

# **Muslim Community Schools in Cape Town: Exemplifying Adaptation to the Democratic Landscape**

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## **Introduction**

This article focuses on the establishment of schools by Muslim communities in Cape Town after 1994.<sup>1</sup> The schools are registered with the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) as independent schools. They are part of a nationwide trend that has seen a mushrooming of such Muslim schools all over the country, especially in the northern provinces. This article is based on interviews with principals, teachers and governing body members of six high schools. It discusses the discursive rationales for establishing these schools and the ways in which particular governance modes have laid down the schools' operational parameters.<sup>2</sup>

These schools provide an apt focus for understanding the variegated ways in which Muslims in particular localities have been negotiating the unfolding post apartheid democratic landscape. They are an expression of a confluence of global and local Islamization discourses, mediated by changing discursive and material circumstances. The schools illustrate the complex ways in which religious discourses are given meaning and expression within local contexts.

## **Moral propriety as discursive marker**

The schools illustrate how members of one community have been engaging with the new democratic terrain. The need to provide a better quality education was given as a key reason by the majority of interviewees for setting up the schools. They referred to the deteriorating quality of education in public schools. They specifically emphasised the negative impact on poor schools by the ill-fated cutback of teachers, which had its most pernicious effect on coloured schools in Cape Town. Three of the principals and some of the teachers were senior educators at public schools. They took the handsome early retirement packages that were made available to entice teachers to leave the public sector. The majority of the teachers of these Muslim schools, though, are recently qualified teacher education graduates who were unable to find jobs in a

shrunk teacher employment market in public schools. Perceptions about the collapsing quality at public schools thus converged with teacher education market trends to give impetus for establishing the Muslim schools.

The perceived breakdown of morality in townships and public schools provided the primary justification for establishing these schools. The interviewees voiced their concerns about the moral propriety of the students. Moral decay in townships was spoken about in negative terms as a sign of the overall moral relativism of a secular democracy, as an apocalyptic sign of the nearing of *Qiyamah* (the day of reckoning). The government was variously referred to by a principal as “amoral” and as “aiding the work of the devil”. Public schools were described as breeding grounds for sin and vice, where kids were socialised into sexual permissiveness, drug abuse and gang violence. It was particularly the governing body members’ views about the moral influences of the public schools that played a key role in producing negative perceptions about them. Being in direct competition with public schools the Muslim community schools, in providing a moral alternative, also siphon off students from those public schools with which they are in direct competition.

During the interviews the negative perceptions of public schools and the weakening moral state of society presented an opportunity to provide an education that would nurture Islam-centred personalities. One principal reflected on the constitutional position “to place choices over morality in the hands of citizens. This is very threatening to people not used to this.” Those interviewed indicated that in a country where morality had been strictly policed, moral choice has had a disorganising impact. Muslim schools are expected to act as a bulwark against the creeping immorality of township life. The schools would be expected to provide their students with Islamic personality attributes to withstand the onslaught against morality. The schools were set up in an attempt to produce Islamic personalities in relative isolation of the perceived negative impact of their surrounding contexts.

The schools can be regarded as a response to moral anxieties experienced by communities after 1994. The protagonists of these schools have chosen ‘splendid isolation’ as a means of producing moral propriety among the students. The

assumption is that these disengaged moral production processes would lay the foundation for their children to engage with broader society.

### **School governance as a relay for community adaptation**

The mode of governance at each school indicates the ways broader community processes are relayed within these schools and the impact they have on them. Four governance types can be discerned, each constituted by a specific mode of community involvement.

### **Mosque – based governance**

Three of the high schools can be described as mosque-based community schools. They are located within working class to lower middle class Malay communities and are run by mosque-based community structures. A spirit of self-help, ideologically produced during mosque sermons, through the mobilising role of the shaykh or imam, and media resources such as pamphlets and community radio, serves to galvanise members around the need to retain communal cohesion and support. The schools' governing structures are made up of mosque-going, public-spirited community members who are active in fundraising and organisational activities. These schools were set up as part of a number of other social welfare activities, including burial services, financial assistance and afternoon religious classes for children who attend the public schools. They help socialize the children into communally generated moral compartments and are crucial in reproducing the community's internal cohesion and adaptive vibrancy.

The interviewees portrayed a general reluctance to interact with other religious and civic groups in their environment. The internal cohesiveness of these communities seemed to be juxtaposed against the perceived negative influences of the external non-Muslim world. This lack of engagement also extended to their lack of enthusiasm about relating their organisational activities and discourses to broader civic and national citizenship processes. Few of the interviewees were attuned to the need to make linkages with the broader community, and other faith and race groups. These mosque-based schools play a central role in reproducing a discourse that distances their adherents from the surrounding community. Their school governance mode is

thus based on a desire to establish a relatively isolated identity insulated from external influences and processes.

### **Governance as expatriate belonging**

The second governance type is provided by the school that was set up by a number of Turkish expatriates who settled in Cape Town over the last decade. They are mostly professionals and business people. The principal of this school provided a dual rationale for establishing the school. He pointed out that the school was established because they wanted to provide their own children with a modern Muslim and Turkish-inspired education on the one hand, while at the same time “share our educational resources with the people of this country” on the other. About seventy percent of 134 children at the school is Cape Malay, ten percent from the Cape Indian community, and twenty percent from the Turkish expatriate community. The school’s governing body is made up of Turkish expatriates. The school’s operational discourse is framed around a constructive and progressive interaction with the secular democracy in South Africa. The school’s symbolic environment, unlike at the three mosque-based schools, indicates an eagerness to co-exist and interact with other communities. From my interviews it seemed that this school is an example of an educational space where this expatriate community can socialise their children into a democratic South African environment. This school’s governance discourse could be said to represent an amalgam of three types of allegiance, i.e. sustaining a social network among Turkish expatriates in Cape Town, a demonstration of loyalty to their adopted country, and a display of religious solidarity with Muslims in Cape Town.

### **Governance as ideological closure**

A school in an impoverished working class area of the Cape Flats run by a group called the Tabligh Jamaat provides the third governance type. Its governing body is made up of members of this group, teachers at the school, and a number of Tabligh businessmen. Strict ideological control in the line with the dictates of the group is achieved by the closed manner in which the school is governed. The balance of control within the governing structure rests with the businessmen whose financial leverage gives them enormous sway in the running of the affairs of the Tabligh group and the school. The businessmen, however, mostly reside in the northern provinces of Gauteng and Kwazulu Natal. This suggests that they have a ‘remote control’ type of

governing influence. This influence is achieved relatively easily in the light of the group's strict ideological control that provides very little scope for the principal and teachers to exercise autonomy in the running of the school. This school is firmly framed around generating a distinct, narrow and disengaging ideological attitude among its students. They are socialised into adopting a narrow moral behavioural range that, according to the principal, is meant to insulate them from the corrupting influences of the modern world.

### **Governance as ethnicised identity production**

A school that caters for middle class to upper middle class children illustrates the fourth governance type. Its governing body is made up of mostly Indian professionals and business people. The children at the school come from more or less equal numbers of Indian and Malay families who pay school fees of R8 000 per year. This compares with R6 500 paid at the 'Turkish expatriate' school, between R2000 and R3 000 at the three mosque-based schools, and R1 200 at the Tabligh school. While all the schools in the study depend on community fundraising efforts such as big walks, food festivals and dinners to help fund expenses, the Indian-controlled school is able to depend on generous donations from its business community benefactors. Its expansive and modern campus, located in a middle class suburb, is an example of the school's relatively easy access to financial support. The school is thus favourably positioned to compete in the student market with former white, now desegregated, public schools.

The school acts as a relay for strong, though informal, business networks for members of the Indian business community. Business ties are sustained through the circulation of activities in and around the governance of the school. The interviewees spoke about the strategic ways in which people are included and excluded within these networks. They aver that the networks are important in protecting access to certain markets and business opportunities. The networks are restricted to certain carefully selected Indian business people, and are relatively closed to their Malay counterparts, despite the large number of children from the Malay community at the school. This leads to intermittent, though muted, clashes between the governing body and the school's management and teachers involved in the internal processes in the school.

The governing body was accused of standing in the way of having the school develop a flexible and mediated school environment. Teachers complained of not being supported to develop a curriculum and pedagogy that would enable the students to develop cross-cultural competence. Recognition of the cultural specificity of groups, instead of fluid cultural interaction, marks the governance discourse. One teacher suggested that this emphasis on “protecting the identity of the group people may be motivated by the need to keep Indian and Malay students from fraternising too closely.” More generally, the governing body’s subtle surveillance against crossing group boundaries is informed by the need to protect its particular adaptive strategy in the new terrain. Reproducing a relatively closed Indian ethnic identity, kept in place by exclusive business networks, has placed particular delimitations on the everyday operations at the school.

The governance modes of these schools are representative of broader adaptive strategies in the new democratic environment. The ways the different school governance types operate indicate how these schools are set up as a conduit of broader communal processes. Whether they are organised to serve narrow ideological purposes, community cohesiveness, expatriate belonging, or ethnic business interests (as described in each of the four types above), the schools’ modes of governance play a key role in marking the discursive terrain wherein these communal forms can be reproduced. The different governance types have structured the discursive terrain within schools in variable ways. They have placed different delimitations on local school processes, which have led to different in-school responses by principals and teachers.

## **Conclusion**

The Muslim community schools are an example of the multiple ways in which religious communities adapt to the changing discursive environment, of the ways they read contexts strategically, and how they adjust their symbolic and communal repertoires to invent new ways of existing in a changing context. Concerns about morality and quality have been appropriated to provide a rationale for the schools’ establishment. The schools each represent different ways of adapting to their local environments. People as formative agents within local contexts interact with the discursive environment of the school to construct religious and social meanings.

While the governance modes place certain parameters on the schools, the principals and teachers are actively involved in giving shape to curriculum and pedagogical practices. The religious and educational meanings generated at these schools are thus the outcome of complex and fluid processes that are playing out within particular localities.

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### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> The twelve schools established since 1994 are: Primary **Schools:** Al-Azhar (Township: Lotus River), Ambassador's College (Bridgetown), Sayyidina Bilal School (Khayelitsha), Hidayatul Islam (Kensington); **High Schools:** Belhar Education Centre (Belhar), Madrassatur Rajaa (Strand), Mitchells Plain Islamic High School (Rocklands); **Schools from Grade One to Twelve:** Darul Islam (Greenhaven), Ieglaasi Niyah (Beacon Valley), Islamia (primary school campus in Rylands and high school campus in Lansdowne), Maddrassatut Tarbiyah (Lotus River, girls and Parkwood, boys); SAMA (Sybrand Park, Grade 1,2,3 and 8,9 and10).

<sup>2</sup> This article is part of a larger study that I have done on these schools, which focused on the hybrid mix of dynamics and discourses that constitutes meaning making and identity processes in these schools. An article on this study is forthcoming in an international comparative education journal.