Int Rev Educ (2017) 63:153–167
DOI 10.1007/s11159-017-9632-7

ORIGINAL PAPER

Building peace education in the Islamic educational context

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Published online: 22 March 2017

Abstract Following the events of 9/11, many misconceptions entered the policy-making platform with regard to the need for education reforms in the Muslim world. Based upon Western cultural and societal norms and increased scepticism of the role of religion in violence, these assumptions have triggered a strong wave of calls for a top-down approach to reform formal state schools in predominantly Muslim countries, These calls often meet with resistance at national and community levels. This article seeks to examine these misconceptions and investigate why educational reform efforts through top-down frameworks which are especially motivated by countering violent extremism or terrorism have had only limited success. Many major international intergovernmental organisations, non-governmental organisations and governments have invested time and effort into education measures aiming to build peace and coexistence in Muslim countries, but they have been unable to build a relationship of trust with community leaders and school authorities. The authors argue that the main reason for defiance is reformers' failure to closely examine the cultural context of their chosen setting and work with existing tools and local institutions. Illustrating their point with a case study of an intervention carried out in informal Qur'anic schools in Niger, West Africa, the authors offer an alternative method which fosters changes from within. They argue that this model has a better chance of sustainability and could thus be used as the basis for future interventions.

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Keywords Peace education · Education reform · Qur'anic schools · Islamic education · Pluralism · Co-existence · Teacher training

Résumé Construire l'éducation à la paix dans le monde islamique – Après les événements du 11 Septembre, de nombreuses idées fausses portant sur le besoin de réformer l'éducation dans le monde musulman ont gagné l'espace d'élaboration des politiques. Fondées sur les normes culturelles et sociétales de l'Occident et sur un scepticisme accru à l'égard du rôle joué par la religion dans la violence, ces thèses ont déclenché une déferlante d'appels à une approche descendante pour réformer les écoles publiques formelles dans les pays à majorité musulmane. Aux niveaux national et communautaire, ces appels se sont souvent heurtés à des résistances. Le présent article vise à examiner ces idées fausses et à enquêter sur la raison pour laquelle les efforts de réforme de l'éducation selon des approches descendantes, ayant pour objectif principal la lutte contre l'extrémisme violent (LVE) ou le terrorisme, n'ont eu qu'un succès limité. De nombreux gouvernements, grandes organisations internationales intergouvernementales et organisations non gouvernementales ont investi du temps et des efforts dans des mesures d'éducation visant à construire la paix et la coexistence dans les pays musulmans, mais ils ont été incapables de bâtir une relation de confiance avec les dirigeants communautaires et les autorités scolaires. Les auteurs soutiennent que la principale raison de cette défiance est l'échec des réformateurs à examiner de près le contexte culturel d'un endroit donné, et à travailler avec les institutions locales et les outils existants. Par l'étude d'une intervention menée dans les écoles coraniques informelles au Niger, en Afrique occidentale, les auteurs offrent une autre méthode, qui favorise les changements menés de l'intérieur. Ils soutiennent que ce modèle, plus susceptible de se pérenniser, pourrait de ce fait être utilisé comme base pour de futures interventions.

Introduction

Since 9/11, there has been increasing interest in strengthening education in the Muslim world; in particular, significant emphasis has been placed on implementing curricular reforms which promote pluralism, dialogue, citizenship and co-existence as tools to fight extremism. These efforts have emerged on a large international scale from entities such as major international intergovernmental organisations (e.g. the European Union [EU], the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe [OSCE]), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and governments (e.g. the US State Department, governments such as Pakistan, Egypt, etc.). Initiatives in education coming from Western or non-Western policymakers are often subject to certain assumptions which do not hold true worldwide, namely that religion or Religious Education either does not belong in schools or is a taboo subject, and that reforms most effectively happen through a top-down approach (international or governmental initiatives). These assumptions often lead to the creation of educational reforms which focus little on or even fail to address how to support

and/or strengthen values of peace and coexistence within religious education. Moreover, since these reforms are often part of international or governmental initiatives, there is often community resistance, which is generated by the fear of a hidden agenda, Western imposition, and/or losing local culture and values.

What these assumptions have in common is, first, that reformers are in part unaware that they are dealing with different cultures and different societies which do not share the same structures and form of education which are customary in the West. Second, these misconceptions assume the primacy of governments, nation-wide governmental regulation of education and, thus, that reforms can only be implemented from above.[1] Third, in most cases there is the value judgement that Western educational systems and approaches are superior and more relevant to the rest of the world, regardless of the local context. Such policies fail to look at the reality of the situation in Muslim countries and overlook the possibility of working with existing institutions which do not fit the definition of formal state schools.

Before embarking on any intervention, it is therefore necessary to consider the cultural context, beginning with a look at the landscape of formal and informal education in Muslim countries,[2] specifically the existence of Qur'anic schools (QSs) and their social and cultural functions. This kind of analysis is needed as a first step in understanding the dynamics and implications of intervention in any formal or informal education system.

An intervention can only be developed once the context has been thoroughly examined and assessed, a strategy which we will illustrate in our case study further down in this article. Although the details and the exact framework will differ on a case-by-case basis, we hope that our example can serve as a model for similar interventions elsewhere. The case study reports on an intervention for educational reform within QSs in West Africa which was carried out by the Salam Institute for Peace and Justice, a small NGO which creates educational materials and conducts trainings on interfaith dialogue and interreligious peacebuilding, especially in Islamic contexts.[3] This specific intervention, performed in the region of Zinder in Niger with the aim of introducing and strengthening peace values within Islam in QS curricula, was generally well-received and succeeded in gaining the support of several QSs and their teachers. The methodology, the project design and the valuable lessons learned throughout the project and its follow-up may serve as an example and foundation for future projects planned by other NGOs, national and international entities (Abu-Nimer et al. 2016).

[1] International education reform efforts have to rely on government buy-ins to be able to implement reforms, while national reforms are implemented by education ministries.

[2] We acknowledge that it is, in fact, necessary to look in even more depth at *specific local contexts* on a much smaller level than the national one, given that the situation, customs, culture and conditions vary drastically from one region to the next. This applies to Muslim communities not only in West African countries, but also on other continents. However, due to the limitations of an article, this contribution can only scratch the surface by looking at Muslim countries in general, and, in the case study, at one community in Zinder, Niger in particular.

[3] For more information, see www.salaminstitute.org [accessed 7 February 2017].

Education in the Islamic world

While Religion classes – or Ethics as an alternative – are often found in primary and secondary schools in many European countries, in most cases these classes are optional, and in countries where they are mandatory, students usually attend faith-specific classes where they study their own respective religion. Despite the existence of these courses, varied types of secular education remain the norm in regular formal schools in the Western world (Stepan 2010).[4] In contrast to secular Western states like the United States (US), Canada and France, education in the Islamic world includes religious education as an *integral* part of a student's formal education. As in the Western world, formal education is provided by the state and must adhere to national standards. While state-funded schools are prevalent within urban areas, and accessibility has spread to more remote areas, formal schooling is still not always available to all members of the population, especially in countries like Niger and Chad.

In regions within Muslim countries where no formal education is available, Qur'anic Schools (QSs) often serve as the only educational institutions available to children. In addition, in some settings, even when formal education is available, QSs offer an affordable, alternative route to formal education (Abu-Nimer et al. 2016). In some cases, students attend formal school during the week and QS in the afternoon and/or at weekends to complete their Islamic education (ibid.). QSs have a long tradition in Muslim countries and regions, which, in most cases, dates back centuries; QSs are therefore often held in high esteem as institutions whose purpose extends beyond teaching basic education, such as literacy and numeracy, to providing a moral foundation for their students later life.

It is important to recognise that QSs have been part of the fabric of Muslim societies for centuries (Riaz 2008). Records of the establishment of the first QSs in the form of *madrasas* [Arabic for schools[5]; from *darasa*, to study] go back to the 11th century (Anzar 2003, p. 3). In some areas, such as West Africa, QSs were possibly the first form of organised education which the populations were exposed to (Anzar 2003). Within Muslim societies, the function of these schools is not limited simply to providing literacy and faith education to less-developed, low-income and more remote areas. Parents whose children attend these schools often feel that QSs "instill values … indispensable to living successful and virtuous lives" while also providing "an educational foundation upon which children can facilitate further learning" (Soni 2013). Teachers in QSs and the schools themselves are often highly respected in their communities.

[4] Alfred Stepan (2010) argues there are three varieties of secularism in Western States: (1)"separatist", for example in France, which posits a complete separation of church and state; (2) "established religion", for example in Denmark, where the constitution includes one state religion (Lutheranism) and religious education is a compulsory subject in the national formal school curriculum; and (3) "positive accommodation", exemplified for example in Germany, where many state-run schools offer faith-specific religious education. However, in general, even in those Western states which offer religious education in public schools, denominational schools are private schools which must follow a state-approved curriculum.

[5] In the Muslim world, the term *madrasa* refers to Islamic schools.

Despite the deeply ingrained nature of QSs in many Muslim societies, they have fallen under the scrutiny of policymakers and been accused of being manufactures of exclusion, intolerance, extremism and even violence in the name of religion. Adversity towards QSs has particularly gained ground with pointed examples of Taliban or Al-Qaeda operatives having been educated in such institutions in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Anzar 2003). Not all concerns focus on national security. Some argue that QSs offer sub-standard education, hindering development and causing concern for international stakeholders involved in development (Bergen and Pandey 2006). This argument is partially rooted in the traditional methods of rote memorisation instead of student-centred learning which fosters critical thinking. Calls for reforming or strengthening educational systems in Muslim countries generally leave QSs out of the picture and focus largely on secular state schools. Thus, reforms have frequently been developed at international or governmental levels and implemented using a top-down approach.[6] However, this approach is often not well-received, and reforms resulting from such endeavours are commonly viewed with suspicion or even as a threat. The result is that such interventions face a high risk of lacking legitimacy within the communities where they are being implemented, which, in turn, raises the chances of their failure.

QSs and the context for reform

External perceptions of QSs, particularly by Western policymakers, reflect a fear that these institutions constitute a national security concern and are perceived as contributing to radicalisation and fostering sectarian violence. This concern is partially fuelled by the issue of regulation, such as in Burkina Faso, where QSs are not regulated and "their curricula [*sic*] is not harmonized with those in the public system" (Romaniuk 2015, p. 41). While Peter Romaniuk does not claim that this means that the education received in QSs promotes extremism, he does state that without regulation and standards, students educated in QSs in Burkina Faso who have completed their studies often face difficulties in finding employment and limits to future options;

> [QS graduates in Burkina Faso] face particular difficulties in the job market and sometimes have few options but to continue their studies abroad, often in the Gulf states (ibid.).

In presenting the background of QSs for a Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report to the US Congress, Middle Eastern Affairs analyst Christopher M. Blanchard states that

> some argue that a small group of radicalized madrasas, specifically located near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, promote a militant form of Islam and teach their Muslim students to fight nonbelievers and stand against what they see as the moral depravity of the West (Blanchard 2007, p. 3).

[6] For international endeavours, see for example UNESCO's Global Citizenship Education (GCE), http://en.unesco.org/gced/approach [accessed 7 February 2017].

Blanchard adds that "other observers" have other criticisms of QSs and "suggest that these schools are wholly unconcerned with religious scholarship and focused solely on teaching violence" (ibid.). Such examples advocating these views can easily be found in widely disseminated periodicals such as *Foreign Policy* (Haqqani 2002), *Newsweek* (Kuchment et al. 2002), *Middle East Policy* (Richards 2001) or *Current History* (Stern 2001). Contrasting views find ties between radicalisation and QSs less conclusive, "worrisome" at worst, and support boosting state education as a means towards countering extremism, while recognising that strengthening education and broadening access to it is not the only factor which can prevent individuals from being radicalised (USAID 2003). This includes proponents for reform of QSs (ibid.). Nevertheless, policymakers in the West still tend to lean towards improving state education, while maintaining lingering suspicions of QSs.[7]

With the acknowledgement of the esteem local communities accord QSs and their teachers and their centuries-long tradition in Muslim societies, the question arises as to whether it would not be better to work with the existing cultural norms to advance education, promote peace and consequently counter radicalisation. And while it is not true that QSs are teaching students to become terrorists, they are not necessarily equipping students well enough to deal with violent or extremist rhetoric. This is compounded with the fact that several remote regions where QSs are the main form of education are situated on the borders of conflict areas, where young people are at higher risk of coming into contact with the extremist narrative; they need to be better armed with the tools to defend themselves against this rhetoric. Thus, reforms are needed.

It is imperative to gain legitimacy from within to be able to successfully implement changes or reforms. External efforts towards educational reforms in general and efforts to counter violent extremism (CVE) in particular have been met with trepidation, and when they are implemented, suspicion still surrounds these measures among members of the population. Such reactions are neither unusual, nor are they new. Top-down approaches, used by colonial powers, often created a dichotomy of opinions in Muslim societies, causing a schism between the elite and the rest of the populace. Colonial powers attempted to replace the role of QSs with state education (Niger and Chad in West Africa are classic examples of such policies introduced by the French colonial system). These schools were with little exception open to the elite, creating a system where the elite were educated in the new colonial state schools and the poor in religious schools (Anzar 2003).[8] Moreover, "the new system of governance did not require legitimisation through religion and this was seen by Islamic scholars as a direct threat to the established code of conduct" (ibid.). Despite examples from the colonial era demonstrating the

[7] See the Implementing the 9/11 Commission Recommendations Act of 2007 (United States Congress 2007), which would require the Administration to submit an annual report on the efforts of Muslim countries to increase availability of modern state-funded education. See also Austrian Integration Minister Sebastian Kurz's push for stricter standards and the investigation of Islamic Kindergartens in 2015 (The Local 2015).

[8] Under the colonial system, these schools not only charged fees but also had admission criteria, such as giving preference to children whose parents either worked in government-related positions, were wealthy traders, businessmen or had an educated background.

effects, policymakers frequently continue to follow a similar top-down method of education reform today, without taking into consideration the need for establishing the legitimacy of these reforms.

That said, the primacy of reforming and strengthening educational systems remains a major part of global and national agendas. What is needed is a different approach towards such reform to ensure sustainability and long-lasting impact. Recently, the need to understand the local cultural context and to develop models which are more applicable to Muslim societies has also been acknowledged by governments, policymakers and education experts.[9] Alternative approaches which take into consideration cultural norms and the need for legitimacy through local acceptance have been explored and have shown positive results. In particular, the methodology used in an intervention carried out between 2009 and 2015 in Niger, the aim of which was to introduce Peace Education into QSs, proved to gain local acceptance and showed promise of sustainability (Abu-Nimer et al. 2016). The next section presents an overview of that intervention.

Peace education in QSs: a case study of Zinder in Niger, West Africa

Having established the notion that a different approach is needed to address local context, gain legitimacy by seeking local support, and work with the existing institutions in the region, we will now examine the project implemented in Niger by the Salam Institute for Peace and Justice, a small NGO already mentioned earlier in this paper. Our aim is to illustrate our point that the experience gathered from this project could serve as the basis for designing future efforts aimed at education reform.

The project, entitled "Peace Through Development, I and II", was conducted in Niger from 2009 to 2015. Participants included more than 150 teachers from a network of 175 QSs in Niger, one local project team (for all the participating schools) with 15 members, and an external facilitator team with 3 members, including ourselves, the authors of this paper.[10] The project involved external project team visits to 20 QSs in Zinder region, Niger, during which the researchers conducted a three-day workshop, three formal focus group discussions, and seven interviews with the leaders of the Nigerien Union of QSs (Union des Écoles

[9] In April 2014, the International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID) gathered Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) member states at ISESCO's headquarters in Rabat, Morocco to discuss national approaches towards promoting interreligious and intercultural education (http://www.kaiciid.org/news-events/news/kaiciid-and-isesco-convene-governmental-policy-makers-interreligious-education [accessed 7 February 2017]). Similarly, in April 2015, UNESCO's Beirut office teamed up with KAICIID to organise a meeting in Cairo, Egypt with education experts and government representatives from Arab states to help develop an adapted version of the British General Certificate of Education (GCE) Curriculum for the Arab states. While maintaining the GCE core, an adapted curriculum with an inter-religious component was needed for Arab states to consider implementation (http://www.kaiciid.org/news-events/news/unesco-and-kaiciid-promote-global-citizenship-values-arab-region [accessed 7 February 2017]).

[10] For a detailed report of the intervention put forth in this section, see Abu-Nimer et al. (2016).

Coraniques du Niger; UECN) in Zinder district. In addition, five class observations were completed.

Drawing upon the growing support of interreligious peace education as a necessary component of peacebuilding, this project aimed to strengthen teachers' capacity in QSs by (1) developing learner-centred pedagogical skills which enable greater critical examination of the curriculum, and (2) putting these skills into practice in the classroom. The project addressed the issues raised in the previous sections of this paper by working with existing QSs in the region and introducing reform in the form of Islamic Peace Education from within while using a highly participatory approach. The project built an intervention which carefully considered the local context and anticipated possible challenges which might arise due to efforts trying to hinder implementation. Observing all these points, the project worked within the framework of the existing QS curricula, aiming to draw attention to values of peace already present in Islamic texts and incorporating QS teacher participation in the development of a training guide and manual. Before moving into the methodological details of the project, it is important to define Peace education.

Peace education

As a framework, Islamic peace education incorporates peace-promoting values which are intrinsic to Islam. There is a growing volume of work by scholars who put forth examples of Qur'anic excerpts which encourage pluralism and interreligious dialogue.[11]

> This Islamic framework of peace education is defined by the assumption that the primary message of Islam is peace and that certain sets of values and beliefs should constitute the foundation for engaging youth and adults: Sacredness of human life; Adala (Justice); Mossawat (equality); Rahma (mercy); Mosamaha (forgiveness); A'mal al kheir (good deeds and action/service); Solidarity. Within this framework of Islamic peace education, there is an emphasis on the need to recognize the fundamental principle of pluralism and diversity (ikhtilaf). Peace education according to the Islamic framework has the theological foundations to educate the person to observe the above values and adopt rituals that aim to preserve such values and beliefs (Abu-Nimer et al. 2016, pp. 23–24).

It is important to note that in stark contrast to opposite claims, Islamic peacebuilding, and the peace education framework within Islamic peacebuilding, supports the notion that Islam is indeed compatible with non-violence and peace (Satha-Anand 1993). However, it also acknowledges that these values are often given a lower profile in favour of more exclusionary and violent ideas advocated by radicalised individuals. Adopting a framework of peace education by engaging QSs through careful intervention makes it possible to train teachers to better facilitate the growth of values which foster peace, plurality and dialogue which are readily

[11] See Abu-Nimer (1996, 2003), Afsaruddin (2007), Köylü (2004), Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding (2013), Husin (2002) and Abdalla et al. (2009).

available within Islamic texts such as the Qur'an, *Hadiths* [teachings of the prophet] and Islamic history.

Gaining trust and designing the intervention

Since QSs, especially in West Africa, maintain a high degree of symbolic power, attempts to reform how these schools operate as well as attempts to modify their individual curricula are usually met with resistance. On the micro-level, QSs strongly mirror their communities' cultural and religious context – typically by promoting a specific interpretation of Islam associated with their own school of thought.[12] Therefore, the external project team deemed it imperative to work with a local partner closely linked to QSs in the region, and with their community leader, and thus gain insight into the conditions necessary to gain public acceptance.

In Zinder, Niger, the Salam Institute partnered with the Zinder Union of QSs, a local QS association, which represented 76 schools located either in Zinder city or the surrounding areas (Zinder region). This partnership was developed by gradually building rapport with the Union to overcome initial scepticism of the Salam Institute's intentions.[13] It is important to reiterate that not only do communities view the teachers as gatekeepers of authentic Islamic values, but the teachers themselves believe it a "holy duty to resist any form of incursion into their perceived authentic Islamic faith and value system" (Abu-Nimer et al. 2016, p. 22). Thus contact was made cautiously.

Since many of these schools face challenges related to infrastructure (dilapidated buildings, overcrowded classrooms, insufficient furniture, and a scarcity of equipment such as blackboards etc.) and local conditions, initial contact was made through an in-kind school improvement grant which offered much-needed aid, such as chairs, books, desks, zinc roof tops, etc. This was well-received, especially since the local partner (the Zinder Union of QSs) had been newly created and was striving for an increased public role with the aim of better serving the local QSs. In consultation with the Union and the community leaders, a number of assumptions and considerations were outlined as necessary conditions to ensure public acceptance.

Examples of these conditions included:

- No intervention will be imposed on the core curriculum of the QS;
- No discussion will be held on the national political dynamics and issues;
- QS teachers are the experts on the Qur'anic interpretations and trainers should avoid any theological debates;

[12] This was observed by the Salam Institute for Peace Studies Team during the case study we present in this paper. The Zinder region of Niger predominantly practises Tijaniya Sufi Islam, which particularly values culture and education.

[13] Here it is important to note that Islam is relatively recent in Niger and constantly defends its authority against other traditions. While the specific form of Islam predominant to the region surrounding Zinder is Tijaniya Sufi Islam, Zinder lies close to the border with Nigeria, from where it has been exposed to growing fundamentalist forms of Islam. Given this context, it was necessary to carefully build up a rapport with the Union so as to assure them that there were no intentions of pushing QSs away from Tijaniya Sufi Islam.

- The emphasis on education for peace is not based on the assumption that the QS is educating for violence, but on the need to strengthen peaceful messages derived from religious scripture;
- There would be no public or media engagement in the training, keeping the process a professional development for teachers;
- The educational intervention in such QSs has to incorporate relief or development components (Abu-Nimer et al. 2016, p. 6)

Twenty QSs were selected based upon consultation with the Zinder Union, while also taking into consideration accessibility (in terms of the likelihood of being welcomed there) to the QSs.

Two core teams were created for the project: a local team with members carefully chosen so as to address possible trepidation from members of the community, and an external team also with carefully selected members to dissipate fears that foreigners were coming to westernise QSs. The external team comprised three Muslim Arabic-speaking experts experienced in working in the context of Muslim countries, who had a facilitative role.[14]

The external team designed the intervention based upon the experiences of previous work in Islamic peacebuilding and the assumptions and considerations outlined in conjunction with the local partners. The goals were designed with the main objective of capacity building, namely teacher training. The training introduced pedagogical practices designed to foster student-centred learning, using cultural proverbs and rituals, poetry, role play, and stories which were context-appropriate to introduce and foster values such as tolerance, non-violence and human rights. These were compiled using only Qur'anic verses and well-known *Hadiths* and gained credibility by close consultation with the local partner for feedback to determine acceptability.

> The core assumption of the collaborative approach in the design and implementation is that building a culture of peace is feasible through the reinforcing of already existing messages of peace, tolerance, and diversity in Islamic religious sources used by QSs (Abu-Nimer et al. 2016, p. 18).

Developing a context-appropriate methodology of peace education

The development of (1) the methodology of incorporating examples of peace into daily lessons; (2) the details of the content for teaching these examples; (3) the training manual modules on incorporating learner-centred pedagogy; and finally (4) the format of the manual required three phases. These three phases consisted of an assessment, a two-day participatory workshop with teachers, and an analysis of the data collected from the observations and focus groups for the assessment. This was then followed by a capacity-building workshop (based on a draft manual). The

[14] The external team was chosen from among members of the Salam Institute, all of whom were not only Muslim and Arabic-speakers, but also had experiences gathered by variously working in countries such as Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Palestine, Pakistan, the Philippines and Indonesia. They also demonstrated a deep knowledge of Islamic peacebuilding and the Qur'an, *Hadiths* and Islamic history. All of these factors together aided in creating a non-threatening atmosphere for the intervention to take place.

entire process was monitored carefully by both the local and external teams and done collaboratively.

The assessment was based upon several elements, including: formal classroom visits and interviews with 16 QS teachers; information gathered from informal meetings with all parties involved; and a collection of sample curricula, guidelines, manuals and texts used. In particular, the external team extensively evaluated what content was taught at each level and how students were assessed. Among the informal meetings were conversations with the parents of students, in which they were asked the reasons for choosing the school, as well as the conditions of the infrastructure.[15]

Thereafter, 30 QS teachers from 12 QSs attended a two-day workshop to outline priority areas and themes to be included in the manual. In addition to defining needs, the external team facilitated sessions to set up the creation of sample lessons emphasising messages such as peace and diversity.

Last, the external team crunched and analysed the data gathered from the assessment and workshop phases. The results of the analysis allowed for the development of the framework of the manual, the specific modules and the creation of sample lessons, as well as the creation of the methodology for incorporating peace education into daily lessons.

What was then left to do (one and a half years later) was to pilot the manual and train a group of teachers to train others in the use of the manual. This was done by way of a five-day pilot training on the manual and gaining feedback from the participating teachers, as well as a separate training of 15 QS teachers on how to use the manual to be able to further train others.

Results

Data collection for the project consisted of interviews, observations and focus group discussions gathered during two 10-day working trips in the field, during which a 3-day workshop, 3 formal focus group discussions and 5 class observations were carried out, and 7 interviews were conducted with the heads of the Zinder Union of QSs. There were noticeable indicators of success among both the teachers and the schools, but like any intervention, success does not come without challenges.

Success indicators were based on observations, interviews and focus group discussions, for example a shift in various teachers' perceptions of their roles as educators, or the expression of enthusiasm for new methods of teaching Islamic values by one participant in the capacity-building training. One QS teacher who participated in the training workshop in Zinder on 8 March 2011 commented:

> I learned that I can use different methods of teaching [i.e. role play, storytelling, and open ended questions, etc.] and still teach Islamic values (Abu-Nimer et al. 2016, p. 12).

[15] Parents were highly interested in the project's intent of maintaining QSs and improving the infrastructure. This further helped gain trust and reduce the fear of intervention by foreigners (non-Muslims in this case) in their schools.

Following the trainings, there was a consensus among all of the teachers trained that the values of peace education need to be incorporated more systematically into lessons and that they do not contradict Islamic beliefs.[16] Numerous individuals gave testimony of their reactions to the training by displaying the immediate effects of the training. In the longer term, there was an impact beyond the teachers reaching to the QSs themselves. This was especially the case in instances where schools took on ownership of the manual. In such cases, we observed a noticeable shift in the teaching methodology. Teachers also strongly supported the idea of their own training and embraced the prospect of more training, often stating that several years had passed since their last professional training.

Challenges were encountered throughout the processes of design, implementation and follow-up. In the design phase, the most challenging area was the curriculum due to the fact that QSs typically have complete freedom in structuring their own curricula and the methods they want to use. There are long-standing traditions which are built into the curricula; therefore efforts to introduce any changes to the curriculum or to the methods used were bound to stumble against the obstacle of the tradition of rote-learning which has existed for centuries. With this in mind, it was not surprising to find that some schools viewed changes with scepticism. This was compounded with the fear of being secularised, thus not only teachers but also clerics potentially viewed such an intervention with suspicion.

A second challenge concerned ethno-centric or religio-centric interpretations of, for example (in the context of Niger), how to deal with the belief that Arabic is superior to all other languages.[17] Deliberations whether and, in the event, how to deal with certain beliefs need to rely on local context and specific beliefs.

A third challenge was the pressure that QSs face to maintain their reputation in the eyes of the public. For example, in the specific context of Niger, participants were concerned about the language of diversity and the equality of religions, fearing that if Islam was on the same level as all other religions, opponents would use this against them to discredit Islam. However, one and half years later, at a third meeting held in Niamey, Niger in 2012 to disseminate the manual, five of the QS leaders publicly committed to diversity.

The fourth challenge was sustainability due to financial issues. Although sustainability is to some degree maintained through teachers implementing the tools they acquired in the classroom, funds are needed to continue trainings and production and dissemination of the manual.

[16] The use of solely Islamic texts and constant consultation and collaboration facilitated the acceptance of the synergy of peace education values and Islamic belief and helped create more openness to understanding the need of such education.

[17] Furthermore, in the case of Niger there is also the attitude that “Islam is superior”. This was not dealt with initially in our project, since in the context of QSs, teachers and school heads are not generally exposed to people of other faiths. But it was eventually addressed when talking about human rights in Islam, where participants acknowledged a distinction between their own feelings and rights of individuals of other groups to practise their own faith.

Conclusions

Living in an increasingly interconnected world, societies are less and less isolated from the effects of globalisation. This circumstance, especially following 9/11, has led to the worry of extremism spreading exclusion, intolerance and violence becoming a focus of international, national and non-governmental entities. As a means to counter extremist rhetoric, it is of utmost importance to ensure that young people are equipped with the tools needed to defend themselves against such ideas. This is a core component of prevention strategy in responding to violent extremism among youth (Romaniuk 2015). Education is one of the most effective ways of strengthening values of peace, tolerance, pluralism, dialogue and human rights, all of which foster coexistence. Although numerous efforts exist to implement education reform, success rates are limited, especially in more remote areas. This is largely due to the persistence of top-down approaches which leave out existing institutions and do not closely examine context-specific factors. One-size-fits all global initiatives in particular face the difficulty of gaining acceptance in the Muslim world, since it is hard to reconcile secular Western education models with education systems which either require religious education or continue to include it as an integral part of the culture and the faith.

This paper has attempted to show that when used as a basis for intervention design, the assumptions underlying past efforts are misconstrued and hinder the success of education reform, especially in Muslim countries. The specific contexts of educational institutions and their conditions vary drastically from one small region to the next, even within countries themselves, and thus require careful consideration and planning to enable the designing of a successful intervention which has the chance of lasting impact. In addition, it is important to recognise that contrary to claims that QSs promote extremism and violence, these schools are not manufactures of terrorists and are often the only form of education available to children in remote regions. They are rooted in a long-standing tradition in the Muslim world, and strengthening values of pluralism and peace requires understanding the rapport of QSs with their respective communities.

The case study we have discussed briefly in this paper and presented in more detail elsewhere (Abu-Nimer et al. 2016) offers an example which differs significantly from the one-size-fits-all approach. The intervention examined local context at the micro-level of Zinder city and its surrounding areas, understanding the strand of Islam practised by the people. The project took into account the history of this particular strand of Islam, the interaction with other religions, challenges faced by the communities, conditions and traditions of the Qur'anic schools in the area, as well as any other factors relevant to the communities which, if not understood, had the potential of hindering acceptance. Several factors contributed to the success and acceptance of the intervention, including, but not limited to, an experienced Arabic-speaking external team, a local partner, participatory workshops and the development of a manual performed as teacher training, and the offer of in-kind development aid for classroom and school improvement.

The lessons learned from this intervention will be useful in shaping future initiatives for education reform in the Muslim world. In addition, these lessons are highly relevant to most, if not all, security-driven and defence intelligence CVE programmes which have been introduced by foreign or even national agencies in many Muslim countries. Such programmes have very little, if any, immediate effect on the perceptions and attitudes of youth or teachers. They are often viewed as external intrusions and have the least credibility with informal religious authorities or institutions. The key for positively engaging Muslim youth and enducational agencies in education measures aiming to build peace and coexistence in Muslim countries is an insider and community development-based approach.

Acknowledgements Without the efforts and suggestions of Renáta Smith, this article could not have been produced. Her work on content editing and literature review is much appreciated.

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