

**Situating Weekend Islamic Schools
in the American Muslim Context**

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ABSTRACT

Weekend Islamic Schools have touched the lives of a vast majority of American Muslims. Yet we feel that these schools have room for improvement in terms of its ability to respond to Muslim students' needs, as they come of age in an American society. Our experiences suggest that a strong disconnect exists between the teachers and students in weekend Islamic Schools due to a combination of factors, including a curriculum that does not relate to the students, outdated teaching strategies, and communication barriers between students and teachers. Most importantly, the education of American Muslim history is completely ignored in both the American public school system and in Weekend Islamic Schools. This omission of American Muslim history when there are so many resources and well written books available does a great disservice to our youth.

This paper recommends a comprehensive program to revamp the curriculum of weekend Islamic schools by including courses on Islam in the American context. Our plan includes the creation of professional lesson plans blending Islam with arts, history, and science. This approach will empower students with the ability to recognize their historical presence in this country and instill a strong sense of an American Muslim identity. This paper suggests that the MSA of the US and Canada should spearhead this effort by creating an online portal (WIS-net) on the MSA National website. This website will include lesson plans, activities, resources, articles, and recruiting/volunteering information for Weekend Islamic Schools nationwide. We suggest applying our model to two Weekend Islamic Schools initially serving as pilot projects.

Keywords: American Muslim, Lesson Plans, Weekend Islamic Schools, MSA

INTRODUCTION

Having graduated from our Sunday school at the Islamic Center of Rochester, NY and also sharing the experience of teaching at that school, we learned to appreciate its role in shaping its students' Muslim identity. However, we feel that there is great potential to improve both the relevance and quality of these institutions. This paper suggests an approach to improve the quality of weekend Islamic schools by focusing on three important areas of the weekend school system. As part of this approach, we envision a shift in the teaching practices of teachers, the creation of professional lesson plans, and the creation of an online portal (WIS-net) to disseminate teaching standards and resources, which would assist in the overall improvement of the weekend Islamic school.

This paper is divided up into two parts. In the first part, we attempt to share some of the challenges we faced as students in Sunday school. Following that, we share the results of an unpublished study conducted by Shaza Khan which shed light on some of the many challenges that Muslim youth face as they attempt to live “normal” American lives while remaining within the precepts of Islam. In the second section, we propose suggestions that we feel will strengthen the institution of weekend Islamic schooling in light of the realities and challenges of our Muslim youth. We do this by providing tips on teaching strategies, curricular content, and resource development, all of which we hope will help the weekend Islamic school engage Muslim students in more active and meaningful learning.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

Shaza Khan, Rochester, NY

I distinctly remember attending classes at the Islamic Center of Rochester with Sisters Najma and Sameera as my first grade teachers. Their classes were always packed with fun. Without realizing it, we were learning essential Islamic concepts as we sang songs about Wudu, recited poems about the five prayers, and created Eid cards to give to our parents and friends. Perhaps most importantly, however, we were creating a classroom community through these fun and educational activities, which resulted in long

lasting bonds with our teachers and peers. Yet unfortunately, my joyful experience at Sunday school lasted only until the end of first grade. After that, I felt increasingly unmotivated to attend weekend Islamic school, due to the lack of connection that I felt with my teachers and curriculum.

The next ten or so years, I continued to attend Sunday school, but not by choice. I can recall faking injuries and sicknesses in order to get out of going that week. When those schemes did not work, I began to bargain with my mother: "I'll clean the entire house and be your slave today, if you let me skip Sunday school!". It worked only on occasion, but more often than not, my mother saw through my tricks, and I was sent to Sunday school anyway.

What was it about Sunday school that drove an otherwise studious child to go to such lengths to avoid it? For me, there were a number of factors. As I became aware of the lack of interest that teachers, students, and other parents had in the school, I too lost any remaining interest. I gauged this by the number of absences and consistent tardiness that both my peers and teachers exhibited. For example, it was only on occasion that classes started on time. Sometimes, we would start ten minutes past ten, yet usually, a half hour would pass before class would actually begin. It was bad when the delay was caused by teachers who decided to wait for all her students to arrive, but it was worse still when students had to wait for tardy teachers to finally make it to class. As a student, both of these scenarios indicated to me that the teachers, parents, and students were not serious about Sunday school.

Adding to my discontent, it felt as though each year we repeated the same curriculum. This involved reviewing the five pillars, the names of the Prophet's relatives, the major Islamic battles, and the reason why every girl should cover properly. But we never seemed to go into any depth about Islam or issues that related to our lives. Rather than engaging in discussions, we were lectured. Sometimes, we were encouraged to ask questions, but we were not allowed to go off topic and engage in a discussion about topics that were truly relevant to our lives.

Yet without realizing its benefits at the time, Sunday school provided me with the Islamic foundation I needed as I grew older. Most importantly, it is where I began to develop a love for my masjid and for the Muslim community in Rochester. I began to feel

an attachment to the mosque, and developed an implicit understanding that the Masjid was a place where I belonged. Coming of age in public school settings that I felt increasingly alienated from, this was perhaps the most powerful effect of Sunday school, and one that I would not come to appreciate until many years later.

Sehar Masood, Rochester, NY

My lack of enthusiasm for Weekend Islamic School began at a young age. As early as third or fourth grade I began to look for ways to avoid Sunday school. The most popular option was to feign illness. My parents, of course, saw through this and I would be forced to attend.

I always loved “regular” school and it bothered me that I couldn’t seem to develop that same passion for the school that I attended every Sunday at my Masjid. My weekend Islamic school experience never seemed to find a way to connect with my regular school. I was very rarely given the opportunity, especially during my adolescent years, to share the challenges that I faced in attending a coed public school.

Islam has made so many contributions to the world in the subjects of Art, History, Science, and Medicine. I always wondered why these same subjects could not be a part of the weekend Islamic school curriculum in addition to Quranic studies, Arabic, and the study of Hadith.

My most memorable and rewarding years in Sunday school were when Brother Hani and Sister Anees were my teachers. Brother Hani was our Quranic teacher. We would literally spend months on just two or three verses of the Quran but would study it with such depth and inquiry that it really drove home the point of how intricate and beautiful the Quran is. The emphasis was taken away from memorization and placed on understanding. After a short break, Sister Anees would take over the class and she really worked hard to connect with us. We learned from her because she worked with us on a level of kindness and respect without being judged.

Often times it is only during weekend Islamic schools that many of our Muslim children come to the Masjid. It is especially important then, that weekend Islamic schools become well established and organized to meet the needs of our youth effectively so that we may secure our future in America. In the next section, we discuss some of the

issues faced by the Muslim Youth in North America.

Muslim Youth in the United States: Possible Challenges

Much of the discontent that we felt as students in the Weekend Islamic School was not necessarily a result of the Masjid itself, but the result of its inability to engage with the challenges that we were facing outside of the mosque infrastructure. As racial and religious minorities, we often felt “different” from our public school peers. This feeling is undoubtedly not one that we alone felt, and it is certainly not the only challenge facing Muslim youth who are growing up in the United States. In an unpublished qualitative research study conducted by Shaza Khan in 2002, approximately ten Muslim adolescents were interviewed. These students were from a range of racial backgrounds, but the common factor amongst them was their participation in the public school system of the United States and an involvement in some form of a Muslim student organization that operated from within the University or Masjid.

The Muslim students reported that the stereotyped views of Islam and Muslims that many of their peers, the public, and the media espoused were frustrating. They often felt as though they had to defend Islam or Muslims when such views were put out in the open. Compared to the male interviewees, many of the females expressed an increased amount of pressure to “represent” Islam correctly, since their peers, the public, and the media often misrepresented it. While two of the female interviewees who wore hijab viewed this as a positive opportunity to do dawah, at least two others who wore hijab discussed the frustration they felt as being viewed as spokespeople for Islam and Muslims.

While many of the research participants also talked about the challenges they faced in establishing their five daily prayers, most of the youth discussed the struggles they faced as they tried to do simple things like avoid hand shaking with the opposite gender or socialize with their non-Muslim friends in a manner that did not compromise Islamic boundaries.

We raise these issues in this paper not in an attempt to list all of the challenges facing all Muslim adolescents in the United States. Indeed, we recognize that issues of

race, class, gender, generation, nationality, and ability all have the potential to complicate or privilege some of us. However, this brief study provides a glimpse into some of the possible issues Muslim adolescents have to deal with as they grow up in the United States. Since weekend Islamic schools are often the only source of formal Islamic education that Muslim youth in the United States receive, we ask: How can we (re)structure the school in order to respond to some of these challenges? In the next part of this paper, we will provide suggestions for teaching strategies, teaching content, including a sample lesson plan, and teacher-resource construction to address this question.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

We would like to recommend a comprehensive solution focused on three vital aspects of the Weekend Islamic schools.

1. Teaching Style
2. Teaching Content
3. Teaching Resources

1. TEACHING STYLE: CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY

One of the unique factors involved in an Islamic school environment, particularly the weekend Islamic school, is the fact that few of the teachers have any formalized training in education and pedagogy. For this reason, most teachers, despite their earnest intentions and efforts, rely on using teaching techniques that were used when they were in school—namely, lectures and oral Quranic recitation. The purpose of this section is to suggest one teaching practice that we feel could help Sunday school teachers connect with their students more effectively. This teaching practice is called “Culturally relevant pedagogy” and it is discussed by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994), who articulated this teaching practice after conducting a study on the teaching practices of successful teachers.

In her study, Ladson-Billings found that teachers who used culturally relevant pedagogy had three purposes for their teaching: 1) They were invested in students’ academic success, 2) They valued the students’ cultural backgrounds and used their culture to help teach integral parts of the curriculum, and 3) They were interested in helping students become more critically conscious of their socio-political environment by helping them read their world critically and to do something about it.

The teachers also shared similar teaching practices. Primarily, Ladson-Billings found that the teachers maintained fluid student-teacher relationships. By this, she means that teachers would give students ample opportunities to demonstrate their individual strengths by teaching the class about a topic, or by asking students to rely on each other for help. She noticed that some teachers would sit in students’ desks, thus reinforcing the

notion that she too was a learner, and that the student truly was the resident expert for that particular topic. The teachers in Ladson-Billings study also demonstrated a connectedness with the students. By sharing their own personal experiences with her students, and by valuing and respecting the personal experiences of her students, the teachers were able to establish a true relationship with their class.

The respect and personal connection helped the teachers develop what is often called a “community of learners”. Instead of having students compete against one another, students were constantly told, in multiple ways, that failure was not an option, and that success was only attained when everyone in the class was achieving. Furthermore, there was always emphasis on the fact that the achievement of one student inherently depended on the achievement of others, since they worked together to build knowledge, using each other as intellectual resources. Students began to understand this themselves since most of the teachers in Ladson-Billings’ study required their students to consult with one another before asking the teacher for help or guidance.

Most importantly, the teachers acknowledged that all students have the capacity to achieve. But beyond just sticking to the mantra, the teachers also provided each student with the structure they needed in order to achieve success, for example, by teaching them how to rely on one another for help, and by providing them with opportunities to become experts in certain subjects.

In this next section, we discuss how to make the teaching content more responsive to the challenges that Muslim students face and to their multiple cultural backgrounds. The lesson plan that we have created attempts to reinforce the teaching practices supported by culturally relevant pedagogy, by encouraging fluid student-teacher relationships and open flow of ideas and opinions.

2. TEACHING CONTENT

This paper calls for the development of professionally written lesson plans about vital issues absent from the discourse in weekend Islamic schools. We have identified three areas that should become a vital part of Weekend School curriculum.

1. American Muslim History

This subject should include study of origins of Islam in America, African Muslim Slaves, Pre-Columbus America, Islam through Immigration, and Historical American Muslim Personalities.

2. Challenges in Schools

Based on an interview study of ten high school and college students conducted from 2002-2003, the following issues came up as challenges that they face in their everyday lives, which we feel need to be discussed in Weekend Islamic Schools:

- a) Stereotypes of Islam and Muslims
- b) Burdens and Benefits of representing Islam
- c) Fulfilling Islamic obligations
- d) Living in the West and praying towards the East

3. Current Events

In today's day and age, it is imperative that Muslim students are able to critically examine the issues and problems facing the American Muslim community. These classes would equip the students with tools to confront the realities of the Post-9/11 world.

In the following pages, we present a sample lesson plan followed by possible classroom activities.

LESSON PLAN #1

Subject: American Muslim History

Topic: Legacy of Muslim men, women, and children in the African slave trade to the New World.

Objective: Students will read and examine Islam's role in the life of West African Slaves who were forcibly brought to the New World.

Skill(s) taught: Research, note taking skills.

Resource: *Servants of Allah* by, Sylviane A. Diouf

Materials Needed: Chart Paper
Markers
Information Packets
Tape

Procedure

Anticipatory Set (The hook that will engage students in the lesson): Students will brainstorm as a class all that they know about Muslims and Islam during the African slave trade. To prompt answers, have students make predictions or inferences. (i.e. Was Islam an important part of American history during this time period? How do you know?) Record answers on chalkboard.

Teaching: Provide students with the background information about the Atlantic Slave Trade through a brief lecture or other effective means of teaching (i.e. guided reading). This information can be found in any high school American history textbook.

Guided Practice:

Divide into groups of at least 2 students. Each group will receive one packet that contains information from *Servants of Allah*. Each packet will be different and pertain to a different subtopic concerning the Atlantic Slave Trade. Every group will be responsible for reading the information, understanding and recording the important points on chart paper, and then presenting that information to his or her classmates.

Closure:

Students will reflect on the lesson in an oral or written fashion. Students will describe their reactions to the material covered in the lesson. Were they surprised by what was left out of their history textbooks about Muslims in Africa and America? Why or why not? Suggest writing a letter to the publisher about any omissions made in the textbook.

POSSIBLE CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

CHALLENGES FACING YOUTH

The following activity would be a suggested way for teachers at Weekend Islamic Schools to address the challenges facing American Muslim Youth while at the same time connecting to Islamic History.

Teachers should consciously look for and be aware of parallels that exist between the challenges faced by youth and the challenges faced by Muslims in the past. For example, when learning of the struggles Muslims dealt with in Mecca and Medina in the early years of Islam, the teacher can ask students how is this both different and similar to the challenges you face as a Muslim youth in America.

CURRENT EVENTS

This activity will allow students to take current events and critically examine it from multiple perspectives. Many resources are available for such study, for example, multimedia resources such as newspapers, the internet, and news broadcasts. Another resource that can be especially vital for critically understanding a current event is personal accounts of an event. For example, when studying about a country arrange for a guest speaker from that native country to provide the students with a first hand narrative. The guest speaker can be an aunt, uncle, friend, or grandparent of students in your class. If the speaker is not fluent in English, a “translator” (i.e. a student who can speak that language and English) can be present. This can be an especially powerful tool that allows students to experience a multiple perspective. It also strongly follows the teaching practices used in culturally relevant pedagogy by using the students’ cultural base as an integral part of the curriculum.

In the next section, we discuss the creation of an online portal that will help teachers build the resources and networking that they need in order to maintain effective teaching year-round.

3. TEACHING RESOURCES - WIS-NET

This paper recommends the creation of Weekend Islamic School Net (WIS-NET). WIS-NET will be an online portal for the weekend Islamic schools. The portal will feature a comprehensive database of weekend Islamic Schools searchable by Zip Code, City or State. Individual weekend schools will be enabled to develop their own websites to organize information about their schools.

The website will include the following important sections:

1. Weekend Schools Database
2. Lesson Plans
3. Resources
4. FAQs
5. Discussion Forum
6. Volunteering Information

We recommend that the website of the MSA of the US & Canada be used for hosting this portal. There are numerous benefits associated with using MSA National's website. Some of them are:

1. Motivating college going students to volunteer for weekend schools
 - a. This will help to reduce the generation gap existing between the teachers and students. Students will be able to relate to their teachers in a better way.
2. Using MSA National's Organizational Strength
 - a. The weekend schools can share resources with MSAs across the country. This will enable schools to get access to a vast majority of speakers to speak on various issues in Sunday Schools.
3. Using MSA members as mentors in Weekend Schools
 - a. Ensuring that the message of Islam is not lost when students go to college.

WIS - NET
Weekend Islamic Schools NET



Resources, Lesson Plans, Ideas,
Discussions, Networking



CONCLUSION

Sylviane Diouf in her epic book, ‘Servants of Allah; African Muslims enslaved in the Americas’ sheds light on the struggle of early African Muslims in this land to preserve their literacy;

‘Sand writing was in all likelihood the most widespread technique used to preserve one’s literacy, but there were other elaborate methods. Muslims from Bornu who had been deported to the Artibonite region in Saint-Domingue made their own writing implements, as they had done in Africa. A French contemporary described them using sticks of mimosa boiled in lemon juice, “bamboo feathers,” wood tablets, and parts of palm trees’

It is our sincere belief that if Islam can preserve its literary tradition through the worst of times, we can certainly improve the quality of Islamic education given to students in weekend Islamic schools. Achieving perfection in executing a good deed is Sunnah, and we sincerely believe that there is a hidden potential in weekend Islamic schools that should be realized. We are aiming to make our dream reality with the help of Allah, by implementing the ideas emanating from this paper. We suggest starting this project by choosing two schools as pilot projects to gauge the effect of our proposed solution.

May Allah help those who try to sincerely work for Him. Ameen

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