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What Islamic school teachers want: towards developing an Islamic teacher education programme

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In the 70 year history of Islamic schools in North America, there is yet to be an accredited teacher education programme to train and professionally equip Islamic school teachers with an understanding of an Islamic pedagogy. Arguably, there has been an imbalance of energy placed on curriculum development projects over the considerations of teacher training. From my experience working as a teacher trainer/education consultant for Islamic schools for the past 10 years, it is evident that the underlying assumption for many school administrators is that a State/Ministry certified teacher who is Muslim will know how to teach ‘Islamically’. The aims of this paper are to first establish some semblance of what it means to teach Islamically or, more accurately, to teach through an Islamic pedagogy. From this framework, the crux of the paper is to present findings from a series of focus groups with Islamic school educators about their teacher training needs. The findings of this study establish the need for a formal teacher education programme in Islamic pedagogy within an established faculty of education. Such a programme would achieve three major ends in cultivating the stewardship of Islamic schools in North America:

1. Define and establish Islamic education as a valid and relevant pedagogical model that can contribute to the broader discourse of alternative, faith-based education;
2. Standardise the pedagogy and curriculum of Islamic schools based on the principles of education in Islam and to make both contextually relevant;
3. Contribute to raising the standards of Islamic schools through a teacher education programme at credible faculties of education where ongoing research and development will also be supported.

Keywords: Islamic schools; Islamic pedagogy; teacher education; religious education

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Introduction

The growth of Islamic schooling in North America has been significant over the past two decades. Muslim communities in Canada and the United States have placed a major emphasis on establishing supplementary and alternative educational institutions for their children (Haddad, Senzai, and Smith 2009; Merry 2005; Zine 2008). Both Christian denominations and Jewish communities have been the forerunners in this respect by establishing schools based on religious worldviews (Fraser 1999; Nord 1995). However, among the ethnic, racial, and ideological diversity within North American Muslim communities, varied indigenous and immigrant communities have also sought to define what it means to be a Canadian/American Muslim through Islamic schools (Cristillo 2009; Memon 2009; Zine 2008).

Educational institutions, along with mosques, have served as a vehicle for the transmission of religious knowledge and practice, cultural history and identity, and both a moral and an ethical code. Mosques and schools have been initiated since the earliest Muslim communities were established in North America (Haddad, Senzai, and Smith 2009; Nimer 2002). Three overarching types of schooling are often conflated by the term ‘Islamic schools’: (1) supplementary evening and weekend religious instruction; (2) traditional madrassa schools that emphasise the religious sciences; and (3) full-time day schools that integrate a religious worldview with the publicly mandated curriculum. This paper focuses on the latter relying on Douglass and Shaikh’s (2004) typology that defines Islamic schools as institutions striving to impart an ‘education in the Islamic spirit’ (2).

Islamic schools of this type seek to nurture a sense of faith consciousness through basic beliefs, practices, and an Islamic worldview that is embedded across the ethos, teaching, and curriculum of primary and secondary schools. Arguably, the first push for Islamic schools in North America came through the Nation of Islam (NOI) in the 1930s. By the 1970s, the NOI had established a substantial consortium of schools, many of which were realigned with mainstream Islamic beliefs. During the same time, the largest influx of Muslim immigrants arrived in the United States and Canada primarily from South Asia, parts of Africa, and the Middle East. The immigrant community established its earliest schools in the late 1970s (1978 in Toronto and Chicago) adding to the over 30 schools (primary and secondary) that were established by indigenous Blackamerican Muslims (Muhammad 1998).

Since then, the schools have grown exponentially with major spikes of growth during the mid-1990s and post-9/11. Today, there are close to 300 Islamic day schools in North America (approximately 252 in the United States and 55 in Canada), countless weekend schools and a substantial demand for more of both (Keyworth 2009; Memon 2009). Outside of North America, yet in the West, there are equally significant numbers of Islamic schools with 129 in the United Kingdom, 68 in South Africa, and 28 in
Australia (Association of Muslim Schools UK, SA; Australian Council of Islamic Education in Schools; Association of Independent Schools New South Wales; Lawson 2005).

Despite the growth of Islamic schools in the West, there is no formal, accredited teacher education programme for Islamic school teachers. There are such programmes in parts of the Muslim world and a programme in the United States that is not accredited, but no existing programme that can ensure higher standards of teaching in North America, Europe, or Australia. Generally, Islamic school educators rely on professional development conferences, seminars, workshops, and in-service programmes to provide teacher training in Islamic teacher education. Most often teachers who conduct such professional development activities are educators with bachelors or graduate degrees in education but rarely a background in the study of religious teacher education, faith-based education, or the philosophy of Islamic education specifically. There are initiatives now such as Al Maktoum Institute in Dundee, Scotland, that intend on offering graduate degrees in the philosophy of Islamic education which will foster greater research in the field. There is also the collaboration between the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) and the Institute of Education (IoE) at the University of London that offers an MTeach and an MA Education. However, this programme is geared towards training supplementary Muslim school teachers through a historical, cultural, and civilizational approach to Muslim Studies. Until now, few institutions have sought to understand Islamic education as a pedagogical framework from within education studies or to serve the growing need of full-time Islamic school teachers.

Given the void of and need for an Islamic teacher education programme in North America, this paper intends to outline the teacher training needs of Islamic school teachers specifically related to an Islamic pedagogy. Using data collected from focus groups with lead teachers and school administrators in some of Toronto’s more established Islamic schools, the findings are intended to serve as a basis for developing similar programmes globally. Prior to delving into the findings of the study, the paper will first provide clarification of what is intended by Islamic teacher education, establish the need for such a teacher training programme, and outline the aims of other faith-based teacher education programmes in Canada as exemplars for consideration.

The basis of a theoretical framework

The theoretical framework that informs this study is based on the grounded belief that the tradition of Islam (foundational sources, lived experience of early communities, and the elucidation of the first two through scholarship) has a pedagogical tradition. What can be termed an ‘Islamic Pedagogy’ or ‘Islamic Pedagogies’ that elucidate the purpose, method, and content of the teaching/learning process may not be codified or systematised within the contemporary field of education studies, yet the absence of a formulated
theory of education does not nullify the existence of principles and practices worthy of an educational philosophy (Halstead 2004; Wan Daud 1998). Whether through the mediaeval scholarship of Ibn Sina, Al-Farabi, Ghazali, and Zarnuji on the method of learning (Günther 2007) or contemporary scholarship of Naquib Al-Attas, Seyyid Hossein Nasr, Abdal Hakim Murad, or Hamza Yusuf on the essence of education in Islam (Memon 2009), there exists serious deliberation throughout Islamic history of the place and purpose of learning.

To clarify the position from which this study has been developed and to present a brief conceptualisation from the numerous writings on education in Islam, I borrow from the work of Imam Zarnuji, a thirteenth century scholar who wrote one of the few books solely on education entitled: *Ta’lim al-Muta’allim-Tariq at-Ta’-allum* (Instruction of the Student: The Method of Learning). Speaking of the search for sacred knowledge, Zarnuji outlines a number of foundational characteristics of an Islamic pedagogy. Among the characteristics are the emphasis placed on: (1) the nobility of learning; (2) the importance of intention when learning; (3) the assiduity with which learning should be approached; and (4) the purpose of learning being to put knowledge into action and to control one’s lower self through the very act of learning (Zarnuji, 13th c./2003). Contemporary scholars have reflected on the mediaeval scholarship on education such as the work of Zarnuji to extrapolate that the essence of Islamic education is essentially a return to one’s primordial state (*fitrah*) through the nurturing of one’s comportment (*adab*). Hamza Yusuf, arguably the Western world’s most influential Islamic scholar (Esposito and Kalin 2009), emphasises the centrality of these two elements in the forward to the Zarnuji text (Zarnuji 2003, vii). Yusuf insists that the process of learning *adab* is in itself an education. And yet *adab* is intangible and immeasurable which makes the process of education in Islam a lifelong journey.

These principles and others have shaped the instructional methods and curriculum of Muslim societies for centuries. In many ways, nuances of these principles continue to reside in the conceptualisation of education among current Muslim educators and scholars such as those listed above. The recognition that a pedagogical tradition exists within Islamic scholarship can then be extended to question whether current Islamic school teachers are given the opportunity to consider the implementation of such a conceptual framework within contemporary Islamic schools.

**The current state of Islamic teacher education**

It would be uninformed to not recognise that the concern for teacher education has been on the minds of Muslim educators in contemporary educational discourse since the 1970s (Al-Afendi and Baloch 1980). The First World Conference on Islamic Education held in Mecca in 1977 is often referenced to speak about the aims and objectives of Islamic education both
in the Muslim world and in the West. Indeed, discussions around an Islamic philosophy of education, principles of Islamic education, and Islamisation of curriculum garnered the greatest concern at this and other forums. Among these themes, the need for a systematic teacher education programme for Muslim educators in Islamic schools was also expressed.

It is evident that since the First World Conference, an excessive amount of time, energy, and resources have been placed on curriculum development projects, especially in North America, to the detriment of formal, academic teacher education programmes. From the influence of the World Conferences, Islamic teacher education programmes have been established in places such as Malaysia and Pakistan, but not outside Muslim majority countries. This may come as harsh critique for some, but outside of the Clara Muhammad School system in America that established the Muslim Teachers College in the mid-1980s there has been no major organisational attempt to systematise a teacher education programme for Islamic school teachers in North America. Apart from in-service teacher education conferences, forums, and professional development activities, there remains a void of a formal, accredited teacher education programme in Islamic teacher education.

Despite the growth of Islamic day schools, there has been no formal, research-based deliberation of the principles of an Islamic pedagogy and the training of teachers with a nuanced understanding of their teaching environment. Unlike other faith-based day schools where teachers are trained specifically about pedagogical aims, teachings of the faith, and instructional strategies necessary to nurture faith-consciousness, Islamic schools have been inconsistent in setting standards for and supporting the development of teachers.

Jewish and Catholic Teacher Education Programmes in Canada serve as worthy models for consideration. I highlight faith-based teacher education programmes in Canada in particular because they are integrated within existing B.Ed. programmes and offered at publicly funded, secular higher education institutions. There are similar programmes that exist in the United States and indeed other parts of Canada but often at privately funded institutions. In this respect, Canadian universities have been particularly open to offering Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) programmes in alternative pedagogies, both spiritually based such as Aboriginal/Indigenous/Native and faith based. The Jewish Teacher Education Programmes at York University (Toronto, Ontario) and McGill University (Montreal, Quebec) are examples of integrating Jewish Studies under the faculty of arts with courses in teaching methods through the faculty of education, and the programmes are complemented with teaching practice in local Jewish day schools. The unique offerings of these programmes reside not in the appendage of religion to education studies, but the combining of the two in specialised courses such as the philosophy of Jewish Education, integrating aspects of Jewish culture
in teaching, and issues in Jewish education. Similarly, the Catholic Teacher Education cohort at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT) is unique in providing a programme that connects religious worldviews to issues of social justice and civic engagement. These programmes certainly deserve further exploration, but for the purpose of this paper, they reinforce that beyond courses in religious studies, such programmes have the potential of centralising religious worldviews within philosophies of education and on contemporary issues for the benefit of teachers in faith-based schools.

**What teachers want: findings from a study of Islamic schools in Toronto, Canada**

To understand what the teacher training needs are for Islamic school teachers related specifically to an Islamic pedagogy, a study with teachers at four Islamic schools in Toronto was conducted. The study was a collaboration between the Muslim Education Project at OISE/UT, Continuing Education OISE/UT, and RAZI Education. Sarfaroz Niyozov, assistant professor at OISE/UT and Qaiser Ahmad and Shariq Khan, educational consultants at RAZI Education served as the research team. The study was conducted through focus groups that lasted for two hours with lead teachers and school administrators in the autumn of 2009. The study was designed through focus groups with the hope of gaining multiple voices and teacher perspectives through group discussion. Given the substantial teacher turnover in many Islamic schools, this method also permitted teachers with less experience to consider the views of their seasoned colleagues while formulating their own. It was beneficial as a result to have both lead teachers who have contributed to schools for a number of years along with others who are equally passionate but often less experienced.

The following guiding question themes were addressed during the interviews based on the theoretical framework briefly outlined above: (1) the relevance of an Islamic pedagogy in relation to contemporary education studies; and (2) the training needs of Islamic school teachers in order to teach from an Islamic worldview. Based on these themes, the following section will highlight some of the elements that teachers felt are important to be included in an Islamic teacher education programme in Islamic pedagogy. The findings are grouped under subheadings that broadly capture similar sentiments and topics brought out in the focus groups.

**On comparing educational philosophies**

Many Islamic school teachers felt that an important part of a teacher training programme should be a comparative study of teaching pedagogies. Teachers want to deeply engage with the aspects that define an Islamic pedagogy but
also want to deeply understand how that pedagogy can be understood in relation to contemporary educational practices. One teacher suggested that, ‘In the design [of the program], there should be something that could compare the differences and also the similarities between the public school and Islamic school systems. There should be something to define how Islamic schools will be different from others’. Speaking of her experience in a B.Ed. programme, another teacher from the same school added that in comparing pedagogies, it is important to look at particular aspects of educational psychology or educational philosophy by comparing educational theory from a wider spectrum that includes faith-based positions. As Hussain (2009) argues, for effective social and inter-faith dialogue to take place in academia, faith-based positions must be approached from within their own theological approach. The Islamic perspective on education that some Muslim teachers have mentioned is just that – a re-centring of an Islamic worldview in educational studies.

On teaching from an Islamic pedagogy

Learning theory of instruction would not suffice when introducing new pedagogical principles. Islamic school teachers have emphasised the need to be trained in how to deliver topics from within an Islamic pedagogical framework. In this scenario, two issues arise: firstly, the reality is that many Islamic schools function with teachers who do not have formal training in teacher education that is contextual and secondly, both those that do and do not, are searching for instructional methods that are in line with Islamic values and beliefs. One participant raised both of these points succinctly, ‘Teaching strategies need to be taught. Teachers who are employed, especially in Islamic schools, they have the qualification to teach that subject. So we get Masters of Biology, Ph.D.’s in Chemistry, we get Masters in Physics, we get Hafidh’ in Qur’an [those who have memorized the Qur’an], we get Alims [Islamic scholars], we get everybody. But having a nice combination of teaching strategies plus our Prophet’s way or being kind and caring (peace and blessings upon him), that is most important’. The issue for many Islamic school teachers is knowing the content of their subject matter yet feeling inadequate when it comes to instructing students. Even teachers who have backgrounds in teacher education mentioned they want the infusing of Islam in the curriculum to also manifest itself in how they conduct classes. On this note and relating to the quotation above, teachers have often mentioned the need to better embody the practices of the Prophet Muhammad in all aspects of life but related to the principles by which he taught in particular.

At one school, a conversation ensued between teachers during the focus group that emphasised the need for a teacher training programme to teach an Islamic pedagogy and not just about Islam. One teacher suggested it this way when speaking about what should be included in the programme, ‘As
well as perhaps teaching strategies like what has been used in previous generations, something that is tradition. Not necessarily learning per se, but how have Muslims learned 300–400 years ago... So if it’s, we use memorizing Qur’an for example, apply that to another aspect to the course... this is a more traditional type in a modern setting...’ Thinking of the cultural diversity in Muslim societies he then suggested ‘strategies of teaching would be an interesting area to explore, you could say, “in South East Asia they do this, in Africa they do this”’ and I think it might provide something more meaningful for a teacher to learn and use this technique. Another teacher then asked her colleague ‘would that be like a pedagogy?’ and he responded by saying ‘Yes, a teaching strategy along those lines. A certificate for me is just a piece of paper unless it’s giving me some value’. From conferences and community roundtables also held at OISE/UT over the past few years, the push for training Muslim educators in an Islamic pedagogy has been consistent. Teachers who have worked in Islamic schools for a number of years especially realise the need to understand the distinction between their instructional approach and the approaches to teaching and learning common in public schools. The absence of a pedagogical framework has contributed to this sense of emptiness.

**On ‘Islamically’ based classroom management**

Similar to a pedagogical framework for instructional practice, a number of teachers also insisted that an Islamic perspective on ‘classroom management’ be taught in the programme. Many expressed discomfort with a system that reinforces behaviour through penalties. The teacher who said ‘classroom management should be a huge part of the certificate’, was seconded by others who elaborated the need for an Islamic perspective that emphasises ‘caring and a kind attitude’. Similar to the need for adopting principles of teaching practice lived by the Prophet Muhammad mentioned above, a number of Islamic school teachers mentioned the need to embody examples of his wisdom (*hikma*) when wanting to motivate and inspire students. This includes addressing misbehaviour or correcting inappropriate actions with mercy (*rahma*).

**On instilling a sense of God-given responsibility when teaching**

Essential to an Islamic pedagogy is reframing the purpose of learning from an Islamic perspective. Some Muslim educators have articulated this through the Islamic concept of *khalifat-Allah fil-ard* (vicegerent of God on earth) whose responsibility it is to uphold peace and justice. The reality, however, is that teachers who work in Islamic schools may hold varying conceptions of what an Islamic education may mean and in many cases no real consideration of Islamic education as a distinct pedagogy. To address this, one teacher...
emphasised aligning teachers as a central task of a teacher education programme. ‘Our focus should be on a connection between a teacher and her job, and her responsibilities towards Allah [God]... Your motive to please Allah is not like your motive to gaining money. Because to please Allah, you are conscious of everything that you do, and I think that’s important because when teachers are working at Islamic schools, not everybody is at the same level. Not everybody is working to get towards the same purpose. If that is instilled during the course, then it may help the functioning of the school because (then) the teachers are all on the same level...’ This sentiment mirrors the words of Zarnuji outlined earlier about the intention with which learning and teaching in Islam must be approached. Many teachers have alluded to the importance of clarifying intention to be one that is God-consciousness which would alter even conception of ‘managing’ classrooms discussed above.

Intention, however, is a very personal matter that is difficult to train in the formal sense. In responding to this challenge some teachers in the focus groups told us that intention should be cultivated through reinforcing Islamic values and a Prophetic way of teaching during the programme. One teacher emphasised that ‘Integration of Islamic values and the values of teaching’ are essential. ‘We need an integration of both of those, because obviously we are an Islamic school, so we have to be aware. Everything we are doing is being reflected. So you have to impart that wisdom as well’. A third teacher at the same school suggested that this can be achieved through teaching about themes that define an Islamic perspective from the Qur’an and Prophetic tradition. A teacher training programme would need to move beyond the ‘face value of the Qur’an’ and towards ‘the symbolic value’.

**On Islamic teacher education and Muslim diversity**

On this note, teachers at one school argued that such a programme and Islamic schools in general need to be clear on their aims and objectives. Given the diversity within Muslim communities, schools and institutes need to be clear on their stance while accommodating the diversity that exists. One teacher said, ‘we have a vast diversity... we have Progressive Muslims, we have certain sects of Islam that are almost polar opposites of the others in terms of even *aqeeda* [foundational beliefs]’. Another teacher then jumped in to add that ‘Islamic schools really have to have a vision of what they want’ which is something that a teacher training programme ought to contribute to. Teachers across the schools agreed that Islam must be taught with some semblance of balance and sensitivity when addressing cultural, sectarian, and ideological differences within Muslim communities and Islamic history. This could be achieved they said through exploring the multiple types of Islamic schools, curriculum frameworks, and instructional methods without imposing one type as definitively ‘Islamic’.
On the importance of learning how to integrate an ‘Islamic’ perspective

The theme of an integrated/infused curriculum also came up. One teacher emphasised the need to have an integrated curriculum similar to the Catholic system. Having goals and objectives of a faith-based institution integrated within the curriculum would be an important part of the certificate. He emphasised that teachers need guidelines when they teach aspects of faith and morality about how deeply to engage with certain topics. ‘That’s the way I view the Catholic curriculum when you look at it . . . they have specific expectations in their profile and they try to build that into their various assignments and day-to-day things that they do’. This is undoubtedly an area that has been under development among Muslim educators for the past 30 years. Many Muslim educational organisations have developed curriculum frameworks as well as textbooks and workbooks for children that teach particular topics in history and science for example from an Islamic perspective (Memon 2009; Merry 2007). However, what currently exists are often curriculum materials/units that append aspects of Islamic history for instance, onto an existing curriculum as opposed to altering existing public school curriculum and rewriting it from within an Islamic perspective. The reference made by the teacher above about the Catholic school curriculum in Ontario, Canada is a model that many Islamic school teachers hope to mirror one day. This would imply a curriculum that upholds the standards, depth, scope, and sequence of provincially approved curriculum, yet developed with the content and written from a perspective that centres an Islamic epistemology and across subjects. An integrated curriculum would, therefore, not simply be an appendage of Muslim contributions to history and science (Shamma 1999).

On the identity crisis of young Muslims growing up in North America

Teachers at another school raised the issue of harnessing the multiple identities of students. ‘One of the topics that would really benefit Islamic teachers in Islamic schools is the identity crisis that the adolescents go through. We’re struggling with it right now. The children are struggling. We don’t see the behaviour how we think that they should be as Muslims. We would like some help, some insight on how we handle . . . we have a tough time in this building with the teenager issues . . . something like that we could really, really take to our schools and say let’s try this’. Part of the identity crisis, the teachers of one school theorised, is a result of 9/11:

Their [the students] self-confidence is low. Everybody has transformed us to being a terrorist. 9/11 has had a severe impact. It becomes important that those people who are teaching Muslim children can tell them, listen, this is not what you are. They can re-build their confidence and re-build their self-esteem and give them some idea of who they are, what they are and where they need to go. When they see these wars and newspapers, even a small portion the kids start hating their own. This is a real crisis. It’s an identity crisis. We need to fix them
or some of our kids go berserk. The most educated kids are getting into this. They’re frustrated and don’t know what to do. They find people are picking on them in the wrong way and I think we need to bring them back. The teacher plays a very important role.

To address this sense of identity crisis, one teacher insisted that a teacher training programme cannot simply be a positive experience but ‘an empowering one’ that transfers to classrooms. Teachers, he said, need to be empowered themselves to then ‘make the kids believe that anything is possible. Not only can they do whatever they want, but that they are responsible for the change’. It was also suggested that there be critical media literacy taught to Islamic school teachers on how to respond to the popular misunderstandings and misconceptions about Islam and Muslims.

**Analysis**

As discussed in the theoretical framework, the overarching issue that arises in establishing a teacher education programme for Islamic school teachers is the absence of codified pedagogies or philosophies of education in the Islamic tradition. Indeed, as argued throughout this paper, there are elements, principles, and practices that can be and have been derived from the vast intellectual and spiritual tradition of Islam; however, each of these is open to interpretation of how they manifest in the contemporary classroom.

What an Islamic pedagogy must articulate are principles of education that allow for a fluidity of practice and multiplicity of interpretation and adaption. Principles of an Islamic pedagogy would be similar to what has been extrapolated from Zarnuji earlier. Viewing the process of learning as a noble act, for example, would affect the way a teacher teaches and a student learns irrespective of whether they sit together on the floor or apart in desks. When teachers in our study asked for a teacher training programme to emphasise a comparative approach to educational philosophies or to teach from an Islamic pedagogy, the task ahead is to ensure both are discussed in relation to principles and not simply individual practices. What would need to be analysed is how individual Muslim institutions and educators (both in the past and present) connect particular practices to principles. So for the teacher who requested such a programme teach about instructional strategies such as memorisation that is emphasised across Muslim societies, the approach of a teacher training programme would be to explore the variance of approaches and their individual rationale that connects them to the Islamic tradition broadly.

Similarly, for the less theoretical and more practical classroom-based issues that arose in our focus groups such as developing integrated curriculum frameworks, managing classrooms that exemplify the Prophetic tradition, or nurturing a grounded sense of self in students, all of these ought to be approached through an exploration and consideration of educational principles within and across the intellectual and spiritual tradition of Islam.
For the teachers who called for a Prophetic pedagogy – making classrooms embody the habits of caring and kindness towards children for example – cannot be adopted uncritically or out of context. An Islamic teacher education programme must be careful in not essentialising the Prophetic tradition with singular understandings. The tradition is dynamic as are its interpretations. Nor would it be anywhere close to accurate to assume that only Islamic education theoretically encourages a caring approach when teaching. What we have gained from the focus groups is the need to balance between providing educators with inroads to an Islamic philosophy of education while critically exploring varying methods, models, and interpretations, as well as similarities with contemporary approaches to teaching and learning.

The final issue of identity crises that Muslim youth post-9/11 are experiencing in particular is certainly an issue central in the literature of Islamic schooling (Cristillo 2009; Haddad, Senzai, and Smith 2009; Zine 2008) and one that ought to be central in a teacher training programme. However, the solutions and strategies for addressing the issue may not reside within the pedagogical tradition of Islam necessarily. This is a prime example of the need for Islamic schools, and their teacher training initiatives, to recognise the ways in which contemporary educational approaches can contribute to building student self-esteem, teaching media literacy, and encouraging a discourse of active civic engagement. Muslims students are not the first, nor the only, demographic to experience discrimination and marginalisation as a result of socio-political circumstances. A teacher training programme for Islamic school teachers must, therefore, not simply rely on the Islamic tradition for answers, but consider the way existing theories, approaches, and strategies in the field of education can contribute to the development of Islamic schools.

The work ahead

After a review of recent literature on Islamic schooling, Hussain (2008) concluded his article with a question worthy of restating: ‘How is Islamic Education to be taught within a Western context so that theory can reflect practice in contemporary issues’ (585)? Many of the issues raised in our focus groups mirror the problems of contemporary, Western Islamic Education as a field. How should issues of diversity within Muslim communities be addressed in Islamic schools and teacher education programmes? How can Islamic schools positively nurture a sense of citizenship and belonging among Muslim youth? And how can the field of Islamic Education reconcile between an ideal philosophy of Islamic Education and the actual practice of teaching and learning in Islamic schools today (Hussain 2008)? Our focus groups with Islamic schools teachers echoed these questions and have moved us a step closer in articulating an answer. At the same time, this study raises new questions worthy of equal consideration. What is an Islamic pedagogy? Should we speak of an Islamic pedagogy or pedagogies? Who defines an Islamic pedagogy(ies)? And how
will a teacher training programme for Islamic school teachers capture the vastness and variety of both educational principles and practices from within the Islamic tradition? These are questions that will shape the work ahead.

What has been gained through this study is the urgency of a teacher training programme that grapples with the questions above. Teachers at one school said that such a programme would ‘give teachers and schools a sense of vision’. At another school, teachers said that an Islamic teacher education programme would ‘reset the benchmark for success’ and allow Islamic schools to create their own measures of educational quality. A programme on Islamic teacher education would expand the discourse of faith-based education in North America. It would not only bolster greater research and development into the area of Islamic education – its aims, methods, and curriculum – but also expand the conception of spiritually based and faith-based pedagogies as valid sites of educational research.

There is now a shift towards systematically raising the standards for Islamic schools through teacher training with a reputable faculty of education (Senzai 2009). The voices of teachers summarised in this study serve as an initial outline of what might be included in such a programme. Their voices likely represent much of the important conversations needed for training Islamic school teachers. This paper is, therefore, meant to serve as a catalyst for discussion and deliberation over developing a teacher education programme and defining an Islamic pedagogy.

Notes on contributor

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