

THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF BRITISH MUSLIMS: SOME LIFE-STORY IMAGES

Bill Gent

Introduction

The author has spent many years working as a local authority school improvement adviser in the borough of Redbridge, North-East London. This borough has a population of about 250,000, of whom just over 28,000 inhabitants (according to 2001 census figures) declared themselves to be Muslim. Since 2001, the Muslim population of Redbridge has increased and, consistent with the weighting of the British Muslim population towards the young (Beckford 2006, p10), current local authority figures indicate that 31% of the current primary school and 21% of the current secondary school population come from a Muslim background. As such, there are significantly more Muslim pupils in Redbridge schools than any other 'minority faith' group. The figures relating to particular schools reveal an even stronger Muslim presence. One Redbridge primary school, for example, has 511 pupils of Muslim heritage, which comprises 64% of the number of pupils on roll.

As a specialist in religious education, the author became familiar with the various Muslim communities in Redbridge, particularly those associated with mosques that were visited by school groups. He became increasingly aware of the educational role of mosques and their supplementary classes and, as a consequence, at one stage set up and chaired a 'Local Authority/Mosque Schools' working group. This group began to gather information about mosque supplementary classes in Redbridge and considered, amongst other things, whether there could be a mutually enriching encounter between mosque supplementary classes and local authority schools. One of the fruits of this work was the publication of a briefing paper, *Muslim Madrassahs in Redbridge*, by the local Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education.¹

Doctoral research

Enrolment on a Doctor of Education (EdD) course at the University of Warwick, at which the Religious Education Research Unit has earned an international reputation for ethnographic fieldwork into religion, provided him with the opportunity of undertaking research into Muslim education, epistemology and practice. Though the research was to ultimately focus on a boys' *hifẓ* class² in a particular mosque,

preliminary research involved a range of background reading, visits and meetings (including two visits to The Islamic Academy in Cambridge) and pieces of fieldwork.

One piece of fieldwork, conducted between August 2001 and November 2003, involved carrying out life-story interviews—a labour-intensive form of interviewing familiar both to oral historians and ethnographers³—with four British Muslims currently living in Redbridge. Though admittedly small, the group can be taken as loosely representative, its size being limited by the time available to carry out the interviews (two in each case) and the lengthy process of transcribing, checking and analysing. Furthermore, the sample group was essentially self-selecting in that each member—two men and two women—had expressed a wish to be involved in the research project.

One of the two men, Sam Chowdhry,⁴ was not only considerably older than the other three but was the only one to have been born elsewhere before entering Britain as an adult immigrant. He was, therefore, the only one of the group not to have received an education in British schools, though his secondary schooling in post-Partition Pakistan had been at an English-medium missionary college. His British-born children, however, had attended English state schools and Sam himself had taught in the state sector. Each of the other three interviewees, all born between 1968 and 1972, had attended English state schools. Whilst both of the female Muslims were unmarried, the two men were married and each had a number of children.

The educational experiences of group members

The educational experiences of group members demonstrated amply the variety of forms that a 'Muslim education' might take, depending on factors such as the family's economic situation, parental preference, and reaction to particular incidents.

For example, Sam Chowdhry, who had emigrated to Britain from Pakistan in the early 1960s, had chosen to educate his own British-born children by providing them with a Muslim tutor at home. In part, this was because of his own negative experiences of *maktab* education as a child but also because of his critical views of teaching and learning methods used in the classes of the Redbridge mosque with which he was associated (see below).

Gulam Ahmed, on the other hand, was born and brought up in a Muslim community in the industrial north of Britain. He went to Gujarati-medium mosque classes there and, being singled out as particularly capable, joined a *hifẓ* class. He attained the status of *hāfiẓ* at the age of 11. Moving to North-East London after university, he was responsible for setting up a small *maktab* in a house in Ilford. Ironically, however, he remained critical of the quality of *maktab* education in Britain.

A'ishah Hussain was born in North-East London; her parents came from northern Pakistan. For some years after the age of five, she was taught in Urdu at the home of an elderly female *ustād*.⁵ Later, however, she began to attend a mosque school but her experiences in this East London mosque-based *maktab* so disturbed her that her father removed her. A permanent rift between the family and the mosque leaders was thereby created.

Finally, Serena Khan was born and brought up in the outskirts of London, but her family roots lie in pre-Partition Mumbai and Pakistan. She had never attended a

maktab, but rather, together with her sisters and brothers, was taught at home by her parents:

Everything that I learned at that stage was through them, including learning how to read the Qur'ān ... and learning to read *namāz* ... fasting was always something that we grew up with and so the whys and wherefores of fasting I was, and the five pillars ... very familiar with from an early age. (Transcript of Interview [TI])

From a detailed analysis of the interview transcripts, it was possible to collate material to illustrate five themes, namely: the lasting influence of a teacher on a student; episodes on the path of Qur'ānic learning; the sub-culture of mosque-based education; darker reminiscences of mosque-based education; and the contested nature of traditional methods of Muslim education.

The lasting influence of a teacher

All four British Muslims who were interviewed had some kind of experience of Muslim supplementary education during their childhood, three of them in Britain. Though the forms that such education took were different, in each case their memories of this education formed a significant part of their general memories. Indeed, so significant were some of the aspects or incidents associated with childhood experiences of Muslim education that their recollection many years later was, on occasions, charged with palpable emotion. This was exemplified by A'isha's recollections of her first Muslim teacher.

A'isha's first experience of Muslim supplementary education was when, between the ages of five and eight, she was taken each day to the house of an Urdu-speaking female *ustād*. It was clear from her recollections that A'isha believed that this teacher had had a profound and lasting effect on her: 'there won't be one point of my life that I won't think of her' (TI).

Of particular importance was what the *ustād* had taught her about the significance in life of being an *insān*, the Qur'ānic term for 'human being' which has played an important role in Sufi thought. It seems that the *ustād* used this term to draw some kind of qualitative or even mystical distinction between ordinary people and exceptional persons:

And she said to me ... when you grow up you've got to learn to be good and you've got to learn to be an *insān*. She'd always say that to me ... and I always remember that, she said ... when you grow up you realise that there are only a few *insāns* that you will meet, a few human beings ... And she said when you meet people who are a real *insān*, a real person, a real human being, she said you don't ever let them go. (TI)

So powerful was the impact on the young A'isha that, 25 years later, she could say:

And even today, I kind of think back and I always ... think, how much of an *insān* am I today? (TI)

Not all encounters with mosque teachers were as beneficial, however. Some encounters with particular teachers could be so disturbing that a family would decide to educate their daughter away from the mosque entirely (see below).

Episodes on the path of Qur'ānic learning

As in many cultural embodiments of education and learning, the different stages in learning the Qur'ān can be bound up with ritual and tradition (see, eg, Kane 1972, pp. 71-73; Eickelman 1985, pp. 4-5, 88-89). Thus, for instance, Sam Chowdhry looked back to the day when, at about the age of four or five in pre-Partition Punjab, a ceremony had been held at home to mark the beginning of his learning the Qur'ān:

The whole family was there and the imam of the mosque was there, my grandmother was there, my father was there, my grandfather was there and everyone ... Like birthday party ... I did feel special because I had new clothes and everything and presents from relatives ... And then the *mulvi*,⁶ my teacher ... asked me to repeat the *Kalimah*. I remembered that. Then, he had a small book, which is the *Qā'ida*, the first alphabet, and then he said, 'Okay, say *Bismillāh al Raḥmān al Raḥīm*' which I did. And from there, he said he will come every day to teach me. (TI)

For his part, Gulam Ahmed was able to describe in great detail, and with great emotion, a significant day in his own path to becoming a *ḥāfiẓ*. Though approximately the same age as A'isha and Serena, his boyhood experience of Muslim education in northern England was very different. Attending a mosque school near his house, he was marked out as a gifted student at a young age and so joined the *ḥifẓ* class. He recalled vividly the day when, in that class, he was able to recite the final portion of the whole Qur'ān that he had committed to memory:

It's one of the most beautiful feelings that I have ever experienced in my entire life ... I can picture as if it's today and it was Valentine's Day ... it was a Wednesday. It's such a beautiful feeling ... The whole class knows that there's something, there's a big moment here ... and everyone just goes silent, as you are coming towards the end ... And everyone's sat there and they know you're on the last page now. And even the teacher's really excited ... and the teacher's sat there and he's really calm and really excited and he's got a big grin on his face ... (TI).

And then, once the final memorised passage had been recited, together with the opening section of the Qur'ān (to show that recitation is never complete):

Everyone congratulates you, everyone shakes hands with you, everyone pats you on the back including the teacher ... The teacher would perhaps invite other teachers within the *madrasah*. And everyone would come along and they'd hug you, they'd hug you with utmost reverence. (TI)

Throughout the Muslim world, public Qur'ānic recitations are held, sometimes in the form of competitions. As such, A'isha Hussain was able to recall a Sunday Qur'ānic recitation competition that took place in an East London mosque in the early 1980s:

And then, one day, we had ... on a Sunday ... we never went to mosque on a Sunday, but on Sunday we had like a competition. And our mosque used to have competitions like that where, if you learned to recite a part of the Qur'ān, you'd go for this competition and ... if you read it properly, the *mulvis* would sit and watch you and, if you read it properly, you'd get a prize ... So ... my teacher in the mosque ... told the *mulvi* that ... she wanted me to go for the competition. And I remember I went and ... there were a couple of other girls ... as young as me. We went and it was really exciting and I was so excited. (TI)

The sub-culture of mosque-based education

Beyond these 'formal' occasions associated with Muslim supplementary education, the interviewees, through delving into their childhood memories, also revealed some fascinating details about the 'sub-culture' of mosque-based education: that is, children's experiences which ran 'beneath' or 'parallel to' the 'official' account of what was—or should have been—happening.

This was most vivid in the case of Gulam Ahmed's account of his experiences as a *hifẓ* class student. It was clear from his account that this experience was of an intensity that would probably surprise many young British Muslims engaged in such activity today.

To begin with, *hifẓ* class hours were very long. They often included Saturday mornings and, sometimes, Sundays too: 'it was literally seven day weeks'. This had the effect, according to Gulam, of creating an exceptionally strong bond between the boys in the *hifẓ* class that sometimes led to mischievous activity in the little spare time that they could find. For example:

I started smoking as a child when I was about nine and in those cold winter mornings a few of us would gather so I'd get a knock from one of my friends and I'd get out and, one day we're just sitting in the park, just before we're going to the *madrasah* and we build a little fire, just warming ourselves up and one of the boys takes out a cigarette which he'd nicked from his dad's box.

Thus:

We were supposed to represent the pinnacle of the Islamic ideology ... So, on the surface ... when the teachers are there we are gold ... We are untainted and we are models. And yet, when we're on the out we do everything possible to try and break out of that. (TI)

Gulam also recalled what happened when new boys joined the *hifẓ* class:

We were an exclusive club and, again, over the years ... a number of boys would drop out and a number of boys would drop in. And every time somebody comes in ... there's this little banter around 'Let's test this one. Is he up to it?' And then we have ... some of the senior ones, some of us would say 'I reckon he'll be here two weeks max. He ain't gonna take more than two weeks'. And that was the case. I mean, so many people left within the first two or three weeks, they just couldn't take it. There was no way ... (TI)

A similar glimpse into the child's-eye view of mosque education can be seen in A'isha Hussain's account of what happened when, following the death of her *ustād*, she began attending girls' classes at a local East London mosque at about the age of eight or nine.

The girls' classes, it seems, were held in the lower, basement part of the mosque building. The male teachers—A'isha, too, referred to them as *mulvis*—were in small rooms adjacent to where the girls and their female teachers met:

We're sitting ... and it was a pattern, every day, we'd be talking like kids ... you'd give somebody your bubble gum ... There was a rule; everybody had to bring a sweet ... that we had to share around in our group ... we were kids - the teacher wasn't bothered with us ... We'd sit and talk. We weren't perfect saints ... When the teacher wasn't bothered, we were sitting there talking and stuff like that. (TI)

But, when one of the *mulvis* appeared, the appearance of the group changed radically and instantaneously:

Then the *mulvi* comes and everyone is rigorously ... moving, pretending that we're reading. Suddenly all the books open ... It was a set agenda. As soon as he walks in, everyone's quiet. We're reading. (TI)

Darker reminiscences of mosque-based education

But such 'lighter' recollections must be balanced by reference to other 'darker' reminiscences that the life-story interviewees chose to share.

Already, in the recollection just quoted, there is a sense of menace, power and fear in the appearance of the male authority figure. For A'isha, this was to have such consequences that, following a disturbing encounter with one of the *mulvis*, her parents withdrew her from the mosque entirely in order to continue her Muslim education at home.

Gulam Ahmed's own childhood experience of Muslim education also contained experiences of fear. Of his own experience in *hifẓ* class, he declared: 'I think sometimes we felt that we were in a prison'. (TI) Corporal punishment was, it seems, an integral part of Gulam's childhood experience of mosque-based learning:

Most of my punishment as a child was not because of the fact that I wasn't able to learn something ... it wasn't that ... we were just

naughty boys. And we used to get up to no good. And the best way to sort that out according to the teachers at the time was just to whack you one around the head or whatever ... a lot of beatings that I used to get which were with a cane, with a stick ... on my hands. (TI)

Parents both knew that this took place and were complicit in it: 'If I was to go home and say to my dad, "I got a real beating up today", he'd say, "Well good on you, you deserve it"'. (TI) Indeed, so much was corporal treatment the norm that, according to Gulam, fathers would say to the mosque teacher:

Make sure that if he doesn't learn properly ... he's yours ... do whatever ... Clip him around the ear. Do whatever you need to do. Make sure that you discipline him. (TI)

Gulam Ahmed comments laconically: 'There was no comfort zone for any of us'.

The contested nature of traditional Islamic education

In short, there was much in this series of life-story interviews—such as the power of male mosque functionaries and the frequent use of corporal punishment—to show that traditional stereotypes of mosque-based education are solidly grounded. But, at the same time, it became clear that 'traditional' methods and styles are both debated and contested from within the British Muslim community itself. Indeed, attitudes towards traditional methods of Muslim education dictated to a large extent both how and where the families from which the interviewees came chose to educate their children as Muslims.

For example, Sam Chowdhry was largely educated at home in India and Pakistan by a series of Muslim tutors and this was also the method that he chose for the Muslim education of his own British-born children. To some extent this choice was no doubt affected by family tradition, his own childhood experiences and the financial ability to pay for tutors, but it was also informed by Sam's extremely critical stance towards traditional mosque-based methods of teaching:

I have visited *madrasah* a few times and I don't agree what they teach, I don't agree how they teach ... To me, they are forced to sit there for two hours doing nothing and tired ... All day school and then one hour at home and then go to *madrasah* again and two hours there. It is too much ... Instead of teaching them Qur'ān which they don't understand, my idea is that they should be taught Arabic for three hours a week, or four hours a week ... and, after five years they would be able to learn good Arabic and then they will be able to read Qur'ān and understand Qur'ān. (TI)

His own views of traditional madrasah education, then, were unambiguous: 'To me it's a punishment to the children ... it's rote learning and [a] crude method of teaching'. (TI)

Gulam Ahmed's childhood experiences of madrasah-style education in northern England were recollected in a stoical spirit, often infused with humour and

a fondness for the past. Nevertheless, as to whether he would want his own children to have the same experience, he said: ‘So if you ask me a question, would I put my son or daughter through the same—and I’d say No, I wouldn’t’. (TI)

Even though he himself sponsored a small *madrasah*, his views were as hard-line as those of Sam Chowdhry: ‘I’m really up for reform in the *madrasahs* and I think unless we reform strongly we’re just gonna kill it off’. (TI)

This response was, in part, connected to the onerous responsibility of being a *ḥāfiẓ* within the Muslim community but was also informed by Gulam’s encounter in recent years with a contrasting perspective on childhood and Muslim education: that associated with Sufism. He exemplified the contrast as follows:

[I]f I was in a *madrasah* and there was a gathering and a kid was playing around or something and one of the elders would jump up and clip him around the ear ... If I was in a Sufi gathering, a child would be left to do absolutely whatever he wants and for not a single person would the thought cross their mind to say ‘I need to discipline that kid’. It’s just ‘Let it be’ ... And the child learns to discipline his or herself by watching others over time through love.

Again, in words that echo the approach adopted by A’isha Hussain’s East London *ustād*:

[I]n a *madrasah*, the teaching ... is very mechanical, it is very much ‘Thou must do this, thou must do that, thou must not do this, thou must not do that’ whereas the Sufi teaching is very much ‘God is love ... Be yourself. Don’t pretend to be something you’re not ... and, above all, be a human being’. (TI)

The decision of Serena Khan’s father to educate his four British-born children at home in a gentle, fairly unstructured manner was also, it seems, connected to critical views about alternative forms of Muslim education:

[H]e’d heard about a lot of the local mosques and it seemed to be the way that most of them worked was ... if you don’t do what you want them to then they will shout at you ... they may use the cane ... So it wasn’t just the idea of somebody using a cane ... it was somebody other than him actually raising a finger or speaking ... in a way that was unacceptable to him. (TI)

Again, as with Sam Chowdhry, there appears to have been concerns about the overall amount of time that young children would have to devote to education, both at state school and that which followed at the mosque:

It was the fact that ... you had these small children starting off with sort-of primary and junior school that would come home from school, not even have time to rest and get themselves together and have a break and they would suddenly sort of put their get-up on as we call it and then go off on their own. (TI)

Serena's own views about Muslim education appear to have been affected not only by her own parents' attitudes but also by her own experience as a British state school primary teacher. As such, if she were to have children of her own:

I would want to introduce them to Arabic at an early age ... because I'd like them to read the Qur'ān. But, unlike my education, I would want them to learn to ask questions, explain the meanings of what they were reading as well and just encourage sort of general reading around Islam as well. And hopefully that would encourage them to see the benefits and to follow the faith. (TI)

Some concluding thoughts

There is a tendency, within the non-Muslim media at least, to assume a homogeneity within the British Muslim community that simply does not exist (Malik 2004, p. 93). Rather, within that community, there is enormous variety in family background, sense of identity and range of experience. If, as we have seen, the range is broad and varied within a very small sample group, the implication is that there will be an even greater variety of ways in which British Muslims as a whole will have engaged with Muslim forms of education, traditional and otherwise.

Though the small size of the sample group obviously calls for caution in making general extrapolations about the wider British Muslim community, the detailed and 'homely' nature of the material that was gathered does demonstrate the value of this method of qualitative research. The fascinatingly detailed and anecdotal character of this material carries an authenticity that provides a helpful counter-balance to more theoretical treatments of Muslim education and pedagogy (e.g. Halstead 1995, Parker-Jenkins 1995).

Finally, at a time when the European Muslim community in general and the British Muslim community in particular, is under the spotlight, this small-scale piece of research suggests the need for further, perhaps larger-scale, fieldwork in order to identify and articulate young Muslims' experience of faith education and nurture. For, though there have been general descriptions and analyses of the nature of 'madrasah' life in Britain (e.g. Mogra 2002, 2004), and some broader research projects that have touched tangentially upon this area (e.g. Smith 2005), there appears to have been little systematic exploration of young British Muslims' experience of traditional and other forms of Muslim education. In establishing the extent to which British Muslim education, particularly that given in mosque supplementary classes, needs to be an agent of both preservation and change (Boyle 2004), it could be argued that such exploration might be vital for the health and future of the growing and evolving British Muslim population.

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1. Available from www.redbridgerenet.co.uk
2. A class consisting of pupils all striving to commit the whole Qur'ān to memory.
3. See, for instance: Atkinson R (1998), Plummer K (2001), Thompson P (2000).
4. Pseudonyms were used in order to protect anonymity.
5. The formal term used for a teacher in both Urdu and Arabic.
6. Urdu term for teacher, a contraction of the more formal *mawlāwī*.