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**Values, schools and the market: reflections on
possible opportunities and dilemmas**

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*Keeping the company of rulers and the powerful is like the darkness of the night of Yalda.
How long will you wait at the door of the unfair people of the world waiting for the master to step
out?* (Hafiz, fourteenth century Persian poet)

This two part paper explores some implications of the revival of interest in character education in the UK and beyond (Arthur, 2005; Marshall et al, 2011). The first part proposes that the focus on character education and moral education more generally provides an opportunity to evolve ‘overlapping consensus’ among school systems rooted in different religious and philosophical traditions. This possibility is illustrated through the consideration of moral courage as an example of an ideal around which such consensus may be evolved. Part two discusses another implication of this revival which is the need to take into account the power of economic system to mediate schools’ aim of promoting moral and character education.

Part I

Recent weeks have seen a Pakistani teenager, Malala Yousufzai, become famous in many parts of the world, including the UK where she was treated for a gun-shot injury. On October 9, Malala was shot in the head and neck because of her stance on education, particularly girls’ education, against the coercive forces of religious extremists whose understanding of Islam required closure of schools and denial of education to girls. The public response to Malala, though arguably shaped partly by media, is a testimony to the power of moral courage to touch sentiments and imagination across cultures. The views Malala held about girls’ education, gender equality, emancipator power of knowledge and opposition to religious extremism, are widely shared in her society. It was not her thoughts on these matters but her act, the display of moral courage, her strength to speak out, that ultimately was the difference between her (and others like her)¹ and the silent majority who also share her vision, reasoning and concepts.

Malala’s story is part of a larger narrative of moral courage that we have seen across the world in recent years – Aung San Suu Kyi, the Arab Spring, the lawyers’ movement in Pakistan, corporate and military whistleblowers, and the Wiki leaks, among others. Each of these were “lonely acts” (Miller, 2000) in the sense that they had different moral inspiration, reasoning, circumstances and adversaries. Yet they seem to share a common thread which in some ways universalises them and justifies their being grouped together.

Pianalto (2012) observes a close link between moral courage and integrity which implies that “one’s own well-being cannot be fully separated from one’s conviction and sense of moral responsibility” (p. 169). It thus seems that the acts entailing moral courage demonstrate the presence of various elements comprising of what it means to be a moral person. If morality is ultimately a practice, acts of moral courage bring together its various components: presence and recognition of a moral situation, moral choice, behaviour, individuality and fear (Miller, 2005). It is for this reason that our admiration is highest for those who pass the test of character by acting with moral courage and in the process risking something valuable.² To the extent moral courage brings together many other traits of a moral person, it is possible to advance the fostering moral courage as a very suitable aim of moral and character education in schools, families and communities.

Though it is tempting to dwell into the pedagogical question of developing moral courage, this is not the aim of this short paper. A longer paper for another project I am currently working on deals with it. There Aristotelian approach to moral courage through habituation and education and the writings of selected Muslim scholars will provide the springboard for reflection upon the pedagogical approaches to nurturing moral courage. Let me add that in Muslim context, the idea of moral courage is integrally connected with opposition to power and extravagances of life and is often expressed in poetic and other literary modes.

More relevant for this paper is a possible educational implication of the widespread presence and approval of the acts of moral courage. In the British context where there are several school systems rooted in a variety of theoretical and historical traditions, there is a need for ideas and practices that can help evolve a shared sense of moral education, a kind of ‘overlapping consensus’ in Rawlsian sense, among different school systems. The idea of ‘overlapping consensus’ is useful because it recognises that similar moral ideas and practices may have

¹ For example, Hina Khan, a 17 year old school girl from Swat, is another campaigner for women’s right education who has received threats for her activism.

² Though beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to ask, ‘what makes an act morally courageous?’ In the case of suicide bombings, for example, is the bomber also showing moral courage, for at-least in some cases they too may act in line with their beliefs? This leads to the distinction between physical and moral courage. Extremists do stand up for their values and in this sense they show courage, but it is more suitable to see it as physical courage.

different historical and theoretical sources. Thus, the Islamic, the Catholic and the secular-liberal educational settings may draw their motivation from their respective traditions but they may be able to evolve a consensus around a set of moral values. The example of moral courage shows the possibility of finding such values. It is in this sense that the current emphasis on character education provides a distinctive opportunity to evolve an 'overlapping consensus' among schools of different philosophical orientations in Britain.

Part II³

This part deals with another implication of the revival of interest in character education. It pertains to a significant challenge to the schools that take moral education seriously. Recent decades have witnessed a strong alignment between education and economics. Literature on moral education rarely investigates the dilemmas and challenges thrown up by this alignment. Drawing upon my research below I try to show how schools face a tough dilemma as they seek to balance a multiple sets of moral values and expectations. My research was on schools with Muslim religious character but the issues identified are likely to have a wider implication.

One of the important arguments put forward for the success of faith schools is that they show above average academic results. Though the claim is contended and is often seen as the result of an explicit or implicit selection process (Schagen and Schagen 2005), the perception is there and many faith schools have a long waiting list, partly for this reason. At the same time, faith schools promise moral and character education as their distinctive contribution. These schools look at themselves "through a moral lens and see how virtually everything that goes on in school affects the values and character of students" (Lickona, 1996). These twin goals – of academic excellence and promoting Islamic values - can be found in the mission statement and objectives of many faith schools. Thus, for example, Al-Kheir school in Croydon has a vision to "Achieve excellence in education for our students within a cultivating, caring and secure Islamic environment".⁴ Similar statements can be found for many other schools as well.

During my conversations with school teachers and management it emerged that the Islamic ideal and environment was often understood as a spiritual, non-materialistic attitude leading to an ethical life guided by a concern for salvation in the hereafter which was seen as far more important than material life in this world. The interviewees often quoted passages from the Quran (Chapter 57, verse 20, for example)⁵ or anecdotes from the life of the Prophet Muhammad or Sufi sages to make this point. One teacher at a London based Muslim school noted:

So we have to help our children transcend these materialist, capitalist orientations. So they need to learn that money, car, football game, wealth and all that comes with it is transitory and secondary and must be seen as the means and never as the end.

For the teachers and management the notion of educational excellence often translated into academic grades. Thus, for example, one head teacher noted that her school has been achieving "an outstanding pass rate for grades A* - C". Clearly, the grades are not an end in themselves. They are passport to prosperity in the economic system, 'materialist, capitalist orientation'.

And therein lies a tension.

An important message of Islam and many other religions seems to be anti-materialism, "teleological devaluation of wealth", as noted by Schmidt (1983). This attitude is very different from that we find in our economic system, which thrives on the desire to possess, consume and aggrandize - the "money culture," as John Hull calls it (1995). The Islamic moral attitude that schools wish to promote is in tension with the morality of capitalism (at least of the mode that has come to dominate economics in recent decades).

At least some teachers were aware of this tension. The same teacher whose words were quoted above noted:

I realize there is certain irony in what I am saying. And this is the complaint I always have. Why is it that so many Muslims have to go into fields that sustain the same system we criticize (they become lawyers, bankers, etc.)? And I think, there is something that has gone wrong here and I am not sure that Muslim schools are able to make any difference. They are caught between societal and parental expectations and their aims.

³ This part of the paper draws upon my doctoral research and a recent paper where the issue has been discussed in greater detail. See: Panjwani (2012).

⁴ Available at: <http://www.alkhairschool.org.uk/Default>. Accessed on November 15, 2012.

⁵ Translation: *Know that the life of this world is but amusement and diversion and adornment and boasting to one another and competition in increase of wealth and children – it like the plant growth resulting from rain which pleases the tillers; then it dries and you see it turned yellow; then it becomes [scattered] debris. And in the Hereafter is severe punishment and forgiveness from Allah and approval. And what is the worldly life except the enjoyment of delusion.*

How do Muslim schools reconcile this tension? Without a conscious realisation and theoretical reflections, Muslim schools seem to have adopted 'prosperity theology' (Jackson, 1987) which sees wealth and material success as a sign of God's approval and pleasure. This resolves the tension in favour of materialism.

Conclusion

The paper draws attention to two inter-related implications of promoting moral and character education in schools. On the one hand, current interest in this sphere provides a distinctive opportunity to evolve an 'overlapping consensus' of values among schools of different theoretical orientations in Britain. We considered the example of moral courage as a possible shared moral aim. On the other hand, schools seeking to promote moral and character education face a tough dilemma as they are expected to prepare children for values that are often incongruent. The discussion on moral and character education needs to take account of this larger economic context which retains a powerful impact on schools.

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