Muslim Schooling Patterns in the New South Africa

emographic profiles in the South African schooling system have been changing rapidly over the last few years subsequent to the de-racialisation of public life. New patterns of school interaction have been established. While the quest for quality education has undergirded these new patterns, factors such as the preservation of community identity have also played a role. Moreover, community schooling patterns are developing in the context of a fragile nation-building process.

This article focuses on schooling patterns that have emerged in the Muslim community over the last few years. Contrary to the popular perception of Muslims as an undifferentiated mass, their schooling patterns show a diversity of interaction with the education system. The basis of the Muslim community's diverse interaction with schooling is determined by an interplay of a number of elements which include race, class, identity and prior educational patterns. These interactions have taken place against the backdrop of the larger canvas of educational reform over the last few years in South Africa.

National educational reform

Schooling patterns that have emerged recently are directly related to the education policy environment put in place by the state. Education policy has thus far shown ambivalence between the two contesting aims of equity and growth. On the one hand, the state has shown a commitment to eradicating educational inequality through its insistence on an equity-driven policy environment. On the other hand, the achievement of equity is constrained by the cautionary discourse of economic growth which argues that nations ought to cut their educational budgets if they want to grow and become part of the global political economy. Thus, policy ambivalence has manifested because the equalisation of education is taking place within the limits of a financially austere budgetary framework.

A number of reform policies have been adopted and are now being enacted. These policies have been constructing and in many cases entrenching a public schooling system which provides the backdrop for community interaction. The School Act adopted in 1996 is the most important piece of legislation currently determining school attendance pat-

terns. It permits a financial arrangement in which parental fees play a crucial role in the quality of schooling, and this has led to the entrenchment of a dual schooling pattern.

Middle-class parents who can afford to pay fees are opting to send their children to former white schools in search of quality education. The children of working-class parents, who are unable to contribute to schools financially, continue to attend low-quality schools in their neighbourhoods. Ironically, the teacher rationalisation process which purported to be aimed at achieving equity across the system, has led to the further deterioration of coloured schooling in the Western Cape.

A minority of South African children have an internationally competitive quality education which guarantees exposure to a sophisticated curriculum that will enable them to work in service and information industries. Working-class children, by contrast, are exposed to low-quality education in which the allure of a youth subculture is often more powerful than the school. It is in this context that community schools, such as the recently established Muslim schools on the Cape Flats, attempt to engender a qualitative educational culture by employing an identity discourse to counter the "moral corruption" that characterises township life.

Muslims and the Model C experience

Muslim attendance at former Model C white schools has increased exponentially over the last five years and particularly after the 1994 election. While some of these children now live in the former white neighbourhoods in which these schools are located, most Muslim children travel more than five kilometres to attend these schools. They come from lower middle-class and middle-class families who are able to afford the school fees and travelling costs necessary to gain access. These families realise the value of a quality education in positioning their children advantageously for later life.

Muslim children at these schools come under enormous pressure to assimilate into the dominant liberal culture. They are exposed to the Eurocentric cultural world of their white counterparts. While multi-cultural in orientation, offering multi-faith religious education, for example, their curriculum supports secular values and is disposed towards engendering a liberal detachment from developmental concerns.

Muslim children, together with other black children at these schools, also suffer subtle forms of racism. In such an environment, they have difficulty in finding acceptability as full members of the dominant school culture. Moreover, their attendance at these schools results in alienation from their own cultural world. This double alienation has profound implications for issues of identity.

However, Muslim children at Model C schools are not simply victims of the hegemonic liberal cul-

ture. They are showing tenacity in the way they confront the homogenising culture of the schools. One example is offered by Muslim boys at one of the Cape's top Southern Suburbs boys' schools who formed themselves into a protection unit after being physically attacked by white boys at the school. Collectively they come to the aid of individuals who are attacked and they target the perpetrators for physical retribution. In an interview with me they used concepts such as "*jihād*", "*qitāl*" (fighting) and "*ummah*" to justify taking action to protect their right to be at the school and to command respect.

The establishment of Muslim Student Associations (MSA) at many Model C schools is another example of Muslim students' resistance to cultural domination. Historically, the MSA operated in coloured and Indian schools during the 1970s and 1980s. They supported a non-racial discourse in their opposition to apartheid. The MSA at Model C schools, however, were established as a means for nurturing religious identity and an organisational vehicle for empowering Muslim students to interact with the dominant culture at their schools. The MSA provide students with a sense of place and significance under circumstances in which they are at risk of being usurped culturally. Muslim students have been able, through the MSA, to lay claim to recognition and respect that they might have struggled to claim as individuals.

Thus, while the ability to access Model C schools has enabled middle-class parents to secure quality education for their children, such access has also exposed their children to a complex cultural context. Muslims and other black children are victims of daily cultural and racial insensitivity which prevents them from becoming part of the dominant culture unless they shed their own cultural identity. However, Muslim students have shown a willingness to engage this domination by appropriating their own religious symbols which allow them to stake a claim to equal recognition and worth in Model C schools.

The rise of Muslim community schools on the Cape Flats

Three Muslim high schools have been established on the Cape Flats over the last five years. A fourth, primary school, was established by means of a partnership between Egypt's Al-Azhar university and the Muslim Judicial Council, the main theological body in the Western Cape. These schools are funded through a combination of parental fees (a nominal amount), community fund-raising and donor money from the business sector. The schools were established with the primary aim of providing an Islam-centred religious and moral education. They follow the core state curriculum and are registered with the Western Cape Education Department. They provide ancillary subjects in Islamic Studies,

Arabic and Islamic law (fiqh).

The location of the schools on the Cape Flats is indicative of their broader purpose and social function. They are found in largely impoverished working-class environments where a perception of the diminishing worth of public schools is becoming widespread. These township public schools suffer from what has nebulously been termed a "lack of a culture of learning". Youth subculture, influenced by a violent gang underworld and the general instability of township life, have a detrimental effect on the functioning of such schools. A real and perceived collapse in morality amongst young people has become a perpetual lament from religious structures. The Muslim community school steps into this breach with the promise of a morally sound educational programme based on strong religious principles.

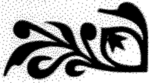
Parents send their children to these schools to give them access to an education that is intended to generate moral and religious propriety. Parents hope that this will act as a bulwark against the corrupting culture that is pervasive in township life. However, these children are caught between the moral culture of the Muslim community school and the prevailing norms of their townships. They often flit between two identities: the narrow one of the school during school hours and a less constrained leisure identity over the weekend. While some do this skilfully, most children are not adept at marshalling a coherent identity to govern their school and extra-curricular lives. The success of Muslim community schools will depend on their willingness and ability to provide a less constricting and adaptive framework in terms of which their students can develop a coherent identity to function with moral propriety and flexibility in township life.

Muslim mission primary schools

The first Muslim mission primary school in Cape Town was established in 1913. Although these schools receive a state grant that pays for their teachers' wages, all were built and are sustained by the community. All consumable items are paid for by community fund-raising. They follow a state syllabus and provide basic Islamic Studies.

They were established in the first half of the twentieth century as counterparts to the Christian missionary schools that sprang up in coloured areas. As Cape Muslims' first contact with formal schooling, Muslim primary schools serve as an instrument of modernisation and adaptation to changing Cape Town. These schools are different from the Muslim community schools in that they have always been firmly located in the mainstream bureaucratic structures of government.

They are attracting many children from the surrounding working-class neighbourhoods, and many pupils are transported daily from all over the Cape Flats. As in the case



of Muslim community high schools, parents send their children to these schools in quest for a religious and moral education. Parents also tap into a rich Cape Muslim identity and sense of community cultivated by these schools over a few decades. They have a moral culture that is much less stringent but no less visible than at the community high schools, enabling their students to relate more coherently to their extra-curricular cultural world.

However, these schools have come under pressure to improve their quality in the face of competition from Model C schools, to which they have lost many of their best students. Moreover, the teaching culture is under the same threat of erosion that other public schools are experiencing. Teacher rationalisation and multiple layers of educational change in ill-prepared contexts have a disorientating effect on school learning programmes.

Thus, the Muslim primary schools face the challenge of improving their educational quality and so affording an equitable learning experience for their students. While their problems are not dissimilar to those of other working-class schools, they have a supportive community and alumni. If properly mobilised, financial and infrastructural support from these sources would enable Muslim primary schools to flourish in the new context.

Conclusion

Muslim patterns of schooling show a diversity which belies their homogenous popular image. The different Muslim responses are the result of an interplay of racial, class, cultural and historical factors which are mediated in a material reality. The common denominator is the role played by religious and cultural considerations in shaping Muslim responses and interactions. Lack of space has prevented a focus in this article on interactions with schooling among Muslim children who attend working-class secular schools or the many "cram colleges" that have sprung up in the Cape.