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Leading Islamic Schools in the UK: A challenge for us all

This report holds up a mirror to the world of Islamic faith schools so that the schools themselves, and those outside the Muslim community can see more clearly what is happening in them.

Ibrahim Lawson, Association of Muslim Schools in the UK

Introduction

In late 2002, I was head of an independent Islamic school for primary and secondary pupils in Nottingham and also a member of the governing body of the national Association of Muslim Schools (AMS), which represented at that time some 80 of the 120 or so Islamic schools in the UK. From this perspective, I was aware of two challenges:

- this fledgling Islamic schools movement was under-resourced, both outwardly, in terms of finance and management, and inwardly, in terms of leadership and vision
- there was a great amount of progress to be made with respect to mutual understanding between Islamic faith schools, the Muslim communities in general, and the UK society as a whole

Very little research has been done on Islamic faith schools, which are often portrayed in the media as a challenge to the liberal values of British society. Neither does the Islamic schooling community itself yet have a very clear sense of collective identity and direction. The intention behind my research for NCSL and the AMS was therefore to hold up a mirror to this world in order for the schools themselves and those outside the Muslim community to see more clearly what is happening, what the leadership issues might be and where the future lies.

One of my main concerns was to help Islamic school headteachers, through the use of action research, to deepen their understanding of the leadership role in the development of their schools and to begin to create a shared vision for the future of the Muslim community in the UK. This vision would correspond to the religious, cultural and social needs of Muslim children here and now.

Another goal was to contribute to the discourse that is emerging among educationists and the wider public about the place of Islamic schools in British society today, and to find a way of structuring this process constructively, to alleviate the fears and suspicions that exist on both sides.

My approach to the investigation

I might have chosen a conventional research methodology to gather facts and statistics and to conduct and analyse interviews, but I felt that a more exploratory approach was called for. Part of the reason for this was that, as an Islamic school headteacher myself, I felt I was, at least in part, researching reflexively my own experience that is a 'valuable example of the contradictions, tensions and issues in large-scale social structures and processes and global trends'. Consequently, by collecting data on my own case, I would be able to 'shed light on those structures, processes and trends while making the individual phenomenon (my own experience) understandable in new ways' (Bentz, VM and Shapiro, JJ (1998), *Mindful Inquiry in Social Research*, London, Sage; p157).

Secondly, by researching Islamic schools from the inside, it would be appropriate to share that journey of discovery with colleagues as a participatory dialogue through which new, unanticipated knowledge and insights might be generated. This collaborative and reflexive way of working is known as 'action research' or 'action inquiry'.

Action research and similar methodologies are bottom up, designed to empower those on whose shoulders rests the ultimate responsibility in practice for managing change. Islamic school headteachers often find themselves in the position of trying to reconcile the conflicts between religious authority, cultural tradition and British citizenship, and yet without the necessary support to make a success of this key role. Therefore my research was designed to start addressing these issues by providing an opportunity for headteachers to inquire collaboratively into the challenges of their profession.

Action research looks at the way people construct the meaning of what they are doing. My research, in considering Islamic schools, also explores some of the principles and practices of such an approach. I propose that one way of interpreting dialogue as 'collaboration in the construction of meaning' (as distinct from competitive debate) rests on an understanding of the nature of aporia. Aporia means deliberating with oneself as though in doubt over some matter; asking oneself what is the best or appropriate way to approach something.

Thus, rather than presenting contentious issues, whether internal to the Muslim community or pertaining to relationship between communities, as problems to be resolved, viewing them as aporias allows us to construe them as an opportunity for a growth in understanding. This understanding is not only of the other but also of ourselves, hence the sub-title of my report: 'a challenge for us all'.

The inquiry thus becomes the journey of discovery itself rather than the end point of arrival.

In this way, we might hope, as an increasingly globalised society, to arrive at a new understanding of our collective situation.

Different styles of Islamic schooling

The Islamic schools in the UK provide a context in which many of the most pressing issues confronting contemporary society are being worked out. In a sense, they are at the cutting edge of much current cultural, religious and political debate, and clear indications emerged that school leaders are aware of this potential.

In the full report, I explain briefly the context in which the Islamic schools movement has developed as a response by the Muslim community to the perceived and real dangers of cultural assimilation. This results in confusion and loss of identity, leading to under-achievement in school and a more general sense of alienation from both cultural and political norms.

The Muslim community, both in the UK and worldwide, has responded to the challenges of modernity in three main ways: conversion, rejection or cautious adaptation. This is reflected in the different styles of Islamic schooling that have arisen over the last 20 years or so. Islamic schools are, perhaps surprisingly, diverse in form: they may be primary or secondary, mixed or single sex, day or boarding, selective or comprehensive, large or small, new and struggling or well-established, independent or state-funded, more or less focused on the national curriculum, mono- or multi-cultural, and, finally, attached to a particular Islamic cultural organisation, community or ideology, or relatively independent. This diversity also extends to the vision and values of both leadership and teaching and learning styles.

There is, moreover, an awareness among headteachers of Islamic schools that the possibility exists for them to challenge creatively the state model of education. One commented, at the Islamic School Headteachers' conference, which I organised as a part of my research:

"Instead of trying to be as good as the state schools, we should recognise that in our situation we are constantly in the process of evaluating what teaching is. Now our situation is quite fluid and we must acknowledge that there's a great deal of dissatisfaction in the mainstream in terms of what education is. On the edges of that mainstream there are some extremely interesting things going on, which probably stand a snowball's chance in jahannam (hell) of taking root in the mainstream. But rather than us jumping into the main pool, when the most forward-thinking people of this society are running away from it and we tend to be running into it, to be trying to do that thing better – it's the most forward-thinking people we need to be keeping an eye on. Where do they see the future of their system? That's what we should be connecting with. We are flexible enough to respond to it and also engaged in such a way that we take it on as a community and then give it back to them. We can do it much more quickly because we still have community. The most forward-thinking people in this society know that education is a matter for community – it's not about institutions. We must affirm our communities and make them active in terms of seeing where the cutting edge is. We are closer to the front of this matter than we think."

There is in fact a large amount of experimentation within this movement, with groups setting up Islamic Montessori schools, Islamic small schools, Islamic Waldorf (Steiner) schools, a growing number of home schooling projects, and some projects that have begun the curriculum again from scratch to include extended periods of travel and study abroad for the pupils; there is even a strong sympathy for de-schooling among headteachers of some of the most established institutions.

Leadership in Islamic schools

From my reading, and visits to Islamic schools, I began to see that understanding of the leadership role is relatively unsophisticated in many cases, perhaps for cultural and historical reasons, and this is one of the factors inhibiting progress. The full report contains a summary of research into leadership styles, which will hopefully stimulate some thinking beyond the traditional authority based leadership that tends to be the norm in these schools.

My research found that there was a general lack of progress, on both sides of the debate, in understanding the practical issues of social cohesion and dialogue, and that a lack of knowledge and understanding of Islam, if not outright Islamophobia, continues to be an obstacle. Attempts by the government to create a sense of citizenship via a new curriculum element for schools have so far failed to address underlying areas of concern. These areas may actually be better understood within the Islamic schools community than by many within the wider society, including politics and the media, for whom religious belief is deeply problematic.

Endnote

Action research differs markedly from more familiar qualitative and quantitative methodologies, focusing perhaps more on knowing as a process than knowledge as an event. The final outcome of my research took the form of a conference for headteachers of Islamic schools at the NCSL Learning and Conference Centre in Nottingham and is recounted in detail in my full research report. Structured around three collaborative inquiries into the management, leadership and vision of Islamic schools, the two-day event, the first of its kind in the UK, laid the groundwork for the future development of the Association of Muslim Schools and provided a large amount of material for further inquiry. The report will be of interest to all those concerned with the future of education and schooling in this country, and with the, as yet unresolved, issues of community cohesion and multi-culturalism.

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