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# Exploring the Role and Potential of Theatre in Islamic Supplementary Education

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## CONCLUSION

## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study examines the use of theatre in education by a multi-ethnic, English-medium Islamic Supplementary School, SOBIS, in Roath, Cardiff. Three interviews were conducted, with a student, teacher and parent connected with the school. Applying an ethnographic and 'grounded theory' approach, themes and sub-themes arising from the interviews are discussed. These themes illustrate the ways that the interviewees justify their use of theatre in education, and the extent to which it is consistent with their understandings of the principles of Islam. This study suggests that there are myriad ways that individuals negotiate the tensions they perceive to exist, with the result that the interviewees espouse both the broad educational and social benefits of theatre, alongside the belief that theatre at SOBIS is consistent with their understanding of Islam, that it helps pupils to become "good Muslims."

# ***WHAT IS THE ROLE AND POTENTIAL OF THE THEATRE IN ISLAMIC SUPPLEMENTARY EDUCATION?***

## **INTRODUCTION**

This dissertation explores the role and potential of theatre in Islamic Supplementary Schooling in Britain, by looking at how theatre is currently being used in one Islamic Supplementary School (hereafter, ISS) in Cardiff, SOBIS. In the first instance I am keen to understand how theatre developed at SOBIS and how is it used and viewed currently. Subsequently I will suggest what further research could be done in this area and draw conclusions as to how aspects of the way SOBIS incorporates theatre into its pedagogy could be shared with other ISSs in Britain. There is currently very little literature which specifically relates to theatre in Islamic education in Britain and so have conducted literature-based research as close to my topic as possible. Many themes and concepts which feature in related literature such as identity construction, relations between

young Muslims and their parents and the religious and personal development of Muslim youth in Britain also factor in understanding the use of theatre in one particular ISS in Cardiff.

Education is a fundamentally important aspect of the Quran and of being Muslim (Gilliat-Ray 2010: 146-146). Given that my study is seeking a better understanding of Muslim cultural life in Britain, the pivotal issue of education was an obvious choice.

Moreover, there has been an appreciable amount of media hype in Britain over the past decade relating to Islamic supplementary education (For example, see Channel 4 2011; Moore et al 2008). Attention to this issue in the British public has been augmented by the recent debate around Muslim faith schools (Gent 2006; Hafez 2003; Mogra 2004).

Theatre is a public art form; a creative practice that provides a means for cultural understanding and exchange. Given some of the sensationalist representation of Muslims in the media in Britain and the existence of a public discourse around Islamophobia, theatre could potentially be a powerful means of challenging stereotypes and cultural xenophobia.

My personal interest in this research question is rooted in a love of theatre and a working life in applied theatre. The formulation of this study was a happy accident of meeting Raina Malik, administrator of SOBIS, at a Welsh National Opera community project that my organization (Wing & Prayer) was involved with. Significantly, my research question is also a result of the fact that I have been the fortunate recipient of various scholarships in my life. I have witnessed first hand how educational opportunities can change lives, and have worked for various educational charities since. I have a deep and committed interest in education, as I often find we all do.

This study is based upon both a review of the existing literature and on fieldwork carried out in July and August 2012. I conducted interviews with three individuals connected to SOBIS, a pupil,

a teacher and a parent/administrative staff member. In approaching these interviews I have sought to apply an ethnographic approach, and to allow the themes discussed in the analysis to arise organically. In discussing the use of theatre, the interviewees described to me the benefits they felt theatre could bring, primarily in the context of providing what they saw as 'Islamic education,' helping the pupils to become 'good Muslims,' as well as other broader educational and social benefits. They also described some of the tensions they felt could arise, and how they negotiated these, and how their use of theatre has changed over time. Each of the interviewees expressed the view that theatre has been a positive force for creative, personal and social development amongst pupils at SOBIS. These conclusions provide a case for further research into the use of theatre in Islamic Supplementary Schooling in Britain, including longer-term, ethnographic studies which could illuminate the many contrasting models and understandings that may exist. This study also suggests that there are potential benefits for other educational programmes through a better understanding of the use of theatre at SOBIS, particularly where there are opportunities for involving Muslims and non-Muslims together.

## ***SETTING THE SCENE***

### **School of Basic Islamic Sciences (SOBIS), Cardiff**

SOBIS is an Islamic supplementary school (ISS) in Roath, Cardiff. They meet on Friday evenings for two hours and the majority of this time is spent in hadith classes, where the children are divided according to age group. Beginning with a handful of students in the headteacher's living room, the school has now been running for over 18 years now. SOBIS now rents a large old town house, which functions as a language school the remainder of the time, and has approximately 200 students, 14 teachers, 4 administrative staff and a waiting list. Moreover, SOBIS teaches in the medium of English as opposed to a community language such as Bengali or Somali. As a result of this the school is multi-ethnic, with various ethnic communities in Cardiff being represented. Those I spoke to at SOBIS also believed it to be the only ISS in Cardiff to have a structured and varied curriculum rather than focusing more strictly on memorization and recitation. SOBIS offers a syllabus spanning *iman* classes for understanding the basics faith of the through to *hadith* classes which was indepth seminar-style study of the Quran, as well as GCSE Islamic Studies and extra-curricula activities such as photography, film making and theatre. At various points in the year SOBIS organises a 'function', which is a cultural event to use the young people's talents to "show the beauty of Islam"<sup>1</sup>. A lot of preparation goes into the 'function' and



the final piece usually includes theatre sketches, comedy, song and sometimes dance. The staff at SOBIS value and encourage these creative activities in their educational programme. Despite being introduced as a treat to provide a relief from studying, the function has gradually been incorporated more and more into the curriculum, being viewed as a useful learning tool. 'Functions' are also calendar markers in the local Muslim community as they are advertised widely and are social occasions, involving food, with an average audience size between 500 and 800 people. As such, 'functions' are also used as fundraising events given that SOBIS is trying to raise money to buy a building which would function as a community centre, of which the school would be only a part. £85 000 has been raised so far.

Through qualitative fieldwork I hope to better understand the educational philosophy and practice at SOBIS and relate it to other similar initiatives going on in Britain, as well as the Muslim world more broadly. I aim to draw conclusions regarding the potential for arts within supplementary Islamic schooling and the effect this could have on British society at large, particularly in respect to theatre and film being used as a form of social engagement and activism.

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<sup>1</sup> (youtube video – 'what does Islam teach you')  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApVXTysvYQU>

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### INTRODUCTION

In this literature review I begin by addressing literature pertaining to Muslim communities in general, to provide context for this study and to attempt to identify specific characteristics and needs of young British Muslims in particular. I will then turn to look at research on Islamic education. This area includes reference to Muslims in mainstream schools and the case for Muslim faith schools to locate Islamic supplementary education within the broader educational experience of young Muslims in Britain, as well as literature specifically on ISSs to situate SOBIS in relation to other supplementary provision. There is a considerable lack of research pertaining to Muslims and the arts. However the arts are thriving in Muslim communities worldwide, and I will refer to this to place SOBIS creative activities in context to Islamic arts more broadly.

### MUSLIMS IN BRITAIN

Muslims in Britain comprise a distinctly young population, with half of all British Muslims being under the age of twenty five (Peach 1990; ONS 2004: 3). Lewis (2007) has written widely on British Muslim Youth and raised the issue of an inter-generational gap between young Muslims and their parents. This work influenced me to ask specific questions around the involvement of parents at SOBIS and also made me eager to elicit the parental perspective on theatre in SOBIS' pedagogy.

A swathe of census data has shown that Muslims in Britain experience socio-economic hardship and exclusion (ONS 2004) and this has been widely explored in academic research (Abbas 2005 and 2009; Hussain 2008). This literature alludes to a range of the barriers to Muslim social

mobility in Britain and demands a response; the ways in which theatre could be of socio-economic advantage to Muslims in Britain is a central concern of this study.

Peach (2006) has detailed how within the general picture of disadvantage, women and girls are in a worse position than men in respect to levels of economic activity, employment and educational achievement. Within this general picture of the Muslims population in Britain there are variations and exceptions relating to differences between different ethnic communities; it would be inaccurate to extrapolate from this that all Muslim girls do worse in education than Muslim boys (Hewer 2001).

Skills and experience gained from being involved in theatre have been linked to self-confidence and social mobility by Johnstone (1999). Boal's (1985; 2002) work is of particular interest in respect to identity, the exploration of different perspectives through role play and civic responsibility. Identity is a central issue in the literature on Muslims in Britain, especially in relation to the dialectic between being 'British' and Muslim, and especially amongst youth (Cesari and McLoughlin 2005; Lewis 2007; Modood 2005 and 2010). Boal (ibid) suggests that interactive forms of theatre, such as Forum, could be a powerful way of engaging with and communicating the complexity of a British Muslim identity. Given the multi-ethnic nature of Britain's population, multi-cultural understanding is vitally important for the health and prosperity of our society. Arguably, a better understanding of Muslims and Muslim communities in Britain is particularly important given (Werbner 2010).

Today's Muslim population in Britain is characteristically diverse (Gilliat-Ray 2010). Ansari (2004) provides a key resource for the history and development of Muslim communities in Britain, highlighting their rich diversity. Ansari (ibid) describes how different factors such as merchant shipping, demand for labour in growing industries such as textiles, facilitated movement under the British Empire and persecution and hardship in other parts of the world led to the migration of Muslims to the UK. Young Muslims grow up with a rich and varied cultural, ethnic and linguistic heritage, aspects of which could perhaps be explored and nurtured through theatre.

A range of ethnographic work has been done on Muslims of different ethnic backgrounds and in different parts of Britain (Alexander 2000; Bolognani 2009; Jacobson 1998; Kalra 2000; Kelly 2003). There are however communities which have been comparatively under-researched, including African-Caribbean Muslims, Shiites and Sufis. This area of literature demonstrates the variance within the Muslim population of Britain, detailing the range of aspirations, challenges and sensibilities amongst British Muslims. The heterogeneity discussed here suggests that theatre could be highly appropriate for ISSs in Britain given its versatility as an educational tool, and the many ways in which theatre can be used for cultural dialogue and engagement (Boal 2002). Werbner (2002) has written extensively on Pakistani Muslims in Manchester, with a particular emphasis on the Muslim public sphere and cultural events. Her mixed methods approach over an extended period of time is one that I myself would adopt had I longer for the present study. Werbner's work illustrates the wealth of cultural activity amongst Muslims in Manchester and centralises Habermas' (1989) concept of the public sphere in relation to Muslims in Britain.

Academic writing has long shown an interest in Wales' Muslim Communities (Little 1942). In recent times, Halliday (2010) writes about the settlement of Yemeni Muslims in Britain, within which there he details Cardiff's Yemeni community. The story and situation of Muslims in Cardiff has been covered more comprehensively by Gilliat-Ray and Mellor (2010), who describe how Muslim cafes, as well as social and religious centres, have been a feature in the city. This points to the foundations of a Muslim cultural scene in Cardiff; Muslim businesses and institutions have continued to flourish over the past century, providing an infrastructure within which performing arts could develop. Jones (2010) has written about life for Muslims in rural Wales. Jones' work (ibid) shows how a lack of visibility for minority communities can lead to cultural disadvantage in terms of accessing religious services and support, linking to community fragmentation. Given the public nature of performing arts, theatre could potentially be an effective way of connecting Muslims who may otherwise feel isolated.

In light of the disadvantage, diversity and relative fragmentation of the Muslim population in the UK cultural interventions, specifically theatre-related, could prove beneficial in relation to social cohesion and development. After all, Aristotle (1971) very much a canonical

figure in mainstream European and Islamic thought and culture, wrote that theatre was the human artifice par excellence, fundamentally the human condition and nature of experience.

## ISLAMIC EDUCATION

### MUSLIM SCHOOLS

Education is of paramount importance in an Islamic context (Gilliat-Ray 2010: 146-148)

As Joly stipulates, “Whatever the level of education of the parents, whatever their occupation, their gender or age, they all agree on the value and desirability of education” (1984: 8). Mustafa (1999: 2) identifies that Muslim parents also agree on two equal objectives of educating their children. Firstly, making the most of the state education system and successfully gaining access to competitive employment, and secondly, transmission and nurture of Islamic beliefs and values. It is the latter aspect of spiritual and personal development which is the focal domain of ISS and therefore a crucial aspect of this dissertation. It has been noted during field work done by a research team at Cardiff University that religion is more of a concern for parents than educational standards (Scourfield et al n.d.). This observation directed my research increasingly towards which aspects of education are valued by students, parents and teachers at SOBIS.

Osler and Hussain (2005) have written about issues of disproportionately high levels of underachievement amongst young Muslims in Britain. In particular, Osler and Hussain have questioned mainstream schools' ability to support the development of South Asian Muslim girls (ibid: 148). This literature influenced me to address questions specifically relating to the situation for girls and gender difference at SOBIS.

Poor educational achievement has been viewed in connection to another theme within the literature on Muslims in Britain, masculinity (Alexander 2000; Archer 2003; Hopkins 2006). Issues surrounding gender again emerged as an important aspect of this literature and informed a series of questions in my research relating to the different educational needs and provision for Muslim boys compared to girls.

Educating Muslims in Britain has led to critiques of the mainstream British education system and concerns relating to non-Christian, religious provision (Joly 1984; Mustafa 1999). Nielsen (1989) has written that mainstream schools could be a threat to Islamic values and practice. Consequently, there is debate around the case for separate Muslim schools. Hewer (2001) takes Birmingham as a case study and presents a balanced argument for and against, identifying concerns relating to availability of Halal food, prayer rooms and gender segregated learning. Whilst there are now several Muslim faith schools across Britain, they are able to serve only a minority of the population (ibid). This debate raises important questions surrounding the specificities of an Islamic education, and whether or not this is something that can be integrated in a multi-cultural context. My fieldwork therefore incorporated questions relating to whether it was possible and/or desirable for non-Muslims to be involved with theatre, at SOBIS or in other Islamic settings.

## ISLAMIC SUPPLEMENTARY SCHOOLS

“The main avenue for religious socialisation and nurture for many British Muslim children beyond the home [...] Many Muslim children in Britain between the ages of five and fourteen years spend up to two hours each day at their local mosque, usually after school, receiving instruction about Islam” (Gilliat-Ray 2010: 152-3)

As can be seen from the quote above, ISSs are full of potential for working with young Muslims in the UK and could be explored further as a resource for supporting young Muslims through the challenges they face, such as those mentioned above (Abley et al 2004). However, Halstead (2005) has pointed out that there is a shortage of literature in the area of ISSs; responding to this absence was a large part of my decision to research SOBIS.

A lack of academic research in this area is partially because there having been insufficient checks and balances in the British media's portrayal of ISSs. Islamic supplementary education as had a poor image painted in the media. Television programmes, with a wide reception, such as *Dispatches* (Channel 4: 2011) perpetuate an image of ISSs as places which breed segregationism and intolerance, as well as the use of violence as a disciplinary method. This kind of stereotyped and xenophobic media portrayal prompted me to challenge the underlying assumptions being broadcast nationally.

Academic research has highlighted the traditional nature of many ISSs, which made SOBIS an even more intriguing case study as their pedagogy and practice seem remarkably progressive. A lot of ISSs employ traditional methods of Islamic education such as rote learning, focusing on Qur'anic memorisation (Hafez 2003). Gent (2006) is known for his work in defence of traditional methods of Islamic learning, such as Qur'an memorisation. He has pointed to the fact that rote learning increases students' capacity to memorise text, a skill which translates usefully into mainstream education and also helps accrue social capital within Muslim Communities. The idea that the education offered at ISSs could be of recognisable benefit to Muslim youth in other contexts features across this study and was a central motivation behind deciding on this particular project. Taking a contrasting stance on traditional Islamic learning, Mogra (2004) looks at the textbooks and curricula in use in various ISS schools across the UK. He is critical of aspects of 'traditional' ISS pedagogy, such as discouraging critical enquiry amongst students, and the reinforcement of the unquestionable authority of the teacher (ibid).

Work has been done at Cardiff University observing various Islamic schools as part of a wider project on religious nurture and the family which researched Islamic education in a variety of different contexts and alludes to the diversity of provision in Cardiff alone (Scourfield et al [n.d.]). This research encouraged me to use SOBIS as a case study because they are an example of an exceptionally dynamic school, illustrating the scope and extent to which extracurricular activities can be developed in ISSs.

There is a lack of literature on the breadth of activities offered at some ISSs, which perhaps suggests that such activities are not a focal part of the experience. However this gap could also suggest that extracurricular activities in ISSs have simply been overlooked by researchers to date.

Due to the focus on Qur'anic study, it would seem that not a lot of ISSs are currently working on dealing with the difficulties facing young Muslims in Britain today. This is perhaps also demonstrated by the prevalence of Muslim youth helpline organisations and internet forums, and the high volume of Young Muslims who are using these services. Basit (1997) suggests that young Muslims enjoy spending time on computers and the internet is a primary social medium for young Muslim girls which may also explain the success of these organisations. Nonetheless, it is fair to presume that if young Muslims had avenues of support in their communities which they felt were accessible there would be less of a need for them to seek help via internet or helpline. Moreover, research conducted in the areas of Islamic youth work, which has a religious orientation, (Hussain 2006) and Muslim youth work (Hamid 2011) suggest that these are the organisations cater for the needs of young British Muslims, beyond the scope of religious instruction.

## ***ISLAM AND THEATRE***

Any study of theatre being made by, with or for Muslims begs a definition of what is meant by 'Islamic theatre'. However, as noted above, I am unaware of academic literature which



addresses this question directly. *Al Khayaal*,<sup>2</sup> an Islamic theatre company in Luton, defines Islamic theatre as that which interprets literature from the Muslim world, encompasses the experience of Muslims in the modern world and theatre made within an Islamic ethos and aesthetic. These three characteristics served as a useful guide in approaching the topic of Islamic theatre with interviewees in my fieldwork.

Some work has been done on Islamic theatre historically (Almohanna 2011). According to Almohanna (ibid) theatre didn't flourish in the Muslim world until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, often linked to the influences of western colonialism. However various forms of pre-theatrical, performative art have long flourished across the Middle East and Africa. These included al-taaziya, a Shi'ia re-enactment of the life and death of Ali, similar to Ancient Greek Dionysian festival. Also Khaial al-dil or Shadow puppetry/play which appeared in the Arab world in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, storytelling was (and still is) central to pre-Islamic, Bedouin culture, linking in part to the fact that the population is largely illiterate. The fact Almohanna (ibid) views Islamic theatre as only being a few centuries old reveals a narrowness in the understanding of theatre that he is employing. Taking a less conventional view, I will incorporate various forms of performing arts within the understanding of theatre in the dissertation. Islamic poetry, which has long been a performative art form, was considered to have educational value in respect to moral and spiritual matters, as Meisami (1985: 253) has discussed in relation to Persian poetry.

Yet how distinct is Islamic theatre? And if it is uniquely Islamic, what makes it so? In respect to the character of Islamic theatre, Tillis work is a key resource. Tillis (2003) revisits Leonard Pronko's influential work on world theatre, where he constructed a notion of 'Eastern theatre', in which Islam played an appreciable role. Tillis (ibid) breaks down the East-West dichotomy that Pronko established claiming that the theory presumes that East and West theatre cultures are entirely different and separate from each other, and also that both are internally homogenous. Subsequent research has largely followed Tillis (ibid) moving away from Pronko's analytic approach. Banerjee (1990) has written on experimental theatre approaches being incorporated in Islamic Asian theatre in Bengal, illustrating the possibility for hybrid theatre, across cultures. Brandon (1988) uses the concept of 'new theatre' to describe an attitude and set

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.khayaal.co.uk/home.html>

of values towards Eastern theatre in the West. Though Brandon (1988) continues to dichotomise East and West somewhat unreflectively, his article shows how Asian theatre traditions have flourished in Europe and America since the latter half of the twentieth century. Brandon (ibid) also conveys that non-Asian performers are interested in and committed to learning traditional forms of Asian theatre and continue to develop this practice within their theatre own making. Winet (2009) has written about how Muslim theatre makers in Indonesia tend to abstract their religious identities from their theatre making, and how this is in distinct contrast to the situation in Malaysia where Islam is a discernible characteristic of the theatre scene nationally. Working with Muslims in Wales, this dissertation falls in the bracket of researching a religious minority within a self-proclaiming secular state and so Winet's work pertaining to the interaction between religious and national identities was helpful in illuminating the spectrum of identity construction by theatre making Muslims worldwide.

This area of literature has led to a lot of questions about the concept of 'Islamic theatre'. Is the idea of Islamic theatre, in fact, orientalist (Said 1978)? This area of research made me decide to ask questions in my fieldwork about the nature of Islamic Theatre, whether the term was appropriate, or perhaps one I am imposing, and if appropriate, whether any defining characteristics could be identified?

Despite there being a gap in the literature relating to Islamic theatre, that is not to say that theatre is not being made by Muslims in Britain. Ulfah Arts<sup>3</sup> in Birmingham, Arakan Creative<sup>4</sup> in West Yorkshire and Muju<sup>5</sup> in London are but a few examples. Gilliat-Ray (2010: 239-244) provides a useful overview of Muslims and the arts in Britain, further identifying this as an area

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ulfaharts.co.uk/>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.arakancreative.co.uk/>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.muju.org.uk/>

for future research (ibid: 244). Masood's (2006: 48-65) work for the British Council explores Muslims' active role contributing to the media in Britain and demonstrates how this can be a powerful way of challenging stereotypes. There may be instances in which this is the case, however if the situation of Muslims working in the media is a positive one, why is it that stereotypes pervade TV, film and newspapers? Are Muslims in fact represented? Are the arts and media accessible to Muslims of different backgrounds? A desire to contribute something to these questions was the primary reason behind the choice of title for this dissertation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **WHY A QUALITATIVE APPROACH?**

*“To see what is there, not what we've been taught is there, not even what we might wish to find,  
But what is”*

*(Du Bois 1983: 110)*

Primarily, my methodology has been designed according to what I felt best suited my question. Any process of generating knowledge is reliant on a theory of knowledge and in this respect I situate my work within a phenomenological framework. Phenomenology (Husserl 2001) prioritises experience and action as reference points for truth, instead of seeking an 'objective' position. As such Phenomenology relates closely to symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969) and social constructionism (Berger and Luckman 1971). Kvale summarises this epistemology as “the assumption that the important reality is what people perceive it to be” (1996: 52) and hence I have sought to understand the perceptions of people directly involved in theatre at SOBIS, to research the role it plays in their Islamic supplementary school (ISS) .

Whilst I have sought to prioritise the perspectives of my research participants I am aware that in collecting and analysing data I am shaping the findings (Ellis and Berger 2002) . Discussion around the role and positioning of the researcher has been a key contribution of feminist social science (Punch 1998: 179) and influenced my own approach. Denzin and Lincoln (2000 ; 2011) have likened the researcher's subjective contributions to the improvisations of a jazz musician, and see the creativity involved in fieldwork and the writing processes as a resource for knowledge. Whilst recognising the importance of this, I do not want to detract from SOBIS' story and am wary of being my research becoming self-indulgent and self-involved (Fine et al 2000). Instead, I have tried to be reflective about all aspects of this process and hope that this acts as a check and balance throughout the study (Reinharz 1992).

On a practical basis, a qualitative approach was also fitting. A quantitative study could have offered more statistical data about the logistics of theatre at SOBIS, such as how much it costs each year, what the audience sizes have been, the exact numbers of students involved etc. and all this information would be helpful in generating a picture of the use of theatre at SOBIS, especially to see if it is something that could work well in other ISSs. However my main concern was to get an in-depth picture of how theatre happens and the effects this has on the people involved. Qualitative, as the word suggests, is research that is concerned with quality of description; the textured and full accounts of research subjects. Quantitative would indeed have afforded a wider sample, for example if I had created a questionnaire and distributed it to everyone at SOBIS, but I feel this would come at the expense of depth and the significance of the context. An appreciation for the 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1973) and richer data that qualitative research produces is why I also did informal participant observation over the course of the past year. Those field notes will not feature here as I was developing a relationship with SOBIS during that time and I feel that the ethics of consent are unclear. Bryman (2008: 384-390) characterises qualitative research as that which emphasises context, process and flexibility. My interest is in what the relationship between theatre and ISS means in a specific example, in the terms of a specific group of people and so prioritising context, process and flexibility was essential.

IN THE FIELD

This study takes the School of Basic Islamic Studies (SOBIS), in Cardiff as a case study. I met the administrator of SOBIS, Raina Malik, in October 2011 at the Welsh Millennium Centre. She had brought a group of boys from SOBIS to perform a short theatre sketch on one of the pillars of the South African constitution. A colleague of mine introduced me to Raina as he had been working closely with the Welsh National Opera and Cape Town Opera on this project, entitled 'Walking to Freedom'. Raina told me about her involvement with SOBIS, as well as her interest in the arts, and after hearing about my MA invited me to visit the school on Friday nights. Since then I have spent a considerable amount of time at SOBIS, auditing classes, chatting to staff and students and attending community events, as I was keen to find out more about Islamic supplementary education and how theatre fitted into SOBIS' pedagogy.

To learn about the function I decided to hold interviews with Raina, a parent and administrator, Ali, a student and Abdul Azzim, a teacher, hoping to hear their stories of being involved with the SOBIS function.

#### WHY INTERVIEWS?

Of the various methods available to a qualitative researcher, I felt that semi-structured interviewing was most appropriate for the present study. Primarily, interviews seem the most natural mode of social science enquiry; if you want to know about someone's experiences, engage them in a conversation and ask (Gubrium and Holstein 2001). Interviews are by no means unproblematic however and an interviewer must always be aware of the effect that the interview context will have on the person being interviewed. May (2001) sees the limitations of the interview method to be so great that he claims, "interviews are a *topic* of social research, not a *resource* for social research" (ibid: 143). There is a tendency for interviewees to 'perform' to an interviewer, and the potential to both exaggerate and embroider for the benefit of the research (Bryman 2008: 466). Also, an interview is not an equal conversation given that a researcher has prepared the questions, has specialised academic knowledge in relation the field of enquiry, and is positioned to navigate the conversation as they see fit (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 33). In an attempt to minimise the effects of this imbalanced power relation, I asked the interviewees to choose the time, date, location and duration of the interview and left space at the end of my interview schedule to ask the participants if there was anything they felt I had

overlooked, or anything they would like to add or revisit. The three interviews took place early afternoon towards the end of July and beginning of August; one of these interviews therefore took place during Ramadan and the potential for this to have affected Abdul Azzim's interview given that he was fasting should be noted. I interviewed Ali and Raina in a private room of a friend's cafe, close to SOBIS and interviewed Abdul Azzim in a small study room in the University student's union. On all three occasions these spaces offered a quiet and relatively neutral environment, in which there were no disturbances and the interviewees seemed comfortable and relaxed. Even the simple questions rarely have a simple answer (ibid) and thus I opted for a semi-structured approach where I could rephrase questions if necessary and encourage the interviewees to follow any thread of conversation they saw fit; allowing for “both *clarification* and *elaboration* on the answers given” (May 2001: 123)

Comparability and flexibility were the central motivating factors in my choice to use semi-structured interviews (ibid: 123-125). My interview schedule was informed by my literature review and themes that emerged from the time I spent as an observer at SOBIS. In this way I was able to identify key areas I wanted to investigate e.g., gender, syllabus, parental involvement. The open ended and general nature of my style of questioning was motivated by the principle of flexibility and not wanting to limit the scope of my enquiry. Writing an interview schedule helped to focus my thinking and having some standardisation to the interviews allowed for comparability between different responses. However my questions served only as guidelines and there were interviews in which I barely referred to them.

A lack of structure also facilitates greater spontaneity in conversations. SOBIS is unique in several ways as an ISS and I was keen to explore the themes and issues that emerged, rather than those I presupposed. This further fits into my epistemological foundation which is rooted in a grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) approach, where theory is generated from the data instead of the researcher imposing their own conceptual framework. This approach treats research participants and their perspectives with greater respect, as well as generating more original conclusions.

The choice to conduct interviews also relates specifically to the place I am researching. The environment at SOBIS is usually busy and crowded in between lessons and quite formal and traditional in class. Neither of these two different atmospheres lend themselves to a researcher

being able to stop and ask what's going on in a given moment. Participant observation can offer a multi-layered experience of a social world, but for this study interviews were needed to ask questions about specific issues, and get beyond my own impressions of SOBIS and its pedagogy (Bryman 2008: 466).

Interviewing is also appropriate for the people with whom I am researching. Given the prevalence of generalizations made about Muslims in the UK, particularly in respect to Islamophobia, projections and experiences of cultural xenophobia and racism, I felt that gaining individual perspectives and amplifying their voices was most suitable. Interviewing thus has the potential to more accurately convey the diversity of the Muslim population in the UK. More than this, from a social justice perspective, research which is more personal in nature can help to undermine negative stereotypes and challenge prejudices.

My chosen method relates not just what would best suit the research, but also what best suits me as a researcher. As Kvale has pointed out, "The interviewer is him- or herself the research instrument" (1996: 147) and this was a key factor in choosing interviewing over other methods. Given my personality, academic training and past experiences from my working life, interviewing is a method I feel particularly comfortable with and am also best equipped to use.

Having made a case for interviewing as the optimum method for this study, I also appreciate its shortcomings. It is widely recognised that human beings communicate in a variety of ways and on various levels. It is therefore reductive and problematic that interviews rely on verbal communication as a medium of data. Interviewing is based on the "assumption that language is a good indicator of thought and action" (Punch 1998: 182) and this is not always the case. For this reason I cross reference my analysis with the interviewees to be sure that my findings fit as closely to their perspectives as possible. The relationship between thought and action is rarely simple or congruent (MacMurray 1933), though as I have not witnessed any of SOBIS theatre activities first hand this study is reliant on what I have been told. Having no particular reason to doubt whether the accounts I have heard are genuine, I construct my research in the good faith that what I have been told corresponds to what happens. Moreover, where different accounts of the same event have conflicted in some aspects I believe that this sheds light on the nature of the individual's perspective, rather than taking away from the

validity of their interview. The individual accounts are of interest in this research, rather than the factual accuracy of what the interviews convey. The issue of robust data in qualitative enquiry shall be further addressed in my conclusion, where I turn to the wider implications and significance of this study.

## **METHODS**

Data was formally collected via three, one-off, semi-structured interviews which each last approximately an hour. As my research is qualitative in nature, a small sample is appropriate. Seeking a spectrum of views, I used purposive sampling (Bryman 2008: 458) which



involves choosing research participants with particular characteristics. I tried to identify people who could shed light on the various perspectives encompassed by the community at SOBIS i.e. male and female, younger and older people, teacher and student, administrative and parental. More on each of the individual participants shall follow in the analysis section below. By describing my sample as purposive I am not implying that my interviewees are necessarily representative of their social categories. Rather, seeking the in-depth, personal view of a few key individuals can offer a window to a group reality, or social world. This follows from a tradition within psychology, of which Freud's contributions to psychoanalysis demonstrate how case studies can be used to deduce more general knowledge (Kvale 1996: 102-103).

My method also involved convenience sampling (Bryman 2008: 183) in that I chose people whom I knew relatively well at SOBIS and with whom I could easily arrange an interview. Also, interviewees had to be over 16 for ethical reasons which further limited the sample. I would have liked to interview younger children also, particularly as they make up the majority of the student body, as they would have been able to offer a different and equally as important perspective. Moreover, my fieldwork was being done in the lead up to Ramadan and time constraints, as well as people's availability, before this important holiday limited the number of interviews I could conduct.

Oakley (1991) illustrates the importance of undermining hierarchies between researcher and researched, stressing openness, self-disclosure, trust and reciprocity are crucial. The interviews I conducted for this study were a result of having built relationships of respect and friendship with the people at SOBIS. Over the past year I have sat in on hadith classes, spent time in the reception area of the school chatting with the administrators, attended all women social events such as dinners and fashion shows and got to know some teachers and students through chance meetings in the schools corridors or around and about, outside of school hours. In the spirit of egalitarian scholarship, I tried to give my research participants as much control over the interview process as possible. I also tried to keep the tone of interviews informal and friendly. Nonetheless, I formally applied for ethical approval from the university before arranging any interviews and followed university guidelines in respect to issuing each participant with an information sheet, consent form and gave assurances that the data would be handled

responsibly. Each interview was recorded and transcribed, the data being saved on a hard drive that was kept under lock and key. The treatment of this data will be elaborated on in the analysis section below. By means of exchange with SOBIS, I will be delivering theatre workshops for the young people at SOBIS and helping them to publicise their function through my networks of theatre makers and appreciators in Wales.

From my very first visit, staff and students at SOBIS have been exceptionally open and accommodating of me as a researcher. They are proud of the community they have there and the education that is on offer. Far from having to negotiate access (see Lee 1993), I found those at SOBIS were keen to have me there as they hope that my work will be able to capture some of the many positive things happening there and serve to publicise their achievements. It is for this reason that the interviewees have not been anonymised in this research, namely that they did not want to be. There is however much debate around the issue of participant anonymity in academic research. Kelly (2009) explores the critique around anonymity as a default position in social science research. Whilst endorsing the practice of anonymising participants Kelly also recognises that context and the preference of the participant should guide a researcher's decision in this regard (ibid: 442). Furthermore, Patton (2002: 411) has discussed participant's entitlement not to be anonymised, and to have ownership over their stories and their identities. This openness also goes some way to illustrating the outward-looking character of SOBIS; participants view my research as a way to respond to the suspicion they feel some non-Muslims harbour towards ISS and also a means by which other supplementary schools across the UK can learn from their experiences and share in their good practice.

More than this, there has been a genuine warmth to my welcome at SOBIS. Staff and students have been intrigued and delighted by my interest in their practice of Islam and have made every effort to make me feel a part of their community. I am fortunate also to enjoy a degree of cultural closeness to those at SOBIS and have been treated like family. Despite the fact that I am ethnically a European mixture of Irish Christian and German Jew, I lived in India for a few years as a teenager, spoke some Hindi and came to feel very much at home. As the majority of those at SOBIS are of South Asian descent this was an immediate bridge to establishing a relationship and provided elements of an 'insider perspective' (Taylor 2011).

The expectation and desire to generate a positive account of my research community, as well as my proximity to participants, has distinct ethical implications regarding the integrity of my work. Ryan et al (2011) have discussed issues of researching with Muslim peers, and raised various questions of 'how close is too close' in an academic context? Personal relationships can place restraints such as a particular concern for how a participant might feel about the findings, which suggest the common criticism that emotionality can undermine analytic robustness. Labaree (2002: 109-115) presents insidership as a spectrum, which is multi-dimensional and under-researched. As mentioned, in some aspects I share experiences and aspects of my identity with research participants whereas in other respects, such as views on gender and sexuality, we are distinctly different. Throughout this study I have endeavoured to reflect on my positioning as a researcher, and as a person, in the hope that transparency will counteract the pitfalls of partiality. Discussing the politics of research, Hammersley (1995) inverts Mao's dictum, that 'in order to understand a thing one has to change it' (ibid: 49) to illustrate the mindset that activist academics can fall into. Hammersley ultimately argues that research is unavoidably political and therefore should be relevant, yet crucially should not serve a particular cause (1995: 118). Despite feeling that SOBIS deserves good publicity, I am conscious that no matter how committed a researcher is, or how close to their participants, critical distance and academic integrity should not be compromised. Nonetheless, interviews have often been described as creative collaborations (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009) and as such neither do I attempt to construe my research as a value-free project (Oakley 1981; Harding 1987; Reinharz 1992). I have been entirely open with staff and students at SOBIS about my research and the development of my findings. I have encouraged their input at every level of my investigation and, despite being keen on the exposure it could offer, not once has there been suggestion that they would like to be involved in editing my work.

# ANALYSIS

## INTRODUCTION

As mentioned above, the data for this study was collected via three, one-off, hour-long interviews. The interviews were recorded, and transcribed shortly afterwards. Once I had a written transcript for the whole interview I then listened to each interview again, applying codes, or labels, to arrange the data according to theme. Initially, each interview produced approximately a dozen themes, which I then narrowed down to three which were common to all: Islamic education, theatre and Islamic theatre. Following this I re-read the transcripts, whilst listening to the recordings, making notes on the gist of each conversation; I wanted to create a general picture of what each interviewee's opinion was, in relation to the central question of this study, to provide context for their comments as they relate to each theme. Moreover, I chose to present my findings in this way to give integrity to the individual voices and perspectives of participants, and to be as transparent as possible about how I arrived at the conclusions I suggest.

Once I had written a synopsis for each interview, I then took the first theme, Islamic education, and grouped together all the responses to which I had applied that code. By doing thematic analysis in this way I was afforded both depth and breadth; I was able to hone in on each interviewee's comments on a single theme, giving a more thorough analytic treatment to the individual sets of data, and could also see how the three participant's views compared and contrasted as having a central theme to guide the analysis gave a common reference point by which I could manage the three sets of interview data together. I followed this procedure for each of the three themes before bringing together the group analysis sections to draw out conclusions, working toward answering the central question of this dissertation.

As such, I have taken a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967) whereby themes are allowed to emerge organically. I felt this was more fitting than a top down approach in which a researcher will approach the data with key concepts and themes in mind and try and read those into the data. The title of this dissertation is appropriately named, 'An Exploration...', I did not presume to know what I was looking for when I started my fieldwork or analysis. As such, it has also been suggested (Charmaz 2001: 675-694) that grounded theory is a particularly fitting analysis style for qualitative interviewing.

#### *ABDUL AZZIM:*

Abdul Azzim is a teacher at SOBIS. He is former President of Cardiff University Islamic Society (ISOC) currently doing a PhD in Religious Studies. I met Abdul Azzim firstly in a university context whilst we were both studying and have got to know him over the past year at SOBIS. As a man in his twenties, Abdul Azzim is considered one of the 'young teachers' there. Given his age and the fact that he was born and brought up in Cardiff he enjoys a close relationship with many of the students and is a committed and key player in the future of SOBIS. Abdul Azzim has only been at SOBIS since 2008/9; he is one of the few younger teachers that didn't study at SOBIS, "wish I did" (*Abdul Azzim*). Abdul Azzim came to SOBIS during his time at ISOC. Other students in ISOC were also active at SOBIS and encouraged Abdul Azzim to get involved. Moreover, the Headteacher Dr Lal was keen to recruit more male teachers.

In his working life, Abdul Azzim also teaches training courses; leadership, project management and events management, and also does sessions on teaching methods. Abdul Azzim has turned this into a business and for the past year has been delivering short training courses commercially. He uses very interactive workshop-based methods himself and feels this influences his teaching at SOBIS.

Abdul Azzim spoke warmly of his involvement in SOBIS functions, and highly of the use of theatre in Islamic education. He was proud of how SOBIS carried on the Islamic tradition of storytelling as a teaching method. It was a turning point in the development of the function when it went from being disparate sketches, and like a school play, to a dramatized story, "a

really developed theatrical event" (*Abdul Azzim*). Aside from this, Abdul Azzim felt that theatre was a medium in which the young people could develop self-confidence and skills in events organizing. He linked involvement in the SOBIS function to the advocacy skills that he saw amongst SOBIS graduates at university. He told me with clarity and conviction how he would like the SOBIS function to have a bigger impact, being keen to see theatre used more widely in ISSs and more Muslims more represented in the media as well as public institutions.

#### *RAINA*

Raina is the chief administrator at SOBIS and runs a team of four other people. However she first got involved as a parent, when she was looking for an ISS to send her own two children to. She was keen to find an ISS which had a structured curriculum as she was looking for a school which could provide both structure and context to her children's Islamic education. Moreover she preferred an ISS that taught in English as this is her children's first language, as well as her own. SOBIS was the only ISS Raina found in Cardiff that could fulfil these criteria.

In the last few years Raina has got much more involved at SOBIS. In her professional life Raina is a para-legal secretary and as such is particularly attentive to detail like spelling and grammar in formal, written English. She felt that some of the official correspondence she received from SOBIS let down the school somewhat. Seeing that there was a gap in SOBIS' staff, and being aware that this skill set was a particular strength of hers, Raina offered to take on the responsibilities of schools' administrator. The administration team is now well established and its main role is to support the teachers at SOBIS. The team also act as a key link between, parents and staff, staff and pupils, as well as connecting SOBIS to its wider community in Cardiff.

I met Raina in October 2011 at the Welsh Millennium Centre. She had brought a group of boys from SOBIS to perform a short theatre sketch on one of the pillars of the South African constitution, as part of an international project on multi-culturalism. My colleague who had been working closely with the Welsh National Opera on this project introduced me to Raina,

entitled 'Walking to Freedom'. Since then I have spent a considerable amount of time at SOBIS, during which Raina has been my friend and guide.

Raina is passionate about theatre, literature and the arts, and this came across strongly in her interview. She spoke of the importance of breadth and variety in young people's education and sees the function as providing balance to the more formal learning at SOBIS. Her interest in the arts links to being keen to see Muslims portrayed in a different light in the media, and speaks consistently about wanting to see more Muslim actors in theatre, television and film in Britain. Raina feels that Muslim communities in Britain are often misunderstood, and that this relates to people isolating themselves. Raina believes that education and the arts have an important role to play in evolving our conception of multi-culturalism in Britain.

*ALI:*

Ali is in a pupil at SOBIS, in his sixth and final year. He is currently in a class called *hadith* where he and a dozen or so other pupils study the sayings and doings of the Prophet, focusing on how to implement this wisdom in their own lives. He has also been a main actor in several SOBIS productions. Ali is in full-time education and studying hard for his GCSEs. A multi-talented young man, Ali has many hobbies outside of school, from professional acting to sports, and spending time with his friends. Although I had seen Ali several times at SOBIS we had not met properly before the day of the interview; I was impressed at the ease and maturity with which he approached the meeting. It was Raina who first told Ali about my project and asked him to speak with me; he as a SOBIS student and a drama student had a unique perspective to share.

Ali spoke positively and enthusiastically about his experiences of theatre at SOBIS. He thinks that more Muslims should be involved in theatre at SOBIS and that it would be a good idea for non-Muslims to be a part of SOBIS functions. Ali also showed himself to be a keen and committed student in his interview. He saw the educational benefits of theatre but felt that his involvement in the function was quite different and separate from his classroom experiences at SOBIS. For Ali, theatre was clearly educational and connected to his Islamic education, but more about the joy of performing and having a good time than learning about Islam.

## THEMES

Below I present the three main themes that emerged from my interview research, Islamic education, theatre in ISS and Islamic theatre. Here I aim to convey and discuss what each of these themes means generally at SOBIS. I will use illustrative quotes to highlight each interviewee's individual take on a theme, and to give a taste of the responses from which my analysis has been constructed. Each theme below has been divided using various subheadings to identify topics of interest and consensus within the overall area of discussion. Where an interviewee has not been quoted under a given subheading, this is because they did not say anything specifically relating to this topic.

### ISLAMIC SUPPLEMENTARY EDUCATION

The participants in this study all discussed Islamic education in terms of two main functions. First, learning the basics of Islam, how to pray, knowledge of the Qur'an etc. Second, learning to 'be a good Muslim', which in the context of these interviews refers to being a good person, of moral standing and exemplary character, in the fullest sense of the expression. This idea of learning to be a good Muslim is where theatre came in; theatre educates the person, holistically.

*Raina:*

- "I believe in a more rounded education"



*Ali:*

- “Studying the sayings and actions of our beloved Prophet, this isn't something to be taken as a joke [...] we have to understand how we can implement it in our own lives, so we listen to the teacher” Learning how to pray
- “Learning one's faith [...] how to be a good Muslim”.

*Abdul Azzim:*

- “Learning must be about understanding, and knowing how to apply knowledge in one's own life”.
- “One of the first things he learnt in supplementary school was the 'six articles of faith', the statements of faith that is, whereas in SOBIS you are taught *Iman* [...] the significance of each aspect of faith”
- “A good education should make a child's behaviour more positive.”
- “the behaviour of a troublesome, rude student, to a positive, respectful and appreciative young man [...] seeing that change in him [...] he'll be there in the uni library, working till midnight.. for his A-levels”
  
- “Parents see Islamic supplementary schooling as a way of affirming their children's Muslim identity”

*PEDAGOGY:*

Two of the three interviewees described the classroom environment as formal and traditional; the concept of education clearly had these connotations. The inclusion of theatre into SOBIS programme provides important contrast for the learning experience of students at SOBIS. The function was discussed as a treat in contrast to classroom study; the fun and enjoyable aspects of theatre were juxtaposed to the formality of what interviewees generally

referred to as 'Islamic education'. However when these comments are viewed in relation to the interviews whole, the term 'Islamic education' was nuanced between *traditional* Islamic education, classroom based and didactic, and *modern* Islamic education which was richer and more impactful for that fact that it offered great breadth and dynamism. The nature of the recreational activities at SOBIS, especially the function, is a substantive aspect of SOBIS' pedagogy. The fact that SOBIS has these creative and experiential elements to its curriculum is a structural issue of SOBIS as an institution; theatre is built into the idea of education at SOBIS. The content of the function that the students perform is however strictly Islamic and strictly educational. Therefore theatre at SOBIS fulfils the ethos and objective of Islamic education.

*Raina:*

- “Some people just want an *Islamic education* for their kids [...] I say give your kids a break” [emphasis added]
- “the young people these days have study fatigue”.

*Ali:*

- “But studying isn't the only thing [...] It [SOBIS] is a charity [...] there are fundays, bbqs, the function”
- “Rehearsals will start from 8 to 9pm, after the regular lessons, *every week*”

*Abdul Azzim:*

- “Before I got there, film and photography courses were already there. As were days out and the Islamic Studies GCSE. The theatrical side was well established”
- “video editing is a useful part of the curriculum and something that Islamic supplementary schools should do
- “Young people need space to develop [...] it's important to have open-topic discussions [...] extra-curricular activities”.

## *SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE*

As discussed above, SOBIS conception of education goes beyond learning the basics of Islam to suggest an idea of educating young people holistically, to develop morally, spiritually, academically and practically so as to be able to achieve their full potential. There was consensus around the fact that being involved in the function teaches the students key skills in organization, management, as well as confidence. Given that the audience size averages between 500 and 800 people, the function is logistically a large affair to coordinate. The students take on this responsibility, learning what responsibility means in the process. The interviewees also mentioned the benefits of the young people working collaboratively, discovering ways of working together, learning to delegate and be delegated to. As such, SOBIS came across in a very progressive light as the function facilitates experiential learning. The students are given space to discover their own strengths and talents organically and learn through doing. Moreover, performing in front of such a large audience was described as being a daunting but crucially a character building experience; the young people involved were said to be seen to grow noticeably during the process. The function therefore offers a valuable, unique learning experience.

In connection, Raina also spoke, as a *parent*, about the way her own children were brought up. She spoke of how their father spent a lot of time taking care of them whilst she was at work and his approach to parenting involved giving their children the freedom to experiment and make mistakes, that they learnt to pick themselves back up again, taking lessons on board in the process. This point of the interview seemed to suggest that Raina, a parent within the SOBIS community, appreciated the value of a freer style to education.

*Raina:*

- “I view the function as a big part of their education, they're not just receiving knowledge, being told this and that, they are being creative [...] learning and using new skills”

*Ali:*

- “They learn some essential skills like discipline and patience [...] there's a lot of waiting, you have to be disciplined on stage”

*Abdul Azzim:*

- “Each little area has their own project manager [...] An educational experience which couldn't be replicated”
- “When you performed in front of a few hundred people you get a kind of confidence you're never going to lose [...] when you organise such a big event [...] it's like riding a bike, you don't forget”
- “Since I've been involved one of the students has been elected to lead the function [...] which is an amazing learning process. One of them did that and then had the confidence to go for ISOC presidency”

*ROLE MODEL TEACHERS:*

The concept of teachers acting as role models as well as classroom instructors is a structure of SOBIS as an institution; it is an aspect of their pedagogy. The young teachers at

SOBIS are very effective in this respect due to the close and trusting relationships they enjoy with students. Raina emphasized the importance of students having role models in their teachers and sees this taking place with the younger teachers at SOBIS, and mentions the young male teachers in particular. Abdul Azzim, being a teacher, spoke about his relationship with some SOBIS students from the perspective of being a role model. He repeatedly mentioned the importance of setting a good example and how he hopes to educate his students to be good Muslims, of model conduct. Interviewees also discussed this as an Islamic approach to teaching, in which teachers embody the lessons they impart, teaching through what they do as well as what they say. This is another respect in which SOBIS conception of education points toward theatre.

*Raina:*

- “The younger teachers are so so important [...] They were born and brought up in this country [...] An older teacher wouldn't understand these issues [Temptations of alcohol and girlfriends]. The pupils will talk to the young teachers about things they wouldn't dare mention to the older teachers.”
- “More than an Islamic education, the pupils have role models in the younger teachers”

*Abdul Azzim:*

- “Seeing kids really benefit from the time you had with them [...] showing them a way”

### *SUPPORT*

Support has been normalized and institutionalised at SOBIS, in a way that it is expressed in day-to-day actions of staff and students. The very presence of an admin team is to support the teachers, that they may focus more fully on their work with the students. The pastoral dimension of SOBIS' pedagogy was described another feature of the curriculum. This is further evidence of SOBIS viewing ISS as responsible for educating the person holistically.

*Raina:*

- “We [the admin team] are there to support teachers so that they can focus on the educational side of things”

*Ali:*

- “SOBIS [...] it’s a family”
- “Even if they do leave SOBIS completely, when it comes to the function, I guarantee you they’ll be back [...] from London, from Birmingham”

*Abdul Azzim:*

- “Focuses on the virtues rather than academic knowledge [...] you know, what you should be doing”

## *CURRICULUM*

All the interviewees discussed the importance of the curriculum. SOBIS was the only ISS they knew of in Cardiff that offered a structured curriculum. SOBIS’ curriculum was viewed as providing vital context for learning the basics of Islam. The curriculum was said to offer an important framework for the young people’s education balancing different elements of being Muslim, how to pray as well as understanding the moral embedded in Qur’anic verse, practice and theory. Having a pedagogical structure in place was also said to allow teachers more flexibility to be adaptable to the students’ needs and interests. There is flexibility for a teacher to let discussion in class unfold naturally, exploring implications and tangents of topics that are on the syllabus, and also to incorporate new elements such as theatre, film and photography where appropriate.

Moreover interviewees told of how the curriculum is constantly evolving as Dr Lal, its creator, reviews it every year and takes on board teachers' suggestions relating to both form and content. The involvement of the teachers at this level is crucial as they are the ones who have been delivering it. As such, throughout SOBIS history the curriculum has been refined and developed to the point where it is now a sophisticated educational guideline. The curriculum is a structural feature of SOBIS, being implemented within decision making on a daily basis. The importance of context and breadth to learning, as well as the importance of storytelling and discussion, traditionally Islamic, are evidenced in SOBIS curriculum.

*Raina:*

- “Looking for my children [...] I wanted a proper, structured curriculum”
- “the curriculum provides vital context [...] why and when an ayat or sura was revealed [...] a logical and reasoned approach [...] so, so , so important”

*Ali:*

- “In the first year we do *Iman* [...] learning the basics [...] five pillars [...] then the second year is *Salah*, how to pray to pray and stuff [...] then we do the Qur'an in depth, especially the last *surahs* [...] read them, study them [...] then final year's *Hadith* [...] focus on the sayings and doings of the Prophet [...] we talk about them [...] in our own lives”

*Abdul Azzim:*

- “There are textbooks, including exercises for students”
- “When I'm teaching the syllabus I make my own notes [...] I know Aunty Sufya [Dr Lal] doesn't always have time [...] it's a work in progress”
- “In the last four years Aunty has really pushed the Function as *part* of the syllabus” #

## THEATRE IN ISLAMIC SUPPLEMENTARY EDUCATION

“SOBIS function every year [...] where all of the kids, sometimes even teachers, go on stage and have a good time... perform sketches, maybe relating to what they've studied in SOBIS [...] maybe one of the stories of the prophets or [...] maybe a lesson about patience through drama and theatre [...] SOBIS' function teaches them about Islam, through the sketches they perform [...] teaches them life skills, teaches them to be good Muslims”

– Ali (student)

“It has an educational value in and of itself [...] a really developed theatrical event”

- Abdul Azzim (teacher)

### PRACTICAL ELEMENT TO ISLAMIC SUPPLEMENTARY EDUCATION:

At its core, Islamic education was described as much more than text based study. Exploring Islamic stories using theatre offers a different medium of education to the young people involved; they are absorbing the story, exploring its content and meaning, and then sharing this with an audience. As such the students benefit from an aspect of learning which is specifically catalysed by the act of teaching. All the interviewees mentioned how the young



people involved in the function develop confidence in public speaking, which could have potential for increasing these Muslims' participation in their various communities.

*Raina:*

- "There comes a time when you see it [literature] being adapted and you think I read the text like this, how does somebody else translate of view that? When you see a play or a film or a T.V. series you think, 'Ah, ok..' "

*Ali:*

- "I played a character called 'SuperMuslim' [...] still remember my favourite line [...] 'The one who is strong is not the one who can fight but the one who can control his anger' [...] it's one of the lines of the Prophet"

*Abdul Azzim:*

- "Theatre was an accident [...] suddenly it came in and it was like, whoa! This is useful – let's do more of it [...] It was serendipity [...] we realized we could teach through theatre"
- "They have to be intelligent about Qur'anic storytelling, more creative [...] In the same way you can't draw a depiction of the prophet, you can't act it out'.
- "Building on the heritage of stories [...] to learn and teach others"
- "It showed a different way of learning about Islam"

#### EXPERIENCE OF DEMOCRATIC PROCESS AND DECISION MAKING:

In the organization and planning of the function the young people experience an equality between students and staff as well. The function is a medium for non-hierarchical co-operation and a valuable experience; interviewees talked about the maturity you see develop amongst the students and the humility in the teachers, during this time. This ability to work together with people of all ages and backgrounds is an important part of what the function

offers as an educational instrument. These benefits also then have clear connotations to citizenship skills such as self-advocacy.

*Raina:*

- “Theatre is something social, for the group [...] participatory”

*Ali:*

1. - “In the classroom it's a regular environment [...] we're very respectful of our teachers [...] because in Islam we're taught that [...] The meeting for SOBIS function can be chaotic, everyone's raring to go [...] everyone's fighting to speak”
2. - “The environment is really vibrant [...] I guess there are a lot of characters in the room [...] a lot of big players [...] everybody wants a say”.
3. - “It just brings a smile to my face when I think about the two situations under one roof... same teachers, same pupils [...] In the meeting teachers are the same as students, so yeh it is different [from the classroom]”
  - “Through the democracy, My Aunty Sufia [...] she will put her view across you know, she will say 'I am right' [...]she still has one vote [...] when it comes to electing the leaders”
  - “People will vote for their best idea [...] and then next week we elect [...] every year we have a leader, sometimes it's a sister, sometimes it's a brother, sometimes it's a student, sometimes it's a teacher, it's very varied”
  - “Who wants to lead, stands up [...] if you stand up you get a major role”
4. - “Through the democracy, My Aunty Sufia [...] she will put her view across you know, she will say 'I am right' [...] she still has one vote [...] when it comes to electing the leaders”
5. - “It's all very democratic [...] but then when you get the leader, I guess it turns into a dictator [*laughs*] [...] otherwise nothing gets done”

*Abdul Azzim:*

- “Collectively a decision will be made”

#### *‘HAVING A GOOD TIME’*

Theatre was also valued by the interviewees because it facilitated fun and enjoyment. Each person spoke clearly and repeatedly about the importance of relaxing and having a good time and there were different reasons for this. Fun, understood as pure fun without the conservative connotations of a classroom or pressure of formal assessment, was primarily important because there was the view that students should enjoy themselves, as well as learn. When discussed in this light, theatre was often portrayed as being separate to education which conflicted with the other parts of the interviews that spoke about theatre being an integrated part of the SOBIS curriculum. Theatre has increasingly been incorporated at SOBIS over time, starting out as just a treat and a means of showing parents what their children had learnt. It is possible that it will take a little longer for theatre to be perceived as education, or equally that there are different kinds of theatre being practiced in SOBIS in different ways, some being more educational than others. It is entirely possible to that this is simply a difference of opinion between interviewees, Abdul Azzim for example seemed particularly enthusiastic about new and different forms of learning. However the word ‘fun’ seemed to disqualify educational associations at times, which was attributed to the sincerity and respect with which learning the Quran is treated at SOBIS. And yet, there was also mention of learning *through* fun, relating to the Islamic content of the function and the moral lessons students took from that. This fun learning had the broad term of personal development applied to it, where the Islamic virtues that were discussed in class came to fruition through the function, and the children noticeably matured.

*Raina:*

- "I know the function is your focus, but for us the function is a secondary thing [...] a tool, an appendix, a treat [...] a diversion"

*Ali:*

- "It's [the function] a fun-loving environment"
- "Then you have things which are both fun and Islamic [...] the prime example is the SOBIS function"
- "We always have a big group, so many of the Muslims are so enthusiastic"
- "Noble character [...] having a laugh, that's the true Islam [...] I guess theatre is a branch of having a good time"

*Abdul Azzim:*

- "They have a great time [...] the change in the kids was really really visible"

## **ISLAM AND THEATRE**

"Wales first Islamic theatre production"

(function flier, *The Sands of Time*)

"I would definitely put the function in the bracket of theatre. It consciously became more and more theatre".

– Abdul Azzim (teacher)

“I like entertaining people”

Ali (student)

The way that SOBIS approaches theatre is one way of considering how ‘Islamic theatre’ might be defined. There are certain conditions that the function must fulfil and parameters within which those involved should work. Principally, the content must be Islamic which was defined as dramatizing a story or message from the Quran but never impersonating or depicting Prophets. There was strong emphasis in the interviews that action couldn’t happen on stage which could be deemed religiously and/or culturally unacceptable, such as blasphemy or taking drugs. This discussion was linked to an awareness of culturally conservative groups within Cardiff’s Muslim population and not wanting to offend or exclude them. Music was an important topic here, being an aspect of performance which is sometimes deemed as forbidden by the Quran and therefore contentious. All kinds of music are popular amongst young people at SOBIS, though this is not always reflected publicly. For example, SOBIS Productions, the video-team, uses traditional Islamic music, a *Nausheed*, in the credits of their videos, which straight away sets the tone as a traditional, Islamic aesthetic.

The environment at functions was also described by interviewees as an aspect in which SOBIS theatre being distinctly Islamic. This was qualified by the fact that rehearsals are stopped for prayer, and the atmosphere of support and respect coming from the way in which people treat each other.

*Raina:*

- “This is a vibrant religion [...] the Qur'an doesn't say you can't do theatre' [...] but you don't compromise the religion or the teaching”
- The young people write the script for the function but it must be checked and edited by Dr Lal, “to make sure it's correct” [44:ish] “because of her knowledge” [49:ish]
- “Even though it's (the function) a piece of drama it still has to be pretty accurate [...] Some things are non-negotiable”
- “We wouldn't do something that had nothing to do with Islam” [51:ish]

*Ali:*

- “Content at SOBIS always relates to Islam [...] always relates to my faith [...] at drama school it's more what other people want to see [...] doesn't relate to Islam at all” [7:31]
- “When it comes to things like this [whether something is *haram*] I would always separate the argument into two sides, a cultural view and the religious view [...] lot of people would say going out on stage isn't really the culture so they'd look down upon it”
- “In a country like ... India [...] it's [performing] not really deemed culturally accepted [...] I mean, Bollywood's very popular but that's majority Hindu and stuff [...] it's not Muslims' thing ... but that's not necessarily the case [...] a good Muslim is someone who engages with community, has a good time [...] shows that he has a good character” [16:50ish]
- “As long as it's not like breaking my religion [...] like if I actually had to drink alcohol and get drunk”
- “Maybe [...] when they [casting agents] see my religion they wouldn't put me forward for that kind of part [i.e. drunkard] ... and I guess that's ok' ”
- “If theatre can be done in a good way [...] following all the conditions of Islam [...] I don't see how anyone could have a problem with spreading Islam, through having some fun, through theatre”

*Abdul Azzim:*

- “I've never heard anyone say that there's something against theatre in the Quran”
- “Music plays a big role. We did one called a Nausheedical”
- “Some might object to the use of music for example [...] Some of us are cool with it. Some prefer to keep it simple”
- “There hasn't ever been any vocal objection to it [the function] ... which I was surprised at [...] I expected some to think of it as inappropriate, or a waste of time”
- “And keep it as open, to cater to as many people as possible”

## *GENDER*

Mixed audiences and the idea of mixed performers are present barriers to some members of the community attending. The main parental objection to the function is that it's a mixed environment. Men and women are seated separately but this is difficult to maintain throughout the event, for example coming in and out of the venue. The older girls are no longer part of the main function, but help out in organising, management, costumes, props, backstage crew roles etc. as they are not permitted to sing on stage or perform with the older boys. However the older girls now have their own show, with only female audience. These shows were said to be better organised and better developed but receive smaller audiences. One issue that was related to small audience was transport difficulties, given that performances take place in Barry, outside of Cardiff, making it difficult for some women to attend. It was suggested that transport was a barrier for women and not men because the ‘main’ function was a family event, something whole families could go to together and was therefore easier to organize. Interviewees related how the older girls were happy with this arrangement as they, and the female audience, enjoyed more freedom that way. Some of the interviewees mentioned that it would be desirable to combine the two events into one main function somehow though expressed an understanding, and degree of resignation, to the fact that this might not be possible in the near future.

Islam, which was expressed by the interviewees as a culture, was discussed at various points as being socially conservative, and that this is something that must simply be accepted. The associations of a traditional culture was one of the main ways that interviewees distinguished Islam from Christianity. Some interviews also mentioned a theological grounding to this, relating to the concept of *fitna*, or sin, in the Qur'an but did not develop this. Cultural conservatism, and the stereotype that Muslims are culturally conservative, proved evocative which generated strong, considered opinions. The general consensus was that SOBIS, students and staff, should be accommodating and creative in response.

*Raina:*

- “Men and women are separate [...] it’s not just a cultural issue but a religious one as well”

*Ali:*

- “If they [parents] had concerns, they wouldn't turn up”
- “There's sometimes debate [...] with the actual performance, with content maybe [...] maybe we shouldn't have too many girls and boys in a scene, or maybe we shouldn't have older girls in a scene, just slight issues like that”
- “My great headteacher, Aunty Sufia, she sorts everything out [...] The older girls have had their own show for three years running now”
- “I'm actually jealous of females, they get their own show”

*Abdul Azzim:*



- “The voice is seen as part of a woman's aura, the part which should be covered by the hijab.”
- “Some might object to boys and girls mixing”
- “The girls’ function [...] I heard from my wife that it was a much more polished event and more enjoyable”
- “The girls are working on getting a bigger audience.”
- “In Barry [...] place big enough and cheap enough.”
- “I’d like to see one event together again.. but Nausheen wants to keep them separate so that the girls can dance and sing, really let their hair down”. #
- “I know how difficult it is to cater to the whole Muslim community. Sometimes it's almost impossible” [42.20]

*POTENTIAL FOR DA’WA:*

“Getting the message across” (Raina) was another key aspect of how the interviewees discussed the function. Predominantly, theatre was seen as a way to spread an Islamic message, by sharing Qur’anic teachings and values with an audience. In recent years the function has gone from being disparate sketches, being likened to a school play, to one coherent performance which had a beginning, middle and an end. This shift was referred to as highly significant in the development of the SOBIS function, correlating to large increase in audience numbers and a shift in rehearsal patterns. In earlier functions rehearsals had happened over a brief period around the time of performance, whereas now rehearsals happen over the course a large part of the year, running for an extra hour after regular classes.

*Raina:*

- “This is da'wa [...] reaching out to people [...] SOBIS is a captured audience”
- "There are many ways to pass on a message [...] words and pictures are the best" [36:ish]

*Ali:*

- "I was talking about the crew earlier [...] another big non-Muslim part of the SOBIS function is the audience [...] they enjoy the show"
- "A lot of people see Muslims how the media portray them" [4:50]

*Abdul Azzim:*

- "The Quran uses stories as a teaching method [...] SOBIS tries to carry on this tradition"
- "If any other schools had a similar idea [...] of this [theatre] as a teaching method [ ...] maybe they could take the idea from SOBIS"
- "It showed a different way of learning about Islam [...] some of the imams came up to us afterwards and were really warm about it. Saying maybe they need to do something like this at the mosque"
- "I really want to put on [...] the story of Joseph [...] The last line is, 'In the Qur'an are the best of stories"
- "Audience, well, it's a lot of parents and family [...] but now we've developed it as more of a theatrical performance we get more people who just come along because they're interested in seeing a play".

#### *CHANGING PERCEPTIONS AND BUILDING BRIDGES*

Theatre as a means of building links between communities - reaching out to non-Muslims:

SOBIS got involved with 'Walking to Freedom' because Raina was in contact with the education department at the Welsh Millennium Centre and spoke to the participation officer about getting SOBIS' students involved. Involvement in these kinds of events is indicative of the outward-looking ethos of SOBIS as a school. Students are encouraged to become upstanding members and ambassadors of their communities and the interviewees made it clear that they, and the Headteacher Dr Sufia Lal, saw the function as playing a vital role in this. In an interview I was told how Cardiff University Islamic Society has a disproportionately high number of influential members from SOBIS, and that the skills that they brought with them could be attributed to the function. More broadly, if theatre opportunities were more widely available to young Muslims then it is likely they would be more inclined to enter the British media professionally, later on in life. Interviewees mentioned how positive they thought it would be for people of different religions to make theatre together and were keen to share what they were doing with non-Muslims. In this respect, if the concept of the SOBIS function could be propagated more widely, theatre could hold huge potential for challenging cultural xenophobia that some Muslims experience in Britain.

*Raina:*

- "No man is an island"
- "I don't like it when you have Muslims who say we are second class citizens, nobody talks to us, nobody likes us, there's all these false impressions about us. My response to that is so what did you do to dispel it then? Why do you expect people to come to you and try to understand your culture?"
- "Where have you made the steps? What have you done?"
- "It's something I never had [...] I think they take it for granted"
- "We send invitations out far and wide [...] but it's mainly parents who come, It's a shame really"

*Ali:*

- “Maybe they'd [a non-Muslim actor] find it ... a bit weird, because they're not used to content, might not be used to breaking in the middle of a drama thing to go pray, they might be a bit uncomfortable at first”
- “A lot of people look up to media and they look up to television, especially young Muslims”
- “On the day the majority of the audience are parents”

*Abdul Azzim:*

- “The theatre production we did with the Islamic Society stemmed from the Function”
- “I would like to see something like the function happen more widely”
- “Some of the kids are getting pretty good at this stuff. Let's hope they branch out in life. And if one of the kids became an actor of the back of their experience at SOBIS , wouldn't that be awesome.”

## **HOW DO THESE INTERVIEW FINDINGS FIT WITH THE LITERATURE?**

There are aspects of these interview findings which correspond to present academic literature and equally, various ways in which this data offers new perspectives on Islamic supplementary education.

Gent's (2006) work endorsing traditional methods is contradicted by Abdul Azzim's experience of this kind of Islamic supplementary school (ISS) in his own childhood, which he

remembered as boring and uninspiring. However Gent (ibid) identifies improved memory as a positive outcome of Qur'anic rote learning, which links to interviewees comments about how learning lines for a theatre performance also helps memorization capabilities. Memory is key to mainstream exams in Britain, and this study shows how both traditional and modern forms of Islamic supplementary education can be advantageous to attainment in the national education system. As such, further exploring and maximizing the benefits of ISS could lead to greater opportunities for young Muslims in Britain, such as access to higher education and training, as well as meaningful employment

Halstead (2005) notes concerns regarding 'study-fatigue' of young Muslims from spending several hours studying in an ISS, after a full day of school. Raina's interview in particular echoes this view, and all the interviewees agreed on the importance of extracurricular activities at SOBIS , recreationally.

In an Islamic context, teachers should also be role models (Gilliat-Ray 2010: 147). The young teachers at SOBIS are very effective in this respect due to the close and trusting relationships they enjoy with students. Raina echoes the importance of students having role models in their teachers and sees this taking place with the younger teachers at SOBIS, and mentions the young male teachers in particular. Abdul Azzim also talks about his relationship with some SOBIS students from the perspective of being a role model; he repeatedly speaks about the importance of setting a good example and how he hopes to educate his students to be good Muslims, of model conduct. Ali, the only current ISS student I interviewed, clearly communicated the fact that he feels he has role models in his teachers at SOBIS, and how much he valued this.

Mogra (2004) looks at textbooks and curricula in ISSs - criticises traditional approach of authoritarian teachers and disparagement of students thinking critically. SOBIS has a traditional environment in classrooms, but an open, non-hierarchical approach at function meetings. Moreover, even within the classroom setting, defined as traditional in that it is textbook based and somewhat didactic, the pedagogy at SOBIS is such that space is created within class time for seminar-style discussion, facilitating deeper understanding of the texts. Abdul Azzim in particular spoke about how he would like to see ISSs move more in the direction of open and interactive learning. Mogra (ibid) is also critical of the textbooks used

in ISSs. At SOBIS, they have taken a curriculum, published by TAHA, and then re-worked it into their own creation which is dynamic, challenging, pastoral and holistic. All the interviewees spoke highly of the curriculum; equally from the perspectives of someone delivering it, someone learning from it and a parent looking to give her children the best possible Islamic education.

None of the interviewees saw an incompatibility between Islam and theatre, describing the function as a developed and celebrated part of their conception of Islamic supplementary education. Scourfield et al (n.d.: 6) found that Muslim Children in Cardiff were happy to be involved in Christmas plays at school, suggesting that the view that Muslims could be involved in theatre more widely in Britain is not exclusive to SOBIS. This research suggests that having a specifically Islamic content to theatre productions is more of a concern for parents than young Muslims actually taking part in these productions. The interviewees all discussed parameters in which Muslims can and should make theatre in an "Islamic" way, which potentially offers ways of working towards a definition of 'Islamic theatre'. Moreover, Gent's work in Redbridge Borough, (2006: 23) discusses the positives of ISSs and mainstream schools working together. Theatre projects could be an ideal event through various schools and community groups could collaborate.

In relation to gender, Jacobson (1998: 55) reported suspicion surrounding female only events being organized, when conducting fieldwork with Pakistani youth in the London area. My findings in respect to the women's only, SOBIS function couldn't be more different, where the SOBIS women's only events were spoken about with warmth and pride.

## CONCLUSION

This study has sought to explore two main areas in relation the role of theatre in Islamic supplementary education, so as to allude to the potential for theatre to be used more widely in this way. First, I sought to understand how and why SOBIS theatre happens and tried to get a picture of what interviewees thought in relation to how theatre is used. Second, I aimed to shed light on whether making theatre was consistent with the interviewees conception of being Muslim and how those two domains are navigated at SOBIS.

Considering the literature in this area and the general perception of Islamic supplementary education as narrowly relating to Quranic learning, SOBIS is both outward looking and forward thinking as an institution. SOBIS has a broad and rich sense of what education means and contributes to the personal development of its young people on various levels; the interviewees all talked about how Islamic supplementary education was about learning to “be a good Muslim”, a good person in every aspect of their lives, and well as learning the basics of Islam such as how to pray and knowledge of the Quran. This pedagogy manifests itself notably in the presence of a structured and varied curriculum, the pastoral elements built into the curriculum and the emphasis on teachers being good role models as well as theological instructors.

Raina, Ali and Abdul Azzim all agreed that theatre was a valuable part of a SOBIS education. As a creative activity, taking part in theatre was discussed as providing important recreation for the young people, in contrast to the amount of academic, book-based learning they experience in mainstream schooling, and classroom learning at SOBIS. The function was also viewed as playing a role in the social development, as interviewees mentioned the way students mature through enjoying themselves with their friends through the experience. On a practical level, being involved in putting on such a big event allowed the young people to develop transferrable skills relating to organization and management. Moreover, it was observed how former students have gone on to be active and influential members of the other

institutions and representative bodies, illustrating how the young people at SOBIS had taken on board what they had learnt in a deep and meaningful way and were able to translate them to different aspects of their lives. Depth of learning also featured in the way that interviewees talked about the way theatre afforded a powerful means of exploring and sharing stories. Exploring Islamic stories using theatre offers a different medium of education to the young people involved; they are absorbing the story, exploring its content and meaning, and then sharing this with an audience. As such the students benefit from an aspect of learning which is specifically catalysed by the act of teaching. Furthermore, the importance of storytelling at the SOBIS function was also related to the centrality of storytelling in Islam traditionally. As such, engaging with storytelling was viewed as a significant people between SOBIS students growing up as young people in Cardiff and their Islamic heritage and identity as Muslims. Also, in the organization and planning of the function the young people enjoy an equality between students and staff as well. This ability to work together with people of all ages and backgrounds, and this experience of democracy, is another important part of what the function offers as an educational instrument.

The interviewees shared fascinating insight into how the combine being Muslim and making theatre. As can be seen above, there are many aspects in which the practice of theatre is consistent with the SOBIS approach to Islamic supplementary education. However there are also ways in which the interviewees discussed their function as specifically “Islamic theatre”. Content was key, in that it should convey Qur’anic teachings, not depict Prophets or dramatise anything that could be deemed *haram* or contrary to aspects of being Muslim such as consuming alcohol. The environment was also described as Islamic, given the way people treat each other and the fact that rehearsals are paused for prayer. It was suggested that non-Muslims could also take a valuable experience from this, learning more about how Muslims approach theatre. Gender emerged as another issue in terms of the compatibility between Islamic supplementary education at SOBIS and theatre. The older girls are not permitted to perform with the boys or sing on stage and now have a separate function. However, far from being seen as objectionable interviewees discussed how this was a positive development as I was told that it provided an



opportunity for the girls to “really let their hair down’, literally and metaphorically. Also, the term ‘theatre’ did prove an appropriate lens through which to view the SOBIS function, given that the participants all confidently described the function as theatre.

Had I the opportunity to repeat this study or do a follow-up my main concern would be to make the data more robust. Using a variety of methods is one way to do this (Flick 2009) and so I would be keen to spend more time at SOBIS, officially as an ethnographic researcher, to conduct participant observation and use these field notes within the final analysis. I would like to hold more interviews with staff and students to get more inside perspectives on SOBIS. I would also like to conduct more interviews to show more perspectives as three is a very small number. I would also have liked to conduct a series of interviews with parents. Although Raina is a SOBIS parent, in her interview she spoke primarily as an administrator. Moreover, where she did share her parental perspective it was often mediated by what she knew of the organization from being heavily involved. Parents are well placed to evaluate a school and its pedagogy as they usually have the greatest part to play in their child’s development, spending an appreciable amount of time with them. Parents also have the potential to be a vital link between SOBIS and its wider communities; they have a vested interest in the health of the school as an institution and yet not too much direct, regular contact with the school which might suggest a bias. It would also have been interesting to get a sense of how audience members view the SOBIS function; interviews would be a desirable way to do this though perhaps a questionnaire would be more practical. If the potential for theatre in ISSs is to be understood more widely in ISSs, it would be important to talk to other ISSs to understand why they are not using theatre in their pedagogy and if this they would consider it. Indeed, adding a quantitative approach to this study could have facilitated more factual data about the role of theatre at SOBIS, which could provide better context for the interview findings. It would also be worthwhile to conduct a much wider piece of research, taking the whole of Cardiff, Wales and even the UK as case studies as this would give a clearer picture of how SOBIS fits into Islamic supplementary in Britain more broadly.

In the future, SOBIS could undoubtedly be an important creative resource in Wales.

“Theatre is a way for um people to see like [...] these Muslims they can go out on stage, they can have some fun [...] they're like anyone else who wannsa have a good time [...] Regarding a non-Muslim at SOBIS, I genuinely think they'd have a blast”

(Ali, student)

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