

Beyond the “Islamic” School: The Quranic Academy

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About the Presenter

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Introduction

As Muslim schools move beyond survival mode they must endeavor toward making a genuinely unique contribution toward both Islam and education in the United States. For the past two decades, Muslim educators have interchangeably used the terms “Islamic” and “Muslim” schools when describing their newfound educational institutions. Some opt for the former, insisting that the ideal of an “Islamic” education is still on the horizon. Others insist on the latter based on the assessment that while the “Islamic” ideal is still a noble goal, our schools are not worthy – being little more in essence, than isolated havens for promoting a certain brand of Muslim culture. As an emerging generation of American Muslims grows up, this model will be forced to adapt with these issues.

This paper considers a new paradigm: the Quranic Academy. The alternative that this offers is an institution that places the Quran as its centerpiece and the foundation for its cultural agenda and values-laden educational program. Issues to be explored will include defining a mission statement and establishing a Quranic cultural environment; blending classical modes of curriculum implementation while meeting modern state standards; exploring ways of capitalizing on time constraints through integrating instruction; discussing the appropriate place of arts and skills curricula in a Quranic setting; and considering practical challenges of staffing patterns, leadership, funding, and accountability. In the end, we hope to present the recipe for a new kind of school that Muslim communities can strive for as we begin to move into a more mature phase of Muslim schooling – learning from the lessons of the first wave of schools while refusing to abandon our vision of an Islamic educational ideal.

To this end, I have drawn upon previous research combined with new experiences as a first year principal at IANT Quranic Academy in Richardson, TX. While this school is still in its beginning stages, I must acknowledge the influence of the school's visionary founder, Dr. Yusuf Kavakci, Imam of the Islamic Association of North Texas. Much of what is described herein builds upon his dream of educating a new generation of classically trained Muslim scholars, both male and female, who are indigenous to North America, who will become future leaders for this Ummah and the world. I also owe much to the governing body, parents, teachers, and students who have allowed me to write about something here that is real and not merely theory, albeit new and as of yet uncommon.

Purpose, Mission, & Vision

The Messenger of Allah (sas) said, "Actions are by intention, and every person will be rewarded in accordance with what he intended."

Thus, before discussing the specific type of school model that this paper intends to address, I wish to begin by mentioning the importance of the school's purpose, mission, and vision statements. They could be arguably the single most determining factor in the success of a school. In fact, they are the means by which success is measured. Before that, they provide direction to the entire operation and guide every decision made in the school's plan as well as the execution of that plan. Without aims, the organization is aimless, and its constituents operate in disunity with conflicting assumptions about what they are supposed to achieve. Let us then, distinguish between the three: Purpose, Mission, & Vision.

Purpose is the reason why the school exists even before it has a mission. I would say, in most cases, Muslim communities are clear and united on this point. That is, it is safe to say that nearly every Muslim community has undertaken the arduous responsibility of opening schools for the sake of pleasing God. True to the hadith cited above, our underlying intentions are for His sake. Even if things get foggy after that, this point is essential to remember, especially when judging the efforts of others. We may have disagreement with others who are striving in the same cause, but we can all respect the basic intention that unites our hearts.

Even if the purpose is left unsaid, the mission statement is another story. The mission of the school is its practical aim, clarified and crystallized into a concise statement that everyone affiliated with the organization can memorize and know. It should be imprinted into the hearts of everyone involved and printed on every memo. It should be displayed throughout the halls of the school and printed on a nice plaque at its entrance. This mission statement provides the practical means for the singleness of purpose that will unite the entire school behind a common cause. It should not be too vague to be understood in certain terms. Many public schools seek to educate every child, and this is reflected in a variety of mission statements around the nations. Muslim schools may seek to do the same thing while providing an Islamic environment. Or they may be specifically geared toward college preparation. Some schools may emphasize math and science or seek to provide develop the "whole child" through Gardner's intelligences or some other

well-known theoretical principal or “successful school” model. Whatever the case may be, the mission of the school must clearly reflect its chief aim.

Finally, the school’s vision statement paints a picture of where the school is going in the future. This statement may be a few paragraphs or even a few pages. Either way, the vision for the school serves as the dream that fulfills its purpose and springs from its mission. The vision should be revisited from time to time to provide inspiration to the staff, students, and parents – and a reminder that what they are doing at the school on a daily basis is more than a ho-hum routine. But rather, that they are a part of something unique and special that fulfills their higher calling. For the staff, it is their career, and hence the great contribution that their lives will make in this world. For the students, it is a seed planted in their formative years that will blossom into a tree, yielding fruit throughout their adult lives. The product in education is the training of God’s greatest gift to realize its full purpose, and to this end, the importance of defining our goals becomes all the more indispensable.

The Quranic Academy

So after confirming our purpose, which is to please our Lord, Glorified and Most High, we wish to turn to the mission of the type of school which is the true subject of this paper: the Quranic academy. The Mission of the Quranic academy is to revive the lost practice of training Muslim scholars, both male and female, in the classical sense of the term, but for the real world ahead, and for the circumstances they are living in now. In doing so, we are endeavoring to create a delicate balance between two current paradigms. On the one hand, we have the traditional “madrassah”, known throughout the Muslim world for continuing to train thousands of young students in the memorization of the Quran, but notorious for doing little else. I am aware that there are a handful of these types of schools that have transplanted this model of schooling to the United States. On the other hand, we have the contemporary “Islamic” or “Muslim” school. These schools have typically sprung up in Muslim communities as an alternative to public education for Muslim families. While their stated goals may vary, it is safe to generalize that for the most part they have provided basically the same curriculum as public education with supplemental Islamic subjects that equip students with enough familiarity with the Quran, Arabic, and religious studies to instill a sense of Muslim identity and facilitate day to day religious observance. While this may be constructive for the common student, those expecting a more rigorous religious program will be disappointed.

While it is not the purpose of this paper to indulge in a discussion on the current deficit of Muslim scholars and properly trained leadership, it is worth noting that the effect of this void will become increasingly apparent as Muslim communities progress toward becoming indigenously rooted sectors of American society. True Islamic scholarship will be all the more sought after as well, as Muslims continue to seek their lost legacy and revive Islam from the ashes of burned out reactionary movements that reduced Islam to puritan reformism during the degrading onslaught of colonial imperialists. The world now craves the revival of leaders who are the embodiment of holistic knowledge – scholars who can understand the world in both its physically manifest and its inherent spiritual terms. Yet what training ground has been established for the purpose of

cultivating such individuals from our new generation? From where will the “mujadideen”, (those who will revive the deen in our times), come forth? To this end, we seek a new kind of school, a new type of academy that will undertake this responsibility. Such a school will prepare both boys and girls indigenous to American society, to learn the Quran, master the Arabic language, study the texts of classical Islamic scholarship, while also being conversant in the contemporary studies of English, math, and the physical and social sciences.

Quran Memorization

Among the major challenges of such an undertaking is the sheer amount of time it requires to give each subject its proper due. Muslims have come to accept that notion that memorization of the Quran requires such an investment of time that nothing else of practical value may be accomplished during its undertaking. I believe, however, that this is false. Indeed, the most insurmountable obstacles come from the limits we impose on ourselves. Fortunately, like the airplane, the light bulb, or even the four-minute mile, such limits become obsolete once they are disproven. Memorizing the Quran requires consistent exercise of the skill required to memorize. It has little to do with the natural learning that takes place through stimulating and satisfying a child’s curiosities. For this reason, it is simply absurd to think that because a child invests a good deal of time in the activity of memorization that the rest of the time would not still be fruitful if directed toward constructive aims. In fact, the miracle of the brain is that it actually functions better the more it is used, which means that memorization of the Quran establishes a valuable skill set that makes other learning easier.

To be successful with Quran memorization still requires a significant investment of time each day. It also requires qualified personnel who are trained in Quran memorization themselves. Because of the individualized nature of progressive memorization, it is important to allow each student individual time with the hafiz. Further, a detailed report sheet should facilitate for daily goals and the ongoing monitoring of progress. Students would have a good amount of class time to work on their targets alone, or with the aid of other students while awaiting their turn with the instructor. To minimize distractions to the instructor, it is advisable to have an assistant monitor the students and help to keep them on task.

Equally important to the actual memorization of the Quran is the art of learning to recite the Quran properly. Students will also require an additional session in order to learn this specific skill set. The goal of such a class begins with getting students to learn to read the Quran independently and to recite the letters and words correctly. As the student masters reading and pronunciation, the next major goal is to teach the student the art of beautifying the recitation. This is essential if we expect the heart to be affected or to crave to hear its sound. The ideal scholar will not merely be able to parrot the Quran’s letters, but rather, s/he will be able to bring tears to our eyes and soften the hearts with the manner in which it is delivered. Imagine how the attendance in the daily prayers would increase if the people could look forward to having the hearts touched by the way God’s words are read in the morning and evening prayers.

The commencement of Quran training begins at the earliest levels. This is to capitalize on the natural memorization capabilities of a young child's mind before it is mature enough to fully understand its meanings. The fundamentals are ideally set down in Kindergarten and first grade, with the memorization load increasing with age. It is reasonable to expect the student to complete the Quran during or before middle school if a moderate course is pursued. Of course, individual abilities must be taken into account. It is also important not to neglect a set amount of time for reviewing material that has already been memorized. About half of the time allotted to Quran memorization will be needed for review of both recently memorized and previously memorized material.

The other subjects required in a normal school day will be similar to other schools. Students must be expected to keep up with their studies in English, math, science, and social studies. In addition, students will also need to be equipped with the proper tools for classical Islamic sciences while Quran memorization is underway. This means that an aggressive Arabic language curriculum combined with basic Islamic studies must also be engaged.

Curriculum Integration

The most practical question one must ask at this point is how this can all be done. I believe the answer lies in integrated instruction. Muslim educators have argued that integrated instruction should be adopted in Islamic schools for philosophical reasons. This is because through combined delivery of subject matter, the "tawheedic" connections between God's creation can be more fully realized. Interdependent relationships among the sciences can be more readily explored. For the practical reasons under consideration here, time can also be capitalized on by utilizing lessons that achieve the learning objectives for more than one subject through a single lesson. However, within the confines of time restraints, this cannot be done only on the superficial level of the occasional project. It must be an adopted methodology that the school day is designed around. For elementary classes, this may be done more readily through the efforts of the homeroom teacher, dedicated to a single classroom. This teacher needs to be given flexibility within the block of time allotted for covering the varying curricular objectives for each subject in the assigned grade. Middle and high school teachers would require block scheduling and the ability to teach more than one discipline, or teaching partnerships could also be used to secure the input of subject area specialists. The most natural integration of subject matter would be English/social studies, math/science, and Arabic/religious studies. These three, in addition to Quran/Tajweed, become the four blocks of time that must share the school day. Obviously, this is easier to fathom than allotting individual periods for each subject. Let us consider each of these in more detail.

The reason English and social studies are an obvious pair is that both require a good deal of reading, writing, and critical thinking. While a portion of English may require attention to grammar and language mechanics, there is no reason why these skills could not be learned and practiced in the context of the social sciences. Literary selections could also be easily correlated with social studies objectives by simply choosing subject matter that agrees with the historical, geographic, economic, or political theme being learned in the social studies curriculum. Vocabulary and spelling are generated from the same material.

Assignments that require critical thought about the material through the writing styles being learned in the arts curriculum easily serve the objectives of both subjects.

Math and the physical sciences also become increasing interdependent as the subjects progress toward more complex material, such as balancing chemical equations for example. When basic math is being learned, it may be sound practice to set aside time for it to be learned on its own. In this case, the reading material required in science may be more readily integrated with English and social studies, adding variety to the scope of literary content and vocabulary. Lab time might be set aside to facilitate the physical demonstrations for both science and social studies. One model of classical education utilizes history as its backbone and science is learned in the context of historical discoveries. The degree of demonstration and experimentation regardless of the subject would depend on how dynamic the teacher is in designing lesson plans that cater to the kinesthetic learner.

Arabic and religious studies will be a critical combination at all levels. This is because it is unusual to have an elementary homeroom teacher who is competent to teach both English and Arabic subject matter. It also facilitates for expanding the literary scope of Arabic language classes and filling the void of religious education materials by utilizing reading and writing materials with Islamic studies subject matter. Currently, the Arabic language curriculum is lacking in the sense that its emphasis on grammar reduces its study to rules and exercises instead of competent communication. There is something wrong when English language classes require separate thick texts for reading and writing while Arabic is reduced to a thin workbook-sized paperback. Rather, Islamic studies texts that written for each grade level in Arabic may be adopted to serve as the content for reading and writing in the same way that social studies is advocated for integration with English. In addition, it goes without saying that in an Islamic school, Islamic values and teachings should supplement the curriculum throughout, in both English and Arabic language classes, as well as in shaping of school policies and codes of conduct. The most important place for Islamic subject matter is in the school's culture, or hidden curriculum.

Finally, we return to the subject of the Quran classes, which will eventually be supplanted with courses on classically recognized scholarly texts. As mentioned above, students are expected to engage in the most intensive memorization of the Quran from grades K-5, warming up in K-1 and going full throttle in 2-5. By the middle school level, students are ready to begin learning the meaning of what they have spent so much energy memorizing as children. This does not mean that memorization will come to an end, since in classical Islamic education, memorization is a recognized pedagogical component. However, it is in the middle school years and above, that the tools learned in elementary school begin to pay off. Students will be avid memorizers, and will also be practiced in reading and writing in both Arabic and English. Classical Islamic texts will be studied under the tutelage of a qualified Muslim scholar. Portions of the texts are memorized, while the terminology is explained and discussed for understanding. These texts will consist of material from the sciences of aqida, fiqh, tafsir, hadith, etc. This will occur during the time formerly reserved for learning new Quranic material. Once the Quran is memorized,

these “Alim courses” take the place of new Quran memorization. Meanwhile, the time allotted for review of the Quran continues to have a dedicated time during the school day.

Before closing the section on curriculum and integration, it is important to note the importance of investing in training the staff in curriculum integration. While it sounds great in theory, most teachers are not taught to practically use this methodology to maximize their use of time. Most teachers have been exposed to the concept, but usually limited to the faddish production of an occasional thematic project. What is described above depends on integrated instruction as an established methodology and will probably require intensive training. However, the benefit allows students to accomplish more during the school day while gaining from the holistic perspective that it cultivates. Once mastered, other “non-core” curricula such as the arts, for example, can also begin to take their rightful place in the school day by being part of the integrated plan. The arts encourage creative and spiritual expression fundamental to the psychological well being of each person. What we are really talking about is facilitation of authentic qualitative learning experiences that are more impressionable and hence, more lasting in the developmental scheme of the child’s education. Inattention to this critical point will prove the bane of contemporary education’s obsessions with standards and “coverage” of quantity. Muslim educators would also find time in the school year to do more of what really matters if they liberate themselves from this “coverage” mentality and invest their summers in planning meaningful qualitative integrated lessons.

Conclusion

In this paper I have presented an overview of what I hope will serve as a new wave in American Islamic education. Quranic education prepares native raised American Muslim scholars with the Quran as the pre-requisite and underlying hum of all other knowledge. It is our mission, that the students who are trained in this fashion will be prepared through their high school experience to enter the top universities in the world to further their studies while being able themselves, to contribute in these universities because of their extensive background in Arabic language and Islamic religious sciences. They will also be able to serve in our local communities as Imams and religious counselors and teachers, providing classes, spiritual guidance, and social services to American Muslims because of their familiarity with the reality of this society. However, I do recognize that a good number of these students may choose other professions such as medicine, law, journalism, business, and so on – and there is no problem with that either. What is critical is that we prepared them fully for whatever endeavor they decide to pursue with their lives, and either way, they will have the prerequisite skills to fill in void of qualified scholars and leaders present in society today.

In order to accomplish this, these schools will require a shift in our communities’ attitudes about Islamic schools. We will require board leadership that is ready to hire experts to do the job and to back away from mundane operations. We will require Muslim philanthropists who can guarantee the financial stability of the institution. In my view, with a mission this noble, only students of the highest caliber should be selected for this type of school. This selection should be based on attitude, ability, and potential and must not be hindered by the economic situation of the child’s family. This means that

donors who can guarantee the financial stability will be responsible rather than a reliance on tuition. Only the highest caliber staff can be expected to develop and raise Muslim scholars, which implies that the issue of teacher compensation cannot be compromised upon. And finally, the school must rise to the challenge of becoming a recognized accredited institution by demonstrating its compliance with standards set by the regional accrediting agencies.

In closing, I pray that what I have submitted here may serve to spark discussion and ideas about how to revive our idealism toward the term “Islamic” education. Some communities may undertake this effort as a new independent project, while others may at least consider adding an “Alim track” to their existing program. Either way, without diminishing the importance of the current opportunities for Islamic education around the country or the dedication of the educators and parents who have made them a success, it is time to push the envelope a little further and demand more. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was sent as a mercy to humanity and it was he who said “The scholars are the heirs of the Prophets”. And in this sense, humanity is depending on us.