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Syncretic literacy practices among Arab heritage students in Denmark

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ABSTRACT

This study inquires how students of Arab heritage in an urban setting in Denmark interpret Islamic literacy artefacts available in their homes, and how these interpretations reflect broader faith literacy practices in the students' diaspora community. Through a linguistic ethnographic study design students have been invited to photograph literacy artefacts of their own choice in their homes and to discuss these photos in group interviews. A framework of syncretic literacy practices with a focus on faith literacy practices is employed to analyse data. We discuss how faith literacies in diaspora communities are inherently multilingual practices as they include the language of religious texts and its various registers, the home language, and the mainstream language. As such, these literacy practices play an important role in the formation of students' transnational identities. Our findings indicate that syncretic literacy practice has the potential to contribute to improve the policies and curriculum of literacy education, as well as linguistic minority students' literacy learning.

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Introduction

In Denmark, the PISA scores across 2000–2018 suggest there is a gap between the reading performances of linguistic minority and majority students. A considerable number of educational reforms have been implemented during the past twenty years to diminish this gap. These reforms have emphasised 'competences, learning goals and learning outcomes, assessment and accountability with a corresponding downgrade of teaching, curricular content, and democratic *Bildung*' (Frønes et al. 2020, p. 308). Yet, the reforms have not provided linguistic minority students with better conditions for literacy learning. In its current understanding, literacy is not perceived only as a competence, but as a cultural, social, and syncretic practice (Barton and Hamilton 1998; Lytra, Gregory, et al. 2016). It refers to the ways children and youth actively combine, interpret, and transform their experiences with

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language and texts in the process of acquiring membership to different cultural communities. In the case of linguistic minority students, literacy practices gained at home inevitably intertwine with and affect literacy acquisition and socialisation at school and might include syncretism of various sorts related to home language and culture, such as faith literacy practices (Heath 1982; Gregory et al. 2004; Rosowsky 2006).

This article focuses on home literacy practices of teenage students of Arab heritage living in an urban setting in Denmark. We centre our analysis on the syncretic literacy events that refer to empirical ‘occasions in which written language is integral to the nature of participants’ interactions and their interpretive processes’ (Heath 1982, p. 50). Syncretic literacy events are embedded in broader literacy practices (Street 1984) in the students’ home environments across a diverse range of forms of print and artefacts, including faith literacies (Rosowsky 2015; Lytra, Volk, et al. 2016). As they interact with peers and family members at home and in their communities through these literacy practices, children engage in scaffolded interaction, guided participation or ‘interchange of knowledge and skills’ (Gregory et al. 2004; Rosowsky 2006; Volk 2013; Akhter 2016, p. 501; Lytra and Ilankuberan 2020).

Intergenerational learning around Islamic literacy artefacts in Muslim homes are believed to support children’s literacy and language learning in ways that educational policies could utilise in family learning programs (Akhter 2016). Rosowsky (2006, p. 540) shows, for instance, how the syncretic literacy practices of the Quranic literacy teaching in a Muslim community in the UK constitutes an educational potential as ‘successful learning’ occurs in a ‘fused, syncretised manner, where culture, language and experience are drawn upon from familiar contexts to provide newer learning experiences for those involved’. In the context of Denmark, where Islam is the second most practised religion in society (Buchardt and Enemark 2021) and almost four percent of the total Danish population are Muslims (Lindekilde 2008), syncretic literacy practices of Arab heritage students deserve closer attention in terms of understanding their complexities, heterogeneities and learning potential.

The present article draws on longitudinal linguistic ethnographic fieldwork with a cohort of 10–12 years-old students of Arab Muslim heritage, their families, and teachers in and out of a compulsory school (Lundqvist 2017, 2019a, 2019b). The analysis focuses on the students’ self-elicited photos of Islamic literacy artefacts that one can find randomly in Muslim homes (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2004), and their subsequent discussion of these photos in group-interviews. Employing a syncretic literacy framework, we investigate the ways in which students respond to faith literacy practices in their communities, as an underrepresented ‘domain of literacy’ (Rosowsky 2016, p. 114). The following research questions guide our analyses:

- How do students of Arab heritage interpret Islamic literacy artefacts from their homes?
- How do these interpretations reflect broader faith literacy practices in the students’ communities?

We first review the literature on literacy as social practice, syncretic literacy practices, and faith literacy practices. This is followed by methodology, findings, and discussion.

literacy as social practice

Critical ethnographers have established that literacy practices in schools are shaped through a 'powerful discourse of regularity and normativity' inherently related to the predominance of cognitive science and psychological orientations. These epistemologies value reading and writing within their given 'conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being' (Street, 2003, pp. 77–78). Meanwhile, non-standard forms of literacy refer to the situated, local forms of literacy that are 'contingent, complex and framed through the eyes of those engaged in particular practices' (Rowse and Pahl 2015, p. 2). Within the New Literacy Studies (Heath 1983; Street 1984; Barton and Hamilton 1998), this perspective has conceptualised literacy as social practice as much as an identity resource that is in a constant process of re-invention in different material forms. The New Literacy Studies attends to literacy with its own historicity and as part of the cultural and material environment in which it is produced.

Literacy in this understanding is also multiple because individuals make use of different forms of literacy in different domains of their lives. Street's (1984) pioneering work on an Iranian village community differentiated across schooled literacy, *maktab* literacy, i.e. Quranic literacy that focuses on recitation and rote learning, and commercial literacy. In the same vein, Heath (1982, 1983) was the first to argue that studies of children's language and literacy development require a broad sociocultural analytic lens. During a decade of fieldwork, Heath documented the ways children were socialised as users of language and literacy across home and school in USA communities, and how the different ways children were socialised linked with the ways families were structured in these communities. Heath brought light into the fact that children bring different ways of being with language, literacy, and culture to the classroom. Duranti et al. (2004, p. 168) argue that 'boundaries of the home need to be expanded historically and geographically to include places of origin'.

We have also gained an understanding of multimodality in children's developing literacy (Akhter 2016). In our case, the literacy artefacts that students engage with and interpret are artefacts related to Islamic faith practices that link with their families' cultural heritage literacy practices. In sum, as one non-standard form of literacy, home literacies that children are born into are complex, situated, multimodal and patterned by values, feelings, and broader societal discourses.

Syncretic literacy practices

As an alternative to the focus on ideology in the New Literacy Studies, the framework of syncretic literacy studies extended this paradigm to approach literacy as a practice in which culture and cognition intertwine (Duranti et al. 2004; Gregory et al. 2004; Volk 2013). Although the original definition of syncretism is far reaching (Shaw and Stewart 2003), in the case of literacy studies, syncretism refers to the construction of 'new practices and forms by drawing on dual or multiple cultural memberships' (Volk 2013, p. 237). It is suggested that, in their everyday lives across school, family and other social contexts, children re-create the literacy practices they are exposed to in a process of social, cultural, and cognitive transformation and creativity. While children's literacy acquisition is mediated by several people around them including their teachers, parents, grandparents, siblings, and friends, they are also active agents themselves as they bring

together, and syncretise, resources they simultaneously have access to through their membership of different cultural and linguistic groups (Gregory et al. 2004; Lytra and Ilankuberan 2020).

Literacy practices become even more ‘complex sites of cultural production’ (Rosaldo 1993, p. 217) in the case of immigrant homes. When multilingual children acquire language and literacy, they combine strategies and knowledge acquired in different languages and learning contexts, such as school, home, and heritage language and faith schools (Kenner et al. 2016; Lytra, Gregory, et al. 2016; Rosowsky 2021). Children’s talk around texts in faith settings serves as mutual knowledge building and supports their multilingual and multimodal literacy acquisition (Gregory et al. 2012; Lytra et al. 2017). Multimodality, in this article, refers to the representation of meaning across different modalities, such as script, speech, listening, visual representations (photos, drawings), and gestural representation (gaze, movements of face, arms, and body) (Cope and Kalantzis 2009).

Faith literacy practices

Faith literacies refer to faith-oriented literacy practices, such as performing a prayer ritual (Rosowsky 2015). Starting with Street’s (1984) research on maktab literacy in Iran, studies focusing on faith literacies show how ‘cultural threads from diverse sources are interwoven into a single interactional fabric’ thanks to the multilingual resources deployed in the everyday practices of the household (Gregory et al. 2012, p. 345). In a typical immigrant home, the mainstream language of society, home language(s) that are in everyday use, and languages and literacies used in religious practice form important parts of the everyday linguistic repertoires. In many cases, faith literacy education provides the only formal learning context in the children’s lives outside of school and has a considerable impact on the children. These sessions offer children new narratives, drawing on various communicative resources, and performed through different rituals that include literacy artefacts, liturgical languages and interactional patterns that are different from the home context (Gregory et al. 2012; Rosowsky 2015).

Lytra and Ilankuberan (2020) demonstrate how children combine linguistic, aesthetic, and cultural elements from school and faith literacy practices to create new forms of memberships of the faith literacy traditions of their families. These memberships are multilingual and multimodal in that they draw from, and transform, diverse linguistic and cultural resources from home and school (Gregory et al. 2012). According to Rosowsky (2021), the linguistic repertoires of Muslim children and youth in the UK are composed of bits and pieces of languages with discrete functions and purposes across various domains. In many immigrant communities (e.g. Turkish), the liturgical language is different from the everyday language. For the Arabic-speaking Muslim communities, everyday Arabic differs from classical Arabic in which liturgical literacy is practised (Rosowsky 2015).

Against this background, limited attention has been paid to Muslim faith literacies in Scandinavian settings. In Denmark, Christensen (2019) has explored literacy practices in families of Somali heritage in Denmark, concluding that school-oriented literacy training, and literacy tests, as well as faith literacy form part of the families’ everyday literacy practices. Daugaard (2019) has analysed Quranic app practices among teenagers of Afghan and Somali heritage, showing that though they use apps for various purposes, they all engage with these digital items to provide themselves with feelings of security.

Methodology

Research design

Data analysed in this article stem from a three-year-long linguistic ethnographic study focusing on students' social identities (Lundqvist 2017, 2019a, 2019b). Linguistic ethnography 'studies the local and immediate actions of actors from their point of view and considers how these interactions are embedded in wider social contexts and structures' (Copland et al. 2015, p. 13). The first author conducted ethnographic fieldwork in compulsory school classes, Arabic language heritage classes and in the home of a few participants in an urban area in Denmark.

The participants and their contexts

This article focuses on four students of Arabic heritage, all born to immigrant parents. While Dina and Mohsen are of Lebanese heritage, Iman and Fatima are of Iraqi heritage. Fatima is 10 years old, and the other three students are 12 years old. At the time of data collections, all four lived with their parents and siblings in public housing blocks near their school. The students were embedded in transnational family networks with grandparents and other family members living in other countries. All the parents raised their children as Muslims and taught them Arabic at home through activities such as Quran reading, praying, listening to music with Arabic lyrics, learning the Arabic alphabet through alphabet posters, quizzes, watching Arabic TV and prompting their children with Arabic words asking them about the meaning of the word. In everyday communication at home, the parents mainly spoke Arabic to their children, while their children shifted between Danish and Arabic. Though the four students had an active command of their respective Arabic dialects, they all had a better command of Danish. When texting with their family members, they used Latin letters for Arabic content.

The students attended a compulsory school situated in an urban working-class neighbourhood. They also attended Arabic heritage language classes offered by the municipality twice a week after compulsory classes. The Arabic teacher, Aslan, was effective in integrating knowledge of the children's home environments into the curriculum. He never taught Islamic classes, but he referred to the Quran to include the students' cultural knowledge. Furthermore, he was very conscious about including the students' multilingual backgrounds to support their school learning. Aslan distinguished between cultural translation and literal translation (from Arabic to Danish and vice versa) in classroom interaction. One of the students, Iman, also attended classes in an Arabic Quran school on Saturdays where the students were taught Islam and Arabic language. She was the only one of the four who was declared Muslim.

Researcher positionality

Accessing the field and building rapport with the participants, the first author deliberately positioned herself as a researcher interested in schooling and language. The students were used to having participant observers in classrooms, and they were familiar with the label 'language researcher'. The first author observed and listened to students, teachers, and

parents. She did not engage in typical teacher activities, such as teaching, praising, or disciplining students in school, nor did she enact parental ways toward children in homes. She had very limited knowledge of the Arabic language, literacy, and Islam. In particular, the students, but also their parents, came to see her as an ‘incompetent adult’ (Corsaro 1996, p. 449) who had no insight in the faith literacy practices they engaged in. For instance, on home visits in several families, the children arranged informal and playful teaching activities so that she could improve her poor Arabic skills. These activities provided a window for her to better understand the children’s and parents’ conceptions of literacy and faith.

Data collection

The first author elicited collaborative data collection (Hodge and Jones 2000; Meinhof and Galasiński 2005) by showing the fourteen students, who attended Arabic language heritage classes, photos of various home literacy artefacts (a Chinese inscription on a tea box, children’s toys, books etc.). She then provided each student with a disposable camera, asked them to be ‘language researchers’ and photograph literacy at home and in other out-of-compulsory school places. She specified that the students could photograph any artefact in any language. Although the prompt did not ask for a particular form or language, every participant in the group chose to bring in an artefact in Arabic. In addition, three semi-structured group-interviews were carried out with groups of three to four students. In the interviews, each participant was provided with a set of their own photos and asked to select their favourite photos among them. The interviews were conducted in the student’s Arabic heritage language classroom in the compulsory school and lasted between forty to fifty minutes.

The collaborative data collection was useful because it enabled us to document literacy practices in the students’ everyday life, including how linguistic resources and social meanings related to the migration and resettlement of their families informed these practices. The data under focus in this article consist of three photos taken by Dina, Iman, and Fatima respectively, and excerpts from two of the group interviews, the first one with Dina, Iman, and Mohsen, and the second one with Fatima and Duha. To further enhance our analyses, we draw from field notes from parent-teacher meetings in Arabic classes, visits in Duha and Mohsen’s homes, and interviews with their parents, as well as interviews with Aslan.

Ethics

This study adheres to international ethical guidelines and EU regulations for research (ALLEA 2017). The participants were informed about the study, they volunteered to participate, and the parents provided informed consent for the collection, storing and reporting of data. Pseudonyms have been used in place of participants’ names.

Data analysis

In the analysis of the photos, a stable set of themes (Braun and Clarke 2006), were identified across all the photos, such as keeping track of time (calendars), transportation (inscriptions on bicycles and traffic signs), Islamic faith practices (wall carpets and other decoration artefacts with Quranic inscriptions), and leisure and pleasure (Tivoli [amusement park],

Zoo, Flea market, pets, candy). In the analysis of interviews, all the interviews were manually transcribed. The research assistant of Arab heritage, Hamida Naji, translated and transcribed the Arabic part of the data. The first author of Danish heritage transcribed and translated the Danish speech into English. For the larger study, photos and interviews were used to create a literacy profile on each of the students (total of 14) that participated in the collaborative data collection. We compared these profiles and explored what they had in common. As a result of the literacy profiles, we found that the students overall reported they engaged in faith literacy practices at home including: (1) books on pre-prayer ablution practices, (2) wall carpets with Quranic verses, and (3) piggy banks for Islamic charity culture.

We pursue a multi-layered analysis, proposed by Gregory and Williams (2000) and extended further by Volk (2013), to approach students' literacy practices. The *outer layer* in our analysis refers to the wider context of students' classrooms, homes, and communities that are ingrained within a much larger socio-historical context. In our case, this is the socio-historical faith context that surrounds the participants. The *middle layer* refers to the immediate contexts of students' home and school lives where they are taught literacy practices. The *inner layer* refers to the actual interaction context co-constructed by the participants.

Findings

We begin with a general ethnographic account of the literacy perspectives of the students' parents and their Arabic teacher Aslan. Subsequently, we analyse three excerpts from group-interviews in which the focal students interpret their photos of the above-mentioned literacy artefacts from home.

The parents' and Arabic teacher's perspectives on Arabic literacy

The Arabic teacher Aslan and the parents share several expectations and insights about the students' literacy acquisition in Arabic classes. In the first place, all the parents sent their children to Arabic classes hoping that their competence in Arabic literacy would come closer to their competence in Danish literacy. However, the parents often complain about the insufficient amount of instruction per week and the lack of appropriate course materials. As Dina's mother says in one of the school-home meetings, Arabic classes in these limited hours compete with more attractive leisure activities, and their children have limited interest in these classes (field note, 2014). Several other parents complain about the lack of appropriate teaching materials. For instance, Mohsen's father says 'the problem is that they do not have books on a higher level. Mohsen does not learn because he does not get books on a higher level. Therefore, he loses motivation' (home interview, 2015). The same concerns are raised by Aslan. He explains that there are 'only a few books available for Arabic heritage students in Denmark,' as they mostly target students younger than 12-year-olds (interview, 2013).

The parents and the teacher are also concerned about their children's lack of motivation and interest in Arabic classes. Parents' accounts often refer to the ways they juxtapose Danish and Arabic while trying to encourage their children about studying Arabic. As Mohsen's mother recounts:

I say to my children, 'I've never heard about a Danish boy who does not command Danish. You're also Arab. It's about knowing yourself. You need both Danish and Arabic. It's a great advantage to have two languages'. Mohsen needs Arabic, if he wants to know his family in Lebanon (home interview, 2014).

The connection between identity ('knowing yourself'), heritage ('know his family'), and language (Arabic) is one circulating discourse among parents. In this sense, they see the outer layer (Volk 2013) of heritage language literacy as an essential component of their children's literacy development. Similarly, Aslan says, 'regardless of what you have to learn or what you want to be, if you don't speak your own language, then you don't have much background in what you learn' (interview, 2013). Thus, the parents and Aslan seemed to be on the same page in terms of identifying the ideological background to Arabic heritage language teaching and learning.

For some parents, Arabic being the language of Quran is also a factor behind their desire for their children's Arabic literacy development. Duha's mother says:

They are learning Arabic with Aslan, but they are not interested in it. They say it is a difficult language. They ask, 'why should we?'. It's their mother tongue. It's their identity. There is another reason. We are Muslims, if they are to understand the Quran, they must be able to read Arabic. I raise them as Muslims (home interview, 2013).

Duha's mother speaks from the outer layer of literacy as she explains how she tries to persuade her daughter to learn Arabic as a religious requirement. Given the lack of motivation due to limited course hours and insufficient materials, parents resort to the larger socio-historical context in rationalising their desire to motivate their children to study Arabic literacy. This perspective is not entirely ungrounded. However, as we will analyse below, students syncretise ways of approaching Arabic literacy, which do not necessarily suggest their lack of interest or motivation only.

Pre-prayer ablution practices

In Islamic worshipping practice, Muslims have a praying ritual of five times a day known as the *namaz* or as *Salat* in Arabic. *Namaz* is one of the five pillars of Islam together with the confession of faith, fasting in the holy month of Ramadan, almsgiving, and the pilgrimage to Mecca. It can be practised individually or collectively anywhere where one can find a clean surrounding. The actual prayer takes 2–4 cycles, with worshippers turning their face to the direction of Mecca. Each cycle is defined by a 'fixed sequence of movements (standing, prostrating, kneeling, sitting), each accompanied by a fixed Arabic recitation' (Bowen 1989, p. 601). The *namaz* ritual begins with the ablution that is practised in a set order with accompanying prayers recited to oneself. Mainly, hands, arms up to elbows, the front part of the head, neck, face, and feet are included in the ablution process.

The photo Iman selects as one of her favourites depicts an Arabic heritage language textbook taught in her Quranic school. The book contains instructions about the ablution practice accompanied by an illustration of a man with a blood stain on his arm after a mosquito bite. The text details how blood is one of the reasons why the body needs ablution (see Figure 1).

The ritual practice of ablution is part of the sociocultural context that constitutes the outer layer of literacy in the practising Muslim community. The Arabic heritage language



Figure 1. Iman's photo of the book.

textbook depicts this practice visually, and it is mediated in the Quranic school and in the students' homes in the middle layer of literacy. Indeed, ablution and praying are integrated activities in the families' everyday lives. For instance, during a home visit to Mohsen's family, his mother explains that the family carefully washes themselves after using the toilet, and how this is connected to praying. She says 'we must wash ourselves carefully every time we've been to the toilet. We must be pure, as we pray five times a day. It's important' (field note, home visit, 2015). Thus, the account of Mohsen's mother brings together the outer and middle layers of literacy regarding the ablution practice.

This background informs the inner layer of literacy that unfolds in the interview, as the participants interpret the photo for the interviewer:

Excerpt 1

Dina, Iman, and Mohsen are the participants. The first author, Ulla, is the interviewer (see [Appendix A](#) for transcription conventions).

- 1 Ulla: Will you tell us about the next photo?
- 2 Iman: Yes. It's a photo of a book I have in my Arabic school. It's about... What is it called?
- 3 Hygiene before you pray.
- 4 Ulla: Do you know what the text says?
- 5 Iman: Yes. No. I cannot see it. It's about if you have a stain of blood on your jacket or
- 6 your shirt then you cannot pray because the blood it's... You just cannot pray because

- 7 the blood it's... It must be pure when you pray.
- 8 Ulla: Is it *haram* or? (Arabic for forbidden and associated with money or food).
- 9 Iman: In a way. It's...
- 10 Mohsen: You cannot pray [without washing.
- 11 Iman: [you must be ah I think it's *taher* (Arabic for spiritual purity. Iman
- 12 looks at Dina who nods).
- 13 Mohsen: [Yes (looks at Iman).
- 14 Dina: [Yes you must be *taher* before you pray. It is totally pure.
- 15 Iman: Totally pure.
- (...)
- 16 Dina: How do you wash? (Looks at Iman).
- 17 Iman: We start like this; water in hands (holds palms upwards). Then we do like from
- 18 here (glides palm from outside upper to lower part of arms) and here (glides palm
- 19 from inside upper to lower part of arms). Then I must do the face and the
- 20 above here and then I kneel and raise (places her palm on top of head, looks at
- 21 Dina, smiles).
- 22 Dina: I hate doing it on my hair. It spoils my hairstyle (everybody laughs).

Ulla initiates the conversation by asking an open question to Iman, who has just shown the group her photo. In her description (lines 2–3 and 5–7), Iman seems to be looking for the exact Islamic concept that is the equivalent of pre-prayer purity of the body. She first comes up with the word ‘hygiene,’ and later finds ‘pure’ as a better synonym. Finally, in line 11, she finds the word she is looking for, ‘*taher*’, which refers to spiritual purity. Both Mohsen and Dina confirm Iman, with the latter explaining to Ulla the ritual purification Muslims engage in before praying. Besides asking elaboration questions, Ulla contributes to the word search by offering another concept she has heard of, ‘*haram*’, which refers to forbidden food or money, and, interestingly, gets approved by Iman. A few turns later, Dina, who is of Sunni Muslim heritage asks Iman to describe Shia Muslim washing practices. Iman responds with a detailed description of the Shia ablution ritual. She shows (lines 17–21), through bodily gesturing, how they begin by washing their arms, face, then kneel and raise, and go on with washing their face and head. Dina, Mohsen, and Ulla watch her carefully. As Iman puts her palm on the top of her head to illustrate that part of the ablution practice, Dina makes a comment jokingly, ‘I hate doing it on my hair. It spoils my hairstyle.’ The students and Ulla all laugh.

Excerpt 1 exemplifies how the students syncretise different cultural and linguistic influences from home, school, and faith practices of their families and communities. This syncretic practice is multilingual, multimodal and can be understood across the outer, middle,

and inner layers of literacy. The students draw on their own and each other's participation (gaze, gesture, and listening to each other) to construct and improve their explanation for Ulla and mediate this through Danish and Arabic speech, the Arabic script, the visual illustration, and their ways of living, values and knowledge obtained from their families (about Islamic pre-prayer ablution practices). Likewise, Iman draws on speech and bodily gestures, as she teaches Ulla, Dina, and Mohsen about the Shia ablution ritual she is familiar with at home and the Quran school. Thus, the different modalities serve to enhance syncretism in the interpretation of literacy artefacts that the students are exposed to daily.

Syncretism is also enhanced in the interaction by way of stepping out of the interactional mode momentarily to reflect on the action described. Dina's secular interpretation (about hair style) of the faith ritual is one such example. By syncretising the religious to-do-list (the Shia ablution practices) and the mundane everyday reality life concern about hair style, Dina suspends the serious educational discourse and evokes jocular peer group recreation. She seems very comfortable about inserting the joke, and everybody laughs, thereby aligning with her and releasing the seriousness of the faith ritual (Rampton 1999). This distanced look into the faith practice seems to stem from her ability to pose a critical perspective that she has most likely gained in her more liberal upbringing in Denmark.

Wall carpets with Quranic calligraphy

Wall carpets are ornamental domestic items that are popularly used across the Middle Eastern and central Asian geography and might depict Quranic script. In Muslim homes, the Quran in its script form is used in decoration and as considered an art form of calligraphy by itself. Finding Quranic verses in print is a carefully constructed literacy practice in the Islamic culture, as the Quranic word is considered sacred by Muslims and one should approach these texts with respect (e.g. after washing your body, putting/hanging these texts above the level of the belly). In diasporic Muslim homes, wall carpets with Quranic verses are commonly used to create a sense of belonging (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2004; Rosowsky 2015).

Many of the participants in the study bring in photos of vases, golden plates and framed posters that depict Quran verses. Several students select wall carpets as their favourite literacy artefact at home. While they explicitly appreciate the beauty of the verses on their selected item, they also refer to the protective power of the sacred words inscribed on them. For instance, Duha says that the wall carpet with the Quran script on it 'is beautiful, important and makes us (her and her family) safe'. Iman photographs a poster with a Quranic verse hanging at the back of their front door at home. She explains that her family recite the verse for protection when one of them is about to travel, and 'then you come back safe again'. These accounts reflect the students' families' mediation of Quranic literacy at the middle layer, invoking religious protection.

The photo Fatima selects as her 'best' depicts a wall carpet with a print of the Quranic Throne verse, hanging on one of the living room walls of her home (see Figure 2).

The Throne verse praises Allah as the almighty God, and the Islamic belief holds that anyone who recites the verse enters the protection and security of God. Its written form takes many different shapes in appearance in domestic spaces, such as inscribed on plates or glasses of various materials exhibited in the living rooms. Many Muslims recite this prayer regularly in their daily lives with the belief that it will protect one from evil, for instance,



Figure 2. Fatima's photo of the wall carpet.

before embarking on an event, such as leaving home, starting their car, or before an upcoming negative event to release the stress. Thus, the photo that Fatima brings in provides an example of the outer layer of literacy with its rootedness in the larger socio-historical context.

The below excerpt illustrates the unfolding of the inner layer of literacy that takes place in the interview, as Fatima explains to Ulla the sacred power of the wall carpet:

Excerpt 2

- 1 Fatima: I use it when I'm home alone (puts hand on heart). Then I know the Quran is with
with
- 2 me so I do not get scared (hands photo to Ulla).
- 3 Ulla: Let me see (takes the photo in hand). Is it a carpet?
- 4 Fatima: No. It's something that hangs up (lifts hands). Well, it could be a carpet but one
that
- 5 hangs. We have it right there above our sofa. When me and Aisha (older sister)
- 6 get scared of our neighbours' dogs. They make such dangerous noises in the
evening,
- 7 then it's here, so we do not get scared, so we know that the Quran is with us (puts
8 hand on heart).
- 9 Ulla: Is it's you and your sister [who use it?
- 10 Fatima: [Yes, and the entire family use it.
- 11 Ulla: The entire family. Okay. Do you know what the text means?

12 Fatima: No.

13 Ulla: But it's something from the Quran?

14 Fatima: Yes.

(...)

15 Ulla: Do you know where your mom and dad have...?

16 Fatima: From Iraq. It's my dad's mom who gave it to us. She lives in Iraq.

17 Ulla: Okay. Do you walk over to it and look if you pray or?

18 Fatima: No. We just walk around. We also have Qurans in the entrée, in my room and in all

19 rooms except for the toilet and the kitchen, so no matter where I go, I

20 know that the Quran is with me, so I cannot get scared.

In Danish, the word carpet (*tæppe*) may refer to a blanket you wrap around yourself, a wall carpet, and a carpet laying on the floor. That is why, Fatima in her response seems to make sure that Ulla understands it is a photo of a wall carpet, not one of the two other options. Fatima articulates further that it is not just a carpet, but an artefact that carries protectionary power due to the Throne verse depicted on it, underlined by her putting her hand on her heart (lines 1 and 8). As an example, Fatima refers to her anxiety about the neighbours' dogs and how she feels protected by the existence of the wall carpet. Ulla tries to find out more about the content of the Quranic verse, who uses the carpet at home, and how they use it (lines 11, 13, 17). Fatima explains that her grandmother in Iraq passed the carpet onto her son and his family in Denmark. She also explains that the carpet is only one out of several other decoration artefacts with Quranic script in her family home. At the end of the interaction, she recapitulates with the slogan statement that the Quran is with her (line 20). Syncretism in Fatima's account, too, is multimodal and multilingual and consists of Danish speech, gesture, a photo of a decoration item, the Arabic script on it that extends to the Islamic interpretations of a Quranic verse in everyday life, her home experiences with Arabic script, including the Throne verse, the values and faith literacy learning from home, and her everyday experience of living next door to neighbours with dogs.

The faith literacy practice of reciting the Throne verse is transformed as it makes its way from Fatima's grandmother in Iraq into the everyday life of Fatima and her family in Denmark. The display of Quranic verses at home can be interpreted as part of a transnational placemaking throughout which her parents create belonging in their new country (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2004). For Fatima, different levels of literacy at home naturally bring about a syncretic interpretation. While she believes in the transfer of a Quranic verse from the book to a domestic item without any question, she also uses it in her everyday approach to the Quran. She incorporates the Throne verse in her life when she feels the need for protection against things, she is afraid of. Throughout the outer, middle, and inner layers of literacy, Fatima's account can be interpreted as a recreation of the Throne verse's capacity for protection against bad evil and stress release as related to negative events.

Piggy banks as artefacts of sadaqah practices

The sadaqah culture serves as regular charity work practices among Muslim communities. The sadaqah may refer to direct money donations, and it can also take indirect forms to help alleviate poverty or help those in need, such as helping orphans or building schools, with the motive of seeking God's mercy (Jamal et al. 2019). The underlying premise in sadaqah is the belief that individuals do not own anything in this material world, and it is their responsibility to transfer their God-owned property to those in need. There are multiple Quranic references to sadaqah (Al-Baqarah: Verses 261 and 277). In modern Muslim societies, Islamic philanthropy is analysed as part of a larger economic system that goes beyond individual benevolence and affects the circulation of finances among Muslim societies nationally and transnationally (Ismail et al. 2022). It is believed that the betterment of Muslim societies will result in the well-being of the individual in this world and hereafter. As in other European countries, the Muslim community in Denmark commonly raises money at the mosques to help their poor. In many mosques, portable bank boxes are placed for mosque goers' giving.

This practice constitutes the outer layer literacy in our analysis against which many different forms of artefacts can be understood. Dina choses a photo of a piggy bank as her favourite item. Her father has obtained the box at a mosque gathering. The Arabic text on the box reads, '*alsadaqat fi almasjid*' which means 'alms through the mosque'. The name of the actual mosque and some other parts of the script are not visible in the photo (see Figure 3).

The students' parents practise the sadaqah culture as part of their everyday lives. Several students photograph piggy banks at home and report that these artefacts are used to collect and donate money for the poor. During a home visit, Mohsen's father explains that he and his wife strive to raise their children as Muslims. Though the children do not go to the mosque, both parents attend gatherings in the mosque, and they donate money for the poor (field note, home visit, 2014).



Figure 3. Dina's photo of the piggy bank.

In the interview, the inner layer of literacy can be depicted, as the students explain such charity work in their Muslim community for the interviewer:

Excerpt 3

- 1 Dina: My turn! This is my piggy bank. How do you say? Saving money box?
- 2 Mohsen: Saving money box (everybody laughs).
- 3 Iman: A piggy. I have one at home, too.
- 4 Dina: Yes. My father got it from the mosque, and he puts money in it for charity.
- 5 Iman: We do that at home too.
- 6 Mohsen: We do that too.
- 7 Dina: He got it in the mosque, and it says something in Arabic I cannot read.
- 8 Ulla: [What do you think it says?
- 9 Iman: [*aṣṣadaqa*? (Arabic for almsgiving. Iman looks at Dina).
- 10 Dina: Yes! Yes! (Looks at Iman).
- 11 Iman: *sadaqaat* (Arabic plural for almsgiving). It means that...
- 12 Mohsen: A saving (looks at Iman).
- 13 Iman: A saving for the poor.
- 14 Dina: And then we give it to the other countries where they need them. There are many
- 15 people from the mosque who got these, and they put money in it every day.
- 16 Iman: It says *mas jid* there (Arabic for mosque. Iman looks at Dina).
- 17 Dina: Yes. Mosque (looks at Iman).
- 18 Ulla: Okay, and where do you pass over the money then?
- 19 Dina: My father goes to the mosque every day. Then he passes it on when it's full.
- 20 Ulla: Okay. Who gets the money?
- 21 Dina: The mosque and then they give it to the poor.

At the beginning of excerpt 3, Dina seems to be in search of a word for the artefact she wants to talk about. She suggests a 'piggy bank' ('sparegris' in Danish) and 'saving money box' ('sparebøsse' in Danish) – both belonging to the Western culture of money saving that she is likely to be familiar with through her Danish upbringing. In response, Mohsen jokingly pretends to provide another suggestion, merely repeating Dina's words and everybody laughs. Iman establishes that 'piggy' works for the present situation, and the students go on to talk about the sadaqah practices of their families. Ulla chimes in to inquire about the Arabic script on the piggy bank. Iman responds to this by reading aloud in Arabic and seeks confirmation from Dina (line 9), who eagerly confirms her (line 10). Encouraged, Iman continues with recasting the word by changing it into plural (line 11) and starts with an

explanation of some of the text on the piggy bank. Mohsen takes up on Iman's sentence, code-switching into Danish for Ulla to understand. In the same line, Iman translates the rest of the Arabic sentence into Danish. Dina expands the explanation to tell Ulla about the transnational aspect of sadaqah practices (lines 14–15). She describes how Muslims, including her father, deposit money in piggy banks, hand them in to the mosque when full, and how the mosque subsequently distributes these donations for poor people.

Excerpt 3 illustrates how the students combine linguistic and cultural influences from different school contexts with the faith practices of their families, modern banking concepts coupled with the Islamic sadaqah culture to carefully co-construct a pedagogical explanation of this faith practice. In so doing, the students combine different spaces (their homes and the homes of the other Muslims) that contribute to the sadaqah in comparable ways, the mosque Dina's father visits daily, and the places of the poor people in other countries that are included in the sadaqah money circulation practice. The students access, co-construct, and teach Ulla about these faith practices, through two languages (Arabic and Danish). Iman successfully combines her experience as a reader in two languages and scripts (Danish and Arabic) that she has acquired in three different teaching contexts (Arabic heritage classes, Arabic Quran classes and compulsory school).

The explanation taking place as part of the inner layer literacy is situated within the outer layer literacy of the sadaqah culture and mediated through the middle layer of students' family practices and personal experiences. Their explanation is syncretic in that it combines the Arabic script on the piggy bank, the visual representation of the piggy bank in the photo, gaze, speech and listening in Arabic and Danish, different spaces and times, the Western concept of the piggy bank and the Eastern system of sadaqah faith their families form part of. The piggy bank itself can also be seen as syncretic, as it has been adapted to the Danish setting, in which it serves to maintain the sadaqah culture, as it bears the name of the mosque in Denmark, though unreadable in the photo.

Discussion and conclusion

This article inquires how students of Arab heritage in an urban Danish setting interpret Islamic literacy artefacts and how their interpretations reflect the broader faith literacy practices of their communities. The analyses centre on three artefacts: photos of a book of Islamic ritual practices, a wall carpet with a decoration of a Quranic verse, and a piggy bank with Arabic text on it. Our multi-layered analyses reveal that the students' transformative interpretations of their photos resonate with the Islamic faith literacy practices of pre-prayer ablution, the protectionary power of the Throne verse, and the sadaqah form of money circulation. In mediating values, norms, and knowledge funds of these faith practices with alacrity for the researcher, the students draw from gestural, oral, visual, and printed modes of Danish and Arabic languages.

Our analyses shed light on the multilingualism and multimodality of faith literacy practices among an Arabic Muslim community in Denmark. It is remarkable that our participants select photos of Islamic literacy artefacts as their favourite photos, although they were not provided with specific instructions. The implication here is that Islamic faith literacy practices in the home and the diaspora community play an important role in the formation of the students' transnational identities. In line with Rosowsky's (2006, 2015, 2021) work on Muslims in the UK, faith literacies as we analyse them are multilingual practices that

are defined not only by the languages of religious texts, but also by their various registers and the mainstream language that immigrants translate them into. Our analyses also depict this diversity. While the wall carpet showcases Quranic Arabic, the instructions portray more educational registers, and the piggy bank set an example of everyday Arabic. In their explanations of these literacy artefacts to the researcher, the students inevitably use Danish and translate the texts, and their cultural significance, which by itself is a syncretic practice.

Our study aligns with previous syncretic literacy studies also in that faith literacy practises function as a resource in the participants' lives to acquire and create membership identities in diasporic faith literacy communities (Gregory et al. 2012; Volk 2013; Lytra et al. 2017; Lytra and Ilankuberan, 2020). Although the limited research on Islamic faith literacies in Denmark (Christensen 2019; Daugaard 2019) does not use the term 'syncretism' in analysis, their examples showcase a wide range of languages, modalities, and interactional patterns that oscillate between Islamic faith and everyday practices.

However, in contrast to the focus on young children in the previous syncretic literacy studies, our teenage participants express ambivalence about faith literacy practices. On the one hand, their alignment with Islamic faith literacy practices is reflected in their collaborative explanations, and their eagerness to make sure that the researcher has properly understood, for instance, the significance of spiritual purity and the protective power of the Throne verse. Furthermore, they do not hesitate to blend knowledge about and faith in Islam as they exercise their epistemic supremacy in teaching the first author. This indicates that they experience their membership of these faith practices as legitimate and unproblematic in the situation. On the other hand, the students contest the Islamic faith literacy practices by creating jocular peer group recreation. While this can be related to the nature of peer group dynamics, it can also be interpreted as a distanced outlook onto the faith literacy practice under focus.

We believe that the conceptualisation of literacy as the cultural, social, and syncretic practice has the potential to contribute to improve the (1) policies and (2) curriculum of literacy education, as well as (3) linguistic minority students' literacy learning. First, in Denmark, twenty years of educational policies focusing on assessment, accountability and downgrading curricular content and *Bildung* have not improved linguistic minority students' literacy skills (Frønes et al. 2020). These reforms have not only affected students but also the professional autonomy of literacy teachers who get their 'wings clipped' by increasing 'accountability requirements' (Jaspers 2022, p. 288). Our findings raise at least two questions for policy makers to consider: How can a syncretic perspective on students' in-and-out-of-school literacy practices provide opportunities for compulsory schoolteachers to include their students' linguistic and cultural repertoires in academically relevant ways? How can teachers motivate learning by interacting with students in ways that allow them epistemic supremacy? We are acutely aware that there are no easy solutions to these questions, but a discussion could initiate a policy upgrading of the hitherto under-prioritised aspects of teaching, curricular content and democratic *Bildung*. We suggest that this discussion includes professional teachers' voices.

Second, our findings have implications for curriculum design in the heritage teaching of linguistic minority students. While the young children in diaspora faith communities in London comfortably acquire membership identities through self-produced scrap books, dance, and singing that utilise fictional characters from folk stories and Disney films (Gregory et al. 2012; Lytra et al. 2017), the participants of our study have reached an age where such syncretic literacy practices do not offer relevant personas to identify with. We

have gathered from the parents and Arabic teacher that there is a lack of age-relevant literature and teaching materials to engage these teenagers in learning Arabic. Having grown up in Denmark and acquired faith orientations that transform more traditional Islamic faith literacy practices (Daugaard 2019), the Arabic heritage youth in Denmark cannot be taught from materials, and literacy artefacts, produced for younger children, or youth, living in their parents' countries of origin. Thus, we argue, heritage language literacy schooling must be supported by a curricular diversity of materials that match the students' age, their multilingualism, educational background, and transnational identities.

Third, we suggest that the syncretic literacies analysed in this article have the potential to inspire education practitioners as they grapple with how they can enhance linguistic minority students' literacy acquisition in mainstream classroom practice. Teachers could prompt students to produce multilingual literacy artefacts in collaboration with their parents, in whatever language they use at home, and integrate these products in academically relevant ways in teaching. On the one hand, when teachers include students' linguistic and cultural home resources in teaching in academically relevant ways, they are most likely to enhance literacy learning for these students (Lytra, Gregory, et al. 2016). On the other hand, the teachers might encounter resistance from colleagues, parents, and pupils. Furthermore, they are likely to find it challenging to academically scaffold, and evaluate, their students' literacy products if these are written in languages the teachers do not command. The point is not that teachers should refrain from including students' linguistic and cultural resources, but that pursuing one priority in class, has an impact on other possible priorities. Thus, handling complex pedagogical dilemmas is the foundation of developing inclusive literacy pedagogies with multilingual students (Jaspers 2022), a topic that deserves closer attention in future research.

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Credit author statement

Ulla Lundqvist: Conception of the study and the article, methodology, data collection, data analyses, contributing to the writing of all drafts and the final version of the article.

Işıl Erduyan: Conception of the article, data analyses, contributing to the writing of all drafts and the final version of the article.

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Appendix A. Transcription conventions

| | |
|--------------|-------------------------------------|
| [rooms | overlapping speech |
| [you | |
| <i>iaher</i> | Arabic transcribed in Latin letters |
| (ggg) | comments |
| (...) | omitted speech |