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**From Readers to Leaders:
Using Literature and Language to Build Self, Communal and Spiritual Awareness
in Middle/High School Students**

The world is rapidly changing. Within our Muslim communities are young adults wrapped up in these changing times. They must cope with the demands of society and culture while maintaining good character and religious values. As educators, we must help our students find balance in their lives. If our students can accomplish this, they will be strong leaders for generations to come. How can we help students understand the world around them, analyze it, and connect with it? One route is through literature and language.

Middle school English teachers have a unique opportunity. Our students are now able to read almost anything on the shelf. At this critical age, students are also soul searching. These two elements can be hazardous if they decide to read literature that has inappropriate themes or heroes with poor values. As teachers we cannot control everything our students read, so we need to teach them to read critically. Three ways to help students read critically are through the use of graphic organizers, guided class discussions, and written response to literature.

Once students are able to read critically, we need to expose them to a variety of texts, from all backgrounds. It is important for our Muslim youth to read literature that builds a sense of pride and self-identity. For this reason, our students should read literature from Muslim writers and Islamic history. It is also important, however, for our students to read literature from other perspectives. With self-respect and the ability to “walk in someone else’s moccasins”, students can become great leaders.

Reading Critically:

One way to help student's read critically is through the use of graphic organizers. "Engaging students in the creation of non-linguistic representations stimulates and increases activity in the brain." (Marzano, 2001) Organizers help students sort and visualize information. In reading literature, two of the most useful graphic organizers are the Venn diagram and cause and effect charts. In his book Developing Academic Thinking Skills in Grades 6-12, Jeff Zwiers (2004) provides a variety of graphic organizers that are suitable for secondary students. For example, on a Venn diagram, instead of two circles, two clouds can be used to compare the character's thoughts with the student's thoughts. Through this, the student can both agree and disagree with the character's beliefs.

Another important way to help students read critically is through classroom discussion. Good discussions include "time for speakers to develop their thoughts, a skilled facilitator who can use student's responses to promote further thinking, active involvement among student participants, and an environment in which it is acceptable to try out ideas that may not yet be formed or 'right.'" (Adler, 2005)

Classroom discussion can be a vital tool in critical reading if done well. Students can hear a variety of perspectives different than their own. Students are able to explore different views, be flexible in their way of thinking, and be open to new ideas. "In a democratic society, such close examination of ideas and viewpoints is a cornerstone for progress." (Adler, 2005)

As Muslims, we must not forget that our greatest teacher, Prophet Muhammad (s) and Angel Jibreel used dialogue as a method of teaching. In Sahih Muslim, it is related by Umar Ibn Khattab, that Angel Jibreel came to Prophet Muhammad asking him questions about Islam. In turn, Prophet Muhammad told Umar that through these questions, “He came to teach you your religion.” Umar learned through the dialogue of others. (Sahih Muslim)

Reader response is another way to help students read critically. “Personal responses are critical in assisting the reader with making meaning from the text.” (McIntosh, 2006) When students use personal responses to explore literature, it helps them reflect on themselves as readers as well. It helps them connect with the characters and explore the theme on a deeper level. Not only this, but is it also motivating. “When students realize that they have an active role in determining meaning, they become more actively immersed in reading.” (McIntosh, 2006)

Using these three methods to help students read, we can help students analyze text on many levels. As it was stated above, we cannot control everything our students read. Many texts have inappropriate themes, characters making bad choices, or conflicts that lead to decisions we would feel are “un-Islamic.” In her lecture, Sr. Freda Crane (2007) addressed some of the common but questionable themes that are used in literature. Some of these themes were broken families, running away, male/female friendships or relationships and independence. These themes are prevalent in young adult fiction today. Our students are reading these books, of course. If our students have been taught to read critically, they will be able to take the good from a text and leave behind the unwanted.

Choosing Literature for Muslim Youth in the Classroom

How do we decide what literature to teach our youth? Or what to allow them to read? If we have taught them how to identify good values in characters, conflicts and themes, our task as teachers becomes much easier.

Choosing books for teaching is challenging on many levels, especially when teaching in an Islamic school. According to the Annenberg Media production “Making Meaning in Literature”(2002), classroom literature should have “issues students deal with...(this) helps them grapple with ideas about cultures, society..(etc)”. So as Islamic school teachers, we have to see the two sides of our students. One, they are Muslim. Two, they are young adults dealing with issues of growing up.

Choosing books with Muslim characters or Islamic values is very important for our children. Because children deeply identify with a character (or even an author), that character may become heroic in a sense. Ideally, we want our children to find heroes in those with good character and Islamic values. Literature is a great way to promote this. Not only this, but when a child reads literature that they can relate to, it helps with understanding and meaning.

Reading Islamic literature has another important value. When children see Islam represented in the literary world around them, it instills a sense of pride and self-respect. When so many cultures, ethnic groups, and religions have representation in literature, it is important for our children to see that they are represented as well.

On the flip side, it is also vitally important that our children read literature from a variety of perspectives. Allah created us differently so that we may learn from one another. If we want our students to be productive members of society and great leaders,

they need to understand the perspectives of others. By reading a variety of literature, analyzing the characters and themes, and building connections to it, our students will have an opportunity to see how others think and view the world. This encourages respect for other cultures and faiths.

English teachers in Islamic schools need to see the vital importance that literature plays in the lives of our students. Literature can help our students think critically about the world around them, connect with their own spirituality and respect others. With these skills, our youth will be successful Muslims in a modern world.

Implementation

Student Tools: a reader response notebook, post it notes and an open mind ☺ (I actually have 4 notebooks in all for my students: RR, Vocabulary, Journal, and “The Big One” which is a three subject divided into literary study, grammar, and word study.)

Teacher Tools: a lot of literature for self-selection, multiple copies of the text to be used in class, graphic organizers and patience ☺

Suggestions for implementation:

1. Start with short stories. The characters/themes are easier to break apart and analyze.
2. Teach students how to write in the reader response. Research suggests that is better to allow free response, not use a teacher-suggested topic. This gives students an opportunity to write and connect in whatever way they want. They

do, however, need to be taught about the essentials of a good reader response. I like to include: a short summary of what was read, personal connections, text to text connections, worldly connections, and opinions about what is happening. (Goudvis, 2007) Sometimes, if needed, I also suggest a suitable length, for those students who like to say “I didn’t really connect to this at all!” and that’s it.

3. Teach students how to have a productive discussion. Lay out ground rules. You need to include rules about when to speak and how to handle someone who does not agree with you. The teacher needs to facilitate the discussion. Keep students on task, give suggestive prompts when needed, and support them with your own ideas occasionally.
4. Set aside enough time for this process. I use at least 3 weeks to discuss a novel. We use 2-3 days a week for discussion/response. This may seem like a lot of time, but it pays off. You can really get students to love great literature, turn un-Islamic values into valuable lessons and it also motivates them to read more.
5. Sometimes a photocopy of the text works better. Students can write in the margins or highlight. If not, encourage students to use post it notes as they read. They can write down their questions or ideas and go back to that when they write their response.

Some “un-Islamic” values that can turn into valuable lessons are:

1. Running away-----what are some other options? Who can you talk to? Go to the masjid?
2. Male/Female Relationships-----how did that relationship begin? Were the people alone together? Are they really respecting each other? Did this relationship truly make their life better or did it bring more conflict?
3. Conflict with Parents-----how can we build trust with our parents? What is the root of the conflict? Are they controlling their temper? Are we showing them the proper respect?
4. Magic-----Read about some of the miracles that were performed by the Prophets. Compare this with the magic in the book. Which were more real or useful?
5. Monsters/Demons/Vampires/Ghosts: Go through the origins of these stories. Many of them arose out of drug use, lies or from pagan traditions. Discuss what is truly un-Islamic about these characters. Don't just say, “They're haram.”
Regretfully, that is not enough.

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Biography:

Sharifa Din has been teaching for over 15 years. She is New York State certified in both Secondary English and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages K-12.

For the past 10 years, she has been working as a teacher/administrator in AnNur Islamic School in upstate New York. She is currently the acting principal of AnNur and teaches middle school ELA.

She has been a coordinator of many middle school projects, including History Day and local INTEL science fair competitions. She is also an active supporter of a unique local program in her area called “Children at the Well,” an interfaith storytelling group for middle school students.