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Teachers' struggle for an Islamically appropriate sexual health education curriculum at their school

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Abstract

This paper will report on some of the findings of a current study by the author in which a group of teachers at a Victorian Islamic College developed and implemented an Islamically appropriate sexual health education curriculum for their Muslim students. This paper reports the process in which these teachers tried to bring curriculum reform to their school in a knowledge area that has been the cause of much dissension in Islamic schools and among the wider Muslim community. In their attempts to create an Islamic perspective to sexual health education, teachers found themselves challenged by the current restrictive curriculum structures, policies and practices at their school. They also found themselves struggling with embedded student cultural understandings and traditions which contradict Islamic teachings, principles and beliefs as stated in the Holy Qur'an and Hadith. As they challenged their school's status quo, they engaged with significant challenges to their pedagogy. These teachers not only made an Islamic perspective to sexual health education curriculum a reality at their school, they confronted longstanding political issues and hegemonic structures, enabling the search for a solution to a curriculum problem and constructed the conditions necessary for its sustainability.

Introduction

The sex education component of many Australian schools health education curricula is generally opposed by many Muslim parents and students in Australia (Sanjakdar, 2004; Donohue Clyne, 2001; McInerney et al., 2000) and overseas (Halstead, 1997; Thomson, 1993; Carroll and Hollinshead 1993:65). This research shows that it is not only the curriculum content that is objectionable to many Muslim parents and students, but also the presentation of the subject. While many people in the Islamic community would agree that Muslim students need to understand the nature of their developing sexuality, how, by whom and when it should be offered is also the source of contention among many Muslim parents and students. While many Australian Islamic schools acknowledge the need for sexual health education in the curriculum based on Islamic teachings, principles and beliefs as outlined in the Qur'an and Hadith (Sanjakdar 2000a, Sanjakdar, 2000b, Donohue Clyne, 2003), very little has been achieved to make this a reality.

Wise College (a pseudonym) is a co-educational Preparatory to Year 12 Victorian Islamic College. Guided by their vision to provide a learning organisation that "fosters the development of Islamic manners and love of learning in its students" (Wise College Year

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Book, 2000:4), the College aims to equip students with enough knowledge and confidence to put Islamic beliefs, values and morals into practice in their own lives. Wise College accepted my invitation to participate in my PhD research which looks at developing and implementing an Islamically appropriate sexual health education curriculum for Australian Muslim youth. The purpose of this paper is to share the experiences of how a small group of teachers at Wise College designed, developed implemented and achieved an Islamically appropriate sexual health education curriculum at their school.

The origins of this research

The origin of this research lies in the concerns in curriculum structures and practices I had whilst teaching at a well established Preparatory to Year 12 Islamic College in Victoria. In addition to my teaching role, I was actively involved in the exploration of the school's curriculum, teaching and learning policies and practices for my Master of Education research (Sanjakdar, 2000a). During the course of the three year long research (1997-2000), the problem became trying to find evidence of Islamic teaching, principles and beliefs as the theoretical model in the curriculum planning and practice of the school. Rather, my research findings revealed the many pedagogical problems teachers faced with the secular nature of the curriculum and the current curriculum paradox; where health issues such as drugs, HIV/AIDS and sexual health are omitted, but the school curriculum claims to reflect a holistic Islamic education. When I commenced a new teaching position at another Victoria Islamic school in 2001, I found similar curriculum inadequacies.

My PhD research takes the responsibility of witnessing and responding to this current curriculum paradox. As discussed throughout this paper, the teaching and learning of sexual health is not only desirable in Islam, but obligatory incumbent upon every Muslim. The teachings from the Qur'an and Hadith are rich sources of information which invite conversations on sexual health issues and can be used to "formulate a workable [sexual health education] curriculum with a unique philosophy and methodology" (Al-Afendi, 1980:30). The broad spectrum of knowledge offered in these texts serve to

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encourage Muslims to recognise and appreciate revelation as a valid source of knowledge (Mabud, 1998). In deliberately omitting these health issues from the school curriculum and thus creating a null curriculum¹, these schools are taking it upon themselves to demarcate and delineate what constitutes appropriate, relevant and important knowledge; something which is in strict violation to the holistic view of Islamic education which these schools espouse to.

This research argues that to develop and implement a sexual health education curriculum appropriate for Australian Muslim students, the 'bureaucratic and administrative character' (Green, 2003) of curriculum decision-making structures and practices, which constructs a null curriculum, need to be identified and challenged. To develop and implement a sexual health education curriculum appropriate for Australian Muslim youth, curriculum knowledge and pedagogy should reflect the teachings from the Qur'an and Hadith. This will create an Islamic philosophy of education and ensure the production of Islamic knowledge, attitudes and behaviour.

The Islamic position on sexual health

Discussion, teaching and learning about sex, sexuality and sexual health, are not taboo or opposed in Islam. In fact, given the centrality of sexuality in human affairs, in both the public and private spheres, sexuality has a prominent place in Islam. Both the teachings from the Qur'an and the Hadith have placed much emphasis on acquiring knowledge in all areas and in the days of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ², Muslim men and women were never too shy to ask questions including those related to private affairs such as sexuality.

¹ Elliot Eisner (2002:107) defines the null curriculum as "the options students are not afforded, the perspectives they may never know about, much less be able to use, the concepts and skills that are not part of their intellectual repertoire".

² There are a number of well known Hadith, the authenticated sayings or actions of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ that are considered part of the common domain of Muslim thought, just as proverbs are in English. When quoting Hadith, Muslims always end it with a blessing for Prophet Muhammad saying 'Peace be upon him' (p.b.u.h). In Arabic, it is written like this, ﷺ. This Arabic script will be used when Hadith is quoted or other reference is made to the Prophet throughout this paper.

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Rules concerning sexual health govern many Islamic issues such as prayer, (*salat*), fasting (*sawm*), bathing (*ghusl*), marriage (*ziwaj*), divorce (*talaaq*), performing the pilgrimage (*hajj*), as well as the entire spectrum of human needs and behaviour, including kindness, fairness, justice and equality (Mabud, 1998). Education regarding sexual health in Islam should be considered part of the religious upbringing of a child (Ashraf, 1998; Mabud, 1998; Noibi, 1998; Sarwar, 1996) and should centre the religious concepts of unity (*tawhid*) and worship (*ibadah*).

In Islam, a human being must be treated as a spiritual and moral being. The moral framework in sexual health is a form of protective control and is also closely linked to upholding the honour of the family. Thus, moral considerations should play a decisive role in the teaching of sexual health to young Muslims (Noibi, 1998). Sarwar (1996) suggests that sexuality education outside moral boundaries will encourage casual behaviour among Muslim students. Similarly, Noibi, (1998:46) suggests that moral absolutes will “provide sanctions necessary for self restraint and accountability, thus responsible young Muslims”. The strict moral controls will also teach patience, chastity, self-control and encourage sexual responsibility and accountability (Ashraf, 1998).

Sexual Health Education: What is the cause of dissension among Australian Muslims?

Three main aspects of contemporary practice in school sexual health education contravene Islamic teachings and have therefore have become legitimate targets for Muslim opposition. As Halstead (1997:319) outlines:

- Some sexual health education material offends the Islamic principle of decency and modesty;
- Sexual health education tends to present certain behaviours as acceptable which Muslims consider sinful;
- Sexual health education is perceived as undermining the Islamic concept of family life.

Each will now be discussed.

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Sexual health instruction and materials must not offend the Islamic principle of decency and modesty

“One of the main aims of sex education programs is to reduce guilt, embarrassment and anxiety” (Reiss, 1993:128-129 cited in Halstead, 1997). While many would probably see this as a healthy goal, for many Muslims there is a danger that such a goal might lead to certain classroom practices which might damage the ‘modesty’ of students (Halstead, 1997). “Every religion has a distinctive quality and the distinctive quality of Islam is modesty” (Hadith Bukhari and Muslim found in Kazi, 1992: 120).

The concept of modesty (*haya* in Arabic) in Islam goes far beyond a specific Islamic dress code, but deals with the entire spectrum of Islamic behaviour, attitude and etiquette. For many Muslim parents and students, it is not always necessarily the content of the sexual health education curriculum that is a violation of natural modesty, but the presentation of the subject, totally divorced from moral and values education (Al-Romi, 2000). As Abdel-Halim (1989: 15) states, teaching the etiquette of dating as is currently practised in much of the world, violate Islamic principles of chastity:

It is the way sex education is imparted and presented...completely divorced from moral values and ethics. Information should not be given in a way that would encourage immoral relationships and conduct, for example, some teachers teach the etiquette of dating without any consideration of cultures who do not encourage dating.

All conversations about sexuality with Muslim students must be within the context of *haya* and to preserve this modesty, single sex classes for health and sex education programs are preferred, as are classes that are taught by a teacher of the same sex (Sarwar, 1996). An Australian study on the potential barriers to learning Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (P.D.H.P.E) in New South Wales schools characterised by religious diversity, (McInerney et al., 2000), found that Muslim students experienced more difficulty engaging in P.D.H.P.E related activities than their Catholic peers. Issues of modesty “such as dress, public display, mixed-sex activities” were of greatest concern (ibid.:26). A commonality of experiences in health and physical education classes of Muslim students is mirrored in a few overseas studies. In their study of an English secondary school with a high South Asian Muslim population, Carroll and

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Hollinshead (1993:65) identify four problem areas as points of conflict between students, parents and Asian communities: the Physical Education kit, communal showers, Ramadan and extra-curricula activities. The wearing of the sports uniform caused embarrassment for both male and female students and feelings of guilt and shame were exacerbated when many of the activities were held in public places such as playgrounds and community parks. Communal showers, part of the school's health education program, caused severe problems even to the extent that some students absented themselves from school. The apparent failure of staff members to accommodate to the students' needs was described as "a policy of positive discrimination towards the Muslims", an "attack on cultural and religious values" and a strong push for "institutional racism" by the school (Carroll and Hollinshead, 1993:71).

Popular classroom practices such as demonstrations on how to 'use a condom correctly' will do little to safeguard the modesty of Muslim students as will the use of explicit videos, depicting nude people or detailed diagrams of the human form. D'Oyen (1996) also points out that modesty affects not only dress but also one's attitudes to all sexual matters. The use of pornographic books, films and videos is clearly incompatible with the principle of modesty as is "staring at people of the opposite sex or watching people kissing on TV or in the street" (D'Oyen, 1996:78).

Islamic law (*Sharia*) must be adhered to when making decisions about sexual health education

Muslim parents look for an education that builds and develops Islamic morals, deeds, character and behaviour (Sanjakdar, 2004, 2000b; Donohue Clyne, 2003). Contemporary sexual health education tends to present certain behaviours which Muslims believe are sinful (i.e fornication, homosexuality), as normal or acceptable (Halstead, 1997).

In Islam, the only forms of sexual relations permitted are those between a husband and wife. Therefore, pre-marital, extra-marital and same sex relationships are forbidden and therefore, cannot be advocated or taught as alternative lifestyles or forms of behaviour

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(Halstead and Lewicka, 1998). 'Free sex', 'safe sex', 'boyfriend/girlfriend' relationships are terms and concepts devoid of any responsibility and accountability and hence are in direct violation of appropriate Islamic behaviour and *Sharia*, Islamic law. The Qur'an views premarital relationships of any kind with the opposite sex as acts of adultery, "a shameful deed and evil, opening roads to other evils" (sura 17, verse 32). Thus, teaching the 'etiquettes of dating' (Abdel-Halim, 1989) as it is currently practised in much of the world, violates the strict moral code and Islamic principles of decency and chastity. Muslims are not permitted to touch, have intimate relationships or date members of the opposite sex outside of an Islamic marriage. Language such as 'spending time together alone', 'getting to know each other', 'feelings can run high but lack of experience with close relationships can lead to many unhappy, disappointing and even bitter experiences' commonly found in secondary school health texts (Davis and Butler, 1996; Wright, 1992), contravenes Islamic principles of decency, modesty, chastity and sexual responsibility.

The widespread 'choice and preference' model of school sex education has come under attack for its lack of 'sexual ethic' (Ulanowsky, 1998). Quranic injunctions and Hadith about this matter make it clear that sexual behaviour is not based entirely on a matter of 'personal choice', but must be within *Allah's* laws (22:5-7; 7:80-81). The philosophy underpinning the idea of individual 'freedom' to judge and the individual 'ability' to judge, is a secular one and stands in opposition to the Islamic conservative one which takes account of the mind, the spirit and the emotional aspects of sexuality. As Al-Attas (1979:158) explains:

In Islam, there is not a question of an individual working out for themselves their own religious faith or subjecting it to rational objective investigation for the divine revelation in the Shariah provides all the requisites knowledge of truth and falsehood, right and wrong. The task of each individual is to come to understand this knowledge and to exercise free will, by either accepting or rejecting it. Education in Islam therefore aims at the balanced growth of total personality of man through the training of man's spirit, intellect, rational self, feelings and bodily senses.

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Islam recognises humans as sexual beings and affirms their sexuality as a significant component of their identity. However, Muslims students should come to understand that they are primarily a moral being, born with *fitrah*, an innate goodness which enables them to make morally correct choices and refrain from *haram* (the forbidden). In refining student morals (*al-tahzeeb*), teachers have the important role of educating their spirits, propagating virtue and teaching students values such as sincerity and purity. Not only can stories of the Prophethood ﷺ be shared, but ideally the teacher should shares these values and be a good role model of them.

Marriage and family life should be promoted in studies of sexual health

Marriage is a sacred institution in Islam, giving expression to the divine harmony consisting between the complementarity of men and women. In the Qur'an, men and women are described as 'garments' fitting each other:

They are as a garment for you and you are a garment for them (2: 187).

Sexual duality in creation reflects the duality on earth (Ashraf, 1998) and is recognised by Muslims as one of the great signs *Allah* has bestowed on humankind:

And among His signs is this: He creates for you mates out of your own kind, so that you might incline towards them and He engenders mutual love and compassion between you (the Qur'an, 30:21).

He has created you from a single soul and from that soul He created its mate (The Qur'an, 4:1).

Marriage is viewed as a "legal sexual means and a shield from immorality" (Sarwar, 1996: 24), a social obligation which forms the basis of an orderly society. The sexual act through marriage is aimed to "receive spiritual strength of the unity of two souls" (Ashraf, 1998:38). Sexual relations are viewed as a means of bringing into the world a worshipper of God who will be able to glorify Him. It is because of this sense of reverence that the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ advised the couple to recite the following prayer just before the sexual act:

We are starting in the name of Allah. O Allah, protect us from the machinations of Satan and save the child that you would bestow on us from Satan's evil influences (cited in Ashraf, 1998:38).

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While procreation is an aim for a Muslim couple, it is not an exclusive aim. Companionship and enjoyment of the spouse along with avoidance of unlawful or sinful relationships are also important.

The teachings from the Qur'an and Hadith, explain sexual practices between husband and wife "clearly and without ambiguous terms, while avoiding indecently explicit representation" (Noibi, 1998:46). "The married couple may choose any convenient and mutually enjoyable method of intercourse or other sexual activity except for those which are explicitly forbidden, including anal intercourse, oral sex and sadomasochism" (Halstead, 1997: 320). Islam shows concern for matters regarding sexual etiquette between husband and wife. For instance, it is a religious requirement that married couples try to fulfil each others' sexual needs; "neither may deny the other right to satisfy these needs" (Noibi, 1998: 45). Explicit information is given on how a Muslim married couple should approach each other. As Noibi (1998: 45-46) explains, "it should be with pleasant preliminaries":

[The husband] should prepare her [his wife] gently, with kind words and enable her to derive a sense of fulfilment, and should not approach his wife as animals do. ... the couple should treat each other with affection and respect. The husband may approach his wife "whenever and in any manner" (The Qur'an, 2: 223) he desires, as suits their mutual convenience, pleasure and satisfaction, so long as it is done through the right passage: "go in unto them (your wives) as Allah has bidden you to do".....(The Qur'an, 2: 222). This proves "the positive, God-ordained nature of sexuality" is not a sin to shy away from" (Asad, 1980).

In Islam, sexual relations between husband and wife are not only encouraged but blessed. Having lawful sexual relations earns its reward in the life to come, while celibacy and refusal to marriage leads to depravity (Boudhiba, 1985). In a Hadith, it is narrated that *Allah* rewards a husband and wife for cohabiting despite the pleasure derived thereby. Similarly, fulfilling the sexual desire unlawfully (i.e outside an Islamic marriage) is subject to *Allah's* punishment (Noibi, 1998). Since there is adequate provision for the lawful fulfilment of the sexual desire within the bonds of marriage, adultery and fornication are considered *haram* (forbidden) in Islam.

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Islam attaches great importance to the family. Family life is viewed as “an important institution” and the “cornerstone of an Islamic society” (Noibi, 1993: 44). The current individualistic perspective to sexual health education which prioritises personal autonomy and self desire (Ulanowsky, 1998) over obligations and commitments to others such as the family undermines the Islamic position and concept of family life. Islamic values of marriage and family must remain intact within the sexual health education curriculum. As Halstead, (1997: 320) points out:

[U]nmarried cohabitation or same-sex partnerships are in direct opposition to Islamic teaching...[as are].. any programmes of sex education which imply to Muslim children that relationships which have some of the features of marriage such as cohabitation, are just as valid as marriage itself.

The dissension with present sexual health education practices is not only caused by clashes with Muslim parents and students’ moral and value perspectives to sexuality, but with their sexual ideology. As McKay (1997:285) explains, “our perceptions, opinions and moral beliefs are derived from within the confines of the interpretative schema of our ideology. In this respect, ideology defines reality, not vice versa”. Both restrictive (abstinence only) and permissive sexual ideologies compete for influence in shaping sexual health education (Lees, 1993; Sears, 1997). However, the permissive sexual ideology, which endorses many forms of non-procreative sex including masturbation, oral sex and accepts homosexuality as morally valid, is the driving force shaping the nature and scope of sexuality education in Australia today (Dyson and Mitchell, 2005; Ollis and Mitchell, 2001). The dominant influence of one sexual ideology can be both damaging and destructive to Muslim students and those young people who do not identify with it. As Lori Beckett (1996:15) points out, “this way of thinking about standards of morality and goodness condemns other expressions of sex and sexuality as wrong and bad, which can have a profound effect on young people”. The contemporary approach favours an assimilation into the dominant culture rather than cultural pluralism which can increase the risk of indoctrination. As McKay (1997: 288) writes:

When we systematically and uncritically teach students secular ways of thinking about all subjects in the curriculum, we are in real danger of indoctrinating them; a deliberate attempt to induce students into accepting a particular point of view, or in this case, a particular sexuality ideology.

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McKay (1997:288) further asserts that in the face of ideological pluralism, indoctrination can be seen as a violation of basic human rights and while it may not be possible to resolve what are fundamental conflicts of a plural society, “a moral agenda for sex education may be the most appropriately realised” (ibid). Although Australian school curriculum and overall educational practices attempt to recognise and respect the reality, diversity and cultural specificity of student experiences in the classroom (Ollis and Mitchell, 2001) the sexual health educational needs of Muslim students remain absent.

Developing an Islamically appropriate sexual health education curriculum at Wise College

As this was the first time Wise College undertakes school based curriculum development in its short history of establishment, it was necessary to establishing a Professional Learning Team (P.L.T). Teachers at Wise College already share a collaborative culture, interacting and working together to improve their teaching practices. However, a P.L.T of teachers enabled for more structured team work and a focus on the professional learning of teachers within the team. In the P.L.T, teachers learn from each other as they contribute to their own learning. As Johnson (2000:5-7) explains, the P.L.T:

...provides conditions which assist teacher learning and this has the ability to impact on the teaching and learning and the overall culture of the school. Teachers’ learning is the key to quality teaching and teachers are the key to classroom change.

As this curriculum development required changes at the classroom and whole school policy level, school board members, senior school administrators and teachers were invited to participate. Six staff members were happy to participate and be a part of the P.L.T (see Table 1).

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Name (Pseudonyms)	Position at the school
Wafia	School board member, secondary co-ordinator and science teacher
Nadia	Senior science teacher
Amy	Islamic studies teacher
Mu'min	Islamic studies teacher
Sulay	Physical Education Teacher
Nemet	School nurse

Table 1: The Professional Learning Team at Wise College

The development and implementation of an Islamically appropriate sexual health education curriculum at Wise College involved more than just finding “..an understanding to a problematic situation” (Opie, 2004: 79). It required a careful undertaking to discover new facts, theory, knowledge and methods concerning a solution that is unknown. As a “powerful tool for change and improvement at the local level” (Cohen et al. 2000:226), action research enabled the teachers at Wise College to gain a better understanding of their practices. The Participatory Action Research Model or P.A.R (see Figure 6), developed in Australia by Stephen Kemmis and his colleagues at Deakin University (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005: 560) was used in this study. P.A.R involves a series of reflective spirals in which a general plan, action, observation of action and reflection on action is developed and then moves to a new and revised plan with action, observation and further reflection.

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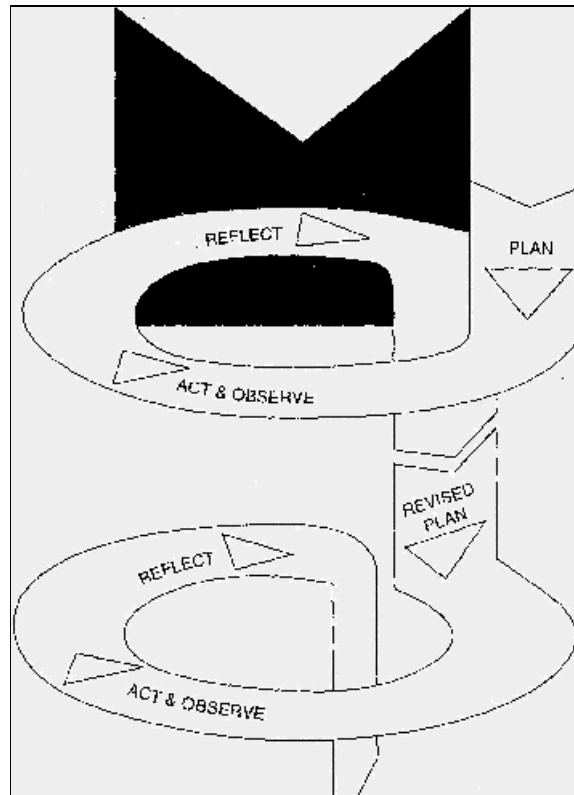


Figure 2: The Participatory Action Research model

Action research created the conditions necessary within Wise College to sustain the curriculum development process, accorded power to the teachers to make curriculum decisions, ultimately giving them voice, participation and control over their environment and professional lives.

The P.L.T met at Wise College for one hour every week across one school term. During these meetings, decisions about the sexual health education curriculum and its goals were made, current health education texts and resources were assessed for their appropriateness, alternative structures to the timetable and curriculum organization were suggested. Serious thought was also given to possible changes to teachers' pedagogies and classroom practices.

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Reconceptualising the curriculum: Centralising the teachings from the Qur'an and the Hadith

In planning for the curriculum, the teachers were concerned about how the current structure and practices for curriculum development at Wise College were inappropriate to achieve an Islamic perspective to the sexual health education curriculum. Strong objections and criticisms were made about the lack of an Islamic theoretical framework centering all curriculum decision-making at the school. P.L.T members also objected to the school's heavy reliance on external curriculum documents for its curriculum decision-making ideas and the dominance of senior school administrators, including the curriculum co-ordinator, in making all the decisions about the curriculum and the little space created for individual teacher contribution.

Learnt and memorised by many Muslims in its original language, Arabic, the Qur'an is considered the highest level of knowledge, "providing an essential foundation for all other knowledge" (Halstead, 1995:30). Everyone on the P.L.T agreed that an Islamic framework must underpin this curriculum development process; Islamic teachings from the Qur'an and Hadith should be at the heart of all decision-making, enriching and building on all other knowledge. This way, Islamic knowledge, principles and beliefs will impact on the decisions made about classroom practice and pedagogy, school policy guidelines and the entire school ethos as shown in Figure 2.

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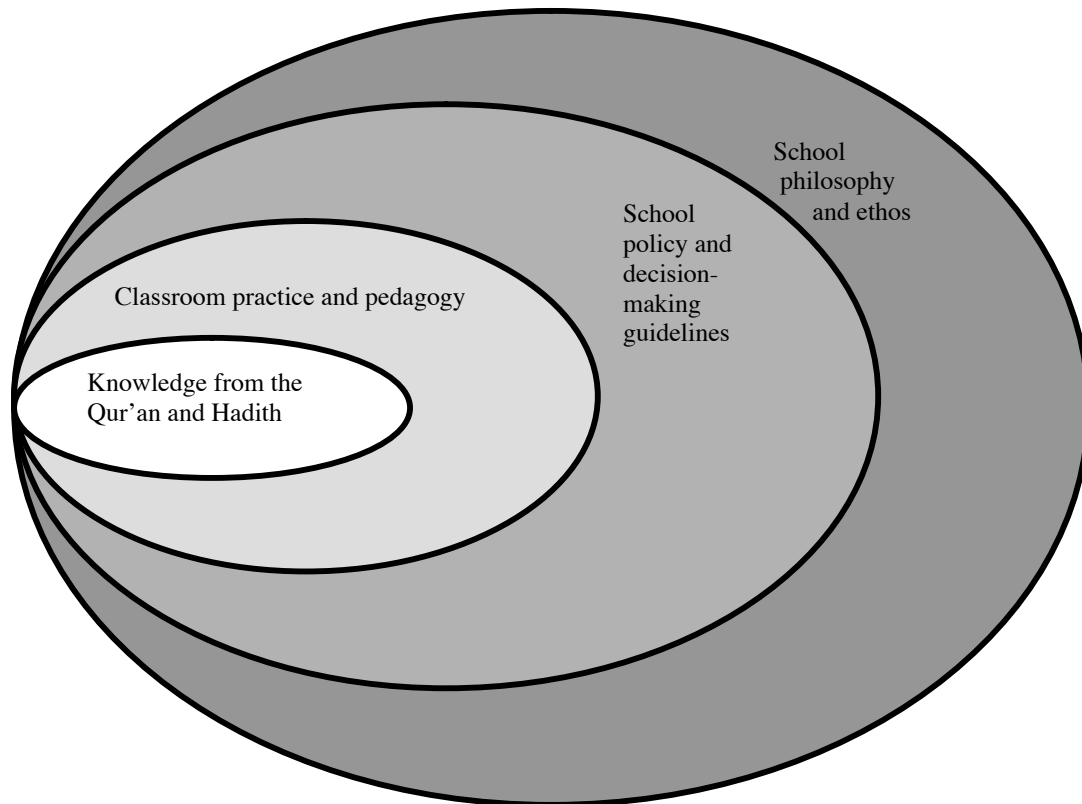



Figure 2: Centralising the Qur'an and Hadith in the curriculum development process

For Wafia, the secondary co-ordinator and science teacher, using the Qur'an and Hadith is the logical first step:

The Qur'an and the life of Prophet Muhammad  are open books for us. We've got all the answers to our questions in these books. So I think we have to go back to the Qur'an and Hadith, take what's in there and give it to our students.

Nadia agreed and added that using the Qur'an and Hadith to select sexual health topics would encourage students to learn and appreciate the Islamic meaning and interpretations of these topics. She explained how she has already successfully used these texts in her teaching:

For my year 12 health class our topic was human development and we were looking at fertilisation in quite a lot of detail. With this class what I did was take ayat [verses] from the Qur'an and some Hadith and I said this is the theory. And then we read the ayat and I said in the Qur'an it

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mentions the egg and sperm asso it's not something I have made up, it's not something that science has made up, it's God's creation. Once they started to see the language, they felt at ease, that it's not wrong or forbidden to talk about it. And I think that's the way we have to do this here.

For Nemet, the school nurse, using the Qur'an and Hadith would encourage students to view these texts as their first source of information and answers to their questions:

I agree, these students need to know that they can get the information they want from the Qur'an and Hadith rather than the Cosmopolitan or Dolly magazines!

Centralising the Qur'an and Hadith in all curriculum decision-making preserves Islamic heritage and culture, as well as promotes Islamic teachings such as Islamic etiquette. As Wafia mentions, important in this curriculum is discussion on how students should behave in the shared environment at home:

What needs to be clear in the curriculum is that when a child reaches a certain age, he needs to know not to enter his parents' room without knocking first. This is not mentioned in health texts and is very important.

Centralising the Qur'an and Hadith might lift the controversy associated with some health issues and the uneasy feelings amongst parents. As Amy suggested:

Also I think it would lift the controversy to the topics among the parents when they find out that we are teaching these topics according to what the Qur'an and the Hadith. There is nothing in this curriculum that is not in line with our religion.

Mu'min agreed that centralising the Qur'an will assist in teaching some of the more contentious topics in sexual health such as homosexuality:

There are some issues that are outside of Islam but they too have to be thought about, such as homosexuality. This information can come straight from the Qur'an....there's no better way to do it.

Still in the *planning* stage of the action research cycle, the P.L.T members began looking through the Qur'an and Hadith for topics to include in a unit to teach the following term. To cater best for the year 9 and 10 students chosen to undertake this unit, they decided to

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cover issues on puberty and came up with the following two themes and related topics (See Table 2).

Islamic themes	Teacher generated topics from the Qur'an and Hadith that relate to the theme
1. That Allah (God) created us in the best of images and a Muslim must be content with their chosen image.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The purpose of creation, of our existence. • How to be a good Muslim. • Avoiding jealousy/ envy- being content. • Dealing with emotions including depression. • Self image/ body image/ self-esteem.
2. Marriage and sexuality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physiology of reproductive system. • Sexual growth and development. • Relationships. • Virginity Myths. • Contraception. • Reproduction and sexual intercourse. • <i>Haya</i> (modesty). • <i>Tahara</i> (cleanliness) <i>ghusul</i> (ablution after sexual intercourse, menstruation and wet dreams). • <i>Zina</i> (Fornication, adultery). • Effects of pre-marital and extra marital relationships on Muslim. Ummah and society as a whole • Onset of puberty (menstruation/ wet dreams). • Sexual desires and feelings.

Table 2: Curriculum themes on puberty

Once consensus was reached on the topics, decisions were made about suitable activities and resources to use in the classroom and the P.L.T members were ready for the *action* stage of the action research cycle (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005). The teachers implemented the curriculum across one school term (a total of 10 weeks) and at the end of every three weeks we met to discuss their classes and the teaching and learning within.

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To each meeting, teachers produced samples of student work and several pages of hand-written notes of their *observations*. At these meetings, teachers capitalised on ‘teachable moments’, what worked well in their classes and the notable problems. They reported on their teaching practice, student reactions and made suggestions for change and improvement for the next action research cycle. Their comments provided insight into their thinking, their interactions with their students and the curriculum development process. Although the P.L.T meetings challenged teachers to think about, explore and make decisions on issues they never have before, the real challenges were faced in the classroom. As the data presented in the next section shows, the teachers’ struggle to regain Islamic status and control in the school curriculum required them to challenge embedded cultural understandings and traditions as well as the longstanding hegemonic structures at the school.

Confronting the Challenges

In the P.L.T meetings, the teachers reported on two major challenges to their teaching which posed a threat to developing in their students’ an Islamic understanding and appreciation of sexual health issues; the students’ cultural understandings and traditions and the school culture and longstanding hegemonic structures. Both will now be explored.

Confronting student cultural understandings and traditions

Cultural understandings of sexual health students brought to class were of great concern to many of teachers. In the P.L.T meetings, teachers repeatedly expressed their concerns about the number of misconceptions surrounding sexual health that students believed were true. A topic of most discussion in Nadia’s all girls class was menstruation:

Many of the girls wanted to know about what they can and can’t do when they are menstruating. Some said that they can’t pick a lemon from a lemon tree. It would poison the tree. The mother doesn’t pick lemon from the lemon tree but would actually wait for her husband or son to come home to do that. Some suggested that you can’t water the garden, can’t take pickles from the pickle jar, otherwise, you spoil the rest. They’re not allowed to dye their hair, cut their hair or, cut their finger nails. One of my students even told me ‘I don’t know if you know Miss but you are not

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allowed to shower for 5 days because it stops your period'. How do I deal with that? They learn this from home.

Nadia was not only surprised with her students' discussions, she was faced with the dilemma of how to appropriately handle this situation. She continued to comment that her students' understandings, or rather misunderstandings of menstruation, influenced by cultural traditions and practices, were a real challenge to teaching the Islamic perspective on these issues. The Qur'an speaks of a woman's menstrual cycle as a time of 'hurt' and a time in which she needs to rest. Islam does not consider a menstruating woman to be 'unclean', 'untouchable' or 'cursed'. A menstruating woman is encouraged to engage in her usual daily activities with only one restriction; a married couple are not allowed to have sexual intercourse during the period of menstruation (The Qur'an, 2: 222). Any other physical contact between them is viewed permissible. Nadia's concern is legitimate considering that although Australian Muslims share a common religion, they are not a homogeneous group. The Australian Muslim community reflect the secular, ethnic and linguistic diversity found in other ethnic or religious groups (Donohoue Clyne, 2001).

For Sulay, challenging his students' cultural understandings of sexual health was an on-going struggle in his teaching. As he explained, cultural folklore may have greater authority than Islamic teachings because it comes from collective wisdom and is transmitted on a personal and individual level by dominating and influential members of the family:

We have to keep in mind that changing their thinking is going to be really hard. These students learn Islam from their home environment, from what their parents say, from what they see their grandfather do....we have to keep in mind that this information may in fact have more credibility than the Qur'an. I know that doesn't sound right.....the Qur'an has the right information, but the students might see that both have the right information.

In her attempts to challenge her students' misconceptions and replace them with the Islamic viewpoint, Amy found herself becoming a cultural mediator. As she explained, students bring to the classroom certain folklore but what is important is to understand that cultural folklore is passed on in good faith and the fact that many students remember and

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repeat these stories is proof of their importance and significance. Amy continued to suggest that perhaps these folklores enable the students to discuss taboo subjects whilst distancing themselves from it. By exploring the nature of the folklore in her teaching, she believed that teachers can give the students a context which to view their thinking and maybe help them assess whether they are true or false:

I want my students to understand what Islam says about all of this, but I know, having been brought up in a Turkish family, that this knowledge is also important. I think when these students say something like, 'you can't pick lemons from the tree' that they do it innocently, they are just repeating what they've heard. I found my students were only comfortable to talk about these issues in this way and perhaps they do believe them. They were brought up with this knowledge and believe it's true.

What was important for Amy, was finding ways in her pedagogy to avoid marginalising her students' culture and as well as Islamic teachings.

These comments clearly demonstrate the complexity involved in the teachers' work. Not only were they competing with the teachings from the world of popular culture on sex and sexuality, but also with home values, beliefs, traditions and practices. Many of the teachers were left with the challenging task of making decisions about whether their role is that of cultural reproducer or cultural reconstructor. Teachers were left asking themselves, 'How can I teach the fundamentals of Islam without putting at risk the credibility and legitimacy of my students' cultural knowledge and upbringing?' 'Am I, within my role and confines of the cultural emphasis and pre-occupation of the school, to actively challenge and question my students' cultural understandings?' Wafia was concerned about the implications of empowering her students with the Islamic knowledge. To enable her students to appreciate the Islamic perspective on these issues, Wafia was aware that she would have to disrupt embedded cultural understandings and that this may create conflict with her students' parents and the cultural leaders of the school. As she explains her point of view she reaffirms Francis Bacon's (1561-1626) famous statement, 'knowledge is power' and in her view, power to cause *fitna*, an Arabic word meaning chaos:

I think we should show them how Islam talks about these issues.....but if we teach them this, I'm just thinking of the implications this might have for them. They just might go home, with the right knowledge, see the complete

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opposite and it just might cause more problems, more conflict. I can just imagine the fitna it will cause. We might be empowering them with this knowledge but it can cause nothing but problems.

Confronting school culture and longstanding hegemonic structures

Agreed to at the P.L.T meetings was the need to create opportunities for students to talk and discuss sexual health issues in class without fear or embarrassment. Many agreed to the importance of removing the ‘taboo’ stigma currently attached and perpetuated by the absence of this knowledge area in the school curriculum. In their classes, many of the teachers noticed their students’ embarrassment when openly discussing certain issues and how some looked away from illustrations of the male and female reproductive systems. Considering there is no tradition of exploratory talk about this subject in the education of students at Wise College, many reported how proud they felt when their students finally summoned the courage to ask questions. As Mu’min expressed:

When I first began to introduce these topics, I found them to be disruptive and withdrawn. They try to avoid talking about it [sexual health]. Because this is the first time these issues have been discussed. Sometimes they do giggle and make sarcastic comments, because they are feeling shy naturally. This is new education for them, it didn’t come from home, or from the early years at this school, so they are coming to class very ignorant but at the same time, very keen and interested to learn. The basics are not there so this is in fact very normal student behaviour I think.

Mu’min’s comment brings attention to the serious implications the absence of a sexual health education in the school curriculum is having on the students’ knowledge and developing appreciation for this subject. A closer analysis of Mu’min’s comments also suggest that students’ feelings of inadequacy and at times resistance to the sexual health lessons, are the result of students confronting this knowledge against a backdrop of previous understandings and assumptions developed from different sources. Not only is this students’ first encounter with these issues in school, for many of the year 9 and 10 students at Wise College, this is their first encounter with the Islamic perspective of these issue. As Schubert (1986: 107) argued, “students meeting the null curricula can convert them in many ways. Their reactions carry individual and whole school policy implications”. To regain control of his class, Mu’min acknowledged his students’

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feelings of inadequacy and tried to ease these feelings by emphasising the Islamic obligation to learn about these issues:

Sexual relationships.....I found my students were beginning to become disruptive in class and I had to say 'look, these issues are important issues to learn'. I had to let them know we are not talking about our personal life issue but issues for life, their life when they become parents. Allah makes this learning obligatory.

Mu'min was also faced with unexpected challenges when he found himself teaching sexual health to his Grade 5/6 Islamic studies class. As he shared with his colleagues, he was surprised with his students' reaction to an activity about the rules of fasting during the month of Ramadan:

In my grade 5/6 class this week I gave them a handout about things that break your fast and on the sheet was the word sex. We hadn't even started to read and one of the students found the word. Then there was an uproar in class. One student put his hand up and said, 'Sir sir, this is an Islamic school'. It took me nearly 10 minutes to settle them down again. Then as I was talking to them, I really began to stun them. I said, if you go and open the Qur'an, you will see that Allah talks about this issue and Prophet Muhammad ﷺ talks about it. These are the facts. Of course we don't talk about these things openly, but we have to learn about it. I even said that it is not rude to discuss these issues if it means we are learning about it. Learning about this has to be normal.

The students' immediate reaction to Mu'min's lesson as a violation of the Islamic philosophy of the school, not only displayed the students' gross ignorance of Islam but also the power and influence of the school culture and hegemonic structures on constructing student learning. Mu'min's class soon became a "...forum within which the two worlds of sexuality and the authority of the school culture come into open confrontation" (Thomson and Scott, 1991:12).

Many of the P.L.T members attributed the high level of student ignorance on sexual health issues to the absence of this curriculum at the school. As commented in many of the P.L.T meetings, when there is silence on these issues at home and again at school, students are left to search for their own information. In her classes, Wafia began to realise how ignorant her students were in female anatomy:

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One thing I found surprising was the boys didn't know that the female urinary system is separate to the reproductive system.

Amy's classroom experiences also shed light on her students' ignorance:

Some of my students were also interested in knowing if pregnant women can have sexual intercourse. Many of them thought it would harm the baby. They asked me 'wouldn't it poke the baby?' Through my discussion and questions, I realised they had no idea where the intercourse was actually happening. Some of them were so confused that it could come into the stomach, which I found extraordinary.

Conclusion

The development and implementation of an Islamically appropriate sexual health education curriculum at Wise College was an opportunity for the school and its teachers to reclaim responsibility and authority for Islamic education and to develop in its students an understanding and appreciation of Islam. Central to all of the teachers' decision-making was the creation of opportunities for their students to engage with emotion and rationality with Islam and to develop the confidence and ability to transfer Islamic knowledge to their lives. As many of the teachers in the P.L.T suggested, sexual health education underpinned by Islamic principles and beliefs was an initiative to move Muslim students from health information to health education.

The development and implementation of a comprehensive sexual health education curriculum at Wise College required an investigation into the different forces at play or "control regimes" (Smyth et al., 2000:39) which impacted on the curriculum decision-making at the school. In an attempt to construct solutions to an issue causing much dissension, the teachers' decisions had to carefully mediate between the learner, the knowledge and embedded cultures and traditions present in students and at the school. The teachers' willingness to challenge their existing pedagogical orientations, not only gave new meaning to their teaching practices but also encouraged new student learning to emerge. Although a school curriculum seeks the support of educational authorities, what made this school based curriculum development initiative successful, was that it involved an educational theory based on the beliefs, values and assumptions derived from the

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auspices of the individual school. In that way, the dissensions were given local and constructive solutions.

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