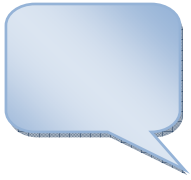


# SIDE BY SIDE

C O N F E R E N C E

FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS WORKING WITH MUSLIM COMMUNITIES



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## Speech by Christopher Rasch

I have to admit I was reluctant when I heard of a job at the IC. I was asked over a series of months to apply by a friend who taught at the school, and I politely declined the offer repeatedly.

Why?.. It wasn't a real school, it could involve working with some very dodgy characters, I would be isolated within the staff as a non Muslim, I didn't share the values, it would be a backward step professionally.

Finally my friend persuaded me to meet with the principal. Not a job interview, just to find out. I went with an attitude of – I don't need this job, I don't want this job but it would be interesting to see what an Islamic school looks like.

I was shocked. The principal had an Australian accent; the classrooms were indistinguishable to any other classroom I had been in. There was student work on the walls researching lizards, literacy projects on cereal packets, Thinkers Keys were prominently displayed. There was no perceivable difference – no religious displays, no strict rules displayed, just happy kids and normal teachers. The principal's greetings of *salaam alaykum* to the students were a bit surprising, as were the girls dressed in hijab - but not disturbing. The girl's eyes reflected the same mischief and excitement that kids have anywhere. In fact this was, from what I could observe, a real school!

I had wanted to move back to primary teaching, was keen on adventure and so saw this as an opportunity. I took the job. I'm now into my fourth year at the school and very comfortable. I now know that my misgivings about the job were misguided.

In fact I am now the literacy coordinator at the school, and I know firsthand that the school's foremost priorities are to provide a solid education and to pass our students on to the best possible pathways beyond school. Differences do exist: in the way we teach Arabic rather than French or Chinese; in the way the students study Quran instead of the bible; in the *Eid* celebrations that take place rather than Christmas or Easter; in the headscarves (hijab) worn by female teachers and students; and in the lunchtime prayer (although morning prayer is just like anything I ever experienced in assembly at a Christian school).

What about the dodgy characters? A true respect has grown between my students and me. The community has been as friendly and keen to share a joke as any of my neighbors. In fact, I believe the community respects and is grateful for the efforts the teachers are making for their children.

Isolated? I have just been to Sydney with two work colleagues. There I had the amazing experience of sitting amidst prayer at the mosque, meeting family, and being treated to a feast of Halal cuisine. There would now be equal numbers of Muslim and non-Muslim teaching staff, and so religion is not a consideration within the staffroom.

As for values, I have found nothing in the expression of Islam that contravenes my own values. The main values of the school and the school community are educational success and tolerance. The parents want the best education for their children; however they prefer that to be achieved within the context of their religion, just as many Christian parents choose. I have never been made to feel worse, different or in fact pressured to change in any way.

Career advancement... I have accelerated to a coordinators position in just a few short years; my C.V. is extensive now including speaking at conferences! Our school is associated with the Association of Independent Schools of South Australia, and as such I get to associate with many teachers from highly respected teaching institutions. Although I am not going anywhere immediately, I am confident that my experiences at such a diverse school would only be an advantage to me.

As for terrorists? I know they are a source of regret and shame to the community, a little like the shame of Pauline Hanson and One Nation to many Australians. The only difference being that all Australians didn't feel the brunt of racism by her actions. My students have to bear the brunt of a mainstream community that can be cruel and vindictive due to their racist misunderstandings

If there is any wisdom I have learned it is this; using the word pig in the classroom will get the same response as using the word bottom and it may be a while before you can control the merriment of a primary school class.

Other than that, I get the opportunity to work in an environment where I feel that my teaching is valued and really does make a difference, and I have made some truly wonderful friends.

*Christopher Rasch*

