

CHAPTER 7:

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTIVITIES

7.1. INTRODUCTION

The study described in this thesis represents a large-scale exploration of aspects and issues relating to the religious education curriculum for, and its implementation in, Saudi Arabian secondary schools. The reason for, and background to, the study was the realisation, amply supported by articles and assertions in the literature, that ‘all is not well in religious education’ in Saudi Arabian schools in that religious education does not appear to fulfil the aims which the people responsible for initially drawing up study plans and curricula had in mind and that it does not evoke from students the positive response that is thought desirable.

It is, of course, true that ‘crises in religious education’ have been reported before, not only in relation to Saudi Arabia and other Muslim countries, but also in the context of other world religions and other societies. Current crises, in so far as they exist, are perhaps reinforced by the fact that societies are nowadays less ‘closed’ than they used to be, that religious beliefs and doctrines are challenged (directly or indirectly) through messages communicated via the modern media and that, hence, traditional religious education may not always appear to students (and even teachers) as being fully relevant to contemporary life and its problems. Indeed, points of this or a similar nature are frequently advanced as ‘explanations’ for the problems encountered in religious education, but it has to be said that - if they are supported by ‘evidence’ - this evidence does not normally extend beyond anecdotes and personal judgements.

Systematic explorations of how students and teachers view religious education in schools and what is done in religious education teaching are rare in general and almost non-existent in the Saudi context.

It was the latter realisation that prompted both the areas of enquiry pursued in this study and the approach to the enquiry. As far as the areas of enquiry are concerned, the following questions presented themselves:

- i. What do religious education teachers and their students regard as, or perceive to be, the key aims and objectives of religious education? What importance is attached by the two groups to different aims of religious education?
- ii. What is the nature and range of the learning experiences (or teaching activities) that are employed in religious education programmes in Saudi Arabian secondary schools? To what extent are these likely to foster or support the realisation of different aims of religious education?
- iii. What teaching/learning resources are used in the context of religious education programmes? Are they adequate to provide students with a wide range of learning experiences?
- iv. What are the constraints experienced by teachers in relation to the conduct and development of their religious education programmes?
- v. What role do textbooks play in the context of religious education? What are their positive and negative features and how can they be improved?

It was decided from the outset that, in order to obtain a valid picture concerning the foregoing questions and issues, the views and opinions of both teachers and students of religious education should be sought. It was also thought desirable to involve a reasonably large number of teachers and students in the enquiry, for the purpose of obtaining 'representative' information concerning the questions raised. This, in the researcher's view, was satisfactorily achieved by means of a sample of 384 teachers and 540 students. The total sample was drawn from schools in four major regions of Saudi Arabia, namely Riyadh, Jeddah, Medinah and Dammam.

In view of the fact that the decision was taken from the outset to cover in the study a large sample of teachers and students, a questionnaire-based approach had to be adopted. Two questionnaires were developed, one for the teacher sample, the other for the student sample. Both covered essentially the same areas of enquiry, notwithstanding some differences in the formulation of questions in various questionnaire sections. As was explained earlier in this thesis, the differences reflected the need for the use of simplified terms and phrases in the student questionnaire.

In the following sections of this chapter, a summary is given of the main findings that have emerged from this study. In this, the focus is on the key questions and issues stated above. Whenever possible and appropriate, teachers' and students' views are compared and contrasted, rather than presented separately.

Towards the end of the chapter, the implications of the present findings for future developments in religious education curricula for Saudi Arabian secondary schools are considered and recommendations made are for actions to be taken.

7.2. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

7.2.1. TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' VIEWS CONCERNING THE AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

In the exploration of teachers' and students' views about the aims and objectives of religious education and their relative importance, four broad areas of aims/objectives could be identified:

- i. Aims relating directly to the teachings and laws of the Islamic religion, especially those concerned with its holy literature.
- ii. Aims which express aspects and ways in which individuals can respond personally to religion and religious events, in terms of personal behaviour and conduct.
- iii. Aims concerning knowledge about, or appreciation of, the role and function of religion in a societal context, especially in relation to caring for others and developing tolerance towards others.
- iv. Aims concerned with the development of 'personal skills' and social skills' in relation to one's contact and interactions with others.

From the teachers' point of view, aims in the first of those categories had by far the highest importance. Not surprisingly perhaps, in view of their own specialism, the teachers see their main role to be the induction of students into the fundamental doctrines and laws of the Islamic religion. In this context, the study of the Quran takes a central position.

In the light of this, it is not unreasonable to suggest that, on the whole, religious education teachers display a 'missionary' approach to their work with students: turning students into 'good Muslims' is a major concern and intention. The fact that, in their ratings of aims, the teachers also gave a high position to issues relating to the students' involvement in religious practices (and the knowledge associated with them) confirms this.

Students, through their importance and interest ratings, broadly endorsed teachers' views about the importance of the Quran as a subject of study. However, in relation to other matters concerning Islamic laws and doctrines, their ratings of interest and importance were distinctly below those of the teachers. What emerged instead from the students' responses was that their primary concern was the development of their personal and interpersonal skills and the ways in which they could personally respond to the requirements and demands of their religion. In other words: the issues of personal relevance appear to be uppermost in students' minds when they judge the aims and purposes of religious education.

The latter point does not conflict with the high importance attached by students to Quran-related studies. They clearly recognise that the Quran is the essential basis of the Islamic religion, in just the same way as the New Testament is the foundation of the Christian religion. Thus, students accept that the study of the Quran must occupy a central position in religious education programmes. Beyond this, however, they appear to look towards religious education as source of 'personal and social education'.

Teachers do not share this view, according to the present findings. Issues concerning students' personal response (even emotional response) to religion and religious experiences are not accorded a high degree of importance, compared with the students' aspirations.

The relative position of teachers and of students about the aims of religious education in Saudi secondary schools may be summed up by suggesting that:

- i. Teachers see their main role to be that of inducing their students into the teachings, laws, rules and conventions of the Islamic faith. In doing this, their role may be described as 'missionary'. By comparison, teachers' concern about their students' social personal and emotional development through religious education is relatively modest: their 'pastoral role' takes second place to the missionary one.
- ii. Although students acknowledge that the Quran has a central place in their religious education programmes, their main concern is the development of their own personal, interpersonal and social skills and the knowledge underlying them. In this sense, they expect or - at least - hope for religious education to have a pastoral function: a purely 'missionary' treatment does not appear satisfactory to them.

A final comment concerning teachers' and students' perceptions of the aims and objectives of religious education is that neither group appeared to attach much

importance to the development of knowledge about, and insight into, faiths and religions other than their own.

7.2.2. THE NATURE AND RANGE OF TEACHING ACTIVITIES AND LEARNING EXPERIENCES IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

The enquiry among teachers and students concerning the nature of teaching activities used and learning experiences encountered led to broadly identical findings. This adds credence to the validity of the information received from each population group separately.

The main conclusions reached were as follows:

- i. On the whole, religious education is conducted in a very 'formal' teacher-centred and teacher-directed manner. Textbooks occupy a central position in this in that they determine to a large extent the order in which religious education topics are discussed and also the content of religious education lessons and programmes.
- ii. Little evidence was found of the use of teaching methods and strategies that require or encourage active 'participatory' learning on the students' part. Such teaching methods would have included role-playing activities, independent study assignments, presentations by students, etc. Instead, most activities appear to rely on teachers' expositions, the reading and discussion of textbook material and on formal homework assignments.

- iii. Although ‘discussions in class’ were claimed by both teachers and students to be a major kind of teaching activity/learning experience, it is difficult to judge from the present information to what extent students genuinely contributed to their content and direction. However, given the dominance of ‘teacher-control’ in the religious education programmes generally, it is likely that this feature also extended to discussion sessions.

- iv. For the overwhelming part, religious education programmes provided for secondary students were strongly ‘school-focused’ in that little, if any, major links were made with outside institutions or agencies that are potentially capable of contributing to and/or enriching students’ religious education. This appeared to apply both to the involvement of outsiders in school-based programmes and to visits by students to places of religious interest.

Two comments can be made on the basis of the above conclusions. The first is that it is unlikely that students find the rigorous, formal approach to religious education which they experience, either stimulating or inspiring. Indeed, if they are to respond more positively to their religious education programmes, it appears essential that they are exposed to teaching approaches that take into account the students’ desire to develop their personal, interpersonal and social skills. This clearly calls for the introduction and adoption of more ‘student-centred’ teaching approaches and learning activities than are currently in use.

The second comment relates to the low use by teachers of ‘outside’ resources in their religious education programmes. In some respects, this results in what may be described as ‘missed opportunities’ for bringing religious education closer to the ‘real

world' of the students and for ensuring that religious education is seen by the latter as a meaningful and personally relevant area of study.

A particular line of enquiry conducted among teachers concerned the treatment of 'controversial issues' in religious education programmes. A range of such issues was suggested to them, including 'fundamentalism in religion', 'conflict between religions' and issues of social, political and environmental interest.

On the whole, teachers agreed that it was appropriate for these and similar issues to be dealt with in religious education programmes. However, in terms of their own practices, the range of controversial issues actually covered appeared rather restricted. In the main, they related only to problems of youth in contemporary society. This may be seen as an extension of the 'missionary' side of teachers works which aims at ensuring that their students are introduced to, and accept, codes and modes of behaviour that are expected of good Muslims.

Controversial issues relating to world affairs and environmental matters were not regarded by teachers as important. A possible explanation for this is that teachers do not see them as issues about which religion holds certain positions.

7.2.3. TEACHING AND LEARNING RESOURCES USED IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

As far as the use of teaching and learning resources in religious education is concerned, teachers and students were generally concordant in their information about them. Generally, the teaching and learning resources employed appeared to reflect the main characteristics of the approach to religious education summarised in the

foregoing subsection of this chapter: it is best described as ‘textbook-bound’ and ‘teacher-controlled’.

Without question, the textbook is the major teaching and learning resources used in religious education programmes in Saudi Arabian secondary schools. It acts as the key source of information; it is also the basis for homework assignments and the key resource for revision work, for example, for examinations. There was evidence that the information in textbooks is from time to time supplemented by information taken from ‘reference books’ of a religious nature, but this supplementation does not appear to extend to the introduction of new material. It merely amplifies or extends the textbook information.

No evidence was obtained that suggested that teachers made use in their teaching of other printed materials, for example, newspaper or magazine articles describing religious issues or events. Such materials are generally readily available and can be of major value as teaching/learning resources, particularly for the purpose of stimulating students to think about the relevance of religious education to contemporary personal and societal problems.

A likely explanation for teachers’ failure, or reluctance, to use printed resource materials collected from newspapers, journals and magazines is that these materials are viewed as lying ‘outside’ the topics and aspects specified in religious education textbooks. Thus, teachers may regard them as irrelevant to, or inappropriate for, their religious education programmes which - as has already been observed - are largely determined by the content of the textbooks.

What has been said about use of ‘non-textbook’ printed materials in religious education programmes applies also to video - or film materials portraying religious events and other topics relating to religious matters. The use of these materials is very limited, despite the fact that at least some teachers would appear to have access to them.

Teachers’ over-reliance on textbooks as the determinants of what has to be taught and learned is itself a manifestation of their perception of their professional role in the Saudi education system. They see themselves largely as the agents for the transmission of information and knowledge specified in official curricula (and the approved textbooks). This role perception is part of the traditional ‘culture’ of education in the Saudi education system and widely fostered in teachers’ education programmes. A more liberal function of teachers as ‘curriculum interpreters’ and a semi-autonomous role for teachers in which they can act as curriculum developers in the context of their own teaching, have yet to be developed. This is one of the ways in which teachers’ professional advancement should proceed in future.

7.2.4. CONSTRAINTS ON THE CONDUCT AND DEVELOPMENT BY TEACHERS OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

Information sought from the teachers about factors influencing their conduct of religious education programmes, revealed that - on the whole - these factors were constraints. It emerged particularly strongly that the ‘external control’ of the curriculum exercised by the Saudi education authorities and the regulations under which schools have to operate, leave teachers with little scope to engage actively and innovatively in the design and development of their own curricula for religious

education. Teachers felt duty-bound to ‘deliver’ the curriculum prescribed by the authorities without departing from it. The fact that the textbooks themselves reflect the prescribed curriculum is a most plausible explanation for the extensively ‘textbook-bound’ conduct of the religious education programmes and the relative absence in them of innovative and progressive approaches and materials.

This pressure upon teachers to deliver the prescribed mandatory religious education curriculum also manifested itself in a range of open-ended answers from teachers. In these, the shortage of curriculum time available to teachers to cover a huge amount of information was referred to. By implication, such time pressure would leave teachers with little opportunity to adjust the content and conduct of their religious education teaching to the interests and needs of their students.

The phenomenon of over-full curricula, externally imposed and controlled, which have a constraining effect on teachers’ professional activities is not new, of course. In England and Wales, for example it was found that many teachers were unable to deliver the full content of the National Curriculum after its introduction in 1988: it required a major review by Sir Ron Dearing in 1993 to reduce its content to a manageable level.

Both the English/Welsh experience and the response of Saudi religious education teachers to the present inquiry suggests that the external imposition of rigid curriculum demands does not necessarily lead to educational practices that are in the best interest of teachers and students alike. Since the teachers are ultimately the

implementers of curricula, their views about what is feasible and desirable need to be taken into account in arriving at a manageable curriculum.

7.2.5. TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' VIEWS CONCERNING CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS EDUCATION TEXTBOOKS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR THEIR IMPROVEMENT

As already stated, the textbook occupies a central position in the delivery and conduct of religious education in Saudi secondary schools. For the teachers, it is the main determinant of what has to be taught; for the students, it is the primary learning material. In view of this important role played by the textbook, it was considered important to survey teachers' and students' views about the content and design of the textbooks in current use and to obtain their suggestions about how the textbooks can be improved.

Comments received from both teachers and students pointed to the following aspects:

- i. More needs to be done to bring out the implications of religious education for contemporary life and problems of particular interest for, and relevance to, young people. Teachers felt that the inclusions of such issues would have a positive effect on students' attitudes towards religious education.
- ii. Students referred overtly to the desirability of including in the textbooks materials dealing with issues concerning their relationships with other persons, especially members of family and friends. In some respects, this request reflects students' expectations that religious education programmes should contribute positively to their social and personal education.

- iii. It was thought useful by both teachers and students to incorporate in the textbooks examples and exercises which would help to clarify conceptually difficult issues and serve as a basis for revision work. Students also mentioned ‘worked examples’ and summaries as potentially useful aids to their learning.

Interestingly, hardly any suggestions were made in favour of any of the topics in existing textbooks being curtailed or deleted, except for a request from some teachers that ‘repetitions’ in the materials should be eliminated. That there may be a need to reduce some of the existing materials did, however, follow from the open-ended comments made by quite a few students. In these, the view was expressed that some of the material in the current textbooks was too difficult and ‘over-demanding’ on students’ capacity to memorise information.

By and large, the foregoing comments concern the content of the textbooks, rather than their presentation. Presentational aspects also received a good deal of attention in teachers’ and students’ comments. Among them, the following requests stood out:

- iv. use of modern printing and type-setting techniques in the production of the textbooks to enhance their ‘reader-friendliness’ (and, no doubt, their ‘readability’);
- v. greater use of visual material, that is, drawings and illustrations, in textbooks to make them more attractive and more readily understandable.

In pointing to these aspects, both teachers and students were obviously influenced by their knowledge of what modern (electronic) information technology procedures can

deliver. Not surprisingly, they want to see these applied in the production of textbooks.

7.3. IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

The findings reported in this thesis provide a detailed insight into a range of facets concerning the religious education curriculum in Saudi secondary schools and its delivery, as perceived by teachers and students. Clearly, if the findings are to be of practical value in the improvement of the religious education curriculum and educational practices relating to it, their implications need to be considered and translated into recommendations for future actions. To do this, is the purpose of this section of the chapter.

Before itemising some of the modifications and changes that should be made to the current religious education programmes and practices in Saudi secondary schools, a few initial comments have to be made about potential constraints to change as they exist in the Saudi system.

The first potential constraint to change may come from the religious community itself since this may wish to adhere to the existing orientation of religious education. This, as has already been stated, is strongly focused on Islamic teachings, laws and traditions. There is no doubt that such 'conservatism' exists in the Saudi society - as, indeed, it can be found in other societies also. However, in the Saudi context, it may prove to be a major barrier to change, because of the special position held by Saudi Arabia in the Islamic world.

The second potential constraint to change may stem from the fact that, in the highly centralised Saudi education system, teachers have traditionally exerted little direct influence on curriculum decision-making. Hence, it cannot be taken for granted that the views of teachers, let alone their students, will be readily listened to by educational decision-makers and/or administrators.

There is a reasonable expectation that, in the case of the present findings and their implications, the two constraints just identified can be overcome, for the following reasons:

- i. The findings are based on a fairly large-scale study undertaken in a systematic way, rather than on anecdotal evidence. This should have the effect that they will be accorded higher credence and importance by decision-makers than might otherwise be the case.
- ii. The researcher's position as a lecturer in a University Education College and the sponsorship of the research by that university, may itself help to make decision-makers responsive to the present findings and lead them to examine their implications in a positive, constructive way.

7.3.1. IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS FOR FUTURE ACTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

In considering the possible implications of the present findings for future actions and activities to improve religious education in Saudi secondary schools, it has to be borne in mind that these actions and activities would not be undertaken by the researcher himself. Instead they would fall upon the agents and agencies that have particular

roles in, and responsibilities for, educational innovation in Saudi schools. These agencies are:

- i. the educational administrators and policy makers;
- ii. curriculum development specialists and curriculum consultants;
- iii. teachers of religious education and teacher educators.

The functions to be assumed by each of these groups to bring about a modernisation of religious education in the light of the present findings are identified in the following three subsections.

i. Implications for Educational Administrators and Policy Makers

The role of educational administrators and policy makers (including the representatives of the Islamic religion) in a process leading to the modification of the existing religious education curricula is vital: any changes to be introduced depend on appropriate policy decisions, if they are to have a significant impact. Without such decisions, little change is likely to result.

The key issues for consideration (and action) by administrators and policy makers in relation to religious education in Saudi secondary schools are as follows:

- a. A re-examination of the aims and goals of religious education is called for to achieve:
 - a recognition that issues and aspects of students' 'personal and social education' receive greater attention and emphasis than hitherto;

- a recognition on the part of students (and teachers) that religious education has important messages to convey that establish its relevance to contemporary issues and events, including those that may be regarded as ‘controversial’.
- b. A critical appraisal of the content of existing programmes should be undertaken in order to identify which aspects can be shortened, deleted and/or simplified.
- c. Recognition that existing religious education textbooks require substantial revision in order to:
- ensure that they reflect the kinds of modified aims and goals indicated under (a) above;
 - improve their reader-friendliness and their effectiveness as a major learning medium.

This should result in administrators/policy makers assuming the sponsorship for the revision of the textbooks.

ii. Implications for Curriculum Development and Curriculum Developers

Curriculum development will have to form the central component of any reform work that is to lead to the revision of existing religious education programmes. If such work is to succeed, it should involve from the outset both subject specialists and practitioners of religious education. The involvement of senior teachers is very important, because of their wide range of experience. They are therefore well qualified to identify suitable materials for students.

The function of an expert group of educators, including senior teachers, would be to examine the findings of this research and to work out in detail the consequences of the present findings for the revision of religious education programmes. In particular, the group should work out plans for:

- a. the revision and restructuring of the current religious education curricula in relation to their content and organisation;
- b. the development of new learning experiences and learning materials through which students' interest in the pursuit of religious education would be enhanced;
- c. the development of training programmes for teachers, at both the initial training and the in-service level, to promote teachers' competence in the use of a wider range of teaching approaches than is currently the case.

Following the completion of the work of the expert group, a curriculum working group should be established to address the practical aspects of the curriculum development process, on the basis of the recommendations worked out by the expert group. Among the tasks to be undertaken by the working group would be the following:

- a. The simplification and clarification of existing learning materials, including the elimination of repetitive and incoherent topics.
- b. The development of study and reading materials through which the relevance of religious education to the students' personal lives can be demonstrated.

- c. The development of novel learning experiences and activities for students, which will promote an active involvement of students in their religious education programmes and foster a higher degree of ‘students-centredness’ in these programmes.
- d. The design and development, in collaboration with film-makers, of filmed or video-recorded materials portraying religious events and issues, which can serve both as interest-generating stimulus material and as teaching material through which students’ vicarious learning is encouraged.
- e. The improvement, again in collaboration with ‘media experts’, in the design and presentation of students’ textbooks, to enhance their value and effectiveness as a ‘primary learning’ resource. The media experts should be drawn from the publishing field and be able to:
 - advise on, and contribute to, the design and layout of the textbooks to ensure that text readability and appeal are maximised;
 - contribute to the design of illustrations, charts, figures, etc., to be incorporated in the textbooks.

A further important function of the curriculum working group would be to conduct or, at least, initiate the formative evaluation of new curriculum materials to ensure that they are effective and usable in the context of normal secondary education.

iii. Implications for Teachers and Teacher Educators

The role of teachers in any curriculum reform process is a vital one because the teachers ultimately have to implement the innovations planned and worked out by curriculum developers. This means that teachers have to be familiarised with the intentions and demands of a new or revised curriculum and given the opportunity of developing the professional skills that the new or revised curriculum may require of them.

Major stress has been placed in parts of this thesis on the desirability of involving students in more active learning activities and for teachers to be able to respond more directly to their students' needs and aspirations, in the context of religious education programmes. In turn, this means that teachers have to move away from the strongly teacher-centred and textbook-bound approach that characterises so much of their present work with students.

It is fair to say that, currently, few religious education teachers in Saudi secondary schools possess a reservoir of teaching skills that would enable them to switch readily to a student-centred teaching approach involving a significant amount of 'active learning' on their students' part. Thus, teachers require some re-training before they can adopt and implement more modern teaching approaches than they have employed to date.

It is doubtful whether, at the moment, much expertise can be found among teacher educators in Saudi Arabian teacher training institutions in the adoption and use of 'student-centred' teaching approaches. This is, of course, a question for further

enquiry. However, if the foregoing supposition is correct, a suitable strategy for the re-orientation of teachers towards new teaching approaches might be to:

- a. expose teachers themselves to workgroups in which they have an opportunity of examining and practising alternative teaching approaches; this would develop their familiarity with such approaches and - so one would hope - build up their confidence to use them;
- b. form working syndicates of teachers from neighbouring schools in different districts, so that they can support one another in the implementation of new teaching methods and the use of new teaching resources; a particularly valuable feature of such syndicates would be that teachers could share their experiences and so learn from each other.

It is self-evident that the curriculum developers and teacher educators must support these activities if curriculum change in religious education is to be successfully accomplished.

Thus, although the research undertaken for, and described in, this thesis represents an 'end' in its own right, it can and - so the researcher hopes - will form the starting point of a genuine reform movement that will lead to the improvement of religious education in Saudi secondary schools. However, it is recognised that this improvement can only be achieved if the various agencies concerned with religious education at secondary school level collaborate in a purposeful and effective manner. If this comes about, it will constitute a most welcome reward for the effort that went into the work described here.