

Religious Supplementary Schools

Religious Supplementary Schools

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Christian
Muslim
Forum

INTRODUCTION

Religious supplementary schools have recently been receiving much media and political attention. In 2015, the then Prime Minister announced that out-of-school institutions which are teaching children intensively (six to eight hours per week or during holidays) will soon be required to register with the Department for Education and be subject to risk-based inspections.¹

The government announced a call for evidence in November 2015 to inform the new system for registering and inspecting out-of-school education settings which “would enable action to be taken where settings are failing to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, which includes failing to protect them from the harm caused by extremism.”²

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We hope that this briefing will enable a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the issues involved

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CHRISTIAN MUSLIM FORUM

The Forum was established in 2006 by the Archbishop of Canterbury, bringing together Muslims and Christians from a variety of denominations and traditions within British Christianity and Islam. The Forum has an extensive network across the country and includes senior religious leaders, scholars, specialists and practitioners. The Forum recognises differences and common concerns between Christian and Muslim communities in the UK.

In the summer of 2016, the Forum developed a new body, made up of Muslims and Christians committed to dialogue and joint working. These people have committed to meet every two months to look at a particular topic in depth and to listen to the background stories, feelings and needs behind any given public position. We aim to be able to disagree as well as agree with one another publicly, while being willing to articulate the reasons for agreement or disagreement back to our own communities and to a wider audience.

THIS BRIEFING

The first subject we addressed was religious supplementary schools. This was because the government’s plans had created so much concern, particularly within Muslim communities. Although the government’s call for evidence came in November 2015 there has, so far, been nothing further published or announced.

This briefing is intended for the Forum itself as well as for parliamentarians, policy makers, think tanks, activists, local authorities, religious bodies, business and the third sector. It is an attempt to share what we learned from each other. We hope that it will enable a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the issues involved and the Forum welcomes further thoughts and suggestions on this topic.

Policy context ³

In its consultation document the Department for Education states that schools and childcare providers are currently regulated under child protection, education and/or childcare law.

These safeguards are not mandatory in out-of-school education settings such as religious supplementary schools and the government states that consequently these children “may be more vulnerable to the risk of extremism and other types of harm.”

The Department also explains that concerns of a safeguarding nature are being raised by local authorities and Ofsted which are “anxious about the lack of powers for any authority to act swiftly to secure the safety of children concerned.

“For example, the Department for Education has received reports of some part-time tuition centres which are teaching children in premises which raise a number of safeguarding and health and safety concerns, such as overcrowded, cramped and dirty conditions; exposed gas pipes; no fire escape; no access to drinking water, etc. There have been reports of unsuitable teaching materials being used, and evidence that no suitability checks are being conducted on staff to ensure children are safe.

“It is right to expect children to be in a safe environment and somewhere which does not teach children views which undermine our fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and the mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs.”

The key features of a system where supplementary schools would register include:

- a requirement on settings providing intensive education to register, so that there is transparency about where settings are operating
- a power for a body to inspect settings to ensure that children are being properly safeguarded
- a power to impose sanctions where settings are failing to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, which could include barring individuals from working with children and the closure of premises

What did we learn?

WHY DO OUR COMMUNITIES FEEL SO STRONGLY (OR NOT) ABOUT SUPPLEMENTARY SCHOOLS?

One point that we all agreed upon, and that we missed in both the government documents and some of the formal responses to the consultation, was the value of out-of-school learning and an appreciation of the huge effort that goes into providing it. Asking the question, 'Why have these supplementary schools appeared?' we heard that they largely had come from a need created by a gap in the provision of formal education. This need was felt particularly among minority communities, whose institutions are younger and therefore less well established than the major Christian denominations in the UK.

We heard that supplementary schools catered to specific needs of communities including providing religious instruction and strengthening ethnic and religious identities, often complementing the state education system. However, in some cases, it was deficiencies within the state provision of education that drove the creation of supplementary schools, where grassroots communities wanted to ensure their ethnic identities were authentically taught to the next generation. In order to support the government's evidence gathering and to further the understanding on which policy will be developed, we are happy to facilitate visits to supplementary schools of Christian or Muslim backgrounds.

As with Christian families, most Muslim parents are not equipped to impart all the necessary skills and knowledge to their children. Mosques and Islamic centres have therefore developed a significant network of madrasahs, which are after-school supplementary schools staffed either by paid teachers or volunteers, sometimes brought over from abroad. Families pay small amounts weekly for their children to study, often five days per week and a couple of hours per day. Members of our group were proud of the sacrifice that parents, teachers, children and volunteers had made in ensuring that so many British Muslims grew up with a sound understanding of and commitment to their religious heritage.

Christians in our group could relate to the need for children to grow up with a grounding in the Christian faith. There is a strong tradition of catechesis or the teaching of the faith to young people and new converts prior to confirmation or adult baptism. However, for most churches, this teaching is given to children on Sundays, with extra time taken in holiday clubs or residential camps run by churches or other Christian groups. Parents give priority during the week to other activities such as scouting or guiding, sports or music that provide a supplement to mainstream school education.

One particularly powerful account we heard was of a group of African and African Caribbean supplementary schools who realised in the early '70s that their children were performing below the national average in schools and needed help. Often the first time that their black heritage made it on to the curriculum was in terms of slavery, which left these children with a negative view of their own heritage. So parents, grandparents and other volunteers began offering supplementary education not only in core curriculum areas such as English and Maths, but also in Black History. This early provision has now developed into more structured and professionally resourced classes and curricula.

This difference in prioritising specific supplementary religious teaching for children may have a number of reasons, including from within our different religious traditions, and sociological reasons including the varying 'majority' or 'minority' status of our different communities. One basic difference was the perceived gap in provision for the needs of children by mainstream schools, especially considering the much more widespread availability of schools with a formal Christian ethos. Supplementary schooling is therefore seen as complementary to children's formal education.

If we are, as a society, to address problems in supplementary education, it would be wise to begin by registering the great value placed on this education by parents, the reasons these educational provisions have been made, and at what cost.

WHAT PROBLEMS DID WE IDENTIFY AND HOW DID WE AGREE OR DISAGREE?

Whilst we sought to understand the value placed on supplementary schools, and the often remarkable work that was being done, we had strong disagreements as a group about different kinds of provision.

One Christian minister told of how, following a stone being thrown through the window of his church, a child was brought to the minister's house to offer an apology by the local madrasah teachers. The minister told of his sympathy for the child's frustration having been in school all day and then having had to learn the Qur'an in Arabic for two hours every night, a language he didn't understand and taught in ways that he found boring. Some of our group defended traditional madrasah provision, saying that it was improving and had produced generations of Muslims who continue to contribute much to their communities and country, and who are secure in their own Muslim faith and identity. Others noted the difficulty such provision causes for children who might otherwise be involved in a sport or pursue another hobby.

Some Muslim members of the group gave examples of madrasah education using new curriculum resources, better trained teachers and innovative technology. One Muslim member who runs a madrasah showed us a picture drawn by a young girl with the words, 'I love madrassah!' that she had given him. Nevertheless, there was general agreement among our Muslim members on the difficulty of providing quality out of school teaching at very low cost using volunteer or very low-paid teachers.

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SAFEGUARDING

An issue that we all acknowledged was the importance of protecting children from harm and the potential risk in any out-of-hours educational provision. Especially when supplementary schools have developed with few financial resources and depend upon volunteers, there is a risk of problems with premises and the quality of curricula and teachers. We spoke about issues, across our communities, of corporal punishment and different kinds of abuse. We recognised the development of safeguarding training and structures within many churches in response to revelations of child sexual abuse over recent decades.

We heard that there was widespread sympathy among Muslim parents for the need for quality control and safeguarding in Islamic supplementary schools, and that various initiatives had been explored either within Muslim communities themselves or between Muslim organisations and local councils to address risks to children.

Stories of corporal punishment taking place across different religious supplementary schools were raised. Allegations about madrasahs have been very dispiriting for others working in the sector. It was agreed that it is neither necessary nor desirable for religious teaching. We heard that there is agreement amongst those who govern madrasahs that these sorts of harmful practices have no place in a madrasah environment and that schools should operate safely to provide a good quality experience for children.

On occasions where there have been issues of corporal punishment in a madrasah, we heard that parents had reported it to the mosque governing body and also to the local authority. Participants felt that in recent years madrasahs have been working better with authorities on this issue and that it was important to communicate to wider society that the use of corporal punishment is the exception rather than the norm. This was deemed vital to ensuring the hard work of those running madrasahs across the UK was recognised and not tarnished by the actions of a few.

SECURITY AND EXTREMISM

We also heard how frustrating some of our Muslim and Christian members felt when these issues of safeguarding seemed in the government's paperwork to be subsumed under a wider concern by the government that madrasahs were breeding grounds for violent extremism. It is understood that the context and background of the new government proposals stem from concerns around 'extremism' and 'radicalisation' in religious supplementary schools. This frustration was particularly focused on the consultation document and the online consultation process. There was a recognition by many in our group that there may be a link between risks around safeguarding, sub-standard buildings, teachers, curricula and risks to children from extremist ideologies. Nevertheless, the consultation did not provide evidence of widespread indoctrination of children to extremist ideologies in madrasahs. We heard that the sympathy for quality control in supplementary schools among Muslim parents was being undermined by a suspicion that the government's security agenda was the real driver behind its proposals.

There was concern in our group over governmental use of criminalising language in statements provided to the press. The labelling of some religious supplementary schools as "illegal" which the government will "crack down on" and "root out" and "prosecute"⁴ sends a negative and unsupportive message about these schools which can tarnish them all as intentionally deviant or fraudulent.

There are concerns that this language doesn't recognise the rich history of good work conducted by religious supplementary schools or their youth programmes. The media takes a steer from government announcements and have so far reported – without any evidence – that the new policy is to 'crack down on Muslim madrassas run by extremists'⁵. Such irresponsible language could result in those working in this area left feeling demoralised or vulnerable to attack such as hate crimes.

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At present there seems to be a good understanding from those running religious supplementary schools of the need to have a cooperative role with authorities around safeguarding. However, the government's reason for the proposed regulation is that these schools need to be inspected due to concerns around extremism, and the statement that this is an extension of the government's Prevent strategy⁶ means that it may be difficult to get these schools to register.

We heard that Prevent is deeply unpopular with many Muslim communities as it is seen to be having a damaging effect through an ethos of mistrust. It was largely felt that religious supplementary schools did not want to be part of a strategy that could introduce an element of suspicion. We heard that this could lead to the institutions or their pupils being put under a form of scrutiny which could lead to an environment counterproductive to learning and open discussion. There have been high profile examples where the Prevent strategy in schools has led to confusing situations of children being referred for potential extremist tendencies only for it to transpire it was a mistake.⁷

Parents would be fearful, some of our group said, of sending their children into an environment where they are at risk of the trauma of being questioned by government authorities without parental consent if they are found to have said anything 'extremist'⁸. For this reason, it was felt that measures to protect children from abuse should be distinct from safeguarding against violent extremism and that claims linking religious supplementary education to extremist behaviour needed to be thoroughly evidenced through robust statistical information.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Concerns were voiced about this new policy which could facilitate unjustified government interference in the teaching and exploration of religious subjects at religious supplementary schools. We heard that for most Muslim communities the teaching and learning of Quranic Arabic is seen as a religious duty that can open the gates for improved religious literacy and a balanced understanding of the faith.

For many it is also seen as a form of worship in itself, so there are concerns over what is seen to be the policing of religious freedom of worship and of spaces where religious ideas and sensitive topics can be freely discussed. There were concerns that the government has not explicitly clarified the terms 'extremism' and 'British values'. We heard that current definitions are seen as vague, causing fear and confusion over what can be taught. There is an unwillingness to turn these educational spaces for learning into paranoid spaces where open conversations are shut down due to fears.

There is a need for clarity if there is to be any monitoring of theological content. For example, does the teaching of creationism in Christian supplementary schools conflict with what is being seen as state-imposed standards or is this something for Christian theologians to determine? We heard that reassurance needs to be given that these communities will not lose their freedom of religion, nor that law-abiding practices of Islam or Christianity will be under scrutiny. In the case of Ofsted inspections, we heard fears that inspectors may not be sufficiently culturally sensitive to religious supplementary schools.

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FOCUS ON ISLAMIC SCHOOLS

Despite the proposed government policy being applicable to all supplementary schools of all faith backgrounds, it was felt that there was a particular emphasis on Muslim schools. The previous Prime Minister's assertions that children in some madrasahs 'have their heads filled with poison and their hearts filled with hate'⁹ was thought to be a simplistic and untrue narrative. Furthermore, the former Prime Minister's comments that the system is "targeted" so as not to cover Christian Sunday schools created concerns amongst some Muslim communities of unequal or discriminatory treatment. The goals of tackling hatred, promoting British values and safeguarding children seemed to be unjustifiably focussed on Muslim madrasahs and not on Christian Sunday schools, Jewish supplementary schools or schools with other faith backgrounds.

There are over 2000 madrasahs across the UK and it was deemed vitally important not to demonise or stigmatise them or their good work through the introduction of draconian monitoring and sensationalised statements. Rather, a supportive approach by the government to religious supplementary schools may assist in raising standards, including safeguarding standards. An unbalanced focus on madrasahs also means that intolerance or poor safeguarding practices found in other educational settings will go unchallenged, and will therefore be counterproductive for the welfare of children overall.

In addition, we heard that the continuous presentation of safeguarding issues within the context of extremism and the primary focus on madrasahs risks encouraging further anti-Muslim sentiment in society.

It ignores the examples of good provision that create a positive environment for children to flourish, engage in new opportunities, and interact with their peers. Madrasahs and Muslim supplementary schools have already been subject to anti-Muslim hate crimes¹⁰ and there are genuine concerns that these will increase as a result of the way this new policy is communicated.

PLUGGING A GAP

Religious supplementary schools are part of a vibrant and diverse community-led sector providing learning opportunities for children and young people. These schools meet the additional needs of children from a particular faith background who are often in full-time state education. Supplementary schools have traditionally provided a space to explore children's religious cultural heritage in detail, which mainstream education has not fulfilled. We learned how these schools are plugging a gap and have arisen from self-organising communities coming together to provide a small-scale structured learning space with a long term impact. Many have evolved organically from the good intentions of volunteers and it was felt that this good work needed to be communicated better rather than be at risk of being lost through increased government scrutiny.

This is a demand-led sector, where the cultural faith heritage of a particular community is maintained and explored in the face of minority status. Many of these schools also provide additional lessons to help with the educational attainment of school children that may be lacking in mainstream education - specifically children with minority ethnic backgrounds. This is true for both Christian and Muslim supplementary schools, for example African Caribbean and Sudanese schools where school attainment levels are raised and children are affirmed in their cultural identity, building resilience to any discrimination faced.

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These schools discuss religious teachings that promote inclusion and help children to have an open and greater involvement in wider society through a shared sense of belonging.

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This form of education is an asset in their lives and these children may go on to develop a further interest in religion or religious studies, or use the learnings gained in this setting in other areas of life. Through learning and exploring their faith background, children are educated to be more confident and knowledgeable about this heritage, which can help them better deal with problems like anti-Muslim, racist or anti-religious bullying.

In short, we heard that supplementary schools can help to broaden a child's education and learning as well as providing opportunities to meet other children with a similar faith background. They help to unite communities and reduce inequality, which can contribute to better social cohesion.

Many religious supplementary schools also encourage children's social responsibility, for example to their neighbours, the environment and to society through charity work and volunteering. These schools discuss religious teachings that promote inclusion and help children to have an open and greater involvement in wider society through a shared sense of belonging.

RESOURCING SUPPLEMENTARY SCHOOLS

The resources which many faith supplementary schools have at their disposal have traditionally been very limited due to the small scale nature of their set up and how they are sustained. They have often served working class and low-income families and so modest fees are charged for the service. This often leads to issues around under staffing and low funding, which have been described as key to developmental change.

These settings do not account for the entire education a child receives; they are meant to complement, 'supplement', but not replace a mainstream education. It is therefore important to understand their limitations in relation to this new government policy.

We learned that the schools have traditionally been in a religious building such as a mosque or a church where lessons take place, meaning that building hire fees do not have to be covered. The 'teachers' and educators at these schools have often been volunteers and members of the same community who see the teaching of religious heritage for children as important. Often, many individuals become involved for altruistic purposes, and haven't received structured formal qualifications, although this is now changing through training and accredited courses. The fundraising picture to sustain or develop the school further has also been patchy and, in the case of madrasahs, dependent on donations and low fees. However, we heard that development is taking place. Some religious supplementary schools, including Islamic ones, are modelling themselves on a tuition based model, offering more hours and additional subjects such as Maths and English lessons to improve the educational attainment of children. This awareness of the mainstream school curriculum and desire to complement it does mean a premium fee is charged to support such a teaching model.

We heard that both types of settings – the traditional basic model as well as a premium tuition based model – would welcome support to cater for the ongoing professional development of their educators. These teachers are able to provide positive role models for the children in these settings and are valued by their communities, such as with the example of schools catering for specific ethnic minorities.

Therefore, it was felt government support to meet the costs involved in improving teacher training was needed in order not to drive educators away from their profession or their position as role models for children.

Footnotes

- ¹ Conservative Party Conference in October 2015
<http://press.conservatives.com/post/130746609060/prime-minister-conference-speech-2015>
- ² <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/out-of-school-education-settings-registration-and-inspection>
- ³ Taken from section 2 in consultation document:
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/480133/out_of_school_education_settings_call_for_evidence.pdf
- ⁴ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-35587488>
- ⁵ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/12108953/David-Cameron-pledges-to-stop-Ofsted-inspectors-raiding-Sunday-schools-and-Scouts-meetings.html>
- ⁶ Section 2 of consultation document:
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/480133/out_of_school_education_settings_call_for_evidence.pdf
- ⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/mar/11/nursery-radicalisation-fears-boys-cucumber-drawing-cooker-bomb>
- ⁸ <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uk-counter-extremism-policies-violating-childrens-rights-241293686>
- ⁹ <http://press.conservatives.com/post/130746609060/prime-minister-conference-speech-2015>
- ¹⁰ TellMAMA UK 2015 report into anti-Muslim hate crime incidents:
<http://tellmamauk.org/geography-anti-muslim-hatred-2015-tell-mama-annual-report/>

Conclusions

1. **Religious supplementary schools have emerged as a complement to the provision of formal schooling**, valued by parents for the religious and cultural education they provide. In general, they provide a good quality experience for children and the sector is steadily growing.
2. A learning environment where open discussion can lead to confidence and better religious literacy and can form a **bulwark against extremism** and radicalisation.
3. A more socially cohesive society is desired, where supplementary schools are able to flourish and continue to improve the lives of children. Recognition and **maintenance of good practice taking place within this sector** by the sector itself was deemed necessary as a conduit to achieving this, but not a heavy handed, securitised approach from government, which it is feared could be counter-productive.
4. **Support of existing infrastructure and networks** that work with supplementary schools needs strengthening through better links with full-time education settings, as many schools do not operate in a religious silo. Many of them make connections to wider society. Opportunities for supplementary schools to join up with full-time education settings should be pursued by both sectors so that all education providers can work in partnership and collaborate with each other.
5. Innovative practices taking place in the sector should be recognised by government and supplementary schools' networks to encourage better teaching, safeguarding practice and building maintenance. **Best practice examples should be drawn out by these networks, shared and promoted**, for example modern interactive but low-cost teaching methods.
6. **A 'Parents' Charter'**, initiated by supplementary schools' networks, should be explored to raise standards, with voluntary take up by these schools as a mark of quality. The Parents' Charter would include providing a report to parents on their child's progress at least once a year, an annual report from the school's governors and open access to reports from any independent inspections that take place.
7. Case studies that demonstrate **good practice should be disseminated** by supplementary schools' networks to show why these schools are so important. In an ethos of transparency and friendliness, Muslim and Christian parents could speak about the benefits to their children of supplementary educations and open days organised by the supplementary schools themselves could encourage the public and the media to see the everyday reality of the full range of supplementary schools.
8. The **safeguarding of children and young people is central to a positive learning environment**. The Forum agreed that corporal punishment is unacceptable and should be eliminated by supplementary schools.
9. The **current language around the consultation and any proposed policy needs to have a more supportive approach**. Government and media should ensure their documents and reports do not demoralise those working hard to create positive learning environments for children and young people.
10. Ofsted **inspectors will need training** by experts in the field on how to be religiously and culturally aware of the environments they are going into if inspecting registered schools.
11. Reassurance from government is needed that **interference with theological content will not take place by authorities** that could lead to infringements on religious freedom.

12. **Increased resources** from government within religious supplementary schools will be needed to meet any new costs arising as a result of new registration requirements.
13. **Concerns around extremism need to be clarified and substantiated** by those voicing concerns. Any worries about extremism should be reported to the authorities by staff, parents, or members of the public. However, there are fears that a new system of inspection could lead to discrimination against some minority communities with children feeling marginalised, so fairness in government inspections across all supplementary schools is crucial.
14. Media and government should ensure that **reports and communications affirm that the new policy is to affect all religious supplementary schools**. An unbalanced focus on madrasahs will create division. Muslim communities are already disproportionately subject to hate crimes and will have to bear the brunt of any negative announcements or reporting.
15. The media spotlight on religious supplementary schools presents an opportunity for networks of supplementary schools to **promote the benefits of this type of education, to break down barriers and to shatter stereotypes**.

Further reading

REPORTS

IPPR: *Inside Madrassas* 2011 or view the report's video summary

IPPR: *Saturdays for success* 2015

RSA: *Beyond the school gates* 2015

Rights Watch: *Preventing Education: UK counter terrorism policy in schools* 2016

MEDIA COVERAGE

The Guardian: *Muslim leaders voice concerns about Tory crackdown on madrasas* 2015

BBC News: *Plans to regulate madrassas published by government* 2015

The Independent: *The PM must crack down on madrassas, but it's not just Muslim schools* 2015

The Independent: *Andy Burnham calls for review of Prevent strategy* 2016

The Independent: *David Anderson QC calls for Prevent review* 2016

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