MUSLIM PUPILS, CHILDREN'S FICTION AND PERSONAL UNDERSTANDING

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Stories for children are written for many reasons, not least for fame and fortune. Stories are a widespread if problematic pedagogical tool. Authors express their values, often more materialistic than spiritual, the more extreme and bizarre the more saleable. Magic, witchcraft and wizardry have now almost become essential features. Natural and supernatural collide without explanation, whether in Alan Garner's folklore inspired stories (including *The Owl Service*), Robin Jarvis's *The Whitby Witches* or the record-breaking Harry Potter stories of J. K. Rowling. Although it is true that characters have moral qualities (courage, kindness and so on), their challenges and experiences are not of the real world. Our question in this paper is how stories can be written and used to assist children's personal understanding, focusing particularly on Muslim children.

We particularly discuss stories written by the authors, for educational purposes. Sample stories are available on-line [1]. One of us, a Muslim storyteller, is based in the USA and Canada, the other in Britain. In both places, stories are routinely used by teachers in schools to entertain, to provide examples of literature, and to raise serious points which can be further discussed. All stories can be sources for discussion, but some have a richer potential than others, having included significant issues in their storylines. Some, for example dealing with sexual issues, may be deemed inappropriate for Muslim pupils (Reynolds, 2007).

According to the Qur'an, righteousness is the most honourable quality a person can have.

> "O mankind! We created you … and made you into nations and tribes that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of God is (he who is) the most righteous of you". (Qur'an 49:13)

The Qur'an contains stories of messengers, virtuous and non-virtuous people whose purpose is to admonish, encourage, provide explanation and give an analogy. In the words of the Qur'an (12:111):

> "There is, in their stories, instruction for men endued with understanding. It is not a tale invented, but a confirmation of what went before it - a detailed exposition of all things, and a guide and a mercy to any such as believe."

Al Attas emphasised (1979: 104) the connection between education and righteousness:

> "The purpose of Islamic education is not to cram the pupil's head with facts but to prepare them for a life of purity and sincerity. This total commitment to character-building based on the ideals of Islamic ethics is the highest goal of Islamic education."

Character formation is thus viewed as the highest goal of Islamic education. Education for moral responsibility is a common feature of education policies. Educational guidelines in Ontario, Canada (2008: 4-6) include:

> "The principles and attributes of character development are universal, based in equity and transcend differences as well as other demographic factors. Empathy for others and respect for the dignity of all persons are essential characteristics of an inclusive society."

This article advances the cause of reading and writing stories as a method in which children can develop their social and moral character.

In the Multicultural Act of Canada (3.1), the policy of the Government of Canada is to

- recognise and promote the understanding that multiculturalism reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society and acknowledges the

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freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage; and

- foster the recognition and appreciation of the diverse cultures of Canadian society and promote the reflection and the evolving expressions of those cultures.

The same is true of British educational policy. One of us (Fawzia) was Principal of an Islamic school in Canada at which language and literacy levels were low, mainly because the kindergarten staff were poorly qualified. It came to her attention, at a Book Party for which children wrote stories and produced books of their own, that there were no Aminahs and Abdullahs, Musabs, and Zaynabs in the stories. Every story was set in a monoculture, using names of English descent such as Paul and Karen, Lisa and Carl. No character had a Muslim name, or a Jewish name, or a French name (French was taught at the school as this is mandatory in Canada), no Chinese name and no African name. This was not a class where children had been encouraged to "foster recognition" or appreciate the "diverse culture of Canadian society."

Later, in a story-writing exercise, the same could be seen. Of the eighty stories, only three stories included Muslim names, and these were autobiographical. In all fictional stories, students gave their characters English names. Yet this school only employed Muslim staff, and only one pupil, whose parents had converted to Islam, had a European name. Some students included a teacher character in their stories, also given English names. All teachers at the school actually had Muslim names or Arab names. Students gave reference to certain places, food, activities within their stories, however no child, except one, selected a place that is recognised by Muslims. No child spoke about a mosque, or Muslim country, about fasting or Ramadan, no one mentioned Eid, no reference was made about halal or haram, about praying, about giving zakat. After reading the stories, one could not tell that these stories were written by Muslim children, some of whom had only ever attended Islamic schools their entire lives. There was a

very obvious disconnect. These children were not visible in their own writing. Their written world was exclusively Anglocentric. This was strange because Canada is a country that promotes, projects, and promulgates multiculturalism in its curriculum, society and government.

One solution was to use Muslim names in popular stories. *Cinderella: An Islamic Tale* published by the Islamic Foundation (Gilani-Williams, 2010), is an adaptation of the popular European story in which Cinderella is a Muslim, reads Qur'an, wears hijaab, offers salah, fasts and will not dance with men who are not her husband. This Cinderella does not conflict with Islamic values. Children place themselves in the shoes of the characters they read about: Muslim children need to feel visible and their value system to be visible. *Little Red Riding Hood* was also adapted for young Muslim children (see footnote 1), putting in words like "Asalaamu alaikum, Mashallah, and Alhamdulilah, words spoken on a daily basis by Muslims. The children were excited and stood up to see the words in print.

Seven Stories [2] is a children's literature institute located in Newcastle, England. Their axiom is, "Some people say there are only seven stories in the world but a thousand different ways of telling them." Islamic school teachers should therefore be encouraged to adapt popular stories. Muslim children, like any other child, needs to have a positive identity. Muslim children attending state schools have had to grapple with teasing, name calling and attitude. Shackled by demeaning labels, Muslim children feel marginalized from wider society. One eight year old thought that Muslims could not also be Canadians.

Teachers can model to children how to write about their culture and daily life in stories. For example:

> "I looked at my watch, it would be time for Maghreb soon, but we knew we had to find the old man with a limp. Yusuf sneezed loudly, "Yarhamuk Allah," I said. Yusuf muttered a reply. Suddenly he slipped

and fell back, his kufi fell over his eyes. He winced as he sat up, "Can you smell that?" he asked, "Samosas and I'm fasting."

In the above passage reference is given to Islamic practice, to common Islamic phrases, to cultural clothing and food. Evans notes that ideology is taught through picture/story books:

"consciously or unconsciously , overtly or covertly, picture books provide through the combination of images and words, themes and ideas, texts and subtexts, a representation not only of how the world is but also of how it ought to be." (Evans, 1998: 5)

Non-Muslim readers also benefit from stories which introduce them to multicultural diversity. It is now common to read about Jewish, Chinese and African-American characters. Naidoo points out that, "Literature is political and one's choice of literature is political, although the reader may of course ignore, or simply not see, the meanings that are there" (Naidoo, 1992: 16). Clough and Corbett comment (2000: 18): "if inclusion is essentially about maximising participation in community and culture, then in schools the medium for this is the curriculum". Islam needs to be seen as an integral part of this diversity, not 'other'.

A British Muslim, Maurice Irfan Cole (2010), argued, in the Association of Muslim Schools (UK) conference on citizenship, that Muslim children need to see themselves as Muslim and British. His project focuses on moral characteristics. Reading stories and writing stories are both tools with which children can develop into contributing individuals whose social and moral anchors are Islamic and complement American, British and Canadian character education.

The other author (Stephen) produced stories for a primary school project in 2008 on personal and social development in a mixed inner-city school. The project tried to raise levels of personal insight and understanding about behaviour and relationships. The title was *Wolf and Friends*, Wolf being a well-natured dog belonging to Josh, the main boy character. The setting is

that of the schools, with the main characters aged 9-10, the same as the class. Josh is a new boy in school, having moved out of London. Of African Caribbean origin he is befriended by a multicultural group of children through whose eyes the story is told, including Jazwinder (Jaz) (a Sikh), Assia (a Muslim), Sophie (white British/Irish) and others. Josh gains enemies, as he hates injustice and defends the weak, which sometimes means standing up to bullies. The social relationships of the children in school are explored, with an emphasis on the choices they have to make, and attitudes to others they have. Stories are introductions to a new world for children. It is an imaginary world, but has been created as true to life rather than fantastical as in the Harry Potter sense. As well as reading the stories, they can be discussed to see whether the scenarios that the children create are similar to or different from the endings of the stories. The children themselves can help to build up the alternative world of the story, add new scenes and be asked to predict what the characters might do next.

This paper examines the story of Jake, interlinked with that of Assia, and her siblings Nadia and Mustafa (see footnote 1). The experiences of real children have fed into the characterisation and plots, although all characters are fictional. Jake is a boy who has not experienced consistent parenting. His father is in and out of prison, beats his wife when he is home, who finds it hard to cope. Jake is angry inside, and has a group of friends who feed on his anger and anti-social behaviour. He bullies people around him, especially the weak, but meets in Josh a fellow pupil who will not put up with his bad behaviour. He reaches a personal crisis when his mother is ill and he is looked after by his grandparents. A new friendship with Josh after initial sparring helps him to build a new life. It is realistic in the sense Jake is generally based on a real child, albeit made unrecognisable by being translated into fiction.

Jake is tormented by his former friends who are annoyed that he has changed. Their teasing and insults tempt him to fight back and he has to

learn restraint. He finds that his new friends are supportive and genuine, whilst his former friends are unpleasant and selfish. Jake and Josh intervene when a group of new pupils, a Muslim family, are bullied by Al, the new gang leader who has taken over from Jake. Details of their country of origin (Pakistan), language (Urdu) dress and food are included. This makes the story personal and relevant to Muslim children, and also gives children of other backgrounds a better understanding. In later chapters, the Qur'an, fasting, prayer and the mosque are introduced so that young readers gain some familiarity with Islam and empathy with this Muslim family.

Stories have a narrator and an author – each have a voice, and it may indeed be the same voice, if the author and narrator coincide. It may be tempting for the author to preach or guide readers to think X and not Y. In a sense this is inevitable: an author is more likely to promote decency and morality rather than advocating violence and hatred. The Wolf stories use the child characters as multiple overt narrators which again allows diversity to be built in.

In terms of personal understanding, the story encourages self reflection and suggests strategies that children can themselves use. Jake's grandfather uses five 'why's to get Jake to explain his problem. Every answer produces another why until he has come to the root of his problem. His grandfather becomes a 'significant adult' after a fishing trip, and Sophie advises him, *'Talk to your Granddad in your head, like I do to my Aunty Helen'*. This offers a calming device, a way of seeing a situation from the viewpoint of a trusted other. Jake learns to value solitude through an enforced stay in a nearby wood where he can observe wildlife from close up.

Assia in the story is from a cultural minority in a state school, as a Muslim and as different, 'other', a potential target for bullying. The story covers possible scenarios when bullying takes place, and suggests to all readers that they have a role in protecting and befriending the bullied. This explores

issues of genuine supportive friendship – being loved for oneself unconditionally – as opposed to being exploited by others for ulterior motives. The conversations between the various children in the story discuss character, values and morality. This is to help them work out for themselves issues of what sort of person they wish to become, rather than being subject to adults telling them "You must do this and you must not do that…". The group, like any city classroom, has Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and others allowing breadth and diversity in their consideration of what is right and wrong. Since this is also true of many urban schools in Britain, it should encourage dialogue between cultures.

In conclusion, writing stories for educational purposes can bring to life for children the life experiences which they encounter, the decisions and choices they have to make, and the responses they make to others around them. Instead of preaching, they can encourage discussion, role-play and story-writing which can make the nature of community and citizenship real to them.

Footnotes
1. https://sites.google.com/site/fawziaandstephenforalmas
2. http://www.sevenstories.org.uk

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