جمعية الثقافة من أجل التنمية بالاشتراك مع جامعة سوهاج

Madrasah schools and the challenges to implementing creative and responsive teaching approaches[1]

By

Saeda Buang

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

National Institute of Education

1This paper is presented at The Fourth Arab Scientific Conference of Education and the Challenges of the Future, Sohag University, Sohag, Egypt, 25 – 26 April 2009.

Abstract

Madrasah, loosely defined as religious school or school that offers primarily religious education as well as some other academic subjects in its school curriculum, has been generally construed to observe 'outdated and unresponsive' teaching approaches and methodologies. Such perception or (mis)construction is not without basis, particularly when socio-historically, *madrasahs* have been generally found to adopt 'safe dogmatic and uncritical' teaching approaches and methodologies to deliver religious knowledge.

This paper argues that creative and responsive teaching methodologies which put high premium on the thinking skills of the students are necessary to re-confer *'aql* and *ins* (man) to their higher and natural status; educationally plausible, and strategically necessary to equip students with the requisites to face modernization and insurmountable challenges of the future. A survey of the *madrasah* schools in Singapore and their challenges to incorporate creative teaching methodologies in religious education will be included to elucidate my arguments.

The *madrasah* and the general perception of its teaching methodologies

The *madrasah* has been observed to have been largely practicing 'outdated' modes of teaching methodologies such as memorization and rote learning, and observing teacher-focused approach and authoritarian style of relationships (Rosnani Hashim, 1996: 107-108, 118; Ajijola, A., 1999: 216; Azhar Ibrahim, 2006; Shaw, 2006: 44; Tariq Rahman, 2006: 152; Saeda Buang, 2007, 2008) [1]. Shaw (2006), in his study of the Muslim education in the Gulf states and Saudi Arabia opines that such 'outdated' approaches in teaching and learning can be partly blamed for producing students who are lack of motivation (Shaw 2006: 44). Ajijola (1999: 216), among other things, opines that poor' teaching methodologies, such as

'sermonisation'[2], in most *madrasah*s in Nigeria due to teachers' lack of knowledge and training serve as a major hindrance to any attempt to install genuine' Islamic education which promotes thinking and self-awareness. Azhar Ibrahim (2006: 95-96) in his survey of the *madrasah*s in Indonesia, India and Pakistan contributes religious traditionalism and the absence of a critical examination of *madrasah* education as the causes for the continuity of medieval curricula which are deemed as perfect; the prohibition of questioning of basic assumptions and doctrines; total submission to the authority of teachers who are at the centre of learning; and total deference whereby students need to accept the teacher's lesson earnestly and submissively. He further argues that such prevalent practices are counter-productive to cultivation of creativity, democratic ideals, civic consciousness multiculturalism and critical thinking which already have been given some due attention by other contemporary schools of education.

The inadequacies of the curriculum content of the *madrasah* to face the onslaught of modernization and industrialization while retaining its Islamic values have been widely discussed particularly during and post First World Conference on Muslim Education held in Mecca in 1977 (Al-Attas, S.N., 1997). A new approach to classification of knowledge in Islam and integration of knowledge have been suggested, among other things, to arrest the issue of duality of education as a result of compartmentalization of knowledge as practiced by many *madrasah* and schools in Muslim world. Until today the issue of integration of knowledge is still debated on and consensus among the Muslim scholars is nowhere near in sight. In the meanwhile, the issue and practices of ineffective teaching pedagogy continue to devastate Muslim education in general. Some researchers have argued that teaching pedagogy is the byproduct of educational concepts and curriculum content (Azhar Ibrahim, 2006: 95-96). Any attempt to introduce creative and critical thinking into teaching and learning will be stagnated by the curriculum content – the very pool of

knowledge that pupils draw from to form the substance of critical thinking skills (Jackson, M. G., 2008). Jackson, in his study of the schools in Uttarakhand in North India since 1986 observes the adverse impact of incoherent curriculum content on the teaching/learning pedagogy to promote critical and creative thinking (Jackson, M. G., 2008: x).

I fully support the afore-mentioned arguments Ideallycurriculum purpose and content precede curriculum practice. Teachers must be clear of the educational philosophy that underlies the school's vision and mission, in order to deliver solid curriculum content in a manner that supports and enhances students' understanding of the curriculum content. Generallyteachers take the cue from the school's philosophy and syllabus to construct their teaching methodology. As a case in point, an examinations result-oriented educational philosophy will translate into drills and content-focused approach as the main teaching pedagogy. I also support the argument that the curriculum purpose (educational objectives, mission and vision) curriculum content, and substance (educational materials) and curriculum practice (teaching-learning methodologies and pedagogies) should interlock and supportive of each other to produce an effective system of education (Foshay, 1987). However, to stall the implementation of creative teaching pedagogies in *madrasah*s until a resolution of the Islamic educational concept polemics could be reached, and/or foolproof curriculum content is created, is not strategically sound. I believe that although the formulation of reformed curriculum content is excruciatingly slow in many *madrasah*s, the issue of teaching pedagogy cannot be sidelined. At least as a short-term strategy teaching pedagogies should be improved to improve learning. Although this is an uphill task, it is not unfeasible that the theories and values underlying the pedagogical concepts and practices would trickle down to impact curriculum content. At this juncture the definitions of creative and responsive teaching are apt.

Arguments for creative and responsive teaching methodologies

As reason is usually associated with critical thinking, the emotions, intuition, and imagination are often associated with creative thinking. Traditional critical thinking models make clear distinction between creative thinking and critical thinking. As a result, each domain remains isolated; each does not need the other in its execution. While critical thinking focuses on logical and dialectical reasoning, and critical spirit, creativity is construed to involve what is new and divergent, a radical break with past traditions. Other long-held assumptions and misconceptions on creativity are: that creative products cannot be evaluated due to the fact that criteria used for evaluation are from the past and creativity is a break from the past to what is new creativity is a mode or process rather than a product; the rulesskills, and knowledge of specific disciplines constrains us into the prevailing paradigm of thought; and creativity is something more than skill, an imaginative element which is transcendent, irreducible, and essentially inexplicable" (Bailin 1988, cited from Thayer-Bacon, 2000: 148-149).

Bailin (1988) challenges the distinction made between critical thinking and creativity, arguing that critical thinking at its finest is creativity, our means for achieving extraordinary ends Bailin does not define creativity as a radical discontinuity with previous products. In fact, the originality of creative products can only be understood with reference to the traditions out of which they come. There is no distinctive creative process or character traits. Rules are not constraining to creativity; rather knowledge, rules, skills and methods are centrally important, for we need them in order to be able to make choices. Essentially imagination and skills are intimately connected. Critical thinking supplies us with the vital skills we need to be creative. Here, I forward Bailin's quilting bee metaphor to make my case; viz. that constructing quilts of knowledge is a creative and critical endeavour. The rulers, scissors, and straight pins we use to cut and measure and order our material (our ideas) do not limit the choices but

in fact, they help us make choices so that we can eventually end up with a finished product, a quilt.

Fisher and Scriven (1997), affirms the interconnectivity of creativity and critical thinking. Simply, to be creative is to be able to offer alternatives, or counter-explanations or counter-examples which can be derived from the particular context of thought or discussion which Fisher and Scriven (1997: 66-67) termed as 'functional creativity' – something of which we are all capable, and all do better for practice. It does not call for aesthetically novel ideas that are 'invented from scratch. Thayer-Bacon (2000: 129) in her arguments on the need to transform critical thinking into 'constructive thinking'[3] also observes that within creativity lies critical thinking. She draws her conclusion from her students' ability to transform historical and current events which they have critically analysed into random artistic activities (draw and color in continent maps, some weave on their handmade looms, some practice a dramatic performance from story-starter suggestion cards and many other activities) involving creative expressions, something fun and playful exploratory, and self-discovery activities to represent their thoughts and opinions.

We argue that the creative teaching methodology in discussion is not mindless, haphazard and valueless activities without the elements of reason and logic. Creative teaching methodology involves structured instructions and activities that are well planned to achieve specific educational objectives, viz. cultivating students' critical and creative thinking. Essentially the implementation of creative methodologies should be seen as our attempt to reconfer '*aql* (reason) to its original place, viz. man's constitution that sets him apart from and higher than the animal kingdom (Ibn Khaldun, 1967). Should the teaching of religion be devoid of critical and creative thinking?

It is apt to quote Ibn Miskawayh who believes that to empower man to exercise his reason (even) in the realms of the soul and ethics is the role of education (M. Abdul Haq Ansari, 1964: 62). Ibn

Khaldun highlights the critical function of man's intellect in education so that he can be distinguished from the other animals (Ibn Khaldun, 1967: 418). In this regard, Ibn Khaldun contends that society is seen as the root cause as well as proof of one's intelligence. Man's intelligence is therefore shaped by his environmental and social factors, which include his family, teachers and community. In other words, his intelligence and conduct are the reflection of his family and society's values and process of socialization. If intelligence is always at its potential' state and depending very much on a child's exposure to his surrounding and the socialization process that he went through as argued by Ibn Khaldun, what definite measures have we taken to actualize the intellectual potentials of the students? Essentially, teaching and learning, in this case, should enhance a child's intellect rather than to suppress it and creative teaching methodology is a good educational tool to achieve this objective.

"Responsive" teaching here does not specifically or entirely refer to "culturally responsive teaching" (Gay, 2000; Banks, 2003) that calls for pedagogical tools and approaches to encounter issues of multiculturism and its adverse effects on the minorities in classroom situations. Rather, responsiveness describes when a teacher's instruction is contingently responsive that is, when she is responsive to the child's learning needs at the time the child needs it (Clay, 1988; Dozier, C. (et. al.), 2006). Dozier (2006: 14) lists conditions to accomplish responsive teaching. They are: - 1) sensitive observation (teacher as a "sensitive observer") to be able to articulate and correlate observations of particular children with what is known about literate practice and how literate systems work; 2) planning and cross-checking – a teacher must have the propensity toward checking and expanding that knowledge, cross-checking their assumptions against children's behavior, and plans her instruction so that the student is in control of his or her learning processes, while being prepared to accommodate a student's new learning or confusion in the learning process; 3) respect – where teachers generate respectful, caring

relationships with students and their families; 4) valuing errors, self-corrections, and learner control; 5) risk, difficulty and control – students need to try new things, but the level of difficulty must be such that the learner is able and prepared to be in control of the activity. For this to happen, the tasks must be manageable, but also allow for error and self-corrections; and 6) making literacy active.

I observe that the essence of responsive teaching to enhance and accelerate a child's learning has its parallel in Ibn Sina's concept of education and particularly teaching and learning. Ibn Sina underlines the necessity of taking into consideration the child's natural inclinations, disposition, and aptitudes in the learning process (Mohamed El-Mokhtar Ould Bah, 1998: 26; Idris Zakaria, 2002: 160). In this respect, I support that Ibn Sina's consideration for the child's vocational inclination demonstrates his conception of man, that is, man's natural qualities are to be cherished and should be carefully developed without having to deconstruct them into a different or a particular kind. Man's freewill is respected and man's differences should be seen as a blessing from the Creator. Parents and teachers, to Ibn Sina, should observe their child's inclination, and subsequently plan and arrange for an appropriate course of study and vocation for the child. In this regard, the teacher's creative and dynamic role as an educator is very much needed to facilitate further development of his students in various fields of their interests.

Should creative and responsive teaching methodologies be unified or carried out separately? More importantly, what do we hope to achieve from these methodologies in order to prepare our students for the new challenges of modernization and globalization? Post modernization and globalization demand new alternatives on the way we perceive and solve problems. Every methodology has its own strengths and weaknesses and creative and responsive methodology is no exception. Howevercreative methodology pushes for the emergence of new alternatives without having to disconnect these alternatives to their past. In this case, creative methodology can be

adapted to be a catalyst for the development of new knowledge and ideas that spring from the *madrasah*s' culture and traditions. I have mentioned earlier in this paper creative methodology has the potentials to develop critical thinking via creative expressions. However in our enthusiasm to achieve this objective we may overlook varying and differing growth pace of each child. Responsive methodology has the capacity to function as a safety net to ensure each child is given due attention and assistance.

In this paper, I forward a case study on the *madrasah*s in Singapore to demonstrate that elements of creative teaching methodology - not in its full form – have started to be emplaced in the *madrasahs*. However, the implementation is not without initial 'stumbling blocks' prevalent among the *asatizah*s and the administrators such as lack of knowledge and training; lack of structural, educational, administrative and financial supports facilities; and most critical of all, the hesitation to make a normative shift in one's mentality. Such hesitation is based on the misconception that to introduce critical and creative teaching is akin to 'opening the doors of freedom to questioning the validity of Islam, the Quran and *hadith*s'. Before we present the case study, a brief narration on the background of the *madrasah* education in Singapore is first discussed.

Background on the *madrasah* education in Singapore

In Singapore, the religion of Islam is largely embraced by the ethnic Malays. The Malays numbered only 490,600 or 13.7 percent of the total population (residents) figure of 3,583,100 in 2007[4], making them a minority in the Chinese-majority, albeit plural, and densely populated city-state[5]. It has been documented that the presence of Muslim religious education in the form of Quran school precedes other forms of educational institutions in early colonial-ruled Singapore (Chelliah, D.D, 1960: 35) and its emergence was almost immediately constructed with the coming of Islam believed to have reached the shore of Malay Peninsular (inclusive of Malaysia and Singapore) around 1399/1400 A.D. after establishing its dominion in

Acheh, the northern tip of Sumatera in the 12th century. The early 1900s was a critical period when a significant wave of in-flow of reformist ideas from Egypt[6] to the Malay Archipelago via the journal *al-Manar* and returning students mostly from Cairo, Egypt took place. The goal was to liberate the Muslims from prevailing socio-political apathy, economic and educational backwardness, and cultural-religious decadence through educational and religious reforms. As a result, a group of local Muslim reformists led by Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, in 1907 set up the *Madrasah* Al-Iqbal in Singapore, believed to be the first reformist *madrasah* in the region, and made an unprecedented move to liberalise religious curriculum by including three languages, Arabic, Malay and English, in the *madrasah*'s syllabus, and subjects such as geography, history, health education, general science and arithmetic to equip students with necessary knowledge and skills to counter colonization and face new socio-economic challenges (*Al-Imam*, 1 Jun 1908: 372-375).

The early 20th century saw the rise of the *madrasah* in Singapore. Wealthy individual proprietors, mostly the Arabs Islamic organisations and the Muslim community saw the need to set up religious schools or *sekolah ra'ayat* (people's schools) in every village and living quarter to provide basic and religious education for the Muslim children. In 1960s, a total of 69 *madrasah*s were prevalent in Singapore and until 1973, a total of 51 *madrasahs* is recorded. As Singapore developed into an industrial economy and as a direct consequence of fast paced urbanization that led to the resettlement of most villages, many *madrasah*s faced the impending closure. Since Singapore Independence in 1965, the rise of national schools, and English schools in particular, due to their better economic prospects, also led to the decline of the *madrasah*.

Currently, there are six full-time *madrasah*s offering primary, secondary and pre-university level education in Singapore. Three of these *madrasah*s received accreditation from the Al-Azhar University and/or International Islamic University of Malaysia. The *madrasah* students constitute a small fraction of the total student population in relation to those

attending national schools. There were 4148 full-time *madrasah* students in 2007[7], constituting about 21 percent from the total 19,752 Malay/Muslim students (Primary, Secondary and Pre-University/college levels) or 0.77 percent out of the total student population in Singapore of 700,774. It is necessary to highlight here that part-time/weekend religious schools are also established at every mosque catering to the needs of Muslim children who attended the national schools. Each full-time *madrasah* is self-funded and run by its own management committee but under the purview of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS).

Teaching methodologies: perceptions and realities

In order to get a general picture of the teaching methodologies employed in the *madrasah*, I undertake two research methods; a survey involving 405 *madrasah* students via self-administered questionnaire and classroom teaching observation. A four graded response, viz. 'always', 'frequently seldom' and 'never' was invited from students. In this instance, a list of 14 prepared items specifically on teaching techniques was given for students to choose from. Table 1 reflects students' identification of the top three teaching techniques perceived to be always employed, and three teaching techniques perceived to be seldom and/or never employed by teachers of the *madrasah*.

Table 1 Distribution of students' choices of 3 'Always' & 'Seldom' employed teaching techniques, by level, in percentage. N: 405 students

Level of students	*Always*	*%*	*Seldom*	*%*
Primary	Reading aloud	41.5	Video viewing	40.1
N: 160	Written work	31.2	Role play	37.7
	Group work	27.3	Use of audio	22.2
Secondary	Written work	35.2	Video viewing	37.8
N: 181	Group work	33.9	Use of audio	37.8
	whole class discussion	30.9	Role play	24.4
Pre-university	Written work	34.0	Video viewing	35.0
N: 64	Lecture	33.0	Use of audio	33.6
	whole class discussion	33.0	Role play	31.4

Source: Students survey, 2004/2005.

While 'reading aloud' as a technique was identified by students as 'always' employed by teachers only at Primary level written work' was widely believed to have been used at all levels. This indicates teachers' heavy emphasis on drill and written literacy; an orientation towards cognitive development and examination skills. 'Whole class discussion' was also believed to be another prominent teaching technique employed at Secondary and Pre-University levels. These findings which was based upon 13 classroom observations, confirm the extensive use of this technique at all levels (see Table 2). Student-centred approaches, such as group work was perceived to have also been employed at Primary and Secondary levels. Lecture was believed to have always been employed at the Pre-University level. I however observed during classroom observations that this method was employed both at Secondary and Pre-University level classes. Video-viewing tops the list of 'seldom/never' used teaching method, at all levels. Similarly, the use of audio and role play were considered to have been seldom employed in classroom teaching in the *madrasahs*. The data I gathered during classroom observations substantiate the perception of students in this regard.

To verify the students' perceptions and uncover the curriculum practice of the *madrasah* thirteen classroom observations involving 13 teachers were conducted in 2004 and 2005/2006, covering six religious subject classes such as Islamic Religious Knowledge, Arabic language/*lughah*, *fiqh, hadith, Muqaddam*; and seven academic subject classes such as General Paper, Islamic Social Studies (Primary and Secondary levels) English language (Primary and Secondary levels), Malay language, Social Studies and Science. Islamic Social Studies is a newly introduced syllabus by MUIS which combines subjects such as Geography, History, Sociology and Economy with *tarbiyah* as the critical component.

When we analyse the data on pedagogic practices of teachers based on these classroom observations, we need to consider that most teachers lack the exposure and training involving the latest and varied

teaching techniques then. Except for three former national school teachers teaching academic subjects, the rest of the 10 teachers and *asatizahs* involved in the classroom observation did not receive formal teacher training at the diploma level. The *asatizahs* however had undergone teacher training via short courses organized by MUIS, and other voluntary professional organizations and commercial bodies.

Five academic teachers had undergone schooling at the national schools and therefore are exposed to the teaching strategies employed at the national schools. The *asatizahs* and teachers' academic background, however, is more credible in relation to their professional training. Out of the five academic teachers, two were graduates of National University of Singapore with Bachelor of Arts degree; two possess GCE 'A' level certificates and one with Diploma in Engineering from a local polytechnic. All the *asatizahs* involved in the observation are graduates of local *madrasah*s. Out of seven, four *asatizahs* were armed with Bachelor of Arts degree in religious studies or Arabic language from external universities, and three with GCE 'A' level certificates and would soon undergo Diploma in Education courses run locally by Edith Cowen University, Australia, under the auspicious of MUIS. These three teachers have been assigned to conduct Islamic Social Studies and Islamic Religious Knowledge in English. These two subjects are designed by MUIS as part of its new religious curriculum initiatives using English language. It is therefore important for readers to read the findings of the classroom observations in light of the teachersand *asatizah*s' educational and training (or lack of) background.

In this research, teachers' observable behaviour is an indicator of pedagogy implemented in classroom teaching and learning throughout three phases of instruction, viz. the induction (beginning), development and closure of the lessons. I am interested to determine the methodology predominantly used, which is either teacher-dominated or student-centered activities. In this case, I adapt the use of 'phases' which are defined as distinctive patterns of classroom

activity (Vygotsky's zones of proximal development) (Vygotsky, 1978) with durations of longer than 5 minutes. Vygotsky describes the notion of proximal development which lies between what a person can do independently (therefore needing no instruction) and what he or she can do only with assistance. The goal of the instruction is to move students from dependence to independence in a wide range of skills and problem-solving abilities. I also adapt, albeit simplified, variables listed by Singapore Pedagogy Coding Scheme (SPCS) (Luke, Cazden, Lin & Freebody, 2004) for both teacher-dominated and student-centred activities phases.

The teacher-dominated phase is characterized by either one or combination of the following activities; a) whole class monologues where the teacher lectures, b) whole class elicitation and discussion where the teacher leads and engages students in interactive discussion, c) initiation-response-evaluation (IRE) phase where the teacher goes through answer checking, and d) choral repetition where the teacher leads the class in reading aloud. Due to its restrictive nature, teacher-dominated phases have hardly any room for creative teaching technique. Based on the classroom observations, the observable student-centred activities included a) individual seatwork where students are given exercises to complete at their desks, b) small group work where students are given tasks to perform as a group, and c) student demonstrations/presentations: student report back demonstration at whiteboard, show and tell, and presentation of students' writing or texts. These include overhead transparency (OHT) presentations, formal presentations, and presentation of results from experiments.

Based on the classroom observations, Table 2 illustrates the percentage distribution of 28 phases occurred during teaching-learning activities in the *madrasah*. The findings are by no means representing conclusively teaching pedagogy used in *madrasah*. They, however, serve to show the sampling of teaching-learning activities conducted in *madrasah* and to a certain extent, the *madrasah*'s departure from

purely memorization' and lecture methodology in teaching and learning employed in the past. At the very least, the findings demonstrate the *asatizah* and *madrasah* teachers' efforts to enrich their pedagogic repertoire in lesson delivery.

Table 2 Distribution of observable teaching phases (in percentage) in *madrasah*, 2004 & 2005.

Subjects/ phases	Lecture	Whole class discussion	IRE	Choral repetition	Individual seatwork	Small group work	Whole class activity	Student demo
Islamic SS (2	-	7.1	-	3.55	-	3.55	-	-
Muqaddam	-	-	-	3.55	-	-	-	-
IRK	-	3.55	-	3.55	-	3.55	-	-
Lughah	-	3.55	-	3.55	3.55	-	-	-
Fiqh	3.55	3.55	-	-	-	-	-	-
Hadith	3.55	3.55	-	-	-	-	-	-
English (2)	-	-	-	7.1	-	-	3.55	-
Malay	-	3.55	3.55	-	3.55	-	-	-
Science	-	3.55	-	-	3.55	-	-	-
Social studies	-	3.55	-	-	-	3.55	-	3.55
Gen Paper	-	-	3.55	-	3.55	-	-	-
% of phases	7.1	32.1	7.1	21.5	14.3	10.7	3.6	3.6

Source: Classroom observation, *madrasah*s.

Based on my general observation, a lesson does not necessarily constitute only one phase. Except two lessons, at least more than one phase took place in the other eleven or 84.6 percent of lessons. Teacher-dominated phases (lecture, whole class discussion, IRE and choral repetition) were predominantly employed by the teachers and took up a total of 67.8 percent of total classroom teaching observations as compared to only 32.2 percent of student-centred activities (individual seatwork, small group work, student demonstration, and whole class activity). When the total percentage of phases is further broken up to differentiate between the pedagogic trend in religious and academic subjects teaching, a similar pattern is

discerned, viz. teacher-dominated phases were mainly used in religious subjects teaching. In the case of academic subjects, the teacher-dominated phases were 28.6 percent, but still slightly more as compared to student-centred phases. There were more tendencies for teachers to employ student-centred activities when teaching academic subjects (25.0 percent) as compared to religious subjects (7.1 percent).

Whole class discussion constitutes the largest proportion of the teacher-dominated phase for both religious and academic subjects. The next frequently used phase is choral repetition in both religious (10.7 percent) and academic subjects (10.7 percent); and individual seatwork (10.7 percent) in academic subject lessons. Examples of choral repetition involved teacher-led reading aloud of Quranic verses and *dhikr*. Students were expected to echo the teacher's reading verbatim.

Small group work in Islamic Religious Knowledge and Islamic Social Studies involved elements of creative teaching activities such as the *doa* designed with frames and decorations, and map-itenary design tasks at Primary level. The element of creative teaching was also observed during Social Studies lesson for Secondary three where mind-mapping was carried out, followed by group demonstration and elaboration of what their mindmaps entailed. Such element was also evidence during whole class activity involving role play and students psychomotor movements to demonstrate the meaning of certain words was observed in English language class for Primary One students.

Teacher-dominated phases were observed to be more dominantly employed by the *madrasah* teachers and student-centred phases were evidently slightly more prevalent in other subject classes than in the religious subject classes. Creative teaching methodology was the least employed by the *madrasah*s. Nonetheless, its presence, albeit small, in the *madrasah*s speaks volume of the eventual opening up of the *asatizah*s towards the efforts to instil creative and critical thinking in the students via creative methodology. Evidently,

madrasah teachers are attempting to diversify their teaching pedagogy, and a shift towards student-centred phases is becoming more apparent.

Measures to improve the curriculum content and practices

The *madrasah*s are aware of the need to buttress the *asatizah*s pedagogical skills to improve teaching and learning effectively. In 2003, MUIS launched its $8 million new religious curriculum project by commissioning Boston-based IQRA' International Educational Foundation to design a new syllabus for religious subjects from Primary to Secondary level under the Curriculum Development Project (CDP) scheme in [8]. This new initiative provides new educational perspectives to the *asatizah*s.

The approach taken to the teaching and learning of these groups of subjects is the Adaptive Methodological Approach or ADAM model which is based on the assumptions that a) learning is a process that is actively engaged between the student and the teacher, b) children are not a blank slate – there is an active process that drives children to construct their own ideas, c) knowledge is not solely about transferring of facts and acquisitions of certain skills; it is also about understanding what it means and how to apply it in everyday living and in the society that one lives, and d) education's overall goal is to help individual child reach his or her developmental potential and assist in the professional growth of the teacher (MUIS, 2003: 35-38). Central to this approach is student as an active and contributing learner to his own cognitive, psychomotor, spiritual, affective and social development. Student's dynamic interaction with his teacher and learning environment, including teacher's teaching strategies, contributes to his development. Hence, teacher plays a critical role in promoting such dynamism by being a reflective and effective teacher. This is a far cry from the traditional approach to the teaching and learning of the *madrasah* in the past. Short of being identified as Constructivism [9], the make-up of ADAM is very much akin to Constructivism adopted by the national schools, but with the divinity components as an undercurrent.

The new syllabus demands a new approach to teaching methodology. Now, *asatizah*'s professional training and development has becoming more critical. In 2003 the first batch of 24 *asatizah*s attended the 2-year Diploma in Education run by a Singapore-based Australian university, Edith Cowan University. The cost of training of each *asatizah* which came up to about $17,600 for 2 and half years was borne by MUIS (*The Straits Times*, 15 Dec 2005; 14 Feb 2007). To strengthen the teaching of English, Mathematics and Science at the Primary school level, another group of 22 teachers with at least GCE 'A' level certificate or diploma were subsidised to undergo a one-year Specialist Diploma in Education courses offered by NIE in 2005. Realizing the importance of effective curriculum and human resource management in *madrasah*, *madrasah* principals and heads of department were sent for professional training courses conducted by NIE, namely Leadership in Education Programme and Diploma in Departmental Management respectively. In 2007, 25 full-time teachers from six *madrasah*s embarked onto a programme that was to make them 'better teachers and acquaint them with the curriculum of mainstream schools'. The part-time Specialist Diploma in Teaching and Learning, offered by the training and development arm of the MUIS and run by the National Institute of Education (*The Straits Times*, 20 Sept 2007) will take them about a year and a half to complete. Currently, the third batch of *madrasah* teachers is undergoing the said course.

Conclusion

The Singapore experience is perhaps not a spectacular example to depict the *madrasah*'s success in implementing creative and responsive teaching methodology. However, bearing in mind that the *madrasah* has been traditionally known to guarding furiously its teaching and learning practices over many years, any small step taken by the *madrasah* to initiate change in these areas are by no mean small feats. These small steps can only take place when there is a shift in mindset; a consciousness to re-confer *'aql* to its high status; and most

importantly, the realization that to educate a child is to empower him with the skills to enhance his critical and creative thinking so that new knowledge could be developed to serving mankind and ultimately, the Almighty. Creative and responsive teaching methodology may not be the most excellent tool to achieve our educational goals, but for a start, it has the capacity to enhance the students' intellectual acumen, appreciate creative expressions, and embraces the values of caring and concern for the students.

References

Ajijola, A. A. (1999). *Re-structuring of Islamic education.* India: Adam publishers.

Azhar Ibrahim (2006). An evaluation of *madrasah* education: perspectives and lessons from the experiences of some Muslim countries, in Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman & Lai, A. E. (eds.), *Secularism and spirituality seeking integrated knowledge and success in madrasah education in Singapore.* Singapore: Marshall Cavendish – Institute of Policy Studies.

Dozier, C. (et. Al.) (2006). *Critical literacy, critical teaching – tools for preparing responsive teachers.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Fisher, A. & Scriven, M. (1997). *Critical thinking – its definition and assessment.* United Kingdom: Centre for Research in Critical Thinking.

Ibn Khaldun (1967). *The Muqaddimah – an introduction to history*, Rosenthal, F (trans.), United Kingdom: Princeton University Press.

Idris Zakaria (2002). *The political aspects of Avicenna's general theory of cosmology and the human soul.* Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Jackson, M. G. (2008). Transformative learning for a new worldview: learning to think differently. USA: Palgrave Macmillan.

Luke, A., Freebody, P., Cazden, C & Lin, A (2004). *Singapore pedagogy coding scheme (SPCS). Singapore,* National Institute of Education, Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice. Unpublished manuscript.

M Abdul Haq Ansari (1964). *The ethical philosophy of Miskawayh.* Aligargh: Aligargh Muslim.

Mohamed El-Mokhtar Ould Bah (1998). *Islamic education between tradition and modernity.* Morocco: Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Rosnani Hashim (1996). *Educational dualism in Malaysia.* Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

Saeda Buang (2007). *Madrasah* and Muslim education: Its interface with urbanization, in Pink, W.T. & Noblit, G.W (eds), *International Handbook of Urban Education.* USA: Springer, 321-342.

Saeda Buang (2008). Religious education as locus of curriculum – a brief inquiry into *madrasah* curriculum in Singapore, in Lai Ah Eng (ed.), *Religious Diversity in Singapore.* Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Shaw, K. (2006). Muslim education in the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia: selected issues, in Griffin, R. (ed.), *Education in the Muslim world – different perspectives.* United Kingdom: Symposium Books.

Short, E. C (ed.) (1991). *Forms of curriculum enquiry.* Albany: State University of New York.

Tariq Rahman (2006). The educational caste system: a survey of schooling and polarization in Pakistan, in Rukhsana Zia (ed.), *Globalization, modernization and education in Muslim countries.* New York: Nora Science.

Thayer-Bacon, B. J. (2000). *Transforming critical thinking – thinking constructively.* New York: Teachers College Press.

ENDNOTES:

1 Each of these authors conducted surveys on Muslim educational institutions in countries in Southeast Asia, Africa and Middle East. Although the selection of studies is by no means exhaustive, it is to depict common pedagogical 'problems' faced by *madrasah*s in many countries.

2 Here, it can be taken to be 'lengthy lectures' usually conducted in religious sermons.

3 While critical thinking proponents focus on logical and dialectical reasoning, and critical spirit, 'constructive thinking' moves beyond critical thinking. It also includes social interaction and highlights the necessity of students developing a personal voice or the subjective self in order for them to be knower (Thayer-Bacon, 2000: 132-140).

4 Resident population comprises Singapore citizens and permanent residents. See Singapore residents by age group, ethnic group and sex, end June 2007, *Monthly Digest*

of Statistics, Singapore at http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/reference/mdsaug08.pdf, accessed on 19 Jul 2008.

5 With the land area of merely 707.1 square kilometres, the population density of the city-state is 6,489 per square kilometre.

6 Jamaluddin al-Afghany (1838-1897), Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), and Rashid Rida (1865-1935) are among Middle Eastern most influential reformist figures whose modernist ideas have impacted the religious and socio-political views and practices of the local reformers.

7 Out of 4148 students, 2730 or 65.8 percent are female. This figure does not include students of the two part-time *madrasah*s in Singapore (325 students). For more details, please refer to Education Statistics Digest at http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/education-statistics-digest/esd-2008.pdf, accessed on 8 Aug 2008.

8 See the history of IQRA' International Foundation at http://www.iqrafoundation.com/http://www.iqrafoundation.com/, accessed on 20 Feb 2005.

9 To elucidate Constructivism, Sigel and Cocking (1977: 225) explain, "That all systems made by people are human constructions should not be confused with the idea of constructivism itself as a label for a theoretical perspective. When we think of constructivism as a theoretical perspective, we start with the assumption that the individual, as an active organism, builds or constructs notions of reality, whether physical or social. The principal assumption is that the active organism does not passively assimilate information and construct a knowledge system. Rather, the active organism builds from experience and the process of building results in knowledge. The process may be similar to the scientist building theoretical models, but our interest is in the developmental aspects of such constructions. The metaphor of construction is applicable to each situation, whether the individual is a scientist or not". Quoted from Sigel, I. E. (1978: 334-335).