

Community service



Dr Mohammed Abdul Bari was recently elected secretary general of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). Education remains his passion and the driving force behind his strategies, discovers Nick Blackmore

One gentleman phoned me and said, 'I have a difficulty with my neighbour. Can you come and sort it out?' I said, 'Look, this is not our job! Why don't you go to your local mosque?' He said, 'Well, the MCB is not doing anything for us, so I'm not supporting you.'" Dr Mohammed Abdul Bari pauses. "The expectation is probably beyond imagination."

The substance of this anecdote (if not the tone it is delivered in) represents Bari's only expression of fatigue or exasperation during our interview. You could forgive him a little prickliness though, considering his schedule: his appointment with *Report* coming hot on the heels of an interview with ITN and before an appearance on CNN. In both

represent the whole of the community; our Prime Minister doesn't represent all of the community. We represent 420-odd national, regional and local organisations and we try to look after the interests of the whole Muslim community." 'Community' is a key concern for Bari; we talk for less than an hour but he uses the word more than 30 times and almost always in conjunction with education.

In fact, Bari describes himself as "a community person". Intellectual curiosity took him out of the air force and into a PhD in physics at King's College London, but after seven years of research it was his passion for working in the community that caused him to reject "the secluded life" of research, in favour of teaching science at a difficult Haringey secondary school. He credits ATL publications with helping him to forge his subsequent role as an SEN specialist.

I put it to him that, since science is based on logic and empiricism and faith is based on the unverifiable, his career move – from researching physics to speaking for a faith group – is an odd one. In response, he describes Islam as "a very rational religion" that does not contradict scientific fact: "There hasn't been an invention or discovery that goes against the Koran; when it talks about human embryology, it talks in a lucid language, when it talks about the cosmos, it doesn't say when it was created." He concludes that Muslims are "better human beings, and better scientists and thinkers, when they are rooted to Islam".

The idea that the education of British Muslims should have a comprehensive

‘Education in the West is amoral’

grounding in Islam brings us to the contentious subject of faith schools. Members at this year's ATL Conference passed a motion to press for state funding of faith schools to end, arguing that such institutions discourage integration and encourage fundamentalism. By contrast, Bari is an enthusiastic advocate of Muslim faith schools and uses an assortment of arguments to justify their existence: they produce better results than state schools; there are only five Muslim faith schools with state funding; there is still ethnic diversity within Muslim schools; state schools can also become mono-ethnic and self-segregating; and that while all schools should follow the national curriculum, we should "let flowers flourish in a garden in their own way".

Whether or not one agrees with Bari's position on faith schools, the fact that his arguments are largely based upon results is characteristic of his approach, which favours practicality over dogma. The Improving School Attendance in Partnership (ISAP) programme between Tower Hamlets LA and the London Muslim Centre is a good example of his doctrine: 20 primary schools have signed up to a scheme that sees Imams join home liaison officers in visiting homes in the heavily Muslim area. Bari says that a directive from a school is never as powerful as one from an Imam as "when an Imam says it, the message is far stronger because the parents take it religiously". He's clearly satisfied that attendance has risen and that ISAP has been praised by the DfES.

Of course, for some members of the British public, the fear is not that young Muslims will skip school, but rather that they will become radicalised. Bari believes that curing the former ailment will prevent the latter one: one reason why he works with those adolescents who have behavioural difficulties is because he believes them to be most vulnerable to the pull of violence, drugs and extremism. Again, community is identified as the bulwark against negativity: "If a child feels homely in his school, why should he or she go into violence and criminality?" Bari reasons. "Community schooling is as important as community policing."

While Bari views problems in local terms (coming back time and again to his experiences in Tower Hamlets), he believes British education has become "heavily Eurocentric" and needs to take a more global perspective. He also feels that "education in the postmodern Western world is value-free and amoral" and cites sex education as one example of why British education needs to move away from this trend. The messages of such teaching should, he argues, be placed more within the context of family responsibilities. "I'm not saying you become Puritans, or teach Christianity or Islam," he reasons, "but there are universal values that give human beings together a respect for each other."

It's hard not to be impressed by Bari's commitment to education or his ability to juggle so many roles (from chairing the London Muslim Centre to sitting on the 2012 Olympic Organising Committee). As he speaks, there is evidence nearby of another role: his youngest son is in tow and, like any adolescent being dragged around a parent's workplace, he is fidgety and monosyllabic; the precise opposite of his father. He will start secondary school this year, ensuring that education continues to pervade every aspect of Bari's life for a long while yet. From Bari's perspective this should be both a virtue and a pleasure: "Education is a charity," Bari summarises. "If you give education to someone, your knowledge enhances and you empower the other person." ✍

cases he's speaking for the MCB and for British Muslims, against the background of another suspected terror plot. These days he's also likely to find himself fighting the accusation that the majority of Muslims are unrepresented by the MCB.

A slim, dapper and patient man who speaks with measured enthusiasm, Bari is just as much an educationalist as a spokesman. An ATL member, he has worked as a physics researcher, a science teacher, and now specialises in behaviour support for Tower Hamlets' educational authority, while running parenting courses for the Race Equality Unit. He says these roles complement his role at the MCB and is frank about the capabilities of the council: "It's not possible for one individual organisation or person to