

In your view, how important are 'Islamic schools' for Muslims in the United Kingdom?

In the last three decades, we can see that Islamic schools in the UK are becoming more popular with call for more to be formed since 2010¹. As it stands the majority of Islamic primary and secondary schools are privately run by charities such as Association of Muslim Schools UK or Muslim Hands UK (who help fund Islamic-schools across the world) with only a handful of the schools funded by the UK Government. The aim of this briefing document is to summarise key arguments for and against the importance of 'Islamic schools' in the UK focusing on primary and secondary schools/colleges. In order to focus arguments on the importance of Islamic school for Muslims in the UK. I have decided to focus on the impact that Islamic schools could have on Muslim learners. This is a complex field and some of the arguments and issues discussed here require further development. Further information seen key to this paper will be referenced to as required.

Education holds a lot of importance in the Islam, this can be seen from the beginning when historically young learners would attend the local Mosque school, usually known as the Madrasa. However with questions being asked on the quality of the education provided in the Madrasas leading to them lose their status in some communities, many bright students (that would usually have progressed to being judges or spiritual leaders) decided to progress to other institutions. Madrasas were seen as extensions of the Mosque and provided learners with information mainly on the scriptures. At a younger level learners would be taught how recite word for word from the Quran but not unpacking the meaning and teachings behind the words until potentially later on. Classes in the Madrasa tended to be larger², depending on area, which would make in more challenging to control the class and provide the highest standard of education. Historically, education and understanding of the Quran was seen as the key to a prosperous religious life, this was emphasised as early as the 13th century by Burhan al-Din al-Zarnuji³. Despite the previous crash in status the Madrasa appears to be gaining popularity amongst parents again, however they are used more as an additional kind of schooling opposed to sole-learning in the UK. This provides learners with the opportunity to learn about their faith specifically, whilst still having school based tuition in other subjects. An Islamic-school would provide the opportunity for learners to learn about their faith in addition to other subjects, this would ensure a good standard of education (as opposed to the lowers seen in some Madrasas) which is an important argument for Islamic-schools in the UK.

Another argument for Islamic schools in the UK is that they can provide Muslim learners with other important opportunities to flourish and develop where other non-Islamic schools cannot. It is important to note that even non faith schools in the UK are expected to teach certain aspects of Christianity in addition to performing some acts of worship such as prayer and singing during assemblies. This can be an argument for the importance of Islamic-schools for Muslim learners. For example, if a learner of any religious belief is unable to take part in a lesson for a reason based on their religion, the parents are responsible for providing alternative provision for that learner for that lesson. Whilst this provides and opportunity for the learner to focus on faith based learning during this time, it does mean being away from a classroom environment and likely to involve learning alone. This isn't an ideal solution and it could put the learner at a disadvantage as they are missing out on experiences. An Islamic-school would have provided the learner with the opportunity to follow a faith appropriate curriculum with other learners of the same faith and with teachers expertise to guide them. This is a strong argument for Islamic-schools in the UK which is supported by an article written on the Hujjat.org website emphasises the importance faith-based learning which ensures children feel a sense

¹ Damian Breen, *Muslim Schools, Communities And Critical Race Theory* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017), pp. 1-56.

² Walbridge, John. "Madrasa." *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, edited by Richard C. Martin, vol. 2, Macmillan Reference USA, 2004, pp. 418-421. *Gale eBooks*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3403500282/GVRL?u=walamp&sid=GVRL&xid=48df26dc. Accessed 8 Jan. 2021.

³ Berkey, Jonathan. "Education." *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, edited by Richard C. Martin, vol. 1, Macmillan Reference USA, 2004, pp. 202-206. *Gale eBooks*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3403500132/GVRL?u=walamp&sid=GVRL&xid=c3e058fa. Accessed 8 Jan. 2021.

of belonging⁴. The aim of Islamic-schools is to teach about Islam in conjunction with other lessons as part of the natural day to day routine. Though all schools have a duty to ensure all learners feeling respected and have a sense of belonging in their schools, ensuring that their faith is completely included is a key argument for the importance of Islamic schools within the United Kingdom.

Whilst academic development is an important goal recognised by all kinds of educational settings, it is not only through academic developments it should be measured. Islamic-schools also provide the opportunities to ensure that young Muslims can understand their own rights within a British community. Though schools in the UK teach some aspects Islam as part of the locally agreed syllabus, it is likely to be basic information on the faith, as opposed to how it is practiced. By today there are generations of Muslims that have been born and raised in the UK and despite being born and raised here, it is still important they learn how to practice their faith and react to situations which require a religious response⁵. With teaching offered by those who practice and have a deeper understanding of the faith, learners are provided with the opportunities on not only to learn what their faiths key teachings are, but how these can be applied and practiced in day to day life in the UK. Though this is an important argument for the importance of Islamic-schools in the UK, a drawback to the argument is presented by Damian Breen⁶ where he warns of the potential lack of expertise and teachers in some areas. He discusses the difficulties in recruitment faced in some areas since 2010 leading to some schools being unable to open. This would lead to a lower standard of education in the longer term, and is a key struggle faced when trying to establish more faith schools in the UK.

Studies in to child development show how children learn from adults. By ensuring Muslim learners had the opportunity to be taught by other Muslims it would ensure a better understanding of religious practices. Research by Dr. Hoda Badawi⁷ supports this as she explains that a majority of Muslim parents would like their children to understand faith and how to act as a Muslim. Her research focusses on responses from parents, many of these feelings are echoed word wide. One of the main concerns of Muslim parents is the quality of teaching Islam in non-Islamic schools is another key argument in the discussion of the importance of Islamic-schools in the UK. As previously noted in this paper, all schools are expected to teach Islam at a basic level. The fear by some Muslims is that it is not taught in enough depth for Muslim learners, a concern also echoed by Badawis research⁸. This is an argument for the importance of Islamic-schools in the UK to Muslim learners to ensure they get the quality of education needed to help them develop in their religious lives.

By today a faith school which belongs to any religion is likely to be under scrutiny in the United Kingdom. The argument made by many, such as the Humanists, is that faith education leaves pupils at a disadvantage as it doesn't allow them the opportunity to meet and learn from people of different faiths⁹. What this argument fails to acknowledge is that the vast majority of Islamic schools are still subject to OFSTED inspection. As a result of this they are required to teach from an agreed syllabus including the teaching of 'citizenship'¹⁰. Citizenship includes looking at other beliefs, cultures and people in our communities. This

⁴"School – The KSIMC Of London – Hujjat, Stanmore", *Hujjat.Org*, 2021 <<https://www.hujjat.org/C/articles/school/>> [Accessed 8 January 2021].

⁵Berkey, *Education*, pp. 202-206.

⁶ Breen, *Muslim Schools, Communities And Critical Race Theory*, pp. 1-56.

⁷ Hoda Badawi, *Theisla.Org*, 2016 <https://www.theisla.org/filemgmt_data/files/Badawi%20-%20Why%20Islamic%20Schools%20-%20main%20Horizons%20article%202006.pdf> [Accessed 8 January 2021].

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "State-Funded Faith Schools", *Humanists UK*, 2021 <<https://humanism.org.uk/campaigns/schools-and-education/faith-schools/>> [Accessed 5 January 2021].

¹⁰ "School – The KSIMC Of London – Hujjat, Stanmore", *Hujjat.Org*, 2021 <<https://www.hujjat.org/C/articles/school/>> [Accessed 8 January 2021].

weakens the argument that learners would be missing out as even though they may not get to mix with pupils of different faiths, they do get the opportunity to learn about them whilst learning more about their own faith. This supports the importance of Islamic schools in the UK.

Therefor to conclude, this briefing has summarised some of the key issues of Islamic schools with reference to faith schools in general. It is clear to see there are benefits and drawbacks to Islamic schools as well as Muslim learners attending a non-religious state school. It is important to have Islamic-schools in the UK to ensure that Muslim learners have to opportunity to develop knowledge of their own beliefs and practices. However it is important that these schools remain monitored by OFSTED in order to ensure learners also get the best delivery of the UK curriculum also.

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