

## The Curriculum Development Experience of Ta‘lim in the Ismaili Community Dr Shiraz Thobani

Two key questions are addressed in this paper: *how* was the Ta‘lim curriculum developed in the Ismaili community, and *what* lessons can be learned from this project? These questions are interwoven into the points examined below.

Ta‘lim is a religious and cultural education curriculum developed by the Institute of Ismaili Studies for primary level children who attend religious education classes conducted by Ismaili communities in various countries across the globe. It seeks to educate young Ismailis in the faith, history, culture and ethics of Muslim societies in general, with specific reference to the Shia and Ismaili traditions. It consists of graded instructional materials, translated into eleven languages and implemented in over twenty-five countries internationally.

The curriculum project was launched by His Highness Aga Khan IV and assigned to the Ismaili Institute as one of the educational programmes under its aegis. It commenced in the 1980s and was completed in its English version in 1998. The project was seen by the community as a vital investment in the education of its young, eliciting long-term institutional, financial and human resource commitment. This factor is of significance for curriculum ventures which need to be sustained through the planning, development and implementation phases, and beyond that, to the periodic refinement or revision cycles of the curriculum.

The challenge the community faced in the 1980s was the lack of educationalists or specialists to develop the curriculum. The Institute therefore devoted the early years of the project to assist a group of teachers to acquire the necessary curriculum development expertise through partnership with the University of London’s Institute of Education. This academic preparation, however, was only one part of the equation; the other was the competencies acquired through an actual engagement with developing the educational materials themselves. The Ta‘lim experience has been that curriculum development is both a science and an art: both theory and practice need to be brought into a dialectical engagement for educational conceptions to gain optimal realisation. Of equal importance is for curriculum developers to have recourse to a range of specialists and scholars in various fields to provide input into the subject matter that constitutes the content of the curriculum.

The concept of education underpinning the curriculum is perhaps the most formidable challenge that any curriculum project faces. In the case of Ta‘lim, the guiding perspectives of the Imam of the Ismailis provided the foundational orientation. Foremost was that Islam should be presented as both faith and civilisation, that is, as *din* and *dunya* in their mutual relationship. Also of importance were the aspects of spirituality, ethics and intellect as inspired by the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.s), Hazrat Ali (a.s), and the Imams (a.s). The need to inculcate civic virtues was stressed so that children would grow up to express respect towards people of all faiths and traditions. The curriculum developers therefore had to strike the right balance of helping children acquire a sound appreciation of their own Ismaili faith while celebrating the rich diversity of Islamic traditions globally. The translation of educational visions and ideals into actual teaching materials demands a great deal of thought, and in the case of Ta‘lim, it necessitated the drafting of curriculum plans, conceptual frameworks, thematic options and other such devices to aid in the identification of appropriate aims, objectives, content and learning activities for each age-group.

Curriculum projects are inevitably part and parcel of social expectations and investments. The nature of the relationship established between educational institutions where curricula are formulated and the receiving communities who are stakeholders in their children's education is crucial. The Ta'lim project evoked high expectations in the community, together with accompanying interest in its overall approach, that had to be addressed. It is worth attending to leadership and parental information programmes prior to the implementation of any new curriculum so as to address questions that naturally arise when educational change occurs. A wholistic rather than piecemeal presentation of the curriculum, and the foundational principles informing it, may furnish the rationale which parents will be looking for in the long-term development of their children. Also necessary here is the need to establish clear structures related to policy formulations, academic and theological input, stakeholder reviews and formal consensus on religious education materials which can gain acceptance and ownership by the communities to whom they are introduced.

A curriculum by itself, no matter how excellent it may be, remains inert unless the teacher breathes life into it. Teachers, of course, are the indispensable mediators who give practical expression to educational intent. It was realised early in the Ta'lim project that teachers would need to receive adequate training if the curriculum was to be utilised effectively in the classroom. As in many supplementary contexts where RE is imparted, the Ismaili community was reliant on voluntary teachers to impart the new curriculum, the majority of whom did not have professional teaching qualifications. In conceptualising a new curriculum project, it is vital that attention be devoted to the nature of professional development which teachers will require in order to successfully use the curriculum. A clear conception of the relationship between the curriculum and the role of the teacher may generate innovative paradigms of education where more effective integration between these two aspects is achieved at an early stage.

A vital part of any curriculum project is evaluation. The Ta'lim programme endeavoured to incorporate both formative and summative evaluations. Feedback was received regularly from a variety of parties – national education boards, educationalists and teachers – to provide information on the quality and effectiveness of the curriculum. Systematic evaluation from the outset is a worthwhile investment, based on both broad contextual scans and ethnographic studies that capture 'thick descriptions' of curriculum use in the classroom, so as to steer the development of the curriculum in the right direction and to ensure that it meets the needs of the community.

Finally, a word about developing curricula intended for international application. The Ta'lim curriculum today finds usage in over twenty-five countries. In having been developed centrally in London, the question of cultural adaptation was a weighty issue for the educators. This was partly addressed through the teachers' guides which allowed flexibility in the way the content and learning activities were applied in the classroom. Providing teachers with techniques for adapting the curriculum in the training programmes also helped to deal with this issue. Finally, the provision of the curriculum in the vernacular of each community was extremely valuable in this regard, as were regular reviews and feedback from the various constituencies. The relation between the global and the local invites creative addressing in international curriculum projects.

The Ta'lim project is now at a point where the Institute of Ismaili Studies intends to embark on a second phase, entailing curriculum revision based on evaluation findings. This approach is in keeping with a philosophy of curriculum development that sees it as a cyclical process – work in progress that endeavours to respond to changing conditions in which each generation finds itself while remaining true, in the context of religious education, to that which is viewed as timeless.