

A SKETCH OF THE PROMOTION OF INTER FAITH HARMONY AT AN AUSTRALIAN ISLAMIC COLLEGE: CHALLENGES FOR ISLAMIC SCHOOLS

Introduction

This brief paper is based on an interview conducted by the author with Mrs Mona Abdel-Fattah and Mrs Rabia Hussein who are respectively the Head of the Middle School and the Values and Religious Education Co-ordinator at the Academy.

The Australian International Academy (formerly King Khalid Islamic College) is a large two-campus school in an inner northern suburb of Melbourne. The student population comes from 40 different ethnic backgrounds, with the majority having been born in Australia. In other words, for most of the students at the college, Australia is the only home they have known, and they are in the truest sense of the term, Australian Muslims.

Earlier this year, in relation to the Australian government's consultation with religious leaders, the school was visited as part of a mission to discover what Islamic schools did to promote intercultural harmony. The school showcased its exemplary program of values, citizenship, and intercultural education, demonstrating that like all good Australian schools, it intentionally educated its students in tolerant and responsible Australian values. In a country where there are many schools associated with particular faith traditions, such scrutiny can only be positive, especially if applied universally to all schools. It is clear that all Australian schools, not just Islamic ones, need to integrate education for inter-faith understanding into their curriculum.

Some aspects of school life have not been easy for the teachers and students of the Australian International Academy since the American terrorist attacks in 2001. This school is very aware of the closeness of the global community and, in its mission statement, declares that it educates students a) for responsible Australian and world citizenship, and b) to be responsible national and world citizens who live by Muslim values. The school clearly understands that education for tolerance of difference and protection of the rights of all is critical to Australia's future.

There is no doubt that there is a tendency in Australian society, especially in the media, to scapegoat Australian Muslims for terrorist activity overseas, and to misrepresent Islam as a religion

that condones terrorism. This has caused issues of identity and self-esteem for Australian Muslim teenagers, especially for those whose dress proclaims them as Muslim. Some Muslim teenagers may try to disguise or hide their identity through changing their names, or dyeing their hair. Others react internally, taking the defamation to heart, and developing a sense of shame about their religious and ethnic identity. Others find that the struggle to retain their Muslim identity strengthens them, so that their adherence to their religion becomes stronger and more informed.

The discrimination is fuelled by ignorance. Many Australians have never met or spoken with a Muslim, and it is this ignorance which allows the verbal and physical abuse of Muslims in the streets and on public transport to continue. It also exacerbates difficulties that many Muslims, especially women who wear a headscarf, have in finding work. On the other hand, generosity, acceptance, and understanding often come from unexpected places and groups. In combating ignorance and fear, the education of youth and future generations is critical.

The Australian International Academy promotes inter-faith understanding in its values education programme; its formal religious education program; and the extra curricula activities it undertakes with children from schools of other religions. It also educates for responsible citizenship through a demanding program of community service.

Community service

In the primary and middle schools, up to Year 10, the curriculum focuses on the International Baccalaureate, with the primary and middle years' program of the Baccalaureate being undertaken by all students. In Years 11 and 12, the students may undertake the International Baccalaureate Diploma or the Victorian Certificate of Education. The focus of the Baccalaureate across all year levels is international understanding and multiculturalism, and these values are enshrined in the whole curriculum.

One of the components of the International Baccalaureate is a community service program, and the students at the Academy each complete 50 hours of community service. These hours may comprise local environmental projects, service in

the local area or fund-raising for local charities, and the children are required to reflect in writing on the activity and upon what they have learned by undertaking it. As the program has continued the students have generated more ideas for projects, they might support. At Years 9 and 10 the students must develop a personal community service project, and, as one example, recently a Year 10 student researched cancer in children. As part of her project, she contacted the organisation Challenge, which cares for children suffering from cancer. She invited 20 very young children who are cared for by the organisation, with their parents, to a fun day at the College, with a jumping castle, a clown, and a magician. The Challenge organisation appreciated the efforts of the student and would like to make the day a regular event at the school. The money raised by the students for this project amounted to \$800 which will help to support the Challenge program. The students at the Academy are required to do community service every year, and gradually they become more and more independent and creative in the projects they choose.

Education for inter-faith understanding

As with most faith-based schools, the religious education curriculum at the Academy focuses on the religious tradition of the school. Religious education is a key learning area, which aims to help the students to understand their own religion, Islam. Being an Islamic school in a secular but nominally Christian society, the school emphasises teaching about Islam in the religious education curriculum. It was explained that in Muslim countries, where the environment in which the students live would also teach them about Islam, there is more room for formal interfaith education. At the Academy many of the parents may not themselves have detailed knowledge of Islam, even though it is a teaching of Islam that parents have the duty to educate their children in the faith. For many parents, the fact that the children will be educated in Islamic belief and practice is an important reason for their choice of the school.

However, the three Semitic religions have the Old Testament in common, and the students study the events and personages of the Old Testament, including the prophets. In the Koran, there is an entire chapter on Mary the mother of Jesus, and so the Muslim students are introduced to her and to her role in Christianity. So, while there are no specific elements of interfaith education in the formal religious education curriculum, Islam, the youngest of world religions, has much in common with Judaism and Christianity which also arose in the Middle East.

However, interfaith education is important to the teachers at the College. In 2005, the Wellspring

Centre, a Christian support organisation, ran a program which they entitled *Building Bridges*. The Australian International Academy was one of the eight Christian, Jewish, and Muslim schools that were involved in the two-year program. The aim of the programme was to use teachers and young people themselves as facilitators to involve secondary school students in interfaith dialogue. The schools involved each sent a group of Year 9 or 10 students, who met with their counterparts in other schools four or five times over the year. Facilitators organised workshops which focused on discovering and explaining the various religions of the young people. They spoke about their backgrounds, and their various religious beliefs and practices. They shared meals and completed art activities together. At their end of year presentation in which the workshops culminated, parents were invited to listen to the students' reflections about what they had gained from the program. The most important thing the students gained was a sense of the common humanity of all. They made friends with young people from other faith traditions and grew in understanding of the religions of others.

In keeping with the best principles of interfaith education, the students were required to discuss and explain the differences between religions, what they believe and why, and to explain rituals and feasts. The Muslim students learned a great deal about Christianity and Judaism, and had the opportunity to explain the relationship of Islam with the prophet, the reasons for fasting in Ramadan and other aspects central to the faith of Islam. Mrs Mona Fattah, the Head of Middle School, attended planning meetings for the programme and the school actively supported the involvement of its teachers and students. Mrs Fattah explained that according to Catholic teachers who were also involved, the ability of the Muslim students to explain and articulate their faith prompted Catholic students to realise that they were not as informed about their own tradition, and to ask parents and teachers to help them to fill in the gaps in their knowledge.

Values education

Education in universal values permeates the entire curriculum from junior to senior years. The three frameworks with which values education occurs are those espoused in the International Baccalaureate, the Australian values education framework and Islamic or faith based values.

When the National values framework was introduced, the teachers at the Academy audited their present curriculum, which is drawn from the International Baccalaureate, against it. Their conclusion was that all of the values espoused in the two frameworks were closely compatible with Muslim values, since Islam also emphasises the

holistic and personal values that lead to aware and compassionate citizenship. The only specifically “religious “ value that teachers deemed it was necessary to add to their framework was the Islamic value of *God consciousness* which signifies an awareness of the presence and love of God in all aspects of life, and which calls the person to fullness of self. It was the belief of the teachers at the school that all other central values espoused by Islam were catered for in the International Baccalaureate framework and the National values education framework. When speaking of faith-based values, the teachers pointed out that the foundational value of “God consciousness” is common to all religions. The Values are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 The three frameworks for values education at King Khalid Islamic College

International Baccalaureate values	National frameworks for values education in Australian schools	Islamic or faith values (all the mentioned values as well as:
Approaches to learning	Care and compassion	God consciousness
Community service	Doing your best	
Human creativity	A fair go for all	
Environment	Freedom	
Health and social education	Honesty and trustworthiness	
Intercultural awareness	Understanding, tolerance and inclusion	
	Integrity	
	Responsibility	
	Respect	

Solidarity among faith based schools

One of the positive outcomes of the scapegoating of Muslims - including Muslim children and adolescents - that has occurred in Australia in the wake of international terrorist attacks, has been an increased solidarity among faith based schools. The Australian Council for Islamic education in schools (ACIES) called Muslim, Christian, and Jewish schools to demonstrate this solidarity, and the result was the following common declaration in support of Muslim schools:

Based on our beliefs, values and traditions, faith based schools/colleges declare and affirm the following:

- We are a proud part of the Australian educational system and committed to teaching according to the guidelines of government curriculum standards and shared Australian values.
- We teach the children in our schools to be proud Australians, model citizens and to participate positively in building a prosperous, harmonious, and safe society.
- We teach the children in our schools to respect the rights of others and to understand the different backgrounds and religions of Australia’s multicultural society.
- We teach our children about the rights of their neighbours and the respect, care and protection of people and property.
- We are committed to perpetuate the integrity of our traditions in teaching the value of life and the dignity of all people.
- We are committed to teach the pursuit of peace and the promotion of understanding.
- We stand against those who preach violence and hatred.
- As citizens or residents of Australia, we stand to defend our country from any form of aggression.
- We are committed to participate fully in our democratic system.
- We believe in mutual respect, co-operation, tolerance, and dialogue.
- We respect diversity and promote multiculturalism.
- We welcome co-operation with the wider community.

The Australian International Academy is consciously promoting harmonious and responsible citizenship among its students, within a framework of true Islamic values and with a conviction that there must be dialogue between religions in order to promote a future of peace and harmony in the Australian community. In all of this, it is in the best tradition of democratic education in Australia.

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