



## Report Summary:

### **Secular or Islamic? What Schools do British Muslims want for their Children? (VOL. 3 of the British Muslims' Expectations Series, Summary)**

A report by Saied R. Ameli, Aliya Azam, and Arzu Merali for the Islamic Human Rights Commission.

Publication date: 6th of July 2005

ISBN 1-903718-27-9

82 pp

## **Background**

The report is the third in the series British Muslims' Expectations of the Government. It aims at producing a study of the reality behind detracting claims concerning faith-based schools and religion and Islam on a broad scale. The report addresses the critique of faith schools, that they are divisive and foster fundamentalism, the issue of underachievement among Muslim students and the experience of bullying and isolation felt by Muslim students in schools. Additionally, the report seeks to extract the positive implications of parents' international human rights to determine their children's education. The issue of state-funding of Muslim schools, their benefits and current standing, as well as a comparison of funds allocated across a range of myriad other faith schools is also addressed.

## **The Struggle for Inclusive Citizenship**

As a relatively new subject in the National Curriculum, the course on Citizenship enables pupils to develop themselves into informed, active and responsible community members on all fronts. This highlights the potential for a Dual Education System: Islamic and Secular. Included in the plethora of advantages this type of system would provide are the endorsement of universalised aspects of education, the reinforcement of commonality, and the promotion of the worth and self-development of all individuals within the school community.

## **Research findings**

The findings of the report negates the view that Islamic faith schools are counterproductive in fostering a sense of citizenship and create segregation. It shows that underachievement can be combated by faith schools, because they foster a culture of inclusion. Furthermore, the report highlights several problems with mainstream schools and the national curriculum, which, inter alia, cause underachievement and a sense of isolation and segregation.

From 1125 British Muslims surveyed, an overwhelming 47.5% indicated they would prefer to send their children to a Muslim school rather than a state school. The majority of remaining respondents stated they would choose the best school (regardless of whether it is mainstream or Muslim), while 8.5% chose the option of a mainstream school.

## **Secularity and the Desire for Muslim Schools**

The findings indicate that even Muslims, who see religion as a negligible part of their lives, see scope for the utility of faith-based education, and do not see a necessary contradiction between their secularity and faith schooling.

## **Education Systems, Curricula and Muslim Schooling**

Both parents and pupils expressed similar concerns regarding what they perceived as problematic in secular mainstream schooling. Recurring concerns are lack of respect for religious values, encompassing intermingling of the sexes and hijab, the teaching of evolution theory and sex education. Most of the respondents saw an observable contradiction perceived between what is being taught in schools and Muslims' cultural and educational values.

## **Muslim Education and Social and Economic Disadvantage: Causes or Cures?**

The findings negated the view that faith schooling is predominately preferred by those who have low levels of education and income. The report shows that income or level of education are not overwhelmingly significant factors in desiring Muslim schools.

### **Age and Educational Choice**

The study surveyed a wide array of individuals, aging from 15 to over 50, to determine the differences between each age group in the preference of schooling. The 30 – 34 age group showed the highest percentage preference of 61.2% for Muslim schooling. The youngest age group, 15 – 19, was the lowest at 37.8%. The significance of the highest preference being in the 30-34 age group belies the view that preference is based on first generationalism.

### **Higher Achievement as a Motivator for Muslim Schools?**

The high achievement of Muslim schools in league tables contradicts the contention that religious schools are at odds with secular mindsets and values. The report also shows that achievement, rather than ideology, is a significant factor in desiring Muslim schools.

### **Ethnic Background and school preference**

While there were no significant preferences between ethnic groups and school preferences, from ten different backgrounds and one 'other' category, respondents from Turkish backgrounds showed the lowest preference for Muslim schooling at 36.4%, whereas the Bangladeshi community indicated the greatest preference at 54.3%. The relatively low variation between ethnic groups suggests a pan-Muslim consciousness regarding the utility of Muslim schools.

### **Creating Confident Individuals**

Discrimination against Muslim students causes low self-confidence and so lower educational achievement. In interviews, both parents and students, whether in favour or against the idea of faith schools, emphasised the need for religious space within mainstream education systems. Among other things, halal food, prayer rooms and uniforms sympathetic towards Muslim dress codes were seen as essential components of an inclusive mainstream educational system.

### **Experience of Discrimination and School Preference**

The study shows that 71.8% of those who experience discrimination 'almost daily' favour Muslim schooling. In the largest category, experiencing discrimination 'only on some occasions', preference is almost equally spread between the 'best school' and 'Muslim School'. The highest percentage of preference for mainstream education, 17.2%, is in the category of those who do not experience discrimination at all.

While these findings show a clear correlation between the experience of discrimination and the desire for Muslim schools, other findings suggest that the importance of this result should not be exaggerated. The choice for Muslim schools seems to be a choice for something and not against secular, 'white' or Christian education per se.

### **Creating Religious Space and Nurturing Spirituality**

Scholars have identified the growing significance of 'secular marginalisation', a cultural phenomenon in which religion is not vigorously attacked but rather simply ignored. The report highlights the problems with the effects of such marginalisation. Both parents and students emphasise the need for religious space within the mainstream education system. The alienation and isolation of students and citizens is detrimental to society as a whole.

### **Inculcating Citizenship and Muslim Educational Space**

The report shows that the desire for faith-schools is compounded in many cases by the idea of character building in terms of civic awareness, allowing diversity and the inclusion of non-Muslim children.

### **Relations Between Sense of Belonging and Schooling**

In testing for correlations between 'belongingness' and school preference, the study found positive correlations between sense of belonging to Britain and preference for Muslim

schooling. However, as the sense of belonging decreased, preference for Muslim schools increased:

- 37% of those who indicated 'Yes, Very Strong' in the category of 'Sense of Belonging' suggested preference for Muslim schooling. This percentage was the leading figure, followed closely by preference for 'the Best School' at 36.6%
- 61.6% of those who claimed 'No, I don't feel a sense of belonging' indicated preference for Muslim schooling. In the same category, only 1.4% prefer mainstream schooling.

### **Gender and School Preference**

Gender was a factor that showed a slight difference between preferring Muslim schooling to mainstream schooling.

- 42.9% of females (from a total of 410 female respondents) preferred Muslim schooling
- 49.7% of males (from a total of 724 male respondents) preferred Muslim schooling.

Interestingly, the variation between the choice of 'Muslim school' and 'the best school' was smaller in females (42.9% compared to 41.6% respectively), while males showed a more significant preference for 'Muslim schools' over 'the best school' (49.7% compared to 36.7% respectively).

### **Conclusion**

Muslim schools and Islamic education are crucial in the contemporary struggle for the formation of young people and for the shaping of their consciousness. Individuals who have attended Muslim schools find it easy to integrate into society. Muslim identity and faith is no obstacle to contributing and integrating positively into British society. The National Curriculum offers little guidance for young people on how to respect others' differences. Creating a 'Muslim educational space' is not only the desire of most Muslims, but also a requirement for the British educational system to be truly inclusive.

### **Recommendations to the Government**

The report concludes with the assertion that the message that the education system provides has a significant influence on young Muslims' attitudes to integration and participation in society.

As the majority of Muslims continue to be educated in non-Muslim state schools, it is necessary that the government:

- provide accommodation of religious needs
- use faith identity to raise achievement
- radically improve education about Islam
- institute religious awareness training for staff and governors at non-Muslim schools
- offer better teacher training on diversity
- expand funding for Muslim schools
- offer tax breaks for parents who wish to educate their children at home
- offer a greater balance of perspectives within the national curriculum
- generate dialogue through the national curriculum

### **Methodology and Sample Group**

In compiling this report, 1125 quantitative and 57 qualitative surveys were conducted, documented, analysed, and here presented for the aspired benefit of interested officials and community members alike. The quantitative questionnaire was part of a major survey carried out by IHRC and reported in volumes 1 & 2 of British Muslims' Expectations of the Government.

### **In summary:**

- The survey was undertaken across England, Wales and Scotland.

- The qualitative surveys were undertaken in 15 different localities across England, Wales and Scotland.
- The diversity of Muslim ethnicities was represented across the survey.
- Respondents' ages reflected the predominantly youthful make-up of the British Muslim community.
- Approximately 90 percent of our respondents are British citizens and 55 percent are born in Britain.
- The majority of respondents saw themselves as practising Muslims

**For further information, please contact:**

Arzu Merali, Islamic Human Rights Commission, T (+44) 20 8904 4222, or mobile (+44) 7958 607475 or email [info@ihrc.org](mailto:info@ihrc.org).

**To buy the full report, please visit:** <http://www.ihrc.org.uk/catalog>

[END]