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Where Tradition and ‘Modern’ Knowledge Meet: Exploring Two Islamic Schools in Singapore and Britain

Charlene Tan

Abstract

Muslims live in a ‘modern’ world where subjects such as the English language, mathematics, sciences, and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) are highly valued and enthusiastically transmitted in schools. How some Islamic schools attempt to equip their students with ‘modern knowledge’ while remaining faithful to their religious traditions is the focus of this exploratory study. Using two Islamic schools in Singapore and Britain as illustrative case studies, this paper examines their history, aims, curriculum, and pedagogy in their aspiration to acquire ‘modern’ knowledge within their Islamic worldviews. It further explores some common challenges faced by students and teachers in both schools in their quest for a balanced curriculum. By highlighting the Islamic schools in two Muslim minority countries, this paper aims to contribute towards the international literature on how religious schools assert their cultural heritage and negotiate their learning in a modern age.

Keywords

tradition; modern knowledge; Islamic Schools; Britain; Singapore

Islamic educational institutions have always played an important role for the Muslims. Islamic education through the learning of the Qur’an can be traced back to the Prophet Muhammad’s time; subsequently informal religious instruction took place in places such as mosques, palaces and homes of learned people, leading to the rise of organised schools with established curricula in the eleventh century (Shalaby, 1979; Rahman, 1982). An Islamic or Muslim school is generally one that seeks “to develop a school along the lines of Qur’anic scriptures, with a strong nurturing of an Islamic ethos, which permeates the school curricula both formal and hidden” (Ameli, Azam & Merali, 2005, p. 12). Such a school is not one that aims to teach Islam as a discrete subject but one in which the whole of education is seen by the Muslims within a faith-centred integrated system (Hewer, 2001). In Britain, a full-time Islamic school can be an Islamic faith school or a Darul Uloom (literally a house of learning) while a full-time Islamic school in Singapore refers only to a madrasah (literally a place of learning) as ‘Islamic faith schools’ do not exist in the country.

Using two Islamic schools in Singapore and Britain as illustrative case studies, this paper examines their history, aims, curriculum, and pedagogy in their aspiration to acquire ‘modern’ knowledge (a term that will be elucidated later) within their Islamic worldviews. It further explores some common challenges faced by students and teachers in both schools in their quest for a balanced curriculum. The evidences for this paper are drawn from literature review, official documents, and interviews conducted at a madrasah in Singapore and an Islamic faith school in Britain between 2007 and 2009. The official documents from the Singapore madrasah consist of the school manual, the student handbook and information from the school’s website; the official documents from the British Islamic faith school comprise the school prospectus, the school’s proposal for voluntary aided status, an inspection report from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) and information from the school’s website. Interviews were conducted at the Singapore madrasah between 2007 and 2008 with the chairman, the vice-principal, the Head of English Department and two teachers, while interviews were conducted at the British Islamic faith school in 2009 with the school’s Advisor, the Head Teacher, the Acting Head Teacher and the Head of Religious Education. All the interviews were semi-structured, recorded with a voice recorder with the permission of the interviewees, and fully transcribed. The data was coded and analysed based on common themes on the school’s history, aims, curriculum and pedagogy. Unless otherwise indicated, all interviews were conducted in confidentiality and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement. Before we compare the two Islamic schools, a discussion of ‘modern’ knowledge from the Muslim perspectives is in order.

Muslim Approaches towards ‘Modern’ Knowledge

A Muslim’s religious tradition is essentially his or her ideological framework or worldview, comprising a substantive set of practices, beliefs and values. It encompasses not just religious beliefs but cultural values and practices essential for one’s identity formation. A significant reason why ethnic communities favour faith-based schools is that the transmission of religion in these schools includes the perpetuation of their cultural and linguistic heritage (Parker-Jenkins, Hartas & Irving, 2005; Ameli, Azam & Merali, 2005). But Muslims, like other religious groups, need more than just their traditions to survive and thrive in a ‘modern’ world – a world that is characterised by constant creation and exploitation of knowledge, technical breakthroughs and scientific advancements in a dynamically changing future. Against the backdrop of a knowledge-based economy, ‘modern’ knowledge especially in the sciences, technologies and humanities are highly valued and enthusiastically transmitted in many schools today.

The Muslims’ perception of ‘modern’ knowledge depends on how the word ‘modern’ is understood and interpreted by them. Modernity in the sense of globalisation, progress and development is not necessarily incompatible with Islam (e.g. see Ahmad, 1980; Saeed, 1999; Moten, 2005; Alatas, 2005; Sikand, 2005; Dangor, 2005; Tan, 2009). On the contrary, attributes associated with modernity such as possessing an achievement motive, supporting economic growth, scientific and technological advances, and increasing social mobility and political participation are in alignment with most Islamic traditions. In fact, the acceptance of these attributes had contributed in no small measure to the Islamic renaissance between the ninth and fourteenth centuries marked by scientific, technological and philosophical achievements (Moten, 2005). Correspondingly, not all Muslims object to ‘modernising’ Muslim education. Examples include the endeavours of a number of Indonesian Islamic scholars to embrace ‘modern ethos’

and efforts to ‘modernise’ the madrasahs in India by propagating a more holistic Islamic understanding of knowledge (Saeed, 1999, Sikand, 2005, both cited in Tan, 2009).

It is also noteworthy that the learning of ‘modern’ knowledge such as mathematics and sciences is not necessarily new or foreign in the Islamic traditions. To appreciate this point, one needs to understand a dominant Islamic conception of knowledge. Underpinned by a belief that all knowledge comes from God and arrives to humans through various channels, Muslims are obligated to pursue knowledge and cultivate the various branches of knowledge (Alatas, 2006; Tan, 2009). There are two main categories of knowledge in the Islamic traditions: the rational sciences (*al-‘ulum al-‘aqliyyah*) or intellectual sciences, and the traditional sciences (*al-‘ulum al-naqliyah*) or revealed knowledge. The former refers to knowledge that stems from man’s capacity for reason, sense perception and observation; it includes ‘modern’ disciplines such as logic, physics, metaphysics, geometry, arithmetic, medicine, geography, chemistry, biology, music, astronomy and science of civilisation (Alatas, 2006). The second category of knowledge, on the other hand, focuses on knowledge that is obtained via Revelation. Notwithstanding the differences between the two kinds of knowledge, most Muslims do not distinguish between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ knowledge, viewing them instead as integrated rather than mutually exclusive (Douglass & Shaikh, 2004). A number of Muslim writers claim that the prevailing dichotomy of traditional knowledge and ‘modern’ education only began from the Western colonial period due to the philosophy and policy of the imperial powers and the counter-responses of the *ulama* (Islamic scholars) (e.g. Zaman, 2002; Dangor, 2005; Syed & Dayang, 2005). Just as ‘modern’ knowledge is not foreign but is part of the Islamic traditions, ‘modern’ pedagogies such as group discussion, debate and project work are not new to the Muslims as well. In other words, these student-centred pedagogies have been propagated by Muslim scholars and practised in the Islamic context since the medieval times (see Tan & Abbas, 2009 for details).

How then do Muslims respond to ‘modern’ knowledge in a globalised world and digital age? Rahman (1982) points out that contemporary Muslim theorists subscribe to two basic approaches to ‘modern’ knowledge, albeit with variations in between:

- (1) that the acquisition of modern knowledge be limited to the practical technological sphere, since at the level of pure thought Muslims need not need Western intellectual products – indeed, that these should be avoided, since they might create doubt and disruption in the Muslim mind, for which the traditional Islamic system of belief already provides satisfactory answers to ultimate questions of world view; and (2) that Muslims without fear can and ought to acquire not only Western technology but also its intellectualism, since no type of knowledge can be harmful, and that in any case science and pure thought were assiduously cultivated by Muslims in the early medieval centuries, whence they were taken over by Europeans themselves (pp. 46-47).

The contrasting approaches preferred by various Muslim individuals and communities led naturally to the establishment of different types of Islamic schools in the world. For instance, there exist Islamic schools that are wary of ‘modern’ (read ‘Western’) knowledge and favour Islamic studies instead, such as most Deobandi madrasahs that adhere faithfully to the *dars-i-nizami* curriculum. Although the *dars-i-nizami* curriculum theoretically comprises traditional religious sciences (such as jurisprudence and prophetic sayings) and rational sciences (such as

philosophy, grammar, and logic), many Indian Deobandi madrasahs have resultantly emphasised the former and neglected the latter (Geaves, 2008).

On the other hand, there are Islamic schools that adopt the second approach by going beyond Western technology to embrace ‘modern’ subjects such as the sciences and humanities while situating the teaching and learning within an Islamic context. An example of a ‘reformist madrasah’ that accepted ‘modern’ knowledge and schooling is Madrasah Al-Iqbal which was established in Singapore back in the period 1907-1908. It was structured along the lines of a state school in its organisation, curriculum and pedagogy. That was evident in the school introducing a system of examination; combining religious subjects such as Qur’an, worship and rituals with ‘modern’ subjects such as mathematics, English, and town planning; and substituting the traditional memorisation method of study with student activities such as debates and rhetoric (Syed & Dayang, 2005). But the reformists’ madrasah was closed down shortly due partly to “rumblings of disapproval from the religious traditionalists about its more ‘Westernised’ education system” (Chee, 2006, p. 9). Against a backdrop of the various Muslim perspectives towards ‘modern’ knowledge, the next two sections explore two Islamic schools in Britain and Singapore.

At the outset, it is necessary to explain why Britain and Singapore have been chosen for our comparative study. First, these two countries have Muslim populations who form the largest religious minorities in their respective countries: about 4 percent in Britain and 15 percent in Singapore. Most Muslims in Britain and Singapore share a common Asian heritage and subscribe to the Sunni tradition. 80 percent of all Muslims in Britain are of South Asian descent (Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi) with the rest from Turkish, Arab, Persian, African and other extractions (Office for National Statistics, 2001, as cited in Hussain, 2007). In Singapore, about 85 percent of Muslims are Malays who were the indigenous people in the country, with the rest comprising South Asians, Chinese, Eurasians and Arabs (Tan, 2007). Another similarity is that only a very small number of Muslim children in Britain (about 5 percent of the Muslim student population) and Singapore (about 4 percent of the Muslim student population) attend full-time Islamic schools with the majority opting for secular state schools. That Singapore was a British colony is also a pertinent point for our comparison. Singapore was founded as a British trading post in 1819 and granted self-government in 1959 (with a brief occupation by the Japanese during the Second World War). It became part of the Malaysian Federation in 1963 and gained independence in 1965. Continuing the dualistic educational system of the British colonial powers, the Singapore government mandates that all the state schools be secular and the Islamic schools remain as private schools under the purview and responsibility of the Muslim community.

But why compare a Singapore madrasah with an Islamic faith school in Britain, rather than a British Darul Uloom? This is because the madrasahs in Singapore, despite their name, are dissimilar to the Darul Ulooms which function more like seminaries. All the Singapore madrasahs, to varying degrees of emphasis, teach both Islamic subjects and National Curriculum subjects such as English and Mathematics. This is unlike most of the Darul Ulooms in Britain where the focus is still on Islamic subjects. In fact, the madrasah in our case study sets aside 60 percent of the curriculum time on National Curriculum subjects at the primary level and between 45 percent and 70 percent at the secondary level. This makes the Singapore madrasah closer to the British Islamic faith school in our case study where between 70 percent and 90 percent of the curriculum time is devoted to National Curriculum subjects. The absence of Islamic faith schools

in Singapore means that the burden of training Islamic scholars and teachers *and* teaching National Curriculum subjects falls squarely on the shoulders of the madrasahs in Singapore. While there are many aspects worthy of consideration in our comparative analysis, our focus will be on the history, aims, curriculum, and pedagogy of both institutions.

A Madrasah in Singapore

Background of Islamic schooling in Singapore

A Muslim community was formed in Singapore at the beginning of the nineteenth century due to the influence of the sultans who converted to Islam. At around the same period, Qur'anic schools were established for Muslim children to memorise and recite the Qur'an. Between the 1930s and 1960s, at least 50 madrasah-type schools that were informal village seminaries with one or two teachers teaching basic religious knowledge were established (Straits Times 1 Mar 1998, as cited in Mukhlis, 2006).

Under the colonial rule, the British established Malay-medium schools (also known as Malay vernacular schools) for the Malays who were predominantly Muslims. While the Malay lessons were part of the formal curriculum and the Malay teachers were paid by the government, Qur'anic lessons were left to the religious teachers who were supported by the parents (Abdullah, 2007). That led to the rise of a dual system of education where religious subjects were demarcated from 'secular' subjects such as the Malay language and others. The development and flourishing of madrasahs in Singapore were due primarily to the absence of education on Islam in the government educational institutions and the threat of Christian missionary activities (Syed & Dayang, 2005). Left to the religious community, madrasahs proliferated as private educational institutions outside the purview and concern of the government. Although Islamic Studies was introduced from 1958 to 1970s and for a brief period in the 1980s, the state schools in Singapore today implement a strictly secular curriculum with no formal religious education and the Islamic headscarf is banned in all state schools.

Muslim children in Singapore can choose to attend a state school (known as 'national school' in Singapore) or one of the six full-time madrasahs (Tan, 2007, 2008). Students who opt for state schools may receive religious instruction after school hours from 'mosque madrasahs' (i.e., mosques that offer part-time Islamic instruction), private Islamic educational institutions, Muslim organisations, and private religious teachers. Both religious subjects such as Qur'anic Study and Arabic language, and non-religious (or 'academic') subjects such as English and Mathematics are taught in the madrasahs. The madrasahs in Singapore devote between 30 percent and 60 percent of their curriculum time on academic subjects with the rest of the time on religious subjects.

Brief history of the school

The madrasah in Singapore in our illustrative case study was founded in 1947 as a school that offered Basic Qur'an and Islamic knowledge to the villagers with an enrolment of about 50 students. It started offering academic subjects such as English, Mathematics and Science at the primary and secondary levels in the 1990s. Its enrolment doubled from about 400 students in the early 1990s to about 900 students in the late 1990s. A popular madrasah with the Muslim

community, it has been receiving more applications than what it could accept. For example, it admitted about 70 primary 1 pupils although more than 100 students had applied to the madrasah in 2006. It currently has over 800 students from ages 7 to 17 (primary 1 to secondary 5). Although the madrasah is a co-educational school, there are more girls (three-quarter) than boys (one-quarter), due largely to the desire of many Muslim parents for their daughters to don the headscarf (known as 'tudung' in Malay in Singapore) in school.

Aims

With a vision to be the 'first choice in madrasah education', the madrasah's learning outcomes are to produce *du'at* [Allah's vicegerent] who glorifies Allah by radiating the message of Islam; loves the Prophet through exemplifying his morally upright character; is devoted to the Quran and the religious knowledge therein; emulates the learned scholars and their quest for knowledge; possesses the spirit of a *mujaddid* [reformer] in their innovative and enterprising spirit; and aspires to be a faithful servant by contributing to humanity (information from the student handbook). The chairman of the madrasah described the school as a 'modern madrasah' with a curriculum that takes cognisance of the challenges faced by Muslims in Singapore in a 'modern' and globalised world. He elaborated:

We strongly believe in that God created you to be the best of *ummah* (Muslim community) ... We use that to invoke this commitment that it is our responsibility to be the best, as far as your capability, your competency, you are supposed to be the best. It is a matter whether you actualise your potential or not. So, as an institution, you must be the best. ... God created you to be vicegerent in this world, so this is our responsibility (interview, October 2008).

Integrating religious tradition with 'modern' knowledge, the madrasah aims to prepare their graduates for a digital age where the English language and technological knowledge are indispensable (information from the school manual and website). The madrasah encourages its students to pursue either a religious pathway to become religious teachers and leaders, or a 'secular' pathway to become Muslim professionals holding non-religious jobs. The madrasah believes in producing religious elites that are in touch with 'modern' sciences and contemporary challenges in order to offer solutions and be of benefit to the Muslim community. A teacher who teaches religious subjects at the madrasah said that it is no longer enough in the 'modern' world for a Muslim scholar or teacher to be knowledgeable in Arabic and Qur'anic studies; rather such a person needs to be well-versed in both religious and 'modern' subjects such as English, mathematics and sciences, be technologically connected, and is confident in using English to reach out to the young generation of Muslims who increasingly prefer English to Arabic and Malay (interview, November 2007).

Curriculum

In terms of the curriculum, the students at the madrasah study both religious subjects (known as *Ukhrawi* Subjects) and National Curriculum subjects (known as Academic Subjects) (information from the school manual). Religious subjects include Arabic, Quranic Study, and

‘History and Words of Prophet Muhammad’ while academic subjects include English, Mathematics, Science, and Geography. Arabic is a compulsory subject for all the students since it is the language of the Qur’an. But such a demarcation does not mean that the madrasah sees these two fields as separate. The chairman of the madrasah asserted:

We don’t dichotomise. While we call these academic and *ukhrawi*, but at the operational level, these are God’s creation, God’s wisdom and knowledge and these are needed for you to be a good *khalifah* (vicegerent) (interview, October 2008).

All the students in the madrasah sit for the national examinations set by the Ministry of Education for academic subjects at the end of their primary and secondary education. On the other hand, the examinations for religious subjects are set by the madrasah and Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS; Islamic Religious Council of Singapore) which is a statutory board responsible for all Muslim affairs in Singapore. Besides expecting the girls to don their headscarves (unlike the case in state schools), other Islamic practices in the madrasah include performing religious duties and rituals such as the *solat* (prayers) and observing Islamic rituals such as Ramadan where the school canteen will be closed for the whole duration.

A distinctive feature of the madrasah is that all the subjects except Arabic and Malay are taught in English for the primary level. This is a major change that was implemented since 2003; prior to that, the medium of instruction was Arabic and supplemented by Malay. The purpose for this change is to give the primary students a firm foundation in English which is the language of science and technology in a knowledge-based economy. In line with the objective of the madrasah to develop potential religious teachers and religious leaders in a ‘modern’ world, the use of English in religious subjects is intended to help the graduates internalise their faith and propagate the religion fluently and confidently in English (interviews with the vice-principal and two teachers, November 2007). To promote multicultural learning and national integration, the primary school students learn, through a new subject known as ‘Islamic Social Studies’, about the religious beliefs and practices of other Singaporeans such as Deepavali (festival of light) which is celebrated by the Hindus. They also engage in cross-cultural activities such as interviewing their non-Muslim neighbours about their cultural and religious festivities. The madrasah also organises activities and games with non-Islamic educational institutions to promote social cohesion between its students and non-Muslims in Singapore.

Pedagogy

Employing ‘advanced pedagogies’ in the madrasah, the chairman of the madrasah stated:

I wouldn’t say that we are against rote learning, but I think religion is not about that. It is about internalisation, value-laden, it is about solving real life problems (interview, October 2008).

Interviews with the Head of English department and two teachers at that madrasah reveal that the madrasah teachers make a conscious effort to engage their students through questioning, group discussion and hands-on activities such as project work. Student-centred pedagogies are also infused into the curriculum across the subjects with activities such as playing games, singing and

solving puzzles (information from the website). English language teachers adopt strategies such as the 'Shared Book Approach' where students participate by reading along and role-playing the characters in the story. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is capitalised on to encourage students to exercise their initiative and shape their own learning. For instance, the students discuss and solve Mathematics problems using interactive whiteboards, learn Arabic using the individual electronic polling devices, and learn Malay using MP3 recording. Academically the madrasah has been performing well compared to other madrasahs and it even produced the top Primary 6 madrasah student in the national examination in 2008.

An Islamic Faith School in Britain

Background of Islamic schooling in Britain

Most Muslims arrived in Britain in the middle of the twentieth century from the Indian subcontinent. There were 1.6 million Muslims in Britain in 2001 (Office for National Statistics, 2001) but the number has since increased to about 2.5 million Muslims (Hussain, 2007). The Darul Ulooms were established in the mid 1970s, followed by the Islamic faith schools in the 1980s (Mandaville, 2007). There were about 60 Islamic faith schools by 1998 and the number grew to over 100 by 2002 (Walford, 2004). It is estimated that there are currently about 111 Muslim schools in Britain, catering for about 14,000 students, out of which seven are currently receiving state funding (Ameli, Azam & Merali, 2005; [Anwar, 2008](#)). There is a spectrum of Islamic faith schools, ranging from small schools for a few dozen children established in homes, mosques and domestic houses, to expensive and substantial establishments for nearly 2000 children (Hewer, 2001; Walford, 2004). For the Darul Ulooms, official statistics are harder to come by but most authors put the total number at between 25 and 30. [Hussain \(2007\)](#) estimates that the total student enrolment is between 3000 and 3500 but Mandaville (2007) suggests a higher figure at between 7,500 and 10,000.

The main objectives of Islamic faith schools are to provide appropriate religious and moral education for the Muslim children especially single-sex education for secondary school age girls; preserve the cultural traditions of the minority faith group; and improve the educational achievement of minority faith pupils ([Mustafa, 1999](#); [Hellyer, 2007](#)). Most Islamic faith schools teach the core subjects within the National Curriculum such as English Language, Mathematics, Science, and Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and prepare their students to sit for the national examinations. All of them are subject to government regulation and inspection. In contrast, Darul Ulooms concentrate on training religious scholars and teaching a spread of Islamic subjects such as *Al-Qur'an* (memorisation of the Qur'an), Arabic Language, *Usul al-Fiqh* (principles of Islamic jurisprudence) and *Seerah* (life of the Prophet). Although the Darul Ulooms offer some core subjects within the National Curriculum such as English and Mathematics, much of their curriculum time is devoted to Islamic subjects, prayer and religious inculcation. In general, the Darul Ulooms spend less than 50 percent of the curriculum time on academic subjects, unlike the Islamic faith schools where between 70 percent and 90 percent of curriculum time is set aside for academic subjects.

Brief history of the school

The Islamic school in Britain selected for our study is an independent Islamic faith school in the southern part of Britain. Established in 2003, it is an independent girls' secondary school with an

enrolment of 130 girls aged from 11 to 16 (from years 6 to 11). It has recently started to take in Year 12 girls to prepare their students for the General Certificate in Education at 'A' levels. According to the Acting Head Teacher, the school was established after requests by a group of Muslim parents who wished to send their daughters to an all girls' school, an option that was unavailable in the area when the state-run single sex girls' school closed in 2002. The state schools were also not the preferred choice for these Muslim parents who were unhappy with the under-achievement of many Muslim children in these schools (information from the school's proposal). What these parents desired, instead, was a school that provides a culturally sensitive Islamic learning environment for their daughters.

Aims

Striving to combine the Islamic traditions with 'modern' knowledge, the school's vision is to be an impressive centre for learning where the pupils can receive a balanced education in an Islamic environment that will promote their spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development (information from the school prospectus). It is hoped that this vision will prepare the girls to enter into the practical world as confident and educated Muslim women. Stressing the need to ace the National Curriculum subjects, the Acting Head Teacher of the Islamic school said:

It's important because we're preparing them to be British citizens. They've to go into the world to look for jobs so they'll need the national curriculum subjects (interview, June 2009).

On the importance of Islamic ethos, the Head Teacher underscored the pervasive presence of Islamic culture, tradition and values that undergird the curriculum. Elaborating on the concept of an Islamic ethos, Dr Basil Mustafa who is the Advisor of the school as well as a British Muslim academic who has conducted research on Islamic faith schools explained:

So the ethos is what I call the physical ethos, there's a prayer room for those who like to pray, there's a library that is stocked with books, that's what I call the physical ethos. But the spiritual and moral ethos is equally important, and Muslim schools should combine both (interview, June 2009).

The school uniform is the Islamic dress code for the girls where donning the headscarf is compulsory. The school also emphasises the habituation of Islamic manners such as punctuality, mutual respect for fellow students, and utmost respect for staff and parents. Islamic obligations such as *wudhu* (ablution) and keeping Ramadhan and Islamic holidays are also underlined (information from the school prospectus and website).

Curriculum

Like many other faith schools, the school offers National Curriculum subjects as well as an Islamic Studies curriculum (information from the school prospectus). The former includes English language, Mathematics, Science, Computer Studies, Humanities, Physical Education, Art & Design, and Modern Languages (Urdu and Bengali). Islamic subjects include Arabic, Qur'anic Studies, Islamic History, *Ibadah* (worship), *Fiqh* (jurisprudence) and *Hadith* (Prophetic

traditions). The students are being prepared to sit for the national curriculum tests and assessments. Interviews with the Head Teacher, Acting Head Teacher and the Head of Religious Education reveal that efforts are made to help the students learn beyond the classroom to explore global issues and current affairs. For instance, the students were asked to do research on charity projects such as the tsunami disaster and raised funds for such causes. The Acting Head Teacher said:

We're to prepare them for everything, not just Islamic ethos but everything happening around the world, the refugees, child abuse (interview, June 2009).

There are also activities to promote integration and multi-cultural learning. Examples of extra-curricular activities include a Sunday sports club, friendly games matches with a local school, and educational visits such as visits to Warwick castle and the theatre to watch a Shakespeare play. The students also learn about other religions and participated in class projects such as creating posters to share their findings of religions such as Hinduism to the class.

Pedagogy

In terms of pedagogy, the prevailing teaching methods in the Islamic faith school parallel those in the state schools since they offer similar subjects under the National Curriculum. The Acting Head Teacher of the Islamic school commented:

We follow the National Curriculum so the teaching style is the same. When Ofsted came to see us, they want to see if we follow the state standards (interview, June 2009).

The Head of Religious Education added:

We use the skills and techniques used in state schools ... I don't see any reason why we can't have interactive fun lessons, it doesn't have to be didactic, it doesn't have to be teacher-centric, a lot of my classes are student-centric (interview, June 2009).

This was attested to in the inspection report by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) in 2005. Noting that the overall teaching was satisfactory, the inspection report stated that the teachers abided by effective procedures to assess pupils' standards and monitor their progress. It noted that some teachers were adept at using good questioning techniques to encourage the students to think, with the students contributing actively through discussions, role-playing and drama. Academically, the school has also performed well in the national examinations in 2005; there was 100 percent pass rate and the results even surpassed those of the state schools in the area (interview with the Head Teacher, June 2009). However, the Ofsted report also pointed out that some teachers were not confident in incorporating more student-centred activities and did not adopt more varied methods to suit all learning styles.

Discussion

A few observations can be made from our exploration of the two Islamic schools in Singapore and Britain. First, they share a common goal to find a delicate balance between the imparting of ‘modern’ knowledge and Islamic knowledge. As pointed out earlier, there are two basic approaches to ‘modern’ knowledge: to limit the acquisition of modern knowledge to the practical technological sphere; or to acquire Western technology as well as its intellectual ideas (Rahman, 1982). The two Islamic schools in our study exemplify the latter approach as they seek to give their students the best of both worlds by acquiring ‘modern’ knowledge through Islamic lens. An advantage of being an Islamic school is that the teachers who are mostly Muslims are able to infuse Islamic teachings and values into the curriculum, although to varying degrees of success. For example, the Head of Religious Education at the British Islamic faith school said:

Where we can, it [Islamic ethos] is emphasised For example they’ve done something on Muslim scientists, Muslim mathematicians, anywhere where Islam can be a focus, it’s brought in (interview, June 2009).

Likewise, a teacher teaching Islamic Social Studies at the Singapore madrasah said that she consciously incorporated verses from the Qur’an to highlight the need to respect other cultures (interview, November 2007).

Secondly, both Islamic schools face similar challenges in the process of teaching both religious and ‘modern’ subjects. First the students in both schools study more subjects than their counterparts in the state schools. On top of the full National Curriculum subjects, they have to devote between 10 percent and 40 percent of their curriculum time on religious subjects. The learning of Arabic, besides English, is also mandatory in both schools – a requirement that is not implemented in secular state schools. Compounding the heavy workload is the state requirement for their students to sit for the national examinations and meet the minimum standards. In Britain, all Islamic faith schools have to be regulated and inspected by Ofsted. That the British Islamic faith school in our case study has applied for voluntary-aided status so that it can benefit from state support also entails that it has to demonstrate its ability to achieve and sustain good academic results and holistic development for the girls. The same pressure to focus on academic performance applies to the madrasah in Singapore. Unlike the Islamic faith schools in Britain, the madrasahs in Singapore are not subject to regulation and inspection by the Ministry of Education. However, they still need to comply with the Compulsory Education Act which stipulates that all madrasahs have to meet the minimum performance benchmarks set by the Ministry of Education at the end of the primary education (known as Primary School Leaving Examination; PSLE). Madrasahs that meet the benchmark twice in a three-year period from 2008 are allowed to continue to take in Primary 1 pupils; those that fail to fulfil this condition have to stop admitting primary school students in their institutions. A repercussion of the implementation of the Compulsory Education Act is that the madrasahs now have to devote more curriculum time to academic subjects especially English, Mathematics and Science (see Tan, 2010 for a detailed discussion on the impact of the Compulsory Education Act on Singapore madrasahs).

Thirdly, the staff in both schools are confronted with the perennial challenge of insufficient teaching resources. The status of both schools as private institutions means that they have to depend primarily on the Muslim community rather than the state for financial support.

Another challenge is the pedagogical and mental shift for some teachers to move from a more teacher-centred to a more student-centred teaching style. The dominant pedagogical mode in many Islamic institutions today is listening, memorisation and regurgitation within a teacher-centred learning environment (Talbani, 1996; also see Eickelman, 1985; Zakaria, 2008; Tan & Abbas, 2009). It has been observed that an impeccable recitation of the Qur'an is so valued that understanding a text or asking questions is perceived to be unnecessary and impeding successful memorisation in many non-Arabic speaking countries (Zia, 2006). Hewer (2001) asserts that such a transmission approach conflicts with a child-centred approach to education and discourages the exercise of individual freedom to maintain a variant synthesis of personal knowledge.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the history, aims, curriculum, and pedagogy of a British Islamic faith school and a Singapore madrasah. Adopting a positive attitude towards 'modern' knowledge, the two Islamic schools in our illustrative case studies strive to help their students learn 'modern' subjects while staying faithful to their religious traditions. The paper has also explored some common challenges faced by the students and teachers in their quest for a balanced curriculum. By highlighting the Islamic schools in two Muslim minority countries, this paper aims to contribute towards the international literature on how religious schools assert their cultural heritage and negotiate their learning in a modern age.

Underlying these challenges faced by contemporary Islamic schools is a fundamental difference between Islamic schools and secular state schools on how they view 'truth', 'knowledge' and other attendant concepts. A case in point, mentioned in a study conducted by the Islamic Human Rights Commission, is the resistance of many Muslim students and parents towards the teaching of evolution as 'truth' in Biology (Ameli, Azam & Merali, 2005). Another example is the introduction of sexuality knowledge in schools. While studying in an Islamic school allows the students to avoid these religiously objectionable topics, there remains an epistemological gap between Islamic schools and secular state schools. A 'modernist' view – one that is accepted in many secular state schools – states that 'truth' and 'knowledge' could be 'discovered', at least provisionally, and are subject to revisions by human beings (Bennett, 2005). In contrast, many Muslims see the starting point of all subjects, including ecology, the social sciences, and the natural sciences to be the revealed scripture, which is not open for discussion or alternative interpretation (Hewer, 2001). The opposing views towards knowledge may explain the resistance and animosity some Muslims have towards secular state schools, perceiving them to be 'Westernised' and inimical to their religious and cultural heritage. At the same time, the antithesis reminds us of the deep-seated and on-going tension faced by Muslims who wish to combine their religious traditions with 'modern' knowledge.

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