most fundamental expectations of your school, and specifically of you?

A10. Their expectation in the beginning and when they first come in, a-lot of it is about learning Quran, how much Quran are they (their kids) going to learn? How many Juzm (chapter) they are going to memorise? That's their expectation. However, they want a safe environment for this kids. But when we actually set them down and show them our curriculum and when we explain the reasons why we teach what we teach, the fact that we want them to understand the Quran, more than just recite it, and learn it and not know it. Then they understand our vision that we want the children to be living and breathing the Quran in the best way possible, not just reciting something but don't knowing what it means, and therefore it would have impact on their character. We want to build their character through understanding the Quran.

Q10.1 Is there any expectation from you as deputy head teacher?

A10.1 To have good communication which I hope I am doing right. I haven't had any complain, but always having that communication with them. So, when we have struggles or when we celebrate things, we share that with our parents so they can support us in anyways they can, and we would be very transparent that this is how it is and we need your support. Where we cannot meet their demands, we will be open and honest to them, and we say this is something we cannot do at the moment.

Q11. Do you have any specific financial, leadership, or management challenges at your school that you'd want to share?

A11. Yes. Finance is always the cause of issues because our fees are not very very high and most of our parents are in low income. So therefore, whatever we get from the fees, it just about covers our school bills and salaries and things like that. When it comes to resources, we have to be very particular about what we need and then buy the things we need. We have to prioritise our orders and we cannot waste. That is why we have to be very mindful about things.

Q11.1Any challenge in regard to leadership and management you would think of?

A11.1 This is all I know because it is always just me and the head teacher, we never had anyone above us. We had people that come in as consultant, but because all I have known, I mean in comparison to other schools, yes there is more people in leadership, you have assistant heads, you have other members who you share works with. But with this role, it is quite a-lot to take on. I have learned as I have progressed, but it is a very difficult task cause, you are not just the deputy, you are the cleaner, you are the supply teacher, you are the mentor, you are the behaviour manager, you are the counsellor, there are so many jobs that go with the job.

About the 'Islamic' education curriculum

Q12. How does your curriculum differ from that of a mainstream school? And Is there anything distinctive and unique about your 'Islamic' education curriculum?

A12. Again, I would say, its not just learning the Quran or just memorising the Quran, we are actually teaching them what the meanings are behind these beautiful Hayas (Quranic verses), the Hadis and linking them to their actual learning, so it all makes sense so if they learn an aspect of values, for example, say, when we do black history month, or when we look at anti bullying week, or when we talk in about respecting others, instead of just looking into respect aspect, we would look at the last saying of our prophet Mohamad PBUH. So we integrate and we would say so this is the last saying of our prophet PBUH that he said 'no Arab is better than non-Arab'. How you should treat women. All these things that we thought under British values, they are already in Islam and they have always been there. So it reminding them and bring them to look this was 1400 years ago. It was'nt from the suffrages, Muslim women have had the rights and freedoms long before that and children need to know that.

Q13. Who designed your 'Islamic' education curriculum and how?

A13. It all came from the vision of our head-teacher. It started from her vision of what she wanted the curriculum to look like. And then obviously, I came along, and then Islamic study teachers came along and then it was a hard team collective work. We also had a leader's trip to Istanbul where we met other schools and we met some really pioneering lecturers and teachers who were doing some that kind of pioneering work in Istanbul. We were really inspired by the things we learn from them. We came

back with the ideas of what they were doing out there and that inspired us to look at our curriculum and really work on it and that's what we did and that was in 2017 when we did the big push after we came back from that trip.

Q14. What intentions and values inform your choice of curriculum, and how it is justified?

A14. The intention is that we want the children to love Islam, and the way to love Islam is to understand it; to know it; to live it and breath it; through school live as well as the curriculum. And if we can achieve that and children leave here with that kind of understanding that Islam is beautiful and it is not restrictive and I can do whatever I want in live and knowing who I am and keeping my identity, then I think that is our greatest achievement for us if we can encourage that among our children.

Q15. How does your school nurtures an Islamic identity in its everyday activities outside of lesson times?

A15. Again, its dealing with their behaviours, dealing with their emotions, so if they had a fall out or argument, it wouldn't just be, oh…say sorry to each other. we would say that, what would Islam say about when you forget and forgive, the rewards in it. It's those reminders, even little things, i-e when you are eating, you eat with your right hand, and you say Besmillah (I began with the name of God) before you eat. All those etiquettes that is a constant reminder to the children about how we behave, how we interact with each other, how we talk to each other. These are the most simplest things. like holding the doors for each other, picking up litter, when you pick something up, you take away something that is a potential harm for anyone, that is again something that you are rewarded for, and it is part of the Sunna to do these things. Any little thing like those (point to the board in the room) values of the week that we teach. Those values we don't wanna just teach them and that is it, we want them to implement them in their live. So the power of Duha (prayers) is something that hopefully the children will learn this week, and if they can implement that from next week where is the Ramadan (fasting month) and they do that, can you imagine the reward in that, that we have thought something so simple that I learned so much by just sitting in the assemblies, it really changed my live because there are a-lot of things that I didn't know. These values and ideas from our Ustad (teacher) I mean I implement in my daily lives like morning Adkars (prayers), how we start up our morning. Just all those beautiful reminders that if the children can take them on in their lives and remember those and implement them in their lives. What better reward then that.

Q16. What methods are used to assess students in 'Islamic' education curriculum?

A16. That is something we don't have a standard way of doing it. That is more form our Ustad, who whatever he is teaching, he keeps track of what is being thought. He will check on them about their recitation, he listens overtime and correct and if they pass that, they will be moved on the next one. There not really a kind of standard test, no.

Q17. What suggestions do you have for improving or expanding the 'Islamic' education curriculum?

Q17. If we were to assist the children, maybe come up with a proper assessment plan for each year group where we can assess the children based on what they have learned, and then identity gaps in learning through the assessment, to find where are

gaps in their learning so that we can improve on.

About the effect/impact of Islamic school and Islamic education in particular?

Q18. Is Islamic education, in particular, and Islamic schooling in general, in your opinion, compatible with British society?

A18. Yes, it is because again, when you go on about British values all the time, those British values are Islamic values as well. They go hand in hand, there is nothing that the British values say that isn't in Islam. So therefore, Yes, it is compatible and Islam teaches only goodness, and love, and peace. So, therefore that is what we are all about and what education should be about. So, I would say it just go hand in hand. There might be few restrictions here and there, and that is because the values might not always much, but it is about learning to respect those and move on from it, it shouldn't restrict you at all.

Q19. How do you correlate Islamic schooling with the broader society? Do you think the Islamic curriculum are relevant to the lives of Muslims in the United Kingdom?

Q20. How your school prepare Muslim pupils to transmit to other forms of non-religious educational spaces such as secondary, college or university?

A20. When year 6 are ready to slowly to transit, we invite secondary schools to come over, so that would not be only Muslim schools, mainstream schools they come. They talk to the students about their schools, so that the children's parent can make those applications. They go visit those schools. A lot of work that we do, we have projects where the children actually go in and visit other schools and mix with other children that are from mainstream schools. We have done a linking project in the past where we linked to another primary mainstream school and then their children came to our school, they wrote letters to each other. There were lots of activities and they got to meet other children. So, definitely through the experience we provide, I mean the children are not restrictive, we take them out for trips, and we encourage them to go to places, see things. That confidence is within them, so they are confident to go out and meet other children. From my experiences anyway, I never got any feedback where our children were not been able to settle in a mainstream school. In fact, we get lots of feedback that the children from our school are lovely and they are really moved on smoothly to the secondary school.

Q21. Is there anything else you would like to add?

A21. Just that I think, sometimes people underestimate private Muslim schools, I think they have these pre-conceived Idea that children come in and set on the floor, backing their head up and down and reading Quran, they have no idea about the world and is very very narrow minded which is so sad, because we have visitors who come in and they actually see the reality of the school and say 'wow, we did not know that Muslim schools are like this'. We ask them yeah what would you think? Oh, we thought it would be very strict, and the kids would not be smiley, happy and they are just sitting on the floor reading Quran. So that notion, I really like people to actually see how it really is. It is actually a lovely place where children are flourishing and learning, and it is not what these preconceived ideas that people have. So I would love for people to see that and change that view points of the Muslim schools. End.

Appendix M: Transcription of Focused group discussion (08-FGD-Pupil-01)

Q1. How do you feel about studying in a private Islamic school? Do you like it?
A1. (All crowed) yes.
(R-Boy) Usually, there is not many Islamic schools in the UK, and if you go to a London Muslim School, you learn about Islam and its more better of if we have different schools, so it will help people who have different religions.
(R-Boy) this school teaches about Islamic stuff. plus its a private school so the government won't be able to force the school to stop it. So they could teach Islamic stuff like pray without any distraction.
(R-Girl) I like our Islamic school, because in a non-Islamic school you only learn little bit of Islam, but in an Islamic school then we learn alot about our religion.
Q2. What is your opinion on the overall school environment?
A2. (R-Boy) It is good as most of the people have the same culture and it brings everyone together so that no-one is odd for us. Since we all Muslim, we get to do the same things like fasting only on year 5 and 6, and then we pray, and then we study the same things in our Islamic studies.
(R-Girl) it's actually fun, it's really good because after school we have clubs like boxing and Karate and games club and art clubs.
Q3. Why do you think your parents choose the school you attend? Which reasons do you think are the most important for them?
(R-Boy) I think my parents put me in this school because this is the only Islamic school near my house. There were non-muslim schools but my mom wanted me to have Islamic education.
(R-Boy) my mom or my parents wants me to grow up in an Islamic environment. They do'nt put me in a non-Islamic school as there are not a lot of Halal stuff.
(R-Girl) my parents put me here to help me to like have a great future.
(R-Boy) so if you are a little child and you are about to start school, obviously if you have some culture and religion, obviously your parents would love to have you in that school, but for some children we have to go to different schools, which can change their personality. I would say I came to this school, because my mom wants me to grow up in an Islamic environment. So, if I go to a non-Muslim school, it might change my personality; the way my future might be and how I am and my culture. Because mostly when you go to a non-Islamic school, it is not really the same as a Muslim school. You do'nt learn about Halal and Haram things. We learn about the Halal and Haram, we start doing our prayers, we learn more about the Islam which can lead us to the right path. But in any non-Muslim school, it can mostly lead us to the bad path.
(R-Girl) if we were in a non-Muslim school, we won't be able to pray Salah (prayer).
(R-Girl) My dad told me that he send me and my other siblings to an Islamic school to grow in an Islamic environment, when he could just send me to a state school that's right outside my house.
Q4. What aspects of your school have you learned to enjoy and value? And is there any challenge you face?
(R-boy) I enjoy playing football.
(R-girl) The best thing in the school is praying Salah (prayers) because in other schools we may not have that chance.
(R-Boy) the activities in our school that I like the most, for example playtime it can help me with a lot of stuff, and I love to play football, so it bring up the joy when we play and put smile in our faces. PE is good for all of us because it can help with our fitness and the environment. Since I am already an athlete, it will help me as well, because I am a judo and karate person out side of the school, and i am a footballer.
(R-Girl) I also like the Islamic studies lesson because you would learn more about the Islam.
Q4.1 Is there any challenge in the school, something that you wanted it to be better

for example.
(R-Boy) longer Playtime, because we need to go in play 5 minutes before the time, because now we go at 12 and its 5 minutes to walk, so we loose 10 minutes of our play time. So we should leave 5 minutes to 12 so we get there at 12 and start play, sometimes we loose 10 to 15 minutes. Sometimes our teacher take longer launch breaks and we loose our playtime, sometimes the take more then 45 minutes.
(R-Girl) because we do'nt have our own playground, that is why we loose our playtime to get there.
Q5. What do you like the most about your school? And is there anything you don't like about it?
(R-boy) PE and playtime.
(R-girl) I like maths.
(R-boy) I like arts and I do'nt really like science and English.
(R-girl) I like studying my religion and I dislike some other subjects.
(R-boy) I dislike, sometimes, when I want to go to toilet, I cannot go to the toilet, because the younger ones go to toilet and as they are practicsing, they can't really keep the toilet clean and leave the toilet dirty. I am struggling and sometimes its mission impossible.
(R-boy) sometimes the youngers, they put to much toilet paper and blocks the toilet, recently our toilet was flooded.

About the 'Islamic' education curriculum

Q6. What is your favourite subject? And why is that?
(R-boy) I like maths and arts, because I find maths easy and I like arts because its fun and I am a very good drawer.
(R-boy) I like the maths because I find it very easy.
(R-girl) I like maths and I like Islamic studies mainly because I want to learn more about my religion.
(R-boy) I like Islamic studies, because it does help me with my Islamic knowledge as well which I should know alot. I also like PE as most of our students struggle, but because I am an athlete, and I do Judo and boxing from three years old, it will be good for me and help with my fitness.
(R-boy) Me and few other ones are the only ones who knew how to do push ups, that is why my favourite subject is PE.
(R-girl) PE is my favourite subject.
Q7. What do you think about Islamic education subject?
(R-boy) I think its perfect, because from year 5 and 6 we slowly learning more about our religion, and we also learn how to talk arabic.
(R-boy) we also learn how to write sentences, and say the days and numbers in Arabic.
(R-girl) we can get to know our religion and learn more and basically practice our religion when we get older.
(R-boy) when you learn you learn and understand, but if you can you can teach to other people, as the Rasullah (the massager of God) PBUH said in a hadis "the best among people are the ones who learn and understand and teaches to others".
(R-boy) You know, Allah he does'nt needs perfect, he loves basics as well. I want to study Islam, not for anyone just for Allah so I learn fasting and on the day of judgment I do'nt have to go through any suffering. Also from Islamic studies you get to learn, how to read Quran, the Tajwid rules (proper reading) and also saying Arabic words like days, months and years and also to write sentences for example, Haza Qalamon (this is pen). Also, we want the Islamic Knowledge in our head to keep it in our head, because you never now, there could be someone that having a day challenge you over the religion, and you could proof it on, because if you are Muslim and just stand there, and if we have no knowledge in our head and we go to a non Muslim school, we can't do anything so it gonna look like we are useless.
(R-girl) I think it is important and fun at the same time. Sometimes we do posters and

competitions. Its important because we learn about our religion.
(R-boy) our Ustad (religious teacher) is the best Ustad I have ever known. His knowledge is amazing.
Q8. What do you think about the way your teachers teach you?
(R-boy) our Ustad (religious teacher) is the best Ustad I have ever known. His knowledge is amazing. He is the best Islamic teacher. He can beat many people. If there is a hundred people in a row trying to have a debate, he will finish them in a snap or a second.
(R-girl) our Ustad (Islamic education teacher) is a hafiz (memoriser) of the Quran.
(R-boy) I am also a Hafiz as well. I have memorised the 30 chapter of Quran.
(R-girl) And our Islamic teacher also knows alot of stories about the Prophet and his companions.
(R-) Our Ustad (religious teacher) is also very strict. But he has a clean heart and he is very humble. He is even a good footballer trust me, he can do a lot stuff but he keeps it inside. He is humble and not arrogant. There is a Hadis (prophets saying) that if you have one dot of arrogance you can still go to hell and not allowed to Janah (paradise).
(R-girl) that is why Shaytan (evil) was not allowed to enter the Janah (paradise) because of his arrogance.
(R-boy) Our main teachers are good, but student-teachers have their up side and down sides. Sometimes they are good. But mainly is good good, Alhamdullah (thanks to god) very good education.
Q9. What is your favourite activity in the school or in the classroom?
(R-boy) Assemblies, on Wednesday is our favourite activities. We do the 99 names of Allah. We do role-play and we explain about the name. When we do the role-play we explain as well.
(R-boy) Sometimes I like English, but sometimes I don't like it as its too much writing. But my favourite subject would be art. But my most favourite is the Islamic studies.
Q10. Is there anything else that you would like to add?
(R -boy) Do you want to hear my Quran recitation, I can do for you? Yeah sure. (Read the verses). He translated the verses what it's about.

Appendix N: fields (Observations) Morning Worship (17th March 2022 8:30)

- Students entering the mosque or prayer venue. Its a double size of a classroom.
- student sitting mixed boys and girls but girls tend to set close to girls and boys to boys.
- Ustad (Islamic education teacher) begins the morning worship session by greeting the students and reciting the prayers of Bismillah (I began in the name of Almighty god, the most compassionate and merciful).
- Teacher began talking what Allah (god) has given us, the theme of Clean or safe drinking water. Its important and the fact that we shall all be appreciative.
- It looks like a religious observance. All students signing a prayer in English. The themes are as follows: Allah is Ghafor (forgiver); Allah is Rahim (kind), Allah is the greatest, He is our creator.
- Teacher reading the other prayers such as Allahoma Sal e Allah Mohammad.
- Teacher reading more prayers and students repeating those prayers, in a way to memorise and recite collectively. These prayers are also used in every prayer that Muslims pray 5 times a day.
- After morning prayers, the Teacher points to the board and talk about the values of the week.
- The values of the week for this week is Dhikr (Optimism), respecting others, and respecting elders.
- Teacher relating the prayers to the concept of Optimism and feeling positive. How important it is to feel positive.
- Deputy teacher is taking the term to talk. She is linking the sunrise to optimism.
- deputy teacher relates the day of Juma (Friday) which is tomorrow to the concept of optimism and explain how Juma is a better day.
- Teacher continues talking about Optimism, and how we shall be thinking optimistic about every day, he also explains how we can have optimism about today and how we think and be hopeful that we have a great day.
- Deputy teacher, asking about the 99 names of Allah, out of yesterday's assembly. She asks students what new names they learned with their meaning.
- student mention few names and then explains their meanings. Students also link the meaning of the name to Allahs capacity for solving our problems. Students says for all problems we need to reach Allah.
- Deputy head teacher talks about some of the upcoming events and agenda. She also reminds students about the 2 weeks left for assessments.
- Deputy head teacher talks about some of the upcoming events and agenda. She also reminds students about the 2 weeks left for assessments.
- Deputy head teacher reminds year 5 and 6 students to work more on their math.
- Deputy head teacher, introduces me as: That is Brother Sulaiman, he is a PhD student at Brunel University, we all need to be respectful to our guest. He will be working in the school for few weeks and we will see him around.

- Deputy Head teacher, asks students about how they feel about their new pavement infant of the school. Students express their happiness and and say it looks great.
- The whole groups read the last Duha (prayers) ‘Sobhanua rabbika’ transalation is: "Glory to thy Lord the Lord, of Honour and Power! (He is free) from what they ascribe (to Him)! And Peace on the Messengers! And praise to Allah, the Lord and Cherisher of the Worlds." (Surah as-Saaffat, 180-182)
- Whole students queuing to go to their classes. The Morning prayer started 8:30 and ended 8:50.