

## **British Muslims in State Schools: a positive way forward**

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For as long as I can remember there has been an on-going debate within the British Muslim community regarding the best way to overcome the problems of 'de-Islāmisation' of our children. Most of the blame is apportioned to state schools and yet the vast majority of us still send our children to these very schools for their education. I have spent more than 25 years of my professional career within the British education system as a teacher, researcher, adviser and, over the last few years of my employment, as a senior education inspector with a 'quality assurance' brief. Throughout that time I have been keen to understand and determine the needs of Muslim children. My intention (*Niyyah*) has always been to explore effective measures that schools and Local Education Authorities (LEAs) can undertake within the prescribed national and local policy framework in order to provide a balanced education for Muslim children. Muslim parents have always impressed upon me the need to inculcate Islāmic values in the minds of young Muslims.

"What are seen as the corrupting influences of a permissive society are deemed irreconcilable with Islām and it is feared that unless an Islāmic agenda is inserted into the educational curriculum, the younger generation will fall prey to un-Islāmic forces." (Wahhab)

"It is a major anxiety of many Muslim parents that their British born children will move away from their faith, culture and influence." (Sally Tomlinson)

It seems to me that most British Muslims who believe that the dangers of *kufir* (unbelief) are lurking behind everything are actually unwilling to look into their own hearts and minds; everyone else is to blame for the moral depravity of society. There is a complex interweaving of superbly unreasoned argument which allows us to hold on to the high moral ground. The anomalies are seldom explored publicly. It makes joining the 'educators' of our children easy because, after all, 'they' are helping the young to understand their experiences so that they may have a sense of belonging to a community and thus understand shared values and meanings; shared beliefs and insights; and shared agendas and goals. At the same time accusing fingers are pointed at those who provide unsuitable role models, who introduce young British Muslims to a false sense of belonging to and being supported by the community, by introducing them to an anti-Islāmic heritage and traditions. The contradictions in these statements are seldom acknowledged. Perhaps we are all struck by what the Archbishop of York has called the "paralysis of pluralism". We are all so busy bending over backwards to be 'nice' to one another that superficial half-truths pass between parents and teachers. When asked for their feelings on the quality of service provided by their children's school the Muslim parent invariably replies, "I am very pleased with the school; you are doing a very good job; my daughter/son/ward is very happy at the school; the teachers are very good; etc." However, when subsequent, more detailed discussions take place in Punjabi, Urdu or the relevant community language, parents will glance over their shoulder and give vent to their true concerns about the lack of discipline; the reluctance to push children academically; the absence of regular homework, etc. Parents have deeply-felt concerns that their children should be studying essential subjects and passing examinations. They are also worried at the overt suggestion in schools that science is the only paradigm of truth and understanding and that the vitally rich moral and spiritual dimension to the educational development of their children is neglected. Such views, though, are seldom shared with the nice non-Muslim head teacher who is, when all is said and done, doing his or her best. In any case, 'we' are here

in 'their' country so what can we expect?

This attitude is bound to encourage complacency and is a recipe for inaction. It is time for open and wide-ranging discussions to take place between British Muslim parents and those who are their partners in the education of their children. I believe that it needs strategic action on the part of influential individuals and organisations, within both the Muslim and non-Muslim communities to break the current unhealthy stalemate. There is enormous scope for progress in areas where there is the most readiness for change. The goodwill exists for a concerted and co-operative effort to address the intergroup conflicts which have thrived on polarisation, prejudice and ignorance.

#### **THE POSITIVE WAY FORWARD**

In an unapologetically secular society like ours it sometimes appears pointless to argue for a spiritual or religious dimension in educational provision. I believe that the majority of British Muslims feel that the main dangers to society come from those forces which undermine, or threaten to undermine, all theistic principles of life. The pressure of secularism, whether in the seductive form of nationalism or in the doctrines of absolute scientific materialism, and the emphasis on economics as the major priority in life is having an insidious influence on all our lives. The voice of the British Muslim in all this is often a cry in the wilderness; it is either of no consequence at all (as a minority) within the mainstream, or it is effectively marginalised through cultural, structural or procedural means.

There are, however, signs that most faith communities share these concerns and are responding to them in their own ways. It was heartening, for example, to read Cardinal Basil Hume's Presidential address to the 77th North of England Education Conference in January 1991: "It is a matter of building bridges between the rigours and disciplines of academic and technical teaching and the human and spiritual needs of the individual pupils."

Similarly, the Church of England has been a little more outspoken in its interventions in matters of national policy where religious principles clearly matter.

Recent statements by Secretaries of State for Education, and shadow spokespersons, leave the door open for those of us who believe that our own faith offers a great deal more than the secular liberalism which, in educating our children, has failed to inculcate a more positive sense of responsibility towards the society in which they live.

#### **EDUCATION AND THE MUSLIMS**

The British Muslim community has shown tolerance and understanding beyond any reasonable expectation over the years on the important matter of the education of their children.

If we examine the situation from the point of view of a Muslim living in Britain today we might say that at the simplest level the two most important concerns are:

- 1) To make every effort possible to fulfil our duty as Muslim parents in helping our children to be conscious of their heritage and identity as Muslims, whilst taking full advantage of the opportunities available.
- 2) To ensure that, as Muslims, we are able to contribute towards the maintenance of the highest moral values possible whilst living in a pluralist, predominantly non-Muslim society (without feeling "holier than thou").

Muslims recognise that an education system which is trying to come to terms with the needs of a pluralist society cannot realistically be expected to provide a comprehensive Islāmic education within state schools. It is, however, not impossible to envisage an education system which is in harmony with Islāmic principles. One of the main reasons why Muslims have established a programme of self-help projects ('Supplementary/

Qur'ānic Schools', or *madrasahs*) over the last thirty-five years or so is because the state schools fail to provide an essential part of spiritual and moral education. Other reasons include the absence of Arabic, Urdu and other relevant community languages from the school curriculum; a lack of adequate concern about single sex provision, either as separate schools or within co-educational schools; and an absence of a balanced 'cultural' content in the curriculum.

I feel, however, that Muslims will continue to distrust the state system and will continue to feel frustrated (even if schools try to meet some of these requirements) until they feel that they have a considerable degree of involvement in the decision-making processes and have some control, power or authority over their childrens' educational diet.

*Madrasahs* are here to stay in order to meet specific needs and give the Muslim community a sense of self-fulfilment. There are grave doubts expressed by almost everyone about the nature of such supplementary provision: the style of teaching, methods of instruction, disciplinary procedures and many other aspects of the current arrangements leave a lot to be desired in most *madrasahs*. It may be said that they meet the needs of ritualistic self-identity and are serving a purpose if only as a form of protest, but one doubts whether the majority of present supplementary schools come anywhere near meeting the spiritual and actual fulfilment of Muslim children. Although there are a few notable exceptions, most parents seem to be dissatisfied with the present provision and consider the *madrasahs* to be far from ideal. However, they also believe that improvements will come with experience, time and better resources. The commitment towards this ideal is unquestionable.

#### **PROBLEMS**

When facing up to the challenges of everyday life, British Muslims are invariably trapped into talking about their 'problems'. LEAs concentrate on the 'problems' they face in catering for the needs of their Muslim pupils when, more often than not, these 'problems' are associated with the adult Muslim community.

The general image of Islām presented in the media perpetuates negative stereotypes and creates enormous barriers which militate against some of the splendid efforts which have been made towards harmony and mutual appreciation. It also poisons the minds of British Muslims in that it either makes them less assertive or alienates them.

Some of the 'problems' involved in the education of Muslim children in state schools are not unique to them. Many non-Muslim parents, for example, are equally concerned about the influence of a permissive society or the effects of institutional and cultural racism on children who are unable to take full advantage of the education provided without feeling oppressed and harassed. There are mutually-held objections to 'sex education' in the school curriculum because of the subject content or the inappropriate attitude of the teachers (and/or schools) who offer this subject, or the age at which it is offered. Others express concern about the effect of conflicting values and norms expected in school and the home. It is alleged that the standard of discipline and behaviour accepted in schools is falling as is the standard of academic achievement; thus, our schools are 'failing' our children.

Some Muslims suggest that the main reason for all this is the absence of proper Islāmic values; others suggest a variety of different reasons. Most parents, though, remain positively critical; that is, appreciative of, but not wholly satisfied with, the education which their children receive. They have adapted in a utilitarian manner by according importance to education as a means of gaining qualifications and obtaining higher-status employment, whilst maintaining a clear distance from those aspects of British culture which are not held in high esteem, drawing instead upon the resilience and strengths of Islām.

#### EDUCATION FOR ALL

In the context of providing an enlightened form of ‘good’ education within a pluralist society, what the Swann report called *Education for All*, there is an effective and increasingly strongly-held point of view that the changes that have taken place to date are too few and fall far short of the ideal. There is a long way to go before the principles of *Education for All* are accepted by the majority of people in Britain, and even longer before they are implemented and realised throughout the country.

#### AGREED SYLLABUSES

Some interpretations of the 1944 Education Act have produced Agreed Syllabuses for Religious Education (RE) that presented Islām and other faiths from a biased perspective. There is a tendency to concentrate, sometimes exclusively, on the outward manifestations of the faith, for example places of worship, prayer rituals, pilgrimage and artefacts, which could serve to deny the deep spiritual values, experiences and meanings behind them.

This, together with the already-distorted image of Islām which is constantly reinforced through the use of over-simplified books written, with the best of intentions no doubt, by non-Muslims (and some Muslims), and the effects, intentional or otherwise, of secular ‘modern’ education, *does* influence unsuspecting and impressionable young minds.

Other efforts under the name of ‘Multicultural Education’ which try to change the ethnocentric (i.e. Eurocentric) curriculum content, promote better intercultural appreciation and celebrate the rich diversity of cultural differences are merely tokenistic. This is either because they simply create another set of stereotypes to replace the old ones, or because they are seen as peripheral to the National Curriculum. They do not change the structures of oppression which are upheld by the institutional inertia built into any form of control, nor do they change the racist attitudes prevalent in our society.

The nature of the discriminatory obstacles placed in the way of establishing voluntary aided Muslim schools is a form of institutional oppression usually defined as ‘racism’. There appears to be such a strong ‘anti-Muslim’ feeling that even Church of England applications for more voluntary aided schools are denied just in case this is used by Muslims as a lever when asking for their own voluntary aided schools. This has meant that members of the Christian community, who should be our allies in such matters, end up wishing us less than well.

The absence of Muslims in positions of responsibility within local and central government either means that we, as a community, are all less able than non-Muslims or that there are discriminatory practices inherent in the ‘traditional’ institutionalised procedures which prevent equal opportunities reaching us.

Strictly ‘Christian’ interpretation of Section 26 of the 1944 Education Act stopped the development of Islāmic Studies at examination level for a long time. The first such syllabus received approval for the GCSE examination by the (then) Schools Examinations & Assessment Council (SEAC) in 1990, after an enormous amount of consistent effort by the Muslim Educational Trust on behalf of the Leyton Sixth Form College in London (GCSE Mode 3 Syllabus 3609 Religious Studies – Islām). This was later upgraded to a Mode 2 syllabus (2630), and is now (since 1995) a Mode 1 syllabus (1477) produced by ULEAC. I am amazed at how few schools actually take up this option, and even more amazed at how few Muslim parents approach their children’s schools to request that this GCSE course should be offered as part of the RE curriculum. It seems such a pity that our British Muslim children, who could so easily add another GCSE to their record of achievement, are losing an opportunity. Another good thing about this option is that in their records of achievement this course (1477) will appear as Religious Studies GCSE, and the universities and higher education institutions cannot easily dismiss it as they

might if it were entered as Islamic Studies.

There are colleges where teacher training in almost every specialism, including Religious Education (Christian, multifaith or comparative religious studies), is available but only one course (at Newman College in Birmingham) where initial teacher training students are offered Islām as a main subject. There remains a distinct lack of adequate teaching and learning material for the purpose of Islāmic studies.

Superficial contact between schools and the Muslim community fosters some strange and unhappy situations. For instance, in those LEAs where some single-sex schools have been retained after comprehensivisation, a large proportion of the teaching staff could well be inclined towards creating an anti-sexist or feminist ethos in the girls' schools. Muslim parents who often go to great lengths to send their daughters to such institutions will have very different reasons for making their choice. This creates a real dilemma in that the expectations of parents and staff are frequently diametrically opposed to each other. The unintentional consequences of such a situation with real value conflicts put the pupils at great risk, both socially and emotionally. What, may one ask is the purpose of our schools? Is it to serve the needs of parents? Teachers? Or pupils? Parents may be forgiven for thinking that what the head teachers and teachers decide to be the most appropriate curriculum cannot be challenged by them. For many Muslim parents it appears that the education in state-funded schools is imposing a set of moral, spiritual, cultural and social values, not of their choice and certainly not in consultation with them, by those headteachers who have a tendency to display a fair degree of intellectual arrogance.

#### **THE LEGAL RIGHTS OF MUSLIMS**

The Education Reform Act, 1988 (ERA) missed a golden opportunity to offer the same rights to both Muslim and Christian parents. Yet more unintended insensitivity means that, not for the first time, legal rights are denied to British Muslims. The right to establish voluntary aided schools is enshrined in the 1944 Act and yet applications from Muslim schools are seen as problematic. There is a strong, mostly secularist, lobby which has convinced itself that it is just to deny the Muslims their legal right. The arguments against Muslim voluntary aided schools have been well rehearsed; it is said that they could prove potentially harmful to both communities:

1. 'Voluntary apartheid' might go against the interest of the Muslims by 'ghettoising the Muslim community' (NUT 89) thus facilitating discrimination against Muslims in the labour market.
2. It is a threat to "the stability and cohesion of society as a whole". It might provoke a "racist backlash" (Swann, 'Education for All', 1985 and Asian Youth Movement [AYM]). It might exacerbate the very feelings of rejection and of not being accepted as full members of our society which they seek to overcome. (Swann)
3. The presence of Muslims in multiracial schools is needed to help the majority ethnic community to shed their racist tendencies. (Swann)
4. Stubbornness in conforming to the norms and values of the dream world of a multicultural pluralist Britain which may or may not be realised in the next century. (It is claimed that just and rational compromises are shunned by the orthodox/unreasonable/extremist/ Muslims who have the audacity to demand their legal right in 'OUR' country without wishing to integrate or assimilate.)
5. The best way to meet the needs of the Muslim community is to provide single-sex state comprehensive schools rather than voluntary aided schools.
6. The best way to make progress is to persuade the DFEE and LEAs to develop policies which take account of the needs of a culturally plural society.
7. Existing denominational (ie Christian and Jewish) voluntary aided schools must be encouraged to think of closing down in the name of pluralism and unity within

- a culturally diverse society like ours.
8. If Muslim and other voluntary aided schools are established this would deny many of our children the opportunity to share their schooling which is an excellent way to increase mutual respect and understanding.
  9. Voluntary aided Muslim Schools will deny Muslim children the opportunities of a broad and balanced curriculum, diminish their life chances, create ghettos, isolate Muslim girls even more than they are at the moment, drop the 'standard' of education, and could create another Northern Ireland situation here.

#### **THE LOGIC OF THIS ARGUMENT**

What is forgotten is that most of these 'logical' arguments either assume that British Muslims are incapable of running a school which can provide an enlightened form of education ('Education for All') with a pluralist perspective, or else that, firstly, all LEAs will provide an education which is anti-racist and responsive to the needs of a culturally plural society and, secondly, that all faith communities at present running their own voluntary aided schools will listen to this splendid point of view and close them down in favour of non-denominational, secular state schools. This is the position most of the members of the 'Swann' Committee took but six 'black' members of the Committee signed a note of dissent which I authored. Significantly, it was the only note of dissent in the whole of the 800+ pages of the 'Swann' report.

If and when the education system really responds in an enlightened form, as outlined by Swann, to cultural pluralism there will be no need for 'separate' schools of any sort. It seems obvious to British Muslims today that this emphasis on ideals in the future is being used as an excuse for inaction in the present, as well as an excuse for not considering seriously the legitimate rights of a minority community. The High Court judgement which declared the original refusal by the Secretary of State to grant voluntary aided status to the Islāmia School in Brent to be unsound proves the case.

The result is that the views of the 'majority' (non-Muslims) are forced upon a minority. The perceived needs of this 'minority' could well be realised more constructively if a diversity of 'solutions' and practices were allowed to co-exist; individuals and communities could pursue different objectives without either infringing upon the other's rights or harming the general interest. The DES and LEAs could use their influence to encourage plurality in a setting which ensures equality of access to financial and other resources. Some such choices already exist within the maintained sector – church schools, single-sex schools, 'grammar' schools and grant maintained schools (opting out of LEAs). So why deny a group of parents, pupils, and teachers the right to set up what, in fact, would be community schools run according to their own values and priorities with capital and running costs coming from public funds? Why should such a group be made to feel inexpert, irrelevant or obstructive? Why should such freedom of choice be assumed to be potentially harmful to other people or to the community as a whole?

It is hardly surprising that British Muslims consider the refusal to offer positive assistance for the establishment of voluntary aided Muslim schools (in accordance with the 1944 Education Act) as both unjust and racist.

Such schools would not only provide invaluable experience in tackling the real issues and give LEAs an opportunity to effectively monitor any new initiatives in partnership with the Muslim Community, but would also be seen as a tangible act of recognition of the rights of British Muslims. It would show that despite the power and authority of non-Muslim institutions, the overwhelming desire of a minority faith community can be respected and appreciated because it is their legal right.

"The fallacy of rationalism is the assumption that the social world can be altered by seemingly logical argument." (Fuller)

#### **GOOD PRACTICE**

It would be foolish not to appreciate the progress that has been made over the years in many schools; head teachers and teachers have made what can only be described as monumental efforts to learn about, try to understand, show respect for and help the British Muslim children in their charge. Special value must be placed on the contribution that religious education (RE) teachers have made in this respect. Some LEA's can also be proud of their efforts in terms of policy initiatives and Agreed Syllabuses etc. However, those directly involved in such positive developments will be the first to admit that there still remains a great deal to be done in order to clarify the principles of RE, its contribution to inter-cultural understanding, its relationship with moral education and its importance in the broad and balanced curriculum at various stages of educational provision. The ERA muddied the already unclear water concerning 'assemblies' (collective worship) and RE (or Religious Instruction). For some enlightened teachers this has proved to be a blessing in disguise which allows them to interpret the law in creative and imaginative ways in order to serve the educational needs of their children. Such initiatives are not, however, likely to change the misperceptions and misunderstandings that exist in the wider community.

There appears to be a slight move in the right direction in the coverage of this issue by the mass media. Let us hope that those responsible will succeed in creating a balanced view.

#### **CHARTER FOR MUSLIM PARENTS**

If there were a charter for the well-being of their children which the majority of Muslim parents in Britain could put their signatures to I suspect it would be addressed to the education system. It would implore those who provide education to continue their efforts to foster understanding:

- by enabling children to become secure in their cultural heritage and faith commitment;
- by offering children a clearly-defined sense of morality and social responsibility;
- by encouraging a positive sense of self-identify, self-confidence, sensitivity, awareness and value orientation which would make children appreciate the need to contribute towards a 'pluralist democracy';
- by exploring the cultural diversity (within and beyond the Muslim community) to enrich children's lives giving a more balanced view of themselves within a multicultural world;
- by widening children's horizons and thereby allowing them to experience a sense of liberation, a sense of joy, a sense of awe, an appreciation of the ultimate and unique gift of life and to exercise the full use of their intellectual skills; without creating a sense of alienation and without feeling a sense of superiority or inferiority in themselves or in others;
- by offering Muslim teachers and educationalists the opportunity to develop a balanced curriculum appropriate for Muslim voluntary aided schools and to share their ideas and experiences within the whole dual mainstream education system;
- by giving the British Muslim community direct involvement in the future development of the type of educational provision best-suited to the needs of their children in a non-Muslim pluralist democracy;
- by offering the right which exists under the 1944 Education Act equitably to all faith communities in Britain: one day this may sow the seeds of trust between the Muslim community and both local and central government. Such a partnership is a vital step if we are to eliminate many of the blockages restraining change.

## CONCLUSION

The continuing debate about the educational objectives has not only revealed great divisions of opinion over such matters as the type of schooling (single-sex, denominational, GM, etc.) but also the relative influence of teachers, parents, pupils or other ‘experts’ and the importance of religious and moral education, etc. At the moment, education decisions are made by the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA), the Secretary of State, central and/or local government, school governors and head teachers; in fact, anyone and everyone except the pupils and their parents. Delegation of control through Local Management of Schools (LMS) might give school communities some say about what goes on in schools but that still remains to be seen.

If the powers that be try to meet the special, *but not separate*, needs of our Muslim children and involve Muslim parents more positively in the running of the schools much of the frustration would disappear. Closer links with the supplementary institutions are essential if we are to meet our childrens’ needs more realistically. Recruiting, training and re-training Muslim teachers, Muslim cultural liaison officers, Muslim Nursery Nurses, Muslim (bilingual) classroom assistants and Muslim staff within the educational services to take on pastoral and liaison responsibilities should help enormously.

Muslim organisations have shown more than just a passing interest in these developments. The establishment of an Islāmic resource centre could prove invaluable in dismantling the myths and creating an imaginative and constructive means of achieving a harmonious appreciation of Islām and the Muslims as dynamic contributors towards a pluralist Britain. So long as we all, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, think positively about each other I feel sure that we can help *all* children to broaden their horizons and enhance their understanding of a variety of religious beliefs and practices, thus offering them an insight into the diversity of values and concerns of different communities which now form part of our society.

May *Allāh* strengthen our faith, give success to our efforts and guide our children to an enlightened Islāmic life. *Amīn*.

“Educate your children; they must live in a time different from yours.”  
(*Hadīth*)

*(This article was written in 1991 and updated prior to publication.)*