

Muslim schools: Where faith works

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There are nearly 120 fulltime Muslim schools in Britain. Many more committed Muslim parents would like to send their children to a Muslim school. What is a Muslim school? Are they socially divisive? Are they politically correct? Musharraf Hussain argues that Muslim schools promote the common good, moral, social and spiritual development of the child thereby producing responsible citizens.

A Muslim by definition is a person who has submitted him or herself to the Divine will, from whose tongue and hands other people feel safe. A person who believes in Goodness and practices who shows respect, consideration and willingness to make sacrifices for others.

A Muslim school is where Islam prevails genuinely and its teachings about the love of God, parents and His creatures is nurtured. Muslim schools promote a peaceful co-existence and respect for all religions. A teacher at a Muslim school says, “ Muslim schools do not offer the dimension of religion alone, they foster strong faith and moral values, a sense of responsibility for the family unit and the confidence in individual girls to participate as full and equal members of society.” (Maria Hanifa in ‘Educating Muslim Girls by Kaye Hawe 1998)

There are nearly 120 Muslim schools both primary and single sex secondary. These schools do not just teach the national curriculum but enrich it through Islamic Studies, Arabic and Urdu. The school ethos is distinctly religious emphasizing the role of faith and traditional wisdom. Furthermore, a Muslim teachers present a role model who make the content of the national curriculum relevant to a Muslim child by contextualising it and Islamising it.

Why Muslim Schools?

From talking to parents, teachers and governors of Muslim schools the following appear as the main reasons for setting up these schools:

1. To counteract the rapid assimilation of Muslims into the torrent of a secular consumer based Godless society.
2. To provide children a secure place where their Muslim identity can develop and blossom.
3. To nurture manners and universal moral values of compassion, generosity, honesty, truthfulness, courage, tolerance and forgiveness.
4. To promote pluralism in British Muslim life by teaching values of human rights to freedom of religion and speech etc.

A student of Muslim school in the words of Dr Hawe “feels more empowered to learn within an environment where the girls feel secure enough in their rights as women and Muslims in their pursuit of excellence and in their quest to achieve their full potential. Such an environment is denied to Muslim girls in the state sector because of racism, bullying and similar isolating and alienating experiences.” (Hawe)

Are Muslim schools divisive?

One of the often heard accusations against religious schools is they are divisive and they produce men and women who are more likely to be prejudiced than those who attended the non-religious common school. Professor Greely and Bryk from Chicago University studied the effects of Catholic schooling upon the religious and social values and attitudes of adolescents, they concluded:

“ Quite the contrary, those who attend Catholic schools are less prejudiced than all public schools graduates. Moreover, they are more likely to be pro feminist.” (Prof.Gerald Grace: Educational studies and faith based schooling: moving from prejudice to evidence based argument)

If we extrapolate these teachings to Muslim schools and this is quite reasonable since Islam is understanding of other religions and teaches the universality of human brotherhood.

“O mankind! We have created you from a male and female and have made you into different groups and tribes so that you may recognize one another. The most honorable of you is the most pious” (Al Hujaret: 13)

We can argue that Muslim schools provide religious, moral and social development, which is respectful of others, nurtures openness and spirit of debate and dialogue, which is sensitive to responsibilities of a good citizen.

There is enough anecdotal evidence to dispel the myth that Muslim schools are ‘ghetto’ schools. The graduates of Muslim schools are successfully working in the society as businessmen, social workers, doctors, lawyers, teachers, community workers and other professionals.

The meaning of separate is to be taken as the meaning of distinctive characteristics and individual special features. Just like in one house you have separate rooms, this does not mean the household is disunited.

How Muslim Schools promote the common good?

Muslim Schools contribute to the wholesome development of the child:

1. By asserting the importance of Islam and its truths. Muslim schools have clear understanding of truth and the absolute nature of religious teachings. They cannot be tampered with by public opinion poll or liberal tendencies.
2. By developing or promoting spirituality. This is the “ faith in the unseen ”, “ God consciousness ” taqwa, sincerity etc. Thus fostering a balanced approach to material and the non-material, the physical and the metaphysical. A proper spiritual development provides the electromotive force for moral action.
3. By nurturing morality or moral sense. This is the state of one’s heart and mind, which is ever ready to do good. This is the bases of compassion, generosity, integrity, honesty etc.
4. By providing clear and unambiguous responses to local and national and international tragedies, like wars and acts of terrorism.

Theological arguments for Muslim Schools

The Quran makes it an imperative on parent to protect their children from kufr and hell fire:

“ O believers! Save yourselves and your families from the hellfire ” (At Tahirim: 6)

Since education is the key to religious understanding and building of a strong faith Muslim schools are an important vehicle for achieving this. Since Muslim schools will not only prepare children to be economic producers and consumers but also a spiritual and moral being who have developed a strong relationship with their Lord.

The Quran also tells us that if children who follow the footsteps of their Muslim parents will join them in paradise:

“ Those who believe and whose offspring follow them in faith-we shall unite them with their offspring”(At Tur : 21)

Muslim schools are important means of educating, nurturing and developing the future generation of faithful and conscientious Muslims. The aim is to produce young people who are exemplary in their character as portrayed in the famous prayer of Ibrahim (AS):

“ O lord give us comfort and peace in our spouse and children and make us good example for the God conscious people ”

Muslim parents are really concerned about the impact of secular education on their children. Dr Abdul Bari accurately captures the fears of Muslim parents when he says;

“ Even single sex schools within a purely secular setup have their problems. As the environment of these schools is ripe for permissive values and teaching and other staff is mixed, they can lead to an unhealthy life and double standards in a Muslim Childs life. That is why Muslim parents are not the only people to insist on the right to send their children to denominational schools.” (The greatest gift a guide to parenting – Taha 2002)

Are Muslim schools politically correct?

There is nothing anomalous about Muslim Schools. In fact one third of all state schools are faith schools there are:

- 4800 CE Schools
- 2500 RC Schools
- 32 Jewish schools (55% of all Jewish children go to Jewish schools 2300 children)
- 5 Muslim schools (Another 4 applying for V A status)
- 1 Sikh school.

The establishment of Muslim schools is not only politically correct but a fundamental principle of the “European convention of Human Rights.” The setting up of Muslim schools is a clear sign of diverse and an inclusive society, which truly practices equity. In the current Islam phobic environment is the labour government going to standby its cherished socialists values of pluralism and diversity? The issue of funding Muslim schools is litmus test of the government.