Home Education and the Muslim Community
by Fzeelah El-Sawah

IHSAN, the 'Islamic Home Schooling Advisory Service' was set up in 2000 to help Muslim families home educate their children. Since its foundation it has seen its numbers double.

IHSAN's success in reaching families who are unhappy with the state schooling system, through internet access and word of mouth, has meant more families are aware of home education as a legal option. In the vast majority of cases families start home education and find that it fulfils needs in ways that the alternatives lack. In many other cases people 'fall into' home education whilst looking for that 'perfect school' or while on the waiting list for the 'right school'.

When I was asked to write this article I contacted a number of families to ask their views on the 'Why?' for home education. The results are, I believe, similar to home education generally:

- Dissatisfaction on the moral teaching where the school system is concerned, or the teaching of theories which contradict parental beliefs as fact.

- In addition to this many parents feel there is a certain amount of negativity that the child faces simply because of who they are: non-white and/or Muslim.

- The bullying factor: child to child, and/or teacher to child, (which interestingly came up for private schools as much as state schools).

- Parental perception of the schools 'failure', whether it be in regard to bullying, not valuing the individual for who they are, not meeting the mark for Special Needs children or the external pressure put on children for the sake of the school's or the government's obsession with paperwork and test scores.

Where state schools are concerned the first point parents are considering is what does the state school offer   our   children?
Roland Meighan, special Professor of Education (retired from Nottingham University), captures the views of many parents in a nut shell when he states:

> "The system is riddled with domination - it is mass rather than personal, coercive rather than invitational, schooling rather than education".[1]

The state school dominates the child, it refuses to allow his personality and interests through. It cannot allow him to develop as an individual, only as part of the herd and it cannot acknowledge that the child may have something as valid, or perhaps even more valid, to offer than the school itself. Partnerships are not possible, only domination.

This domination for Muslim children has an insidious undertone because it reflects negatively on the child's home belief system, his religious views and therefore his self view and world view. Many children are forced into dual roles; one to satisfy peer pressure and non Muslim adult pressure on school property and one to satisfy Muslim adults at home. As a result the child is happy in neither and low self esteem and self conflict leaves young Muslim children very confused and angry. The pressure to 'fit in' can be very forceful e.g.:

"My first day at secondary school will always remain with me. I had worn the uniform but not a knee length skirt, a pair of trousers instead. The deputy head took me for a walk round the school while she suggested I bring a skirt with me to school in my bag, change once in school and only put the trousers back on when it was home time. She also stressed there would be no need for my parents to know!"

So lying and deceit are fitting in!

"The deputy head… suggested I bring a skirt with me to school in my bag"

acceptable in the pursuit of

This same message came through when my eldest son

started school: hymn singing, school assemblies to a specific faith, lack of respect for personal space for changing, praying etc. The only thing my son's headmaster was upset about was that in his 20 years as head *no one* had asked for anything else i.e. if they were happy enough to do as they were told then so should I be.

This 'domination' comes through on many different levels and in many areas but the end product is the same: the child has to fit the system; the system does not have to fit the child.

Many parents are also dissatisfied with the actual curriculum in schools and what appears to be a conscious effort to teach a white, Christian view of the world. For example:

> "When we study Europe's Middle Ages, we seldom include Spain (at least not until after the "re-conquest"). Our libraries abound with books on the Middle Ages, but try to find in any of them a single word about daily life and customs in Spain. It is as if later historians, in order to justify a uniquely "European history", ignored the fact that a vibrant and brilliant civilization created by "Others" - by Arabs, by Muslims, by Jews - by brown and black people - not only existed in Europe, but without whose contributions the region could not have become what it did. When we talk about Europe's Renaissance, we never think of its beginnings in Spain several centuries before it reached Italy. It's as if we lopped off a good 1000 years of history - or at least amputated it from Europe. Nothing could be farther from the truth." [2]

How many parents have come through the school system learning about the virtues of Florence Nightingale and the bravery of Richard the Lionheart?

How furious are these parents when they realise the black and brown counterparts were never even mentioned or when they read of the Crusades from an Islamic perspective? To take but two names, where have Mary Secole and Salahuddin been hiding for all these centuries?

The placing of Muslim children under the care of non Muslims is not necessarily a bad thing, but when these non Muslims consciously try to belittle the faith of the child, then it becomes an active wrong. Ramadan, for example, often comes near exam time. How many Muslim children have been 'advised' by their non Muslim teachers not to fast as it may affect their exam performance?

These teachers may think they are helping the child, but for those of us who believe in Allah's decree and the temporary status of this life the missing of one Ramadan is too great a loss, much greater than a failed GCSE. One of the greatest challenges of Ramadan for a believer is to fast *and* continue with normal life.

Academic success does not need to be elevated to the status of God.

> **"as Muslims we are responsible for our selves, our families and our community"**

There is, of course, the other angle to consider, that in order to 'anglicise' these children they must be taught that what they learn at home is of little importance, the real value is here in this school structure and this exam route.

To deny a Muslim child the chance of developing an Islamic identity is wrong. There are some wonderful articles which show how children's minds are bullied into viewing Islam in the worst possible light and the rest in the best possible light. By home educating their children Muslim parents are removing the false and useless pressures of 'fitting in' and of denying who and what we are.

Many home educating Muslim parents have never considered the school option for their child. Their reasons range from we 'fell into' home education by knowing family or friends who were

already home educating to making the decision to home educate when the children were very tiny or even not yet here!

Many of these parents come from the viewpoint that as Muslims we are responsible for ourselves, our families and our community.

> Allah's Messenger (sallallahu alaihi wa-sallam) said: "Each of you is a shepherd and each of you is responsible for his flock. The leader is a shepherd and is responsible for his flock, a man is the shepherd of his family and is responsible for his flock; a woman is the shepherd in the house of her husband and is responsible for her flock, the servant is the shepherd of his master's wealth and is responsible for it. Each of you is a shepherd and is responsible for his flock."[3]

Allah says in the Qur'aan:

> "O you who believe! Save yourselves and your family from a fire whose fuel are men and stones."[4]

Leadership, or being a shepherd, brings about the question of who has responsibility? Who is actively using '*shura*' (consultation) and who is fulfilling their responsibility by the teaching the young? Women have responsibility over the house and children and a massive part of a child's life is education, not just schooling, but "Education" in its widest sense.

The idea of being a Shepherd conflicts with handing over children to others to teach them and form their minds where Religion is concerned or where a way of life is to be taught.

Muslim parents make the decision to bring into the child's life a purer and more balanced flow of information and teaching, which will enable them to face the Day of Judgment knowing that they have tried their best to instil values such as honesty and integrity and to teach us to recognise the Creator and the place we have as God's vice regents on Earth. Academic success or 'schooling' type success is a tiny part of this picture.

By taking responsibility for self, family and community they are building a future that they will be happy to be part of, and giving the next generation a chance to grow with positive role models around them. To borrow part of a title they see themselves as 'between assimilation and segregation' [5]

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Parents born or raised here feel themselves to be between assimilation and segregation, both ends are no longer acceptable, and so we must carve our own route through for our children.

Home Education is here to stay and as the numbers of people home educating increase, so do the numbers in religious minorities. Personally I sincerely hope that the current trend not only continues but rapidly accelerates.

References:

1. Roland Meighan Natural Parent magazine

2. From the introduction to *A Medieval Banquet in the Alhambra Palace*, Audrey Shabbas, editor, AWAIR, 1991.

3. Saheeh al-Bukharee and Saheeh Muslim

4. Soorah at-Tahreem (66): 6

5. *British Muslims Between Assimilation And Segregation* Mohammad Seddon, Dilwar Hussein and Nadeem Malik The Islamic Foundation ISBN 0860373541