

Extended Abstract**Formal Religious Education at Pre- and Primary Schools in England: The Example of the Islamia Primary School***

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Abstract

Muslims are a religious group who make up about 4.8% of the population in the United Kingdom. Over 500,000 Muslim children attend public schools where Christianity is basically taught alongside different religions, church schools that promote different Christian sects and teach Christianity, or one of the over 120 Muslim schools where Islam is taught. In this study I will examine the place of religious education practices by taking one of the Islamic schools receiving state support under the UK education system, which supported their educational activities in the 2012-2013 academic year. The school that is the topic of my investigation was opened in 1983 as a pre- and primary school; in 1998 it began to utilize the state support that parish schools benefit from. The school is a superior school through its representative strength of Muslims on the points of providing religious continuity in a Christian and secular society and creating an Islamic environment. This school, which captures academic success, provides students from an early age with education in the scope of basic Islamic research under three basic headings: Islamic studies (akaid, morality, siyer, Koranic commentary, and hadiths), the Arabic language, and Islamic art and music. In this context, Muslim students of different races and cultures have an educational environment where they can learn their own religions around the common component of Islam. This school, which adopts a religious educational approach over denominations, supports religious education through social and cultural activities outside of the course curriculum, such as are in parish schools.

Keywords

Early childhood • Primary school religious education • Islamic schools • Religious education in the UK • Islamia Primary School

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The Development of Islamic Education in the United Kingdom

Muslims have had an important place in England's social and cultural life since about a century ago. In recent years they have opened institutions that are engaged in education and training in accordance with their own fundamentals of belief as an independent religious group, just like other religious or ethnic groups; their opportunities for an ideal education have also come into being by constantly improving their curricula. However, performing educational and training activities this way in the UK has not happened quickly or easily. With their first immigration movement, Muslims have been involved in some initiatives in religious education with the first immigration movement, and have tried to meet their needs on this topic through alternative institutions of religious education. Despite the religious education that is provided in schools in the Christian framework, both giving space to a curriculum that teaches other religions and includes general information about religions, as well as governments allowing private initiatives on religious education, have led Muslims on the search for alternative education. Mosque lessons, mekâtib programs, Daru'l Ulum Schools that provide classical madrasa education, and weekend schools have emerged here as institutions of alternative education where the Muslim community meets their requests for religious education outside of the school system. Although not precisely known, the number of students who attend these institutions, which are quite common in some regions of the UK, is estimated today to be around 200,000.

Undoubtedly, Muslims have many religious, social, educational, and personal reasons to move toward these types of alternative education activities in a secular and Christian society. Muslim schools, in which approximately 3% of students are attending and which have been established by Muslims with an Islamic life philosophy, apply their own curriculum on the issue of Islamic religious education over regulations similar to the church schools by applying the lessons in the curriculum in the same way as other schools. As of 2013, 12 Islamic schools have continued their education activities on these regulations through government support within their general education. Aside from these government-supported schools, completely independent private Islamic schools are also found. The number of these schools is around the neighborhood of 120.

Religious Education in Islamic Schools

Among the schools that Muslims established using their own resources in the UK, the Islamia Primary School is the first established and most recognized. The school's founder is the famous artist and writer Cat Stevens (Yusuf Islam). After becoming Muslim in 1977, Stevens began some works in the field of education and had the enterprise to establish a school through his own means in London in 1983 for his own child's education. This school appeared as a result of his effort and leads the Muslim schools that have opened in the UK. The Islamia Primary School is the first primary school of its type to be an Islamic school as well as to receive government support. It finally encountered a long application

process through the coming to power of the Labor Party, and the school gained the status of a Voluntary-Aided school by receiving state support in 1998. Schools under this status, approximately 85% of whose expenses are government-funded, are free to implement their own religious education curriculum alongside the implementation of the national curriculum.

The school's main goal is to prepare a school environment that teaches how to be academically successful, in addition to an Islamic lifestyle. The school, which has indeed drawn a rather successful chart compared to other schools in England, received positive results from an inspection carried out in 2009, being evaluated as "good" and "satisfactory;" however, it was stated as having other aspects that need to be developed. The inspections of 2013 identified that developments were recorded in many areas in accordance with the previous inspection, evaluating the school status as "good" in general, with some qualities being "outstanding."

General Applications of Religious Education

Mosque visits. In weekly programs organized by the school, students 8-11 years old are taken on Wednesdays, students 4-7 years old are taken on Fridays, and all students are taken on Tuesdays to the mosque for about a half hour. A short group prayer is made on these trips, in addition to some religious education courses that are taught there.

Daily and congregational prayers. Under the scope of collective worship, Friday congregational prayer (Jumah Salat) and some of the other daily prayers are performed at school as a group with the participation of all the students and teachers. During the academic semester, the noon prayer is held regularly at school after the morning classes are finished. Students as well as their parents participate in the Jumah Salat. Additionally, some school holiday periods become a common religious and cultural activity through the students and parents' participation. For example, on the first Friday of the Ramadan and Qurban festivals (Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, respectively), both the Jumah Salat and a series of religious activities are held in this sense. Almost all students and parents participate in these programs.

Arranging the school calendar according to Islamic practices. Eid al-Adha, the last ten days of Ramadan, and the Eid al-Fitr are holidays. Because Eid al-Adha occurs at the same time as the Hajj, the school is on holiday for two weeks. Additionally, the school can have holidays on days that are considered sacred in terms of Islam. Apart from the holidays, the curriculum distribution of religious education courses conforms to the chronology of Islamic history. At the start of Ramadan, only Qur'an lessons are given because the Qur'an was first revealed in that month. In the month of Sha'ban, the topic of the changing of the Qiblah (the direction Muslims face while praying) is explained. The topics of the Isra and Mi'raj (two events of the Night Journey), and finally the Hajj, are described in the month of Rajab.

Teaching other religions. Teaching other religions is done in school in accordance with the sources of the religion of Islam. Religions not mentioned in Islamic sources are not included in the curriculum.

Teachers of religious education courses. While the religious education coordinator gives the *akaid* courses, which teach the fundamental doctrines of Islamic faith, the class teachers generally provide the other religious education courses.

Religious Education Curriculum

The religious education program of schools that implement the national curriculum is completely free. Particular attention is paid to this issue when implementing the program because the general life philosophy of the school is “to provide the best education in a safe Islamic atmosphere in the light of the Qur’an and the Sunnah.” In this context, 20% of the curriculum is devoted to religious education courses. This corresponds to approximately five hours in the weekly course curriculum. At this school, lessons are begun one hour earlier than in other schools so that the curriculum can be fully applied.

When looking at the education curriculum, the courses are seen to include teaching Arabic at the level of being able to read and write an Arabic text with no advanced level of understanding or speaking using predominantly Islamic studies (*akaid*, morality, *siyer*, Koranic commentary, and hadiths). Apart from this, religious music lessons are also applied as a separate learning area. This curriculum is given five hours a week to the students, who began school at the age of four. With the length of courses changing according to grade, the predominant part of curriculum is made up of courses on Islamic studies. The Islamic studies lessons, which are given three hours a week for the first two years, continue for four hours starting in the third year. All students are given an average of an hour of Arabic and a half hour of religious music per week each year.

The main aim of Arabic lessons, which begin at the age of four, is to be able to sufficiently read and understand some basic concepts of the Qur’an. One can say that the efforts to improve students’ ability to write in Arabic are also intensive. After learning the Arabic alphabet, students are given assignments on writing the surah of the Qur’an they’ve learned; additionally, students who’ve learned a surah of the Qur’an at the same time learn both Arabic texts and the English language.

In the context of this curriculum, the goal is for students who’ve finished their last class to acquire some basic religious achievements like having knowledge about the basic fundamentals of belief, being able to show Islamic morality in their life as a practice, understand the Prophet’s life through its general aspects, memorizing and knowing the meaning of the surah of the Qur’an from Surah al-Balad to Surah an-Nas, understanding and learning the 40 Hadiths, having knowledge related to the general applications of the Islamic religion, and being able to read an Arabic text.

Collective Worship

The British education system considers collective worship to be an important part of religious education. In this regard, collective worship is not only applied in some state and church schools, it is also applied at the same time in Islamic schools. This application is a religious practice whose boundaries are defined through a legal framework under the scope of religious education courses in public schools, schools opened by faith groups, and Islamic schools.

Through collective worship in school, achievements are targeted such as *providing students with the opportunity to understand that they are also members of different races, languages, and culture; creating community spirit in students; being aware that God is constantly with humans and sees all they do; and creating a safe environment that allows students to take responsibility and learn from each other's experiences*. In this context, group prayer in school is performed at specific periods in cooperation with the school/mosque with the participation of all personnel. The following is a three applications on the topic of collective worship in school:

- I. *Every day before the morning classes begin and after classes finish, all students and teachers come together as a group in the school area to pray.*
- II. *The obligatory prayers are performed together.*
- III. *The Islamic testimony of faith is introduced for entering Islam.*

Results and Evaluations

The philosophy of the Islamia Primary School is based on the idea of *forming a safe Islamic environment for children by setting out on the path to Islam's basic sources*. The basic model that school administrators adopt in religious education is *confessional approach*. This model carries out religion education in the framework of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, outside of other views and opinions. Religious education practices in school occur with the participation of the school administrator, the teachers, and the parents. In my observations of the classroom environment, students in great measure were seen to acquire the targets that had been identified. Apart from the religion education courses, this curriculum plays a complementary role in activities that are performed both at school and outside of school. In this regard, in-school and out-of-school religious activities complement each other. In particular, collective worship, which constitutes an important part of the UK religion education system, has been transformed into a form of prayer and worship that the whole school performs in accordance with Islamic principles. Practices like praying the Duhr, Asr, and Jumah Salat (the afternoon, mid-afternoon, and Friday group obligatory prayers, respectively) in school, performing the rite of entry to Islam, and finishing and beginning classes with prayer show that religion education occurs theoretically and practically, and that Muslims have the opportunity to express themselves within a Western culture.