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Religious Learning Environments of Austrian Muslim Youth: An Empirical Analysis of Religious Educational Processes

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Abstract: In recent decades, Islamic education and the religiosity of young Muslims have received considerable attention in academic research in German-speaking countries. However, an analysis of the different learning environments of religious education and their respective significance has yet to be carried out so far. Using Austria as an example, this paper explores these different processes of religious education among Muslim adolescents. Based on qualitative guided interviews, the experiences and learning processes in the family, in the mosque, in the school, and online are depicted from the learners' perspective. In this way, this paper assigns Muslim adolescents a constitutive role in the analysis. In this context, we discuss how the understanding of education, pedagogical approaches, and person-centredness differs in the learning environments of Muslim religious education.

1. Introduction

In the context of religious pluralisation in contemporary secular societies, the need to reflect on the religious education of Muslims has become urgent (Kraml and Sejdini 2015; Sejdini 2022, p. 92). Research on the learning sites of Islamic education has begun sporadically over the past two decades (e.g., Ceylan 2014; Uygun-Altunbas 2017; Karakoç 2022). However, significant research gaps remain, and there is a need to address the religious learning of young Muslims in families, mosques, schools, or online. Often, studies have focused on a single learning environment, neglecting the interactions and differences among them (Brandner et al. 2022, 178 ff.). Moreover, most analyses of learning sites have been conducted from the perspective of educators, such as religious teachers or parents, i.e., adults in general. The learners' perceptions of the learning environments and the significance they attribute to religious learning within them have been largely overlooked.

Against this background, our contribution aims at a well-founded analysis of the different learning sites of Islamic education in the German-speaking context. Based on an empirical pilot study, the first results on the learning experiences of Muslim adolescents in family, school, mosque, and Internet learning settings are presented. The study was conducted in Austria, as there is already considerable experience with the various learning sites of Islamic education. The first mosque associations emerged here as a result of labour migration from Muslim-majority countries starting in the 1970s. Subsequently, the mosque associations have also become places of religious education (Aslan et al. 2015, p. 63). In addition to mosque communities and families, public schools in Austria are another site of religious learning. Islamic religious education in public schools, under the responsibility of the Islamic Religious Community, was initially introduced in the 1982/83 school year and has subsequently been available at all public primary and secondary schools in Austria (Khorchide 2009).

The paper is structured as follows. Firstly, we provide an overview of the existing state of research, highlighting what is known about the different learning sites of Islamic

education. Thereby, it becomes apparent that various voids exist in the research landscape, which our analysis addresses. Next, we outline the methodological approach used in the empirical study, which forms the basis of this paper. Following that, we present the findings related to the learning sites of Islamic education. We specifically examine the family, the mosque, the school, and the Internet as distinct learning environments. Importantly, we adopt a perspective that acknowledges the crucial role of Muslim adolescents as active participants in our analysis. In the discussion section, we delve deeper into the key findings, focusing on aspects such as educational perspectives, pedagogical approaches, and the importance of personalized learning experiences. Lastly, we provide concluding remarks summarizing the main points and implications of our study.

2. Current State of Research

Muslim youth in the German-speaking context and their processes of growing up have already received extensive attention in previous research. There is an extensive body of research that addresses various aspects and facets of the field. Nevertheless, there are still gaps that this research project aims to close. For example, there are few analyses on individual places of religious education, such as the family, mosque, or Internet. There are also hardly any secure insights into the interaction or differences between the various places of learning. Additionally, the perspectives of Muslim youth are often not given much attention. In the following, various focal points in research on Muslim youths will be highlighted.

In the German-speaking context, previous research has dedicated significant attention to Muslim youth and their experiences of growing up. Consequently, a substantial body of research exists, addressing various aspects and dimensions within this field. However, there are still gaps that this research project aims to address. For instance, there is a lack of in-depth analyses of specific settings for religious education, such as the family, mosque, or Internet. Furthermore, there is a need for more comprehensive insights into the interactions and distinctions between these different learning environments. Additionally, the perspectives of Muslim youth are often marginalized or overlooked in existing research. In the following sections, we will highlight some key focus areas in the research on Muslim youth.

2.1. Studies with General Focus on Religiosity

First, some studies deal with the question of religiosity in general. Given the heterogeneity of Muslim religiosity, attempts have been made to identify types of Muslim religiosity based on surveys, primarily qualitative interviews. The focus is usually on young people, adolescents, or young adults.

Notable studies in this area include the works of Gritt Klinkhammer (2000), Yasemin Karakaşoğlu (2000), Boos-Nünning and Karakaşoğlu (2005), and Nikola Tietze (2001), as well as the work of Nikola Ornig (2006) and Mouhanad Khorchide (2007). Each of these studies has a slightly different focus. While Gritt Klinkhammer (2000) explores the experiences of young second-generation Turkish women, Yasemin Karakaşoğlu (2000) examines the religious influences on educational ideas among Turkish student teachers, Nikola Tietze (2001) compares the religious identities of young Muslim men in Germany and France, Nikola Ornig (2006) investigates the development of religiosity among second-generation migrants in Austria, and Mouhanad Khorchide (2007) focuses on the meaning of Islam for second-generation Muslims in Austria.

Also worth mentioning is the 2017 study by Ednan Aslan, Jonas Kolb, and Erol Yildiz entitled "Muslim Diversity" (Aslan et al. 2017). On the basis of extensive empirical data, the authors of the study distinguish five types of religious practice, which represent the range of variation in the everyday use of religion by Muslims in Austria (Aslan et al. 2017, 47 ff.). Although the study did not focus specifically on young Muslims, it provides interesting insights into the diversity of religious environments and practices.

In addition, the study "European Islam. Muslims in Everyday Life" by the French sociologist Nilüfer Göle (2016) should also be mentioned. This study delves into the

strategies employed by Muslims residing in Europe to reconcile their religious norms and practices with Western lifestyles (Göle 2016, 199 ff.). It sheds light on the ways in which individuals navigate the complexities of their religious and cultural identities in the European context.

2.2. Studies on Religious Socialisation of Muslim Youth

In addition to the previously mentioned studies, there are several works that examine the processes of religious socialisation of Muslim youth in a broader sense. One such study was conducted by Adem Aygün, who explores the religious socialisation processes of Turkish youth in both Germany and Turkey. Aygün develops a typology consisting of four different groups—the "traditional" (Aygün 2013, 100 ff.), the "ideological" (Aygün 2013, 121 ff.), the "secular" (Aygün 2013, 140 ff.), and the "individual" type (Aygün 2013, 153 ff.). The study focuses on biographical experiences and processes of religious socialisation, offering insights into the social influences that shape religious beliefs and practices within these groups.

A study by von Wensierski and Lübcke (2012) also focuses on socialisation processes. Through an examination of the biographies, living environments, and everyday cultures of young Muslims in Germany aged between 20 and 30, the authors identify four distinct milieus: the "traditional" milieu, the "modern" milieu, the "religious" milieu, and the "postmodern" milieu. These milieus convey different lifestyles, values, and norms that are also reflected in the everyday culture of young people. The study explores a wide range of learning environments and differing instances of religious socialisation.

These studies highlight that Muslims, including youth and young adults, frequently have ambivalent understandings of their religion that may contradict their biographies and lived experiences. Further investigation into these contradictions is necessary. An overview of research on the religiosity and religious socialisation of Muslim youth and young adults, with a focus on Germany, is provided in an article by Berna Kenar et al. (2020).

Research also emphasizes the significance of specific learning environments, such as the family, mosque, school, and Internet, in the religious education of young Muslims. It is widely recognized that these different learning environments do not seamlessly align, but rather, tensions exist between them (Brandner et al. 2022). To ensure a comprehensive religious education process for Muslim children and adolescents, it would be beneficial to include the various stakeholders involved in each learning environment (i.e., parents, mosque members, imams, and religious teachers) in transdisciplinary boundary work. This can facilitate collaborative learning and reflection processes (Brandner et al. 2022, pp. 187–94).

In addition, several studies specifically focus on individual religious education institutions. The most significant ones are listed below.

2.3. Studies on the Learning Environment: Family

However, only a limited number of research studies specifically focus on this learning environment (Aysel 2022). For instance, Haci-Halil Uslucan (2008) examines religious values education in Muslim families. He concludes that obedience, parental control, and (self-)discipline often dominate as central elements in Muslim families, as previous sources indicate (Uslucan 2008, 51 ff.). Muslim parents often raise their children based on their own experience, which can result in inconsistencies when it comes to addressing conflicting ideas, encouraging critical thinking, promoting autonomy, and fostering maturity.

Another noteworthy study is Ahmet Toprak's "Our Honor is Sacred" (Toprak 2012). Based on the interviews of 22 families of Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab origin, the author develops a typology that distinguishes between conservative–authoritarian, religious, achievement-oriented, and modern parental households. Religious values, issues of "honor," and authoritarian traits are characteristics found in different types of parental households.

In addition, a study by Fahimah Ulfat (2017) deals with the development of concepts of God among Muslim pupils. The study reveals that by the age of ten, Muslim children in

Germany already possess diverse understandings and relationships with God. This phase of development plays a crucial role in preparing young believers for a life in a religiously pluralistic society.

In this context, a study by Ayşe Uygun-Altunbaş entitled "Religiöse Sozialisierung in muslimischen Familien" (Uygun-Altunbas 2017) should be mentioned. The author examines religious socialisation processes in Muslim families from a comparative perspective. Based on qualitative empirical data, the author reconstructs religious–Muslim education ideas and forms of Islamic education mediation in family contexts. She shows that the religiosity lived and experienced in families can be seen as a blueprint for the later religiosity of the next generation. Religious education in the family context perpetuates family traditions and cultural references to the respective contexts of origin.

2.4. Studies on the Learning Environment: Mosque

Since the end of the twentieth century, there has been an increasing focus on the community life of Muslims and mosques in German scientific research. Previous studies have explored various topics including integration (Ceylan 2008; Yaşar 2012), interreligious dialogue (Klinkhammer et al. 2011, Schmid et al. 2008), the relationship between mosques and Islamic religious education (Ceylan 2014; Karakoç 2019), the role and function of imams (Ucar 2011; Spielhaus 2012), the role of mosques in urban neighbourhoods (Kuppinger 2015), and the status of women in mosques (Gamper 2011; Borchard and Ceylan 2011). Regarding mosque education, there have been critical examinations and discussions on pedagogical concepts, contents, and procedures based on information provided by umbrella organizations and their officials (see, for example, Mohr 2006, 47 ff.; Ceylan 2014). However, the experiences and perceptions of young people participating in mosque education have not yet been investigated.

The most comprehensive and recent study on mosques—including their significance as a learning environment—was published in 2020 by Ayse Almila Akca under the title "Mosque Life in Germany: An Ethnography of Islamic Knowledge, Tradition, and Religious Authority." Drawing on participatory observation, interviews, and informal conversations with individuals involved in mosques and Muslim groups, Akca analyses religious practices and teaching traditions within mosques. Through her field observations and conversations, Akca develops two heuristic typologies of mosque and Quran schools: 1. Literacy-oriented Quran schools and 2. Understanding-oriented Quran schools.

In schools of the first type, emphasis is placed on reciting and memorizing Quranic verses and prayers, imparting the fundamental aspects of faith and practicing it (Akca 2020, p. 82). Conversely, the second type of Quran schools prioritize understanding and dialogue. In these schools, learners are encouraged to learn not only to recite and memorize the Quran but also to comprehend its meaning. Thus, the verses are "first conveyed in Turkish or German meaning" and then memorized in Arabic. According to Akca, Quran schools of the second type are less favoured among parents than schools of the first (Akca 2020, p. 84).

Again, in Akca's study, the learners themselves do not have their say. Instead, Akca's findings are based on her perceptions and interpretations. As a result, how the learners themselves experience the lessons and what consequences the lessons have for the learners and their lives remain unexplored.

2.5. Studies on the Learning Environment: Islamic Religious Education in Public Schools

Currently, only few empirical studies focus specifically on the learning environment of Islamic Religious Education (IRU). These studies primarily examine the evaluation and acceptance of Islamic Religious Education in Germany, as well as the professionalism and professionalisation of teachers in Germany and Austria.[1]

Evaluation studies have been conducted in Germany in North Rhine-Westphalia (Uslucan and Yalcin 2018), Hamburg (Wolff 2018), Baden-Württemberg (Schröter 2015), Bavaria (Holzberger 2014), and Lower Saxony (Uslucan 2011). These studies, mostly

conducted quantitatively, examined, among other things, the acceptance or satisfaction and expectations of teachers, school leaders, and/or learners regarding the respective experimental Islamic Religious Education model. Schools that did not participate in the experiment or students who withdrew from the course were not considered in these studies.

Since 2021, the professionalism of teachers of Islamic Religious Education in Germany has been studied by Badawia et al. (2022) as part of a qualitative study. In the study, Badawia et al. were able to reconstruct various antinomies, such as proximity/distance, as a structural logic of professional action. Furthermore, their study results, in contrast to the above-mentioned evaluation studies, show that teachers are referred to as "phantom teachers" (Badawia et al. 2022, p. 36)—and thus also Islamic Religious Education—and often have to struggle with a lack of visibility as well as prejudice and discrimination.

Another comprehensive study on the professionalism or professionalisation of Islamic teachers was conducted in Austria. The qualitative study examined, among other things, the challenges of professionalisation of teachers and their understanding of professionalism and quality teaching (Tuna 2019).

2.6. Studies on the Learning Environment: Internet

Studies dealing with religiosity in general show that digital media and online forums have gained a massive importance as sources of information for religious concerns among Muslims during the digitalisation of everyday life (Bunt 2003, 2009, 2018). Regarding religious issues, Muslims are less likely to turn to their local imam or religious scholars but instead research online for answers. By turning to the so-called "Google-Hodja" (Aslan et al. 2017, p. 151) for religious questions, they often come into contact with the views of religious networks, which tend to circulate backward-looking religious views—also in connection with Sharia—through homepages and forums (Harms 2009; Kutscher 2009).

However, the mentioned study did not analyse the web portals. Regarding the specific religious content that is spread in online forums or platforms, there are only a few exceptions in the research literature that provide deeper insights, such as the works of Sabine Damir-Geilsdorf, who deals with the renegotiation of Sharia norms in cyberspace (Damir-Geilsdorf 2014; Damir-Geilsdorf and Tramontini 2015).

When analysing the use of online sources from an educational perspective, it is usually conducted under the auspices of religious radicalisation or Salafism. For example, a study by Mahmud El-Wereny (2020) examines how the Salafist scene uses digital formats and virtual spaces to recruit new followers and spread their religious ideology. Regarding religious radicalisation processes, research has shown that messenger services such as Telegram and WhatsApp play a central role in this (Kiefer et al. 2018; FNRP 2020).

2.7. Summary

In conclusion, the studies mentioned show that religious education for Muslim children and youth has been addressed in many research papers. Often, these studies focus on the general expression of religiosity and religious socialisation processes. However, individual learning places are rarely examined in detail. An exception to this is the school, as there are various research papers on Islamic religious education in schools. Other learning places, such as Muslim families, mosques, and the Internet, have received little attention. With few exceptions (such as Brandner et al. 2022), the interaction of various learning places in religious education still needs to be addressed. An empirical analysis of the importance of the different learning places, i.e., the family, school, mosque, and Internet, has not been carried out. It should also be noted that the perspectives of Muslim children and youth who have undergone or are undergoing education in these places are hardly considered in the current research. Usually, only the assessments of experts or adults are included, overlooking the perspectives of the young people involved.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Question

Against this background, we addressed the following research questions: How do Muslim youth acquire religious education in the family, in the school, in the mosque, and online? What are their perspectives on religious education in various learning environments? This article primarily focuses on the religious socialisation of Muslim youth and explores how religious education takes place in various learning environments. A comprehensive analysis is conducted examining religious education within the parental home, school contexts, the mosque, and the Internet. We consistently inquire about emphasis placed on religious content, the specific practices involved in religious education, and the sources utilised to investigate religious content when studying and learning religion (Islam) in these learning environments.

3.2. Collection of Data

Thus far, 12 interviews have been conducted using guideline-based problem-centred interviews (PCI). Decisive for the choice was the narrative openness despite the object orientation and the possibility of guideline support, characteristic of PCI (Witzel 1985, pp. 230–35; 2000, 5 f.). Interviews designed according to PCI can be openly and flexibly adapted to the requirements of the object of investigation in the sense of object orientation. At the same time, the interviews can be centred on the communication process. The interviewer can use sensitive and accepting signals and questions to promote the development of the conversation and work towards reconstructing orientations and attitudes (Mayring 2023, pp. 60–64). In methodological terms, our analysis is characterized by the fact that, unlike the usual adult participants, such as Islamic religious teachers, imams, or representatives of mosque associations, we interviewed Muslim adolescents who have gone through these different learning environments. The interview guide deals in detail with the individual learning environments, i.e., the family, mosque, school, and Internet, and asks about learning experiences and educational processes in these contexts. The young individuals were invited to share their perspectives and experiences regarding religious education in diverse learning environments.

3.3. Sampling

The strategy for selecting the units of analysis—in the case of the present research project, the selection of interview partners—plays a significant role in gaining insights. We based our sampling on the "theoretical sampling" principle, developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967, pp. 148–68), characterized by flexibility and iterative-contrasting movements (Breuer et al. 2017, pp. 156–69).

Due to the generally known heterogeneity of the Muslim community, which is demonstrated, for example, by existing mosques organized according to the linguistic and cultural origin, theoretical sampling is of particular importance for the research project. Therefore, the following successive-exploratory sampling procedure and sampling criteria were developed:

- Survey locations: The presence of Muslims in Austria varies significantly from region to region. While it is exceptionally high in the east—in Vienna, Muslims account for 12.5% of the total population—it is much lower in the west. Due to limited resources and considering these regional differences, the interviews were conducted primarily in Vienna and the surrounding area in Lower Austria and the federal state of Tyrol, where Muslims comprise 5.8% of the total population. By including these regions, our sample covers the variations between provinces with high and low shares of the Muslim population and the differences between the western and eastern parts of Austria.
- Number of interviews: It is assumed that as the amount of data increases, the new insights gained from each additional interview tend to decrease, as the same themes and patterns are often repeated. This phenomenon is known as "theoretical saturation" (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Dimbath et al. 2018; Marshall 1996, p. 523). Based on

this strategy, 12 interviews were conducted. This collection of data was designed as a preliminary study that forms the basis of the subsequent empirical analyses. Consequently, the study will be extended, and a larger sample of young Muslims in Austria will be interviewed. Due to the number of cases, however, not all the demographic factors that can potentially influence the attitudes and viewpoints of the interviewees—such as the socioeconomic status of the parents or membership in mosque associations—can be considered in our sample.

- Ethnic affiliation: Many Austrian Muslims come from Turkey and the Balkan region, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Northern Macedonia, and Albania (Aslan et al. 2017, p. 43). Therefore, the sampling focuses on Muslim youth who ethnically belong to the group of Turks or who have connections to the Balkan Peninsula. Due to the limited scope of the sample, a focus on these two groups was necessary. Furthermore, interviews were conducted exclusively with Muslim youth who were raised in Austria and have experienced religious education in all potential learning environments, including the family, mosque, school, and Internet, in Austria.

- Age: The sampling was limited to Muslim youth between the ages of 16 and 21. The decisive factor for this restriction was, among other things, religious maturity, which according to Austrian law is reached at the age of 14 (BGBl 1949), but young people develop differently during adolescence.

- Interviewing young people is always challenging because they are experiencing puberty and often do not yet have stable self-perceptions or well-developed religious identities. For this reason, when contacting potential interview partners, particular emphasis was placed on adhering to ethical standards—such as obtaining consent from guardians or informing them about the project and the rights of the participants.

3.4. Evaluation of the Data

When analysing the interviews, we employed the qualitative content analysis methods devised by Philipp Mayring (2015). Following a summarizing approach, we initially pre-structured the interview material and derived categories inductively from the gathered data (Mayring 2015, pp. 69–90). Subsequently, we conducted a systematic analysis of the interview transcripts, marking and coding statements or text passages based on the defined categories. In a subsequent step, we summarized and condensed the coded text passages into pertinent themes. Lastly, we interpreted the findings and situated them within a comprehensive context.

The evaluation of the collected data was conducted within the team, beginning with each author of the contribution individually reading the interview transcripts and highlighting significant text excerpts. As part of the effort to analyse processes and experiences of religious learning across various learning environments, coding rules and categories were jointly established. Through a collaborative team interpretation, diverse readings and interpretations of the empirical data were integrated, resulting in a multi-perspective approach and enhancing the overall quality of the analysis.

4. Findings

The results are presented by analysing the different learning environments step by step. We choose a chronological order that corresponds to the phases of religious socialisation. After an introductory presentation of the learning environment of the family, we then focus on the mosque, religious education in schools, and online sources.

4.1. Learning Environment: Family

Family is one of the primary learning environments that are relevant for Muslim youth. Informal religious education takes place within the family, regardless of whether the household is religious or secular. Parents can play a more active or passive role in this regard. This developmental phase holds particular significance for the religious socialisation of children and youth, as it perpetuates religious beliefs, family traditions, and

cultural ties to their respective origins. Initially, we will explore *topics and questions* that play a role in the family learning environment, followed by an examination of *the significance of caregivers*. Finally, we will look at *family experiences and the transmission of family traditions*.

4.1.1. Topics and Issues

The case of a student from a religious family background illustrates an active approach. The 16-year-old girl with a Bosnian background describes herself and her family as devout. According to her account, she usually adheres to religious norms:

> I do many things you just have to do as a Muslim. You know, I fast and all that. But my problem is more with prayer. Because, my mom always has to tell me, 'Yeah, Edina, pray!' The only time I really pray every day is during Ramadan, but not so much after that. (Edina)[2]

While the student observes fasting, she struggles with performing the obligatory prayer. Her mother constantly reminds and urges her to pray. If she has any questions about religious topics, the 16-year-old usually turns to her mother, who plays a central role in parenting matters. Edina is currently concerned with the issue of wearing a headscarf. She believes one "can be a Muslim without wearing a headscarf" (Edina). However, since she is unsure whether her actions align with Islam in this regard, she seeks multiple opinions. When she requires clarification on religious matters, her initial point of consultation is within her family:

> Mainly, I always go to my mom first because she knows quite a bit, I would say. And then I ask her back and forth because my mom personally doesn't wear a headscarf either. And then, either in school, I asked in Islamic class or in the mosque. (Edina)

The student considers wearing the headscarf as essential and significant. The opinion of her closest family members, especially her mother, whom she trusts intuitively, is very important to her. In such essential questions, Edina does not turn to people with whom she has a less trusting relationship, even if they—like an imam or a religious teacher—may have more religious knowledge than her mother.

Muslim youth cannot talk to family members about all issues connected to religious questions. For example, 19-year-old Mahmud said that when it comes to "girl problems" or problems "that one does not like to talk to parents about," "One can simply talk more openly with friends" (Mahmud).

The family can also play a significant role as a place of learning in socialisation in which religion plays a less dominant role. This is expressed in the case of Fatma, an 18-year-old pupil who lives in a small town in Lower Austria to the north of Vienna and works at the checkout in an Austrian supermarket chain on Saturdays. She describes her parental home like this:

> So, we are religious, but we are not extremely religious. And for me, religion is very important. My mother is not the most devout, but she also knows a lot. And my father, well, he does pray, but he doesn't know everything. We don't necessarily talk about Islam like we used to, my parents already know that I'm old enough. (Fatma)

Although her parents are religious, they do not always adhere to religious norms. They are sometimes sceptical of religious authorities such as imams or religious teachers. In the past, they did not always support their daughter in attending Islamic religious education. Fatma attended weekend classes at a mosque as a child but did not have a good experience. Later, she wanted to attend Islamic religious education in school. However, her parents dismissed her request, saying that the knowledge of imams and religious teachers should be relativised because "everyone tells it differently" (Fatma). As a result, the 18-year-old did not participate in religious education in school.

4.1.2. The Significance of Caregivers

Fatma seeks the opinion of her grandparents on religious matters, partly due to the partial religious distance of her parents. She also does so because her grandparents have more time than her parents, with whom she currently talks less about faith topics. When Fatma wants to learn about religious questions, a trusting relationship with the person she turns to is important to her. Religious topics are not the decisive reason for conversations, but she asks her grandmother on the sidelines of meetings if the opportunity arises. On contentious issues, when Fatma hears different or opposing opinions on a religious matter within her family, it irritates her:

> I like listening to the opinions. It's difficult sometimes, for example when my grandma from my mother's side says "Yes, this and that is right." And my grandma from my father's side says "Yes, this and that is right." And you never know what is true. (Fatma)

The student who attends a vocational school describes religious learning in the family as an interactive process. When it comes to religious questions, she discusses them with several family members and seeks their opinions. However, if their views are not unanimous, it tends to confuse her, and in such cases, she prefers to consult books that provide more precise answers to her questions than her grandparents do.

The significance of books in religious socialisation within the family is demonstrated by Merima, a young Bosnian woman who regularly attended a Turkish mosque during her childhood. She often consults books when she has a religious question or desires to explore a specific topic. With her father possessing a small library at home, she typically selects a book from his collection. If that book does not provide a satisfactory answer, "then I usually ask my father for his opinion, because he has read so many books himself" (Merima). Merima turns to her father in matters of religion due to his knowledge and expertise, which he derives from books, making him a kind of religious authority figure for her. In addition, he is a central reference person for Merima as her father, with whom she has a close and trusting relationship. Such a foundation is essential to her when it comes to religious questions, which is why she first consults family members before turning to an imam:

> If I have a religious question, I would rather ask my parents or someone in the family. Or, if you go to the mosque, ask a hodja. So, I would be cautious about using the Internet because a lot of negative information about Islam is spread there. It could be that there is also something false there, and then you learn something wrong and maybe pass it on to others. (Merima)

In religious socialisation within the family, parents or grandparents typically serve as the central point of reference. However, in some cases, other family members can also play an important role. For example, Abid, a 17-year-old Austrian citizen with Macedonian roots who lives near Vienna with his family, describes his older sister as highly influential. She "studies [Islamic] theology. When I ask her something, she always answers me" (Abid). He turns to his sister when he is interested in a religious topic. He also consults her when he comes across statements about Islam online and wants an expert opinion. In Abid's eyes, his sister serves as a religious authority, which is based on her studies of Islamic theology and her extensive knowledge of Islamic topics that she willingly shares with her brother.

4.1.3. Family Experiences and the Transmission of Family Traditions

The significance of family for religious socialisation does not solely occur through continuous religious educational processes. It can also be influenced by specific family experiences or life events. This is exemplified by Elma, a 21-year-old from Lower Austria who recently lost her brother. The profound impact of this familial loss is evident in her mother's response, as she now wears a headscarf and adheres more closely to religious norms than before. Elma's mother processes her grief in this way. Consequently, this change in her mother's behaviour also influences Elma's perspective on the world:

> And for me, the only way to accept it was through Islam. Because in our religion, it is accepted that everyone is created by Allah and returns to Him. That means, there are no ifs and buts. And if you firmly believe in it, then you can also deal with it. That's my opinion. Islam and faith have also helped me a lot in this regard, have also brought me a lot further. (Elma)

According to Elma, her parents have had a significant impact on her comparatively calm reflection on her brother's death. They serve as role models not only in coping with grief but also in terms of religious education and knowledge. Their devotion and humility influence how Elma deals with religious norms in her daily life. Furthermore, when she wants to make religious decisions, she first consults her parents for advice, as "they know their stuff" (Elma).

The interviews also highlight that the family, as a learning environment, encompasses more than just religious education and the transmission of religious knowledge and beliefs. It also involves the passing down of family traditions to the younger generation. As interviewee Merima expresses it, "I think it was also passed on to my parents back then. And thus, it is passed down from generation to generation" (Merima).

Sanela, a 20-year-old Upper Austrian, supports this statement. The young woman works as a clerk in a local company and does not wear a headscarf. However, religious norms are essential to her and her parents. Because they

> have always practiced them and want their children to carry on with them. So that when we grow up and have our own children, we can also teach them about religion, what is haram, what is halal. That's why it's so important to us. (Sanela)

The family as a learning environment thus ensures that children experience essential religious socialisation and that family traditions are maintained and passed on to future generations.

4.2. Learning Environment: Mosque

Based on the data, mosques are identified as significant learning environments for young people, primarily focused on imparting religious orthopraxy and fundamental beliefs in the respective mother tongue of the mosque communities. The recitation and reading of the Quran in Arabic are also emphasized. However, when it comes to the role of mosque education in shaping faith and religiosity, the interviewed youth paint an ambivalent picture in their narratives. On the one hand, they perceive and describe *mosques as unique learning and gathering places for Muslims*; on the other hand, there is an explicit *criticism of the teachers' pedagogical approach*.

4.2.1. Mosques as Unique Learning and Gathering Places for Muslims

According to the interviewed young people, the mosque as a learning environment is mainly characterized by its diverse offerings. In addition to teaching and worship, mosques also offer spaces for informal conversations with the imam and community members, as well as social activities, making an essential contribution to the socialisation and development of young people, as well as to the transmission, preservation, and maintenance of Muslim culture and identity.

The versatility and significance of the mosque is illustrated by Ahmet, a 23-year-old young man of Turkish descent from Tyrol, through his personal experiences as follows:

> Yes, back then, when I was in Vienna, I was often and intensively involved in the board or in the youth branch of the association. Yes, in Vienna, the mosque was like a second home when we did something. If we wanted to drink something, not just for religion, if we wanted to watch football, we went there, if we wanted to talk in the evening, we always went there. It was like our second home. (Ahmet)

The youth spends much time in the mosque and takes advantage of the diverse activities to make social connections and exchange ideas with peers and elders. In this way, he learns about Islam and being a Muslim formally through lessons and informally through

social activities and conversations in which the imam sometimes participates. He attributes a special leadership role and responsibility to the imam, which he describes as follows:

> Yes, in my opinion, there has to be an imam who also leads or guides the people. Such a leader has to be there, not the association chairman. Because some people like the association chairman, some don't. He is shit for everyone, extremely said. But every imam is respected, whether they like him or not, and he can act and do everything there [. . .] (Ahmet)

He makes the imam responsible for the content and direction of social activities and conversations. According to him, the old imam "tried hard to make things good and to move things forward, and then the mosques were full," whereas under the new imam, "only two people pray, even though there were 30 people in the prayer room." Currently, he experiences that there is much politicisation and gossiping in the mosque:

> And then you think, maybe they have something important to discuss, so you go in, and either they're discussing football, which I sometimes do too, or politics, or gossiping about others who are not present. And that's the problem, just sitting in the mosque's café is not really Islam, just because you're sitting there and not at a coffee shop. (Ahmet)

As illustrated here, the imam is seen as a figure of respect and authority and is held responsible for what happens in the mosque. According to the young person, the contents that the imam fills social activities and conversations with are crucial for whether Islam is lived, taught, and learned at the learning location of the mosque or not. In addition to the content, the pedagogical approach of teaching imams is also significant for the learning outcome, as perceived by the interviewees. This point will be discussed further under *Criticism of the Pedagogical Approach of the Teachers*.

4.2.2. Criticism of the Pedagogical Approach of the Teachers

According to the statements of the young people, the learning outcome and success of the mosque education heavily rely on the pedagogical approach and (in)competence of the teaching imams. In the interviews, the authoritative approach of some teaching imams is particularly criticized and questioned regarding its consequences. Based on the interviews, the traditional approach can be described as a teacher- and content-centred instruction, in which the learners have to memorize contents and religious orthopraxy through intimidation and sanctions—sometimes also through physical punishment. Although this approach achieves fast learning results in terms of subject-specific competence in the short term, the skills, abilities, and religious socialisation of the young people are not further developed in the long term, and over time, what has been memorized tends to fade away. These can be exemplified by the case of Fatma. She attended classes at a Vienna mosque school in her younger years, which she retrospectively describes as catastrophic:

> I used to go there every Saturday and Sunday. We learned how to pray and so on. But to be completely open and honest, nothing really stuck with me, nothing at all. This mosque school was actually a catastrophe, to be honest. The teachers taught us many things, but they themselves lacked motivation, so to speak. [. . .] They mostly yelled at us when we were too loud or acted in a way that is typical in "that" mosque school. [. . .] We learned how to pray there, for example. I'm 18 now and I have no idea how to pray. [. . .] And yes, I didn't have good experiences with it. (Fatma)

In the long run, she only retains the "not so good" experience from the mosque. Despite this experience, which did not significantly contribute to her religious socialisation and from which she did not gain much, she continues to be interested in Islam. She tries to teach herself about Islam "from the Internet or books" (Fatma).

Some of the interviewed youths attribute the use of authoritative methods, ranging from intimidation by shouting to physical punishment, to the training of the teaching

imams. Mahmud, a 19-year-old youth of Turkish descent who lives in Innsbruck and recently passed his final exams, personally experienced the authoritative approach and observed a change in the training of the educators.

> The old teachers or imams were mostly from Turkey and were older, coming from the older generation. For them, it was simply nothing bad if someone was hit, it was just part of it. Now, I don't think anyone can imagine that because it's not like that anymore. Today, they are people who usually study or educate themselves in that direction. (Mahmud)

He hopes that the improved training of the teaching imams will result in a shift away from the authoritative approach and a reorientation of the content of mosque education. He hopes that the newer generation of teaching imams will know "what they should perhaps teach and not just teach the children in Arabic", which they do not understand. Because one should "read and understand the Koran first in Arabic and then in its language" (Mahmud).

Regarding the language mentioned here, some of the interviewed young people question the use of mother-tongue instruction in mosques. According to Ahmet, it would be advantageous if "teachers, especially religious teachers, taught in German" in the mosque. Ahmet further illustrates the importance of the German language using the example of fasting, as follows:

> We only knew everything in Turkish, and as soon as someone asked me what fasting was because we always fasted, as a child, we said, "Wow, I am fasting; I cannot eat anything," and then my classmate asked me: "What is it?" Moreover, I could not explain it to him because I do not know it in German, I only know it in Turkish. Sometimes it was a hurdle that we only knew it in Turkish and not in German. (Ahmet)

Ahmet hopes that having instruction in German at the mosque would teach and allow him to effectively communicate his religion, Muslim orthopraxy, and tradition to non-Muslims. Further, he argues that German as the national language is generally significant because "we grew up here, were born here, and live our whole lives here" (Ahmet).

4.3. Learning Environment: Islamic Religious Education in Public Schools

Another significant learning environment for the religious education of Muslim youth is Islamic religious education, which receives mixed evaluations from the interviewed youth. Some of them recall having a "great time" in Islamic religious education, although they also acknowledge that it was sometimes lacking in depth (Mahmud). In contrast, others describe their experiences as "not the best" (Elma). These different perceptions can be primarily attributed to the youths' experiences with their Islamic religious education teachers. Youth tend to evaluate the Islamic religious education negatively when the teachers represent and attempt to convey rigid positions and beliefs in the classroom. Conversely, it is evaluated positively when teachers adopt an open and flexible approach, providing learning spaces and opportunities for independent thinking.

The interviewed youth criticize certain teachers for lacking openness and willingness to address their questions. They criticize the adherence to particular perspectives and viewpoints the learners are expected to accept without questioning and discussing them. Such approaches by the teachers are generally rejected by the interviewed youth, including Mahmud, a 19-year-old youth of Turkish descent who recently earned his high school diploma:

> Well, I know that I have really noticed that you can have very good discussions with some teachers, while other teachers simply represent their standpoint and their point of view. No matter what you say, they remain stubborn and do not engage in discussions. I think that is not right, especially for an Islamic teacher. I think teachers should be open and take all questions seriously and address them. (Mahmud)

Mahmud goes on to explain in the subsequent part of the interview that, in Islamic religious education, topics such as religious norms and commandments (halal) and prohibitions (haram) were discussed. For instance, the teacher mentioned that seafood "such as shrimp" is forbidden (haram), but without providing any further explanation. He illustrates the situation as follows:

> Then, I asked why it is forbidden and if she can justify it. Her answer was simply: Yes, because it is forbidden, because it is Haram, that's it. I then said I will not accept it like that. They have to prove it to me and explain it so that I can understand and comprehend it. (Mahmud)

Mahmud attributes the teacher's unwillingness to engage further on the prohibition to a lack of openness, willingness to discuss, and adherence to religious positions. Other possible reasons for the teacher's behaviour, such as a possible lack of expertise or a normative–dogmatic understanding of Islam, should also be considered. These reasons would be plausible, especially since the teacher in this example failed to provide a further explanation despite Mahmud's direct request.

Such experiences can negatively affect young people's religious education and socialisation by dampening their intrinsic interests and motivation. In the words of one young person, they can be a reason "why people sometimes portray Islam in a negative light." (Elma) This can be especially true when students feel that their religious actions and efforts are being judged by their teacher. For example, Elma had an experience with a teacher in an academic secondary school (AHS) at age 11/12, who said:

> "Yes, you fast, but you don't pray, so it's not accepted." Of course, you can't say that to anyone, I think. You can't say to anyone, "You fast, but you don't pray, and it's not accepted." Only God knows if it's accepted, no one else. (Elma)

Elma finds this experience to be influential and unforgettable, as she now views it as teacher misconduct. In the subsequent conversation, she expresses doubts about the competence and professionalism of the teacher and emphasizes that "a trained and educated Islamic teacher is actually extremely important. [. . .] It is essential what kind of person brings you closer to faith and in what way." (Elma)

Like Elma, Merima feels "condemned" by certain teachers in Islamic religious education, no matter how much she tries when deviating from expectations or norms. She describes this impression as follows:

> Because, how should I say, not everyone does everything that one should do in Islam, but they try, they want to learn it, but this condemnation, when you don't do something. In elementary school, of course, there are enough children who don't pray five times a day. (Merima)

Looking back, she cannot remember exactly "what he said or what it was about". However, she emphasizes, "I know that I felt uncomfortable at the time and not just me, but also the others." (Merima) The examples of Elma and Merima highlight the importance of a sensitive approach to religious norms in Islamic religious education. Failure to handle these norms with sensitivity can lead to feelings of condemnation and discomfort among young people, ultimately impacting their motivation and religious education negatively.

In contrast to the normative and faith-based teaching approach described above, moderating, open, and empathetic teaching methods are perceived and evaluated more positively by young people—and thus also the Islamic religious education. A moderating teaching approach can be cognitively activating and promote learners' overall religious education. This is particularly evident in the following example from Gül, a 21-year-old Turkish-origin young woman from Tyrol who works in a social institution for the elderly:

> So, our Islamic teachers always asked why we explained certain things in a certain way and not maybe differently. And he also threw critical things into the room, which maybe he knew were not true. But he wanted to see how we react to them. I found that good and took it with me. (Gül)

This form of teaching does not result in Gül's "world being completely turned upside down," but rather causes her to be "encouraged to think" (Gül). This gives the young person the opportunity to actively participate in the class and acquire skills such as communication or judgment competency. At the same time, interest and motivation in the subject are preserved and strengthened.

How a teacher conducts their lessons can be a determining factor in whether students choose to attend or drop out of Islamic religious education. Elma, for example, "still went to Islamic education for the last 4 years of high school" due to a change in teachers. The new teacher, who is "completely opposite" to the old one and considered the student's needs, motivated her to continue attending the classes and prevented her from dropping out:

> The Islamic teacher who came afterwards was just the complete opposite of him. And he taught us Islam in a way that we could really understand it. And in my opinion, he was a really skilled person who explained it superbly and brought us closer to the faith in a beautiful way. (Elma)

According to Elma, the teaching method and style of the teacher not only influence the extent and types of competencies that students acquire in the classroom but also play a significant role in shaping their connection to the Islamic faith.

4.4. Learning Environment: Internet

The Internet is the final learning environment of religious education that appears in our data. However, placing it in the fourth position does not mean that this learning space is of a lesser importance or only relevant after religious education in the school and mosque has been 'completed' or is ongoing for a long time. Instead, the Internet should be recognized as a learning space that can have a significant role for young Muslims alongside the processes of religious education in the family, mosque, and school.

In the interviews we conducted, the Internet emerged as a highly versatile space of learning encompassing various media. Religious topics can be explored through reading texts, watching videos on platforms like YouTube, and engaging in passive reception. This is a common practice among the interviewed Muslim youth. However, active exchanges through messenger services like WhatsApp or Telegram, online forums, or postings on platforms such as TikTok or Instagram were not reported. In the following, we will first outline how the youth utilise *the Internet as a source of knowledge*. Then, we will discuss the role of *online imams and religious influencers*. Finally, we will explore how the youth are *dealing with ambiguous answers* they encounter online.

4.4.1. Internet as a Source of Knowledge

In the lives of Muslim youth, the Internet plays a central role that cannot be ignored. This is evident, for example, in the case of Elma, the 21-year-old from Lower Austria who was previously quoted:

> The Internet? Of course. When you want to know something, which you don't know at the moment, but you have an interest in it. [...] Yes, and on the Internet, there are no specific pages. I just write down what I think is right. And then I look at what's available, there are also pages where people write their opinions and so on. And then I just read through everything because I find it interesting how many different views different people have, yes. (Elma)

When it comes to religious questions, Elma primarily relies on reading texts and examining user comments. She does not seek out specific platforms or curated collections of texts, but rather conducts open Google searches, entering keywords related to her search interests into a web browser. In addition to obtaining substantive information about her question, Elma pays careful attention to the commentary and opinions of various individuals she encounters in the search results. While Islamic religious education in school and the mosque holds significant importance for Elma, the Internet is her first go-to resource for seeking answers.

> I am, in fact, a person who thinks a lot at night about things, whether you have done them right or wrong. And at night, you usually still have your phone in bed. That's why the Internet was always the first thing I looked at. And then maybe I asked my parents or read in some books. I think the Internet was always the first. (Elma)

The Internet as a learning environment has the advantage of being available everywhere and always accessible—even from home, and from the bed at night. Consequently, the 21-year-old conducts online research to gather information before seeking answers and guidance from her parents, consulting books, or reaching out to religious authorities like an imam. She tends to use the Internet for specific questions that require informative descriptions, such as determining whether she has done something 'right' or 'wrong'.

Similarly, Fatma also relies on the Internet for her religious inquiries. One example she provides is her search for information on how to perform the obligatory prayer and the specific aspects to be mindful of during its performance:

> On the Internet, it explains how to pray, and how to wash yourself. That's correct. I believe that it's explained better and in more detail on the Internet than, for example, when someone else explains it. For instance, my mother says, "Yes, you wash yourself like this." And my father says, "No, you wash yourself like this." That's a problem again. So, regarding prayer, I think it's explained better on the Internet than in books or by family. (Fatma)

The 18-year-old student living in a small town in Lower Austria, north of Vienna, finds the Internet learning environment very advantageous. According to her, the application of religious norms such as practicing obligatory prayer is explained more vividly and illustratively in online sources than in books or as her parents could express it in comparison. Since religious education did not play a significant role in her socialisation, Fatma emphasizes the importance of the Internet as a learning environment for her. She describes herself as being "in the learning phase again" and "trying to teach myself something from the Internet or books" (Fatma).

Although the inquiries of young people usually have a practical background, such as how to perform the ritual ablution, the interviews did not extensively mention apps that support the execution of religious norms in everyday life, such as the Muslim Pro app. However, there are exceptions. Muamera, for example, mentions that she uses the app in her religious practices:

> This way you can see, when you have to pray, which side the sun rises and sets. You can also read the Quran there, I think. I usually use it to see when I have to pray and until when I have time. (Muamera)

There are indications that Internet usage in such matters is so ingrained in daily routines that it becomes challenging to articulate its significance in words. Instead, the Internet is used more as a source of knowledge, not just for the purpose of performing religious practices with a greater certainty, but rather to gain a better understanding of them.

Gül also confirms this observation. Until the age of 15, she had minimal Internet usage and her religious education had primarily taken place independently of online resources. However, since then, the Internet has become an increasingly important learning environment for her.

> It is a relief. Among other things, you can look up certain things like Surahs or translations right away on the Internet, instead of spending hours searching or reading them in the Quran. Then, maybe videos, so that you not only have a reference to the local hodja. If I may say so, but also to others, that you can read the opinions of others. So, there are platforms where certain things are discussed and so on. I found that really interesting, for example. (Gül)

The young woman, who resides in a small town in the Inntal Valley, relies on online searches to find specific Quranic verses or their various translations. This targeted online

research saves her time as she obtains immediate results related to her areas of interest. However, this also means that Gül does not spend hours reading the Quran to stumble upon a specific passage, which often leads to unintentional learning experiences during the process. Nevertheless, the Internet's educational opportunities expand her religious education as a 21-year-old, as she is confronted with different opinions, not just those of the local imam.

4.4.2. Online Imams and Religious Influencers

Aside from consuming texts as a source of knowledge, watching videos on platforms such as TikTok or YouTube is also of great importance.

> I enjoy watching documentaries by hodjas. I love listening to their narratives and not only do I watch them alone but also with my entire family. Sometimes, when I am alone, I enjoy watching Islamic hadiths on my phone; their sayings are really beautiful. (Sanela)

Online media consumption does not necessarily happen alone but also with family members. Sanela does not randomly select videos but rather follows some preachers intentionally. In her case, they are all exclusively Albanian imams. Sanela is a follower of Fatmir Latifi, Bedri Lika, Zekerija Bajrami, Enis Rama, and Irfan Salihu. These individuals serve as personal points of reference and religious authorities on the World Wide Web, providing her with a wealth of relevant religious knowledge and appealing to the 20-year-old.

Even though the names of religious influencers may not always be familiar to young people, the content and themes attract them. This is evident, for example, with 19-year-old Mahmud:

> I don't know any names, but on TikTok, there are also many videos by hodjas who make various claims. It may be true; for example, I recently heard that according to one of them, wearing a certain type of chain is forbidden for boys. I find this debatable. (Mahmud)

Statements from Internet imams are often viewed critically. The videos address current or relevant topics for a specific audience. However, as Mahmud criticizes, the presentation of religious content can often be one-sided. Significantly young people who spend much time online can be influenced by this. Because

> young people can be easily influenced. I speak from experience, I had Facebook when I was 12 years old and was influenced by it, then my father banned it and deleted it. And there are also some, some social media Hodschas. [...] What some of them say, I just find it unacceptable. (Mahmud)

4.4.3. Dealing with Ambiguous Answers

The diverse range of possibilities for utilising the Internet as a learning environment and the vast amount of knowledge that young Muslims are exposed to cannot solely be regarded as positive, as previously mentioned. Some individuals react with perplexity when confronted with ambiguous answers, while others proceed with caution.

Fatma expresses her preference for caution when encountering religious content on the Internet, stating "[B]ecause everything is written there. But I am a bit cautious, I prefer to be careful. I do not know what is true, and every page says something different." (Fatma)

The abundance of knowledge can be overwhelming, particularly for young people who do not have a solid foundation of religious knowledge. The presence of varying interpretations and nuances on different web pages can lead to uncertainties and confusion. Comparing statements from different websites may not always provide a clear and definitive answer, as different sources may present conflicting views.

16-year-old Edina reacts as rather perplexed to the inexhaustible source of knowledge on the Internet. When researching online, she seeks clear answers to everyday questions, such as whether wine vinegar contains alcohol and should be considered haram (forbidden). Regarding this specific question, Edina states

> I read several things, but I just didn't find a clear answer. So, it's sometimes complicated on the Internet. That's why I prefer to ask people, like teachers or at the mosque. Because they might know it better or be able to explain it better. (Edina)

Edina is hesitant to rely solely on information from the Internet, as answers found in online sources can be complex and conflicting. Instead, she prefers to seek clarification from other people such as her parents, religious teachers, or imams, whom she considers reliable sources. This allows her to quickly obtain trustworthy answers to her religious questions.

Similarly, the 17-year-old Macedonian Abid provides an example of how seeking guidance from knowledgeable individuals can be helpful. He explains:

> I often see religious posts on TikTok, for example. And sometimes I listen to the things on TikTok and think about them. And sometimes I also open the Google browser and check. Is that true? Is that not true? But I have a sister at home who is studying Islamic theology. That's why I prefer to ask her. And she tells me to avoid these sites because they spread a lot of false information. So, since she told me that, I avoid these sites. (Abid)

Abid sees his sister as an authority on religious matters due to her studies and religious knowledge. When he has doubts or uncertainties, he seeks her opinion to verify or refute messages he comes across online. As she is familiar with the online treatment of religious content, Abid values her assessments highly and takes them seriously. Following his sister's advice, he often turns to the islamportal.at platform for religious questions. "When we have a presentation on Islam in Islamic studies, I use Islamportal because I know it is good. And other than Islamportal, I do not really know any other sites." (Abid)

The Internet as a learning environment is considered highly important by all the interviewed individuals. However, this was not always the case, and its significance seems to have been further amplified, especially due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic:

> During the pandemic, there was not much to do except for using the Internet, and when a person has enough time, they tend to search and research a lot, which leads to many topics coming up. (Abid)

While there is often limited time to delve into religious questions alongside school, training, or work, the lockdowns have provided an opportunity for a more intensive engagement with such topics. Additionally, the uncertainties and fears brought about by the pandemic, particularly at the beginning, have prompted many Muslim youth to explore religious questions more deeply.

4.5. Summary

In summary, the statements of Muslim youth reveal the following insights into the role of learning environments.

Family serves as the primary environment for religious socialisation during childhood, according to the Muslim youth we interviewed, who are between 17 and 23 years old. Looking back, they find it difficult to provide specific examples or descriptions of religious education within the family. Instead, they tend to assess their parents' level of religiousness and their adherence to religious practices such as obligatory prayer or fasting. The specific content of religious education within the family remains vague, with a focus on broader topics such as belief, the validity of religious norms, or discussions around halal and haram. Parents aim to ensure that their offspring "know just as much about Islam, that they can at least learn that at home" (Merima). However, the practical aspects of religious practices, such as learning and performing obligatory prayers, are often left to other learning environments such as Islamic religious education in school or at the mosque. These additional environments serve as complements to family-based religious socialisation.

Mosques serve as versatile learning environments for young people, offering practical experiences that introduce them to religion, faith, and socialisation. Within the mosque, young people engage in formal instruction, informal conversations, and participate in social

activities. The imam plays a crucial role in shaping these experiences. In the eyes of young people, the imam is responsible for the pedagogical approach to instruction, as well as the content and direction of conversations and social activities within the community. When it comes to instructional approaches, young people express a preference for empathetic and learner-centred methods over intimidating and teacher-centred ones. They believe that a supportive and understanding approach from the imam is more productive for their learning. In terms of conversations and social activities, young people see imams as authority figures within the community. They expect imams to discourage political discussions and gossip, and instead facilitate meaningful conversations and activities that contribute to the transmission of Islamic teachings and culture. It is worth noting that young people perceive variations among imams in fulfilling these roles. While some imams meet their expectations and actively engage in effective teaching and community-building, others may fall short.

Islamic religious education in public schools is or should ideally be a learning environment where young people feel free and comfortable expressing their perspectives and questioning and discussing facts and Islamic teachings without fear of judgment for potential divergent views or practices. The teacher plays a crucial role in creating such a learning environment. As the young people interviewed in the study highlight, the teacher's approach can either foster cognitive engagement or enforce normative standards, thereby determining the level of active participation or passive reception by the learners. The young people generally view the former positively and the latter negatively. Their evaluation of Islamic religious education becomes particularly negative when they perceive that the teacher would pass judgment on their religious actions, such as fasting or praying, or on their religious omissions. Consequently, learners' decision to continue attending the class or not may be influenced by these factors.

Online religious learning typically takes place by entering keywords or search terms in a browser. Knowledge platforms are at the forefront, and while specific figures such as online imams can be mentioned, this is only the case for some young people. Mentioning specific platforms such as YouTube or TikTok outside of an Internet browser is the exception. Young people receive provided religious content by reading texts and comments or watching videos. However, they do not take an active role, for example, by posting something or being involved in providing content themselves.

5. Discussion

When examining the different learning environments of Islamic education and their characteristics, certain aspects emerged that are present to varying degrees in all these environments. We will now discuss these aspects in more detail. In the analyses of our empirical data, the following three points stood out, which deserve special attention: the *understanding of education*, *teaching approaches*, and *person-relatedness*.

5.1. Understanding of Education

First, we turn to the understanding of education that plays a role in the different learning environments. Suppose one considers the public discourses as well as scientific studies on **mosques** in the German-speaking region, such as the studies by Akca or Ceylan. In this case, we see that there is a tendency towards a knowledge-oriented or "material understanding of education" (Klafki 1963) prevailing in mosques. For example, Akca shows in her comprehensive field study that while there are also mosques that offer understanding-oriented programs, they have little use by Muslims. However, content- or knowledge-oriented offerings aimed at conveying as much classical Islamic knowledge as possible through memorization are well received by Muslims, according to Akca (2020, p. 84).

These tendencies are also evident in our study. The interviewed young people often believe they have learned "a lot" in the mosque, even if they were intimidated by "shouting" or "physical punishment" in the mosque. While they criticize and reject such practices, they still believe they have learned a lot in the mosque due to memorizing many

classical contents. In individual cases where a possible negative mosque experience was not compensated for by further learning places, distancing occurs, and the memorized material fades over time.

According to the interviewed youth in Islamic religious education, material and/or formal understandings of education are pursued depending on the teacher. While the youth generally support an education that is cognitively activating and involves critical engagement with the material—that is, a proper understanding of education—they also tend to describe such education as "meagre" because not much knowledge is memorized. This perception of the youth may be due to their socialisation. However, it may also be because object-oriented material education is easier to operationalise, assess, represent, and observe than subject- and competence-oriented formal education. This aspect is addressed in some professional theories, which are conceived of professionalism as the competence to demonstrate competence convincingly (Pfadenhauer 2003; Kühl 2010, 286 ff.; Tuna 2019, pp. 283–86). Even in competence-oriented teaching, a great importance is placed on the competence of representation and the demonstration of competencies.

There is little in the existing literature about the **Internet** as a space for Muslim religious education. The learning environment is primarily seen as a space where Muslim children and youth can acquire religious knowledge through discourse. Previous studies have focused on the extent to which digital media may lead to religious radicalisation while acquiring knowledge (see, among others: Kiefer et al. 2018; El-Wereny 2020; FNRP 2020). In our analysis, it was confirmed that the Internet is a significant learning place, both for religious and potentially non-religious Muslim youth. Our data need to provide insight into whether online sources are essential for religious radicalisation. Our study did not confirm the frequent use of messenger services such as WhatsApp or Telegram. This may be due to the relatively small sample or the higher educational qualifications of the young people we interviewed.

Our analysis shows that the Internet is primarily used as a source of knowledge to understand religious or theological matters better. Adolescents acquire this knowledge by reading texts or written explanations or by watching videos of online imams who provide religious knowledge in an individualized manner. Adolescents engage with pre-made content, but they independently select which question to address, which of the available texts to read or compare regarding a religious matter, which online imam to watch or listen to, and where and when to do this. Therefore, the educational process at the Internet learning place is location- and time-independent, and self-motivation plays a central role, with knowledge being a dominant category.

In this learning environment, the confrontation with different perspectives and views on the same question is also relevant. This is particularly important for religious topics with controversial views (Tuna 2020), such as Islamic theological views on homosexuality. Given the plurality and complexity of the positions found in online sources on such topics, educational processes in the online medium are characterized by adolescents initially perceiving that there can be different, sometimes conflicting, or contradictory approaches to the same religious topic. Young Muslims are challenged to develop an educational understanding that can draw knowledge from many different sources, allows for differing views, critically examines perspectives for their content, and compares them with other approaches. The data show that the interviewees do not assume that only "one single truth" is conveyed to them in online texts. Instead, they usually compare and critically weigh different sources.

5.2. Teaching Approaches

In addition to the understanding of education, it is also worth examining the pedagogical principles prevalent in the various places of learning, namely the family, mosque, school, and Internet. In our data, the family appears to be particularly influential in the overall religious socialisation of Muslim children and youth. This confirms fundamental views that have already been widely described in the literature (Ulfat 2017; Uygun-Altunbas 2017). A

closer analysis of pedagogical approaches reveals that religious education in the **family** can be both active and passive. The latter is when Muslim youth ask their parents religious questions and seek answers. This is often the case in the qualitative guideline interviews on which this analysis is based. This presumably also has to do with the age of the young people we interviewed. From adolescence onwards, education in the family seems to be increasingly an act of self-education, in which parents tend to take on a more passive role. An exception can be parents who are very religious and primarily adhere to religious norms such as the obligation to fast and the obligation to pray and who play a more active role in religious education within the family. Our data do not confirm that pedagogical principles prevail in a family characterized by obedience, control, and discipline or by purely authoritarian features and questions of 'honour,' as Uslucan (2008, 51 ff.) and Toprak (2012) suggest. Instead, religious education appears to take place in a way that allows young people to interactively ask questions or request clarifications on religious topics from their parents or grandparents, who respond in a balanced and reflective manner, as well as they can. However, our data do not provide information on religious education in early childhood within the family.

Concerning the learning environment of the **mosque**, the study shows that some imams pursued an authoritative teaching approach focused on the intimidation and obedience of young people. Such a teaching approach contradicts the guidance of young people toward maturity and, as the analysis clearly showed, can impact young people's religious and personal development. Because

> the way we treat our children is a reflection of who we are and what we as a society believe. Our social and political attitudes, our institutions, and our child-rearing practices produce the next generation of citizens who, through their social institutions and political behaviour, in turn create the world their children will live in. (Milburn and Conrad 2016, p. 5)

A teaching approach focused on the maturity of young people, as outlined here, is particularly important, especially since maturity is crucial for faith, as it is a fundamental prerequisite for faith and religious norms (Badawia 2019, p. 294).

According to its curriculum, **Islamic religious education** follows the principle of "educating for maturity." "The students are educated for maturity." They are also "enabled to consider facts from different perspectives and to develop and justify their position independently." (BGBl 2011). Nevertheless, according to the interviews, certain teachers can exhibit opposing tendencies. The reports of the young people suggest that they feel judged by the teachers and that some of the teaching staff display an attitude that contradicts maturity and instead expects imitation and obedience. This partly corresponds with the study results of Tuna (2019) on the professionalism and professionalisation of Islamic religious education teachers in Austria. The study found, among other things, that some teachers have a knowledge-based understanding of education and an imam-like role perception (Tuna 2019, pp. 227–41).

In the context of the learning environment of the **Internet**, it becomes apparent that young people mostly conduct planned online research by addressing specific questions to search engines. Selected platforms, such as Islamportal, are rarely directly accessed. Typically, Muslim youth educate themselves alone in the sense of self-formation. This is supported by the fact that engagement with online sources is always available and can be conducted anywhere. The content that young people engage with within the Internet learning environment consists of knowledge questions (e.g., what is haram or halal? What ingredients do foods contain?) or concerns the application of religious norms (e.g., how is the obligatory prayer performed? What should be observed?). Religious education via the Internet occurring in society, such as watching videos of hodjas with others, as mentioned by the interviewee Sanela, is rather the exception. Smartphone apps, such as messenger services, do not play a significant role in the religious education of the Internet learning environment, at least for the youth we interviewed. Internet usage, including for religious

purposes, is so commonplace that the diversity of the Internet learning environment regarding religious education is only briefly and implicitly expressed.

5.3. Person-Relatedness

Especially noticeable in religious education processes is the personal aspect. Religious content tends to be internalized more easily when conveyed by positively perceived personalities.

In the **family** as a place of learning, various people close to the Muslim youth are usually involved, especially members of the nuclear family, primarily their parents. However, siblings and grandparents can also play a significant role. One striking aspect of this learning environment is that educational processes within the family are mainly remembered by young people when there is a good foundation of trust with their caregivers. In particular, such religious learning processes have a lasting impact. This lays the foundation for fundamental understandings and approaches to religion, as emphasized by Ayşe Uygun-Altunbaş in her study on religious socialisation in Muslim families (Uygun-Altunbas 2017). However, the learning content itself is only superficially addressed in the interviews, at least regarding the family learning environment.

A certain degree of personal reference can also be inferred and suggested in the learning environments of the **mosque** and **Islamic religious education** in school. However, the data do not allow for a closer analysis and discussion. On the one hand, this is because the young people in the interviews tend to focus on the approach of the imams and teachers. On the other hand, they report persistent teacher changes in the case of Islamic religious education without going into detail about the causes of the changes. Frequent teacher changes will likely make it difficult to perceive Islamic religious education teachers as reference persons and build relationships and trust. In the case of imams, they are perceived more as a figure of respect and authority, which also brings a certain distance.

On the contrary, the learning environment of the Internet is less person-centred at first glance. In most cases, the young people we interviewed described learning processes in which no other persons played a role. The Internet is generally seen and used as an inexhaustible, profound, and versatile source to acquire new knowledge, deepen existing knowledge, or eliminate uncertainties and ambiguities. In such cases, a constructive engagement with the diverse approaches to a religion-related question usually occurs. However, there are also connections to reference persons who play a role in the religious education of young people on the Internet. Occasionally, young people report that they intentionally consume videos on platforms such as YouTube from online imams on religious questions. Such individuals can act as religious influencers who reduce the apparent complexity of positions on a religious question and impart relevant religious knowledge to young people in a well-dosed manner. They reach out to young people and serve as personal reference points and religious authorities on the World Wide Web. This kind of offer is attractive to young Muslims. However, the downside is that, through the possibly one-dimensional presentation of religious content, they may also risk spreading retrograde religious views, as pointed out at various points in the research (Harms 2009; Kutscher 2009). Although we could not observe such phenomena in our data, this may be because our sample has slightly higher educational qualifications than average.

6. Conclusions

This article explores the topic of religious education in various learning environments from the perspective of Muslim youth. It highlights that religious learning within the family, school, mosque, and online environment is characterized by differences in educational concepts, pedagogical approaches, and person-centredness.[3]

However, it is important to acknowledge that these different learning environments are interconnected and often overlap with each other. Therefore, it is crucial for Islamic religious teachers in public schools to employ contemporary teaching methods that prevent parents from exclusively relying on mosque-based religious education and withdrawing

their children from school-based religious education. Likewise, mosque communities, as extracurricular learning environments, should offer Islamic education that aligns with and complements religious education in school settings. Additionally, school-based religious education should recognize the significance of the Internet as a learning platform, acknowledging that Muslim youth actively search for religious information online and engage with online imams or religious influencers.

In conclusion, we advocate for a collaborative and complementary approach among the various learning venues of Islamic education, despite existing differences and diverse expectations. This collaboration should involve the active participation of educational stakeholders in family, school, and mosque settings. Only through the interplay of these different learning environments, and the cooperation between socialisation institutions, can Muslim children and young people receive a comprehensive Islamic education.

Notes

[1] Fahimah Ulfat et al. (2020) recommend in their AIWG expertise contribution on Islamic religious education in Germany the "establishment of empirical research on Islamic religious education."

[2] The interview data presented in this paper were anonymized, and all personal data were removed. The names of the Muslims interviewed were pseudonymized in a way that allows for conclusions to be drawn about the regional origin of the interviewees, while ensuring that no identifying information is disclosed.

[3] Limitations and Delimitations of the Paper: We acknowledge that the current article primarily concentrates on the situation in Austria and Germany; however, it still offers valuable general insights. As Muslim youth face similar experiences under certain circumstances due to the increasing globalisation and pluralisation of societies, the findings can be relevant beyond Austria. For instance, when it comes to religious education on the Internet, the potential limitations lie primarily in language barriers, as there are no other boundaries.

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