

# **Educating Muslim Children: A Study of the Hidden and Core Curriculum of an Islamic school**

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## **Introduction**

The necessity for establishing independent Islamic schools in Australia, arose after many members of the Islamic community questioned the extent to which the religious needs of Muslim children were being met in the Australian education system. Australian schools are usually described as 'free, secular and compulsory' and there is little provision for religious education (Donohue Clyne, 1998:281). In contrast, Islamic education, one which endorses good morals, helps children maintain their cultural identity, including their mother tongue language and religious practice, is a major concern for many Muslim parents. (Donohue Clyne, 2000; Hartley & Mass, 1987).

There have been a few early studies on the planning and development of Australian Islamic schools (Begum, 1984; Galea, 1991; Buckley, 1991). However, this paper will report on the first tentative examination of the contributions made by a well established Victorian Islamic school towards Islamic education. Using qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews, participant observation and document analysis, the study examined both its hidden and core curriculum. The assumption driving this Master of Education study, was that since Australian Muslims are committed to establishing Islamic schools, it would seem natural that these schools should have their own unique and distinctive contribution to make. The study sought to investigate how this Islamic school provides an alternative to the secular based and Judeo-Christian nature of many Australian mainstream schools' curriculum (Donohue Clyne, 1997).

During the course of the three year long research, the problem became trying to find evidence of Islamic education as the theoretical model in the curriculum practice of an established Islamic school. Rather, the research findings revealed the many pedagogical problems teachers faced with a secular curriculum and the current curriculum paradox, where controversial areas in health (including sexuality education) are omitted yet the school curriculum claims to reflect Islamic values and beliefs. This paper will begin with an Islamic view of education as a vehicle for planning and developing the curriculum in an Islamic school. The College curriculum, which is a combination of tradition and alternative forms of education, will then be discussed revealing its curriculum success, its problems and paradoxes. The paper will conclude with a discussion on the current work in progress, a Ph.D thesis by the author exploring the complex relationship between religion, culture and curriculum in an attempt to establish a research design for the teaching of controversial issues in an Australian Islamic school.

## **The Islamic view of education: Towards developing an Islamic curriculum**

Every action a Muslim performs, including seeking an education, is seen as an act of worship. Education is fundamentally important to Muslims. The immense incentive to learn is evident throughout the Holy Qur'an, emphasising that God's commands can never be fully understood without knowledge and education. The Holy Qur'an states

And those who are firmly grounded in knowledge say 'We believe in the Book, the whole of it is from our Lord' and none will grasp the message except men of understanding (*sura* 3, verse 7).

In addition to the injunctions addressed in the Holy Qur'an, Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h)<sup>2</sup> also emphasised the importance of knowledge when he stated:

He who leaves his home in search of knowledge walks in the path of God.

Furthermore, he was quoted as saying

To listen to instructions of science and learning for an hour is more meritorious than attending the funerals of a thousand martyrs and more meritorious than standing up in prayer for a thousand nights.

For all Muslims, Islam is the purpose of their life and knowledge has to be subject to religion for it to be pure and complete (Zaki, 1982: 34; Ismail, 1994:63). If education in general is concerned with the development of the full human life, then Islamic education is concerned with the full Islamic life, based on *iman*, (faith), *aqidah* (belief) and *tawhid* (unity of God) and guided by the teachings from the Holy Qur'an, the *Sunnah* (the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h) and *Sharia* (Islamic law). In considering a curriculum rooted in Islamic values and beliefs, duality in education, that is splitting of knowledge into two distinctive types, secular and religious, with aims and objectives independent of each other, needs to be abolished. For Muslims, education without an awareness of *Allah* (God) is "meaningless" (Mabud, 1992:90) and "a contradiction in terms for a Muslim" (Hulmes, 1989:39). All learning must be approached with the intention of developing *taqwa*, "a highly developed and profound awareness of Allah" (Bhabha, 1997:3).

Islamic education is about seeking *knowledge* to guide the *training* of a good character and personality. Co-operation rather than competition, service to others rather than selfishness, mutual consultation rather than domination, are not only the guiding principles of an Islamic character, but resemble the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h), who is described throughout the Holy Qur'an and Hadith as the ideal example.

### **The curriculum success: Establishing an Islamic ethos**

The 'hidden curriculum', also known as the organisation, environment, total culture and ethos of a school, is increasingly being recognised as significantly influencing students' attitudes and behaviours (Eisner, 1994; Smith et al, 1993). As Elliot Eisner (1994:97) describes, the hidden curriculum, although

seldom publicly announced, is intuitively recognised by parents, students and teachers. And because they are salient and pervasive features of schooling, what they teach may be among the most important lessons a child learns.

So that Islam can be cultivated in the minds and souls of learners, Muslim children need to be immersed in an environment where they are made to feel that their own norms are being respected "rather than becoming assimilated to Western norms" (Wielandt, 1993:53). Using participant observation techniques, it was observed that the Islamic ethos at the College played two distinctive roles described below;

## The preservation of cultural heritage and the development of faith commitment

It was observed that upon entrance to both the junior and senior campus of the College, the students are immersed in an Islamic culture. Islamic art, calligraphy and verses of the Qur'an decorate the walls of hallways and classrooms. Students greet each other and teachers warmly with the Islamic greeting of 'Assalmuallakum' (peace be upon you). There is an overall ambience of peace and tranquility, a sense of tolerance, respect and pride. If Islam is to be entered in the students' hearts and the total repertoire of their thinking and living, Islam must enter all student activities (Ashraf, 1994; Al-Afendi, 1980). It was observed that morning assemblies at the College fulfil a religious, social and administrative function beginning with collective worship and morning dua's (supplications). *Zuhr* (noon) prayer, falls within the school day at the College and is always performed in congregation allowing the student, whose faith is still growing and developing, to understand that prayer is a combined activity, for both the student and teacher. The provisions for *halal* (permitted) food in the school canteen, shortened school hours during the month of Ramadan, pupil free days for religious celebrations and modest Islamic dress for students and staff, also help preserve and transmit the faithful heritage and develop a genuine sense of belonging, comfort and pride. This environment is summed up in the following comment:

*"Here students can always relate to their own Islam openly and confidently. They can use their own Muslim name, use the Muslim greeting and go to prayer without feeling any shame. Over many years, that must have an effect on their confidence as Muslims and that it's O.K to be Muslims in this world".* (Deputy Director, 2000)

## The establishment of an Islamic identity

Socialising and nurturing students in the Islamic faith and enhancing students' knowledge of the Islamic way of life, becomes imperative during the students' secondary school years. As the individual experiences of the world begins to extend beyond the family, the influence of the peer group on an individual is very strong, particularly during the period of adolescence, "a period of idealism as well as questioning, doubts, rebellion and frustrations" (Ashraf, 1988:105). Helping keep Muslim youth on the path of the Islamic ideal, is at the very heart of the College mission statement as presented in 'Al-Risaalah', the College magazine (1991:2).

Children are most strongly influenced by their friends and children of their own age. The more time they can spend in a protected Islamic environment, in the company of good Muslim friends, under the influence of Islamic guidance, the stronger the chance that they will remain on the correct path, the path that leads to God.

Guiding Muslim youth, particularly at the secondary school stage, so that they do not question religious ideals that may seem alien to life in a Western materialistic society, is a priority at the College, described below in an interview discussion with the Deputy Director

*"One thing that tends to happen to a lot of Muslim children, especially in a predominant non-Muslim environment, is that they lack confidence in their own religion and own Islam, so they tend to want to suppress and hide what they've got. They do that in different ways. They adopt Christian names, they don't have any association with the form of the religion so they give up prayer, try to hide the fact that they are Muslims from their friends and they don't try to portray the strengths of Islam, but rather the weaknesses of it. So by being with others, who are Muslim, they can give expression of faith without any shame because everybody is doing it. So in fact, the peer group is the*

*dominant group, so the Muslim culture becomes the dominant culture for them".*

While the College ethos can contribute to developing and nurturing the whole person and provide a secure sense of personal and social identity, the rest of Islamic education should be concerned with "developing in students an understanding of the purpose of creation for mankind and their specific role on earth" (Ashraf, 1988; Al-Beely, 1980). Extensive analysis of the college core curriculum documents and in-depth interviews with staff, revealed the many pedagogical problems faced by teachers and the current curriculum paradox.

### **The curriculum problems**

Finding the right balance between secular subjects and religious subjects, as expressed in the core curriculum, proved to be the greatest area of concern for many of the teachers interviewed. Teachers did not dispute the importance of secular subjects in the curriculum, but rather desired a curriculum that responds equally to the religious requirements as the academic success of the students. Their criticism for the secular *ambition* of the College suggests that they feel that it is this drive for academic success, that has made the College forget its focus, purpose for establishment and its religious obligations and commitment to parents. And as a result, the true spirit and notion of an Islamic education is, as one religion teacher described it, "*lost in the pool of all the other subjects*". As discussed earlier in this paper and supported by various literature, Islamic education does not recognise a division between religious and secular education. The inclusion of three periods of Quranic and Islamic studies classes per week is no substitute for a comprehensive Islamic education.

It is the restricted structure of the current religious curriculum that is also causing problems. Teachers are concerned that students will raise and explore religious questions only in the religion class and the chance that religious knowledge becomes compartmentalised will increase. Religious education will serve to produce religion as something that should be confined to a limited time and a specific place and students will learn that questions of life do not concern religion or that religious issues are somehow separate from daily life. Restricted class time and the current fragmented approach of Islamic education in the core curriculum makes it difficult for students to view Islam as a long life activity, extending beyond the limits of formal schooling, as one teacher describes

*"The students view it.. [Islamic and Quranic studies] ..just as another subject and I don't want them to think like that. I always emphasise that this is not just another subject. I'm not just here to test your knowledge. What we are talking about here is something you will need for the rest of your life".*

Furthermore, the entire absence of Islam from some subjects has lead to the teaching of curricula which directly contradicts Islamic beliefs, causing confusion among students and further pedagogical problems for Muslim staff. Darwin's theory of evolution, for instance is taught in secondary science classes, as a justifiable theory for existence which is contrary to Islamic beliefs. Religious teachers then have the common task of supplying the students with the Islamic perspective of evolution, adding to their already exhaustive workload. For many of the staff, the next step in responding to such problems, is to develop an integrated curriculum model, based on Islamic principles and beliefs.

An Integrated curriculum is not a new concept for Muslim educators (Bhabha 1997; Abu Aali, 1980). Only when 'Islamicising' knowledge, that is bringing secular subjects in line with Islamic principles and beliefs" (Rahman, 1980:93) is effective, may students see the relevance of and connection between Islam and other areas of knowledge. The inclusion of Islam across the entire curriculum will acknowledge the significant contributions Muslims

have made to science, world history and to civilisation, which is currently largely invisible in the College curriculum. Furthermore, it may help to find a curriculum solution for the teaching of controversial areas such as health education (including drug, HIV/AIDS and sexuality education) which is currently omitted from the school curriculum.

The total absence of Health education and its related topics can be referred to as the null curriculum; the concepts and skills that are not a part of the students intellectual repertoire" (Eisner, 1994:107). The striking paradox lies in that the exclusion of this subject, contradicts the broad educational aim and mission of the College as well as the principles of Islamic education; preparing students for an education that is concerned with the development of the whole person. The full extent of this curriculum paradox will now be discussed.

### **The curriculum paradox**

Apart from the College documented policy of 'off limit' curriculum areas and brief mention of an Islamic environment free from drugs and permissive sex education in a College brochure, there is no documented explanation for the exclusion of Health and its related topics (including sex and drug education) from the core curriculum. Further probing into the College's position on the matter revealed that the decision to exclude the subject was a perceived lack of consensus about this subject among Muslim parents in the school community.

It is not always necessarily the content of the health curriculum, (including sex education), that is objectionable to many Muslim parents and students, but rather the presentation of the subject, totally divorced from moral and values education (McInerney et al, 2000; Al-Romi, 2000; Abdel-Halim, 1989; Lindsay et al, 1987). Whilst some parents may prefer to teach these subjects in the privacy of their own homes (Akhtar, 1993) there is no evidence to suggest that parents of students at the College are taking an active role in the teaching of sex education, however currently, the College has made it the responsibility of parents.

For many of the Muslim teachers interviewed, only an Islamic school can ensure the protection of this Islamic consciousness and excluding health education and its related topics from the curriculum, is clearly denying Muslim students of knowledge on how to be responsible and informed adults (Sanjakdar, 2000). Teacher's emotive comments suggests a need for Australian Islamic schools to respond to the many issues and realities of our social complexities and adopt a broader curriculum framework, one where Muslim children may grow in their religion whilst participating and understanding the society they live in

*"This [health and sex education] is knowledge students need to have otherwise, there is a danger they can get it from the wrong sources. The school must adopt another attitude other than, we don't want to deal with the problem it may cause!"* (Secondary religion teacher)

While College curriculum and policy documents claimed a curriculum that reflects Islamic values and beliefs, extensive school document analysis cross-checked with rich discourse from the participants, revealed the opposite. The gap between school subjects and an Islamic framework and context is very large, causing many pedagogical problems. Controversial issues create debate and disagreement in Islamic school communities. What can be done to reduce this sensitivity in order to plan for the effective teaching and learning of these issues, was a concern for many of the teachers interviewed. It was the teachers' concern for priority of Islamic education in the curriculum, the lack of formative research on what framework for curriculum development is appropriate for Australian Islamic schools, that has prompted the need for further research. The complex relationship between religion,

culture, curriculum planning, development and the decision making process at the College, makes this current Ph.D study significant and most challenging.

### **Current work in progress: Controversial issues and the development of a Health curriculum framework for Australian Islamic schools**

The purpose of the current study is to examine Australian Islamic schools in order to develop a curriculum framework for the teaching of controversial issues using health (including sex education) as an example. Using qualitative research methods under a naturalistic paradigm, this study will build upon strategies already used or proposed for the handling of controversial issues within the Health Promoting School (HPS) framework (Rowling, 1996; Maher, 1987). The HPS has been claimed the 'best practice' framework for school health promotion (Lavin et al; 1992; Green and Kreuter, 1991), in Canada (Kolbe, 1986) and more recently in Australia (Colquhoun et al, 1997; Rowling, 1996).

There is no shortage of literature that advocates the need for schools to devote attention to health literacy (Harrison & Dempsey, 1998; Colquhoun et al, 1997; Gallivan, 1997; Anderson et al, 1995; Nutbeam et al, 1992, 1993; Lavin et al, 1992; Kickbusch, 1992). Since the Australian Education Council (1989) identified Health as one of the eight areas of learning, health education and its related subjects are increasingly making their way into many Australian schools' curriculum and classrooms and hence, present significant implications for Australian Islamic schools. Health is chosen as the desired area of study for this research because at present there is no curriculum solution for it and if taught properly, it has the capacity to develop *ta'dib*, the Arabic word for "culture and the training of moral sensibility" (Ashraf, 1994:149). The teaching of Health under an Islamic framework, can promote healthy growth and development as well as cultivate and strengthen students' Islamic faith and morals, leading to growth in *taqwa*; "a highly developed and profound awareness of Allah" (Bhahba, 1997: 2)

To achieve the purpose of the study, curriculum change and development must acknowledge the secular, pluralistic society in which Muslim students live in and the culturally diverse nature of the Australian Muslim society. Although Islam is a universal religion, Muslims do not constitute a homogenous group and whilst some Muslims views of education are strict, others can be quite liberal. Although the researcher will draw analysis of data from a religious perspective, using authentic sources, such as the Holy Qur'an and Hadith, the effective development of a health curriculum (including sex education) for Australian Islamic schools, will also need to be built on community and parental consensus.

The situation of controversy surrounding Health education is not exclusive to Australian Islamic schools (Brinkley, 1999; Bridges, 1986). Sexuality education, HIV/AIDS and drug education are controversial health topics because they involve matters of value as well as matters of fact (Bridges, 1986; Carrington & Troyna, 1988; Stradling et al, 1984). Stenhouse (1975) defines a controversial issue as one that divides students, parents and teachers because it involves an element of value judgement. Rowling (1996) states that controversial issues are defined by their context contestability of values, they relate to content and they involve at least two people in the disagreement. Although much is still to be learned by the researcher from the extensive literature on controversial issues and school curriculum, what is clear is that "controversial issues rely heavily on context for their definition" (Rowling, 1996: 19) and a "Western understanding of sexuality can not be transferred unproblematically to Muslim students" (Halstead, M & Lewicka, 1998: 61). A different view of Health knowledge and pedagogy is required, one based on the Qur'an, Sunnah and Sharia.

In developing a comprehensive health curriculum for Australian Islamic schools, the research design must acknowledge that the education at an Islamic school is part of the

wider enculturation practice of a group. The orientation and function of an Islamic schools' curriculum is concerned with culture, where "knowledge, skills and values ensure the foundations of society are transmitted to the next generation" (Brady & Kennedy, 1999:8). Furthermore, the development of a health curriculum of Islamic schools will be affected and generally controlled by the value orientations of many stakeholders of the curriculum, including the school board, staff and the parental community.

The purpose of Australian Islamic schools will be questioned and possibly redefined in this study. It was the in-depth discussion on the element of balance in the core curriculum that generated interesting discourse on the aims and purposes of Australian Islamic schools (Sanjakdar, 2000). Some teachers claimed that the sole purpose of the College is to provide an Islamic atmosphere, a place where Muslim students can be protected from the Western influences of society. Others argued that it should claim some responsibility for developing and implementing a comprehensive Islamic education within the core curriculum; something that cannot be offered in the public system. This study will challenge these ideas further and ask, what are the fundamental educational responsibilities of Australian Islamic schools? Are these schools Islamic schools or schools for Muslim children?

This study does not question the validity of health education and its related controversial topics in the school curriculum, but rather seeks to find a curriculum approach to an Islamic perspective on health education. While knowledge in an Islamic school curriculum must be drawn from authentic Islamic sources as well as the particular cultural setting, the questions 'What knowledge is intended?' and 'What knowledge is of most worth in Australian Islamic schools?' must first be answered. Should the curriculum centre on subject matter, student needs or societal demands? Whose interests are served by the curriculum- the students, parents, teachers or Islamic community?

The study also poses questions about controversy; what is understood to be a controversial issue in an Islamic school setting, how should it be taught and what are their perceptions of its educational value? This raises further questions of the ownership of school knowledge and power, who has the power to choose controversial curriculum content and what influence do these issues have upon the curriculum decision making process? To what extent does hegemony play a role in curriculum development if hegemony is defined as the "collection of meanings and practices that are owned by ruling groups which those who are dominated come to accept as normal" (McGee, 1997: 124). These questions will become journeys of discovery, in an attempt to cross borders and break barriers in the educational research on Australian Islamic schools.

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