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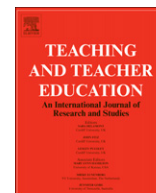

Female Islamic Studies teachers in Saudi Arabia: A phenomenological study

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ABSTRACT

This study highlights on describing the experiences of Saudi Arabian female Islamic Studies teachers by exploring what is means to be an Islamic Studies teacher teaching in the current unprecedented vibrant and complex tapestry of social, religious and political debates occurring in the larger context of the country. The study draws on phenomenology as a guiding theoretical framework. The seven teachers involved in the study used their identities, beliefs and values to make sense of their everyday lived experiences. Discussions about their lived experiences provided a counter-discourse that challenges the traditional image of Islamic Studies teachers as transmitters of sacred knowledge. The study points to the growing complexity of the Islamic Studies teachers' roles due to an array of challenges that surfaced both in society at large and within the classroom walls.

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1. Introduction

Religion in Saudi Arabia is regarded as the bedrock of all educational decisions. In fact, the constitution of Saudi Arabia reflects the country's philosophy: 'The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a sovereign Arab Islamic state with Islam as its religion; God's Book and the *Sunnah* [ways and practices] of His Prophet, peace be upon him, are its constitution, Arabic is its language' (International Constitutional Law Document, 2005). With regard to the education sector, the first general objective and strategic starting point of Saudi Arabia's Sixth Development Plan (1995–2000) made it a priority 'to safeguard Islamic values by duly observing, disseminating and confirming Allah's Shariáh (God's Divine Law)' (Ministry of Planning, 1995).

Religious education, namely *Islamic* education, is emphasized throughout all levels of the school system in Saudi Arabia. Its subjects are: *Quran*, *Tajwid* (conventions of Quranic recitation), *Tafsir* (Quranic Interpretation), *Hadith* (sayings of the Prophet), *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), and *Tawheed* (the Oneness of God). Failure in anyone of the above subjects requires the student to repeat the whole academic year. Approximately 30% of the students' total classroom hours is dedicated to teaching these subjects in elementary school, whereas 24% of class time is committed to teaching these subjects at the intermediate and secondary levels (Prokop, 2005). The emphasis on Islam, however, is not limited to the parts of the school day that are explicitly devoted to religious subjects, but pervades the teaching of all subjects at all academic levels. Sciences and humanities subjects are enveloped in layers of Islamic thought and philosophy. For instance, history classes emphasize such elements as the history of Islamic civilization and the life of the prophet, and Arabic literature classes are heavily influenced by Islamic teachings (Prokop, 2003).

Current research on Islamic Studies in Saudi Arabia focuses on reforming the 'official curriculum' and school textbooks in response to fierce attacks alleging that on the Saudi national curriculum promotes hostility against non-Muslims (Prokop, 2003; Stalinsky, 2003). Such allegations were met with an aggressive response, most notably from the Imam at the Holy Mosque of Makkah, Sheik Saud Al Shuraim, who publically declared that any change in the curriculum material would be regarded as an act of 'high treason' (Prokop, 2003). Nonetheless, Ministry of Education and other government officials continue the call for toning down the anti-non-Muslim rhetoric in the curriculum and have made efforts to retrain teachers in fostering tolerance and open-mindedness among the Saudi youth. Despite widespread attempts to develop new curricula and materials for schools the impoverished understandings of the complex role of the teacher and the classroom context has resulted in the creation of a parochial and simplistic understanding of this fundamental issue. In this context, I seek to broaden the scope of educational research by steering away from the heated debate around the 'official curriculum' and focusing on what is known as the 'delivered curriculum' (Eisner, 1992)—i.e., that which is actually taught in the classroom, taking account of teacher identity beliefs, styles, and their impact on the form and content of curricular materials that students actually receive.

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1.1. Why study women?

There are several reasons for limiting the study to women teachers. First, the conservative nature of the Saudi society would make it difficult for a female researcher like myself to interview or interact with male Islamic Studies teachers. Second, Saudi women, let alone Saudi women teachers, are an understudied population. Research in Saudi women is scarce and often lacks meticulous description. This could be due to the fact that women in Saudi culture are regarded as *oura*, a term used to designate something extremely private, including private body parts (Arebi, 1994). Women are also regarded as objects of family honor and hence protecting them from the public eye is not limited to physical concealment or veiling, but includes shielding the disclosure of their identities and voices. Hitherto, very few researchers have attempted to study the Saudi Arabian female. One of the prominent researchers in this area is the Saudi anthropologist Suraya Al Torki, who has conducted research on women's development and employment in Saudi Arabia (1992), on the ideology and behavior of privileged Saudi women (1986) and on family organization and women's power in Saudi urban society (1977). Arebi (1994) has also contributed to the understanding of Saudi women through her study on Saudi women writers and the political discourse.

Thirdly, given that Saudi Arabia is a relatively young country and that, like many developing countries, it has undergone rapid economic, social and demographic changes, the country implemented what was known as a 'rapid expansion policy,' in which the emphasis has centered on quantitative expansion of the education sector (Abd-el Wassie, 1970; Prokop, 2003). The advances in terms of infrastructure, developing books, training teachers and establishing schools have been so rapid that it has been difficult to evaluate the efforts expended into education (Abd-el Wassie, 1970). In fact, female teacher education for Saudi women only began in the late 1960s. Most teachers prior to that time were imported from neighboring Arab countries, particularly Egypt and Syria. In the late 1960s, as part of its effort to address the dire need for Saudi teachers, the Ministry of Education implemented a two-year diploma programme for teacher preparation. The participating teachers were only required to have completed an elementary school degree. Today, due to increasing unemployment among Saudis, the country has implemented a policy known as 'Saudiazation,' in which Saudis are given priority for job placements over none Saudis, a policy that is felt strongly in the education sector. Hence, there exists today a new generation of female Saudi teachers working in the education system. These women, I believe, are key players in the development of education in Saudi Arabia today; however, they lack voice and presence in current research regarding Saudi Arabia and its education system.

Fourthly, choosing to focus on the experiences of the female Islamic Studies (referred to as IS hereafter) teachers, who are regarded as the weavers of the moral fiber of Saudi society, is unprecedented in the Saudi Arabian context. These women teachers are important because they are situated at the core of the ongoing debates about the role of women in Saudi Arabia today. As stakeholders in this debate, whether active or passive, their identities and experiences are constantly being shaped and reshaped by the political, social and religious changes in the nation at large. Moreover, according to Prokop (2005), 'the influence of religious forces is particularly felt in the field of female education' (p. 63). Indeed, women's education in Saudi Arabia is strictly controlled by the *ulama* and is impacted by a prominent gender ideology or ideal image of the Muslim Saudi Arabian woman that is sustained by the state, by society and by the *ulama* (Doumato, 1992).

According to Kirk and Winthrop (2008) both in North America and western contexts, there is a wealth of literature that addresses individual teachers' experiences, identities, biographies, narratives and voices (see for example, Casey, 1993; Clandinin & Connelly, 1999, 2000, 2003; Goodson, 1992). The previous type of literature has greatly informed teacher education programmes, especially in more progressive institutions and is recognized for its importance in the area of teacher professional development (Kirk & Winthrop, 2008). However, in Saudi Arabia, there is very little attention given to the various experiences, perceptions and narratives of teachers. Simply put, no one has endeavored to ask teachers for such input – perhaps because no one has considered their experiences to be a valuable subject of study, since the teacher is still regarded as an implementer of reform policy who may occasionally require 'retraining' rather than as an active stakeholder in the reform process.

1.2. Why now?

As a political unit, Saudi Arabia's origins lie within the puritanical *Wahhabi* movement that gained the allegiance of the powerful Al Saud royal family. This political/religious alliance is not only the basis of the present Saudi Arabian state, it also shapes the social, cultural, and political norms, attitudes, behavior and environment of the nation. The field of political psychology takes the view that political systems routinely shape the identities, memories, stereotypes, beliefs, language, emotions and actions of citizens. Seen from this perspective, the people of Saudi Arabia have historically been habituated to a system within which change is rare and most individuals choose to remain within the realm of the familiar, thus buttressing and perpetuating a ubiquitous belief in *accurate knowledge* and *indisputable truths*. This exemplifies the view of Taba and Til (1945) that 'Homogenous cultures are largely conservative: change comes slowly and the core of the culture is preserved intact' (p. 62). In the wake of the attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001, many of the perpetuated 'truths' have been challenged and education reform in the Arab and Muslim world has emerged as a subject of great debate. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the country is currently experiencing a metamorphosis due to the unprecedentedly vibrant and complex tapestry of social, religious and political debates occurring in the larger context of the country. This phenomenon is best described in the words of Al Rasheed (2007), who explains that 'more than any other time, Saudi society is polarized over religious interpretation and political aspirations. Without ignoring the impact of rapid social and economic change, the polarization is primarily a product of a widening gap between professed symbols and reality. The ongoing debate, together with the increased violence, simply indicates that Saudi Arabia is undergoing a transformation' (p. 13). This transformation has led women to become more vocal about their role in society. This was particularly evident in the 2004 National Dialogue Forum, at which women debated many issues regarding women's education in the kingdom, such as the introduction of physical education, which was previously banned (Prokop, 2005).

Furthermore, due to increasingly widespread literacy and mass media, ordinary Muslims have become increasingly familiar with religious concepts and interpretation. This has lead to a modern phenomenon in the Muslim world known as the 'objectification of religion,' in which issues that were once practiced unreflectively are constantly being debated among the masses (Eickleman & Piscatori, 1996 as cited in Mahmood, 2005). These debates, once regarded as exogenous to the Saudi classroom, have become increasingly salient among students and teachers. Hence, in addition to the task of teaching about religious practices, IS teachers are constantly being asked to 'persuade' students about the authenticity and sanctity of their religion. Mahmood (2005) explains this phenomenon succinctly as the 'pedagogy of persuasion' (p. 79). Hence,

there is a palpable change in the teaching experience of these female teachers, which I believe is worthy of documenting and bringing to light.

1.3. Aims

In light of the above, this study focuses on the experiences of Saudi Arabian female IS teachers by exploring such women's perceptions of what it means to be an IS teacher in Saudi Arabia today. The study will also contribute to the wider literature on Islamic Education, on teacher thinking and teacher identity and, finally, on the use of phenomenology as a qualitative research method since I draw on phenomenology as my guiding methodological framework.

The key questions that I hope to address are as follows:

- What does it mean to be an IS teacher in Saudi Arabia today?
- How do IS teachers experience their roles as IS female teachers in Saudi Arabia today?
- What meanings and beliefs do teachers ascribe to their roles and what themes emerge from their experiences as IS teachers?
- What do IS teachers actually do in the classroom?

2. Islamic education: theory or social actors

The term "Islamic Education" is a relatively novel phrase in the language and discourse of Islam. If one were to examine the earliest works of Muslim scholars, particularly those from the first few centuries following the life of the prophet Mohammed and the initial spread of Islam, one would not find a book entitled "Islam and…" or "Islamic…" anything (Panjawi, 2004). At present, however, there seems to be a growing trend toward affixing the adjective "Islamic" to familiar signifiers. Douglas and Shaikh (2004) assert that current discourse on Islam as a religion, along with its scriptures, underlying assumptions, and practices, is unprecedented in scale. At the very least, this indicates that Islamic education has become an object of study, particularly in the context of growing interest in the juxtaposition of Islam and the West. Nonetheless, the field of Islamic Education is fraught with frustration as its scholars take on different stances, adopt different definitions, and envision varying futures for the field. Although the majority insists that there is a distinct conception of Islamic education, some scholars challenge this assumption (Panjawi, 2004). In fact, the term 'Islamic Education' has been used to denote four different types of educational activities: 1) education for Muslims about their faith, sometimes referred to as *Islamic Studies;* 2) education for Muslims in general, including both religious and secular disciplines; 3) education about Islam for non-Muslims; and 4) education in the spirit and philosophy of Islam (Douglas & Shaikh, 2004). In my study, I opt for the term *Islamic Studies* rather than *Islamic Education* since the latter is a broader term that has been mainly used in the discourse surrounding the philosophy of education in Islam.

To date, most of the writings in the area of Islamic Education focus on theory or meta-theory (Halstead, 2004; Sardar, 1991; Ul Islam, 2003; Wan Daud, 1998). This has led to a rise in debates concerned with the gap between theory and practice. Panjawi (2004) describes this gap by noting that "authors go into factual details to describe the problems with contemporary education…. However, when these authorities turn to proposing solutions, or rather 'Islamic' solutions, their tone changes from factual to rhetorical and from argumentative to assertive" (p. 5). The question thus remains: What *is* Islamic education? What does it *look* like in practice? In this regard, Panjawi (2004) argues that the central difficulty in defining Islamic education resides in the fact that the question, when posed, almost always elicits another question: "What do you mean by Islam?" This question should not be avoided, since the interpretation of the Quran is almost always influenced by the interpreter's understanding of the text in addition to the social, historical, and political context of the time and place in which the interpretation is made.

Since Islam is not monolithic and Muslims are not homogenous, I concur with Panjawi (2004) view that the focal point of reference for understanding Islamic education should be the 'social actors' or the 'Muslims' themselves. Hence, in order to contribute to this debate, rather than chanting with the choir the question: What is Islamic education? The central question should be: How do Muslims (given their diversity) understand and experience Islamic education? This query can be explored through field research, in particular qualitative research, with the multiple and diverse stakeholders involved in the Islamic education enterprise. For my study, I am asking how female IS teachers experience their roles both as teachers and as interlocutors who constantly interact with the body of knowledge referred to as 'Islamic Education.' Hence, it is my belief that this study will make a substantial contribution to the wider circle of debates through providing a grassroots account of the teachers' experiences, frailties, strengths, inclinations and conceptions through its phenomenological orientation and its emphasis on the meaning that these teachers ascribe to their experiences and to their understandings of Islamic Education.

3. Phenomenology: philosophical assumptions

To date, there has been considerable disagreement about the meaning of the term *phenomenology* and whether the school and practice so designated constitute a philosophy, an overarching perspective or an orientation that falls within qualitative research methods (Ehrich, 2003). Etymologically, the word is derived from the Greek *Phainomen*, which means the appearance of things as they are given (Ehrich, 2003). In fact, phenomenology as a research orientation 'is concerned with the wholeness, with examining entities from many sides, angels, and perspectives until a unified vision of the essence of a phenomena or experience is achieved' (Moustakas, 1994, p. 58). The aim of phenomenology, both as a philosophy and as a research tradition, is to describe phenomena just as they appear from the perspective of the doer; the epistemology inherent in phenomenology reflects a non-dualistic worldview in which the subjective reality of the doer gives meaning to the phenomenon under study. Phenomenology is also a study of essences. It inquires into the nature of a phenomenon is "that which makes a something what it is – and without which it could not be what it is" (Van Manen, 1997, p. 10). In this regard, Van Manen (1997) notes the following:

> Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences. Phenomenology asks' 'what is this or that kind of experience like?' it does not offer us the possibility of effective theory with which we can explain and/or control the world, but rather it offers us the possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world. (P. 9)

Hence, a phenomenological study aims to provide a deep understanding of a certain phenomenon as experienced by individuals. It highlights the essences derived from the 'common experience' shared by individuals (Creswell, 2007). Nonetheless, the nature of phenomenology is complex, as it requires that the researcher first gain a deep understanding of the multiple broader philosophical assumptions that shape his or her perspectives (Creswell, 2007). A detailed treatment of these perspectives is impossible here, but the aims and approach of this study can be traced fundamentally to the writings of Van Manen (1997, etc.), Creswell (2007, etc.), and Moustakas (1994, etc.).

4. The study

The study reported in this article is the first chain of an ongoing study which will continue for the next two years. Results from this study will furnish the basis for a future study.

4.1. Setting and participants

The study took place at a private girls' school in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Jeddah is one of the largest cities in Saudi Arabia; it is also the largest seaport in the country. It is located in the western region in the area known as the *Hizaj*, the place of the two holy cities of Makkah (Mecca) and Madena (Medina). Jeddah is a cosmopolitan city with a heterogonous population since many of its residents are pilgrims who settled in the Arabian Peninsula hundreds of years before the formation of the Saudi Arabian Kingdom. Jeddah is also regarded as the most liberal region in Saudi Arabia (Al Torki, 1986).

Given that this study is a springboard for further studies to be conducted with IS teachers in multiple contexts (both private and public schools), I had stipulated two rather broad conditions for my school of choice at this stage, first it had to be a 'private school' given that gaining access to private schools in Saudi Arabia is far less daunting than gaining access to public schools. This is due to the fact that access to private schools depends almost entirely on the school principal -who is typically the primary decision maker in the school and second, perhaps even more generic, I was looking for a school that welcomed researchers and where the school personnel (both principal and teachers) exhibited some enthusiasm about the research itself.

I proceeded by contacting several private schools by informally chatting with the school principals and head teachers about the research aims and goals where three schools initially indicated their willingness to participate. However, due to the time constrains and the exploratory purpose of this study, I ultimately decided to work with one school only.

The school chosen, after careful deliberations with the principals and head teachers catered to five hundred students from preschool through high school and is considered one of the elite schools in Jeddah. It is important to note that although private and public school settings are significantly different in some aspects, e.g., private schools usually cater to the upper class while public schools cater lower and middle classes, they are similar in the sense that both teach IS from the same national curriculum, which also stipulates the required textbooks. Also, the teachers teaching in both private and public schools are most often than not graduates of the same teacher education program taught at the College of Education, *Kuliyat Al Tarbiya* in Jeddah which is still regarded as the primary supplier of teachers in the region.

As shown in Table 1 below, seven Islamic Studies (IS) teachers participated in the study. There were a total of 12 IS teachers in the school. Given the personal and sensitive focus of the research, I had informed the teachers that participation was voluntary and did not attempt to persuade those teachers who opted not to participate. Although the participant teachers all taught at the same private school, they represented a spectrum of age, experience, and to a lesser extent a variation in their educational backgrounds. All but two of the participating teachers had degrees in Islamic Studies. The teachers taught at various grade levels and had teaching experience ranging from one and one half years to seven years.

4.2. Data collection methods and analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participating teachers. Interviews were transcribed and translated into English. Observational field notes conducted during the Islamic Studies classes were also collected to augment the interview data. The field notes captured the teachers' daily classroom routines, their dialogue and interaction with students in classes and their use of curricular materials such as textbooks and Internet resources. The aim behind the methods mentioned was to draw as vivid a picture as possible about the experiences of Islamic Studies teachers in Saudi Arabia, keeping in mind that the findings of this study will furnish the basis for a larger study to be conducted in this area.

The data analysis process drew on the phenomenological method as a guiding theoretical framework. The interviews and observations were analyzed according to a modified version of the van Kaam (1959) method of phenomenological data analysis as described in Moustakas (1994). In accordance with this method, all transcripts and field notes were read several times to obtain a general feeling for them. The second step in phenomenological data analysis, known as *Horizonalization*, was then implemented, in which significant statements and/or anecdotes relevant to the topic were listed in one document and given equal value. Statements and anecdotes were then tested for two requirements: Whether they contained a unique moment of experience related to the phenomena under study and whether it was possible to label them as independent themes or meaningful units (Moustakas, 1994). Statements were then clustered into themes such that each theme illustrates a particular meaning or experience. Themes were described and interpreted through an exhaustive textual and structural analysis aimed at delimiting the essences of the phenomena under consideration.

The analysis also drew on the hermeneutical phenomenological method developed by Van Manen (1997). His method complements the former through his emphasis on lexicology, whereby the researcher traces the etymological roots of words and analyzes idiomatic phrases employed in participants' responses. The results presented below were intended to transform the lived experiences of teachers into textual expressions that edify 'the personal,' contributing to a more thoughtful understanding of these teachers.

5. Limitations of the study

There are three main inconsistencies or limitations to this study. First, given that the focus of this study is on the lived experience of the individual teachers there were other aspects of the context of the teachers' work which were not examined; in particular I have not set out to explore the social structures in which the teaching is set and the

Table 1
Profile of Islamic education teachers who participated in the study.

Teacher	Grade Level	Place of Education	Major	Years of Experience
Teacher 1	Intermediate/Secondary	College of Education	BA Islamic Studies	5
Teacher 2	Elementary	KAAU[a]	BA Psychology	4
Teacher 3	Intermediate	Institute of Teacher Training	BA Islamic Studies	1 1/2
Teacher 4	Intermediate	College of Education	BA Islamic Studies	5
Teacher 5	Elementary	College of Education	BSc Biology	2
Teacher 6	Elementary	College of Education	BA Islamic Studies	7
Teacher 7	Secondary	College of Education	BA Islamic Studies	7

[a] King Abdul Azziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

details of the context of the school setting. Although in one sense of course, the teachers whose experience is reported here are themselves the product of contextual forces. Nonetheless, I have attempted to present the subjective reality of teachers working experiences without focusing on the particularities of the school context, hoping to shed the light on what it means to be an IS teacher in Saudi Arabia today. Second, the study, given its phenomenological outlook, is also limited in the sense that it does not offer solutions to problems (Van Manen, 1997) – such as providing teacher educators with solutions to problems of quality in teaching. Yet it can provide 'insight' into the experience of teachers already in the field for both a Western and a local audience by providing a rare narrative for female IS teachers in Saudi Arabia.

Further there is an apparent inconsistency in my work, to argue that the notion of experience is unique to each teacher given the messy, complex and personal nature of the teaching activity while simultaneously attempting to cluster these rich experiences into a set of core themes. Inevitably, however any attempt to order the teachers' experiences imposes an artificial coherence upon the latter. It can reasonably be argued therefore that my painstaking efforts to organize the teachers' thoughts can by no means be completely free of distortion. However, as I studied the testimony of these teachers I became immediately aware of these shared patterns as they expressed similar emotions, challenges, self-images and aspirations.

6. Findings and discussion

When I decided to do fieldwork in Saudi Arabia I was excited about combining my training as a researcher with my native experience in order to reach a deeper understanding of my own culture. I was aware that being an insider and having attended schools in Saudi Arabia provided me with an inherent advantage. However, there were many challenges that arose from being an insider; for instance, I found myself continuously needing to manage and evaluate my degree of *insiderness* and its effects on the research process. I realized early on that the classroom climate and the discourse that took place were familiar. As much as I understood this context – having once been a student then teacher in a similar system – it was nonetheless fascinatingly alien to me. I can scarcely explain in words how it felt, except to attribute the feeling of strangeness to the fact that my role in the 'same' scene had changed and that therefore what I saw as a student and later on a teacher was entirely different in form and perspective from what I see now as a researcher.

In what follows I attempt to cluster the emerging themes into the following three conceptual categories: A) becoming an Islamic Studies teacher; B) the quotidian experience of teaching and learning; C) the topography of the role.

6.1. Becoming an Islamic education teacher

6.1.1. Theme 1: the role of fate

The belief in fate, destiny or divine decree often exerts a special appeal in religious thinking. The concept of fate (*al-Qadar*) in Islamic thinking is one of the six tenets of Islamic belief (*iman*). Cohen-more (2001) attests to the importance of fate in Arab and Muslim societies when she notes that 'fate provides a key to understanding the Arabs' outlook on life, their social psychology and traditional value orientations' (p. xvii). The concept of being driven by fate, i.e., that divine decree wills that certain individuals will eventually teach Islamic Studies (IS) or that overlapping events and circumstances have guided their footsteps to where they are today, appeared several times both in interviews and observations. When one teacher was asked why she decided to become an IS teacher, she answered:

> …so you can say that life played a role or God's Will. Sometimes with our limited thinking we think something is good or bad for us, but then in the long run you know this was the best thing for you. God never writes anything bad for his devoted follower.

In the same vein, another teacher stated the following:

> …it wasn't my intention to join IS; it happened by coincidence…. *Subhan'allah* (Exalted is God) how fate plays a role in your life. There were circumstances that made me join.

Fate is regarded as one player in the game of life. Having said that, it is crucial to make a distinction between total surrender to fate—perhaps seen as some form of mystical quietism—and the stance that the teachers take in the statements above. The teachers are simply saying that they lack clairvoyance and that they are in contentment and harmony with the notion of 'limited human knowledge' which will be reiterated again and again in different contexts. The virtue of contentment and its underlying meanings in Arab and Muslim cultures has been studied by Cohen-more (2001), who notes that contentment is different from surrender in the sense that the former is a sign of strength while the later is a sign of defeat. Many of the sayings attributed to the prophet Mohamed concern the virtues of contentment, as do a whole constellation of popular Arab maxims and cultural proverbs that endorse this attitude toward life, the most common being: "Contentment with one's lot is a limitless treasure" (*Al qna'a kanz la yafna)*. Furthermore, the concept of fate as teachers experience it is not simplistic, in the sense that fate is not regarded as a linear process or a fixed entity. One teacher, for instance, communicated to students in her class that their destinies are unpredictable and unfixed. She noted that although God has decreed both mundane and central events in their lives, they are subject to change through prayer (*Do'a*). She encouraged students to pray and to ask God for the fate that they desire for themselves.

6.1.2. Theme 2: 'Good deeds' as a motivation

Attaining good deeds for the afterlife was one of the most common recurring themes. This finding was consistent with the theoretical perspective that 'traditional Islamic education has always had the personal success and happiness in this world and particularly in the hereafter as its most important aim and purpose' (Nor Wan Daud, 1998, p. 123). Many of the participating teachers associated the concept of attaining good deeds with the concepts of 'achievement' and 'motivation.' Some invoked the notion of achievement particularly in relation to teaching the Quran which is regarded as the bedrock of scripture authority in Islam. One of the teachers noted the following in this regard:

> The principal wanted to give the subject to someone else but I asked her to keep it for me because teaching IS I get a lot of good deeds, especially teaching Quran. I feel that I have achieved something teaching the Quran.

Another teacher made the following analogy between worldly salaries or wages and the accumulation of good deeds:

> Look on the bright side. All of us, as workers or teachers, receive a worldly salary *(ajr*), but I have an extra advantage that other people don't have: I accumulate good deeds. Although all of us do to a certain extent by working, I take good deeds if I plant one good seed among the hundreds of girls I am teaching….

The participating teachers constantly referred to good deeds as a motivating factor, even in times of despair. The road to attaining good deeds is fraught with a sense of struggle and responsibility. What is of particular interest is the fact that teachers do not limit the attaining of good deeds to the prescribed rituals and religious obligations in Islam, such as prayer, fasting and alms giving. In fact, the very nature of the lived experience of being an IS teacher is the most substantial contributor to attaining good deeds and hence to

prosperity in the afterlife. The common rhetoric among teachers illustrated that they were looking for a career that served both their current life and the afterlife by searching for ways in which to augment their store of good deeds.

6.1.3. Theme 3: making a difference

Despite the diversity of the backgrounds and experience of these female IS teachers, they all shared a common desire to make a difference in society. Most used the allegorical idiom of 'planting a seed' to illustrate what they meant by instigating a difference. They also shared their concern for what they described as an increase in 'westernization,' which resulted in the erosion of the true spirit of Islam. Their desire to make a difference was concentrated around two issues: first, the desire to encourage students to perform the religious duties known as '*ibādāt*, such as ensuring that students pray five times a day, fast, and so on, and second the desire to instil the virtuous moral character and behavior known as *Fadā'il* through engendering in the students emotions associated with the divine. The following quotation illustrates this matter:

> In exams a lot of students get the full grade…, but the most important thing to me is for them to get the message and change their behavior. In the lesson today we talked about avoiding bad language…. [W]hen I find that students are avoiding this kind of language with each other it makes me happy even if it was only two or three students. It's not important writing and getting the grade…, but the most important thing I am looking at is behavior. I was also talking about prayer today. I told the girls: "I hope I don't have to tell you girls during the payer break – 'please go and pray. I want you to pray without me having to tell you.'" I am proud of my daughters [the students]; they were arguing about who will lead the prayer…. It's not important to write in the exam that the ruling of prayer is *wājib* (required)…. [T]he true ruling of prayer is that you actually pray.

Although the traditional role of the teacher confines his or her duty and influence within the borders of the classroom, these women teachers were keen on expanding their influence to the homes of their students. Baird's (1999) phenomenological study of science teachers' experiences in Australia also illustrated that teachers felt a strong duty toward society and that they described themselves as cogs in the machinery that steered their society toward a better future. In the quotation below, one teacher expresses her content and success in influencing change at the level of the student's home:

> One mother came to me last week [and] said "I learned from my daughter how to do ablution (washing before prayer) and what are the prayers you say during ablution and I let my daughter teach her older brother as well." …I was very happy that she taught her brother and mother—that was great!

Other teachers expressed similar feelings. One teacher also explained that in the time when she was out of a job she had decided to give lessons in *tajweed* (conventions of Quranic recitation) to her neighbors in an effort to influence some form of change in society.

6.2. The quotidian experience of teaching and learning

6.2.1. Theme 1: setting the stage

In everyday practice, each teacher seems to have adopted a set of routines and/or rituals that are part of a larger plan to 'set the stage' prior to commencing her lesson. The aims behind these rituals are twofold; first, to prepare the students mentally for the lesson by sending verbal and physical cues that both student and teacher have come to understand; second, to prepare the physical environment (e.g., to introduce technology required for a lesson, rearrange the classroom, etc.). All teachers begin their lessons by first reciting the traditional Islamic greeting '*Al Salm Alaymkum*' (Peace Be Upon You) in a loud and clear voice. Students immediately respond to this verbal cue by replying '*Wa Alyakum Al Salam*' (And May Peace Be Upon You) as they walk back to their seats. Students continue their chatters and whispering in their seats while the teachers face the white board to write the topic, date and the subject of the day. Standing in the middle of the classroom, the teachers then turn their bodies to face the students and begin to utter a prayer in classical Arabic. The teachers often begin their lessons by reviewing the previous lesson while speaking in classical Arabic; they also try to maintain the use of classical Arabic throughout the lesson, even though students often respond in colloquial Arabic. The following three quotations are examples that illustrate how the teachers handle the first few minutes of their lessons while they attempt to set the stage for the lesson of the day:

Quotations 1:

> I am very cold when I first enter…at first I don't talk to or answer anyone, until everyone is calm; then I say *Al Salam Alaykum* and begin. I usually ask about the previous lesson [and] we also take a test…. If [the test] was oral, which is in my opinion better than the written test since it increases the students' self esteem, I give 10 points for participation.

Quotations 2:

> I come in [and] put down my stuff [and] ask them [the students] about their books. Then I start by saying a prayer: *bismiallah wal salat wa al salam* (*In the name of Allah and peace be upon his prophet*…); [after that] they know that the lesson will start.

Quotations 3:

> When I first enter I begin by saying *Al Salamu alyakum* (peace be upon you), then I say: "did you girls study or not? Ok, let's sit back in our places…." We review the old lesson, then we commence with the new lesson.

The concept of *discipline* was singled out by many of the teachers as one of the most important factors related to the success of their teaching. Ensuring discipline in its various forms, as understood by the teachers, was a priority for both effective teaching and learning. Some teachers attempted to ensure

Fig. 1. Parameters of a discussion as conceptualized by the participating teachers.

discipline being demonstratively strict at the beginning of the year—e.g., frequently reiterating class rules and expressing irritation through body language. Although the majority of teachers did depart from the traditional Saudi notion of 'discipline' by considering a certain degree of movement and chatting to be normal for the students' age and therefore acceptable, they nonetheless preferred relative quiet in the classroom. One teacher explained that she often tried to cultivate the 'quietness of loving to listen' among her students:

> Yeah, as I told you I like a quiet classroom, but [I like] "the quietness of loving to listen," not "the quietness of forcing students to listen." It is not my way to force students to listen, but I like them to listen because they love the thing.... Of course, for every rule there is an exception. You will find students that don't like to listen—not all [students] are angels. But if someone doesn't listen, I stop. Being well behaved, to me, means that you are listening. You are quiet because you are listening and not bothering others next to you.

The issue of movement was addressed by another teacher as follows:

> I am one of the people who doesn't like the girl to be attached to the table and merely answer my questions.... [M]ost of the girls [in my classroom] have their freedom. I believe when the girl is comfortable and participating, then she will learn more than when she is tied down. Many times the girls are quiet and you think they are paying attention but in fact they are not: they are day dreaming in another world.... I don't mind giving my lesson

Vignette 1

This scenario took place in a *Tafseer* (Quranic Interpretation) lesson with ninth graders. The teacher was explaining the verses below, which are extracted from The *Juma* (Friday) Chapter in the Quran.

> "O ye who believe! When the call is proclaimed to prayer on Friday (the Day of Assembly), hasten earnestly to the Remembrance of Allah, and leave off business (and traffic): That is best for you if ye but knew! And when the Prayer is finished, then may ye disperse through the land, and seek of the Bounty of Allah. and celebrate the Praises of Allah often (and without stint): that ye may prosper. But when they see some bargain or some amusement, they disperse headlong to it, and leave thee standing. Say: 'The (blessing) from the Presence of Allah is better than any amusement or bargain! and Allah is the Best to provide (for all needs).'"

The explanation takes the form of questions and answers. The teacher asks about the importance of prayer and students answer.

Teacher: Girls what is the importance of prayer?

Student: it's one of the five pillars of Islam.

Teacher: Good, what else, if you were invited to a party at a friend's house, would you like to go?

Student: yes.

Teacher: Do you want to see God and his prophet and have a big house?

Student: Yes

Teacher: the place is heaven.

Teacher: the price is 12 *Rak'a* (one complete round in a prayer) per day.

Then teacher plays an audio recording of the *Athan* (call to prayer)

Teacher: girls what do you feel when you hear the *Athan*?

Students shout out different things

Teacher then asks the students whether they are looking forward to their houses in heaven. She then shows a picture of a grave, of someone being buried, and explains that life is short and that one should make an effort to perform ones religious duties in timely fashion. The teacher then begins to dissect the verse into chunks and explains each part separately; she writes a list of key words on the white board and writes the simplified meaning next to the words. When the teacher arrives at the section in the verse that states 'leave off business,' she asks what this means. Students reply by saying that during the Friday prayer Muslims must close their businesses for prayer. The teacher praises them for this answer. The teacher then moves on to connect this practice with the laws in Saudi Arabia and praises the Kingdom for being the only Muslim country in which shops and businesses close during all prayer times, not just on Fridays. One student interrupts the flow of the teacher's logic and shares her own view on the matter; she says:

Student: But there are many non-Muslims who work in the sales sector and they can keep the shops open while the Muslims go and pray. I don't see why the shops have to close every time there is a call for prayer as long as those who want to pray can do so freely.... Also, God specifically says that one should leave one's business only on Fridays and only during the one hour dedicated for prayer.... So I don't see why we close the shops all the time during all prayers.

Teacher: Yes, the verse only says 'Friday,' but God meant all days and all prayers.

Student: But the verse only says 'Friday'!

Teacher: I know, but the interpretation of this verse is applicable to all prayer times. It says 'Friday' because it was revealed during the incident where the prophet's friends left him praying alone on 'Friday' while they went to pursue their businesses.

Student: But how do you know that God meant all days?

Teacher: This is the correct interpretation

> by sitting in the floor on a circle like the Quran lessons, for example. I enjoy when the girls share their stories and have input of this kind.

6.2.2. Theme 2: discussion as a strategy for teaching and learning

During the interviews all of the participating teachers volunteered their views of discussion as a method of effective teaching and learning. The characteristics of "discussion" as articulated by the teachers differ from the typical western understanding of this concept. Discussion as perceived by Islamic Studies teachers is bounded by the following parameters (see Fig. 1): 1) it is considered a form of 'giving' known as '*ata*', which flows from the teacher to the student; 2) it should lead ultimately to an answer or a state in which students are at least convinced of an answer; 3) it unfolds through a question answer mode; 4) it should be capped by certain limits which both students and teachers are encouraged to respect; 5) a good discussion evokes the students' emotions.

The conception of discussion as *giving* and as *convincing* students is expressed in the following quotation:

> I try to *give* the information that I have … as much as I am capable … to the students, and the students are often convinced. I search for the information as much as I am capable to ensure that I am *giving* the information in the correct manner. (Emphasis added)

Discussion also usually occurs thorough a question and answer mode. The conversation is structured around a number of closed questions that the teachers ask and the students answer. In some cases, if students do not answer the questions, the teacher gives the answer and continues explaining. Students are usually positively reinforced after attempting to answer a question correctly. In what follows I present a vignette that illustrates the type of discussion that takes place in an IS class; this vignette is followed by a discussion in the light of the five features of discussion illustrated in Fig. 1.

As explained, the exchange quoted above illustrates how discussion is driven through a question answer mode as she begins by asking students about the importance of prayer. Students respond in short sentences and are often praised. The teacher also tries to evoke emotions of love, fear and hope (Mahmood, 2005) by conjuring images of the house in heaven for those who pray, the grave, death and the afterlife. She tries to cultivate piety not only by reinforcing the importance of worship, e.g., prayer, but through building a gradual sacred aura that grounds her argument. According to Mahmood (2005), 'For many Muslims the ability to fear God is considered one of the critical registers by which one monitors and assess the progress of the moral self' (p. 141).

In addition, the explanation is not geared toward developing an abstract understanding of the text given that the discussion must lead to an answer. Therefore, the teacher connects the interpretation directly to cultural practices in Saudi Arabia. Since the Quran and Hadith are written in formal classical Arabic, which is very different from colloquial Arabic, part of the teachers' task is to render these texts into colloquial language for the students to understand. The flow of the *giving* on the part of the teacher is then shaken when the student interrupts by asking an unexpected question. The challenge that the student poses to the teacher's interpretation of the Quranic verses demonstrates how familiar these young girls are with scholarly arguments and the remarkable dexterity that they exhibit in supporting their arguments. Although traditionalists usually promote a literal understanding of the Quranic text – which is the common practice in Saudi Arabia – the teacher in this case adopted the local interpretation supported by Saudi sheiks and jurists since it was common practice to close all business during prayer times. The challenge for the teacher was twofold: the first was to explain why she diverted from the literal interpretation in this particular case, and the second to respond to the student's logical argument. In this case, the teacher simply chose to end the discussion by asserting that hers was the correct interpretation. The same teacher, when asked why she did not pursue the discussion with the student, said that she did not have the *Huja* or the logic to address most of the students' questions.

When discussions become difficult for IS teachers to maintain they often simply ignore or close down the conversation by availing themselves of the established convention of setting limits for a discussion. In fact, it is common practice among the teachers to set the limits of the discussions early in the year. Some of the teachers' comments in this regard included the following:

> Quotation 1:
>
> No, I set principles: about the prophet we can talk – about God, no. Its closed, there is no room to discuss it, not because its closed but because we have to do good deeds to see God as if it's a surprise for students.
>
> Quotation 2:
>
> Yes, for instance Heaven is, according to the prophet, "What no eye has ever seen and no ear has never heard and no human heart has ever perceived." [from the book of *hadiths* compiled by Imam Muslim]…. For instance, the nature of God and how he sits on his throne…. There are things that no matter how hard we try to understand or pursue our human minds remain limited. These are unknowns, and when we get into things like that we will harm our religion.
>
> Quotation 3:
>
> It's their right to be critical and to ask, but with limitations in order to respect the sanctity (*kadasa*) [of certain subjects]. This is a religion: I can't cross my limits about the Prophet or be disrespectful, but it's your right to ask, so you will be proud. Asking these questions will make you proud as you believe the religion you follow is the best religion you are proud of it. But there are limitations that you cannot cross [so as] not to harm your religion.

6.2.3. Theme 3: teaching as a struggle

During the interviews the participating teachers described their teaching nowadays as a form of *Jihad* or struggle against unpredictable forces that are rapidly changing society. According to the teachers, their struggle is manifested in four areas: 1) increasing students' Islamic knowledge and spirituality and correcting misguided practices; 2) persuading students about their own religion; 3) keeping up with the students' discursive deliberations and debates. One teacher explained the distress that she experiences due to this current condition as follows:

> We have reached an age where students are not convinced about the Quran [or] are not convinced about certain versus in the Quran. [At our school] we have one student who is not convinced about the whole religion—the whole religion! We have reached this stage … and everyone in the school knows this… It is apparent to everyone…. She [the "one student"] is always asking: "Why, why, why?"

Most of the teachers complained about the lack of knowledge among students and their families about certain Islamic practices. Some teachers shared their distress over the fact that many students did not know the names of the wives of the Prophet Mohamed (PBUH) and did not know how many times the Raka'ah (a unit of the Islamic Prayer) occurs in some prayers, although the rituals in prayer are studied every year from first grade. Teachers also expressed their concern with what they called a loss of spirituality. One teacher commented as follows:

> I want to give to them and increase their knowledge of religion. You know, the [student] girls don't have spiritual feelings; the school on its own is not enough [to provide this feeling]…. [E]ven if the student responds to you for a while there is no continuity at home.

Another teacher reported that:

> There is a total change [in society]: the technology, the TV, the Internet—the families are aware but sometimes their awareness is not in the right [way], particularly in relation to religion at home…. [I]n our generation we were in a sense more conservative but we had the basics; now families don't have the basics. We apply prayer and ablution in class and the mothers come and tell me they didn't know ablution was done like that, that you have to let the water pass through your fingers, so you feel this generation is more aware [than others].

The second struggle is related to persuading students about the authenticity of their own religion. Most of the teachers interviewed referred to one case in particular, a student who had been raised most of her life outside Saudi Arabia and was entirely unconvinced about Islam as a religion. They talked about the collective intervention plan that the school was implementing in order to support the student through her confusion. Some teachers have resorted to a new, lenient and relaxed form of religious discourse in order to cultivate student spirituality and help their students learn to love religion. The teachers also expressed their frustration with the Saudi Arabian curriculum, which focuses heavily on the forbidden and presents only one *Madhab* or school of thought. Some of the teachers reported that they were resorting to a type of 'doctrinal pluralism,' in which they are beginning to present a variety of opinions according to several Islamic schools of thought. The focus on *halal*, or that which is permitted in religion, was mentioned several times, as in the following:

> I tell them [my girls] that not everything is forbidden. Many things are *halal*. The minute you say, *La Ilah Illa Allah (*There is no God but God), you are going to heaven. God forgives us even when we make mistakes. God is loving and forgiving this is what I try to tell my students and what I want them to think about.

And similarly:

> Ah, yes. I like to show that there are so many *halal* things and that it's part of human nature to make mistakes. God said that if the people didn't make mistakes, He would remove them and bring a people who make mistakes. He says the best of those who make mistakes are those who repent.

The third form of struggle that the IS teachers face is related to keeping up with the students' questions and level of discourse. In order to handle this factor the teachers adopt various coping strategies, each according to her individual teaching beliefs. Some resort to the use of technology in order to shrink the generation gap between them and their students. Recently, there has been a proliferation of popular Islamic material on the Internet intended to ease the comprehension of the religion. Classical materials are often reprinted, presented in new formats for the masses to understand (see Mahmood, 2005). Interestingly, Islamic Studies teachers are making use of this popular material, particularly material that is available on the web in the form of video clips and religious rhymes. The teachers explained that they were not trained to use Internet resources in their teacher education programmes, but that the school supported their individual learning efforts. One teacher, while explaining the importance of prayer, used a humorous clip that she downloaded from the Internet about a boy who was about to pray when suddenly a comical devil appears and tries to divert his attention from prayer to mundane issues. Another teacher used a variety of religious rhymes downloaded from the Internet to stir the students' emotions and cultivate a climate of spirituality before beginning her lesson.

Although the teachers seem to be putting exhaustive efforts into keeping up with this new generation of students – as they refer to them – they are nonetheless often caught in a conundrum. Some teachers said that they often felt 'embarrassed,' 'shocked,' 'shaken,' or 'surprised' by questions that they could not answer. One teacher illustrated this situation as follows:

> [The students] asked me once how one can be sure that the Quran was not tampered with or changed like the other Holy Books? Of course, I answered immediately using the verse in which Allah says that he has vowed to protect the Quran from any changes and I explained again that the meaning of Islam is *istislam* ["submission," or the total surrender of oneself to God] to certain truths, that there are limits where I should stop, and that some questions may lead me to *shirk* [the sin of polytheism.] Finally, I told them that there are some things I have to submit to and that God mentioned that this includes the Quran, and then I have to believe it.

Another teacher provided the following:

> I will never forget this thing that happened to me in the previous school where I was teaching. This one student asked me a question that had nothing to do with our lesson. She raised her hand and asked…"Teacher, can I ask you something, please? How do I know that Islam is the right religion? If I believe it's right and Christians believe that Christianity is right … is it possible that generation after generation we worshiped this religion as a habit [and that I believe it only] because my parents did? I was shocked. No one had ever asked me this question. We submit to these ideas and principles and we are proud of them.

Some teachers simply resort to silence or change the topic when they feel that they do not have the proper knowledge to address students' questions. The teachers also reported distress over the fact that they were sometimes blamed for their students' misguided knowledge concerning religion. They all purported the view that they were standing alone in the face of change, and that the role of the home is paramount in supporting or hindering their message.

6.2.4. *Theme 4: autonomy and freedom from constraints*

To cope with the challenges noted above the teachers expressed the need for a degree of autonomy in teaching. Concerns with the repetitive nature of the curriculum, the focus on breadth rather than depth and the limited focus on one juristic school of thought were common among the participating teachers. They also expressed their distress regarding the tension between the school, which supports autonomy in teaching, and the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education, which prohibits autonomous efforts, particularly in relation to revising the curriculum. Several teachers also explained that they preferred to work with topics or general concepts rather than having to teach prescribed lessons that are designed in a way that relies on memorization rather than application.

Although the teachers expressed the need for autonomy and freedom from administrative or governmental constraints, they also pointed out that they were neither trained for nor ready to implement a flexible curriculum. Many said that they would prefer to have a team of consultants develop a new curriculum that takes into account the needs of this new generation of students. During the observations, it was clear that the teachers were trying to diversify their teaching strategies through implementing some form of cooperative learning; nonetheless, they still felt that they lacked the skills to take matters in their own hands and hence often took refuge in traditional teaching strategies.

6.2.5. Theme 5: loving what you do

Perhaps no other theme of the experience of teaching IS better captures the lived experience of the teachers than the theme of 'love.' The theme of both being a loving person and cultivating and honing piousness through love is central to success as an IS teacher. Loving one's duty, profession and students was conceptualized as a transferable emotion. Teachers used the concept of love and its manifestation in the classroom as a strategy for teaching, for managing behavior and for cultivating a religious ethos in the classroom. Consider the teachers' statements below:

> I always tell the students: "Because I love you I want you to pray, not because you have to.... [A]nything I didn't get as a student I try to give to my students..., although we never loved IS teachers when we were young.... Yes, my students respect me, but I want them to love me. [If] I can call myself successful, this is the secret of my successes: that I love my daughters [students]. The more you work with love the better [your teaching will succeed]. Shouting and complaining don't get you anywhere. You have to love the girls and worry about them and take on all the difficulties that come with the profession.

The participating teachers reported using a variety of strategies to convey the feeling of love to their students. One of the teachers said that she used exaggerated facial expressions; others used a gentle and soft tone when talking about gaining merit with God. Teachers also often structured their lessons around the Quran and around compilations of the prophet's sayings about heaven and happiness in the afterlife. One teachers often said *Jazaki Allah Khaier* (May you be rewarded by God) every time a student responded to her questions regardless of whether the answers were correct or not. Other teachers also refrained from invoking topics such as Hell's fire and God's wrath to compel the students into action. Instead, they used a subtle, delicate and sometimes apologetic form of discourse in order to help their students find their way to a virtuous life.

6.3. Topography of the role

The word *deen* in Arabic, which is commonly translated as 'religion' in English, is vital to understanding how IS teachers experience their professional role. The word cannot be translated by a single English word or phrase because along with the idea of 'religion' it carries connotations such as 'the complete way of life' and 'the path.' Observations and interviews with the participating teachers revealed that they are in constant deliberation with themselves over how best to enact the *deen* that they are preaching to their students. Some of the teachers expressed that living the role of an IS teacher evokes feelings of *responsibility* and *parenthood*. The relevance of these terms will be examined in what follows.

6.3.1. Theme 1: responsibility

The participating teachers referred to the notion of *responsibility* numerous times throughout the interviews. Their conception of this notion essentially entailed a responsibility toward the curricular content and toward the students. Responsibility toward the content effectively means that teachers must be vigilant about the 'correctness' of the knowledge that they offer to students. Consider the following quote:

> In the beginning I was worried. I was thinking, "Oh my God, studying IS! This is too much! This means that the more I know about religion, the more knowledgeable I am the more I am responsible. If you know more than others, if you know the rulings of Islam, then you are more liable than others for the correct application of what you know.

Although the notion of ensuring the transmission of correct knowledge was reiterated several times by the participating teachers, they nonetheless continued to use both authoritative (Quran and Hadith) and non-authoritative sources (local sermons, orally transmitted stories) in their teaching. One teacher told the story of three people who were trapped in a cave and asked God to set them free by recounting their good deeds. The students responded to the teacher by saying that this was a children's story and that it simply could not be true. The teacher refused to respond to this comment and casually continued her lesson as planned. This practice was popular among the teachers, who often covered up their lack of command over authoritative sources by using other popular Islamic material or resorting to a form of 'folk Islam' (Mahmood, 2005).

Responsibility toward the content also meant that teachers were liable for disseminating the sacred knowledge that they had acquired through their training as IS teachers. One teacher, for instance, reported a feeling of guilt for quitting her job for a few years, since the knowledge she had learned was entrusted to her by God and therefore must be disseminated to others.

The responsibility toward students manifested in the teacher's conception of a need to portray the image of the ideal Saudi Muslim female. In theory, the Wahhabi Ulama in Saudi Arabia reject the reformist interpretations of the Quran and Hadith that have played key roles in shaping changes in the areas of women's education, their role in society, traditional dress, gender segregation and face covering. The religious curriculum in Saudi Arabia supports local and cultural practices, e.g., face covering, which are then reinscribed into society through policies (Doumato, 1992). Although teachers espoused some reformist interpretations during the interviews, they also clearly feel responsible for transmitting cultural identity to students. One teacher for instance, during a lesson on *ida* (the waiting period for women after divorce or after the death of a husband) advised her students that during this time women should refrain from going out, from beautifying themselves and from answering the phone at home. She reiterated the common Saudi rhetoric, which purports that women should be protected from men as they are more libidinal and sexually charged. This emulation of societal practices and interpretations has been combated by many contemporary Muslim scholars nonetheless the effects of culture remain very powerful. In this light, the teachers seem to be walking a thin line between the responsibility of promoting a pluralistic view of Islam and the responsibility of inscribing normative cultural practices.

Although the teachers felt that they must conform to the roles dictated to them by society, they continue to struggle with the contradictions inherent in Saudi culture. There seems to be a growing tension between these teachers' roles, identities as women, and pedagogical ideals. For example, the teachers talked at length about how being role models required that they sometimes address their mistakes, vices and faults in the presence of students. Consider the following example, in which a teacher talks about issues such boycotting products from Denmark and smoking:

> Last week I told them I love Kinder Surprise. I love it but we will try to boycott it because of the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him). Maybe in some situations, I don't know..., like smoking Shisha and cigarettes – I can't say.... [W]hen I make a mistake in written language and things like that I like them [the students] to know that I make mistakes. When I was in school, teachers were not allowed to make mistakes. I make mistakes even when I read the verses from the Quran incorrectly. [Sometimes] my students correct me. "It's ok, the verses are difficult," I tell them [laughs]. I always tell them I am sorry.

Another teacher talked about the growing contradiction between societal practices and religious doctrine in Saudi Arabia in relation to restrictions on Music:

> About music, you know, the issue itself is confusing. I mean the religious explanation itself. They say that music is forbidden, but then there is music in the school but the majority say its *haram*. When you come to school, you can't bring your iPod, but in the school party there is Music! So really there is a contradiction, but if the students ask me if music is forbidden I say, "Yes, it's forbidden, so we try not to listen to it in the future.

6.3.2. Theme 2: I am a parent

'I am first and foremost a parent' is a statement that was echoed by all of the participating teachers. "The etymology of the word 'parent' refers to *giving birth* and *bringing forth*. It has connotations of *origin* or *source*. To parent (parere) is to originate, to be the source the origin from which something springs" (Van Manen, 1997, p. 59). The Arabic term *Tarbiya* 'to parent' conventionally means fostering the development of individuals in various aspects, e.g., physical, educational, moral and spiritual. It is commonly used with reference to children's upbringing as parents provide them with the skills that they need to participate in society.

In this light, the teachers felt that they are originators or bearers of a truth that was entrusted to them and that hence must be given to students. They often referred to their students using the term 'my daughters,' and this signifies that they see themselves as responsible for ensuring that they grow up to be good Muslim women. The quotes below demonstrate the roles that teachers ascribe to themselves in this regard:

> I am a teacher and I am like a parent (*Murabiya*). I spend seven hours with the students. I cannot do everything, but my role even if very small requires that I plant something in them.

And further:

> I am patient, I think this is my strength, I treat the students as my daughters. I tell them: "Consider me your mother." I comfort them.

7. Conclusion

The teachers in this study used their identities, beliefs and values to make sense of their everyday lived experiences. Discussions about their lived experiences provided a counter-discourse that challenges the traditional image of IS teachers as transmitters of sacred knowledge. Atop the list of themes that have emerged from this study is the growing complexity of the IS teachers' roles due to an array of challenges that surfaced both in society at large and within the classroom walls. Whilst the teachers in this study sought refuge by resorting to familiar discourse when confronted with the unfamiliar, leaps of courage were nonetheless necessary at times, particularly with regards to expanding the dimensions of classroom discussions to incorporate topics that were once considered incontestable. The study certainly demonstrates the need for future research to further elucidate 'who' the Islamic studies teacher of today is and how he/she experience teaching in the light of the dramatic changes in society.

Furthermore, impoverished understandings of how the teachers conceptualize and make meaning of particular aspects of their teaching, e.g., how they conceptualize a good discussion, has led to a rise of blanketed assumptions about what teaching *is*. For one thing, the study points out to the fact that we lack adequate definition or insights into how teachers perceive their own teaching in the light of this particular context where the lines between religion and education are blurred. The picture became even cloudier, yet more intriguing as I began to think of the numerous questions that emerge from this preliminary study: To what extent does the experience of the teachers in this study resemble experiences of teachers in other disciplines, perhaps even teachers in other western cultures? And to what degree is the experience of teaching universal? Is there a subject specific pedagogy, or a particular form of professional knowledge required for teaching IS? What knowledge, attitudes will teachers need to face the changes occurring in Saudi Arabian society today?

I can fairly argue thus far, that given the scarcity of research in this area, and methodological shortcomings of previous research which focused addressed both the teacher and the curriculum as mutually exclusive entities, it is crucial to shed some light on the importance of the teacher and the lived realities of the teaching occupation itself. Goodson (1992), in his book *Studying Teachers Lives*, provides a key statement in this regard when he notes that:

> Researchers had not confronted the complexity of the school teacher as an active agent making his or her history. Researchers even when they had stopped treating the teacher as a numerical aggregate, historical footnote or unproblematic role incumbent still treated teachers as interchangeable types unchanged by circumstance or time. As a result a new more contextually sensitive research was needed. (P. 4)

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