

Enter the discourse:
Teacher and Principal Voices Through
Action Research in Islamic Schools

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Abstract

While many of the voices that ride the waves about Islamic Schools are from outsiders there is not much research about the experience in Islamic education from the insider perspective or from data that can only be generated from within. To enter the discourse in educational research about our schools many voices and perspectives can only serve to enhance our work. There has not been a better time for the voices of principals and teachers to resonate on the waves and provide an insider perspective. Those in the field of education can ask critical questions that will not only provide research data but will enhance our practice. Sharing research can provide our schools with guidance for critical developmental strategies. This presentation seeks to discuss action research, collaboration and partnering as means for enhancing the practitioner's opportunity to inform their own practice.

This multi-media and interactive presentation is intended for the practitioner with a research idea or an educational practice that needs to be tested as well as those willing to share their curiosity. Funders are welcome to join the discussion. It is designed for classroom teachers, principals and other stakeholders in our schools by approaching action research through the following steps:

1. Define and discuss action research
2. Present examples of action research
3. Demonstrate strategic goals for research projects
4. Guide the discussion to ask relevant research questions
5. Enhance our own practice through sharing with one another about classroom and school experiences

Brief Biography

Dr. Seema A. Imam is a current Board Member of Islamic School's League of America and Faculty of Elementary and Middle Level Teacher Education at National-Louis University in Lisle, Illinois. She has sixteen years of classroom experience, has served as founding principal of a large metropolitan area Islamic School for five years, does international consulting and has been serving at the university level as a teacher educator for ten years. She is involved in a longitudinal study called, "Multicultural Teacher Education Pedagogy" and presents at the national level at the American Educational Research Association's annual conference and numerous other annual educational conferences. During the 2005 AERA conference, Seema was part of an interest group that requested the establishment of a new SIG (Special Interest Group). It will be launched this year and deals with teacher education and teacher preparation for teaching in a multicultural setting. This year she presented a paper at AERA entitled, "Challenges facing teachers who teach Muslim children in their classrooms."

Enter the Discourse:

**Teacher and Principal Voices Through Action Research in
Islamic Schools**

By: Seema A. Imam

Introduction and Rationale

The voices that ride the waves about Islamic Schools are mostly from outsiders. Nearly no existing research is available about experiences in Islamic education from the insider perspective or from data that can only be generated from within. The discourse in educational research about our schools requires many voices and perspectives. Phillips (Phillips 2006) noted, “We research our own issues, meaningful in our current life and practice. We pursue critical questions that resonate with our professional community and have potential to improve teaching, learning and life” (p.42). Such research will serve to enhance our work. This challenging time for Muslims in America is the best time for the voices of principals and teachers to resonate on the waves and provide insider perspectives. There are many critical questions to be answered through action research to enhance our practice. Action research can provide our schools with guidance for current critical developmental strategies. Through focused action research and planned institutional development, Islamic educators will participate in formulating world opinion of Islamic teachings and practices.

I used to turn on the radio when I was much younger and listen to a variety of things, I would laugh to hear the talk show hosts poking fun at someone or something, I would get the latest information about the special sales, and hear the latest music hits. Sometimes I even found the talk show hosts humor to be funny and I too laughed. After

teaching for three decades and realizing the power of education I no longer sit complacently in on someone else's learning agenda, but rather I want to set my own learning agenda. I look for the ads and specials of things I plan to buy or join. I tune in to talk shows where the hosts cover topics of value to me and I have long since learned that talk show hosts who poke fun are often the source of pain, even agony and certainly and most importantly they are shapers of popular opinion. Essentially, I now make a purposeful effort to guide my intake of popular opinions. I understand the process of educating the masses with popular opinion. I cannot afford to be a passive learner in things that are important to me.

In recent years, perhaps more than ever before like many followers of Islam around the world, I tune in to hear the latest story, and the twist, or angle that a reporter gives to his or her respective reports about Islam. While, the topic of Islam is sure to be there we cannot deny that lots of details about Islam are talked about. What is alarming is that the twist is often wrong. Like many others I may decide to set the record straight and call in. If the story is about something taken out of context in the Quran or some aspect of our belief I have numerous sources to turn to and usually can manage to quote or share something of value, which provides Islamically correct information going out on their waves. In essence, I can provide them with a responsible insider perspective to counter their discussion.

This participation becomes difficult if the story is about an institution that I am not familiar with and even harder if it becomes important to call in with factual data. In the days and years since the Islamic schools are in greater number, whenever I hear media discussions of Islamic Schools, I cringe. For the most part we see schools that exist

across the country in both new and in old buildings. These schools are established by Muslims from all over the world with a variety of philosophies, most of which do not come from a particular model base but rather are institutions attempting to take the best from the east and blend it with the best from the west and move forward. You see schools with every level of classes, and extra-curricular activities. Someone or the other of the schools has experienced nearly every challenge faced by any other school and more. But, where can we find information that tells us what model of education a particular school follows, or what level of academic success they are enjoying? Furthermore where is our own showcasing of the fact that we value education of girls and boys separately even before the recent research came to show the advantages of such practices? We simply have not documented enough about the successes or shared enough of our stories to provide the world with information about Islamic education.

As a professor of elementary and middle level teacher education at a major teacher education university in Chicagoland, National-Louis University and as one who is frequently called upon to speak to the media, I would like to be able to turn to a textbook or an article and say something grounded in research. I am sure that I am not alone in this feeling. I would like to say for example, “here it is, details about the Islamic schools, their models of learning, their beliefs, visions and mission statements.” If our voices ride the waves as participants and insiders, we become the experts with the expertise that is relevant and one perspective that no other body can have.

For this very reason, it is time now, for Islamic schools to craft their own definitions of education for Muslims, for example, whether we say Muslim education or Islamic schools has been debated. We need to define ourselves. In essence, the only way

to be appropriately defined is to participate in the definition. Although talk show hosts are only one element of the mass media, I spoke only of them to make my point. Talk show hosts and other media sources know exactly how powerful they are. They plan their messages, do quite a bit of background research and they study all angles for a story before they air it, that puts them in the best position to remain in control of the message that the public receives. But, if in their research they find our own real story, then our own message may go out.

Stakeholders in Islamic schools in America can be their own critical voice and stand firm on the Islamic principles. Phillips and Carr (Phillips 2006) have stated, “ In problematizing your own practice, you have spent some time engaged in what we call *listening to your own setting*. As teacher / researchers it is critical that we learn to examine our settings—communities, schools, classrooms, and students—closely, with an ear to what direction our settings may be leading us.” (p.46). Teachers and principals can enter the discourse, not to provide a monolith but rather to study all the angles and craft an honest insider perspective. By using action research a powerful message can go out. The schools themselves will ideally be able to use the research, a shared body of information and collaborative approach that will guide schools and schooling in new phases of school development.

Action research definition and process

Action research as defined by Sagor (Sagor 2000), “is a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the ‘actor’ in improving and/or refining his or her actions” (p. 3). This, Sagor further explains provides for empowerment.

Numerous models of action research are currently in use. The use of action research has become increasingly popular over the past few decades. Going back as far as the 1930s, Lieberman and Miller (Lieberman 1991) stated:

Collier spoke in terms of research-action and action-research. It seems to be a question, then, of either doing research for action (according to a prospective orientation) or doing research in/of action (which is largely a retrospective approach). It might be profitable, however, to separate out research in action from research of action, thus creating three approaches:

1. Research for action provides the database for action planning.
2. Research in action occurs within and during the implementation of new ideas and constitutes the ongoing monitoring of the changes.
3. Research of action is operated to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the changes (p.149)

The whole experience in doing action research, as we know it today, provides stakeholders whether teacher, principal or collaborative group with options. It is an opportunity to act professionally in making decisions, allows for researchers to account for personal or institutional improvements, motivates goal setting, invites those who are interested to do research together, and promotes discussion and sharing of ideas.

Accordingly Sagor (Sagor 2000) states, “three different approaches to organization for research serve three compatible, yet distinct, purposes:

- Building the reflective practitioner
- Making progress on schoolwide priorities
- Building professional cultures” (p. 7).

We often engage in discussions about whether there is enough progress being made or not, on an individual basis teachers reflect on their own success. Many

practitioners are looking for the best methodologies relevant to their own teaching. Action research as it is defined and according to these stated purposes holds the potential for the Islamic school stakeholders to answer many questions that we already desire answers to. Action research is instrumental in developing learning communities.

Examples of action research

Action research does not differ so much in the methods used or the techniques used to collect data, but in fact the bigger difference is in the process that takes place through action research. Standards for action research are still evolving today. According to Noffke and Stevenson (Noffke 1995), “intentions and interpretations of actions and the consequences and circumstances of those actions need to be voiced and tested in internal dialogue or reflection and in dialogue with ‘critical friends’ ” (p. 201). In fact there are intended multiple meanings as school context is usually quite complex and it is hard to understand it in one particular way only. Dependent upon the information being sought the method of the research itself will change, as does the research design step in other types of research.

While new ways are emerging there are a few designs used most often. Such types of action research design Phillips (Phillips 2006) explains in chapter 1 with templates included in the appendices are quite useful and popular. When using a qualitative research approach these popular designs are: Integrated action research, curriculum analysis, ethnography, and self-study. While I have

not included any quantitative design discussion in this introduction to action research it is also discussed by Phillips and will be a useful and necessary skill for action researchers and our school stakeholders to understand if the research being chosen is quantitative research. The brief explanation of the four qualitative designs listed above are briefly discussed below.

1. Integrated action research is used when one tries certain methods of intervention with students usually aimed at achieving some improvement in the students themselves.
2. Curriculum analysis is an organized focus on curriculum to discover the weaknesses or strengths of the curriculum.
3. Ethnography was first used in Sociology and is used to study culture for the most part.
4. Self-Study is used most as a study of oneself in relation to others with the hope or intention of improvement. It relies a lot on collaborative efforts, public focus and various methodologies.

The beauty of action research is that it helps the practitioner or stakeholders in determining what is taking place, what could be taking place, what the intention is and finally what the next step or steps might be. It is an organized way to improve and reflect. There is a constant need for action research to be critical and to critique the current situation. From the nature of the four types of design it is easy to realize that more than evaluative, the research is personal and reflective on the part of the researcher. It is meaningful and causes reflection in ways other than to evaluate. It is ideal since the focus

is not on being wrong but on finding new ways to do things, new focus, new initiatives and purposes. Such methodology serves to build confidence and a strong and valued sense of purpose and meaning.

Strategic goals for research projects

Because of the nature of action research and the fact that it is done in conjunction with duties of teaching or administration in the case of the school, it requires specific focus in order to be achievable. The amount of time and energy that is needed is significant. Many times teachers for example have goals to set and initiate for professional development. As a result of those goals much time is invested in some particular activity that often has a beginning and an end. Often teachers do not feel that they own the process and therefore frequently attend presentations but without being fully focused. This effort is owned by others as a result. If teachers were to focus their plan for action research and combine their goals toward completing an action research project along with professional development, it is more likely that a tangible project will result at the end. Teachers will feel rewarded for their personal growth, the outcome and even the next goals that often emerge naturally from any such project will generate new energy for teaching.

One best way to find a meaningful focusing strategy in order to move forward with a specific inquiry is to write a reflective journal. I have found that Sagor's approach in chapter 2, Sagor (Sagor 2000) explains journal writing effectively and much more. Usually asking questions such as these. 'What is it

that went well? What did not go as well as I would have expected?' These questions can generate a daily response. Researchers follow this by several days of written responses along with asking, 'why it might be that such an event is significant in my teaching can guide one further?' This process begins to focus the research. A second strategy is a reflective interview or in a group setting doing an analytic discourse, such as a focus group, which may draw out the ideas of others to be focused on in the research (p. 13).

Asking relevant questions

The question phase of research determines what data is collected and how it will be collected. After reflection on the journal or doing some analysis related to the dialogue that stakeholders had we begin to head into a phase that determines the research outcomes. The result of thinking about something that went well or did not go as well as we would like develops a thought process to get at ways to discover why this is so.

Some of the questions I have heard related to schools that serve Muslims or nearly any new school are as follows:

1. How can we retain the students in the school and raise tuition to cover the rising costs of education?
2. How can schools create the spiritual spaces we desire in order to motivate students to respect prayer halls, prayer time, timeliness and adherence to the regular five daily prayers? (faith-based school specific)

3. How can we successfully integrate the important Islamic perspectives into the core curriculum? (faith-based school specific)
4. What are the contributing factors that determine school culture?
5. What are the critical ways to strengthen the teaching skills of teachers who have not attended or have not completed teacher education?

The questions that are often related to teaching might be:

1. How might my classroom benefit from integrated curriculum?
2. What are the key steps I could take to integrate Islamic studies in to all the subjects I teach?
3. What are some paradigm shifts that could be made in my classroom practice that will directly relate to the satisfaction of my students?
4. What are the assignments I currently use that engage my students the most?
5. Which assignments that I make result in students attaining the highest level of credits in my current grading plan?

Questioning oneself individually or in a group helps us to think and act critically. The reflective journal, group discourse and questions are first steps in becoming the agent of change. A healthy perspective is not one that looks at change as a negative it looks at change as a healthy element in building school communities.

Our own practice, how can we share the experience?

As a particular study nears an end no matter how hesitant the researcher may feel, the sharing of the research is a must. It needs to go public, a step that requires researchers to put the journey on paper. The hardest part for many researchers is writing the results. Sagor (Sagor 2000) states, "Practitioners who engage in action research inevitably find it to be an empowering experience" (p. 3). Many educators feel empowered but don't have time to take this step.

Writing the results or creating a portfolio is required for sharing the experience. Schools could join together to describe issues important to their programs, and work together to create a design, collect the data and share the results. This is an extensive requirement but offers many advantages. As we progress and in consideration of our current phase of school development, thought should be given to longitudinal studies as well. It is my opinion that it would benefit the schools serving Muslims if we collaborated and helped one another to direct our research efforts in meaningful directions. As we enter new phases we may like to create research circles to facilitate our collaborative efforts and a focused professional discourse. Perhaps the time has come to create an extensive research agenda and to seek research funding for development of models of education, integrated methodologies for schools that teach Muslim students, analysis of our teacher force and policy development.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this brief paper is merely an introduction and rationale for all of us who care deeply about schooling of Muslim children. It seems realistic to expect that the more we strive to create schools that are competitive and successful, as we define our goals, our purpose and education for Muslims in the American landscape, the more likely we will be motivated to move toward more action research agendas.

This paper is not intended to spell out the process of action research from beginning to end. It takes at least a one or two-day seminar to begin to do this or participation in research coursework at the university level unless of course individuals in the schools are already beyond that stage. I suspect that there are numerous well-equipped stakeholders in many schools who are prepared already and could now be encouraged and supported to carve out a research agenda.

The culture of growing professionally is a healthy one when it promotes learning together, improving our practice, evaluating our schools, developing our teacher practice and the components of our school improvement planning. It is my hope that we join together in these efforts to increase success in creating even stronger schools, to enhance our professional development, teacher efficacy, and the overall schooling for Muslim children where those same children get the most toward attaining a sound worldview, an appropriate spiritual upbringing and enjoy academic preparation for life.

Resource Handout

Phillips and Carr (2006) text comes with an interactive CD that is very useful. Even though the title indicates that it is for pre-service teachers it is a very good resource for any teachers in my opinion.

Websites as a resource that are listed on pages 39-41 are excellent.

<http://arexpeditions.montana.edu> is a site where action research papers can be downloaded and is managed from Montana State University School of Education.

<http://www.teachersnetwork.org> is an innovative teacher group where examples are included.

<http://edchange.org/multicultural/tar.html> is a teacher action research network.

The same pages in the text list numerous books and contacts for use by researchers in the field. (39-41)

Data Collection tools are the necessities that make action research possible. In Phillips and Carr (2006) the glossary is useful as well as appendix E. This appendix explains each of the following data collection uses, variations and examples:

- 1. Notetaking, Note Making**
- 2. Anecdotal notes**
- 3. Logs, Checklists and Rating Scales**
- 4. Mapping**
- 5. Shadowing**
- 6. Surveys, Questionnaires, and attitude-response scales**
- 7. Formal, Informal, and focus group Interviews**
- 8. Sociograms**
- 9. Multiple-Intelligence Approaches to Interviews**
- 10. Artifact Collection**

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