

EDITORIAL

The Role of Muslim Schools

Since the First World Conference on Muslim Education (organised by King Abdulaziz University in 1977), Muslim education has taken a new direction with renewed vigour and enthusiasm. This has resulted in the Muslim world seeing a lot of changes and reformation in the field of Muslim education that have brought about development of curricula infused with Islamic values and the establishment of Islamic schools, colleges and universities. A multitude of Islamic organisations have also sprung up to discuss, debate and formulate new policies. The common goal of many of these organisations is to design a system of education that gives children both ‘secular’ and religious knowledge as well as developing their moral and spiritual character. Like Muslim educationalists, Muslim parents were also filled with the hope of imparting Islamic education as well as strong morals to their children, and soon the newly-established schools were overflowing with students. Many of these schools were competing with existing state schools and excelled academically, which further generated keenness among a large section of Muslim communities across the world to establish more and more Islamic schools. Such heightened educational activities among Muslims are unprecedented in the recent history of the ummah.

Muslim schools, however, have a long tradition rooted in Islamic history. As seeking knowledge is a religious duty, the establishment of Muslim schools has always been considered an act of *‘ibādah*. Education is a worshipful activity and the teachers are one with the students in this eternal journey of worship of God. Beyond the façade of external appearances, there is a deep culture of Islam embedded in the very fabric of an Islamic school which reverberates in the entire school atmosphere – the extent and degree of this depends on the sincerity and fervour with which the school community fosters and practises the teachings of Islam.

Such schools have provided an anchor for the dynamic faith of the Muslim community. By nurturing the young, they aim to produce people who excel academically and are good human beings, capable of interacting with those around them in a meaningful way, contributing to the development of their community and society. They are as much places for the dissemination of Islamic knowledge as they are spiritual centres for the entire Muslim community.

Both the ethos of an Islamic school and the Muslim community are based on interpretations of the revealed word of God and the noble teachings of Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.). The school and the community nurture and support each other. In its interaction with the members, the school authorities make ethical decisions all the time, and it is here that they have a crucial role to play in developing their young to behave in accordance with Islamic manners and morals. The school community should be constantly aware of our contingent circumstances and limitations as human beings which should make the members humble and supportive of each other. In an

atmosphere of love, care and understanding, the dignity and self-worth of both teacher and student would be enhanced. By cultivating a true Islamic ethos the Islamic school is engaged in producing people who would be aware of their individual and societal roles as the vicegerents (khalifah) of God on earth.

The need to interact in an Islamic way applies to the whole of the school community – students, teachers and other staff. At the heart of an Islamic school there should be no other principles than those on which our religion (*dīn*) is based. But in a mechanistic world the centre stage of our life has been taken over by things that are contingent, immediate and material. The spiritual perspective that should define our relationship with the Creator has become only peripheral.

Man has transformed the world technologically, but in doing so, he has also transformed himself. The concept of eternity, transcendence and permanence has taken on a secular meaning, a fact which percolates into our education system by rendering it just as a means of production and consumption, purely in an economic sense. In a world where material supremacy seems to hold sway over the destiny of those less fortunate, human beings appear to be oblivious of the purpose of their terrestrial existence. This has had dire consequences for our educational systems.

In this state of affairs Islamic schools are engaged in the arduous task of bringing meaning back to life. If modernity has robbed us of our humanity, how can we regain it without having recourse to the very principles that govern our relationship with God? There is no guarantee that an Islamic school will eradicate all social ills, but it will help to produce youths who are expected to be morally good human beings, and who, by their interaction with society at various levels, will contribute to its development. Students educated in Islamic schools will be able to bring Islamic values to bear on social questions such as those regarding politics and economics. The teaching of ‘citizenship education’, in one form or another, has always been built into the curriculum of the Islamic school, as its purport is to produce good human beings who are also good citizens. To abide by the law of the land, to co-operate with people of other faiths, to promote peace and harmony, to discuss and express grievances in a decent way, are all part of Islamic teachings. A sense of obligation towards others stemming from deep convictions is far more conducive to a cohesive and harmonious society than the attempt to impose teachings that are in dissonance with one’s faith.

Quite often Islamic schools are seen as an obstacle to social cohesion. This perception is erroneous, as Islamic schools can be a positive addition to the existing educational system and an effective way of integrating religious minorities into the British community as has been observed in a recent study conducted by Bristol University (*Muslim schools in Britain: challenging mobilisations or logical development*, 2007). While it is true that a narrow interpretation of faith often obliterates the wider view of religion and becomes an obstacle to the broadening of the horizon of their mind, by virtue of their holistic view of human life, properly educated students of Islamic schools will be the most powerful agents of integration in modern society. This report rightly observes that, “By drawing upon Islamic principles, and contrary to some recent news stories, the curricula of Muslim schools proactively agree on universal dignity and worth irrespective of ethnic, religious or racial differences ... If Muslim constituencies are granted the provisions for Muslim schools, it could contribute to the bringing together of faith commitments and

citizenship requirements within a public area that has historically included and incorporated other religious minorities before it.”

This will show the wider society that by providing us with a unique vision of the purpose of human existence, Islam embodies and promotes a viable, coherent view of life. This is the basis of the school ethos and, by implication, the basis of the aims and objectives of education, educational curriculum, and everything that teaching and learning involve. The responsibility of the school is thus to help students understand the fundamental teachings of the Prophet as contained in the authentic books of *ḥadīth*. The school should impart these teachings with a lot of care and sensitivity, so that the students imbibe an Islamic way of looking at the world and life, and learn to lead an Islamic lifestyle.

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