Islamic community schools in Australia: a case of a contextually response curriculum

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Introduction

For a large number of Muslim Australians, Islamic community schools are extremely important sites for religious education, language and culture maintenance, and religious rituals and practices.

These institutions are also significant and symbolic of Islamic identities.

My research in Islamic community schools in both Adelaide and Darwin in 2015 suggests that curriculum practices of Islamic community schools are in fact responsive to the context within which the Australian Muslims operate and socialise.
First, I discuss the context of Islamic education in Australia. Second, I describe the features of Islamic community schools. Third, and last, I discuss the Quran-based curriculum in the Islamic community schools and the ways in which it addresses the Islamic education needs of Australian Muslims while accommodating the challenges posed by the context within which the learners operate.
The role and importance of Islamic Studies and faith in community Islamic schools in Australia: A case study of Adelaide (SA) and Darwin (NT)

2016

Part of this presentation
Features of Islamic community schools

• They provide ‘integrated’ Islamic studies (Quranic studies, Arabic and Islamic studies) on a weekly basis (weekends/evening classes)

• Islamic community schools contribute significantly to the provision of Islamic education services to a large number of Australian Muslim children.

• Islamic community schools in Australia are generally run independently by the Muslim communities or jointly with a local mosque or with Islamic foundations or cultural centres.

• Flexibility and changing nature of the curriculum; varies from institution to institution.

• Collective, but individualised: needs of the learners. Integrated but offer ad hoc solutions/answers to issues faced by students.

• They are referred to as heritage schools in North America and as complementary or supplementary schools in the United Kingdom.
Public perception of Islamic school/Community Islamic schools

- Generally perceived as irrelevant / outdated
- Incompatible with secular laws and practices
- Disseminating Qur’anic and Islamic texts devoid of any context and relevance.
- Breeding grounds for radical views and violence.
- Vehicle of anti-western and anti- secular values.
- Attitudes not generally positive
- Isolated islands.
The Muslim community and Islamic education

According to the 2017 census, the Muslim population represents 2.6 (against 2.2% in 2011) per cent of the total population. In the shared religious space, Islam is the second largest religion (was third religion in 2011) after Christianity. The Muslim population is represented by 183 different nationalities MnM (2015). The Australian Muslim population speaks a range of languages, including Urdu, Pashtun, Turkish, Persian, Bahasa Indonesia, and Hazara, to name just a few.

Despite these ethnic and linguistic differences, knowledge of the Quran and, to a certain, the Arabic language is essential for any Muslim in order to perform their daily religious duties and rituals as well as to identify as a Muslim.

For Australian Muslims living and socialising in a secular context, this raises the crucial question of maintaining and developing Islamic beliefs, practices and values. For these reasons, many Australian Muslim parents seek to enrol their children where they can learn Islam and are given opportunities to practice their faith and live according to Islamic culture and moral values’. (Clyne, 2001)

= Islamic education institutions (schools and mosques) have significantly increased in Australia.
The context of Islamic education in Australia

• Being a Muslim and a religious minority in a white, liberal and secular country poses a number of challenges to Australian Muslims. These challenges took a critical turn since 9/11 as anti-Muslim sentiments and attitudes significantly increased:
  • Violent attacks and incidents targeting Islamic institutions (mosques and schools) in Australia and elsewhere.
  • Personal attacks on Muslim individuals, including verbal abuse and hate speeches.
  • Prejudices against Islam and Muslims: discrimination, stereotyping, marginalisation, racism, etc.
  • Negative media portrayal; generally reporting Islam as a religion that breeds terrorism, violence, and a local and global threat.
  • Muslims are treated as the negative “others” (Alghmadi, 2015:203).
  • Islam is incompatible with modernity and/or democracy and secular values.
Questions

We asked participants if they agree or disagree with the following statements and encourage them to explain the reasons for their choice.

• The school curriculum provides the students with the knowledge they need to understand mainstream Australian culture.
• The school curriculum provides the students with the knowledge they need to understand equally the Muslim culture and the mainstream Australian culture.
• The school curriculum is helpful in maintaining their Islamic culture.
Data collection and method

To understand the curriculum of the Islamic community schools, I conducted a research in Islamic community schools in both Adelaide and Darwin in 2015. I used questionnaires and interviews were.

• A self-administered questionnaire was submitted to the participants and semi-structured questionnaires were used as prompts for recorded one-on-one and group interviews.
• In Adelaide, the data were also collected at an Islamic community school and at the Mosque Open Day.
• In Darwin, the data were also collected at an Islamic community school and at the Mosque Open Day.
• Research question:
Background of the sample

• The sample of the case study is diverse in terms of geographic distribution, gender, age of the participants and socio-professional backgrounds. A total of 61 respondents participated in the research:
• 55.74 per cent from Adelaide and 44.26 per cent from Darwin.
• 57.37 per cent were females and 42.63 per cent were males.
• The ages of the participants ranged from 15 to 60 years and above:
  – with the largest group, aged 15–18, representing 29.56 per cent of the respondents.
  – The second largest group was aged 31–45 (27.86 %),
  – the third largest was 19–30 (24.59 %), the fourth largest 46–60 (13.11 %) and the fifth largest 60+ (4.88 %).
• The participants come from a range of occupational and educational backgrounds, including students at both high school (27.86%) and university levels (19.67%), who are the largest groups.
• Teachers 16.39% of the sample,
• Health and medicine 8.19%,
• Retirees  4.91%.
• The remaining 18.03% (a broad range of other professions, including imams and government employees, and the unemployed people)
The context of Islamic education in Australia

- **Research sites**: 56% Darwin, 44% Adelaide
- **Gender**: 57% Male, 43% Female
- **Age groups**: 15-18 29%, 19-30 25%, 31-45 28%, 46-60 15%, 60+ 13%

[Image: University of South Australia Research Centre for Languages and Cultures]
The context of Islamic education in Australia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High school students</td>
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<tr>
<td>University students</td>
<td>19.67%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>16.39%</td>
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<td>Health sector</td>
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<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
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<td>Unemployed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>18.03%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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Analysis & findings

Based on the voices of the different players:
Interviews
A curriculum that seeks to address local and contextual challenges

Context

• The ten per cent that is different is difficult for the students. In general, for example in our religion not allow boy and girl to touch each other, okay, they can learn in the same school, and class, they can share together the home work, but they cannot like uh play a game, they cannot touch each other okay, this is very like, prohibited in the religion. In uh Australian values they have no problem they can touch each other. So this kind of thing we try to explain to them in a way that in term of the religion, you are not, if you are a Muslim you are not allowed to touch each other. You are not allowed to have girlfriend and boy friend before marriage, this kind of thing. If you are living in a Muslim country and you say that music is not allowed in the school everyone can understand. In Australia, its very hard to explain to them, lets be honest with you if I stop my kids to listen to the music in the school, believe me they can listen anywhere so we are trying to convince them in a way if you want to listen to music okay that's fine but listen to the nice music don't listen to the wrong music, and what is the difference between wrong and right music that is like really slow not like high music.

• We are role models for the children we are very careful in our actions
A curriculum that seeks to address local and contextual challenges

context:

• We believe that 90 per cent of the Islamic values is like meet the Australian values. Okay so when we give them the Islamic values we give them the Australian values. For example, to obey the rules in this country, alright, in the Islamic rules if you are uh breaking the rules of the uh the country alright that means you will get sins from the God. Because Allah will not love you if you are breaking the rules. If the traffic light is red and you pass on the traffic light is red that means you break the law the rules, if the police didn't see you that doesn't mean Allah didn't give you the sins.

• For example if you see any bad thing on the road, okay, you have to remove it, don't say no one here no one can see me, you have to remove it, if no one sees you no Allah saw you and will give you good reward if you remove it, and don't throw anything on the road even if there is no police or no people uh so if you did it don't say that no one saw me, no Allah saw you.

• we are trying to do a lot oh and we have something called Mosque Open Day, so we've done this one every year since xxxxx , so I mean there is a gap between but we are trying to bridge it.
A curriculum that seeks to address local and contextual challenges

Context

- I keep in mind that the parents don't want their kids to be too western, even though they are in Australia, they want the kids to maintain their own cultural identity, ethnicity, but with a strong foundation of Islam. [...] when I taught Arabic reading and Arabic writing, it's not its more to the Arabic alphabet, when I taught Islamic studies, I have to relate to the, because we learn about how the Prophet live and so on, so I have to relate that topic with how they live now so that they can make sense, it's not, they will be questioning like why do we have to learn about someone who lived 1,000 years ago okay so I've got to relate to okay kindness, for example, patience and tolerance I've got to remind them okay when you live here you have to be patient and tolerant for example during the fasting, um that subject requires me to do some thinking especially teaching the teenagers, aged 10, 12 and 15, because they already have their way of thinking so I've got to relate what I teach to how they live, I've got to understand that they are not in an Islamic country, they are not in Malaysia, they are in Australia, so I've got to think about how teenagers in Australia live, then I can relate to them. When they are, like in some culture you don't say no to your parents and stuff but um I think in western culture you tend to be more independent. So yeah.
A curriculum that seeks to address local and contextual challenges

Context

• think it is possible to be a good Muslim and a good Australian, because if you say to me good Australian is to love the country, so I think the students they love to country and yet they are Muslim, I think the two compliment each other. You cannot be a Muslim and not love your country, um and yet there are people who love their country but they don't have a religion so that's a different thing. With the kids sometimes they ask, why can't we have boyfriend? why can't, some of my friends they hang out with their boyfriends its not like we do something, um because the parents they are very cautious so they say you can't have a boyfriend because you are Muslim. As a teacher I cannot say yes, but I cannot say no you can't have a boyfriend either. I told them, if you like someone, what is the purpose of you liking someone. Try to be realistic, at high school you might think oh this guy is hot but when you go to University there will be more hot guys, (laughs) and I think that sounds like maybe I shouldn't say that but I try to make, to make the students think that in Islam there are so many things you cannot do, but um sometimes I don't know how they go with the elders but the elders say no you cannot do this, you don't speak to them. So like um I told them if you like a guy that's fine because that feeling comes from God as well, but you have to know how to control yourself, even though you have boyfriend you have to obey your parents and this kind of thing. I have to understand that their environment is different, I think peer pressure would be very hard for them.
A curriculum that seeks to address local and contextual challenges

Context

• That is one of the challenges that we are faced with, that a kid, an Australian Muslim child, is stuck between the Australian culture and the Islamic culture and is, the culture of his birthplace, for example, all our duty because there are similarities in culture because if you know if you look at the Australian culture many of the values coincide with the Islamic values. So we encourage them to be Australians, to respect each other and look after their neighbours and there is no problem with being a practicing Muslim and following the Australian culture. Except those cultural values that will make you an unethical person, like mingling with boys who catch up for mischief like clubbing or all those things, but generally the Australian culture coincides with the Muslim cultures. (How have you come to terms with this, considering you have only just come to Australia yourself, a year ago?)

• Yes, I studied Australian culture and the Indigenous culture before I came here, I tried to assimilate it and compare it to our Islamic culture and I found it 90% of it coincides, uh its just for those who don't understand, and this is our duty as XXXXXX to tell the people those that are anti-westerners who think there is a problem with following Western cultures and this is when we come in and say there is nothing wrong with it, we tell them, look at this and give them lots of examples so even though I am here just a year ago but during this period I have been able to compare them.
A curriculum that seeks to address local and contextual challenges

Context

- Mm so what we do is um uh we try to address this peer pressure where their colleagues at school have bad habits. So every Sunday we have a youth group that get together, no adults, it is run by youth leaders, so some kids who don't feel uncomfortable talking with their parents or the elders can relate to their peers here. So they find solace in his friends. We created this youth campaign so that they go out and play and sometimes they have a bbq and in the interim they discuss their problems. We supervise from the sidelines, we get feedback from the student leaders, like okay what are their problems, can you address it from this angle, so we don't physically go there and show our faces but they discuss their things amongst themselves and it has a good impact, unlike when you go there its like oh I cannot listen to you but they um someone of their age, tells them something, it works. This is a strategy that we have done here. We do it for both the boys and girls.
Discussion

• Curriculum/practices:
• Skills and knowledge about the Quran and Islam
• Embedded and ad hoc solutions

In addition to teaching skills and knowledge about Islam and the Quran, Islamic community schools need to deal with contemporary challenges/tensions faced by their students living in a secular context: crucial issues that young Muslims experience in their daily life; questions about religion, values, identity, etc.

• Islamic community schools offer a range of strategies: Contextualising the issues and the solution by inviting students to critically examine and find the situation/answers to their questions. They seek to given the students the tools/skills they need so that they can critically appreciate and interpret real life context.
Conclusion and implications for curriculum

Islamic community school practices can be a good example to inform curriculum development, especially for Islamic schooling; in particular, the process needs to follow a bottom-up approach:

- To understand students’ needs is critical: vertical vs horizontal approach?
- To provide the skills and knowledge needed to critically and creatively master their own learning so that they are active players who successfully shape/reconcile Islamic worldview with their own context and situation. E.g.: Islamic worldview in a secular worldview. Diversity in Islam/Muslim-ness.
- To be flexible to capture and incorporate changing needs/challenges/demands as society is constantly changing.
References


Thank you