

EDITORIAL

Islamic supplementary schools in the UK

Out of hours Islamic supplementary schools is a common phenomenon throughout the UK. These schools are variously known as weekend Islamic schools, evening Islamic schools, Islamic supplementary schools and mosque schools. Sometimes an Islamic supplementary school is known as a *madrasah*, which is the Arabic word for any type of educational institution. These schools are different from full-time madrasahs that are run along the line of the mainstream schools in the country. No proper statistics are available about Islamic supplementary schools but it is estimated that up to 250000 pupils attend roughly 2000 madrasahs for about 2 hours for six to seven days a week. Pupils who attend these schools belong to the age group 4 to 15 years (*Inside madrassas: Understanding and engaging with British-Muslim faith supplementary schools*, IPPR, 2011, p. 11). Most of these schools are run during the weekends but a significant number also operate in the evening during the weekdays. These schools operate from local mosques or have their own premises, but sometimes they are run in local schools, community centres or private homes.

The purpose of these schools is to impart basic knowledge of Islam to children in an Islamic environment. They learn subjects that mainstream schools do not cater for. These schools are independent and so the policy of each school is locally determined, including the appointment of teachers, the syllabus, school hours and holidays. Pupils are charged a nominal fee for the tuition they receive. Sometimes they attend these schools free of charge. The syllabus of each school is different, although some schools may follow the syllabus of another school. The most important part of the syllabus is the recitation of the Qur'an in Arabic which pupils learn from as early as five years of age, irrespective of their mother tongue. In addition to this they learn biography of the Prophet (pbuh), elements of Islamic history, rules of ablution (*wuḍū'*), prayers (*ṣalāh*), fasting (*ṣawm*) and almsgiving (*ṣakāh*) as well as Islamic morals. Some schools teach basic Arabic language and memorization (*ḥifẓ*) of the Qur'an. Pupils are taught the basic principles of Islam and how to implement them in their lives. These schools provide basic Islamic education for the Muslim community at grass-roots level and play a significant role in the lives of most Muslim children in the UK.

Media coverage for a considerable period of time has raised concern about anti-western teachings, and violence against children in some madrasahs. There have been accusations that madrasahs contribute to radicalization of young people and serve as centres of extremist networks. There have been also reports that mosques and madrasahs impart fundamentalist and monocultural teachings which make it difficult for young people to integrate with the mainstream society. In order to provide correct information about how British madrasahs work and generate public debates in this area of Muslim education a rigorous research was undertaken by the Institute for

Public Policy Research last year (*Inside madrassas*, IPPR, 2011). This research provided new evidence on the work of madrasahs, identity development and community cohesion, and pupils' education and welfare.

This and some other earlier reports show that Muslim faith schools are actively engaged in fostering community cohesion. For example, highlighting the work of various groups, the IPPR research team observed, "Looking at faith schools across the spectrum of denominations, it concluded that they were generally well-placed to make a positive contribution to community cohesion, and highlighted a number of religious schools (including a Muslim school) that were actively engaged in building bridges between faiths through developing strong community networks with leaders from different faith backgrounds (DCSF 2007). Although there are no comprehensive national studies of whether, or how, madrassas are coordinating with local schools and other community organisations to promote integration, there are indications that this is taking place at a local level in some places." (*Inside madrassas*, p. 11). Generally madrasahs are trying to create awareness among their pupils of the need to integrate with the wider society. The degree of cohesion and integration that an individual madrasah can promote will depend on the ethos and practices of the madrasah. These pupils are already attending mainstream schools and developing social skills like any other pupils. Madrasahs are building upon the positive skills the children have been learning at mainstream schools.

Research shows that religion itself is not the main cause of terrorism. (See *Inside Terrorism*, Bruce Hoffman, 2006). Economic, social and political injustices have been identified as the root causes of terrorism. When people are stripped of their rights or lands they choose terrorism to right what they perceive to be wrong. Madrasahs themselves do not promote extremism and isolation; instead they help children to develop morally and spiritually and further their skills to integrate with the society. Some madrasah students may have resorted to violence as a form of response to injustice, but what is not realized is that people do not have to be products of a madrasah to become extremist or terrorist. If students of certain madrasahs are found to be engaged in such destructive activities, which are by no means Islamic, a concerted action should be taken to counter them. A lot of mistrust and suspicion could be removed if there is cooperation between madrasahs and mainstream education providers, community leaders and parents. This will help dispel the wrongly-held view that madrasahs promote anti-western and fundamentalist ideology and even facilitate terrorist networks.

Madrasahs are proper religious learning centres and perhaps the only place where basic Islamic education is imparted besides home. Madrasah education strengthens children's beliefs and encourages their positive development by helping them foster a sense of belonging. Without this sense of belonging there cannot be a proper sense of engagement with others in society. It is in such schools that pupils experience the spirit of faith in a community. The vision of Islam that they develop at home and at these schools will shape their personal life as well as social life, where faith is expressed through every aspect of their activities. Islamic education provides them with a foundation of their learning: what the children learn of the Islamic principles in the madrasah endows them with an outlook that will be reflected in everything they do, either consciously or unconsciously. Madrasah education has a contribution to make to the learning process as a whole as it contributes to the

development of the potential of the person. The vision of Islam lies in the firm commitment to faith in God and the more they experience God's words the more they are able to explore the meaning of life.

Madrasahs not only help pupils preserve religious and cultural identities, but they also impart information to counter existing secular attitudes. In a secular liberal society where traditional values are in decline, madrasahs or any other religious learning institutions still remain as a solid bulwark against the corrosion of faith. Through mainstream religious education (RE) pupils gather information about religion but do not experience the living faith of Islam or any other faith for that matter. The primary responsibilities of teaching religion lies with parents who should establish in their children the practice of prayer through their own example at home and participation in the religious activities of the community. Pupils are sent to madrasah to learn more about Islam and for sharing their faith experience with their peers. Madrasah education plays a vital part in the life of the pupils and parents as it helps them learn more about the application of the faith in daily life. It is a place where life-long faith is nurtured. Attending these madrasahs can deepen the faith of these children and prepare them to interact with the society as responsible members of the community. Here they are expected to experience Islam as a living faith that helps them think morally and spiritually in all circumstances of life. Without the inculcation of basic values nurtured by their faith they will easily fall prey to the secular environment that they are in, and assailed by doubts and confusions, will gradually become alienated from the moral and spiritual teachings of Islam.

Madrasahs are blamed, often quite rightly, for poor teaching standard and lack of adequate child protection. As the law does not prohibit corporal punishment in supplementary schools, painful and humiliating punishments are known to have been meted out to pupils. In general Islamic supplementary schools suffer from a lack of structured syllabuses, qualified teachers and modern teaching methods. There are no adequate teacher-training facilities either. There are hardly any teachers trained in special educational needs. Where the teachers are not well qualified, they suffer from low expectation and fail to engage the pupils with the subjects they teach. Under such circumstances madrasahs will turn into a place of mental and physical ghettoization promoting a narrow vision of Islam.

Many schools do not have clear-cut learning objectives, appropriate teaching content, proper teaching methodologies, correct methods of assessment and efficient classroom management that are reflected in the low educational outcome of their pupils. However, it is heartening to see that there are those madrasahs across the country that are trying to achieve improved level of education with positive outcomes for the growth and development of the pupils under their care. For example, in their school brochure, Madrasah Zeenatul Islam of Coventry (UK) states, "Our aim is to help the Muslim children and youth of Coventry to understand the basic principles of Islam and how to incorporate them into their lives. ... We are continuously trying to develop our Madrasah and syllabus in order to provide the best Islamic education possible for our community." All supplementary schools are trying to achieve such goals, although success rates vary tremendously.

Madrasah education has raised the inspiration of Muslims to offer spiritual education for their children which mainstream schools have failed to provide: every year there is an increasing demands from parents for more places at these

supplementary schools. This shows the confidence and trust the parents have placed in these supplementary schools, which with proper care, will blossom into a strong organization that will enrich the British education system as a whole.

Shaikh Abdul Mabud