

CHAPTER 5:

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF THE STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

5.1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the data and information derived from the student questionnaire are presented and discussed. As was previously pointed out (in Chapter 3, section 3.4.2), the student questionnaire explored broadly the same areas covered by the teacher questionnaire, namely:

- i. views about the aims and objectives of religious education;
- ii. the nature of knowledge and skills relating to religion and religious education, which students thought it important to acquire;
- iii. the nature and range of teaching/learning activities to which students were exposed in their religious education courses, and factors influencing these activities;
- iv. comments on the religious education textbooks used by students, their positive and negative features and the ways in which students use them.

A comparison of students' views and perceptions of the foregoing aspects of religious education with those of their teachers is not made at this juncture. It will be the subject of the next chapter.

The structure of the student questionnaire corresponded closely to that of the teacher questionnaire in that both rating items and open-ended questions were used to probe into the various aspects of religious education. For this reason, the procedures adopted for the evaluation of the quantitative and qualitative data from the student questionnaire were the same as those used for the teacher questionnaire.

The following sections deal with the results from the various aspects explored by means of the student questionnaire.

5.2. STUDENTS' VIEWS ABOUT THE AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

5.2.1. INTRODUCTION

The first section of the student questionnaire sought to explore students' views about the aims and objectives of their religious education courses. It was broadly equivalent to the first section of the teacher questionnaire and presented students with a number of rating items (fifteen in all) and also invited them to identify any additional aims not covered by the items.

The rating items focused on the following aspects:

- i. The essentials of the Islamic religion, especially the Quran and other Islamic writings, as well as the working of Islamic institutions and the people in them.
- ii. Issues concerning the relevance of religion and religious knowledge to the students' personal affairs, for example, events in their lives and matters of personal conduct.
- iii. Issues concerning the relevance of religion to 'world events', for example, war, famine, religious intolerance, etc.
- iv. The teaching of world religions other than Islam.

However, unlike the equivalent items in the teacher questionnaire, the present items were so formulated that they asked students to indicate the degree of their interest in the various themes specified in them. This was done to ensure that students gave a personal (rather than abstract) response to each item. Indications of interest were

given on a five-point rating scale, ranging from ‘very high’ (=5 in the evaluation) to ‘none’ (=1), with ‘high’, ‘moderate’ and ‘low’ as intermediate positions.

5.2.2. VALIDATION OF THE CONSTRUCTS RELATING TO THE AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

This was done by means of a factor analysis of students’ responses to the rating items.

The same procedure was used as has previously been described.

Table 5.1 summarises the results of the factor analysis after Varimax rotation. It is seen that a 4-factor solution resulted, with the four factors accounting for 58% of the total variance. It was possible to assign each item to one or other of the factors, although the highest loadings were relatively low in a few instances.

Table 5.1: The Loading of Aims and Objectives of Religious Education Items on Rotated Varimax Factor Analysis

Item	Description (Area of Interest)	Loading on Factor			
		1	2	3	4
1	Information contained in the Quran and other Islamic writings.				0.48
2	Origins and history of the Islamic religion.			0.73	0.60
3	The teachings of other world religions.				
4	Influences of religion and religious movements on contemporary society.	0.45			
5	The nature and work of religious organisations and societies.	0.50			
6	How to view life events, e.g. birth and death, etc.		0.75		
7	How to view/deal with issues such as war, famine, oppression of people.		0.73		
8	How to conduct oneself according to the laws of religion.				0.58
9	Reasons underlying religious conventions and festivals.		0.46		
10	How people of different religions can live together in harmony and tolerance.			0.57	
11	Relationship between religious and public (civil) laws.			0.66	
12	How one can train for careers in religion.	0.82			
13	The life and work of people in religious institutions.	0.84			
14	The achievements of great religious leaders of the past.				0.69
15	Information presented in school textbooks on Religious Education.				0.64

The interpretation of the factors, based on the scrutiny of the associated items, is as follows:

Factor 1: The items loading on this were, in the order of decreasing loadings; 13, 12, 5 and 4. As the descriptors in Table 5.1 reveal, the first three of these items are concerned with the religious work of people (including their training) and of institutions or organisations operating in the religious domain. Item 4 does not refer directly to people or organisations, but its theme - that of religious movements - is acceptably closely related to the 'work of people and institutions' notion.

Factor 2: The common theme underlying the two high-load items associated with this factor (Items 6 and 7, with loadings of 0.75 and 0.73) is that of how religion views, or deals with, 'life events' of a personal and more general (social and political) nature. In this sense, the factor appears to bring out the 'relevance of religion' issue.

The third item (Item 9- 'Reasons underlying religious conventions and festivals') has only a moderate loading on Factor 2 (0.46). This is indicative of a more tenuous link. However, even this item can be thought of as expressing a 'relevance' issue: festivals and conventions are clearly part of the student's life; thus, the question of why they exist is likely to be asked by any student who raises the wider question of what religion means in a general life context.

Factor 3: Three items load on this factor (Items 3, 10 and 11), with high to moderate loadings. On first sight, the topics referred to in the items appear not to have much in

common: they refer to ‘the teachings of other world religions’, ‘how people of different religions live together’ and the ‘relationships between religious and civil laws’, respectively. However, further reflection leads to the realisation that implicit in each of these items is the issue of ‘tolerance and compromise’ based on understanding. This applies as much to religious tolerance as to the tension between religion and secular affairs, especially in terms of the law and justice.

Factor 4: This has the largest number of items loading on it. Four of these (Items 2, 8, 14 and 15), have loadings of close to, or above, 0.6; the loading of the remaining items (Item 1) is only about 0.5. Ignoring Item 15 for the time being, the theme common to the items in this factor appears to be that of the Islamic religion, its foundations, in terms of the Quran and other writings, its history, the leaders who influenced its development and the demands it places upon people (through its laws).

The textbook issue raised in Item 15 clearly does not relate to the foregoing issues, except in as much as it functions as the main medium through which students arrive at information about them. This probably explains why the textbook item loads on this particular factor.

To summarise: the factor analysis of students’ responses to the first section of the questionnaire leads to four rating scales, corresponding to the themes of the four factors. These scales are concerned, retrospectively, with students’ interest in learning about:

- i. the work of people and institutions operating in the religious domain;

- ii. religion and its relevance to life events of a personal and associated/political nature;
- iii. religious understanding, tolerance and compromise;
- iv. matters concerning the Islamic religion and its origins.

5.2.2.1. Reliability of the Scales Derived from the Factor Analysis

Table 5.2 gives the alpha reliability values for the four scales identified from the factor analysis.

Table 5.2: Cronbach-Alpha Scale Reliabilities for the ‘Aims and Objectives of the Religious Education’ Domain

Scale	Scale description	Items included	Alpha reliability
1	The work of people and institutions operating in the religious domain.	4, 5, 12, 13	0.77
2	Religion and its relevance to life events of a personal and a societal/political nature.	6, 7, 9	0.61
3	Religious understanding, tolerance and compromise.	3, 10, 11	0.62
4	Matters concerning the Islamic religion and its origins.	1, 2, 8, 14, 15	0.66

The alpha values range from just over 0.6 to 0.77. The lower values apply to the scales comprising only three items, but may still be regarded as satisfactory since alpha-values for ‘short’ scales are usually lower than those for ‘long’ scales.

5.2.3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF STUDENTS’ VIEWS ON THE AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

The results derived from the questionnaire section exploring students’ views concerning the aims and objectives of religious education are presented and discussed in three subsections. In the first, the ratings on the four rating scales are considered.

In the second, students' ratings on individual items are examined, on a selective basis. Finally, students' responses to the open-ended questions are reported and discussed.

5.2.3.1. Students' Ratings of Their Interest in Different Areas of Aims and Objectives of Religious Education

Table 5.3 shows the mean ratings and associated standard deviations for the four scales derived from the factor analysis. In the strict sense, the ratings indicate the levels of students' interest in the various areas. However, as was previously argued, these ratings may also be regarded as measures of students' views concerning the aims and objectives of religious education.

Table 5.3: Mean Ratings and Standard Deviations for the Four Scales Expressing 'Aims and Objectives of Religious Education'

Scale	Scale description	Mean ratings	Standard deviations
1	The work of people and institutions operating in the religious domain.	3.72	0.85
2	Religion and its relevance to life events of a personal and a societal/political nature.	3.55	0.82
3	Religious understanding, tolerance and compromise.	3.18	0.90
4	Matters concerning the Islamic religion and its origins.	3.84	0.67

As the data in Table 5.3 indicate, students' interest appears to be highest for 'matters concerning the Islamic religion and its origins'. For this, the mean rating of 3.84 is close to the 'high interest' scale point. Also, the standard deviation for this scale is on the low side ($SD = 0.67$), which suggests a reasonable degree of consensus about the level of interest in this particular aspect.

Next in terms of level of interest comes 'the work of people and institutions operating in the religious domain', with a mean rating of 3.72 which is again fairly close to the

‘high interest’ mark. In this case, however, the students’ consensus about their interest is less pronounced, as the higher standard deviation suggests.

‘Religion and its relevance to life events of a personal and societal/political nature’ has a mean rating of 3.55, which places it half-way between the ‘moderate interest’ and ‘high interest’ scale points.

Compared with the foregoing scales, students’ interest in matters concerning ‘religious understanding, tolerance and compromise’ is only ‘moderate’. However, the relatively large standard deviation for this scale suggests that students’ opinion about it is far from uniform.

By and large, though, the mean ratings for the four scales are not too different from one another, and all indicate that, on average, students have at least a moderately high level of interest in the areas of religious education expressed by the scales.

5.2.3.2. Students’ Interest in Particular Aims and Objectives of Religious Education

Table 5.4 gives the distributions of students’ responses to the items included in the rating table in Section 1 of the student questionnaire. The items are listed under the scale headings to which they relate. Also given in the table are the mean ratings and standard deviation for the items.

Table 5.4: Distribution of Level of Students' Interest in Different 'Aims and Objectives of Religious Education' (Including Mean Ratings and Standard Deviation)

Item	Description	Students' Level of Interest (percentage of students)					Mean Rating	S.D.
		Very high	High	Moderate	Low	None		
Scale 1: The work of people and institutions operating in the religious domain.								
4	Influences of religion and religious movements on contemporary society.	27.5	30.3	31.1	8.0	3.1	3.72	1.03
5	The nature and work of religious organisations and societies.	19.1	22.1	36.6	15.1	7.2	3.33	1.15
12	How one can train for careers in religion.	36.7	27.9	23.5	7.5	4.4	3.83	1.14
13	The life and work of people in religious institutions.	43.9	24.6	23.1	5.7	2.7	4.01	1.07
Scale 2: Religion and its relevance to life events of a personal and a societal/political nature.								
6	How to view life events, e.g. birth and death, etc.	26.5	28.7	30.6	10.9	3.3	3.65	1.07
7	How to view/deal with issues such as war, famine, oppression of people, etc.	18.5	23.5	35.5	15.3	7.3	3.31	1.15
9	Reasons underlying religious conventions and festivals.	24.8	33.5	31.4	5.7	4.6	3.69	1.04
Scale 3: Religious understanding, tolerance and compromise.								
3	The teachings of other world religions.	12.9	17.0	41.3	17.0	11.8	3.01	1.16
10	How people of different religions can live together in harmony and tolerance.	19.5	23.8	32.4	16.6	7.8	3.31	1.18
11	Relationship between religious laws and public (civil) laws.	18.7	26.1	26.5	16.8	11.9	3.22	1.26
Scale 4: Matters concerning the Islamic religion and its origins.								
1	Information contained in the Quran and other Islamic writings.	36.9	22.7	30.2	6.2	4.0	3.82	1.12
2	Origins and history of the Islamic religion.	23.4	34.3	33.3	6.2	2.8	3.68	0.99
8	How to conduct oneself according to the laws of religion.	51.6	28.3	16.3	2.8	0.9	4.30	0.90
14	The achievements of great religious leaders of the past.	32.0	31.8	25.5	8.0	2.7	3.82	1.05
15	Information presented in school textbooks on religious education.	26.4	30.9	29.0	9.3	4.4	3.64	1.09

Of particular interest in this context is the identification of items for which students' ratings appeared comparatively high and low, respectively. Thus, not every item is discussed separately.

i. Items with 'high' interest ratings

What constitutes 'high' interest rating is inevitably a matter of personal judgement. For the purpose of this discussion, the criterion was adopted that the sum of responses in the 'very high' and 'high' interest rating categories should be equal or greater than 60%.

On the basis of this criterion, four items may be placed in the 'high' interest ratings category. These are, in descending order of responses in 'very high' and 'high' response categories: Items 8, 13, 12 and 14. A fifth item, number 1, is at the borderline with 59.6% of responses and may also be included.

Items 8 ('how to conduct oneself according to the laws of religion') and 12 (how one can train for careers in religion') have a strong 'personal' orientation. It would appear that students' interest in learning about how they should 'behave' in accordance with the laws of the Islamic religion and about career opportunities in the religious field is very strong. Therefore, these aspects should occupy a central position in the religious education curriculum.

Items 13 ('The life and work of people in religious institutions') and 14 ('The achievements of great religious leaders of the past') also deal with the person-related aspects of religion and religious life, but the focus here is on persons other than the

student himself. Evidently, students' interest in these aspects is high. The question is whether, in current religious education programmes, such interest is responded to.

The fifth item in the 'high interest' group (Item 1- 'information in the Quran and other Islamic writings') needs not much comment. It is concerned with what is the essential corner stone of the Islamic faith. Thus, students' interest in it is inevitably high, as would have been expected.

ii. Items with 'low' interest ratings

As for 'high interest' items, the decision of what constitutes 'low interest' items is inevitably an arbitrary one. As the mean ratings reveal, none of the items was judged to be less than 'moderately interesting' or average. However, for a few of the items the combined 'no-interest' (= none) and 'low interest' responses amounted to more than 25% and these were regarded as 'low interest' items for the present purpose.

Two items met this criterion: Item 3 ('The teaching of other world religions') and Item 11 ('Relationships between religious laws and public/civil laws'). In each case, nearly 30% of the students indicated either no interest or low interest in the topic of the item. For the 'teaching of other world religions', this is an unexpectedly high and, at the same time, somewhat disturbing figure. One would have hoped that, in this day and age of the 'world getting increasingly smaller', all students would have shown an interest in, and curiosity about, faiths other than their own. Merely to close one's eyes to them is not a means of developing understanding and tolerance. Perhaps students ought to be made aware of this and encouraged to look willingly beyond the confines of their own religion.

As far as Item 11 is concerned, it may be that students declaring little or no interest in the matter raised have not yet reflected on the tensions that may and do exist between religious and civil interpretations of points of law. Alternatively, the issue may just be a ‘non-issue’ for these students, reflecting an acceptance of the existing situation in Saudi Arabia, where religious and public life are closely interlinked.

5.2.4. STUDENTS’ RESPONSE TO THE OPEN-ENDED QUESTION CONCERNING THEIR INTEREST IN RELIGIOUS MATTERS

The purpose of this question was to elicit from students further areas or aspects of religion and religious education in which they were interested. Of the 540 students in the total student sample, 284 responded to this part of the questionnaire, producing 333 suggestions in all. Table 5.5 summarises the pattern of responses.

Table 5.5: Distribution of Students’ Response Pattern to the Open-Ended Question Asking for the Identification of Additional Aims and Objectives Items

Responses provided	Number of students	Percentage of students
No response given.	305	56.5
One response given.	235	43.5
Two responses given.	49	9.1
Total	540	100.0

On the basis of an initial scrutiny of the responses from fifty students (randomly selected from all students who responded to the open-ended question), it was possible to identify four broad response categories which were subsequently used for the analysis of all answers received.

The four response categories dealt with the following:

- i. Issues of relevance to students’ personal and social lives, often with reference to their relationships with others and to ‘self-education’ (104 of the responses fell into this category).

- ii. Issues and topics relating broadly to Islam as a (contemporary) religious movement. The emphasis here tended to be on issues of morality, tradition and leadership. (Sixty-five of the responses could be assigned to this category).
- iii. Topics concerning historical aspects of Islam, often with reference to the lives of the prophets of the religion and the history of the Arabic people. (The number of responses assigned to this category was 64).
- iv. Issues concerning the relationship between Islam and other religions. (Issues of this nature were referred to in 42 responses).

Fifty-eight responses were so vague that they could not be interpreted. In the main, these were single-word answers that were disregarded in the subsequent evaluation.

In the following subsections, students' responses are briefly discussed, in relation to the four response categories identified above.

5.2.4.1. Issues of Relevance to Students' Personal and Social Lives

This response category received the largest number of responses. Different personal issues were stated by the students as being of interest to them. Hence, these must also be regarded as important for inclusion in religious education programmes, as viewed from the students' perspective.

Issues concerning students' own religious education were frequently raised, largely with reference to 'self education'. Implicit in many of the responses was the question

of how students could study religious materials independently of the teacher.

Examples of such responses are:

(Interest in learning about)

“How I can educate myself”;
“How I can read the Quran”;
“How I can guide myself as a Muslim”.

Admittedly, these and similar responses are not very explicit and fail to provide details. However, their general drift appears fairly clear.

Another set of responses within the ‘relevance to students’ personal and social lives’ category referred to issues concerned with aspects of social relationships. A number of students expressed the wish to learn about their role within their own extended families and how to figure in family affairs. Responses like the following illustrate this:

(Interest in learning about)

“The responsibility of young people towards their family and society”;
“The family role in the context of the Islamic faith”;
“How we can treat family problems in the light of Islam”;
“The responsibilities of husband and wife to each other and towards their children”.

The fact that students raised these matters suggests that current religious education programmes do not address family and related issues to an adequate extent. No doubt, the gradual impact of new and diverse education processes in Saudi Arabia is leading students to the realisation that religious education should address ‘real life’ issues, not just matters of traditional Islamic teaching.

Personal relationship issues also appeared in a different context in students’ answers.

This was in relation to questions about students’ interactions with people other than

their relatives and the ways in which they might deal with, or respond to, other faiths and beliefs. The following quotations illustrate this aspect:

(Interest in learning about)

“How I can deal with other people”;
“The basic methods of discussing religious issues with people of other faiths”;
“How I can deal with other faiths and ideologies”;
“How a Muslim can deal with other (non-Islamic) values and attitudes”.

The call for the inclusion of these and related issues in religious education programmes reflects the phenomenon that, through the influence of the media and electronic means of communication, students have become increasingly aware of ‘the world outside Islam’. No wonder, then, that they wish to learn about it and, in particular, how to respond to it.

5.2.4.2. Topics Relating to Islam as a Contemporary Religious Movement

Nearly a quarter of the students responding to the open-ended question provided answers that could be assigned to this category. The majority of the answers received concerned issues of Islamic morality and moral behaviour, as is exemplified by the following quotations:

(Interest in learning about)

“The importance of Islamic morality”;
“The basic methods of correct Islamic behaviour”;
“Islamic morals, such as patience, belief, etc”;
“Development of good Islamic attitudes and behaviour ”;

It is interesting that these matters were so explicitly raised by students, since - according to the author’s knowledge - they are normally dealt with in religious education programmes. However, it is also true that in Saudi society, many attitudes

towards morals and morality derive from tribal traditions. Thus, it may not always be clear to students where the balance of influence from these traditions and the teachings of Islam lies. This may explain students' wish to learn more about these aspects.

Another area referred to in students' answers concerned religious leaders and their role in contemporary Islamic religion. For example, students expressed an interest in learning about:

*“The achievements and deeds of religious leaders” and;
“The role and function of Imams (Islamic priests) in the teaching of the Islamic religion”.*

On the whole, answers of this nature were not very detailed or specific and are, hence, not easy to interpret. However, the fact that the matter of religious leaders and leadership was raised underlines the finding from the rating items that students are genuinely interested in the people-related aspects of their religion.

5.2.4.3. Topics Relating to Historical Aspects of Islam

The history of Islam and of the Arabic people was the third category of student responses to the open-ended question. About 23% of the responses received addressed this area.

The majority of topics mentioned referred to the history of Islam itself, often in the context of conflicts with other religions. For example, ‘the historical Islamic battles’ was mentioned, as was the issue why Islam had displaced other ‘previous’ religions. ‘Why is Islam the last true religion?’ was asked in one of the responses. More general answers referred to ‘the Islamic culture and tradition’.

In a number of answers, Islamic history appeared to be linked to Arabic history. Thus interest in the study of Arabic history ‘before Islam’ was expressed by quite a few students. Also, ‘the role of Islam in uniting people’ was mentioned, either in the context of ‘uniting the Arabic people’ or in a wider, unspecified sense. The reference to ‘uniting people in one way of thinking’ was taken to be indicative of the latter.

In a minority of answers, explicit reference was made to the life and history of the prophets in the Islamic religion. ‘The history of all the prophets in the world’ and ‘historical aspects of the prophet (Mohammed) and his followers’ were specifically mentioned, although it is not clear from these and similar answers what exactly students had in mind.

The fact that, in response to the open-ended question, a sizeable proportion of answers related to topics of a historical nature can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, it would indicate that current religious education programmes do not focus extensively on historical topics - such topics often give rise to good ‘stories’ which students tend to find interesting. Secondly, historical topics tend to portray ‘real people’ and ‘real events’ at least in the students’ perception. They are thus more ‘concrete’ than issues of theology and Islamic law: this feature may make them particularly interesting and appealing to the students.

5.2.4.4. Issues Concerning the Relationship between Islam and other Religions

The relationship between the Islamic religion and other religions was raised in just under 15% of the students’ answers. Among the particular aspects referred to were the

similarities and the conflicts between the religious movements. The following quotations illustrate this:

(Interest in learning about)

“How Islam deals with other (non Islamic) attitudes”;

“The basic tenets of different creeds in the world”;

“The Islamic view concerning different faiths”

“The different Islamic rules from the viewpoint of different Islamic ideologies”.

The last of these points is particularly interesting in that it acknowledges the existence of different branches and traditions within Islam.

A number of answers appear to hint at the fact that, in addition to the religions founded by the main ‘messengers of God’, namely, Moses, Jesus and Mohammed, there existed a wide range of ‘minor religions’ - again, the question was raised what their basic doctrines were.

To conclude the discussion of students’ responses to the open-ended question inviting them to identify issues about which they would like to learn in their religious education programmes, the following general observation can be made.

1. Students’ response rate to this question was significantly higher than that of the teachers to the equivalent question.
2. Although quite a few of the answers received were extensions of the topic areas covered by the rating items, some new aspects emerged as being of interest to the students. Particularly noteworthy among them were the references to students’ ‘self-education’ in religious matters, to matters concerning students’

relationships within their families and with others, to the students' personal skills in relation to behaviour and morality and last, but not least, to questions about the historical development of their religion.

3. The fact that frequent reference to these and related areas was made, leads to the conclusion that they do not feature in contemporary religious education programmes to the extent to which students would apparently like them to be represented. Indirectly, it may also be taken as an indication that traditional topics covered in the programmes appear rather abstracted to the students and hence, fail to portray religion adequately as a 'living subject'.

5.2.5. CONCLUSION

This section explored the views of students through analysis of their ratings of interest in some 15 different aims and objectives of religious education programmes. Four scales were derived from the analysis, into which all the rating items fell, shown here in order of descending interest level:

- i. religious understanding, tolerance and compromise;
- ii. religion and its relevance to life events of a personal and associated/political nature;
- iii. the work of people and institutions operating in the religious domain;
- iv. matters concerning the Islamic religion and its origins.

Although tolerance was cited here as the least interesting, it was nevertheless rated as moderate; the level of interest in all of the areas was fairly similar.

Students rated their interest in their own personal Islamic behaviour highest, and a possible focus on examples probably explains their interest in the life details of historical figures and the essential corner stones of the Quran. There were no topics of low interest but students seemed to hold little curiosity about other faiths. However, this is probably not encouraged as their own faith is so intricately part of their lives, personally and publicly. Other faiths may represent a danger which would threaten their identity, and possibly even be seen as heretical. Students were least interested in theological or academic tensions in public and religious law.

The open-ended section was more successful in the student questionnaire than the teachers' in that it received proportionately more answers. The biggest group of suggestions showed students' personal involvement in their religion and motivation to involve themselves through informal rather than academic efforts. It also showed their introspective fears of the encroachment of the modern world in justifications for dealing with other faiths. The middle was divided between responsibility and expectations of society, especially in moral issues. Moral issues are already covered in religious programmes so students might have been responding to what they know is usually covered, but morality issues are difficult to define easily and they may have been asking for firmer guidelines. This speculation is supported by the inclusion of interest in the role of Imams, as familiar examples to follow.

The interest in historical detail may also fill in gaps in knowledge, especially from a personal level. There were fewer suggestions about the relation of Islam to other religions, but some did arise, reflecting some interest in looking outward and taking responsibility for evaluating other cultures for themselves.

5.3. STUDENTS' VIEWS CONCERNING THE ACQUISITION OF KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS FROM RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

5.3.1. INTRODUCTION

Section 2 of the student questionnaire extended the line of enquiry initiated in Section 1 (which was concerned with identifying students' interest in a range of topics in religious education) by asking for information about the knowledge and skills that students hoped to gain from their involvement in religious education.

The particular knowledge domains and skill areas covered in altogether 15 rating items developed for this questionnaire were as follows:

- i. Knowledge and skills needed for living in accordance with Islamic laws and morality.
- ii. Knowledge and skills required for one's personal relationships with others, including people of different faiths.
- iii. The ability, including associated knowledge, to discuss different religious issues, including those relating to other faiths.
- iv. Personal skills and abilities needed for one's own life and that of one's family.

The nature of the rating items is identified in Table 5.6. Each item called for a response on a five-point scale ranging from 'very high' (in terms of the degree of importance attached to it) to 'none', with the intermediate points of 'high', 'moderate' and 'low'. The numerical equivalents of these scales points were 5 (for 'very high') to 1 (for 'none').

In addition to the rating items, the questionnaire section included an open-ended question which invited students to identify any knowledge/skill items not covered in the rating items.

5.3.2. VALIDATION OF THE CONSTRUCTS RELATING TO THE ACQUISITION OF KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

For the purpose of validating the rating items and the constructs covered by them, the answers received from the students were subjected to a factor analysis, using the procedure and criteria previously employed. A three-factor solution emerged, as shown in Table 5.6. Between them, the three factors accounted for 47 per cent of the total variance. This is a relatively low proportion of the total variance, but is explained by the fact that some of the item loadings are of only moderate magnitude. This applied particularly to the items loading on factor 3.

Table 5.6: The Loading of ‘Acquisition of Knowledge and Skills’ Items on Rotated Varimax Factor Analysis

Item	Description	Loading on Factor		
		1	2	3
1	The ability to discuss issues of religious interest in an informed and balanced way.	0.63		
2	The ability to cope with life events such as birth, death, illness, etc.			0.63
3	A strong sense of commitment to the laws of Islam.	0.64		
4	A thoughtful and creative attitude towards my own experiences.	0.70		
5	Respect for the opinions of my parents and teachers.		0.66	
6	A tolerance for the teaching of other world religions.			0.51
7	Concern for the well-being of my fellow human-beings.		0.76	
8	The ability to decide between what is right and what is wrong.		0.55	
9	The ability to write about religious matters.	0.65		
10	The desire to learn more about religious matters and affairs, even after leaving school.	0.60		
11	The ability to educate my children in the true faith of my religion.			0.57
12	The knowledge needed to live my life in accordance with Islamic morals.			0.55
13	A compassionate attitude towards people who are less well off than I am.		0.61	
14	The skill to argue against religious opinions that I regard as wrong.			0.50
15	The ability to reflect on my own behaviour and adjust it, if necessary.	0.54		

Factor 1: Six items were found to be loading on this factor, mostly with loadings of 0.6 and above. These were Items 1, 3, 4, 9, 10 and 15. Inspection of the item descriptors suggests ‘personal response to the Islamic religion’ as an underlying construct: practically each item expresses some facet of this - either in the form of a personal commitment to Islam and sensitivity to one’s religious experiences (Items 3, 4 and possibly 15) or the disposition to learn about and discuss matters of religion (Items 1, 9 and 10). Obviously, the context of these (and the other) rating items is that of knowledge and skills acquisition. Thus, students’ ratings express their perception of the importance of gaining knowledge and skills to enable them to make a personal response to their religion.

Factor 2: Four items loaded on this factor, namely, Items 5, 7, 8 and 13. The content of these items, as seen from Table 5.6, suggests ‘respect for, and concern about, other human beings’ as the construct underlying this factor. Items 6, 7 and 13 express this very clearly. The remaining item loading on Factor 2 (Item 8) is less strongly tied to this construct, as is evident from the lowest value of its loading (of 0.55). Nevertheless, if the item is thought of in relation to one’s personal behaviour towards others, then its placement within this factor makes sense. No doubt, students responding to the questionnaire made this connection.

Factor 3: Five items, namely, Items 2, 6, 11, 12 and 14, loaded on this factor, but - as has already been stated - with loadings of only moderate magnitude. The general theme underlying them is not easy to identify since the items concern a variety of different topics. These include: (knowledge and skills) ‘to cope with life events’, ‘to

educate my children in the true faith of my religion', as well as (knowledge and skills) 'to be tolerant of other world religions' and to be able 'to argue against religious opinions which I regard as wrong'.

A possible way of interpreting factor 3 would be to argue that it relates to matters of personal skills in the way of coping with life events and maintaining one's faith, but, as has already been indicated, this construct is less clear-cut than those for the other factors.

In the light of the foregoing argument, three scales may be proposed, corresponding to the three factors identified. These are:

Scale 1: Acquisition of knowledge and skills required for making a personal response to the Islamic religion.

Scale 2: Acquisition of knowledge and skills needed to show respect for, and concern about, other human beings.

Scale 3: Acquisition of knowledge and skills needed for coping with life events and for maintaining one's faith.

5.3.2.1. Reliability of the Scales Derived from the Factor Analysis

Table 5.7 shows the alpha-reliabilities of the three rating scales derived from the factor analysis of students' responses. The alpha values for the first two scales are entirely satisfactory and indicate a good degree of homogeneity of the items within each scale.

Table 5.7: Cronbach-Alpha Reliability for ‘Acquisition of Knowledge and Skills through Religious Education Programmes’

Scale	Scale description	Items included	Alpha reliability
1	Knowledge and skills required for one’s personal response to the Islamic religion.	1, 3, 4, 9, 10, 15	0.76
2	Knowledge and skills involved in showing respect for, and concern about, other human beings.	5, 7, 8, 13	0.67
3	Knowledge and skills required for coping with life events and for maintaining one’s faith.	2, 6, 11, 12, 14	0.58

The alpha value for the third scale, though acceptable, is seen to be somewhat lower than the corresponding values for the first two scales. This is in line with the findings from the factor analysis which produced only moderate loadings of items of this scale on factor 3. Detailed scrutiny of the reliability analysis data indicated Item 6 to be the ‘weakest’ one in terms of its correlation with the scale as a whole. However, it was decided to retain it in the subsequent evaluation of students’ ratings.

5.3.3. STUDENTS’ VIEWS OF THE ACQUISITION OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF KNOWLEDGE AND SKILL THROUGH RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

The results derived from the questionnaire section probing into skills and abilities to be acquired through religious education are presented and discussed in three parts. In the first, the results relating to the three rating scales are given. In the second, students’ ratings of particular items are dealt with. Finally, in the third part, students’ responses to the open-ended question are examined and discussed.

5.3.3.1. Students’ Views Concerning the Importance of Different Types of Knowledge and Skill

Students’ mean ratings for the three scales expressing different areas of knowledge and skills to be gained through religious education are shown in Table 5.8, together

with associated standard deviations. The mean ratings themselves express students' perceptions of the importance of these areas.

Table 5.8: Mean Ratings and Standard Deviations for the Three Scales Expressing 'Acquisition of Knowledge and Skills'

Scale	Scale description	Mean ratings	Standard deviations
1	Knowledge and skills required for personal response to the Islamic religion.	3.95	0.64
2	Knowledge and skills involved in showing respect for, and concern about, other human beings.	4.34	0.61
3	Knowledge and skills required for coping with life events and for maintaining one's faith.	3.83	0.62

It is seen from Table 5.8 that the highest mean rating is obtained for scale 2 which concerns the development of knowledge and skills involved in showing respect for, and concern about, other human beings. The actual value of this rating (4.34) places it above the 'high importance' scale-point, in the direction of 'very high importance'.

The mean ratings for the other two scales, though lower than the rating for scale 2, are still quite close to the 'high importance' scale point (3.95 and 3.83, respectively), indicating that these aspects too are regarded as important by students.

It is noteworthy that the standard deviations for the three mean ratings are relatively low. This suggests that students' views about the importance of the knowledge/skill areas expressed by the three rating scales are fairly uniform.

5.3.3.2. Students' Views Concerning the Importance of Individual Knowledge and Skill Items

Table 5.9 shows the distribution of students' responses to the various rating items in the three scales derived from the factor analysis. Mean ratings and associated standard deviations are also listed.

Table 5.9: Distribution of Students' Importance Rating of Different Knowledge and Skills (Including Mean Ratings and Standard Deviation)

Item	Description	Degree of Importance (per cent)					Mean Rating	S.D.
		Very high	High	Moderate	Low	None		
Scale 1: Knowledge and skills required for personal response to the Islamic religion.								
1.	The ability to discuss issues of religious interest in an informed and balanced way.	34.7	31.5	27.8	4.3	1.7	3.93	0.97
3.	A strong sense of commitment to the laws of Islam.	49.3	31.4	16.8	1.9	0.6	4.27	0.85
4.	A thoughtful and creative attitude towards my own experiences.	27.5	35.6	28.3	6.9	1.7	3.80	0.98
9.	The ability to write about religious matters.	17.6	30.3	37.2	10.9	4.0	3.47	1.03
10.	The desire to learn more about religious matters and affairs, even after leaving school.	38.7	32.5	21.5	5.4	1.9	4.01	1.00
15.	The ability to reflect on my own behaviour and to adjust it, if necessary.	45.6	32.6	17.6	2.5	1.7	4.18	0.92
Scale 2: Knowledge and skills involved in showing respect for, and concern about, other human beings.								
5.	Respect for the opinion of my parents and teachers.	54.4	27.5	15.1	1.9	1.1	4.32	0.88
7.	Concern for the well-being of my fellow human-beings.	51.1	33.1	13.3	1.5	1.0	4.32	0.83
8.	The ability to decide between what is right and what is wrong.	53.3	30.5	13.9	1.7	0.6	4.34	0.82
13.	A compassionate attitude towards people who are less well off than I am.	56.5	26.4	12.7	2.7	1.7	4.33	0.92
Scale 3: Knowledge and skills required for coping with life events and for maintaining one's faith.								
2.	The ability to cope with 'life events' such as birth, death, illness, etc.	33.8	36.3	25.0	3.8	1.1	3.98	0.92
6.	A tolerance for the teaching of other world religions.	19.7	24.4	30.9	17.6	7.4	3.31	1.19
11.	The ability to educate my children in the true faith of my religion.	44.0	32.5	17.2	4.0	2.3	4.12	0.98
12.	The knowledge needed to live my life in accordance with Islamic morals.	26.5	38.1	26.7	7.1	1.5	3.81	0.96
14.	The skill to argue against religious opinions that I regard as wrong.	34.0	32.2	25.7	5.4	2.7	3.89	1.02

Even a cursory glance at the distribution figures reveals that, for the majority of items, the highest proportion of responses is found in either the ‘very high importance’ or the ‘high importance’ rating category. Indeed, for seven of the 15 items, the combined ‘very high’ and ‘high’ importance responses are in excess of 75% of the student population in the sample. The items in this group are:

- Item 3: A strong sense of commitment to the laws of Islam.
- Item 15: The ability to reflect on my own behaviour and to adjust it, if necessary.
- Item 5: Respect for the opinion of my parents and teachers.
- Item 7: Concern for the well-beings of my fellow human-beings.
- Item 8: The ability to decide between what is right and what is wrong.
- Item 13: A compassionate attitude towards people who are less well off than I am.
- Item 11: The ability to educate my children in the true faith of my religion.

The fact that the foregoing items are judged to be important by so many students is a clear sign of the nature of expectations of religious education programmes. It would appear that students look genuinely towards the development of ‘life skills’ in them, that is, skills (and associated knowledge) that they need to organise their personal lives and their relationship with others.

Only two of the items received a relatively low importance rating. These were Item 9 (development of the ‘ability to write about religious matters’) and Item 6 (development of ‘tolerance for the teaching of other world religions’). In these two instances, the combined ‘very high’ and ‘high’ importance ratings were below 50%, with the majority of responses falling into the ‘moderate importance’ category. Students’ overall response to Item 9 is perhaps not surprising: the ability to write

about religious matters would not normally be expected to be a ‘major skill’ to emerge from a religious education programme (except in relation to examination tasks and similar assignments).

The relatively low importance attributed by students to the ‘tolerance for other religions’ issue is somewhat disappointing, but can be explained by the fact that, through textbooks and traditions, religious education in Saudi secondary schools is strongly Islam-focused.

5.3.4. STUDENTS’ RESPONSES TO THE OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS CONCERNING KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS TO BE DEVELOPED THROUGH RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

The open-ended question invited students to suggest any additional knowledge and/or skill items to be developed through their religious education courses, not already embraced by the rating items discussed above. Of the 540 students in the sample, 219 (=41%) responded to the question, furnishing altogether 249 answers. Table 5.10 summarises the response pattern.

Table 5.10: Distribution of Students’ Response Pattern to the Open-Ended Question Asking for the Identification of Additional Knowledge/Skill Items

Description	Number of students	Percentage of students
No response given.	321	59.4
One response given.	189	35.0
Two responses given.	30	5.6
Total	540	100.

Careful scrutiny of the answers received gave rise to three broad categories, as follows:

- i. Answers which identified personal and social skills (and associated knowledge) regarded by students as important. In the main, no reference was made in these answers to religious matters per se. (N=129; 52%)
- ii. Answers which specified knowledge and/or skill items that related directly to religious matters, both of an Islamic and non-Islamic nature. (N=90; 36%)
- iii. Answers which repeated statements already made in the rating items, without elaborating or exemplifying them. (N=21; 8.4%)
- iv. A few answers (nine in all) proved unclassifiable.

Before discussing the nature of the answers received to the first two response categories, it should be mentioned that relatively few of them revealed genuinely ‘new’ skills or knowledge items considered by students to be of importance. Nevertheless, these answers invariably provided elaboration of the issues mentioned in the rating items and hence, provide an insight into students’ thinking about knowledge and skills to be derived from religious education activities.

Category i. responses

In the main, these related to what might broadly be described as ‘interpersonal and communication skills’. Some 90 of the 129 answers were of this nature. The following quotations are indicative of the variety of suggestions made in them:

“I should like to develop the ability to deal with others fairly.”
“I should like to learn to be tolerant.”
“I should like to develop the attitude of mercy and sympathy towards poor people”

“I should like to learn the skill of asking questions of people with different faiths”.
“I should like to improve my ways of talking and discussion.”
“I should like to learn the skills of creating relationships with other people and students”.

Other statements were not ‘personalised’, but also pointed to desirable or important skills to be acquired from religious education programmes. For example:

“Good relationships with others should be developed through religious education lessons.”
“Acquiring the skills of advising other people in the right way.”
“Skills of dealing with other people in an uncomplicated way.”

The development of ‘personal qualities’ was also implicit in a number of answers. Statements such as the following illustrate this:

“The skills of listening to other people with respect for their opinions”
“Acquisition of decision-making skills”.
“The ability to carry out one’s family responsibilities.”

However, compared with responses relating to ‘interpersonal and communication skills’, these responses were few. Only about 30 students mentioned ‘personal qualities’, not infrequently in the context of interpersonal skills (like the first example above).

Category ii. responses

Of the 90 responses assigned to this category, just under 70 referred directly to matters concerning, or relating to, the Islamic religion. The remaining answers took a broader perspective and usually either referred to ‘other religions’ or implied the desirability of ‘comparative religion’.

Practically all responses which related to purely Islamic issues were concerned with skills acquisition: knowledge items (as opposed to skill items) were hardly mentioned. Some of these skills appeared to be indicative of ‘study skills’ and the skill required for dealing with the Islamic holy texts, especially the Quran. The following quotations illustrate this:

“I should like to learn the slow reading style for reading the Quran.”
“I would like to become skilled in interpreting the Quran.”
“I wish to learn how to understand (make sense of) Islamic law books.”
“Development of the ability and skill to interpret the Quran.”
“Skill to make sense of all aspects of the Islamic tradition.”

Another group of responses focused on skills concerned with the proper conduct of religious practices. Examples of such responses are:

“I should like to have developed in me a code of practice for Islamic behaviour.”
“The ability to distinguish between the prohibited and the non-prohibited.”
“The skills to distinguish between Halal and non-Halal.”
“The ability to follow Islamic worship.”

In general, the emphasis in these and similar responses was on skills and abilities which, in the opinion of the students, were important for conducting one’s life in accordance with the rules and requirements of the Islamic religion.

In a few other answers, also classed within the ‘Islamic issues’ subcategory, students appear to focus on their ability to communicate their religious ideas to others. Here are some examples of such answers:

“The ability to persuade others about Islamic knowledge.”
“The ability to create strong opinions and judgements about Islamic matters, through discussion.”
“The skill of responding to different questions about Islamic issues, by giving evidence and using reason.”

Answers which went beyond, or outside, the concerns of Islam were given by only a minority of students (21 responses were received). In the main, these answers were concerned with the importance of the acquisition of knowledge about other religions, as the following quotations indicate:

“Learning more about other religions”
“The ability to distinguish between other religions.”
“Knowledge of the major differences between different religions.”
“The ability of comparing other religions and Islam.”
“Learning to deal (interact) with others of diverse faiths.”

To some extent, the notions underlying these students’ answers and those discussed above, are not new in the sense that they are also implicit in the rating items to which students had responded. However, the elaborations contained in them give an insight into students’ thought which the answers to the rating items cannot provide. This makes the analysis of the open-ended questions interesting and informative.

5.3.5. CONCLUSION

This section is an extension of Section 1, which sought information about students’ interest in a range of topics from their religious education programmes. This section explored students’ views about the knowledge and skills which they hoped to gain through their religious education programmes. The results of analysis revealed that three scales seemed to be most relevant here. These were:

- i. Acquisition of knowledge and skills needed to show respect for, and concern about, other human beings.
- ii. Acquisition of knowledge and skills required for making a personal response to the Islamic religion.
- iii. Acquisition of knowledge and skills needed for coping with life events and for maintaining one's faith.

The analysis of students' responses can be summarised as follows:

- a. The results show that students want a varied package of knowledge and skills from their religious education programmes. The highest emphasis was on showing respect for, and concern about, other human beings. They expected such basic knowledge to enhance their relationships and interaction with others in a balanced way. Secondary but still heavy was the emphasis on knowledge and skills required for a personal response to the Islamic religion, which is expected to develop their interpersonal skills and help them to conduct themselves according to Islamic dogma.
- b. Knowledge and skills required for coping with life events and for maintaining one's life were found to be less important to religious programmes in the students' viewpoint. It can be argued that such concerns are general knowledge and can be obtained in other ways, but the religious education programme may help to fill in the background detail. Most of the rated items were considered by the majority of students to contain essential information and to impart desirable skills.

c. In the open-ended part of the investigation the students gave different answers to the questions. Many expressed their desire to learn new skills. Their responses focused on personal skills, social skills and knowledge, which were categorised under 'interpersonal and communication skills'. Largely, students wanted to learn how to deal with others with kindness. Mostly, these qualities come with maturity, but religious education could be a guiding or encouraging factor. At the other extreme they hoped to gain knowledge and/or skills that related directly to religious matters, the majority about Islamic matters and a few who expressed their desire to gain knowledge about other religions. The most common knowledge and skills desired by students were those related to the holy Quran. Secondly, students hoped to gain required skills and knowledge for Islamic religious conduct in life.

In summary it can be argued, in the light of the results obtained, that students expected to gain knowledge and skills to help them, as far as possible, to defend their points of view; in other words, to develop their personality. Most of the rated items were rated very highly by students but indicate a current lack of such skills. Thus, attention should be paid to the practical life of students.

5.4. STUDENTS' VIEWS CONCERNING LEARNING ACTIVITIES ENCOUNTERED IN THEIR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

5.4.1. INTRODUCTION

The third area about which the student questionnaire sought information concerned the learning activities encountered by students in their religious education courses. As for other questionnaire sections, this section too presented students with a number of rating items describing different types of learning activity and also with an open-ended question which invited them to identify any additional learning activities in which they had engaged.

The main purpose underlying the rating items was to establish the extent to which the different instructional procedures were experienced by students. (This corresponded to the equivalent information obtained from the teachers via the teacher questionnaire.) For this reason, students were asked to judge the frequency of use of the procedures on a five-point scale ranging from 'regularly' (=5) to 'never' (=1), with 'fairly often', 'occasionally' and 'rarely' as intermediate points.

The items themselves covered the following types of learning activity:

- i. Individual skills, values and knowledge needed for life according to Islamic morals and laws.
- ii. Abilities in personal relationships, and in dealing with people of different faiths.
- iii. Ability to discuss different religious issues and be tolerant in argument.
- iv. Personal abilities and skills needed for one's own life and that of one's family.

The nature of the individual items is given by the descriptors in Table 5.11.

5.4.2. VALIDATION OF THE CONSTRUCTS RELATING TO LEARNING ACTIVITIES USED IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

The initial factor analysis of students' responses to the 15 rating items, using the eigenvalue ≥ 1 criterion and Varimax rotation, yielded three separate factors. Together, these accounted for 52% of the total variance.

Table 5.11 shows the results of the factor analysis. As is seen, the distribution of items among the factors is rather uneven, with factor 1 attracting nine of the 15 items. Each of the remaining factors had two items loading on it in a strong manner, with loadings above 0.7. However, the third factor also attracted two weakly loading items (Items 5 and 7). Attempts were made to generate an alternative factor-analysis solution in which these two items might take a more prominent position, but these were not successful.

Table 5.11: The Loading of the Learning Activities Items on Rotated Varimax Factor Analysis

Item	Description	Loading on Factor		
		1	2	3
1	Reading/studying passages from textbooks.			0.71
2	Viewing of video-tapes/films showing religious events.	0.72		
3	Lectures/presentations from visiting speakers, e.g., religious leaders, social workers, etc.	0.75		
4	Visits to places of historical or cultural interest.	0.74		
5	Debates/discussion on controversial issues, e.g., war, famine, etc.			0.42
6	Preparation of formal homework assignments.			0.76
7	Written work during lessons, other than note-taking.			0.34
8	Study of books other than formal textbooks.	0.52		
9	Visits to libraries or museums.	0.75		
10	Attendance of functions outside the school, e.g., religious services.	0.71		
11	Visits to places such as orphanages or old people's homes.	0.60		
12	Preparation of classroom displays on topics of religious interest.		0.85	
13	Short presentations by students on religious topics.		0.74	
14	Visits to people outside the school for obtaining information on religious matters.	0.59		
15	Study of articles and/or photographs from newspapers or magazines.	0.49		

Factor 1: The best clue to the nature of this factor is obtained from the scrutiny of the high-loading items, namely, Items 2, 3, 4, 9 and 10. All these items point to ‘non-traditional’ teaching/learning activities which involve relatively little, if any, direct ‘teacher control’. Prominent among these items is the theme of ‘outside visits’. This theme is also extended by Items 11 and 14, which also concern visits to ‘outside’ (that is, out-of-school) places.

The remaining two items loading on this factor are Items 8 and 15. Neither has a particularly high loading, which is understandable if their actual content is considered. What brings them into the realm of factor 1 is likely to be the fact that both items refer to non-traditional learning resources which are different from the conventional textbooks encountered by students.

Factor 2: Both items loading, on this factor point strongly to ‘student-centred’ activities: ‘the preparation of classroom displays’ and ‘short presentations by students on religious topics’.

Factor 3: The two main items loading on this factor (Items 1 and 6) refer unambiguously to traditional teaching/learning strategies: the use of the textbook and the preparation of formal homework assignments. The link between these and the remaining items is, at best, tenuous, unless it is assumed that the discussion of issues such as war, famine, etc. (Item 5) and written work during lessons (Item 7) form part of what students experience or perceive as formal teaching.

Given the fact that only one of the factors comprises a reasonable number of items, it is perhaps inappropriate to suggest a scale of rating items. Nevertheless, it is clear that three main constructs emerge from the factor analysis. These are:

- i. Learning activities involving ‘outside’ (out-of-school) agencies, and resources.
- ii. Learning activities which are ‘student-centred’ and ‘student-controlled’.
- iii. Learning activities which relate to, or derive from, formal (teacher-directed) teaching.

5.4.2.1. Reliability of the Scales Derived from the Factor Analysis

Table 5.12 gives the results of the reliability analysis of the rating scales derived from the factor analysis of students’ responses to the rating items.

Table 5.12: Cronbach-Alpha Scale Reliabilities for the ‘Learning Activities Featured in the Religious Education Programmes’

Scale	Scale description	Items included	Alpha reliability
1	Learning activities involving ‘outside’ (out-of-school) agencies and resources.	2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15	0.86
2	Learning activities which are ‘student-centred’ and ‘student-controlled’.	12, 13,	0.63
3	Learning activities which relate to, or derive from, formal (teacher-directed) teaching.	1, 5, 6, 7	0.44

It is seen that the alpha-reliability values for the first two scales are high; this is especially true for the first scale which concerns the use of out-of-school learning activities.

The reliability value for the third of the scales is such that it would not be appropriate to treat its items as sufficiently homogenous to arrive at a single measure reflecting

‘learning activities arising from formal teaching procedures’. Therefore, the items will be dealt with as separate, self-standing items.

5.4.3. STUDENTS’ RATINGS OF THE FREQUENCY OF USE OF DIFFERENT LEARNING ACTIVITIES IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

The results derived from the third section of the student questionnaire are presented and discussed in three subsections. In the first, a broad analysis of the frequency of use of different learning activities is made in terms of the scales derived from the factor analysis. Thereafter, a range of individual learning activities is discussed. Finally, in the third subsection, the students’ responses to the open-ended question in the questionnaire section are presented.

5.4.3.1. The Frequency of Use of Different Types of Learning Activity in Religious Education Programmes

Table 5.13 gives the mean ratings and associated standard deviations for rating scales 1 and 2. The figures for the third scale have not been included for the reason given above.

Table 5.13: Mean Ratings and Standard Deviations for the Three Scales Expressing Learning Activities of the Religious Education Programmes’

Scale	Scale description	Mean ratings	Standard deviations
1	Learning activities involving ‘outside’ (out-of-school) agencies, and resources.	2.35	0.85
2	Learning activities which are ‘student-centred’ and ‘student-controlled’.	2.74	1.04

In interpreting the mean ratings, it has to be borne in mind that scale point 2 represents ‘rare use’ whilst scale point 3 denotes ‘occasional use’. It is evident from the figures that neither type of learning activity is used to a significant extent. This is

particularly true for ‘out-of-school’ activities that could be undertaken as part of students’ religious education.

The immediate conclusion one may reach from these results is that, judging by students’ perceptions, learning activities which may be described as ‘progressive’ and ‘student-centred’ are not provided to any significant extent. This aspect is examined further in the next subsection.

5.4.3.2. The Use of Different Learning Activities in Religious Education Programmes

Table 5.14 shows the distribution of frequency-of-use ratings given by students in response to all 15 items describing different learning activities. Mean ratings and associated standard deviations are also shown. The items are grouped in accordance with the rating scales identified and described above.

The data for the various items listed under ‘Scale 1’ and ‘Scale 2’ amply confirm the correctness of the conclusion advanced in the last paragraph of the preceding section. Except for Item 8 (‘Study of books other than formal textbooks’), none has a mean rating above 3 which corresponds to ‘occasional use’. Indeed, most mean ratings are closer to scale point 2 (denoting rare use) than to scale point 3.

The frequency distributions show this even more clearly: for the majority of items in scales 1 and 2, the combined figures for ‘rare use’ and ‘no use’ are in excess of 50%, with those for Items 2 (viewing of video-tapes showing religious events) and Item 11 (visits to orphanages, and/or old people’s homes) exceeding 70%. Evidently,

progressive teaching/learning activities are not in common use in Saudi secondary schools, at least not in the context of religious education.

Table 5.14: Distribution of Students' Frequency of Use Rating of Different Learning Activities of Religious Education (Including Mean Ratings and Standard Deviation*)

Item	Description	Frequency of Use (percent)					Mean Rating	S.D.*
		Regular	Fairly often	Occasional	Rarely	Never		
Scale 1: Learning activities involving 'outside' (out-of-school) agencies, and resources.								
2	Viewing of video-tapes/films showing religious events.	4.4	6.5	16.0	27.8	45.3	1.97	1.13
3	Lectures/presentation from visiting speakers (religious leaders, social workers, etc.).	8.2	14.8	31.2	27.9	17.9	2.67	1.17
4	Visits to places of historical or cultural interest.	8.4	11.6	18.1	21.6	40.3	2.26	1.32
8	Study of books other than formal textbooks.	16.2	20.2	27.8	22.9	13.0	3.04	1.26
9	Visits to libraries or museums.	7.3	11.1	20.7	26.3	34.6	2.30	1.25
10	Attendance of functions outside the school, e.g., religious services.	9.4	13.4	22.2	22.6	32.5	2.45	1.32
11	Visits to places such as orphanages or old people's homes.	4.2	4.8	8.8	23.2	58.9	1.72	1.08
14	Visits to people outside the school, for obtaining information on religious education-related matters.	10.7	13.9	24.2	24.2	27.0	2.57	1.31
15	Study of articles and/or photographs from newspapers or magazines.	7.0	12.9	24.3	23.7	32.1	2.39	1.25
Scale 2: Learning activities which are 'student-centred' and 'student-controlled'.								
12	Preparation of classroom displays on topics of religious interest.	10.8	18.4	28.4	35.9	16.5	2.81	1.23
13	Short presentations by students on religious topics.	8.2	18.3	27.2	24.9	21.6	2.67	1.23
Scale 3: Learning activities which relate to, or derive from, formal (teacher-directed) teaching.								
1	Reading/studying passages from textbooks.	28.9	31.2	30.4	7.2	2.3	3.77	1.02
5	Debates/discussions on controversial issues.	15.6	23.7	37.3	18.5	5.0	3.26	1.08
6	Preparation of formal homework assignments.	57.1	18.7	12.1	6.4	5.7	4.15	1.20
7	Written work during lessons, other than note-taking.	15.9	16.7	26.1	22.2	19.2	2.88	1.33

The picture is confirmed by the high ratings given to the two learning activities that are most closely associated with formal teaching: 'Reading/studying passages from textbooks' (Item 1) and 'preparation of formal homework assignments' (Item 6). For both, the combined 'regular' and 'fairly often' ratings of frequency of use are reported by over 60% of the students.

'Debates and discussions of controversial issues' (Item 5) also receives a moderately high rating, as far as frequency of use is concerned, with just under 40% of the students opting for the 'regular' or 'fairly often' response category. However, this has to be seen in the context of almost a quarter of students, experiencing this activity either not at all or only rarely.

The overall picture to emerge from the enquiry into the use of different learning activities is that, for the most part, religious education involves traditional teaching methods which are extensively 'teacher-directed' and 'teacher-focused'. Little genuine evidence exists to suggest that more 'enlightened' and - for the students - enlightening methods are used, except perhaps very occasionally. In particular, little use appears to be made of learning activities that would bring students into contact with the 'outside world' as far as religious issues are concerned.

5.4.4. STUDENTS' RESPONSES TO THE OPEN-ENDED QUESTION CONCERNING LEARNING ACTIVITIES ENCOUNTERED IN THEIR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

This question invited students to identify additional learning activities to those covered by the rating items. As Table 5.15 shows, some 177 students (out of 540)

responded to it, which represents a response rate of 33%. The total number of responses received was 201.

Table 5.15: Distribution of Students’ Response Pattern to the Open-Ended Question Asking for the Identification of Additional Learning Activities Items

Responses provided	Number of students	Percentage of students
No response given.	363	67.2
One response given.	153	28.3
Two responses given.	24	4.4
Total	540	100.0

Detailed scrutiny of the answers received showed quickly that only a minority stated aspects of learning/teaching activities that had not been covered by the rating items or were implicit in them. Indeed, only about 35 answers expressed ‘moral’ activities, though not all of them had a direct link to students’ school-based or school-related work.

Apart from a number of ‘unclassifiable’ answers (consisting largely of one-word responses), the answers received could be assigned to three response categories:

- i. Statements which merely repeated, explicitly or implicitly, learning activities, already covered by the rating items (N=74).
- ii. Statements which referred to general classroom teaching /learning activities, without relating to religious education (N=70).
- iii. Statements which pointed to religious education activities other than those referred to in the rating items (N=35).

The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of responses assigned to the three categories.

Category i. responses

In the majority of cases, these responses gave more detailed information than the rating items had done. For example, many students identified actual meetings they had attended outside the school or particular places they had visited. Other answers specified the nature of the video-recordings students had watched or gave an indication of the particular topics about which they had given presentations or done supplementary reading.

Answers of the foregoing types did not identify any learning activities additional to those given in the rating items. Nonetheless, they were interesting in that they put ‘some flesh on to the bones’ of the rating items: the fact that students were able to specify a range of specific activities is evidence that they had actually engaged in them. In this sense, those open-ended responses provided supportive evidence of the responses made to the rating items.

Category ii. responses.

Practically all responses in this category referred to activities that are commonplace in all school lessons, regardless of the subject taught. In broad terms, the activities mentioned either referred to particular kinds of work for, or interaction with, teachers, or they mentioned interaction with other students. Examples of the first were statements like the following:

“Preparing short exercises for the lesson”;
“asking the teachers for explanations or information”;
“preparing some aids for the lesson”.

Examples of the second included responses like:

“Explain the lesson content to other students, after the lesson”;
“talking/discussing with other students”;
“working with other students to solve problems”.

None of these statements pointed to activities that could be specifically or predominately associated with religious education. Although worthwhile from the students’ point of view, these activities were not regarded by the researcher as representing special means for facilitating students’ learning in religious education.

Category iii. responses.

These were responses which identified some aspects of learning in religious education not covered by the rating items. Most of them pointed to activities which, although conducted within the school, did not form a direct part of the religious education curriculum. Thus, for example, “involvement in school broadcasting” was mentioned by several students, but it was not clear that the broadcasts were conducted in a religious context. The same applied to references made by students to “participation in school theatre activities” and to “contributions made to the school magazine”. There were also a few responses in which reference was made to “membership of the school’s Islamic society”.

On the whole, activities like the forgoing tend to be of a voluntary nature, often taking place after school hours. No doubt, the students who reported to participating in them,

saw them as extension of their formal religious education work. However, since the activities were unconnected with the official religious education programmes in the schools, it would be inappropriate to regard them as genuine 'learning activities' in the sense of the rating items in the student questionnaire.

5.4.5. CONCLUSION

This section explored students' experiences of learning activities in their religious education programmes. 15 items were rated and an open-ended question prompted additional responses. The results of analysis give rise to three types of learning activities. These are:

- i. Learning activities involving 'outside' (out-of-school) agencies, and resources.
- ii. Learning activities which are 'student-centred' and 'student-controlled'.
- iii. Learning activities which relate to, or derive from, formal activities (teacher-directed).

The main points to emerge were that:

- a. It is evident that the activities associated with formal teaching were commonly used in religious education programmes. For example, the reading/studying of passages from textbooks, and the preparation of formal homework assignments are standard educational procedures in almost any teaching situation. This suggests that religious education instruction provided in Saudi schools tends to be extensively 'teacher-directed' and centred on the traditional teaching methods.

- b. The use of learning experiences involving visits to out-of-school places or institutions is either rarely or never encountered by a majority of students. This is particularly true for learning activities which are associated with a high degree of active student involvement. Students also reported little or no experience of debates or discussion of controversial issues.

- c. Few students responded to the open-ended question and of those who did, most of the answers were repetitions of previous answers already covered by the rating table or in general classroom activities. Some pointed to activities not related to the religious education curriculum, but considered to be associated with school activities. These tended to be voluntary activities.

In summary, it may be argued that religious education in Saudi schools is highly 'teacher-controlled'. Clearly, not all the learning activities feature in the religious education instruction received by students in Saudi-Arabian schools.

5.5. TEACHING METHODS USED IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

5.5.1. INTRODUCTION

In the previous section of this chapter, the focus was on the range of learning activities encountered by students in their religious education programmes and their frequency of use. In this section, we report briefly on students' perception of 'what the teacher does in the implementation of the religious education programmes'.

The information presented here effectively supplements that in the preceding section in that it relates to a range of instructional strategies that teachers might use. In particular, the following issues were explored:

- i. The extent to which teachers adhered to the topics specified in the textbook (or syllabus), rather than being overtly responsive to students' interests by inviting them to propose topics for discussion or to pose questions.
- ii. The extent to which, in their religious education lessons, teachers addressed issues of current interest by reference to, for example, news items or events reported in the media.
- iii. The extent to which students were informed in advance of topics to be discussed (so as to stimulate their own thinking about them).

These issues were covered by six rating items which are identified in Table 5.16. Items 1, 2 and 4 related to issue i.; Item 3 to issue ii. and Item 6 to issue iii. The additional item, Item 5, was included in order to establish the extent to which teachers use questions as a means of monitoring students' learning.

As in the previous questionnaire section, the emphasis in this one was on establishing the frequency of use by teachers of various teaching strategies listed in the rating items. Thus, students' responses were required on a five-point scale ranging from 'always' (=5) to 'never' (=1) with 'fairly frequently', 'occasionally' and 'rarely' as intermediate points.

All items enquired into specific aspects of teachers' action. Thus, it was considered inappropriate to conduct either a factor analysis on the responses received or scale reliability analysis of the kind carried out for other data. Also, no open-ended question relating to teachers' teaching procedures was included, in the belief that students would not be able to conceptualise such procedures sufficiently clearly to produce meaningful answers.

5.5.2. STUDENTS' REPORT ON TEACHING METHODS USED IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Table 5.16 lists distribution of students' assessment of the frequency with which the various teaching procedures are used by their religious education teachers. Mean ratings and associated standard deviation are also shown.

Table 5.16: Distribution of Students' Frequency of Use Rating of Teaching Methods Used in Religious Education Programmes (Including Mean Ratings and S.D.)

Item	Description	Frequency of Use (per cent)					Mean Rating	S.D.
		Always	Fairly frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never		
1	Teacher follows the topics specified in textbook.	44.7	33.3	13.1	3.8	5.1	4.09	1.09
2	Teacher asks students questions for discussion in class.	41.8	27.0	20.4	8.5	2.3	3.98	1.08
3	Teacher refers to current events reported in the media.	8.9	15.2	26.2	30.0	19.6	2.64	1.21
4	Teacher invites students to suggest topics which they would like to learn about.	6.5	11.1	19.3	21.8	41.4	2.19	1.26
5	Teacher asks questions to find out extent of students' learning.	27.7	26.8	25.0	14.2	6.3	3.55	1.21
6	Teacher informs students in advance about topics to be discussed.	33.2	27.9	17.8	10.8	10.2	3.63	1.32

It is immediately seen that two of the procedures referred to by the rating items are in regular or fairly frequent use. These are the use of textbooks as guides to what is being taught (as implied in Item 1) and the use by teachers of questions as precursors to class discussions (Item 2). In both instance the combined ratings of ‘always’ and ‘fairly frequent’ use is at least 70%. Indeed, the figure for “teachers follow the topics specified in textbooks” is in excess of 80%. This, once again, demonstrates the extensively textbook-bound nature of religious education in Saudi secondary schools.

At the other extreme of the frequency-of- use spectrum are Items 3 and 4: for both, at least half the students report ‘rare’ or ‘no’ use by their teachers. Items 4 (‘teacher invites students to suggest topics they would like to learn about’) has the highest return for these two rating categories. Evidently, teachers do like to conduct their religious education teaching in a student-oriented manner. This is an obvious consequence of the strongly textbook-bound approach to their teaching.

Item 3 is next lowest in the frequency-of-use rating. Its theme relates to the ‘relevance of religious education to contemporary events’ issue which has already been touched upon in previous sections. The low rating here again confirms that attempts, on the part of teachers, to link religious education to contemporary life issues are, at best, irregular. Indeed, according to the students, half of them hardly ever experience such links.

For the remaining items (Items 5 and 6), a reasonably high frequency of use is reported. It would appear that a fair proportion of students receive ‘advance warning ‘

of topics and items to be dealt with (Item 6). This obviously enables them to prepare for them, if they are so inclined. Also, teachers' use of questions for obtaining feedback about their students' learning (Items 5) is quite common, although far from universally practised.

5.5.3. CONCLUSION

The enquiry into teaching procedures experienced by students in their religious education programmes, reported in this section, yielded little information beyond that already established in the previous section. The main points to emerge were that:

- a. teaching methods which are in keeping with a strongly textbook-bound and teacher-directed approach to religious education are very prevalent and widely experienced by students;
- b. relatively few opportunities are provided for students to contribute to the shaping of their religious education programmes by , for example , being encouraged to suggest topics about which they would like to learn.

This is not to say that the teaching provided by the teachers lacks effectiveness. Indeed, the fact that teachers use questions not only as starting points for discussions but also for the purpose of monitoring students' progress must be regarded as a positive facet of their teaching. However, the overall direction of the teaching appears to be very traditional.

5.6. STUDENTS' GENERAL VIEWS ON THEIR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION COURSES AND ON THE TEXTBOOKS USED BY THEM

5.6.1. INTRODUCTION

In the final section of the student questionnaire, an attempt was made to obtain students' views about some more general aspects of their religious education programmes. These were:

- i. Features in their religious education course which students had found particularly appealing or unattractive, respectively.
- ii. Aspects of their religious education textbooks which students had found pleasing and useful.

As part of the second enquiry domain, students were also asked to identify ways in which, in their views, the textbooks could be improved. They were also invited to specify the main use(s) to which they put their textbooks.

The overarching concern in enquiring into these issues was to identify in what ways, in the students' view, religious education programmes could be improved and made more attractive. The decision to focus here on textbooks and textbook use, in addition to features of religious education lessons, was made in the realisation that the conduct of religious education in Saudi Arabian schools is frequently closely tied to official textbooks. Thus, the content and presentation of the textbooks may well be a considerable influence on students' attitudes towards religious education.

All aspects covered in this questionnaire section were explored by means of questions requiring (or inviting) open-ended responses. Rating items of the type used in other questionnaire sections were deliberately not included in order to ensure that the responses given by students were not influenced by the content of rating items.

It was foreseen, when deciding to use only open-ended questions in this questionnaire section, that not all students would respond to the questions asked. The evaluation of the completed questionnaires confirmed this: non-replies ranged from about 26% to 47%. However, given the large number of subjects in the student sample (N = 540), the actual answers received may still be regarded as valid and representative.

The results derived from this section of the questionnaire will be presented and discussed in two subsections, corresponding to the two areas of exploration identified above.

5.6.2. FEATURES IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PROGRAMMES LIKED OR DISLIKED BY STUDENTS

Table 5.17 gives brief statistics of students' responses to this questionnaire part. It is seen that altogether 402 (of the total of 540) students identified features they liked, whilst disliked features were specified by 288 students. The number of statements received were 492 and 319 for the 'like' and the 'dislike' category, respectively. No students afforded more than two statements concerning each category, although the questionnaire had invited them to list 'up to three features' for each.

Table 5.17: Response Pattern to Question Concerning Features in Religious Education Programmes Liked and Disliked by Students

Description	Features liked		Features disliked	
	Number of students	Percentage of students	Number of students	Percentage of students
None stated.	138	25.6	252	46.7
One feature identified.	312	57.8	257	47.9
Two features identified.	90	16.7	31	5.7
Total	540	100.0	540	100.0

5.6.2.1. Features in Religious Education Courses Liked by Students

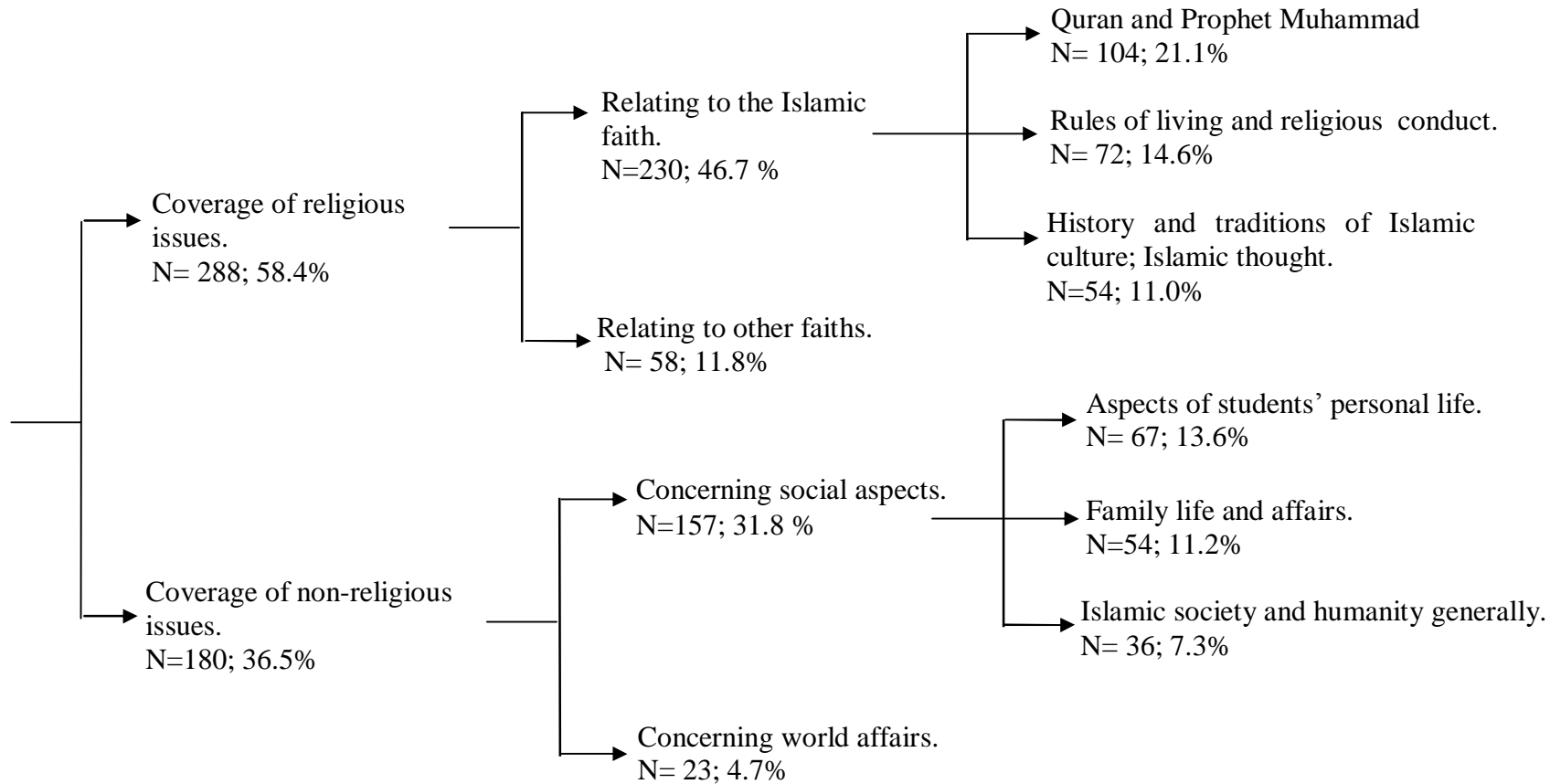
Detailed scrutiny of the responses showed that, in the main, these were concerned with the content of religious education programmes. Aspects concerning the organisation and conduct of religious education teaching were not mentioned at all, despite the fact that the formulation of the question in the questionnaire had not ruled this out.

In the broad sense, the answers divided into two major categories. These were:

- i. answers relating directly (or indirectly) to religious issues , especially issues and aspects of faith;
- ii. answers which focused on concerns and issues of a social and/or personal nature, without referring to aspects of faith and religions *per se*.

Answers in each category could be further subdivided, as Figure 5.1 shows. The numbers associated with the descriptors indicate the number of responses that could be associated with the categories or subcategories. The percentage figures indicate the distribution of answers across the various categories or subcategories. It should be mentioned that of the total of 492 responses, 24 (= 5%) could not be classified because of their vagueness. These are not listed in the Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1: A Network Representation of Features in Religious Education Programme Liked by Students



As is seen from Figure 5.1, the majority of answers (close to 60%) referred to issues directly concerned with religious faiths, chiefly the Islamic faith, although ‘other faiths’ were mentioned in about 12% of the total answers given.

Within the sub-category of answers relating to the Islamic faith, three main themes emerged; those concerned, in order of frequency of answer:

- i. aspects of the Quran and the life and work of the Prophet Mohammed;
- ii. rules of living and religious conduct;
- iii. the history and traditions of the Islamic culture, including Islamic thought.

Almost 37% of students’ answers to the question of what features they liked in their religious education programmes were classified as referring to ‘non-religious’ issues. This description should not be interpreted as implying that these issues had no religious implications as such. Rather, they were issues which have no direct link to either the Islamic or any other faith.

The overwhelming majority of ‘non-religious’ issues mentioned in students’ answers expressed aspects of what may broadly be described as ‘social and real-life’ issues. Prominent among these were points relating to the students’ personal life, although the actual nature of students’ interest here was seldom identified. Family-related issues also received fairly frequent mention (in about 11% of answers). The third sub-category of issues mentioned made reference to broader matters relating to Islamic society and to humanity generally. It is in this sense that the distinction between ‘religious’ and ‘non-religious’ issues is made here.

In interpreting the information in Figure 5.1 and in the foregoing paragraphs, it has to be borne in mind that the responses given by students refer to aspects of their religious education which are liked and appreciated by them. Clearly, such judgements can be made only after students have actually experienced the teaching of subject matter in the different areas indicated in figure 5.1. The fact that these areas were referred to by the students provides evidence that at least some of their teachers endeavour to cover exactly those aspects of religious education that the students find interesting and useful (as was established in previous questionnaire sections). However, it is also evident from the results presented in the preceding sections of this chapter, that not all teachers do so. There is clearly considerable scope for improvement here.

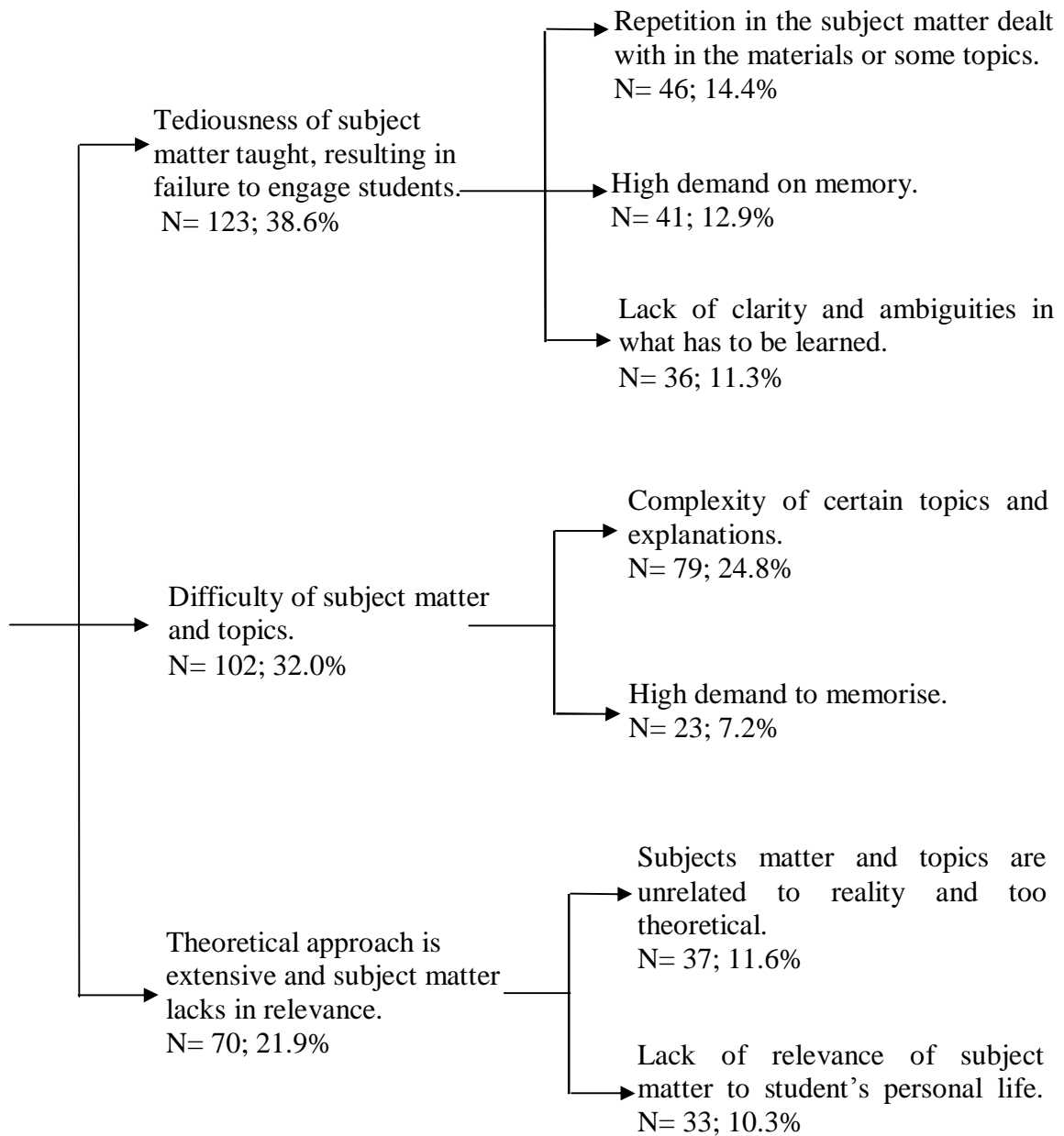
5.6.2.2. Features in Religious Education Course Disliked by Students

As the result of the scrutiny of the responses, three main categories of answers were identified which expressed students' dissatisfaction with their religious education programmes. These categories concerned the following aspects:

- i. Tediousness of subject matter taught in religious education, leading to a failure to engage students adequately.
- ii. Difficulty/complexity of the subject matter dealt with.
- iii. A strong theoretical orientation of religious education programmes, with a consequential lack of relevance of what was taught to students' personal life.

Answers assigned to each category could be further subdivided, as is shown in Figure 5.2. The numbers given in the figure represent the responses in each category or subcategory. The percentage figures show the distribution of responses across the various categories and subcategories. Of the total of 319 answers received, 24 (=7.5%) could not be classified because they were insufficiently detailed.

Figure 5.2: Network Representation of Features in Religious Education Programme Not Liked by Students



Even a cursory glance at the descriptors used for the various categories and subcategories of responses indicates that, in identifying aspects of religious education courses disliked by them, students' focus was exclusively on aspects of content. No mention was made of teaching approaches and/or learning activities encountered in the course.

In relation to the first of the above categories, 'tediousness of subject matter taught', three particular issues emerged. The first one was that a substantial proportion of answers pointed to repetitiveness in the subject matter dealt with in religious education programmes. This, in the students' view, made the subject boring and less 'engaging' than it might have been. The second kind of comment referred to the large amount of material that had to be memorised in religious education courses: this aspect, too, was thought to make the subject tedious. Finally, lack of clarity and ambiguities in what had to be learned was given as another facet that made students (at least some) dislike the subject.

The second category of answers referred to 'religious education subject matter being difficult' and this emerged as a fairly common feature which was disliked by students. Frequent reference was made in this context to the complexity of (certain) religious education topics and of explanations that were given or had to be learned. Indeed, this particular type of disliked feature was mentioned, in one form or another, in a quarter of all answers. If one accepts this point at face value, one may perhaps suggest that part of what is taught (or how it is taught) might be beyond the students' ability to comprehend.

A further cause of the difficulties which some students perceived in relation to their religious education programme, seemed to be the high demand placed on students' ability to memorise information. This is, of course, the second reference to the 'memory demand' made in religious education programmes: the previous one raised it in the context of tediousness and boredom. However, when all answers referring to 'memory demand' are taken together, this becomes the second most frequently mentioned 'dislike'.

Answers allocated to the third category invariably referred to religious education programmes having a strong theoretical orientation and/or indicated that they were thus either unrelated to 'reality' or that they lacked relevance to students' personal lives. One in every five answers made reference to these aspects, which suggests that there is a significant relevance gap in the programmes to which teachers and curriculum developers ought to address themselves.

5.6.3. STUDENTS' VIEWS ABOUT THEIR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION TEXTBOOKS

In view of the fact that, in the teaching of religious education in Saudi secondary schools, the textbooks occupies a central position, the final part of the questionnaire section probing into aspects of religious education programmes liked or disliked by students was designed to establish students' opinions about their textbooks.

Two main questions were posed. The first asked students to state what aspects of their religious education textbooks they found pleasing and useful, whilst the second invited them to suggest in what respects these textbooks could be improved. A

supplementary question, added at the end of the questionnaire, asked for information about the main uses which students made of their religious education textbooks.

Table 5.18 shows students' response rate to the questions concerned with textbook features. In both cases, this was approximately 70%, which may be regarded as entirely satisfactory.

Table 5.18: Response Pattern to Questions Concerned with Textbook Features

Description	Pleasing/useful aspects of textbook		Ways of improving textbook	
	Number of students	Percentage of students	Number of students	Percentage of students
None stated.	154	28.5	181	33.5
One feature identified.	328	60.7	311	57.6
Two features identified.	58	10.8	48	8.9
Total	540	100.0	540	100.0

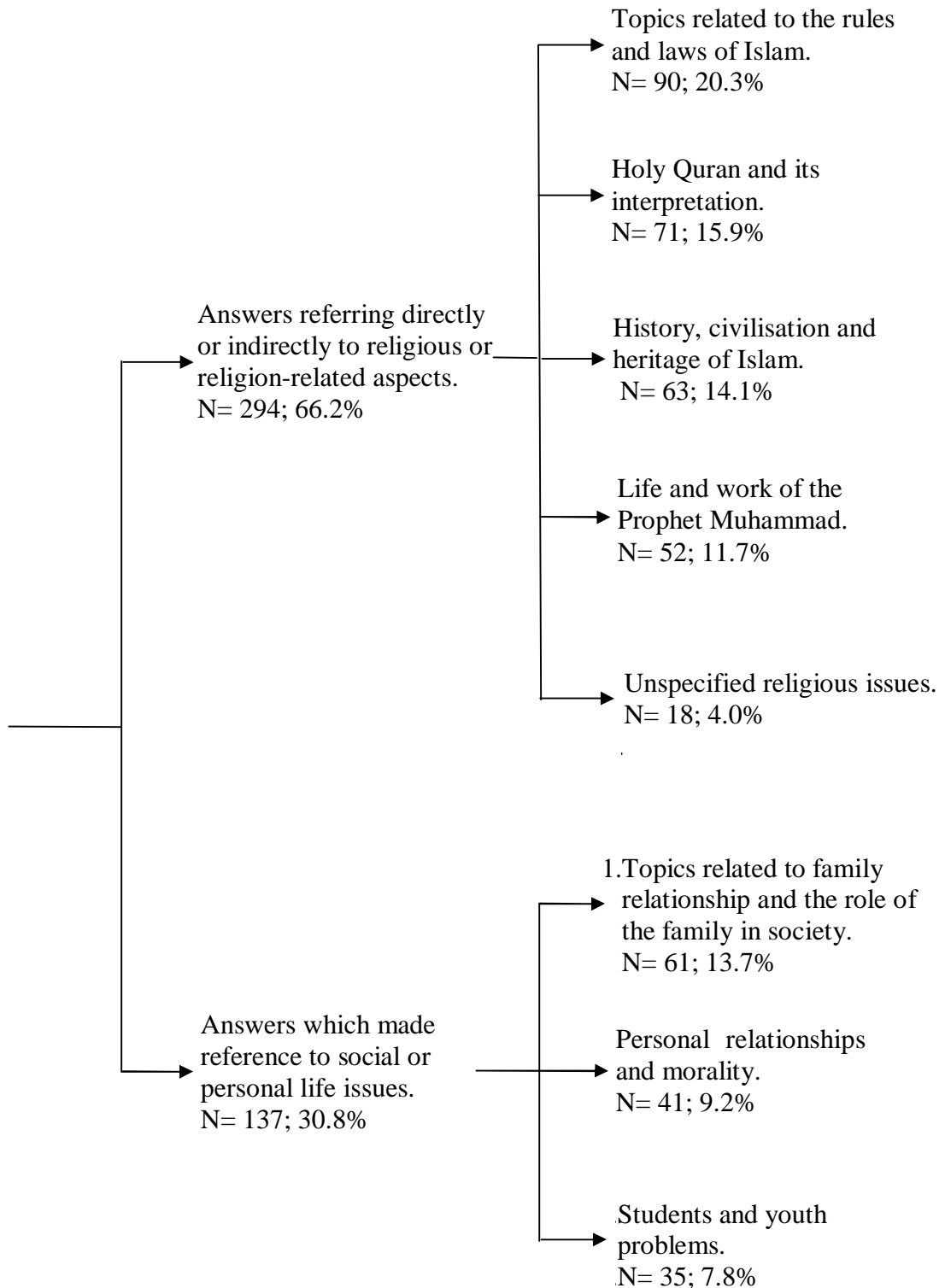
5.6.3.1. Aspects of Religious Education Textbooks Found Pleasing and Useful by Students

Initial scrutiny of the answers received suggested two main categories for their classification:

- i. Answers which referred directly or indirectly to religious or religion-related aspects.
- ii. Answers which made reference to social or personal life issues.

Altogether, 97% of the 544 answers received fitted into these two categories. The remaining answers (about 3%) could not be classified. Further scrutiny of the answers in each category led to the identification of a number of subcategories which are listed in the network presentation in Figure 5.3.

Figure 5.3: A Network Representation of Religious Education Textbook Aspects Found Pleasing and Useful by Students.



As can be seen from the figure, about two thirds of the answers received referred to religious or religion-related aspects covered in the textbooks. Without exception, these concerned Islamic matters and ranged from topics relating to the ‘rules and laws of Islam’ (as the subsection with the highest responses rate of about 20%) to the ‘life and work of the prophet Muhammad’ (with about 12% of the responses). In between these two groups of topics were topics relating to ‘the holy Quran and its interpretation’ and to aspects of the ‘history, civilisation and heritage of Islam’. A minority of responses received just referred to ‘religious aspects’ and were placed in a separate subsection entitled ‘unspecified religious issues’.

The second broad category of textbook topics and/or information found pleasing and useful by students is that embracing social and life-related issues. Here, topics relating to family relationships and the role of the family in society were most commonly mentioned (in nearly 14% of the responses received), but topics concerned with, or relevant to, issues of personal relationships and morality, as well as ‘youth problems’ were also listed by significant minorities of students.

For brevity’s sake, examples of students’ responses are not listed here in order to illustrate the categories and subcategories of answers developed on the basis of the scrutiny of responses.

As far as the interpretation of students’ responses to this part of the questionnaire is concerned, it is expedient to point out that these express reactions to the textbooks as they are, rather than to what students wish their textbooks to be like. Therefore, in

pointing to the aspects of their textbooks which they find useful or interesting, students are inevitably confined to the actual content of the books.

It is obvious from the response pattern that the textbooks are regarded as most useful in relation to subject matter and information that relates to the Islamic religion. The absence of any mention of “other world religions” in this context is not so much a matter of students having no interest in this aspect (indeed, other questionnaire sections indicate clearly that the reverse is true): it reflects the fact that, in general, the textbooks focus strongly, even exclusively in many instances, on the Islamic religion and matters relating to it, without going beyond it to a consideration of other world faiths.

It would be wrong to interpret topics allocated to the second response category (‘social and/or life-related issues’) as ‘non-religious’ in the sense of being secular in character. Most of the various issues mentioned by students and falling into the subcategories in this group have a religious undertone, but point more in the direction of applications of religious ideas in real-life contexts. Thus, it would appear, the textbooks offer some useful advice and guidance to students about ‘good Islamic living’.

5.6.3.2. Aspects of Religious Education Textbooks which Merit Improvement

The decision to focus, in the formulation of the second question in part B2 of section 5 of the student questionnaire, on ways of improving textbooks, rather than simply on features disliked in them, was taken deliberately. It was intended to steer students in

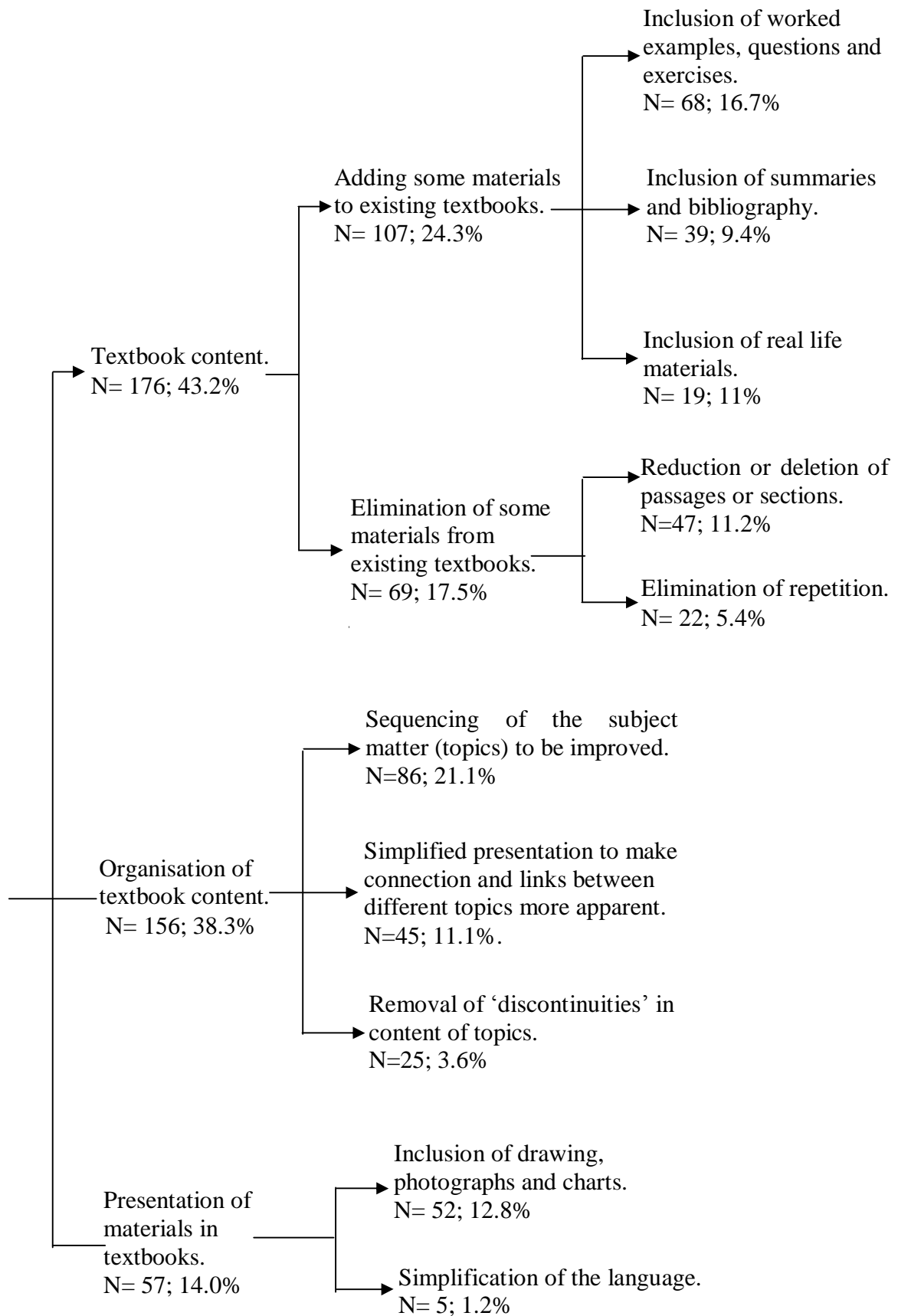
the direction of making constructive comments, rather than indulging in mere criticism.

As already indicated in Table 5.19, about two thirds of the students in the sample responded to this question, providing altogether 407 observations or suggestions. On the basis of a preliminary analysis of the responses received, three broad response categories could be identified. These concerned respectively:

- i. The content of textbooks, with students making suggestions for addition to, or deletions from, their textbooks.
- ii. The organisation of textbook content, in terms of the sequencing of material and the coherence between sections in a book and between books.
- iii. The presentation of materials in textbooks, where the focus was on such matters as the inclusion of illustrations and also the simplification of the language in which the texts were written.

Each of these categories, could be further subdivided, as Figure 5.4 shows.

Figure 5.4: A Network Representation of Students' Suggestions about Ways in which Religious Education Textbook Could be Improved



The numbers shown in Figure 5.4 represent the number of responses assigned to the various categories and subcategories. The corresponding percentage figures are also given. It should be noted that altogether 18 responses (= 4.4%) could not be classified, because of their vagueness.

In relation to the first of the categories ('textbook content') which turned out to be the most important one in terms of the numbers of responses received, the suggestions divided between those that called for the reduction of materials from the textbooks and those that asked for additional materials to be included.

Request for additional materials were the more numerous of the two and focused on three main aspects:

- i. The inclusion in the textbook of 'worked examples', questions and exercises. About half of the suggestions for the modification of textbook content fell into this subcategory. The likely explanation for this is that students believe that these features, if added, would help their learning and understanding of the subject matter conveyed in the textbooks.
- ii. The inclusion of summaries and/or bibliographies with suggestions for further reading. The mention of summaries was fairly widespread and suggests that students see them as an aid to obtaining a quick overview of the main ideas to be learned from a textbook chapter or section.

- iii. The inclusion of material to enhance the relevance of the information in the textbook to 'real life'. This point was raised in just over 11% of all comments, but this cannot necessarily be taken as evidence that this issue is of concern to only a minority of students. Indeed, it is evident from responses to other parts of the questionnaire that a large proportion of students is anxious to have the relationships between religious education knowledge and their contemporary life adequately explored. No doubt, these students would like to see this also reflected in the content of their textbooks.

A significant percentage of responses concerning improvements in the content of textbooks referred to the shortening and/or deletion of passages or sections from existing textbooks. The actual nature of the material proposed for deletion usually remained unspecified. Therefore, no firm recommendations emerged from the students' responses about what might qualify for shortening and/or deletion, except that some students advocated the avoidance of repetition either within particular textbooks or across textbooks used in different school years.

The next response category dealt with comments relating to the organisation of the content in textbooks. The main issue mentioned by students in this context was that the order in which materials were presented in the textbooks should broadly reflect the order in which the various topics were taught in class or that the topics should be printed in their 'order of importance' (without the latter notion being defined). Broadly speaking, these points may be summarily described as relating to the 'sequence' of subject matter in textbooks. Nearly two thirds of all answers in this category touched upon issues of sequencing.

Another group of suggestions referred to the desirability of organising textual material in such a way that connections and links between different textbook parts would be more apparent than seems to be the case at present. Unfortunately, no specific examples were given to illustrate this point. However, it is possible that this kind of comment is just an alternative response to the ‘lack of sequencing’ mentioned in the foregoing paragraph.

Some students also pointed to ‘discontinuities’ in the organisation of the topics described in their religious education textbooks and recommended their elimination. However, since specific examples of such discontinuities were not given, it is not easy to interpret these comments further. One possibility is that they referred to the way in which apparently similar topics are dealt with in different textbooks used by the student.

The third broad category brought together responses which pointed to the need for, or at least desirability of, changes in the presentation of textbooks. Two major requests were expressed by students:

- i. The inclusion of (more) drawings, photographs and charts in the text, to illustrate particular points or ideas.
- ii. Simplification of the language used in the textbooks.

Both kinds of request (which, together, were contained in one quarter of all answers received) were frequently linked to the observation that such changes would make the

ideas presented in the books easier to understand. In their request for the incorporation of (more) illustrations, photographs, etc., in textbooks, students may also have been guided by the realisation that modern text production techniques allow such additions to be made with relative ease. Indeed, there is the likelihood that nowadays students expect their textbooks to show the same level of sophistication in presentation as other printed matter with which they come into contact, for example, magazines and journals. It is noteworthy that a few students made overt reference in their answers to modern printing or text production techniques.

On the whole, students' ideas about ways in which their textbooks could be improved appear constructive and can potentially be of considerable help to textbook writers and curriculum developers. Although few of the comments received pointed to specific themes, topics or sections in textbooks as meriting particular attention in an attempt to improve the books, the general ideas advanced by the students merit serious consideration.

5.6.3.3. The Main Uses Made by Students of Their Religious Education Textbooks

This aspect was explored by means of a supplementary question in the last section of the student questionnaire. Altogether 333 of the 540 students (that is, 62%) responded to the question, with a total of 450 statements being received.

Broadly speaking, the responses divided into the following major categories:

- i. Use of textbooks for the purpose of acquiring basic religious education knowledge - 133 responses falls into this category.

- ii. Use of information given in the textbooks in order to enhance and supplement the knowledge gained from religious education courses. This aspect was mentioned in 101 statements.
- iii. Use of textbooks to support study tasks, especially homework assignments. This kind of use was referred to in 89 responses.
- iv. Use of textbooks when revising for tests and examinations - 59 statements expressed this aspect.

All of the foregoing uses are, of course, entirely appropriate and in line with the general purposes that one normally associates with school textbooks. However, it is noteworthy that the type of use most frequently mentioned by students relates to textbooks serving as a primary source of knowledge to be acquired from religious education courses. This may be interpreted as yet another manifestation of the phenomenon already commented upon previously, that religious education teaching in Saudi Arabian schools is strongly textbook-bound. Teachers themselves reported this to be so (see Section 4 of Chapter 4); and the students' responses clearly confirm this.

5.6.4. CONCLUSION

The final section of the student questionnaire, looks at students' views about the religious education programme and its textbooks according to the following aspects:

- i. Features in the religious education course which students had found particularly appealing or unattractive.

- ii. Aspects of their religious education textbooks which students had found pleasing and useful, including their views of the ways in which the textbooks could be improved.

Their main use of the religious education textbook was also explored by means of a supplementary question.

The main findings may be summarised as follows:

- a. Students' positive comments about the features liked in their religious education programmes were divided into two main categories. The first was related directly to religious education; particular reference was made to the Islamic faith. Students saw themselves as gaining valuable information about various facets of the Islamic religion, especially the Quran, Islamic culture, traditions, rules of living and Islamic history. The second positive feature liked related to social and personal matters, particularly real-life issues, personal life and family affairs. Students want to be able to implement what they learn in their personal life and the society in which they live. Little reference was made in this context to learning about other faiths, which probably reflects the dominant emphasis given in religious education programmes to the Islamic religion.
- b. A considerable proportion of the students also pointed to negative features in their religious education programmes among which were: tediousness, difficulty, and complexity of subject matter, brought about by the extensive demand on students to memorise information. The lack of clarity or relevance of what was taught in religious programmes to students' personal life was also a popular complaint. The

students focused mainly on the content of the programme and no mention was made of the teaching methods, but students may have little experience of alternative methods and in fact, what makes the programmes tedious and disliked by students, may be alleviated by more stimulating treatment.

- c. Students' comments about the pleasing and useful aspects of the religious education programme referred directly or indirectly to religious or religion-related matters, especially in relation to Islamic faith and culture. These ranged from topics relating to the 'rules and laws of Islam' to the 'life and work of the prophet Muhammad'. Information about the implications of the Islamic religion for social and/or life-related matters was also highlighted by a minority of students. Relationships within the family and personal relationships, as well as youth problems, received frequent mention by students.

- d. Students offered numerous suggestions about ways in which, in their view, religious education textbooks could be improved. Their responses were concentrated in three broad areas. The first area was related to textbook content; they suggested including materials such as 'worked examples', questions, exercises and summaries beside material related to real life; they also suggested elimination or reduction of repeated or complicated materials. The second area was related to the textbook presentation. Students also mentioned in the third area, the organisation of the content in textbooks. They preferred subjects in sequential order, with more drawings and illustrations for more attractive and understandable presentation. These responses are useful and practical suggestions for

enhancement of the textbook to appeal to and interest students, and should be of help to the curriculum designer for the educational authority.

There is clear evidence from students' responses that the religious education textbooks are used as a major source of information, especially for homework assignments and revising for tests and examinations, rather than as a supplement to the teaching received, as is quite common in, for example, British schools. Although the particular uses to which the textbook-derived information is put may be different from time to time, the responses received confirm that, generally speaking, religious education programmes in Saudi Arabian schools are strongly textbook-bound, in the sense that textbooks are a major determinant of what is taught and what is learnt.

5.7. CONCLUSION

This chapter reported on the results from the student questionnaire which was designed to obtain views about different aspects of the religious education programme. The first two sections of this chapter dealt with two matters. The first dealt with the aims and objectives of religious education as seen by the students. The second section explored students' views about the knowledge and skills which they hoped to gain from their religious education programmes. However, because the experience of the students is too limited for them to define the aims and objectives of religious education in a highly structured and professional sense like teachers, these aspects were approached by:

- a. asking students what particular topics they were interested in with relation to their religious education; and

- b. asking them what kind of knowledge and skills they wanted to derive from their religious education programmes.

Although students claimed to be interested directly in Islamic writing or Islamic religion, there is a lot of evidence, particularly through the second section, that their real concern was directly relevant to their personality development. For example, they want to gain skills in dealing with others, and skills in relationships. The students clearly want to derive knowledge and skills from their instruction which they can use in relation to their own life. They would also like to learn a little about other people, how they live and their personal lives.

Although a number of students clearly express, through the open ended responses, an interest in broader religious matters, for example, comparative education with other religions, largely the importance attached to non-Islamic religious issues is relatively low. Some students quite clearly are interested in this, but this does not have a major importance ranking.

However, the topics identified as relevant to students' lives, for example the development of tolerance, demand understanding and acceptance of other people; how they live, how they think and their beliefs. It is important to recognise that people of different faiths share the same concerns and that their religion helps them to deal with issues such as birth and marriage. To get at the relevant issues for students, then, religious education must have, as a starting point, a focus on other ways of life. Maybe this could be approached through general topics such as focussing on life events or experiences and relationships, such as marriage.

The next two sections are related to the learning/teaching experiences provided to students in religious education and the teaching methods used in religious education programmes. These two sections look at different instructional procedures experienced by students and report students' perception of what teachers do in the implementation of the religious education programme.

Few religious education teachers employ other than formal teaching methods, which depend on teachers' control and the transfer of information. Teaching methods which required active student involvement or student-control were absent. One reason for this may be that the teachers may not have had sufficient experience and training, but other factors suggest that religious education is restricted by its syllabus whereby the teachers must follow the instruction given in the textbooks, which reflects in textbook-bound teaching. Evidence to support this shows in the limitation of outside activities, as the links between the school and society were simply not established. To forge links between the school and the community, visits to different places of interest in connection with subject matters taught, where new experiences and knowledge can be gained, is vital for religious education programmes.

The use of other teaching experiences or recourse and learning aids, such as video recordings or films showing religious events were also limited. If the teacher simply follows the specified topics and concentrates on the textbook with no consideration for current life issues, students can only see the subject as irrelevant to contemporary life and society.

In general these results confirm that the religious education programme is strongly textbook-bound and the teaching methods used in implementation of religious education is teacher-directed.

Students had an opportunity to add any additional learning activities experienced in their religious education course other than those listed in the rating table. Unfortunately, their responses in the open-ended parts was disappointing, since most of them did not specify genuine learning activities, but repeated items in the rating table. Some of them gave responses related to general classroom activities, such as homework assignments. We can conclude, in support of the previous point, that students did not think of activities other than school-based work as learning activities.

The final section of the student questionnaire invited their views about their religious education programmes and the textbooks. Many positive features were identified, which shows that the students were interested to gain valuable information from religious education programmes, especially Islamic religion. They would like a more practical base towards daily life and their society. Similarly, there were many features in religious education programmes students disliked, mostly to do with the complexity and mass of information, together with how they were presented in the textbooks, which made the subjects tedious and unnecessarily difficult to the point of abandonment for some.

The social issues related to students' personality and family relationships or relationships with others were also touched upon by the students. Religious education

was not seen to be linked with daily life and relevant to society, being seen as more concerned with abstract and theoretical issues.

Students' suggestions for improvement centred on enhancing the content of the textbook by deletion of repeated chunks and adding items such as examples, drawings and diagrams to simplify the subject. They also mentioned that the presentation and organisation of topics should be in logical sequence.

To conclude, the concentration on the book probably reflects the students' current experience of religious education. While the books undeniably need to be updated, the teaching methods must also be reviewed, but mainly the syllabus itself seems to be overloaded. Challenging and enterprising teaching methods were uncommon and should be introduced to religious education together with the use of outside visits, because such teaching methods are based in real life and increase students' knowledge and experiences and make the subject relevant to them.