

S P R I N G 2 0 0 5

Leading Islamic Schools in the UK: A challenge for us all

This report holds up a mirror to the world of Islamic faith schools so that the schools themselves, and those outside the Muslim community can see more clearly what is happening in them.

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Section 1

This final report on my research project is divided into two sections. The first, below, gives the background to the research, an explanation of the methodology that evolved during the project, and a summary of theoretical and practical conclusions. The second section analyses the practical activities on which the research was based and shows how the methodology developed over time in order to make sense of, or tell the story of, those activities. [Download Section 2](#)

Introduction

In May 2002, I read a research report called 'Challenge Plus: the experience of black and minority-ethnic (BME) school leaders' written by Jan McKenley and Dr Gloria Gordon and published by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL). The report suggested NCSL could offer more help to people from black and minority-ethnic backgrounds by getting as many of them as possible involved in the work of the college, creating opportunities for people to research what was going on in multi-ethnic schooling and school leadership, and by looking into what was happening in the independent-school sector for BME teachers and school leaders.

As most of the heads, teachers and pupils of Islamic schools in the UK are of BME backgrounds, I applied to NCSL to do a research project on issues arising for Islamic school heads. At that time, I was the head of an independent Islamic school in Nottingham, which I had helped to set up. We had started with primary-age pupils, boys and girls, and then later added Key Stage 3 (KS3) and Key Stage 4 (KS4) classes.

I was also, and still am, a member of the governing body of the Association of Muslim Schools (AMS) in the UK and Eire, which is an umbrella body for Islamic schools, and the AMS also helped to fund the project.

The project had several sides to it. I spent a lot of time reading about Islamic education and faith schooling, school leadership and education in general, and also the different types of research. Then there were the different activities that I arranged or participated in. I visited Islamic schools up and down the country and interviewed headteachers about their work. During this time, I was twice invited onto the Radio 4 programme 'Beyond Belief' to talk about Islam and Islamic schools.

During the third month, I was invited to attend a high-level conference on Muslims in state education, which was organised by the Leicester-based School Development and Support Agency (SDSA). This contact later led to me working with the SDSA to set up a network of state and Islamic schools in Leicester.

As a research associate at NCSL, I was asked to host a hotseat on the College's talk2learn website, which was intended to open up a discussion about the issues which come up when Muslims attend state schools. This was just before the invasion of Iraq, and so it was thought to be a hot topic which heads from around the country would be interested in discussing.

The invasion of Iraq prompted NCSL to arrange a Leading Edge (now Leading Practice) seminar to look at the issues that heads across the country might need to be aware of and to offer them advice and support. I was part of the team who planned and delivered this seminar, which attracted a lot of media attention. Following on from this, I was asked to write a short think piece on Islamic schools for NCSL's newsletter and also on Muslims in schools for a magazine called 'Children's Minds', which focuses on mental-health issues among young people.

The final activity of the project was the Islamic schools headteachers' conference, which I organised in collaboration with NCSL and the AMS. This was the first conference of its kind to be held nationally and brought together the heads of 35 UK-based Islamic schools for three days at the NCSL national centre in Nottingham.

Throughout the project, in addition to the activities I organised and participated in, I was aware that, as an Islamic school headteacher myself, I was, in a sense, researching into my own experience as a microcosm of the Islamic schooling phenomenon, that is

...a case study that is a valuable example of [the] contradictions, tensions and issues in large-scale social structures and processes and global social, economic, technological and cultural trends [which makes it possible to] collect data with a view to analyzing the case in a way that [would] shed light on those structures, processes and trends while making the individual phenomenon understandable in new ways. (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998, p157)

In other words, in finding ways to understand my own individual experience as a British Muslim Islamic school leader, I would also be able to reflect on the wider context which produces that experience.

Muslims and schooling in the UK

Muslims are by far the largest religious minority in the UK, about three per cent of the total population according to the 2001 census. Also, a relatively large proportion of these, over 50 per cent, is under the age of 24, which means there are probably around 500,000 Muslim pupils in UK schools; this is over five per cent of the total school population. Most Muslims live in London and the large industrial cities of the Midlands and the North of England, with relatively few in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. About 75 per cent are of South Asian origin, the rest coming from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds, including a very small number of converts, probably less than one per cent of the total.

Despite the differences in cultural background, Islam is a unifying factor among these communities, and religious commitment is widely shared, even though there are sectarian and personal differences.

The first Muslim immigrants after World War Two were essentially male economic migrants who wanted to benefit from employment opportunities in the UK so as to be able to send money home to their families. The first organised community institutions were mosques, places of worship, usually converted houses or other buildings.

As time went by, men brought their wives over, babies were born, and families had to face up to the fact that their children were going to grow up in Britain with English as their first (preferred) language.

By the time the first generation of children were finishing their 11 years of compulsory state education, parents were realising the effects of secondary socialisation – not only were their children speaking English among themselves, but they were also absorbing and displaying British cultural beliefs, attitudes and behaviour.

Reactions to this situation varied roughly along the three lines which are generally typical of Muslim responses to modernity: **modernist**, **traditionalist** and **fundamentalist** (see Rippon, 1993).

The modernist tendency is to accept a relatively large degree of reinterpretation of Islamic practice in order to take a full part in modern British society, while remaining faithful to basic Islamic principles. So, for example, the requirement to dress modestly may be interpreted in context to allow modern styles of dress; another example is that participation in the British political process may be seen as fulfilling the Islamic requirement of giving *nasihah* or good advice to the ruling authorities, and there are now Muslim councillors in many towns and Muslims in the House of Commons and the House of Lords

On the other hand, the fundamentalist approach, which is, paradoxically, a modern development, rejects modernity and looks for a return to the 'purity' of the past. This may take several forms, some more inward-looking – seeking to purify the Islamic community of the alien 'innovative' practices which have crept in over the centuries – while others focus on the 'outward enemy' as the perceived source of corruption. Both forms may have strict attitudes to dress codes, sometimes adopting a particular Islamic costume, and have little interest in voting in British elections, which they may see as either irrelevant or even *haram* (forbidden).

The predominant tendency, however, is to hold traditionalist attitudes, which allow a slow process of change and adaptation guided by firmly established principles of interpretation. People following traditional practices often wear clothes associated with their cultural background, so Asian, African and Arab styles will vary, and will get involved in – usually local – politics, when they see a clear advantage for their own community.

None of these reactions to modernity constitutes a group or sect, and often a Muslim may hold all three types of attitude, depending on different situations in life.

When it comes to education and schooling, we see that the modernist attitude is often that Muslim children should go to the same secular state schools as everyone else in order to learn how to play a full part in society alongside the children of other religions and of none. Islamic education is seen as

the job of the family. This tends to be the position adopted by some of the more educated and middle-class families, who might even mistrust the culture of the local mosque more than they do that of the local state school. For such families, sending your children to an Islamic school may even seem a step in the wrong direction, away from successful integration into mainstream society.

A fundamentalist position would be based on a great mistrust of the motives of secular state education and the hidden curriculum. Muslim children are seen as needing protection from un-Islamic influences, at least until they are old enough to understand for themselves how to identify and resist social, media and other forms of influence and indoctrination. There are some fundamentalist schools in the UK of the inward-looking type mentioned above, often boarding schools, which use sometimes draconian methods to create the Islamic personality of the child.

Traditionalists occupy the middle ground. The majority are more firmly rooted in a cultural tradition than any theological position and so try to maintain as much contact and continuity with 'home' – be it India, Pakistan, Bangladesh or elsewhere – as possible. Going to a secular state school is not seen as too much of a problem, as long as it is counterbalanced by attendance at the local mosque or *madrassa* (religious school) and, often, by extended visits 'back home'. These visits may sometimes cause quite serious disruption to a pupil's school education at a critical phase and may lead to underattainment. Another traditionalist practice is to marry 'from back home', which means that at least one parent speaks English as an additional language, and this may also have an effect on the educational culture of the family. In fact, Muslim families are statistically far more likely than others to be of below-average income, with unemployment, a lack of formal qualifications and semi-skilled or unskilled occupations all significantly higher than average. Muslims are also more and more likely to end up in prison, according to Home Office statistics, and made up some 7 per cent of the total prison population in 2000.

Increasingly, however, there is the development of an awareness among traditionalists that they have as much of a right as other religious groups to have their own educational institutions where children can benefit from all of the technology of education represented by the national curriculum and associated teaching methods, while at the same time absorbing the principles and practices of their religion and community. The intention is not to reject modernity, but not to be swallowed up by it either. One headteacher I interviewed expressed this as "getting right the balance between integration and disintegration".

Against this historical and social background, there has been an exponential growth of Islamic schools in the UK during the past 20 years.

Faith schools

Faith schooling, although common in the UK, is not often well understood. Professor Grace, Director of the Centre for Research in Catholic Education at the London University Institute of Education, writes:

Michael Gallagher has argued (1977:23) that “secular marginalisation” has become a dominant feature of Western contemporary intellectual culture with the result that “in the academic and media worlds... religion is subtly ignored as unimportant”. The effect of such marginalisation can be seen in educational studies and research by the general neglect of the faith-based dimension of any major feature under investigation. Detailed scrutiny of the literature on globalisation and education, policy studies, school effectiveness and school leadership or of the conference programmes of organisations such as the American Educational Research Association or the Islamic Educational Research Association will demonstrate this lacuna.

...it may be argued that while faith based schools have come “out of the ghetto” in terms of their relationship with external agencies, this process does not seem to have happened to the same extent in educational scholarship and research.

...it must also be noted that the various faith communities themselves have not given much priority to researching the culture and outcomes of their particular schooling systems. (Grace 2003: 149)

So it seems that there is very little research into faith schools generally, and even less into Islamic schools. This is true both for research done by outsiders and insiders, for different reasons. From a secularist perspective, faith tends to be viewed as a private, personal phenomenon irrelevant to education and schooling; from a religious perspective, research may also be perceived as irrelevant, or even threatening, to the authority of faith and tradition.

At the level of everyday life, I have certainly found that many non-Muslims do not understand why Muslim parents would want to isolate their children in exclusively Islamic schools and that there is a lot of misunderstanding of what might be going on there. Without exception, I found that all of the visitors to my own school were surprised at how ‘normal’ it was; even a *Muslim* teacher who came to do some supply work for us had expected to find rows of children sitting on the floor learning religious texts by rote, watched over by a man with a stick.

The other side of this is that many Muslim parents do not understand why anyone should object to their sending their children to an Islamic school; *they* know that they are not trying to create a ghetto mentality or fundamentalist fanatics.

This shows there is often a large gulf of understanding between the two sides, and this is something I wanted to find out about in more detail through my research.

Islamic and Muslim schools

I use the term Islamic school to refer to an institution which is set up specifically to teach Muslim pupils their religion, in addition to the secular subjects, and which replaces attendance at a state-maintained school or college. These schools are usually full-time and include in their programmes of study, as required by law, an equivalent to the broad and balanced national curriculum, in addition to Islamic Studies. There are well over 100 of these schools in the UK at present, and the number is increasing exponentially year by year.

There is, though, a wide diversity within the Islamic schools community: they may be primary or secondary, mixed or single-sex, day or boarding, selective or comprehensive, large or small, new and struggling or well-established, independent (mostly) or state-funded (five at present), more or less focused on the secular curriculum, monocultural or multicultural, and, finally, attached to a particular Islamic cultural organisation or community or relatively independent. This diversity also extends to the vision and values of both leadership and teaching and learning styles.

There is also an awareness among heads of Islamic schools that the possibility exists for them to creatively challenge the state model of education. One recently commented, at the heads' conference:

Instead of trying to be as good as the state schools, we should recognise that, in our situation, we are constantly in the process of evaluating what teaching is. Now our situation is quite fluid, and we must acknowledge that there's a great deal of dissatisfaction in the mainstream in terms of what education is. On the edges of that mainstream, there are some extremely interesting things going on, which probably stand a snowballs chance in *jahannam* (hell) of taking root in the mainstream. But rather than us jumping into the main pool, where the most forward-thinking people of this society are running 100 miles per hour away from it, and we tend to be running into it, to be trying to do that thing better – it's the most forward-thinking people we need to be keeping an eye on. Where do they see the future of their system? That's what we should be connecting with. We are flexible enough to respond to it and also engaged in such a way that we take it on as a community and then give it back to them. We can do it much more quickly, because we still have community. The most forward-thinking people in this society know that education is a matter for community – it's not about institutions. Schools are dying everywhere, so let's not follow them into the grave. We must affirm our communities and make them active in terms of seeing where the cutting edge is. We are closer to the front of this matter than we think.

There is a large amount of experimentation within this community, with groups setting up Islamic Montessori schools, Islamic small schools, Islamic Waldorf (Steiner) schools, a growing number of home-schooling projects, and some projects which have begun the curriculum again from scratch to include extended periods of travel and study abroad for the pupils. In addition, there is a strong sympathy for deschooling among heads of some of the best-established institutions.

Some of this experimentation and diversity results from the *aporias* between state and Islamic education and between conventional and experimental approaches to schooling. I will explain my use of the term *aporia* in the following sections.

Muslim school is a commonly used, but imprecise term. The national Association of Muslim Schools is rather an association of Islamic schools by my definition. There is agreement among Islamic school heads that the term Muslim school implies a school which has a significant number of Muslim pupils, whether an independent school or a state school (not a few of which have between 90 per cent and 100 per cent Islamic populations in some inner-city areas):

So the question is: are we creating Islamic schools or Muslim schools? And the definition of what is meant by the two is that a Muslim school may be a school where Muslims happen to be attending; whereas an Islamic school would be where the ethos, all of the things which are in the hidden curriculum, are getting across to the children. And it may be that a lot of Islamic schools are really

just Muslim schools. The head is trying to run an Islamic school, but all the pupils – and even the parents – want is a Muslim school.

(Comment at headteachers' conference)

This suggests another *aporia* between state and Islamic school, and perhaps between religion and culture.

School leadership

During the project, I read an NCSL report (Bush and Glover, 2003) summarising research into school leadership. I found this report so helpful and relevant that I am including a summary of it here. It is clear to me, and to other heads I have spoken to, that an understanding of school leadership is something often lacking in Islamic schools. Also, Islamic school leadership tends to be basic or intermediate and of the instructional, transformational or moral varieties (see below), whereas there is perhaps a need in the modern context for more distributive and collaborative forms of leadership. Even where there is a recognition of the need to empower employees in creating the vision of the school, in actual practice power and authority often remain in the hands of the school founder or founders, which is seen as perfectly natural within a culture which maintains a respect for traditional authority. These power relations are often played out in the classroom, where, even though there may be an awareness of the more democratic and child-centred methodology people talk about in education today, the daily reality is that children do and think what they are told. An example of this in one school was the appointment of the pupil members to the school council by the chair of governors. The pupils all recognised that this was an exercise of power which effectively went against the democratic intention behind the concept of a school council, and every class reported that they themselves would not have elected the representatives appointed by the chair of governors. Of course this is not only typical of Islamic schools: many state schools seem to claim to have a pupil-centred ethos, only to effectively deny it in practice through authoritarian teaching and disciplinary methods.

The NCSL report begins by examining the concept of leadership and quotes Cuban (1988, p190) who says: "There are more than 350 definitions of leadership, but no clear and unequivocal understanding as to what distinguishes leaders from non-leaders."

Nevertheless, he proposes four levels of vision, which might distinguish a leader:

1. **basic:** possessing a set of goals derived from ministry and board expectations
2. **intermediate:** developing school goals consistent with the principal's articulated vision
3. **advanced:** working with the teaching staff to develop school goals which reflect their collaborative vision
4. **expert:** collaborating with representative members of the school community to develop goals which reflect a collaboratively developed vision statement

The sharing of values is key to successful leadership, and these should be clearly expressed on a personal and institutional level. How this should be done is perhaps something Islamic school leaders need to get together and discuss, since *sharing* values is probably not the same as *telling* people what values you think they should have.

Management is distinguished from leadership: the former is more focused on administrative *systems*, in terms of efficiency, maintenance and implementation, while the latter creatively explores the leading of *people* in the development of vision, values, and purpose. The point is made that both management and leadership are necessary and important in schools. Heads may experience a tension between these two requirements, with either not enough time for developing leadership because of more routine managerial demands or poor systems of management for the implementation of the higher-order leadership role. This issue came out quite strongly at the heads' conference, and the tension between traditional ideas of authoritarian leadership and the more modern concept of general empowerment is one that often comes up in discussions about the difference between Islamic and Western models of education.

On the issue of the relationship between governors and headteachers, one chair of governors commented to me that:

Islamic schools are still in the establishment phase, and the fathers or founders are going to be very careful of who they let control things. I think there is that situation where the schools are not yet in their professional phase – there's more like a proprietor/employee relationship at this early stage of development.

The report describes eight broad, and probably complementary, styles of leadership:

Instructional

“Instructional leadership focuses on teaching and learning and on the behaviours of teachers in working with students.” Here, the school is seen as a kind of machine that produces results, a technical process which is judged by outcomes. The downside is that the leader may then not be aware that a school is a complex organism and that successful outcomes depend on getting right all kinds of relationships within the system itself. As the report adds: *“Too narrow a focus on teaching and learning may marginalise broader issues of institution building.”*

Transformational

“Transformational leadership describes a particular type of influence process based on increasing the commitment of followers to organisational goals. Leaders seek to engage the support of teachers for their vision for the school and to enhance their capacities to contribute to goal achievement.

It may also be criticised as being a vehicle for control over teachers and more likely to be accepted by the leader than the led. In one view, transformational leadership has the potential to become ‘despotic’ because of its strong, heroic and charismatic features.”

In this model of leadership, we can say that perhaps the staff, and maybe even the children, are being used by the leader to establish his or her personal vision of what a good school should be. This has another version:

Moral

“Moral leadership is based in the values and beliefs of **leaders**. The approach is similar to the transformational model but with a stronger values base that may be spiritual.”

This model of leadership will be very familiar to many staff of Islamic schools. Often, the school will owe its existence to one person who had the vision and the energy to establish it. How this founder then copes with having to share his or her school with the employees is sometimes a source of difficulties. As the report comments, moral leadership *“may be experienced as disempowering for those deemed to be the **followers**”*.

Participative

“Participative leadership is concerned primarily with the process of decision-making. The approach supports the notion of shared or distributed leadership and is linked to democratic values and empowerment. Participative leadership is thought to lead to improved outcomes through greater commitment to the implementation of agreed decisions.”

This sounds like a more attractive option to teachers who have been trained in the principles of child-centred education. However the report warns:

“There is little evidence of the successful implementation of this leadership style in schools, even though it may be that to cope with the unprecedented rate of change in education requires... establishing new models of leadership that locate power with the many rather than the few.”

Another potential problem with this style of leadership is that a willingness to participate is needed on the part of the staff the leader is hoping to share leadership with. The part about sharing decisions may be welcomed by most staff; the greater commitment to the *implementation* of such decisions is another matter. In addition, the leader's desire to share leadership may be perceived as a weakness or lack of confidence by people who have grown up in an authoritarian culture – they may just not see the point of a leader saying: “What do *you* think we should do?”

Managerial

“Managerial leadership focuses on functions, tasks and behaviours. It also assumes that the behaviour of organisational members is largely rational and that influence is exerted through positional authority within the organisational hierarchy. It is similar to the formal model of management. If heads are simply expected to implement external policy decisions, they are engaged in a process of managerial leadership sometimes described as ‘managerialism’.”

I found this perspective on leadership to be quite common among Islamic school leaders, though heads sometimes feel that there is something missing if all they are basically doing is managing the school for someone else. The daily experience of all of us, I think, is that human behaviour is not “largely rational” and that authority is rarely a kind of neutral effect of formal relationships.

In short, leadership seems to be a more complex thing than management, depending as it does on an understanding of what makes people tick, rather than simply what systems need to be implemented.

Postmodern

“Postmodern leadership focuses on the subjective experience of leaders and teachers and on the diverse interpretations placed on events by different participants. There is no objective reality, only the multiple experiences of organisational members. This model offers few guidelines for leaders except in acknowledging the importance of the individual.”

Understandably, any theory which is based on the idea that “There is no objective reality” is going to be initially incomprehensible to Muslims. But it is probably true to say that postmodernism is not well understood. In practice, this style of leadership picks up on what was mentioned above as a criticism of managerialism: that it seems to be very important for leaders to pay close attention to the personal experiences of staff members, not to say pupils and parents. School is, in some sense, the sum of what everyone thinks and feels about the school, and this puts a different perspective on what leadership might be. One head I spoke to saw his job as continuously “telling the story of the school” to staff, pupils, parents and the world beyond the school. It should also be recognised that these other participants in the school are also telling their parts of the story. This is where power becomes an issue, especially, for example, in the case of the British media – a powerful entity – whose voice is widely heard and accepted. Thus what the media has to say about Islamic schools carries a lot of weight within British society, which the Muslim community has struggled hard to engage with so that its voice may be heard.

Interpersonal

“Interpersonal leadership focuses on the relationships leaders have with teachers, students and others connected with the school. Leaders adopt a collaborative approach, which may have a moral dimension. They have advanced personal skills, which enable them to operate effectively with internal and external stakeholders.”

Several of the school staff and heads that I spoke to during the research project felt that their individual needs were not taken into consideration: there was a job to do and that was it. One *Imam* (community leader) I was discussing Islamic schooling with told me that he had found the perfect definition of education: “Education is being done to.” I decided to gently challenge this view with a favourite adage of my own: “Telling isn’t teaching and listening isn’t learning.” With us at the time was another Islamic school head, who I looked to for support, but he remained strangely silent. Later he said to me that he thought this discussion needed to be had with the whole community, if Islamic schools were going to make any headway – too many community leaders still see education as a basically instrumental process of pouring knowledge into empty young minds. The problem often is that those pupils who cannot, or will not, submit compliantly to this procedure are labelled ineducable or deviant.

Contingent

“Contingent leadership focuses on how leaders respond to the unique organisational circumstances or problems they face. The wide variations in school contexts provide the rationale for this model. Leaders need to be able to adapt their approaches to the particular requirements of the school, and of the situation or event requiring attention.”

I am conscious here that the most pertinent audience for this report is likely to be Islamic school heads and I would like to invite a discussion of what the “unique circumstances, problems and requirements” are that we face and what the implications are for our leadership roles. This is something we began to address at the heads’ conference, but probably only to the extent of raising the questions in a collaborative way for the first time. This is an issue that perhaps needs to be taken up by the AMS.

Finally, the report draws out implications for the development of school leadership training programmes. These programmes should:

- have a **clear focus on learning**, the main purpose of schools, and on the teaching required to promote effective learning
- develop the portfolio of skills required to transform schools. These include **developing an explicit vision** for the school which inspires teachers and other stakeholders to work towards a better future.
- [help] leaders to develop a **participative, or team, approach** which enables staff and others to contribute to the process of visioning rather than simply accepting the leader’s personal vision
- include **management as well as leadership** to ensure effective implementation of the vision
- [require] leaders to develop a **portfolio of leadership styles**. They need to be able to carry out effective situational analysis to show that they are able to adapt their approaches to the specific circumstances

The issue of training for Islamic school heads which is set out above is a priority, and this was a view shared by many at the heads’ conference. Unfortunately, those with control of school budgets may feel that there are other, more important priorities, and, given the poor finances of most Islamic

schools, it may be hard to argue with this. However, perhaps the question should be posed the other way round: what will be the effect of *not* training heads to lead?

Methodology

One of my main interests is in the methodology of action research, for reasons that I will go into later, so during the project, I did a lot of thinking and reading about the *way* I was trying to do things (as well as *what* I was actually doing). Much of this material can seem highly theoretical, but I have included some of my findings here because I believe that the paradigms we use to understand the world must be examined when we face situations for which there seem to be no solutions. Sometimes, the problems we see out there in the world are actually caused by our thinking. In addition, from one point of view, our ideas about the world actually *are* the world, so the world changes when we change our ideas about it. That is why I have given a lot of emphasis to the methodology I was developing during the project.

Some of the biggest issues we are dealing with in the UK today include education and social cohesion, and if we can find some new ways of thinking about these things, then perhaps some of the major problems in society, not only in the UK, but in the world generally, might be handled in a better way.

Which methodology?

There are usually said to be two kinds of research, or really two kinds of research data: quantitative and qualitative. A table in Silverman (2002: 2) describes some of their features:

Qualitative and quantitative research methods

Qualitative	Quantitative
Soft	Hard
Flexible	Fixed
Subjective	Objective
Political	Value-free
Case study	Survey
Speculative	Hypothesis testing
Grounded	Abstract

My understanding of these two terms is that quantitative data is basically numerical: it's about things you can count and then present as numbers, and it usually takes a large amount of data to be able to say that what you have found out is statistically significant. One example of this kind of research would be the national census that happens every ten years. Good quantitative data is reliable, partly because other people could go out and collect the same data in the same way as you and come up with the same results.

Qualitative data, on the other hand, is more to do with words, and this makes it far more complex to analyse and interpret. We might agree, for example, that there are 20 pupils in a particular class and that 20 per cent of them have achieved national curriculum level 5 in English; but to say that 65 per cent of them are happy at school is quite a different matter, because the phrase "happy at school" could mean so many different things to different people at different times. Obviously, efforts can be made in qualitative research to be as precise as possible, but, in the end, it can be very difficult – some philosophers would say impossible – to completely define a word. Good qualitative data is said to be valid in that it represents the messiness of what is *really* going on, but perhaps not reliable, because someone else might get different results from doing the same research.

Action research

I was interested in a third kind of research, *action* research. I did an MA in action research in 1995 and I found it very useful because, when you do action research, you are trying to improve what you yourself are doing as an essential part of the research.

To explain this, we might say that, in research, normally, there are four roles: the person who commissions the research (a government minister, say), the person who does the research (a professional researcher, perhaps), the person or people who are being researched (teachers or pupils, for example), and then the person who is going to use – or not use – the research results. The points to notice in this scenario are that the researcher is just doing a job: he or she does not necessarily have any interest in what the results, or the use, of the research might be. The persons *being* researched do not have any say in the process or in what might happen as a result of the research, even though they are probably the ones who are most likely to be affected by it in the end. And the person who commissioned the research may decide that it has not produced the desired result, so he or she is not going to use it.

In *action* research, all four roles may be combined in one person: *you* decide what to research, *you* do the research, *you* research what *you* are doing, and *you* use the research, as you go along, to improve what you are doing. This means that it is both very practical and also a learning process for the researcher himself or herself. In fact, this is another interesting thing about action research: you are constantly revising what you are doing as you go along and as you gain new insights into what you are doing.

Action inquiry is also meant to help individuals explore their own propositions about themselves and their situations.

Dash, 1999: 477

An action researcher would be expected to evolve in his or her thinking as part of the research process, and this is something that makes action research quite difficult and even uncomfortable at times: you have to be able to live with a certain amount of uncertainty, and other people have to be ready to accept that you may not be able to say in advance exactly what you are going to do or what precisely you are hoping to find out. The advantage is that, that way, you may just find out something new.

Another feature of action research is that you need to work in collaboration with other people. There are some philosophical, as well as practical, reasons for this, which I would like to try and explain.

Research is based on certain key concepts like truth and knowledge, logic and rationality, but these concepts are hard to define and explain, and our ideas about them tend to change over the centuries and from culture to culture. It has become popular in recent years for people to say that we are coming out of the period known as modern times or modernity into postmodernity, and the adjective postmodern is applied to all kinds of things, from architecture to ideas. In philosophy, this contrast between modern and postmodern often has to do with the idea that the world we live in is much more about the meanings that we give to our experiences than any external world of matter and energy (which is just *one* way of looking at things). This leads to a shift of emphasis from questions about what we can or cannot know about the real world, to questions about what we *mean* when we say this or that about the things that go on in our lives.

In a concrete situation in the classroom for example, a teacher doing action research will start with some ideas about what he or she is trying to do with a particular group of pupils. These ideas are based on things he or she has tried before and what happened as a result, and also on various theories he or she has about how to interpret what has happened and why. The teacher will then try out something new to see what the effect is, thinking about this and reviewing theories as he or she goes along. The questions are: what *is* happening and what *does* it mean? However, is the teacher the only one who can decide this? Not if we accept the idea that other participants in the research have a valid point of view. Hence:

the importance of building on and developing the subjective knowledge of individuals where nobody in the group has the privileged status of a researcher

Dash, 1999: 474

So an action researcher will also try to find out what the pupils, ie the other participants, think about what is happening and what it means, as this is also a valid part of the picture. The action researcher will also want to check out his or her ideas with colleagues who may know the same children or be trying out similar ideas. At another level, there are the various other people writing about teaching and learning in other places whose ideas will also feed into the action researcher's developing understanding of what it is he or she is trying to do and why, what works and why, what doesn't work and why not, and so on.

The point is that what is really going on is the sum of all these points of view and more besides, and a lot of it is a matter of deciding whether to look at it like this or like that. So philosophically, the truth, and what we know and our reasons for thinking what we do, are often something we agree on amongst ourselves rather than find out somewhere out there. For this, we need other people, so that we do not run the risk of inventing some fantasy world purely of our own.

To summarise then, I decided to use an action research approach to the project so that I could work out gradually what it was that I felt needed to be done, hopefully have some positive impact on some aspect of the Islamic schooling process in the UK, which was the subject of the research, and maybe work together with colleagues to develop some new ideas about the situations in which we find ourselves from day to day.

The context of the research

I had been the head of an Islamic school for over two years, and a teacher for the past 20 years, and I had been thinking for a long time that the reason why there seemed to be so many problems was perhaps because we weren't asking the right questions. We in the Islamic schools know what the *difficulties* are well enough, but a lot of these are managerial, not really to do with leadership. Problems can be thought of as being more complex and as being the underlying *causes* of the difficulties, but, whatever, I felt that what was needed was to take a more exploratory approach, so that we could begin to find out what it was that we did not even yet know that we did not know.

This is an idea that has interested me for years, about how we ever find out something genuinely new, how we can even recognise something so new that it has not been invented yet. What is more, I had the feeling that whatever it was might turn out to be a challenge to some people's entrenched ideas about what Islamic schooling was all about. I had already been told, for example, during a discussion at the highest level in Islamic educational circles: "We *know* what the issues are for Islamic schools, and we know what the answer is – more money."

But the whole issue of what an Islamic school in the UK in the 21st century is *for* is part of a larger discussion about the role the Islamic community sees for itself in this time and place, and people are arguing more and more passionately about this. The ongoing debate over multiculturalism, the ever-shifting language (assimilation, integration, inclusion, cohesion), citizenship, the clash of civilisations, the war on terrorism, jihad, *khilafah* (the Islamic State), interfaith dialogue, the list goes on. And with each piece of terminology, each discourse, huge and unexamined assumptions about the history and nature of both Islam and the modern world. Meanwhile, people are dying.

For me, the world of Islamic schooling in the UK is an ideal place to look for some new insights into 21st-century Britain, because here we find people who are struggling to understand what is happening in our society in a very real and practical way: our children's future is not, after all, an academic issue. The problem is that Islamic school headteachers are often overwhelmed by day-to-day managerial situations. How could I work with them to open up the deeper aspects of leadership?

Another reason for wanting to open up new areas of inquiry was that I started to feel that this is an issue for all of us in our search for understanding. Sometimes you have to be willing to go into the unknown, especially in times of crisis, in order to try to go beyond the current limits of understanding and find something really new. People have called this the hermeneutic experience and it is something which I found I could relate to personally more and more throughout the period of the research.

This is what some writers have said about the search for understanding:

"When the human being is cast back upon himself [*sic*] through some personal or cultural crisis and when he responds by giving himself up, what is given up or brought forth is the authentic being of the person involved, ie himself. This authentic being, when it is manifested as an attitude of perception, is the phenomenological attitude [*experience*] and, as such, is the most genuine attitude of the human being because it is in closest proximity to his source, ie to his being." (Brenneman 1982:27-28; my brackets).

"It is not always the case that what happens in understanding is that one understands something in the sense of grasping it or solving it. What happens, what happens also or instead, is that one always confronts the limits of understanding itself. ... what happens in understanding is that I always experience the refusal of the other to be contained in the conceptual apparatus that I have prepared for it or that my own time and place have prepared for it; and of course this alters my own relation to this framework, not to say my own self-relation or my own standing. So one could say that what happens in understanding is not so much the familiarisation of the other as self-estrangement.

“The point we have to understand here is that **we have to try to understand each other**, there is a crisis in our world we cannot avoid, **and in doing so we ourselves must change**, otherwise understanding will not take place and the crisis will have no purpose or meaning. The failure to understand the other is the failure to understand oneself and the world, while understanding of the other is an estrangement from oneself and the world. This is the tragedy of hermeneutical experience, a ‘damned if you do, damned if you don’t’ choice that has to be made one way or the other. What is required is the courage to go beyond oneself into the otherness of the other in order to reclaim oneself (on the way back, as it were) at the limits of understanding. Not to have the courage to do this is to accept one’s own ignorance; for this reason the Ancients used to say, ‘Sapere aude!’, dare to know.” (Bruns 1992: 179-80)

I have included these lengthy quotes because I think it is so important that we all, Muslim and non-Muslim, understand how to find some way to really get to grips with the problems that affect every aspect of life in the world today; yesterday’s solutions to yesterday’s crises are not enough. This is what one leading action researcher has to say:

Many writers and commentators are suggesting that the current worldview or paradigm of western civilisation is reaching the end of its useful life. Bateson... argued that the most important task facing us is to learn to think in new ways: he was deeply concerned with what he called the epistemological errors of our time, errors built into our way of thinking. So it seems to me that the challenge of changing our worldview is central to our times. (Reason, 1998)

To summarise: difficulty, crisis and alienation lead to understanding. This is what life is; this is what understanding is; it is not easy, it does not get any easier, but we have to do it.

I think this kind of approach is very important in researching Islamic schools, for several reasons. It is common to come across people who have grand theories of Islamic education and then are puzzled, worried and let down when the actual reality of schools does not match up to the ideal. The point is that the lived reality of human life is infinitely complex. Unless you realise that every context is different and that, to *work with* what is going on, you need to pay really close attention to as many details of the situation as possible, while at the same time holding your beliefs lightly, rather than defending them to the death, then you will end up dealing with things that are only an abstract version of what is happening, filtered through your own unexamined theories about how reality works. This infinite complexity does not mean that we can never understand anything, but that we can understand enough of it to be able to act effectively, as long as we do not think that we have nothing to learn – sometimes from even the most unusual of sources. This is what can lead to an ironic attitude, a refusal to take oneself too seriously or to think that anything is ever final, and a willingness to look for new ideas. This can of course, as I mentioned earlier, sometimes mean breaking a few taboos.

The complexity of the whole is present in every part, which is why methodology can be more important than quantity of data. For example, during one of the first interviews I did, a head said:

The overall vision concerns us. We’ve got the kids in, things are happening, and lessons are taking place – we started from zero experience and have developed a lot. But at the moment it’s got to the stage where we can build more rooms, get more kids in and whatever, but do Islamic schools in Britain have a long-term overall objective or anything like that? The kids that we’ve got now, in 5 to 10 years’ time... there is an increase in demand for places, including secondary girls, but...(*trails off into silence*)

A lot of time could be spent unpacking those 89 words.

Research aporias

At this point, I need to explain my use of the term *aporia*. I had spent some time studying two books (Bruns 1992; Gallagher 1992) on hermeneutics – the science of understanding in itself – and I began

to see how deeply connected inquiry is to simply being human. I had always felt that the idea of action research was really a way of explaining, understanding and improving on something we all do all the time, ie being and acting in the world in a goal-oriented way on the basis of experience and values. What I had noticed, however, was how *badly* I usually do this, and I am not vain enough to think I am uniquely inadequate.

Pursuing this interest, I started to read about the concept of *aporia*, which I then used to develop an explanation, for the purposes of my research, of what inquiry might be. An *aporia*, from the Greek *a-* meaning 'without' and *'poros* meaning 'passage', is a contradiction, dilemma or paradox, and in philosophy, the kind of puzzle which Socrates was good at finding, where we know we know something but can only explain what it is not, not what it is. More than this, though, it is the kind of unsolvable puzzle which won't go away, one we *cannot* solve and yet one we *have* to solve, like a Zen *koan* perhaps, and it has the potential to hold open a space for challenging questions to arise. So it seemed to me helpful to use the word *aporia* for situations where, paradoxically perhaps, two opposite things both seem to have some truth in them, they may even seem both mutually contradictory *and* defining (like 'up' and 'down' for example), and I got into the habit of symbolising this with the 'yin/yang' sign, which seemed appropriate. The problem is that some computer keyboards cannot use this sign, so I have replaced it with </>.

What have *aporias* to do with my inquiry? From a hermeneutic point of view, there are three elements in an inquiry: my **self** (all my personal history and background), my **world** (everything in the context I am operating in, including my own actions, other people, their actions, their thinking) and my **thinking** (all my ideas and theories about myself and the world). An inquiry starts when I come to see an aspect of my self/world/thinking process as puzzling, ie where there is what I call an *aporia*.

This automatically involves an initial level of thinking or theory in order for the *aporia* to be noticed at all, so an inquiry begins to open up as a possibility from this initial impetus. Both thinking and interacting with others give us new ideas and actions, and an interpretation develops both of the context and the theory, and, reflexively, myself. Without an *aporia* (like the irritating piece of grit in an oyster which causes the pearl to form, as one writer suggests), there is no inquiry. Moreover, if the hermeneutic attitude which underlies inquiry is, as Brenneman (1982: p 27) claims, the proper attitude of the human being, then a state of permanent *aporia* is implied, ie the perception that the self/world/thinking is always puzzling, uncanny or at least demanding an explanation. If there is nothing to explain or improve about my self/world/thinking, inquiry does not start, and the self/world/thinking continues on automatically, inauthentically, the self having "fallen into the world" and become one with it. In this condition, although we do have some vague sense of ourselves as actors in a world about which we have thoughts – a *preliminary* understanding – we nevertheless tend to just get on with things, without distinguishing or reflecting on the constitutive elements of the process. If we experience an *aporia*, we may see it as something wrong, an intrusive element to be avoided, covered over or eliminated. There seem, in fact, to be many ways in which an inquiry can fail to develop, including perhaps even a fear of what an inquiry may uncover or a mistrust of the spirit of inquiry itself, especially in cases where there is an overdependence on authority such as that of tradition. Inquiry may also sometimes provoke "feelings of instability, anxiety, negativity, even depression", according to Marion Dadds (1993). It may even be that there is a fundamental and necessary level of risk, and hence fear, in the very experience of understanding:

One could say that what happens in understanding is not so much the familiarisation of the other as self-estrangement. (Bruns, 1992: 180)

If the process of inquiry develops, there occurs what I came to think of as the hermeneutic progression. This appears to me to have four stages. At first there is no experience of *aporia* and the self/world/thinking process proceeds without critical awareness. Without discrimination, everything is one seamless process. This is the null position. However, there seems to be an almost automatic progression to stage one in which distinctions are made concerning the experience of self/world/thinking: others are not like me, the world does not always run smoothly, I am puzzled about these things. A *distinction* opens up between what *is* and what *is not* (but perhaps *might* or *should* be).

If the inquiry is able to proceed, a *circular movement* takes place between self and other, what is known and what is not known, a cycle of discovery and interpretation, of *déprise* (going beyond) and

reprise (reclaiming). Sometimes this is characterised as education (Greek: *paideía*) and sometimes as play (Greek: *paidiá*), both of which share the same essential structure and spirit (cf. Gallagher 1992: 45-54) and share the root of the word 'pedagogy'.

The successful turning of this hermeneutic circle already implies a third dimension, an axis or balance point – imagine a spinning top – and this opens up the possibility of the third stage: a direction or *purpose* of the process of interpretation, which represents its *value*. It is unlikely that the hermeneutic process has no direction or goal, and this being the case, the hermeneutic circle becomes more a spiral (or, more accurately, a helix) as each revolution of the circle leads to a new level of understanding.

So I came to see an unfolding of inquiry as a process implicit in human self-awareness. However, there also seems to be a counter-tendency for the inquiry process either to collapse or to resolve too quickly back into the null state, as a result either of a lack of skill in maintaining the driving energy of the initial *aporia* through successive stages of inquiry or of a reluctance to confront the difficulties involved and a need for closure. So, in my research, I began looking for instances of *aporias* opening up an inquiry space which could be developed through dialogue in relation to an espoused value position. Wherever I have found an *aporia* in my work, I have shown it by using the `</>` symbol, and in the **second section of this report**, I will further explain this concept.

Conclusions and recommendations

This piece of research focused on the issues arising for leaders of Islamic schools, which are mainly in the independent sector, serving the black and minority-ethnic communities.

An important part of the work was desk research, that is, reading an extensive amount of relevant literature concerned with education, multiculturalism and research methodologies. The other side of this was a series of activities which allowed me to relate this theoretical work to particular contexts of practice. These included visiting Islamic schools and interviewing members of the senior management, participating in local and national media events, and attending and collaborating in workshops, seminars and conferences.

The context of the research was the social, cultural and political challenges presented by the growing Muslim population of the UK and the responses of the Muslim and other communities to these. Given that this is an entirely new situation in which our society finds itself, my report proposes that we all look for new ways of thinking together that offer the possibility of resolving what appear to be potentially serious conflicts.

Such new ways of thinking are perhaps rooted in an approach to knowledge and understanding which has been evolving for the last hundred years or more since the methodology of phenomenology began to inform a range of paradigms in the social sciences.

Consequently, I found that action research provided a suitable methodological framework because of its emphasis on both reflection in action and reflection *on* reflection in action (ie reflexivity), and also because of its stress on the need for collaboration, or dialogue, between the subjects of the research in the search for productive interpretation of the data.

Building on a hermeneutic approach to education, I propose a reconstruction of the problems of multiculturalism as opportunities for inquiry, or *aporias*. I identify inquiry as an evolving process inherent in thinking itself, which requires social collaboration and conscious attention in order to develop constructively, and I contrast this with the kind of thinking which seeks to close down inquiry by imposing solutions in order to make problems go away.

I found that the Islamic schools are a vigorous and idealistic response by the Muslim communities to address the social issues of our time and that such schools are frequently more highly aware of the challenges we all face and more committed to finding solutions than perhaps many in the state sector. Unfortunately, Islamic schools are also likely to be relatively poorly resourced as a result of a lack of support and a misunderstanding of their role and potential within the wider society.

By collectively and proactively developing an inquiry-based approach to issues of both school leadership and social cohesion, the Islamic schools, under the auspices of the Association of Muslim Schools in the UK for example, have the potential to lead the way in responding to the challenges for us all.

[Download Section 2 here](#)

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