WHAT MOTIVATES 21ST CENTURY MUSLIM PARENTS TO HOME-EDUCATE THEIR CHILDREN?

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In the 21st century a growing number of Muslim parents opt to home-educate their children, foregoing careers or personal goals, sacrificing their time and effort, adapting and making changes to their homes and family routines to give their children the best start to their lives. In this short article, Sajjida Sarwar considers what inspires these parents to carry out this formidable task.

Introduction

In the 21st century a growing number of Muslim parents are opting to home-educate their children, willingly foregoing careers or personal goals, sacrificing their time and effort, adapting and making changes to their homes and family routines, all in order to give their children the best start in life.

At the beginning of 2012, local authorities were aware of 20,842 home-educated children in England[1]. The phenomenon of a rising number of home-educated children is significant not only for Muslims but also for non-Muslims, with many people now looking to re-erect much sought-after classical educational approaches or alternative education as they realise that not all aspects of modernisation may be beneficial and that much is to be learnt from our history.

Using references from thinkers and authors who have been trying to research this growing trend all over the West, and specifically in the USA where the popularity of home education is unparalleled, I aim in this article to take a deeper look at how far home education is a viable alternative to schooling.

Considering the following set of questions, I will investigate what inspires parents to carry out this formidable task:

- Why is home-schooling becoming a popular choice for parents, both Muslim and non-Muslims?
- How are the motivations for Muslim parents to home-educate their children different to those of their Western counterparts?
- What do they aim to achieve in the end?

- In what way are these parents different in choosing home-schooling?

I will present a short case study looking at three families of individual home-schooling Muslim parents who, although motivated by entirely different reasons, have taken the educational future of their children into their own hands.

Finally, I will focus on quotes from Muslim theorists, educationalists and local home-schoolers as a point of reference.

Although educational theory and practice in the West is free for all, nevertheless it is found to be influenced by the prevalent thought and direction of the government of the day, with a current projected spend of £88.6 billion for 2013-2014[2]. Questions such as who stands to gain the most from home-schooling will arise. Each succession of elected parties culminates in changes to the educational framework, at times detrimental to those whom they wish to serve. This contributes to the many reasons why some parents have lost confidence in the system; others never believed in it to begin with, preferring to home-educate their children.

Educational theorists have made efforts to create models of educational practices which are relevant and practical in the 21st century. These range from the classical methodologies such as Waldorf, Steiner and Montessori and further incorporate the modern theories and practices such as Sensory Stimulation Theory, Reinforcement Theory, cognitive-gestalt approaches, Holistic Learning Theory, Facilitational Theory, Humanist Approach and Experimental Learning. Nevertheless, many parents are still not convinced, no matter how much pedagogical research

is done, and opt to home-educate their children, preferring the classical one-to-one approach rather than that of modern day 'mass production'.

The motivation for parents to home-educate their children tends to differ for most parents based upon their reality, experiences and even ideology. Muslim parents choosing to home-educate their children do so in an attempt to preserve their children's natural disposition and identity.

This article will introduce *tarbiyah* (nurturing the child in line with his/her natural disposition) as one aspect of the holistic Islamic educational approaches which historically are the backbone of Islamic education.

Why is home-schooling becoming a popular choice for parents?

The term 'home-schooling' or 'home education' is related to a concerted decision made by the parent or guardian of a child to keep their child out of traditional schooling, taking on the responsibility which the government has assumed, to educate their child in accordance to the manner they see fit. The decision to home-educate one's children is based upon very different reasons and motivations for most parents, nevertheless there is no doubt in this growing trend that parents are thinking a lot more about their children's education.

The interest in this growing trend has ignited many thinkers, academics and authors to raise the topic in various educational fields and establishments, suggesting that "home education is a solid, viable alternative that should be readily and intelligently presented to the public at large." (Ray and Wartes, 2013).

Although there are opponents and proponents of home-schooling, it is a practice which goes far back through the times, when oral and practical communication helped to nourish children, teaching them the skills of life by the use of language and aiding them to carrying out instructions.

Further building upon this idea, Thomas and Pattison (2008) began by stating that "all children start out as informal or 'osmotic' learners, mastering the complexity of learning to understand and speak language and to interpret social cues without any sort of formal, structured curriculum. Some children continue in this informal home-schooling also known as 'Natural Learning', 'autonomous learning' and 'un-schooling'".

Learning takes place via conversations with parents, siblings and others, trips to various places and access to technology such as computers, books, clocks, art supplies, etc. "Adults just live their lives and children absorb it all", (Thomas and Pattison, 2008). It may not sound intrinsic, but results are discernible, even measurable. For informal home-schooling practitioners, even academic subjects are approached this way.

Perhaps the best example of the power of osmotic learning comes in the development of the learner's critical thinking skills and autonomy. While school children are spoon-fed knowledge, informally educated students have to figure it out for themselves. (Thomas and Pattison, 2008).

A critical appraisal of Thomas and Pattison's work states that although the benefits of the osmosis is extremely apparent and that the earlier years of a child's life are naturally a point in which he/she is engaged with learning from surroundings, previous information and sensory perception, there is no clear data to extrapolate specific evidence to suggest whether or not this is representative of a wide spectrum of individuals.

Looking at the whole concept of home-schooling, government policy and educational research, Charlotte Rochez, Researcher, Histories of Home Education and Home Learning at Cambridge University, questions whether or not research should be in response to or guided by government policy, an assertion made by Anna Vignoles, also a researcher at Cambridge University. With the rising cost of education, should the government promote home-schooling as a viable alternative in line with cost-cutting measures? Or has teaching become an economic tool to be used by government policy to shift the workforce paradigm in the economy? Is there too much focus on the school-based view of education in research, with us limiting our consideration of education to that synonymous with schooling rather than considering education in its broadest sense?

If it were to be analysed numerically and logically, it is in the interest of the government to promote home-schooling as a viable, healthy and acceptable alternative. This results in more work in the economy for tutors (including parents who require casual work), a reduction in the education budget (as home-schooling is cost-free for the government), reduced traffic pollution and congestion as well as promoting better morals and standards in society, a reduction in anti-social behaviour.

On the downside, from the Government's perspective, there would be less control over what the children are learning, a lack of control of ideas and difficulty in maintaining standards. One parent would need to stay at home with the children to engage with their education, resulting in one less person working in the economy. Nevertheless this can be offset with savings made in the reduced budgetary expense for home-educated children. Home-educated children have been known to reach the same level earlier than their successful counterparts as they are not bound by the academic calendar. Most of us may never have thought of alternative childhood education, however for centuries many people considered home-schooling to be the norm, where children were taught within the home. The notion of state-administered education would have been considered a gross breach of the personal liberty.

Government schooling is the most radical adventure in history. It kills the family by monopolizing the best times of childhood and by teaching disrespect for home and parents. We don't need state-certified teachers to make education happen - that probably guarantees it won't. (Gatto, 2008)

The real motivation to home educate children derives from many different places. Some of the case studies I have researched on the Internet and interviewed personally suggest that these include: failing schools; a label of underachievement at schools for black and ethnic minorities; ideological reasons; safeguarding children's identity; parents' perceived duty to react to low standards, peer pressure and bullying. Whatever the reason, home-schooling is on the rise. Based upon the Freedom of Information Act, research was conducted by Channel 4, in which 134 local education authorities in England, Scotland and Wales took part, the findings were:

"Of those with year-on-year trends, 103 - or 80 per cent - reported an increase in the number of children they knew were being home-educated, and in those authorities with figures for the last five years, there has been an average increase of 61 per cent in the number of children being educated at home. In some areas it is far higher - Lancashire for example has seen an 829 per cent increase in home-schooling since 2002."

Deborah St Cyr, a teacher for 15 years, found that a legacy of black boys failing to achieve the required standards was a stigma attached to the educational practice all over the UK. For this reason she chose to home-school her three sons.

Home-schooling my sons for the last three years has allowed me to appreciate my time with them. I can teach them about their history, who they are and where they fit into this society. (Deborah St Cyr)

In the following example, we find that parents who are convinced and determined upon this path will not be deterred; even the law of the land will not stop them and they will move where necessary to keep their children home-educated.

In 2006 the Romeike family pulled their children out of a state school in Bissingen, Germany, in protest at what they deemed to be an anti-Christian curriculum.

They said textbooks presented ideas and language that conflicted with their Christian beliefs, including slang terms for sex acts and images of vampires and

witches, while the school offered what they described as ethics lessons from Islam, Buddhism and other religions. The eldest son got into fights in school and the eldest daughter had trouble studying. "I think it's important for parents to have the freedom to choose the way their children can be taught", Romeike told the Associated Press. (Melchior, 2013). In 2009, the Badman Review, also known as the Review into Elective Home Education in England, was conducted with a remit to investigate current practice of local authorities in relation to home educators. These proposals caused Techla and David Wood to "reluctantly" move north from North Yorkshire to Ayrshire with their four children. Techla Wood says if the family had remained in England, they would not have been able to continue with their 'child-led learning' because of the requirement that teaching plans must be submitted to local authorities. "My eldest children, twins aged 13, have never been to school, but the Badman Review turns everything that we have being doing on its head. If we stay in England, Ben and Ariana, who are six and one, won't have the same options to explore their education or have the freedom to learn as the older kids have," she says. How are the motivations for Muslim parents to home-educate their children different to those of their Western counterparts?

Home-schooling is popular amongst the Muslim population, of whom most are likely to have been through the current educational establishments. Living in the heart of the Western world and having enjoyed a 'good' standard of education, I wanted to see if their reasons were similar or different to those of their Western counterparts. Having interviewed three different parents to try to extract this information, I have found that they were aiming to give their children a specific upbringing, *tarbiyah*.

Some Muslim parents living in the West in the 21st century have chosen to retain the classical principles of education. In this manner a movement has arisen among Muslim parents who are now taking the education of their children very seriously, opting to home-educate or to seek alternative Islamic educational establishments where possible in order to safeguard their children's education. Those who cannot do either of the

above send them to normal schools but nevertheless try hard to instil the values of Islam.

I conducted a brief study consisting of a series of dialogues with Muslim home-schooling mothers in my locality. I found that their motivation to choose home-schooling was quite different to the examples in the Internet research above.

There is something intrinsic which they feel they are nourishing within their children; it is not just about academia, rather it is about a holistic approach to nurturing their children in line with the natural disposition, *fitra*, an innocence, which they feel becomes diluted by the influencing factors of a society which lacks morals.

Um Nafisah reflects on her perspective of the ills of society:

> …I personally remember what it was like in school and don't want to be exposed to the rudeness, boyfriend/ girlfriend attitude, being encouraged to lie to my parents and the many other negative things I had to confront. … My responsibility as a mother which has been given to me by Allah motivates me to continue home-schooling my four children.

The concept of the natural disposition (*fitra*) comes from the reference in the Holy Quran: 'How Merciful is our Lord who has planted in every soul the natural disposition'. This *fitra* is the pure state that each child is born into; like a clean slate each individual has the same foundations. The Prophet Muhammad said, "Every child is born in a state of *Fitrah* (pure innocence); it is the parent that will make him to be a Jew, or a Christian, or a pagan." (Sahih Muslim)

These references assist parents to go the extra mile and remain committed to home-schooling. Um Ruqayyah sees an analogy between the importance of home-schooling and "protecting the young seedling prior to exposing it to the harsh outdoor environment". She further mentioned her feeling that home-schooling is so natural and diametrically opposed to the artificial environment at school that she would never consider it, feeling at ease with the close relationship she has with her two daughters.

Furthermore, Um Ruqayyah spoke of the concept of "osmosis learning" (Thomson and Pattison): "Home-schooling is not as rigid as the school environment but rather the child is learning throughout the day from the morning till the evening, at times without even knowing it".

Um Habeebah's motivation to home-educate was the "preservation of my children's identity", fearing that the Islamic identity of her children would be lost and assimilated, which could be detrimental to future generations.

How do Muslims view education?

Here it is important to understand the Muslim's view of education. In the Arabic language there are three terms for 'education', each representing the various dimensions of a holistic educational process as perceived in Islam. The most broadly used word for 'education' in a formal sense is *ta'līm* which comes from the root word *'alima* (to know, to have knowledge, come to know, to perceive, to learn), used to denote knowledge being sought or imparted through instruction and teaching. *Tarbiyah* comes from the root word *raba* (to increase, to raise, to rear) and implies a state of spiritual and ethical nurturing in accordance with the will of God. *Ta'dīb* comes from the root word *aduba* (well-cultured, refinement, well-mannered), suggesting a person of sound social behaviour and development.

In this study I will look at one aspect of the Arabic term for education, *tarbiyah*, linguistically derived from the Arabic root word *Rabb*, meaning 'Lord' but in this context would refer to 'guardianship' – *Murrabi* – the one who assumes the care and responsibility of another individual.

The Arabic lexicographer Al Raghib Al Asfahani (d. 402 AH/1011 BC) describes the *tarbiyah* "…to cause something to develop from stage to stage until reaching its completion (full potential)".

I found that the parents had a general understanding of the term *tarbiyah*, defining it as the 'teaching and upbringing of children', 'building the child's understanding of right and wrong, pleasure and displeasure of Allah' and 'to know their purpose in life' and in 'developing the child's character'.

Based upon the *tarbiyah* of Islam, parents follow the process of nurturing an individual in line with the natural disposition of pure innocence, which one has been endowed with, helping the personality to flourish and enabling the person to reach their highest potential.

Um Habeebah spoke of how this personality becomes compromised by the influencing pressure of schooling and the child loses his sense of identity and self.

> You can make your own son or daughter one of a kind if you have the time and will to do so; school can only make them part of a hive, herd or anthill. (Gatto, 2008)

Education in Islam has to involve the complete person, including the rational, spiritual and social dimensions. As noted by Naquib Al-Attas, a comprehensive and integrated approach to education in Islam is directed towards the "balanced growth of the total personality … through training Man's spirit, intellect, rational self, feelings and bodily senses…such that faith is infused into the whole of his personality". (Al-Attas, 1980)

A great duty is placed upon parents to set the correct foundations for their children and what emerges from the discussions with the home-schooling mothers is that they do not necessarily strive for their children to become great doctors or engineers, but rather to become good people, to earn a lawful income and to live their lives as obedient servants of Allah. Although education prepares humankind for happiness in this life, these home-schooling parents do believe that the "ultimate goal is the abode of permanence and all education points to the permanent world of eternity". Nasr (1984)

Um Ruqayyah specifically referred to this when questioned about her children's academic future and her aspirations for them, having said "the primary objective of home-schooling is to retain my children's identity, as long as they grow up to become good adults, caring parents and observant of their relationship with Allah, then I have succeeded in my goals. If my children want to become dentists or teachers then this will be a bonus, but I will not be pushing for this".

No doubt research has found that the motives for home-schooling can be ideological. This is based upon the thinking of the parents and whichever methodology they believe in. The large Christian movement in America which has been pushing for home-schooling is evidence enough to prove this point. The parents will be the ones who make this choice on behalf of their children, which will be reflective of their own life experiences.

Muslim parents who choose to home-educate their children are also using a certain criteria and threshold to make this decision. The foundation for this is the Islamic Aqeeda (Creed). With this deep conviction that there is a Creator who has not only created us but also shown us the right path to live our lives, the Muslim parent seeks the best way, based upon the evidences provided in this faith to bring up their children.

The role of the parent is described as a shepherd in the hadith (saying), where the Prophet Muhammad said, "Each of you is a shepherd and each of you is responsible for his flock. The ruler 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 of her husband's household and is responsible for her flock". (Bukhari; Muslim)

This places a great responsibility upon the parent along with the Ayah from the Quran, "O you who believe! Ward off yourselves and your families against a Fire (Hell) whose fuel is men and stones, over which are (appointed) angels stern (and) severe, who disobey not, (from executing) the Commands they receive from God, but do that which they are commanded" (Quran 66:6)

This is seen as a direct command related to the structure of the family and the importance of responsibility. In this manner an Islamic educational framework has been celebrated and implemented for over 1,300 years, prior to colonisation, where the Muslim world thrived from an education system established by the Prophet Muhammad himself and adopted by the Islamic leadership afterwards.

Many historians have commented on the social reform that later took place, leading to the expansion of Islam from China to Spain. Muslims view the Islamic historical methodology as one of success which helped the students of knowledge become pioneers in many subjects, not just one or two faculties, which is seen as a limitation in today's educational framework.

The home-schooling mothers have been taking aspects of the holistic educational framework and applying this in their programmes, trying to raise their children to become responsible adults. Upon questioning the mothers about the normal argument put forward against home-schooling, which is a lack of social skills, they all categorically believed that the children meet more people of different ages, allowing them to experience many types and ages of people rather than being surrounded at school by overcrowded classrooms and teachers who may prefer to be elsewhere.

A network of home-schoolers has been established who meet up weekly for workshops/group trips and activities. In this way they are in agreement that they have managed to create an enjoyable home-schooling experience for all the participants.

Conclusion

The concept of home-schooling as a viable alternative to school-schooling is no doubt on the rise. More parents are feeling able to make this autonomous decision. Historically many famous people who have excelled in society were home-schooled, for example, John Adams, Abraham Lincoln, Joan of Arc, Leonardo da Vinci, Wolfgang Mozart, Agatha Christie, Winston Churchill, Charles Dickens, Thomas Edison, Benjamin Franklin, Florence Nightingale, Woodrow Wilson, the Wright brothers, Hans Christian Anderson, George Washington, Claude Monet, to name but a few. In recent times a new breed of celebrities who have become parents are also leading the way by home-schooling their children.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of people who choose to home-educate do so due to a real conviction that the current system of schooling is incompatible with their views of what they wish to achieve for their children. The rise in the number of failing schools, under-achievement labels for black and ethnic

minorities, bullying and anti-social behaviour in schools, all continue to put parents off sending their children to these institutions. The race for grammar schools (where they exist) results in problems for the vast majority of parents who find their children are not able to achieve their requirements, forcing them to be dependent on a postcode lottery for the next best schools in the surrounding area. The majority of parents in the UK cannot afford to move to well-off neighbourhoods to acquire a place in the local school. Nevertheless most people who choose to home-school their children believe that this is a better alternative even to grammar schools and would not consider these to be sufficient.

In the words of Shaykh Hamza Yusuf who has home-schooled all his children, "A mu'min's concern for his children precedes their birth". (Yusuf, 2013)

Muslim parents have historically shown a great passion for Islamic Studies and Arabic, with after-school *madrasah* classes having been set up to fill the educational gaps which parents saw as paramount to their children's upbringing. Over time they too have lost confidence in the school curriculum, having been products of the school system themselves, and wish to maintain their children's innocence and relationship with their inner disposition (*fitra*) intact.

In the future I see home-schooling as being on the rise, although it may be less popular in comparison to schooling which has its own place and is now established as the status quo. The benefits of home-schooling, nevertheless, are unparalleled for those who put their effort into it.

It would be beneficial if the Government would promote home education as a viable alternative and provide aid by outsourcing a curriculum guide for all parents, should they wish to use it as a measure of their child's achievements. This would allow parents the freedom to decide what is best for their children. For now this does not seem likely, but one thing both camps will agree upon is that education is extremely important for the progress of a society. As Plato said, "If a man neglects education, he walks lame to the end of his life."

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[1] Source: http://edyourself.org/
[2] Source: www.ukpublicspending.co.uk/government_expenditure.html

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Her research in this field led her to working in an independent faith primary school called the Islamic Shakhsiyah Foundation. The school's ethos is based upon the classical teachings of Islam through a Holistic Islamic Education based on the Human Scale Movement.

She has been a key staff member of the school's Key Stage 2 classes. She is involved in the school's action research projects and further development of the Halaqah curriculum.