Madrasah Centre of Excellence

Transforming Madrasah into Learning Community-

Towards a Learning Madrasah

(By Minhas Tejani)

Introduction:

The institution of Madrasah has a key role in imparting Islamic Religious Education in order develop true Ithna Asheri Shias and it also has a long and evolving history. Every community has the vision of prosperity through development in various areas. Religious education has been given its due importance by every community whether it is developed or developing nation for its salvation and prosperity. Even the different religions of the world give due importance to acquiring religious education.

As a follow up of the madrasah retreat in 2011 a strategy document was prepared and approved at The World Federation conference in May 2011. A key recommendation was the formation of a formal madrasah structure to ensure that the madrasah agenda is always at the forefront of our leaders and our global organization. The Madrasah Centre of Excellence was established which is a vehicle that delivers and maintains the strategies for the madrasah program. Its focus is to attain harmony amongst the madaris and realize the vision which is "**nurturing piety**" and its mission is "**to enable a learning environment that instills the values of Quran and the Ahlulbayt (AS)**"

This concept paper will briefly explore the current status of Madrasah education and would particularly like to draw attention to some aspects of teaching and learning and suggest ways of transforming the Madrasah into a Learning Community. The focus of the concept paper is not to go into the depth of modalities but to suggest a framework for the change/transformation to initiate and sustain itself. The framework will somehow take into consideration the impact of transformation on the four work streams i.e. curriculum development, teacher training, learning resources, Assessment and Evaluation.

The Philosophical Perspective:

The two major sets of philosophical perspectives on education are the Greek and Hebrew. The understanding of these conflicting educational systems is important in determining the perspective of education. The Greek model of education shapes the modern educational theories. Greek education focused on content. Hebrew education focused on relationship. Greek teachers tried to shape students' minds. Hebrew teachers tried to shape students' hearts. Greek students were to learn what their teacher knew. Hebrew students were to

become what their teacher was. The notion that one can merely teach the mind and body of a child without involving the heart and soul is the method of the Greeks.

The Greeks focused on the CONTENT of knowledge. The Hebrews focused on the CONTEXT. The Greeks saw minds as empty jars to be filled. They followed impersonal curriculum. The Hebrews saw minds as clay to be molded. They personalized the educational process by teachers spending time simply talking with, working with, playing with, living with, and their students.

The Islamic Perspective:

It is evident from the teachings of Islam that the greatest emphasis is based on the concept of "Taqwa" and one of the tools for acquiring Taqwa (Piety) is through "Ilm" (Knowledge). However it is significant to note that the concept of Taqwa is not absolute and it is more of a formative nature. It is not acquired through the performance of rituals only but through introspection, soul searching, pondering, learning and reflecting.

The Holy Quran at numerous instances mentioned about the significance of "Ilm". Some of the references are as follows:

1. Soora e Talaq Ayat 12: Where the creation of world is discussed and the glory of Allah's Qudrat through His knowledge
2. Soora e Alaq Ayat 1-9: The whole soora is on the significance of Knowledge and teaching humans though Pen and letting humans learn that they did not know.
3. Soora e Fatir Ayat 29: Only the Ulema are the ones who are fearful of Allah
4. Soora e Baqarah Ayat 269: Those who have wisdom are the ones with ample virtuousness.

Note: The above are not the actual translations of the Ayaat but the contextual meanings

Holy Prophet (PBUH) and Masomeen (AS) through their words and actions have also emphasized the importance of piety and acquiring knowledge and wisdom. The famous hadith of Holy Prophet "Acquire Knowledge from cradle to grave" is a strong evidence of the importance of the formative nature of knowledge seeking.

To conclude Madrasah should not confine its focus on acquisition of knowledge (memorization of facts) only but should broaden it horizon on molding the personalities so that they can move towards the taqwa. Thus the madrasha should not confine itself to "Taleem" but should focus on "Tarbiyah". This will also help in achieving the vision of MCE which is "Nurturing Piety"

The Concept of a Learning Community:

Staratt (1999) cited in Retalick and Farah (2005) defines a number of characteristics of a learning community, which can be easily related to the context of Madrasah and are as follows:

- Learning must be situated in a critical community of inquirers who support knowledge through sharing of meanings, interpretations, and learning amongst all members of the community.
- The learning agenda of the school (Madrasah) must be continually related to something intrinsically human- to the exploration of questions important to human individuals and social life.
- The school learnings are connected to a significant discourse about the making of history.
- School meanings (i.e. what students learn at school), must be continuously related to students' experience of everyday life.

Mitchell and Sackney (2000) cited in Retalick and Farah (2005) share three interrelated dimensions of capacity building for a learning community. These are:

- Personal Capacity
- Interpersonal Capacity
- Organizational Capacity

Mitchell and Sackney (2000) conclude:

For us, a learning community consists in a group of people who take an active, reflective, collaborative, learning oriented and growth- promoting approach towards the mysteries, problems, and perplexities of teaching and learning.

From the above discussion it is quite evident that the Madrasah's need a paradigm shift into their approach towards teaching and learning. One of the important factors for making this shift is to transform the madrasah into a learning community. However the question arises how? The following discussion will help us understand how the madrasah can be transformed into a learning community.

Transformation of a Bureaucratic Organization to Learning Community

Retalick and Farah (2005) have discussed the idea and stages of transformation of schools from Bureaucratic organizations to learning communities which are equally applicable in the context of Madrasah. During the discussion they argue that schools are seen as 'organizations' featuring

bureaucracy, hierarchy, rules and regulations, policies and procedures etc. While discussing the concept of community they use the ideas of relationship, meaning, collaboration, reflection etc.

Scribner 1999 cited in Retalick and Farah (2005) suggests that bureaucratic organization and community are the opposite ends of a continuum.

Retalick and Farah (2005) suggest a three stage shift of schools from Bureaucratic organizations to Learning Communities.

Stage 1: From Bureaucratic organization to Learning Organization

Stage 2: From Learning Organization to Community of Practice

Stage 3: Designing a Learning Community

Learning Organisation

Communities of Practice

Learning Community

Stage 1 From Bureaucratic Organization to Learning Organization:

As part of the Madrasah Assessment and Evaluation Program of MCE it is evident that while assessing the madrasah an insight can be taken into whether the madrasah fulfills the criteria of a learning organization. In the training program for madrasah assessment and in the assessor's handbook the concept of madrasah as learning organization is mentioned with the details of the work of Peter Senge- The fifth discipline.

Argyris (1992) suggests that 'organizational learning is a competence that all organizations should develop'. In the book Schools that Learn Peter Senge (2000) and team discuss about the concept of single loop and double loop learning and its implications on the organizations. Argyris (1992) argues that single loop learning occurs when an error is detected and corrected without questioning or altering the underlying values of the system. Double loop learning occurs when errors are corrected by first examining and changing the governing variables of the organization and then the actions. A diagrammatic representation of the two types of learning is given below:
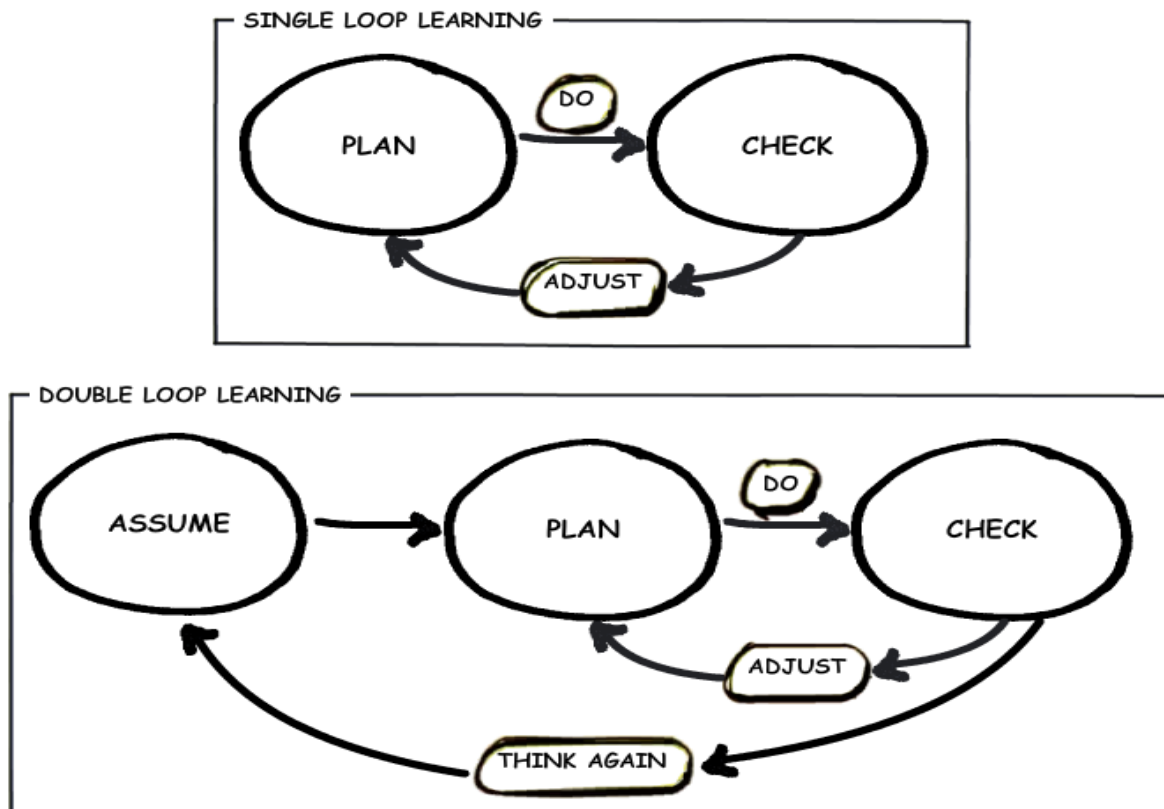
The core difference between the two is that in double loop learning you deliberately question and challenge your own norms, attitudes and assumptions. This helps to change the practices in a better and effective way. One of the effective means of carrying out double loop learning is to spend quality time on reflections that will help in changing the underlying assumptions of the organization.

Another significant work on learning organizations is done by Peter Senge (1990). He puts forward five interconnected disciplines for building learning organization. These five disciplines are:

- Systems Thinking
- Personal Mastery
- Mental Models
- Shared Vision
- Team Learning

Stage 2 From Learning Organization to Community of Practice:

Wenger (1998) cited in Retalick and Farah suggests "a community of practice is both social and individualistic; through social processes each individual develops and shapes their identity i.e. who they are, what they can and cannot do, how they relate with others and so on. Wenger has suggested three characteristics of a practice that generate the coherence required to constitute a community:

- Mutual engagement
- A joint enterprise
- A shared repertoire

The idea of mutual engagement refers to people discussing and negotiating meanings with each other. In a Madrasah setting it is very important for the teachers to have a mutual engagement to discuss and share their views on various aspects related to teaching and learning. We also need to keep one fact in mind that there will be diversity of views and opinions.

A joint enterprise is the result of a collective process of negotiation reflecting the full complexity of mutual engagement and it creates among participants, relations of mutual accountability that form an integral part of the practice. In the madrasah setup it can be done for curriculum development and implementation.

The shared repertoire or set of resources include routines, artifacts, tools, ways of doing things etc. In a madrasah setup sharing of the best practices amongst the colleagues and amongst other madrasahs can be done very easily.

Stage 3 Designing a Learning Community:

An important principle of designing a learning community is that students have varied opportunities and places for engagement. In a madrasah setting ample opportunities should be given to a student to have varied opportunities for learning inside and outside the classroom.

Mitchell and Sackney (2000) use the term 'learning architecture' to suggest that the elements of a learning community need to be consciously built alongside the 'physical architecture'. The elements are: learning teams, a learning agent, time, feedback, incentives and rewards.

It is imperative to note that learning is not confined to the students and the madrasah should focus on the following three levels to organize the reach the level of a learning community. These levels are:

- Students
- Teachers
- Community (Parents and overall community)

Conclusion:

In this concept paper the idea of embarking upon the journey towards becoming learning communities is proposed. The journey as discussed is challenging but it will be the basis of transforming the madrasah education particularly its outlook on teaching and learning. As argued above it has to come in phases and stages and it requires constant action and reflection. All the stakeholders i.e. community, parents, teachers, students have to work seriously to attain this target. If we are to achieve our target it will have a significant impact on the future generations.

References:

The following books were used for developing this concept paper:

Retallick and Farah (2005) Transforming Schools in Pakistan – Towards the Learning Community

Senge Peter (2000) Schools that Learn – A fifth discipline field book for educators, parents and everyone who cares about education

Assessors Handbook- Madrasah Assessment and Evaluation Program - MCE The World Federation (July 2012)

Muniat-ul Murid (in Urdu) by Shaheed e Saani (2007)