

Gülen's Educational Philosophy: Striving for the Golden Generation of Muslims

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Education has been cited as one of the factors that have left the Muslim World in its seemingly dark ages. Muslim reformers from various orientations have sought to address the issue of education through their intellectual works (Iqbal, 2005). Yet, none have successfully developed an educational philosophy that has been successful in producing individuals (both Muslims and non-Muslims) who are adept in the professional fields but more importantly complete human beings who strives to improve the conditions of their respective societies (Hermanson, 2007). It is in this regard that Fethullah Gülen, Muslim scholar of Turkish origin has been successful. Gülen's vision of creating the golden generation of Muslims seems already bear fruits in many parts of the Muslim World where his followers are present (Gülen, 2000). This paper is an attempt to understand the impact of Gülen's educational philosophy on the schools build by millions of his followers around the world. It argues that Gülen's educational philosophy have led to the churning of hundreds of thousands of Muslim individuals who have successfully improve societal conditions in their respective societies. This paper will draw extensively from the author's interaction with the followers of Gülen in Australia and Singapore. There will be four parts to this paper. The first part will briefly highlight the key tenets of Gülen's educational philosophy by examining Gülen's writings and statements about education. The second part of the paper will examine ways this philosophy is reflected in the movement's activities. The third part of the paper will assess the impact that this philosophy has had on those who are part of the movement. The paper will conclude by looking at how these individuals have impacted their respective societies.

Brief Introduction to the Gülen Movement

Fethullah Gülen is perhaps one of the most important Muslim intellectuals of this century.^[1] Born in the village of Korucuk to a family of religious individuals, he received traditional Islamic education and was awarded the state preacher's license by 1959. One of the first steps taken by Gülen to propagate his ideas is by starting summer camps where the Islamic religion is taught. Subsequently, he started private dormitories funded by local businessmen where his initial students, many of whom were university students from lower income backgrounds lived. In the 1980s, he began travelling throughout Turkey to preach and encourage his students to start schools all over Turkey. Gülen sought to solve contemporary problems and issues facing Muslims through his preaching of the Islamic religion. His exemplary character and practical approach in teaching Islam won him millions of followers over the next five decades. His movement has surged into public prominence in Turkey

and abroad through its newspapers and magazines, schools, business organizations and inter-faith foundations.^[2] Yet despite, Gülen's religious training, the movement has sought to promote Islam through religiously neutral activities. As one prominent expert on Turkey noted, *"The Gülen movement is a fascinating example of a piety movement that appears to concentrate on secular activities as an expression of a deeply religious attitude to life It has established an extensive network of modern schools in numerous countries around the world, but the schools offer an entirely secular curriculum. Similarly, the newspaper Zaman, which appears in many different languages, does not appear to support any specifically Islamic agenda (though it is largely supportive of the AKP government in Turkey), and many of its contributors are secular intellectuals."*(Van Bruneissen, 2010).

One of the most important facets of this movement is in its educational activities through which the movement has made significant contributions in many countries the movement is currently operating in. Prior to this discussion, a brief description of Gülen's educational philosophy will be expounded.

Gülen's Educational Philosophy

For Gülen, education and learning are the most important aspect of human life (Caroll, 2007). He taught that the pursuit of knowledge is a human duty that when fulfilled elevate a man to the rank of true humanity making him a beneficial element of society (Ünal and Williams, 2000). Similar to earlier Muslim intellectuals such as Muhammad Iqbal and Sayyid Jamal Al-Din Al-Afghani, Gülen argued that the upliftment of the Muslim World would occur if Muslims become more educated. The end goal of Gülen's educational vision is to raise a "Golden Generation," a generation of ideal universal individuals, individuals who love truth, who integrate spirituality and knowledge, who work to benefit society (Gülen, 1998).

In order to achieve this end goal, Gülen advocates for a new approach to education. Gülen writes,

Although knowledge is a value in itself, the purpose of learning is to make knowledge a guide in life and to illuminate the road to human perfection.

For Gülen, the most important aspect of education is teaching. Teaching is viewed as a sacred deed and the key duty of a teacher is to bring about a positive change in the lives of their students (Gülen, 2004). Citing the example of Prophet Muhammad whom he argued personified the perfect educator, Gülen noted that the Prophet led by example and it was through his behaviour and good deeds that he taught his family members and companions the virtues of Islam. This in Gülen's view has ensured that all those who were close to him never became heretics (Gülen, 2001). An educator must be one who give due importance to all aspects of his/her mind, spirit and self and sought to raise each of these to its proper perfection (Gülen,2001).Gülen also envisaged the establishment of an education system which is judged is universal, comprehensive and producing high quality students (Gülen,2004). This education system must also be able to change its students for the better.

Interestingly, despite Gülen's background as a scholar of Islam and the fact that his educational philosophy was derived from his faith, he advocated that scientific and religious knowledge are essential and complementary parts of the same whole (Woodhall, 2010). This has led to the strong focus that Gülen-inspired schools have given to secular subjects. Gülen's ideas on education, religion, human progress as well as his own example as an educator has inspired thousands of his followers to start schools from the Americas to Asia.

Gülen-inspired Schools

As highlighted earlier, Gülen had initiated the setting up of schools in Turkey as early as the 1980s. The movement had started schools in Izmir and Ankara by 1983. The year 1983 also marked an important event that was to remove an important barrier for followers of Gülen to set up schools. Turgut Özal, a keen student of Said Nursi took over power as the new Prime Minister of the country. Under his government, private schools were encouraged resulting in Gülen inspired schools springing up all over Turkey. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 also brought the movement to a new dimension of its development. Gülen had encouraged his students to start schools in the former Soviet Central Asian Republics. Gülen was quoted as saying, "Fly like swallows to these countries that are newly free, as an expression of our brotherhood" (Turgut, 2010). The first Gülen inspired school was opened in Azerbaijan in 1992. Since then, schools were opened all over the world including Asia, the Americas and Africa. In Australia, the first school, the Sule College was opened in 1996.

In virtually all the countries that these schools operate, the school will follow closely the national curriculum of the country. The schools have generally steered away from teaching religion in schools but focus on the teaching of ethics[420 Even when religion is being taught, it is done after official school hours and is mainly introduced to address the demands of Muslim parents who feel that their children should have some religious grounding. For instance in Australia, the Turkish schools are registered as non-denominational school to reflect its 'secular' approach to education.

These schools adopt an interesting and fresh approach to education. High emphasis is given to the students' well being and teachers are highly committed. Gülen has said that "The best way to educate people is to show a real concern for every individual, not forgetting that each individual is a different 'world'" (Ünal and Williams 2000:313).

Teachers are known to spend long hours mentoring students in their studies without being paid more. Even in Australia where employees tend to work during their official working hours, teachers including those who are not part of the Gülen movement agreed to stay for longer hours to assist their students. In some cases, the alma mater of the schools will return to coached students in their school work (Aslandoğan and Çetin 2007:54). The teachers also took a different approach in disciplining their students. Besides being exemplary individuals, teachers often shower their students with love. Each student in the school has a teacher who is responsible for his/her overall educational and personal development. One student from a Gülen school in eastern Turkey noted that his life changes completely after he started studying in a Gülen school. The teacher's commitment to his

studies and to him as an individual inspired him to kick bad habits like smoking and encouraged him to commit more time to his studies. He noted that prior to various examinations, teachers would offer free classes to students at their homes and would not sleep to ensure that all their students are well-prepared. These teachers would even cook and assist their students in other chores (Gokhan, 2010). Such a transformation is an important aim of the schools. One commentator noted that *"Gülen schools excel in academics because the instructors strive for perfection not only in having a command of their subject matter but also in (1) loving and caring for their students and (2) developing their own character as much as, if not more than, their students' character."* (Woodhall, 2009).

The role of the teachers do not just end in school. These teachers understand the important role played by the family in the development of a child's life and education. Gülen himself is of the view that children can receive a good education at home only if there is a healthy family life and that a dysfunctional family life increasingly reflects upon the child's spirit, and therefore upon society (Gülen, 2001).

Teachers sought to maintain a close relationship with the student's families. In Turkey, at least once a fortnight, parents will be invited to the schools to be briefed about their child's development. In countries like Australia, parents are invited less frequently due to time constraint. There are also cultural differences in relation to the role of the family. Students in Gülen schools in Turkey observed that parents in Australia (esp from Turkish backgrounds) tend to take a more *laissez faire* attitude towards their child's education as compared to those in Turkey. Nevertheless, teachers endeavour to ensure that the children are cared after even in cases where parents are less cooperative. Teachers will also spend after school hours to coach or sought help (in areas outside their field) for the children under their responsibility.

Beyond the teachers, ex-students (often referred to as *abis* by the younger students) from these schools also contribute significantly to the development of these schools. Many of these students devote several hours of their time per week to assist students from the school with their studies. The *abis* not only assists students in their school work but also act as mentors and examples to these students. To encourage these students to attend the extra mentoring sessions, the *abis* often would buy food and intersperse the sessions with breaks where students play games. In Sydney, some students from the Sule College would also play soccer on Saturday nights with their *abis*.^[3] The former students do not just contribute in terms of time. Students who are established in their respective profession will also contribute financially to the betterment of the schools.

One the most important dimension of the Gülen schools is the support schools receive from Turkish businessmen who are committed to the Gülen's Turko-Islamic worldview (Yavuz, 2003). These businessmen provides fundings form scholarships and bursaries to be given to outstanding students who otherwise could not afford Gülen had encouraged businessmen to support schools in Central Asia when schools mushroomed all over Central Asia. The relationship between the businessmen and schools is a symbiotic one. They benefit from the networks and assistance they received from business organizations formed by Gülen's followers. Such association will assist a Turkish businessman interested to do business in a particular country by providing the context of business

climate and contacts within the country. One such organization, the Singapore-Turkey Business Association was set up in 1995 for this purpose. Such a relationship is encouraged by Gülen who argued that economic wealth will support a modern educational system that could empower Turks and Muslims (Yavuz, 2003). Due the strong financial support schools received, Gülen inspired schools tend to be equipped with the most modern and state of the art educational facilities (Woodhall, 2009).

Dersane as Educational Hubs

Transmission of education for Gülen need not occur only in schools. One of Gülen's first effort was to establish a network of student homes and dormitories known as *dersane* (light houses) that is use as centers to assist students in their school work and provide students with spiritual guidance. The more senior members of the movement will rent houses for tertiary students to stay. While many of these students are followers of Gülen, they would often invite university friends to stay in these homes. Each house will have a person in-charge (imam). The appointment of these imams is done by the senior abis within the movement and often the student deemed to be intellectually and spiritually suitable will be appointed. In these homes, students spend most of their time on their studies and are encouraged strongly by the abis to perform well in their studies. Perhaps the key difference that separates these dersanes from a regular shared house is the emphasis on daily prayers and other activities related to the movement. These activities include a weekly gatherings known as *sohbet* (religious talks) where students will study and discuss the works of Bediuzaman Said Nursi collectively known as the *Risale-E-Nur*. *Sohbet* could also be in the form of simpler religious sermons conducted by a more senior abi. In contrast to other Islamic groups where one would be ostracised for being lax in prayers or group's activities, there is no coercion in these *dersane* and students who involved themselves in these activities do so voluntarily. One of the most important activity undertaken by the tertiary students is mentoring younger students who are in secondary or high schools (not necessarily from the Gülen schools). There is regular homework assistance by older students, and some of them may actually live in pensions where they receive 24-hour supervision and support especially during the exam period (Van Bruinessen,). These students are often sent to the dersanes by their parents. Even younger students are sent to the dersanes for basic religious instructions in theology and Koran-reading. The dersanes are important hubs for education. The bulk of the students who subsequently commit themselves to Gülen's philosophy do so after staying in the dersanes.

Other Institutions

Besides the schools and dersanes, followers of Gülen also established various institutions in line with his educational philosophy. One such effort is the university preparatory courses. As early as 1974, Gülen initiated various university preparatory courses in Manisa, where he was based. The rationale of these courses is to provide students from regular families an opportunity to be adequately prepared for universities which till then was the domain of the wealthy (Seker).

Subsequently, various private centers were established to provide such services. Similar to the schools, parents enrol their children in these centers prior to their entry into the universities. The organizational structure of these centers are similar to the schools where teachers are to manage the overall performance of students. A student from one of these institution described how two weeks prior to the exams, his teacher in charge had not gone back to his house at all and was completely devoted to ensuring that his students perform well in the exams (Serker, 2010).

The Gülen movement has also successfully adopted its educational strategies depending on the context where it is operating in. In various countries such as Albania where there is a dearth in Islamic schools, the movement has started imamhatip schools where future religions scholars are trained. (Mahmet, 2010). In some Western countries like Australia, followers of Gülen conduct classes on islam due to high demand for such classes. In Australia, a leading intellectual from the movement, Mehmet Ozalp conduct classes at the Auburn Gallipoli Mosque weekly to a a class of mainly non-Muslim students to provide an understanding of Islam. Gülen had stressed that his approach to education inspired an “ethical vision rooted in Islam but not limited in its expression to sympathizers of the umma (community).”(Thomas Michel, “Fethullah Gülen as Educator”, in Esposito and Yavuz (eds), p. 82). To this end, various i dialogue associations were formed to conduct educational activites aimed at creating understanding between adherents of different faiths. In recent years, followers of Gülen has also started several research institutions aimed at producing knowledge that are relevant to contemporary societies in line with Gülen's vision that knowledge should bring about betterment of society.

Gülen's Educational Philosophy Applied: The Case of Australia

The history of the Gülen movement is indeed interesting. Greg Barton's paper on the movement in Australia is the most important account till date. As such, the paper will not delve into great detail about the movement in the country. The movement began in the country in 1980 when a Gülen follower Orhan Cicek arrived in Melbourne and started organizing activities related to the movement. His first project in Melbourne was a tuition center , the Light Tutoring Centre in inner city Melbourne, with the primary aim of helping struggling Turkish and other Muslim youth (Barton, 2009). Subsequently, through collective efforts of the Gülen followers and the Turkish community several dersane and schools were founded in Sydney and Melbourne. These schools include the Aurora Sydney Education Centre (1992), the Sule College (1996) and the Isik College in East Meadows, Melbourne. By mid-2008 there were sixteen Gülen inspired schools in Australia serving a collective student body of over 6000 (Barton, 2009). Alongside schools, Gülen's followers also founded several interfaith organizations including the the Melbourne based *Australian Intercultural Society* (AIS) and the Sydney based Affinity Inter-Cultural Association. In 2009, the Islamic Science and Research Academy Australia (ISRA), a research insitution with the aim of embarking on inter-faith research and other scholarly activities.

The Sule College in Preston: Embodying the Gülen's Educational Vision

The Sule College is the main Gülen inspired school in Sydney. Followers of Gülen who shared his educational vision had organized themselves and formed the Feza Foundation in 1994 with the aim of starting a school. Through various fund raising efforts, the foundation bought the current Sule College Preston's property in December 1994. The school opened its doors to its first students (numbering 32) in 1996. Since then the school has grown significantly with a 1400 student community spread through three campuses (Preston, Auburn and Illawara). Similar to Gülen inspired schools all around the world, the school's curriculum is based on the national curriculum. The exception being that Turkish language is taught as a compulsory subject. The school has done extremely well producing top students at both state and national levels. In 2009, the Sule College topped all schools in the state of New South Wales in Mathematics. Unlike many of the other top schools which charged exorbitant school fees, the school fees charged by the Sule College are comparably lower. In addition, the school also offers a number of highly competitive scholarships. Most of the students in the Sule College hailed from Muslim backgrounds with about 60% coming from Turkish families while the rest are from South Asian and Lebanese backgrounds. There is a small number of students from non-Muslim backgrounds. Due to the overwhelming Muslim student population, there is a high demand for some form of religious instruction to be taught in the schools. This is often taught after school hours. While there is a small prayer area (where the daily prayers and the Friday congregation prayers are observed) in the school, students are never forced to pray. However, many do so voluntarily forgoing their lunch time to do so.

The Sule College represents an interesting case study of how a Gülen inspired school functions in a multi-cultural setting. Unlike such schools in other parts of the world, the followers of Gülen account for only 20% of the teaching staff. Yet, the school has successfully internalised Gülen's philosophy within the school system. Teachers in the school remain highly committed to the students; performance often sacrificing time after working hours to provide extra help to students. The relationship between students and teachers is that of friends. Rather than instilling fear of the teachers and principle, values of love and respect are inculcated amongst students. In 2008, during a visit to the school, I observed that during snack break, students would affectionately greet the principal of the school who was walking around the school with me. Discipline seems to also be in order within the school. In an informal chat with one of the students of Sule College, he expressed the view that the discipline at the Sule College is much better compared to other Australian schools. He explained that teachers treat their students with respect and would often resolve a problem or conflict in a positive manner. Teachers avoid trying punishing a child. However, in cases of problematic children, the child will be suspended from school. Each teacher also mentors several children whose overall educational development comes under their purview. Students who excel in their education and who are of good character are assigned mentors outside the schools. These mentors who are often ex-students of the school will be introduced to the students through the teachers. These mentors would assist the students in their studies and act like an elder brother to the student to ensure that the student will continue to do well in their studies. One of the most

important factor for the success of the Sule College is the highly competent teachers that are employed in the school. These teachers are high achievers who have done extremely well in their studies and are highly committed to Gülen's educational vision. While many of these teachers could obtain highly paid jobs in the private sectors, they choose to work for the schools due to the higher calling to create a golden generation of Muslims, a vision held by Gülen. One such individual, Azmi ___ had graduated with a first class honours in ___ and had done a Masters degree on a scholarship. He was subsequently offered a scholarship to pursue a doctorate degree but chose instead to be a teacher. Another individual, Barbaros Serker who is currently completing his degree in business studies had intended to return to Turkey to run his father's bakery business. Instead, he is opting to teach in the Sule college as he wanted to make a difference in the life of others rather than leading a 'meaningless' life as a businessman in Istanbul (Serker, 2010). Such individuals have committed their lives in order to serve within the larger scheme of Gülen's vision.

The Park Road Dersane: Building the Golden Generation Muslims

As highlighted earlier, dersane play an important role in internalizing Gülen's educational philosophy. In Australia, there are numerous dersanes. One such dersane is the Park Road dersane in Auburn, Sydney. The house was purchased by Gülen's followers in 2008. Due to the nature of the international character of Sydney, the residents of the dersane are of mixed background. Besides Turks and Australian born Turks, there are also students from Kuwait, Kazakhstan and Jordan living in the house. At a glance, the Park Road house looks just like any other student shared home. However, the distinction of this house becomes apparent after several hours in the house. The residents of the house will pray together during every prayer time often led by the Kuwaiti or Jordanian student due to their proficient Arabic. The residents will also roster cooking and cleaning duties on a daily basis and will sit down for breakfast and dinner together. Many of those who decided to stay in the *dersane* often do so with the thinking that the accommodation will be a temporary one. However, upon staying in the house, all of these students decided to stay on. The focus on studies is an important aspect of life at the dersane. Contrary to the experiences of the Turkish dersane where residents avoid discussing politics (Van Bruneissen, 2009), Turkish politics often dominate conversations in the dersane. While residents of the dersane have little time for frivolous activities such as watching television, they would indulge in sporting activities as a past time. In more recent time, residents from Turkey have also been watching a drama series about the Ergenekon case in Turkey. Residents also listen to music albeit those with a religious jaundice such as the ilahi music.

Education especially religious education plays a significant role within the dersane. Residents would read the Risalah-e-Nur on a daily basis and have sohbet on a weekly basis to discuss the contents of the Risalah. Often, residents would invite their friends and contacts to attend such sohbet. Those participating in the sohbet focused more on the substance of the session rather than symbolisms often associated with Muslim religious classes. Often these sohbet will be guided by a more senior abis who would come to the dersane for such sohbet. Sohbet could also involve the sharing of

general religious knowledge. Interestingly, those who are tasked to conduct these sohbet are often seen to be more knowledgeable in religion and could be the youngest person within the group. The contents of the sohbet tend to also be free of any religious denomination biases. As such, even those with more puritan understanding of Islam tend to be able to accept these ideas with an open mind. Education within the dersane is not limited to formal education, the process of appointing an imam within the house (which can also be rotated) is an important leadership training process for those within the Gülen movement to learn about leadership and responsibility and serves as an important training ground for their future endeavours within the group. As highlighted earlier in the paper, dersane is also used as a center where high school students would come to have tuition classes. These students will be given free tuition classes in their school subjects. To entice students especially those in the primary schools to come regularly, the residents of the dersane will buy food items such as cookies, pizza and soft drinks that will be served to them. At times, students will also be taught reading of the Koran.

The dersane in Auburn also exposes residents to an important dimension of education. The fact that residents are from different nationalities and even Islamic sects provide important lessons and insights to these differences. One particular resident who affiliates himself to the Wahhabi sect has chosen to continue living in the midst of the Gülen followers whose daily rituals include 'Sufi' practices such as *tasbeeh* and congregational *doas*. He also gained important lessons in tolerating differences within for the larger unity of the Islamic community, an important belief within Gülen's philosophy. It is through the dersane that Gülen's followers have grown beyond the Turkish community. Many Muslim students of Afghan, South Asian and Arab backgrounds came to know about Gülen's ideas and philosophy while living in Auburn. While it is not the purpose of the followers of Gülen to 'recruit' others to be his followers, the exemplary conduct and ways of his followers is often a factor in an individual's decision to learn more about Gülen. Mo'ad Fathouh had noted that he had planned to stay at the dersane temporarily while he is looking for a more permanent rented apartment. However, after living in the dersane for a month, he not only decided to stay but has started learning more about the teachings of Gülen. He also vowed to spread Gülen's ideas upon his return back to Jordan.

Footnote

[1] Gülen emerged first in the list of one hundred intellectuals in a ranking conducted by Foreign Policy/Prospect in 2008.

[2] Gülen himself did not set up these organizations and institutions. Rather it is set up by his followers who sought to imbibe his teachings through these bodies.

[3] The author had observed this personally when he stayed with several followers of Gülen in 2008 to 2010 in Sydney.

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