Curricula that Respond to Local Needs: Analysing Community Support for Islamic and Quranic Schools in Northern Nigeria

Masooda Bano

Abstract

Involving local communities in school management is seen to be crucial to improving the quality of education in state schools in developing countries; yet school-based management committees remain dormant in most such contexts. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with a rich network of community-supported Islamic and Quranic schools in the state of Kano in northern Nigeria—a sub-Saharan African region with very low education indicators, low economic growth, and political and social instability—this paper shows how making school curricula responsive to local value systems and economic opportunities is key to building a strong sense of community ownership of schools. Under community-based school management committees, control over more substantive educational issues—such as the content of school curricula and the nature of aspirations and concepts of a good life that it promotes among the students—remains firmly in the hands of the government education authorities, who on occasion also draw on examples from other countries and expertise offered by international development agencies when considering what should be covered. The paper shows that, as in the case of the urban areas, rural communities or those in less-developed urban centres lose trust in state schools when the low quality of education provided results in a failure to secure formal-sector employment. But the problem is compounded in these communities, because while state schools fail to deliver on the promise of formal-sector employment, the curriculum does promote a concept of a good life that is strongly associated with formal-sector employment and urban living, which remains out of reach for most; it also promotes liberal values, which in the local communities' perception are associated with Western societies and challenge traditional values and authority structures. The outcomes of such state schooling, in the experience of rural communities, are frustrated young people, unhappy with the prospect of taking up traditional jobs, and disrespectful of parents and of traditional authority structures. The case of community support for Islamic and Quranic schools in northern Nigeria thus highlights the need to consider the production of localised curricula and to adjust concepts of a good life to local contexts and economic opportunities, as opposed to adopting a standardised national curriculum which promotes aspirations that are out of reach.

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Introduction

In development theory and practice, community involvement in state schools is seen to be crucial for addressing the challenge of low levels of learning in state schools (World Bank 1996; Hickey and Hossain 2019). Many donor-led interventions are geared towards involving communities in monitoring school performance through the formation of school-based management committees (Patrinos et al. 2007). The evidence of the impact of these committees on learning, however, is limited (Westhorp et al. 2014); further, in most contexts such committees remain dormant, even when governments adopt policies aimed at supporting their establishment. Yet in many developing countries, communities have a long history of supporting local schooling networks. This paper explores the extensive network of community-supported Islamic and Quranic schools in northern Nigeria, with a focus on the state of Kano, the most populous and politically influential northern Nigerian state, to understand what motivates local communities to support these schools. The paper shows that, in order to build real community ownership, it is not enough to engage the community in the instrumental aspects of school management, such as monitoring of teachers and engaging in resource mobilisation; the community has to be convinced that the education provided is leading to value systems and inculcating aspirations that are conducive to individual and collective well-being. This aspect of education becomes particularly important to communities when state schools are seen to be failing to deliver the promised goal of linking education to formal-sector employment.

Drawing on interviews and focus-group discussions with members of the community, the paper shows that, while the primary concern of the community regarding state schools is the low levels of learning and the consequent inability of school-leavers to find formal-sector employment, there is also a closely related concern about a lack of focus on moral education and the formation of aspirations among children which remain out of reach, given the limited economic opportunities for upward mobility. The fieldwork in Kano suggests that in many rural and low-income urban centres in the developing world, where modern facilities are limited, the ambition for upward mobility and the liberal[1] values promoted through standard school curricula leave the individual and the community worse off. Students end up dissatisfied with the existing standards of living, which lack basic modern comforts, and they often become disrespectful of traditional values and local authority structures, which in the view of the community are key to maintaining social order in the absence of strong state institutions and limited economic opportunities. Islamic schools, due to their focus on character building, help to address these parental concerns, in addition to teaching children how to fulfil their religious obligations.

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[1] In this article, the term liberal values versus traditional values is being equated with what the World Value Survey (WVS) defines as *Secular-rational values* versus *Traditional values*. The two sets of values are seen to harbour opposing preferences. As per the definitions provided by the WVS, traditional values emphasise the importance of religion, parent-child ties, deference to authority and traditional family values. People who embrace these values also reject divorce, abortion, euthanasia, and suicide. Societies harbouring traditional values have high levels of national pride and a nationalistic outlook. Societies shaped by secular-rational values are seen to place less emphasis on religion, traditional family values and authority. Divorce, abortion, euthanasia and suicide are seen as relatively acceptable (World Value Survey 2021). The use of liberal versus traditional values in this article broadly fits a similar framework.

Although focused on Nigeria, the findings have wider implications, given that countries such as Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan record similar community preferences among rural populations for a greater content of moral or religious education in state-school curricula (Asadullah and Chaudhury 2013; Bano and Dyonisius 2021). It is worth noting, such a demand for moral education is not restricted to Muslim societies or the developing world. Catholic parochial schools in American inner cities, which have operated for over one and a half century, catered to families who wanted decent quality education for their children while also inculcating within them good morality, discipline and respect for the tradition (Gannon 1967; Shokraii 1997). Initially white migrant families drew on the services of these schools but when they moved further-out in the suburbs, many Black and Hispanic families started sending children to these schools for these very reasons. Similarly, the Fe y Algeria system of Catholic schools that operates all over Latin America and caters primarily to the working poor or children from lower middle-class families, offers slightly better learning than public schools, but above all the schools in this network focus on inculcating discipline, kindness, and moral values within children (World Bank 2007).

The paper thus illustrates how there is an active need to discuss the role of state schools in promoting moral education and the concept of good life, and how to manage the risk of high aspirations leading to high degrees of frustration in contexts of limited economic opportunities. Again, there is a need to recognise that such tensions between the state and community to control content of education, especially around role of religious values in shaping the curriculum, have been and continue to be relevant in the developed countries. The shape education systems took in different Western countries is a product of how different European states dealt with local schooling networks, which were largely under church control, when these states started to roll out the state schooling system starting in late nineteenth century or early twentieth century. The main difference between countries which emerged from a colonial past and the Western countries is that in the latter, the 'modern' school had to struggle its way into legitimacy and acceptance through superior performance whereby these schools had to prove that they really were better at teaching the needed 'modern' skills and they had to stay accountable to the community. In contract, in post-colonial 'development' environments the government could draw on external support for the modern state building project and rely on 'isomorphism' to legitimise the 'modern' bureaucratic forms and hence could more easily marginalise the religious schooling network (Pritchett 2013).

The paper has the following structure. Section 1 situates the question of schooling and aspirations within the wider debate on the goals of education among international development institutions. Section 2 records the education challenges in the state of Kano, introduces the large network of Islamic and Quranic schools, and records communities' support for these schools. Section 3 outlines the research method. Section 4 documents the factors that shape community support for these schools in a context where state schools struggle to win community support. Section 5 presents some examples of traditional communities feeling apprehensive about liberal values promoted by state schools, or girl-child education campaigns run by international development agencies. The conclusion reviews some challenges that this case study poses to current thinking in development circles about how to ensure equality of opportunities, and the role of aspirations in improving individual and societal well-being.

Section 1. Education and Development: Dominant Discourse
In development theory and practice, increasing community participation is seen to be critical for improving education quality. But the policies aimed at improving community participation are normally narrowly focused on engaging the local community in school-monitoring

processes (Patrinos et al. 2007; Westhorp et al. 2014). The mobilisation strategies are often based on the assumption that the community does not value education, and that parents living in poverty have to be educated about the value of education. It is rare for mobilisation work to start by attempting to understand what it is that the parents really want from their child's education, and attempting to record the effort that they might already be making to ensure provision of the desired education. The overriding justification within development theory and practice for investment in primary and secondary education is focused on highlighting how at the individual level education is important for securing formal-sector employment and upward economic mobility and at the societal level for stimulating economic growth. Other benefits of education, such as moral training and character building, are rarely addressed in any detail. A recent illustration of this can be found in the World Bank 2018 report on education.

Entitled *Learning to Realize Education's Promise*, the report rightly argues that schooling is not the same as learning; but its concept of learning remains closely tied to improvement in the development of numeracy and literacy skills. The report acknowledges the importance of other aspects of education: 'Education systems often have other goals as well: they want to endow students with citizenship skills, encourage civic-minded values, and promote social cohesion' (World Bank 2018:19). Elaborating on the benefits of education for building inclusive institutions, the report adds (World Bank 2018: 19): 'Through its effect on civic agency— meaning high levels of political engagement, trust, and tolerance— education can create the building blocks for more inclusive institutions' (World Bank 2018: 41). Yet the report's references to the role of education in building mutual trust and social cohesion are brief; the focus moves very quickly to promoting the tangible gains of education, measured primarily in terms of its importance in promoting economic prosperity: 'When delivered well, education cures a host of societal ills. For individuals, it promotes employment, earnings, health, and poverty reduction. For societies, it spurs innovation, strengthens institutions, and fosters social cohesion' (World Bank 2018: 3). Similarly, it adds: 'Education builds human capital, which translates into economic growth. If improvements are faster among the disadvantaged, the additional growth will reduce poverty, reduce inequality, and promote social mobility' (World Bank 2018: 19).

The report takes the position that if good-quality education is provided, then it can be expected to 'crowd in' these other benefits; it thereby avoids the need to address the importance of moral education in building individual character, mutual trust, and social cohesion. As we will see in this paper, while improving learning outcomes in state schools would indeed help to address the communities' main concern about state schooling, the actual substance of education and the values and aspirations promoted through the school curricula have a direct bearing on whether education can yield such collective benefits as promoting social cohesion and increased civic and political participation. As we will see in case of the community support for Islamic and Quranic schools in Kano, the values and aspirations imparted through state schools, if not sensitive to the local cultural values and in line with local economic opportunities, can in the community's perception actually pose a threat to the social order, producing frustrated young people who have developed aspirations whose realization is out of their reach.

Admittedly, the argument for ensuring that aspirations promoted through state-school curricula are in line with the realities of the local context does raise difficult questions about equality of opportunities: would state schooling be blamed for making children in rural areas forgo possible opportunities to pursue the comforts of urban living if they encouraged students in rural areas to take pride in being farmers or artisans, instead of aspiring to pursue higher education and formal-sector employment? Yet, as the case presented in this paper helps to

illustrate, it is important to address these difficult questions if we are to ensure that state schools provide education that meets local community needs and produces young people whom the community values as productive members of the society.

Here it is also useful to bear in mind how very similar debates about the content of state-school curricula took place in Europe as nations gradually moved towards adopting the universal primary-education policies starting in the mid-to-late eighteenth century. The state motivations behind the drive to educate all children were mixed: the dominant incentive, however, was to build loyalty for the ruling elites and the existing social order (Ramirez and Boli 1987). The modern conception that education is key to building a workforce for an industrialised nation became influential much later. The original spread of universal primary education (UPE) was linked to states' concern to restrict the expectations and aspirations of the public in line with the existing social order, to prevent the development of support for any rebellion. This emphasis on using education to build loyalty influenced the debates on curriculum content. Documenting the case of Prussia, the first state to promote UPE, Ramirez and Boli (1987: 5) note: 'Some of the designers of the Prussian system were liberal reformers, but Prussian officialdom was extremely sceptical of providing the masses with too much schooling or with schooling that was too classical.' They also quote Frederick the Great, who was leading the push for universal primary education, as saying: '"We do not confer upon the individual or upon society any benefit when we educate him beyond the bounds of his social class and vocation, give him a cultivation that he cannot make use of, and awaken in him pretensions and needs which his lot in life does not allow him to satisfy" (quoted in Reisner 1922, pp. 143-44).'

The leadership in Austria, the second nation to promote compulsory primary education, which took inspiration from Prussia to adopt the policy of universal primary education, had very similar concerns. In 1773, the commission appointed to make a proposal for standardization of course books and teaching methods proposed maintaining a clear difference in the curriculum between urban and rural schools: 'rural schools could teach only reading, writing, arithmetic, and religion while urban schools had a wider range of course to be taught at their disposal, including German, orthography, math, history, geography, *etc*. The main reasons for such diversification were, firstly, the apprehension not "to overeducate" rural populations so that they would flow to the city in the search for a better life, and, secondly, the strife to educate experts in the cities' (Zinkina et al. 2016: 2).

These plans of European politicians or royalty who supported the spread of education to all, but argued that the education provided should keep in check the expectations of individuals, especially in rural areas, would today be seen as discriminatory and disempowering of the rural populations. But absorbing large influxes of populations from rural to urban areas was a genuine challenge in eighteenth-century Europe, and that remains the case even today for most developing countries. In such a context, the community elders in rural areas or semi-urban centres in developing countries are fearful of the impact of state schooling on young men and women, who become dissatisfied with the local conditions, and whose expectations of a good life start to clash with the moral values and traditional authority structures that are key to maintaining social order. The case of community support for Islamic and Quranic schools in Kano illustrates a clear logic behind the community elders' apprehensions about the values and ambitions promoted in state schools because of the threat they pose to social order. As we shall see in Section 5, it is logical for the community to want schools to promote expectations among children, both male and female, that are in line with the local opportunity structures and respectful of local values and traditions, even if such a policy runs the risk of depriving the

very bright students of exposure to high aspirations that they might be capable of fulfilling. Given the growing literature in the field of Development Studies on the importance of aspirations (Ray 2003; Bernard et al. 2014) and increased investment in education and upward socio-economic mobility, the evidence in this paper highlights the need to recognise that increased aspirations without access to the means to pursue them can run the risk of undermining individual initiative and disrupting the social order.

Section 2. The Educational Landscape in Kano

Nigeria is one of the countries with the largest number of out-of-school children. In particular, northern Nigeria lags behind in basic education indicators, in terms of both provision of basic education to all and ensuring quality. With a population of over 10 million, Kano is the most populous state in northern Nigeria, and state education provision suffers from all the standard challenges: there are many children out of school, and rates of transition from primary to secondary school are very low (Cameron et al. 2016). The capacity of the officials in the Local Government Education Authorities, the tier of government closest to the communities, is very weak. At the same time, private schools remain very low in number compared with southern Nigeria states, such as Lagos, which has a high concentration of private schools, including those charging very low fees and catering for the poor. Yet it is normal to hear in Kano, even from officials within the state education authorities, that all children do attend a Quranic or Islamic school. This Islamic and Quranic schooling network, which is spread across northern Nigeria, is much larger than the state schooling sector and operates largely through community support. A 2003 census conducted by the Office of Advisor to the Governor on Islamic and Quranic schools recorded more than 23,000 Islamic and Quranic schools in Kano, as opposed to nearly 6,500 state primary and secondary schools. This section briefly introduces the main types of Islamic and Quranic school and the extent of community support for them.

The Islamic and Quranic schools in northern Nigeria are divided into two broad categories: Quranic and Islamiyya. See Table 1.

Table 1   **Types of Quranic and Isalmiyya Schools**

School Types	Variations	Further Variations
Quranic	Modern Quranic/ Day Schools	Quranic Primary /Tahfeez Primary
		Quranic General/Tahfeez General
	Tsangaya/ Boarding Schools	Bush
		Suburb
		Town
Islamiyya	Islamiyya Primary	
	Islamiyya General	

2.1. Quranic schools

Quranic schools are the oldest education-provision platforms in northern Nigeria, first established in the fifteenth century (Adamu 2003). Today they take different forms and are divided between Tsangaya schools, the oldest type of Quranic school, and Tafeez schools, which were established in the late 1960s. The word *Tsangaya* in Hausa literally means a 'study centre', and the focus of these schools has historically been on teaching the reading, memorisation, and writing of the Quran. These schools follow a seven-year learning cycle

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marking different stages in learning to read and write the Quran. Unlike modern schools, Tsangaya schools are boarding facilities: complete responsibility for the child is handed over to the *malam* (the religious scholar), who is obliged to ensure that the child is fed and also has a place to sleep.

In contemporary Nigeria, Tsangaya schools are not seen as a rival for state schools, given their exclusive focus on study of the Quran. Historically, Arabic, the language of the Quran, had a role in literate circles in Kano, and even Hausa was written in Arabic script (Adamu 2003). Thus, learning to read and write the Quran also contributed to the acquisition of basic literacy and literary skills. After colonial rule, Hausa was, however, written in Roman script; and, due to the introduction of English as the state language, Arabic lost its socio-economic relevance as the language of high culture, and the Tsangaya education system lost its social relevance and became associated with the poorer segments of society (Adamu 2003). Yet, as we will see below, the Tsangaya schooling system continues to mobilise extensive community support.

The Tafeez schools, which are the modern Quranic schools, are on the other hand designed to offer an hour or two of teaching each day to children who are following regular primary or secondary schooling curricula in state or private schools. Unlike the traditional Tsangaya schools, the Quranic schools focus mainly on teaching children how to recite the Quran properly, instead of a narrow focus on memorisation or learning to write the entire Quran from memory.

2.2. Islamiyya Schools
Like the Tafeez schools, Islamiyya schools are a modern invention, compared with Tsangaya schools. These schools were first established in the 1960s and then spread rapidly (Umar 2001). They were partly a response to the state schools introduced under British rule. As local scholars realised that Tsangaya schools could not cope with modern education demands, whereby qualifications from state schools and colleges were essential to secure formal-sector employment, some of the reformist scholars thought of establishing schools that combine Islamic and modern education, thereby marking the birth of Islamiyya schools. These establishments thus operate as regular schools, with standard school time, formal school buildings, and a set curriculum. Unlike Quranic schools, Islamiyya schools do not focus solely on the study of the Quran but also cover other Islamic sciences, such as *hadith* and *seerah* (the Prophet's sayings and actions), which are aimed at inculcating a sound moral character, and a knowledge of Islamic history. In addition, these schools teach other primary and secondary school subjects. Many Islamiyya schools, however, have limited ability to cover all these subjects properly; but if they do manage to teach the state-approved Islamiyya school curriculum, which requires equal coverage of Islamic and modern subjects, then these schools achieve recognition as Islamiyya Primary. They are accredited by State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB), and their graduates are awarded formal primary- and secondary-school certificates, as in the regular schools. A 2009 study of the most popular secondary schools in Kano showed that Islamiyya Primary schools are the most popular school choice among the parents.

The most striking aspect of both Quranic and Islamiyya schools is that not only are they popular among the parents; they also survive primarily due to active community support, which is provided in a number of ways. Most such schools are established on land provided by the community, the community often contributes free labour towards their construction, individuals make donations towards the working of the school, and there is an established practice of providing food for children, especially those studying in Tsangaya schools. Most

importantly, Islamiyya schools rely heavily on volunteer teachers who work for very low salaries. Further, communities have been successful in lobbying the government to recognise Islamiyya schools and to implement a policy whereby, once a school is recognised as following a proper integrated curriculum, SUBEB provides government-paid teachers to teach modern subjects.

This community support for Quranic and Islamic schools is often explained by the government officials interviewed for this study, in terms of historical legacy, as Islam continues to be a powerful force in this society. The population of Kano is 99 per cent Muslim. Islam was brought to Hausaland in the early 14th century by a group of traders and clerics in the reign of Ali dan Tsamiya (1349–1358), who converted to Islam under the Wangarawa Muslim *ulama* from Mali (Adamu 2003). The Wangarawa *ulama* belonged to the Maliki school of Islamic law, which to date remains the school adhered to in Kano. Islam places great emphasis on education, with the Quran at the centre of learning; but also there is a rich tradition of Islamic sciences. The tradition of learning to recite and memorize the Quran properly has a long history in the region. The Tsangaya system originated in the reign of Mai Mali Gaji (1503), who encouraged and supported the establishment of such centres in many areas for the spread of literacy. The rulers of the time regarded it as an honour to host such schools. Later the Sokoto Empire in northern Nigeria continued to spread and encourage this system of education. Thus, some attribute the continued support for Islamic and Quranic education to historical practice and religious devotion. This is believed to be particularly the case for Tsangaya schools, which, as noted above, are recognized as having seen a steady deterioration in education standards more recently, given that their education is today seen to have limited relevance for modern needs.

But does this historical legacy alone explain the local communities' demand and support for Islamiyya schools? And what about Islamiyya Primary schools, which cover both Islamic and modern subjects and are more popular than the state schools? In order to understand the appeal and support for these different types of school, the paper draws on focus-group discussions and individual interviews with members of the community across three Local Government Authorities (LGAs) in Kano. During the interviews and the focus-group discussions, the focus was on understanding the community's concept of desirable learning outcomes; its perceptions and expectations of state schools as compared with Islamic and Quranic schools; and the basis of its support for the Islamic and Quranic schools.

Section 3. Research Method
This paper draws on interviews and focus-group discussions (FGDs) conducted with heads of Islamic and Quranic schools, parents, traditional elites, government officials, and community members across three Local Government Authorities (LGAs) in Kano, with a view to understanding the communities' support for Islamic and Quranic schools. The FGDs were held in 2019 as part of a larger study on Islamiyya schools, which involved repeat visits to Kano between 2016-2019 to understand the appeal of these schools among female students (Bano 2018). As explained below, this paper draws primarily on the data gathered during the FGDs but the themes discussed during the FGDs were heavily shaped by the interviews and ethnographic fieldwork carried out during the earlier field visits. The three LGAs were selected because they helped cover rural and urban variations: Albasu (rural), Kumbotso (semi-urban), and Fagge (urban). Fagge is densely populated and has many primary and secondary schools, as well as Quranic and Islamiyya schools.

Table 2: Population density per LGA

LGA	Rural/Urban	Geographical Area	Population (2006 census)
Fagge	Urban	21 km square	198,828
Kumbotso	Semi-Urban	158 km square	295,979
Albasu	Rural	398 km square	190,153

The main occupations available in Fagge consist of tailoring, currency exchange, sales of new and used motorbikes, bicycles, and cars, skin and leather works, and trading in the famous Kwari market, which is known all over Nigeria. The Kumbotso local government area is partly urban and partly rural. The community is involved in a diverse range of economic activities, such as running provision stores, petty trading, and selling food. The area is flat and fertile for farming, and the vast majority of people are involved in subsistence farming. Albasu, on the other hand, is completely rural. It is surrounded by Faragai, Yaura, Hungu, and Bataiya villages. Dominant occupations are subsistence farming, cattle rearing, and petty trading.

Conducting FGDs with the community members across the three LGAs helped to ensure a certain degree of representation across the rural and urban populations in Kano state. On the basis of discussions with local researchers, the influential actors within the community were identified as traditional elders (ward heads, village heads, and mosque imams), representatives of the Sufi orders (Qadiriyya and Tajjania), and the modern Islamic reformist movement, popularly known as Izzala. Thus, in addition to inviting the parents, general community members, and teachers and principals from government and Islamiyya schools and *malams* of Tsangaya schools, representatives from these influential groups were also actively represented in the focus-group discussions. Each FGD consisted of 20 participants, featuring representatives from across these groups. Each FGD lasted for two hours, and three were held in each LGA. Thus, a total of nine focus-group discussions were held across the three LGAs, providing an opportunity to elicit the views of 180 individuals. In addition, detailed interviews were conducted with parents, some traditional elders, and senior officials within education authorities in order to understand their views on why Islamic and Quranic schools are successful in gaining community support.

Interviews and focus-group discussions were the most appropriate method, because the focus of this study was on understanding communities' reasoning for supporting Islamic and Quranic schools. Interviews and FGDs allow the researcher to analyse people's thinking about an issue. The validity of data secured through these two methods is at times questioned, on the assumption that respondents might not tell the truth. However, this concern was not particularly applicable in this case, as the topic was such that individuals had limited incentives to deliberately lie: questions focused on why, in the respondents' perception, the community supports Islamiyya and Quranic schools – instead of asking individuals personal questions, which they might be uncomfortable to answer. Also, participation in the FGDs did not result in receipt of any benefits as is at times the case when such discussions are part of a development project. Finally, holding three FGDs, consisting of 20 members each, in each of the three selected LGAs, helped to achieve sample saturation. When interviews and focus-group discussions held across different locations and with a number of independent individuals from different socio-economic and educational backgrounds yield very similar findings, it helps to demonstrate data validity; the overlap in their responses helps to establish that the responses were authentic representations of the reality. As noted above, while the FGDs were carried out over three months in 2019, interviews and ethnographic fieldwork with Islamiyya and Quranic

schools in these three LGAs were carried out over a four-year period as part of a larger study. This thus allowed for interviewing a large number of parents, community members, teachers in Islamiyya and Quranic schools and senior officials within the three Local Government Education Authorities (LGEAs) over the years to understand the working of Islamiyya and Quranic schools (Bano 2017). Thus, when after hosting the FGDs, follow up interviews were conducted to explore the reasoning behind some of the views expressed in the FGDs, analysis of which is presented in Section 5, it was easy to gain access and interview some of the parents, community members and officials with whom the research team had developed ongoing interactions over the course of the larger research project.

A local NGO was engaged to help select participants for the FGD and to moderate the discussion. The discussion was conducted in Hausa, and transcribed notes were then translated into English. When selecting members, it was not possible to ensure representative sampling. Instead, the logic of purposive sampling was used, so that individuals who were representative of the core groups within the community were invited to join the FGD or give an in-depth interview. In general, there was no resistance to participation, and representatives of traditional elders, Sufi orders, Izzala, teachers, principals, and *malams* of Islamic and Quranic schools and parents and general community members all participated actively in the FGDs, as they were keen to share their experiences, in the hope that the information might help to inform better policy making. Government teachers and principals, were selected from three largest and highly reputed government schools in each of the three selected LGAs as the staff in these schools are often more experienced and also the larger school size means that the school staff engage with a larger number of parents and community members. The government officials in the LGEAs were also very accessible and willing to share their views about community support for Islamiyya and Quranic schools. Thus, the voices of all relevant actors – the community elders, parents, teachers and principals of government schools as well as Islamic and Quranic schools– were heard and have shaped the findings of this paper.

It must also be noted here that due to COVID related lockdowns and travel and fieldwork restrictions, plans to carry out follow up fieldwork with parents who are active with SBMCs in selected government schools, and with the school staff involved with SBMCs, could not take place. The paper thus does not expand on why parents who support Quranic and Islamiyya schools don't actively take part in supporting SBMCs in state schools. This issue could not be meaningfully discussed within the FGDs as most parents and community members participating in the FGDs reported simply not being aware of the existence of SBMCs. This does suggest that in line with the existing literature and the findings recorded in a recent RISE study (Bano 2021), establishment of SBMCs remains a very top down effort as opposed to the bottom up support that these Islamiyya and Quranic schools, which are the focus of this study, enjoy.

The in-country fieldwork was conducted under Oxford University ethics protocol, under which this study has been approved. Anonymity of respondents and informed consent, whereby the respondents are fully informed of the objective of the study and given a choice whether or not to participate, are the core guiding principles. In terms of data protection, in accordance with Oxford University data-protection policy, the interview transcripts and notes from the FGDs were saved on a computer with an encrypted password. Also, in accordance with Oxford University ethics protocol, all respondents were promised anonymity unless they themselves expressed a desire to be quoted.

Section 4. Efficiency Not Ideology: Why Communities Support Islamic schools

The FGDs help to demonstrate that the community support for Islamic and Quranic schools is embedded in the ability of these schools to deliver what the parents expect from them: the building of sound moral character and the inculcation within the children of a respect for elders and community traditions. The state schools, on the other hand, fail to deliver on what they promise: high-quality modern education, leading to formal-sector employment. The results from the FGDs challenge the assumption shared in development circles that communities which record low enrolment or low learning outcomes do not value education. Instead, this study finds that despite an extremely low-performing state-school system and low educational outcomes, the community has a sophisticated concept of education which seriously appreciates the value of actual learning as well as moral training. While the community does not have the resources to ensure that all children can be taught to high standards that result in high learning outcomes, it does contribute actively to that part of education where it feels capable of making a difference, namely investing in moral education as provided through Quranic and Islamiyya schools.

4.1. Desirable Learning Outcomes

The first theme that became very clear during the discussions was that community members had a very holistic view of education and expected schools to educate the children in modern subjects and technical or vocational skills to make them economically independent, but at the same time they held schools responsible for developing the moral character of the child. As one village head said, 'We enrol the children into state school to acquire vocational training, to become public office holders and businessmen, and we enrol them in Quranic or Islamic schools to make them fear God and live an honest life.' Similarly, elaborating on the goals of education, the District Head of Fagge argued: 'Education should enable children to live a better life; be morally sound and respect themselves, their parents and the wider community; become responsible and productive citizens and learn to socialize or interact with others very well.' Leaders of Islamic Sufi orders*,* as well as of Izzala, raised similar expectations of good-quality education and desirable learning outcomes, as summarised by one member: 'We hope to see our children learn to worship God, learn entrepreneurial skills, live well, live a productive life, and behave well.' The local *malams* and imams of mosques also emphasized that education should build skills for developing good social relationships; develop children's social, economic, and personal skills; enable children to recite the Quran; and secure good jobs. Some also expressed the desire for children to become future imams and local *malams* in the community.

Interestingly, the head teachers and teachers from state schools did emphasize the need for children to secure good-quality education, with a particular focus on what they referred to as the 'three Rs: reading, writing and arithmetic'. However, even they equally emphasized the need for children to also learn the Quran and *hadith* and to make positive contributions to society and to the lives of other individuals around them. Heads of Islamiyya schools similarly emphasized both the income-generating and moral-development aspects of education. As the head of one Islamiyya school noted, 'It is important for children to acquire specific vocational skills so that they can earn a decent living, while also learning to follow Islamic rituals, which teach children to be good moral individuals.' In addition, most parents and teachers from both state schools and Islamiyya schools highlighted the need for children to be able to read and write, form positive attitudes towards life, and acquire moral values, while also developing the ability to speak English and secure good jobs. Some also expressed the desire for children to be able to learn to speak the Arabic language. Parents also expressed a desire for their children to acquire moral training to fight social vices and develop a better society and also to be

rewarded in the hereafter. The parents of children in Tsangaya schools similarly argued that for them the desirable learning outcomes are to see their children develop a good moral character and get good-quality education. They also said they want to see a harmonious relationship between their children and the local community, and that the education system should produce students that are honest and have integrity.

Thus, the heavy emphasis on securing good-quality education as well as moral training, expressed by all segments of the society covered in the FGDs, counters the assumption that one reason for low educational outcomes in northern Nigeria is that the communities are seen as being ideologically resistant to securing modern education because it was associated with British colonial rule and the introduction of Christianity. As the FGDs show, today such explanations do not hold: even the *malam*s of Tsangaya schools agree that modern education is important for children to secure economic opportunities, while Islamic education is key for moral character building and preserving traditions and social values. Thus, the community is not against modern education and acquisition of modern skills per se, but it is critical of the practice whereby schools are used to promote liberal values often with a conscious intent to undermine traditional values, while failing in their main goal of providing modern skills.

4.2. The Preferred School Option
The respondents' views on the preferred school option similarly recorded a preference for pursuing both modern and Islamic education. All traditional elders opined that both secular and religious educations are preferred and that it is always better for a child to have the two, preferably graduating from a Quranic school to a secular school. As one village head stated: 'All children in Kano state should acquire both secular and Islamic education. The Prophet himself advised Muslims to seek knowledge, even if one has to go to China.' As he added, this shows that the education in question may not necessarily be religious knowledge. Similarly, a District Head emphasized that the provision of both religious and secular education by the government is not only necessary but compulsory if the society wants to progress. He said that 'both education systems should be mandatory at all levels if our children are to be prepared for a better life'. He also argued that both secular and religious education should be provided to complement each other, and that the state should take responsibility for both.

Similarly, heads of Sufi orders and Izzala emphasized that children should be provided with both secular and religious education, as did the local *malams*. As one religious leader added: 'Children should be enrolled in both secular and religious schools. This is the only way to fit into the modern world.' In the view of the head teachers of state schools, the two systems (state schools and Islamic and Quranic schools) should go hand-in-hand, and each should complement the other. Similarly, teachers in public schools emphasized that both secular and religious forms of education are necessary if children are to live better and responsible lives. They gave two reasons for their positions. Firstly, secular education prepares children to live a successful life in a modern world, while religious education is offered to enable children to understand and serve God and also shape their morality and live as responsible individuals within the community. The teachers of Quranic schools also agreed that the two types of education should be provided to children, for reasons of self-development and harmonious relationship with God and society.

Parents also shared a similar preference for securing both secular and religious education. Basically, it was clear in the minds of all respondents that state schools were not even aiming to focus on building moral character or providing religious education, and that Islamic and Quranic schools are key to filling that gap. Thus, during the discussions, repeatedly respondents

highlighted the need for the state to contribute towards the operation of Islamiyya and Quranic schools for the important role they play in children's development. As one of the heads of Qadiriyya Sufi order highlighted, 'The government must support Islamic and Quranic schools by providing teaching and learning materials, including classrooms, and training of teachers.' One of the often-repeated statements in the FGDs was that 'both types of schools need to be supported by the government, as the state schools do not focus on building moral character and providing religious education'.

4.3. Comparative Views on Islamiyya and Tsangaya versus State Schools

There was an overwhelming consensus among participants and across the nine FGDs that local communities support Islamiyya and Quranic schools because they are effective in delivering on their promise, namely to develop the child's moral character and impart basic Islamic knowledge so that they become good individuals and responsible members of the community. Further, in the case of Islamiyya Primary schools, which combine equal ratios of Islamic and modern subjects, it was argued that these schools are most popular because they offer the perfect balance that the community is looking for. Respondents were also of the view that the teaching of modern subjects in Islamiyya Primary schools was in fact better than the quality of education imparted in state schools, which in the view of the community members were failing to teach children to read and write. As one village head explained: 'Students in the Islamiyya Primary schools are seen to graduate frequently and are visibly seen to have memorized the holy Quran. The schools often invite the Emir of Kano to attend the graduation ceremony.'

The three sect leaders shared a similar view that the quality of education provided in Islamiyya and Quranic schools is better than that provided in state schools. One of the leaders of the Qadiriyya sect noted: 'IQTE schools provide qualitative education because the curriculum of Islamic and Quranic schools is flexible. In addition, the students trained in the Islamiyya and Quranic schools are later recruited to teach the younger ones in the same schools, which improves their own learning skills.' Many expressed the view that one reason for the success of Islamiyya and Quranic schools is that the teachers in Quranic schools are more dedicated to teaching because they teach not for just for the sake of money but also because they see their job to be winning them reward from God, given the emphasis in Islam on imparting knowledge. As a leader of the Izzala sect noted, 'Teachers in Quranic and Islamiyya schools are paid very little, but they teach with total commitment because they know they are working to educate the community's children.'[2]

There was also a common perception among participants that the moral education and training in Islamic rituals and the basic ethics taught in Islamic and Quranic schools made the children more disciplined, and that this helped them to do better when they were exposed to modern subjects or moved to state schools. As a *malam* of Tsangaya school added: 'The skills the students receive in Islamiyya and Quranic schools assist in easing the learning processes for the children in secular schools. This is why some parents take their children to Islamiyya and Quranic schools before secular schools.' The parents of pupils in state schools were also unanimous in expressing the view that the education received in Islamiyya and Quranic schools is better because it meets the objectives for which children are sent to those schools, while the state schools fail to deliver on one goal that they have set themselves: to educate the children

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[2] The role of commitment in improving performance is also recognised within economic literature. Besley and Ghatak (2005) demonstrate how individuals committed to a purpose can work harder and better.

in basic numeracy and literacy skills to enable them to pursue higher education and formal-sector jobs. Even many parents were of the view that the performance of children in state schools relies heavily on the education that they received in the Islamiyya and Quranic schools prior to their enrolment into state schools.

The responses from the principals and teachers of the state schools were mixed on this issue. All agreed that Islamiyya and Quranic schools are very important and that they play a key role in building the child's moral character, but they resisted the criticisms of the state schools by saying that the state schools are under too much pressure and have limited resources. Furthermore, some teachers from the state schools acknowledged that the quality of education in Islamiyya and Quranic schools is better because the teachers are better qualified and more dedicated, as it takes long years of training to become a *malam* (religious scholar), and because of the belief in earning rewards from God. But some others argued that state schools have a more formal programme of learning, which is important for students' continuous development. But, overall, respondents were unanimous in sharing their concerns about the low quality of education in state schools. The reasons given for this included favouritism in the recruitment of teachers, lack of teaching materials and resources, and the appointment of teachers who were not qualified and do not possess the minimum requirement of a Grade II Teacher's Certificate or the Nigerian Certificate of Education (NCE) to teach.

Finally, respondents also shared their views on the benefits of Tsangaya schools. While all respondents acknowledge that contemporary Tsangaya schools do not match the high learning objectives associated with early Tsangaya schools, which imparted Quranic education while also preparing students to act as prominent members of society, the respondents highlighted how even the contemporary Tsangaya schools play an important role in preparing students to become economically independent. The economy plays a critical role in explaining the continued preference for Tsangaya schools. Agriculture is a very important sector of employment for the Kano economy and is characterized by small-holding, rain-fed subsistence agriculture, with large-scale commercial agriculture comprising only a small share of employment in the sector. Public-sector employment is relatively low, with only 7 per cent employed in this sector. With limited jobs in the formal sector, there is limited demand for formal education and qualifications. Most children attending Tsangaya schools are not seeking this education for employment or formal certification. The students from these schools return to work with their families in small-scale agriculture or join the profession of their parents. The Tsangaya schooling system, by leaving the children to fend for survival along with the *malam* (teacher), is thus argued to build useful survival traits within the children, something that the formal schooling system does not offer. For some parents these schools are also cheaper alternatives to regular government schools, where the parents have to provide for the uniform, textbooks, and work books, even if there is no fee.

Thus, the FGDs demonstrate that the continued community demand and support for Islamiyya and Quranic schools is not just a result of historical legacy and religious conviction. Instead, Islamiyya and Quranic schools are seen to play a major role in shaping the moral character of the child and inculcating a sense of respect for elders and traditions within the children. Tsangaya schools, while not imparting modern education, do provide important life skills and technical skills to children, while Islamiyya Primary schools, which cover both Islamic and modern subjects, are seen to provide better modern education than the regular state schools. Put in another way, the responses from the community suggest two related but analytically distinct reasons that the Islamiyya and Quranic schools are able to mobilise community support. One, these schools give the parents what they want. In this case it is a balance of

Islamic and secular education, but in other cases of community ownership of schools, it could be something else that the community desires, while the state schools only offer a set agenda determined from the top. Two, many communities expect schools to impart moral education and contribute to character building of the child and do so by promoting values that are consistent with community's religious and traditional values. State schools again fail here. Either they are not seen to be addressing the subject of moral education, or are seen to impart values which the community views as being alien to their culture or actively aimed at eroding their own value systems or beliefs. At the same time state schools are also failing in their main goal of providing good-quality education which can lead to formal-sector employment. Hence the community's limited enthusiasm in support of state schools, even when government has tried to mobilise School-Based Management Committees (Bano 2021, forthcoming).

In this organic model of community participation, the basis of cooperation thus is that the schools have figured out what the community wants and they offer that to the community in exchange for financial and moral support. This is different than the approach of international development agencies, which focuses on building formal-sector-style governance models requiring parents to get involved in school governance through establishing school management committees. This latter approach is more demanding as it requires parents to get heavily invested in governance when most neither have time or relevant skills. Donor interventions can thus be more effective if instead of looking to establish formal structures of community accountability, they learn to get better at identifying the community needs and preferences regarding the schools in order to more actively engage them. This requires drawing on the informal networks, such as those formed by the Islamiyya and Quranic schools, which figure out what people want through trial and error and evolutionary processes that sometimes take years but lead to outcomes that are very fine-tuned and subtle.

Section 5. Keep Students' Expectations Realistic: Help to Address A Sense of 'Moral Panic'

In-depth interviews with key actors, which were held with some of the respondents after the FGDs were completed, further helped to explain why local communities place such value on the moral education and training provided by Islamiyya and Quranic schools. Islamic education has a very heavy emphasis on *adab* (moral training). This was repeatedly noted in the interviews. It was highlighted that communities are coming to value the importance of moral training for children even more in modern times, as they are realising that the modern influences to which children are being exposed today through the western media, social media and networking apps, and films are rapidly changing the traditional value systems. The children see the allure of urban living, modern living standards, and liberal values and the free mixing of sexes through these media. This increased exposure, however, is seen to increase frustration among the school-going youth, instead of making them more productive to achieve their desired goals. This frustration occurs due to the mismatch that exists between their heightened aspirations and desires and the limited opportunities available in the local socio-economic environment to transform their lives. The poor quality of education provided in state schools, as noted by the respondents, is at the heart of this challenge, because, in line with the other platforms offering exposure to modern living, the school curriculum encourages children to pursue economic development but fails to deliver the quality of learning required to refine children's basic learning skills. The result is that many children drop out even before completing secondary school, and many of those who do complete secondary school are unable to pursue higher education or find any meaningful job.

At the same time, the interviews suggest that these children end up nurturing an inflated notion of themselves whereby they think they are more educated than their parents and retain limited respect for traditional rural-sector jobs; many even express open disdain towards their parents' professions as they themselves aspire for white collar jobs, which they are unable to secure. The outcome of such a context is high levels of frustration, disrespect for parents and traditional elders, and refusal to undertake traditional work. During the interviews, it was repeatedly mentioned that many young boys waste a lot of time and money watching football games or films shown at clubs. Similarly, many cited the example of boys riding commercial motor bikes. These are young boys, often the products of state schools, who are visible on the streets in their jeans and t-shirts, riding motor bikes. Commonly referred to as 'Achaba boys', in reference to the name of the politician who approved loans for purchase of these bikes, these boys are often seen as a nuisance by the community, as they refuse to do traditional farming jobs or petty trading, instead spending the day riding on their bikes, which is seen as a sign of being modern, and charging people a small fee for transporting them. Many other anthropological studies document similar phenomenon in other developing countries whereby despite having earned formal degree certificates, youth end up not being fit for formal employment due to low quality of education or limited employment opportunities. Yet, due to an inflated sense of their self, they are not left fit for anything else either as they refuse to take on traditional professions in which their parents engaged (Jeffrey 2010; Newell 2012).

Similarly, in the case of the girls, many respondents noted how in the local economic context, where jobs are very limited, marriage remains for women the main source of upward mobility and security. Thus, marriage remains a key social institution, which in the eyes of the community is seen to be central to preserving the interests of the women, who, given the context, have limited means of economic empowerment. In such a context, the community finds the constant messaging from the state schools about women's empowerment or liberal life choices as being threatening to the social order. In particular, community members raised serious concerns that international development agencies often fund campaigns through state-school platforms against early marriage without appreciating the realities of the local context. This concern seemed justified, given that the results of a survey show that the majority of the girls in state schools, as well as Islamiyya schools, look forward to marriage and exercise a much higher degree of autonomy in their negotiations with the husbands than is assumed by the development agencies campaigning against early marriage in the region. Watkins, et al. (2015) found similar evidence in the context of Malawi. Referring to this 2015 study in a recent RISE study (Watkins and Ashforth 2019) note:

> Recently, many non-governmental organizations have mounted projects to address what they call an "Epidemic of Child Marriage" by advocating that girls should remain in school until they are 18 (nothing is said about boys). Yet the conditions in rural Malawi are not propitious for delaying girls' marriage. For a girl who drops out of school, her opportunities to earn are largely confined to subsistence agriculture and small-scale retail, such as selling vegetables in a market. The alternative is to marry. Since girls see pregnancy as a way to secure a husband who would support her (Poulin 2007), delaying marriage may increase the proportion of births that are out of wedlock, potentially leading to an epidemic of unmarried mothers (Watkins, et al. 2015).

Many scholars working on northern Nigeria (Loimeier 1997; Last 2008; Lubeck 2011) attribute the efforts within the communities in Kano to spread Islamic moral values as a response to the 'modernization shock' faced by these societies under colonial influence and beyond. According to Last (2008: 41): 'At root, I suggest, is a widespread unease among Muslims, especially

among those in the urban centres of northern Nigeria; there is a pervasive anxiety over insecurity felt on both a physical and a spiritual plane.'.

The 2018 World Bank Report on *Learning to Realize Education's Promise* also acknowledges the role of the broader institutional matrix in shaping returns to education and the kind of education that a society will prioritize:

> Economics, politics, and society shape the returns to education. Education systems do not function in a vacuum; they are part of broader economic, political, and social institutions. For example, does a society uphold property rights? If not, entrepreneurs are unlikely to invest in risky new ventures, which cuts into job creation and reduces education's returns in the labor market. Are there regulations to prevent fraud? If not, those with education might find it more profitable to engage in socially unproductive but financially remunerative activities. Are women restricted from working outside the home? If so, the economic returns from education will be unavailable to them. These are all examples of how formal and informal institutions influence education's returns. In general, reliable institutions that implement the rule of law, reduce corruption, and protect property rights are associated with higher returns to human capital. (World Bank 2018: 44)

In the above, what is not fully recognised is the importance of ensuring that the education provided responds to the social institutions and moral and religious values upheld by the society in question. Rather, the approach advocated by the international development agencies is to use education and state schools as platforms to challenge traditional or conservative value systems, such as family values that promote women's role as mothers and home makers. As documented in this section, this approach, however, runs the risk not only of creating a sense of moral panic in society and making communities distrust state schools but also of creating frustration among young people when the ideals promoted do not relate to the actual reality.

Conclusion

Mobilising long-term community participation is a challenge faced by most internationally funded development programmes across different sectors, including the field of education. Induced participation, one led by donors or governments, often fails to last; participation that evolves organically from within the community proves much more sustainable and effective in achieving collectively desirable goals. The Islamiyya and Quranic schooling network in northern Nigeria presents one such case of long-term community participation to ensure provision of education for the community's children. Examination of the reasons why communities support these schools shows that moral education and character building remains a top education priority for communities in northern Nigeria, where the economy remains largely informal, and respect for tradition and religious values defines the social fabric of the community. In such a context, when the state schools also fail to deliver on the promised goal of imparting good-quality education leading to formal-sector employment, the community comes to value the importance of moral education all the more, given that the products of state schools run the risk of ending up with frustrated ambitions and lack of respect for what the community is in a position to offer.

The findings from the paper also raise the question of whether state-school curricula in many developing countries are representative of what the community wants its children to learn. Two forthcoming RISE Indonesia studies document a similar demand for high content of moral and religious education in state schools in a rural district in Indonesia (Bano forthcoming). These

examples raise difficult questions for development planners: if a community expresses a strong demand for equal weight to be given to modern and religious subjects in the state-school curriculum, should the state enforce a secular curriculum without taking into account the community's preferences or consulting it?; Similarly, why is it that in many developing-country contexts state schools are seen to be lacking a focus on moral education, when even in the Western framework moral education and training is seen to be integral to schooling experience?

As demonstrated by the example of the 2018 World Bank report, international development agencies, which influence the curriculum-development work in many developing countries, have largely ignored any serious engagement with ethical and moral education, confining their focus to promoting curricula which are seen to be most suited for building aspirations for high economic mobility, developing skilled labour, and increasing exports, or delaying marriage for women and thus reducing the fertility rate. Given the evidence from Kano, from the RISE Indonesia papers (Bano, M. and Dyonisius 2021a &b, forthcoming), and from other countries such as Bangladesh, where the Aliya madrasa system which offers a mixed Islamic and modern curriculum is very popular within more conservative communities (Asadullah and Chaudhury 2013), it is clear that the communities' conception of what is useful education can vary from context to context. To successfully engage communities in supporting state schools, it is thus important to hear their views on the actual content of the school curriculum, instead of limiting their involvement to monitoring teacher attendance and performance.

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