

What goes on in an Islamic school?

■ Peter D. Jones

A third of secondary school students in Australia now attend Catholic and other independent schools, with the number of these schools substantially increasing since educational funding policy changes introduced by the Howard Coalition Government after 1996. One group of faith schools to receive a great deal of publicity in the last decade has been the Islamic schools, although the main area of growth in numerical terms has been with the conservative Christian schools. Much of the publicity for the Islamic schools has focused on community opposition to their establishment, particularly the proposed Islamic school in Camden, near Sydney, in 2007-2008 (the protests were the subject of an ABC Four Corners programme, *Dangerous Ground*, on 10 March 2008). Islamic schools were also targeted in the Australian Values debate after 2003 when the then Minister for Education, Dr Brendan Nelson, said he had received letters from 'concerned citizens' about the schools and what they taught, that he was following up.

Wild allegations have been made about what these schools are teaching their students, yet very little research has been carried out on them. It was for this reason, that my own research since 2004, has focused on visits to many of the schools, interviewing a cross section of Muslim and non-Muslim staff, as well as former students. The research focused on what was taught in the schools, how it was taught, and how staff and students had reacted to the Australian Values debate. In addition, did the schools teach intolerance of other faiths as alleged by some of their critics, and did the schools isolate students from other high school students who were not Muslims?

Australia's Muslim community

According to the 2011 census, there are 476,300 Muslims representing 2.2 per cent of the population of Australia, although some commentators say the figure is probably higher. Almost 50 per cent of Australia's Muslims live in Sydney in addition to 32 per cent in Melbourne, which is why most of the Islamic schools are in these two cities.

The first Islamic schools were established in Melbourne and Sydney in 1983. Today there are just over thirty of them, all in capital cities: three in Perth, one in Adelaide; two in Brisbane; one

in Canberra; and the others in Sydney and Melbourne. While most Australians think of Muslims as a homogenous group, the face of Islam is in reality about as diverse as Christianity, and these differences are reflected in the schools and the organisations or individuals setting them up.

Thirty-eight per cent of Muslims in Australia were born in this country. While the largest communities are of Lebanese and Turkish origin, ethnically over 70 different Muslim communities now live in Australia. In addition, Muslim connections to Australia go back to before European settlement with several centuries of inter-visitation between the trepang fishermen from Sulawesi and the Aboriginal people of Northern Australia. In the nineteenth century, the Afghan cameleers made it possible for Europeans to penetrate the Desert Centre of Australia, and it was this community that established the first mosques in this country.

The growth of the Islamic schools

While there are a number of diverse Muslim organisations in Australia, one of the main ones is the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC), which originated in the early 1970s and is based in Sydney. AFIC decided to set up Islamic schools in each capital city in Australia, starting with Melbourne in 1983. Getting land and finance was initially a major problem for the early schools but in Victoria, they had the advantage of taking over previous schools that had been closed for various reasons, especially during the era of the Kennett state government (1992-1999). Some of the schools sought funding from the Gulf States which is why a number of them have names associated with their benefactors. The AFIC school in Melbourne was initially named the King Khalid Islamic College for this reason, while the first campus was set up in what was previously a Catholic school in Coburg that had been fire damaged. In 2006, the school broke away from AFIC to become the Australian International Academy and today it has a sister school in Sydney (formerly Noor al-Houda) and another in Abu Dhabi. AFIC has since opened another school at Tarneit in the western suburbs of Melbourne, starting with a K-4 campus that they plan to expand each year, a model developed by many of the other Islamic schools. Other AFIC schools have been opened in Perth, Adelaide, Canberra and Brisbane.

Sydney was different as the first school there was started by Silma Buckley and her husband after their daughter was turned away from another private school for wearing a hijab. Both Silma and her husband were converts to Islam and the story of their struggle to establish the school has been published as a pamphlet, *Bridges of Light*, and then shown on an ABC Compass program, *Silma's School* (3 September 2006). Finding land in Sydney has always been a struggle, with a great deal of community opposition often masquerading as traffic concerns or related issues. The AFIC school, Malek Fahd Islamic College in Bankstown, tried to set up a second campus in 2010 to meet growing demand and had opened its first classes, when appeals from a local community group meant their initial Council approval was over-ruled. Other schools have been set up by individuals, like Mr Abdullah Magar in Perth, whose Australian Islamic College has over 2,000 students and is the largest Islamic school in Australia. Some schools are connected with a particular ethnic community, while others have been started by organisations specifically set up to develop a school.

Financially the schools were to benefit from policy changes introduced by the Howard Coalition Government (1996-2007). Today, while the schools do charge fees, on average about 80 per cent of their funding comes from government sources because of the low socioeconomic status of the suburbs where they are established. Significantly none of the schools now seek funding from overseas.

In terms of numbers, around 20 per cent of Muslim students currently attend Islamic schools in Australia. While most students attend schools in the public system, there are others whose parents send them to independent single sex schools, especially Catholic schools. Other students get sent to Muslim countries once they reach puberty, where education is again gender segregated, but there are no figures for either of these options, and evidence is only anecdotal. From my research, it seems that more students would attend Islamic schools if they were closer to home or their parents could afford the fees. Many of the schools bus a majority of their students in every day, especially those campuses developed on the outer edges of Sydney and Melbourne.

What do they teach in the schools?

All schools in Australia that receive government funding teach the Australian curriculum. Faith based schools are only different because they include extra classes on religion and their assemblies will take a religious form. Like many other faith-based schools, the annual calendar reflects their sacred times. In the case of Muslims, this means a two to three day holiday for the Eid el-Fitr after the fasting month of Ramadan and the Eid ul-Adha during the time of the Pilgrimage month to Mecca, the Hajj (the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar). On Fridays, the noon prayer forms a special assembly time and one of the school imams* will give a short address. Sometimes older male students will lead the prayers.

Other advantages for Muslim students are having access to a halal (permitted) canteen, which means they do not have to worry

about what they are eating, and the school uniform is in keeping with the Islamic dress code. Girls wear a scarf or hijab, though the age at which they start wearing it varies, and cover their arms and legs, while boys wear long shorts, even when on the sports field. In addition, at school functions, no alcohol is served, and gambling is haram (forbidden) as a school fundraising activity.

Most of the schools devote six lessons a week to faith teaching. A native speaker will teach Arabic while the school imam usually teaches the units on the Qur'an and Islamic Studies. All the imams have qualified overseas, but the standard of teaching varies enormously. Former students interviewed were sharply critical of older imams who did not have a good command of English and were even more critical of their Arabic teachers who were often not even qualified as teachers. Some schools now insist on their staff qualifying as teachers in Australia and students spoke appreciatively of younger imams who understood how to relate to young Australians. There was a marked difference between students who came from an Arabic speaking home and those who did not, and contrary to popular opinion, only about 20 per cent of Muslims are Arabs. Nonetheless, speaking Arabic at home did not mean that students could read and write the classical Arabic of the Qur'an, but some students from a non-Arabic speaking home told me that they never really understood Arabic and their lessons were a waste of time.

With the rest of the curriculum, there are some differences from other schools, reflecting Islamic beliefs, but no different from some of the other faith schools. One big issue for Muslims is whether an Islamic ethos penetrates the whole school curriculum or just the faith units. In some schools, there is an effort to embed these ideas in the curriculum, for example Islam's contribution to mathematics and science, or to provide for a more balanced approach to history than the current somewhat Euro-Centric curriculum. However, as around half the staff at most of the Islamic schools are not Muslims, this awareness is usually missing. Nonetheless, students said that they did appreciate staff who referred to Islam's contribution to knowledge as well as covering the set curriculum.

Many of the schools have a high intake of new arrivals so need to have ESL classes. In English, most of the teachers are non-Muslim, but while teaching the official curriculum, they need to censor passages or films occasionally (especially those with references to inappropriate use of alcohol or pre-marital sex) or not teach inappropriate texts. *Looking for Alibrandi* was a popular text for girls and many of them enjoyed the teen novels of Muslim Australian author, Randa Abdel Fattah (such as *Does my head look big in this* and *Ten Things I Hate About Me*), who had herself attended an Islamic school. Her visit to speak at one school in Sydney had not surprisingly proved very popular.

One contested area is Health Education as like other faith-based schools, Islamic schools reflect a culture where issues like sex and drug education are not discussed in class, although efforts are being made to develop a suitable curriculum. Muslim students are encouraged to keep physically fit, in line with the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad on the subject, but the sports taught do



vary in different schools, often reflecting ethnic backgrounds and access to facilities.

Many of the schools do not teach music because the more orthodox Muslim parents say it is 'unIslamic', and the principals say it is easier just not to teach it. Other schools argue that there is a long tradition of music in Islamic culture although there are certain instruments or kinds of music that are not appropriate. The same controversy surfaces over Art although again Islamic Art has a long and rich history. However many other Australian schools do not teach Music or Art because they do not have the space or trained teachers, just as not all schools can offer Physical Education to their students.

Do the schools teach intolerance of other faiths?

One allegation, often made against Muslims and the Islamic schools, is that they teach hatred of other faiths. In fact, the evidence is quite the contrary, as older students are given the opportunity to take part in inter-faith dialogue through programs like *Building Bridges* in Melbourne. However these occasions are largely with other independent and Catholic schools rather than public schools. The faith units sometimes include a look at the other Abrahamic traditions (Judaism and Christianity), while pre-tertiary religion courses in states like Western Australia include comparative religion units that cover the Indic faiths too.

In Melbourne, Minaret College developed an accredited unit on the Qur'an for the VCE 'Texts and Traditions' syllabus that attracted many of their own students once it was perceived as a pre-tertiary course.

Some students interviewed did complain that only select students were invited to take part in these exchanges but admitted that it did take a certain level of self-confidence to speak on these occasions. The ones who had taken part said that they had enjoyed meeting other students and the best part was the informal exchanges. Given that public schools in Australia do not even include Religion as a subject (apart from recent controversial programs allowing religious visitors into the schools, usually proselytising Christians), the Islamic schools are way ahead in terms of inter-faith dialogue rather than the other way round.

One other related angle within the Islamic schools themselves is the divide in Islam between Sunni and Shi'a. Only one student interviewed said she was taught hostility towards Shi'a Islam by her teachers while others said it was not an issue, though they acknowledged there were a few differences in religious practice like how they prayed. There are two Shi'a primary schools in Sydney, both of which hope to expand their classes to become K-12 schools over the next few years.

Do the schools isolate Muslim students?

Both Muslims and non-Muslims sometimes express the fear that Islamic schools isolate the students from other young Australians and act as a barrier to integration. Some students interviewed said that this was the case for them because they had never been to any other kind of school. However a high proportion of other students

had been to other schools as well as the Islamic schools so they did not feel isolated. These students had often attended Catholic primary schools or public schools while others left high school before Year 12 to attend colleges where they could take subjects not taught at Islamic schools. There is some truth in the allegation that one or two schools manipulate their pre-tertiary results by encouraging students to leave early if they are not prepared to take high profile subjects that will lead to doing Medicine or Law at university. The Australian International Academy is the only Islamic school to offer the International Baccalaureate (IB) and is proud of its high standard of results.

Students also met their contemporaries through extra-curricular activities, ranging from sporting fixtures to debating or participation in Youth Parliaments and Model United Nations Assemblies. Students interviewed often said how much they valued meeting other students and explaining their faith, especially to overcome common misconceptions. The girls reported that questions they were asked included whether they took their clothes off to have a shower, or what they wore to go swimming, rather than raising theological issues about beliefs.

Those students who had attended an Islamic school from K-12 said that while it might have isolated them a bit from wider society and made university a bit of a culture shock, it did offer them a 'shelter from the storm'. This was the case particularly since the events of September 2001 and the Bali bombings. Even as far back as the first Iraq War, Islamic schools and mosques had been the target of attacks. Girls had their hijabs ripped off and some said they took them off out of school to avoid abuse. School buses were also a target. Some also referred to outrageous statements made by so-called leaders of the Muslim community which made them cringe, given the public perception that Islam was monolithic and these men spoke for all Australian Muslims. Muslim staff admitted that it was a problem that in Islam nobody speaks for the whole community. They also reported that it was a problem that the media often focused on some of the more extreme views expressed, in rather the same way that some Christians would get upset if other Australians thought they shared the views of Rev Fred Nile, the Jensen brothers or Archbishop Pell.

As the Muslim population of Australia increases, obviously more schools will be established, and though teething problems remain, students interviewed expressed the view that overall they had improved since the early days. One day, hopefully Islamic schools will be as acceptable as Catholic schools, given the initial opposition both have faced over the years. *

*In Islam, an imam is the person who leads the prayers in a mosque and delivers the Friday address but in the schools, they have an important role as spiritual guides and figures of authority, as they have qualified at overseas seminaries.

Peter D. Jones teaches Comparative Religion at The Friends' School in Hobart. He took the Graduate Diploma in Islamic Studies offered by the University of New England and converted his thesis on Islamic Schools in Australia into a PhD, submitted in July 2012.

Photo courtesy of Minaret College, Victoria

