

Enhanced Curriculum and TA Training for Senior Students of the Weekend School

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The Islamic Weekend School is a Western phenomenon. Typically, it is organized by a small group of parents at the grassroots level, parents with perennially limited resources and organizing, staffing, managing and teaching experience. Also, such schools can be heterogeneous in the truest sense of the word. Of the many issues facing such an enterprise, one is the retention and training of children who have reached the 10th or 11th grade. Whether their training to date has been sound or not, many of them will come to the school only if they are allowed to TA. Parents like this option. It keeps their child busy. Students like it because they are able to gain volunteer time that look good on college applications. By introducing a certain course or by resorting to a particular higher level courses as well as instituting a TA training system, this natural drive of certain children could be developed and used for an all around more desirable outcome.

I. Introduction: This paper is based on a broader paper submitted in this forum in 2005.

Here, the focus is on a certain segment of students – those in the 10 or 11th grade in Public schools. There seems to be a very common pattern of issues with respect to these children in most weekend parochial schools – disinterest, non-attendance, parental distress and student desire to do something else in the system other than attend the classes. The goal of this paper is to suggest ways and means to recapture these wandering young souls and cater to them in ways that will challenge them, reenergize them and give them certain hands-on skills that could be easily used by the community, in particular, by the weekend school themselves.

In order to achieve that end, two items are being suggested here: a. Improve the curriculum to challenge such students the higher age bracket by introducing new subject matter(s) and or new texts, and b. Introduce a detailed Teacher's Aide (TA) training module to straddle the 11th grade year in the Weekend School.

This paper should be viewed as a policy paper and not a theoretical exercise.

II. Updating Curriculum for 9-11 grades: If we note the typical curriculum of a well organized Islamic school we might observe a particular pattern – a system of deliberate repetition. The Qur’an and the Sunnah appear to be taught at least in two cycles: once up to the 4th grade or so and then repeated again for the next 3-4 years using textbooks with greater depth. Sometimes, particular Qur’anic topics, such as Aqida and Tahdib, are extracted and taught with a particular focus. However, a complete and forceful overview may often go missing such as that presented by Yahiya Emerick in his “What Islam Is All About.” What is also missing is a competent and comprehensive course on the Prophet’s Life as in, say, Martin Ling’s “Muhammad”, that is at the reading and comprehension skill levels of students. Finally, there is hardly a book that covers Islamic History as is done by Karen Armstrong in her book, “Islam.” That would reflect what 10th graders may be taking in their high schools in the form of the American or World History.

Thus, in 9th grade one could use Yahiya Emerick’s textbook; in the 10th grade concentrate on Martin Ling’s Muhammad; and learn Islamic History a la Karen Armstrong in the 11th grade. In this same year, A thorough TA training could be instituted so that these students could act as assistant teachers in selected classes – mostly in the Islamic Religious Studies side.

III. TA Training for the Senior Students: It is very difficult to keep 11th grade students to attend the Weekend School. They want to get teaching experience. Even students from the outside with very limited Islamic learning background step in seeking to be a “sub” in a class. Some parents can get very adamant that their children should be a TA even if they are not ready simply to keep them engaged. This is all very good from one angle. However, the quality of the service to younger students suffers badly whenever

the education committee relents and allows such volunteers to step in without any prior classroom management training or curricular background.

Now, there is another overt problem constantly plaguing the Weekend School – teacher unavailability, tardiness, absence and turnover. So, these young hands are entrusted without much qualm with very huge responsibilities. Since, for some time to come, this will be a serious problem, it makes absolutely good sense to start a TA training class for the students in the 11th grade. The nature of this training is an area of curriculum, which is not a focus of this paper. However, here, one can allude to some elements of that structure. The student TA trainees must have been a student of this or similar school in the last three years, learn to consult the calendar and be alert to it, must choose a class they would like to TA - preferably an IRS course, need to know the curriculum for that course and the overall curriculum of the school, have access to existing syllabus and lesson plans, otherwise, in tandem with current teacher develop them over the course of the first quarter, prepare and deliver mock lectures, write and grade tests, learn how to use the Excel workbook and assist the same teacher with carrying out that responsibility, learn to apply the classroom management policy, be taught how to handle difficult students and how to communicate with parents on pertinent issues.

While the Appendix contains a detailed mapping of this curriculum, a statement is included below about behavioral expectations of a typical volunteer teacher.

III. Classroom Conduct of Volunteer Teachers: All members of the Weekend School must apply for a position. They need to be told in writing about the expectations and policies. A written contract of understanding must be signed. They must all be subject to orientation and training at the beginning of the year and some in-service training later on

in the year. The job of teaching or being a TA cannot be taken casually. There is a matter of trust and of liability. There is also the issue of image and professionalism. Teachers cannot shout or be physical and they must not instill fear in their students by clear or muffled threats. Indeed, it is frustrating being a teacher or a TA in many instances in the Weekend School. The roots of that problem are deep. It is a social issue that will take time to set aright. In the meantime there is no short run cure. So, any frenzied expression will not help. Kind, generous, smiling, relaxed and gracious manner, allowing students to makeup and catch up, connected with good teaching every time with clear instructions and demand and resolute attachment to the calendar will serve to get a message of seriousness to the students that does not have to be driven in with fury. Many satisfactory results are likely to follow from this. There should be a manual for classroom conduct and both the teacher and the TA should be familiar with it.

IV. Conclusions: The Weekend School is a rich innovation in the life of the Western Muslim. For it to be truly effective and a respected program many overlapping enrichment steps have to be undertaken. Of the various items to streamline retaining interest among senior students via revamped curriculum for 9th-11th grade students while subjecting the 11th graders to TA training is one of them.

Appendix I
11th Grade IRS Curriculum: Preparation for TA-ship

Learning Goals:

- Following the calendar – test dates, conferences, off-days, etc.
- Following the curriculum
- Following the Code of Conduct
- Handling a class
- Preparing lesson plans for an assigned class using preformatted form
- Delivering a lecture
- Understanding the role of repetition and drilling exercises
- Using alternative means to make a point and/or grab students' attention
- Writing, Giving and Grading a test
- Recording student data for an assigned class using MS-Excel workbook
- Posting grades
- Getting ready for the registration days
- Handling truancy
- Handling students with learning problems
- Handling students who do not study
- Handling parent-teacher conference
- Reporting to office
- Reporting to parents

Part I: Familiarity with the Calendar

Go over it carefully and establish a procedure of going over at the beginning of every class

Part II: Familiarity with the Code of Conduct

Go over it carefully, discussing what it means, why it is to be done, how it is to be done, how it is to be followed up and how as an individual the rules should be followed

Part III: Familiarity with the MS-Excel Workbook

Go over it carefully in hardcopy first and then electronically at the Al Amal Computer Room. Be assigned to an ongoing class and handle all its transactions. Be introduced to the teacher

Part IV: Familiarity with Writing Lesson Plan

Be assigned to an ongoing class and receive a copy of its books/materials. Be introduced to the teacher. Be given hardcopy and electronic copy of the lesson plan template. Modify it need be. Discuss with the assigned instructor and produce a series of lesson plans for that particular class to cover all the materials

Part V: Familiarity with Giving Lecture based on the Lesson Plans

Based on the lesson plans deliver as many 15-20 minute lectures as possible over the course of the year while following the elements in Part VI below

Part VI: Handling a Class

1. Preparation for the class:
 - a. Sign-off at the Office
 - b. Have chalk-erasable marker/eraser
 - c. Have book/materials
 - d. Have a lesson plan following the curriculum
 - e. Call-in early if late or make arrangement for a substitute – inform office
 - f. Follow the calendar and the curriculum

2. Room Condition:
 - a. Write down and report anything unusual
 - b. Use only chalk or erasable marker
 - c. Leave the Chalkboard clean when done
 - d. Leave the tables where they belong
 - e. No eating or drinking in the classroom
 - f. Pick up papers, wrappers, etc. strewn about on the floor
 - g. Remember the Al Amal School uses the room later in the week

3. Starting the Class:
 - a. With a short praise of Allah
 - b. With a short durud
 - c. With salaam
 - d. Take care of roster – mark down late or absence
 - e. Make sure everybody is comfortable – properly seated, jackets off, back up by the table, book(s), notebook and pen/pencil out
 - f. When necessary tend to unfinished earlier business
 - g. Ask/remind students that it is preferred that everyone should have wudu
 - h. Be alert to the dress code

4. First Day of School
 - a. #3 above
 - b. Introduce yourself
 - c. Find out about the students
 - d. Show them the book/materials
 - e. Go over elements of #2
 - f. Go over the calendar
 - g. Remind the students that there are three quarters with three exams in each quarter
 - h. Remind that everyone starts with 30 points for attendance and good conduct as define in “j” below. The points are for them to lose!
 - i. Assign some students to be calendar spotters in the class

- j. Go over the Code of Conduct
 - k. Assign work for next week
 - l. #13 below
5. Briefly outline activity for that hour:
6. Time Allocation:
- a. Divide class into two-halves
 - b. For QAS
 - i. Teach letter &/or any memorization first
 - ii. Hit language activity next
 - iii. Besides everything else, make sure that everyone knows Suratul Fatiha, 2-3 other short suras and Attahayyatu for salat purposes
 - c. For IRS
 - iv. Cover the book/material first
 - v. Do activities next
 - vi. Besides everything else, make sure that everyone knows how to go through the motions of salat, finding the direction of the Qibla, 5 prayer times, Fard prayers and associated raka'ah, etc.
 - vii. Make sure that everyone knows how to perform wudu
7. Defining Fun activities:
- a. Must be actual learning through alternative means
 - b. TA's/Substitutes must come prepared to actually teach from assigned book/material whenever substituting
 - c. Children must still be seated – no running around in the room and no milling around at the Chalkboard
 - d. With permission from the Administrative Committee, occasionally class may be held outside in the backyard
8. Periodic emphasis:
- a. On the Code of Conduct
 - b. Adherence to the calendar
 - c. Timeliness
 - d. Non-absenteeism
 - e. Spending two 30 minute segments per week to review past week's lecture and preview the following week's lecture
9. Classroom Vibes:
- a. Gentle but firm voice and no shouting
 - b. No threat, physicality or use of swear words
 - c. Whenever possible smile while speaking
 - d. No accusation, sarcasm or name calling
 - e. Use humor, but do not be a clown and be careful not to use off-color jokes
 - f. Do not make racist or sexist remarks
 - g. Avoid being political

- h. Give the Benefit of the doubt to others
 - i. Be hopeful. Use in-shaa' Allah
 - j. Use silence/pause to express disapproval whenever possible
 - k. Praise the work not the person – use al hamdulillah, ma shaa' Allah, etc.
 - l. Blame the choice not the person – use subhanAllah, astighfirullah, etc.
 - m. Do not be excessive in praising or blaming
 - n. Use pop quiz, journal writing, classroom reading, etc. to break monotony in the class. Have students raise Islamic general knowledge question(s) at different points in the class to perk up attention. Whenever possible, use current but relevant topics in the news to stimulate discussion of materials in the class
 - o. Record problems – by name, issue and date
 - p. Contact parents early
 - q. Report problem child or excessively under prepared child to the Administrative Committee. Special separate class could be arranged for all such students, school wide. This is often a QAS problem arising from filtration failure at the end of the previous year or at the time of admission
10. Refer to Committee whenever in Distress:
- a. For QAS issues, turn to the QAS Committee
 - b. For IRS issues, turn to the IRS Committee
 - c. For daily classroom problems or issues, turn to the Administrative Committee located in the ICM Office
11. Exams:
- a. Follow schedule dates
 - b. Exams will usually cover about 3-4 lessons, no more
 - c. Keep exams short – easy to write, take and grade
 - d. Have 10 questions at most – 15 minutes to take
 - e. True/False, Multiple Choice, Fill-in-the-Blanks and/or short questions usually possible to answer with 2-4 written lines
 - f. Grade right away in the class, if possible, by redistributing the scripts among the students
 - g. Collect them back for recording the grades
12. Parent-Teacher Conference:
- a. There are two (?) such meetings this year
 - b. Make sure your grade reports are updated
 - c. Post the grade reports without names – for privacy reasons – from the Excel workbook. Students should have their own ID's as given by the school office
13. Ending the Class:
- a. Briefly summarize what was done in the class
 - b. Remind important future scheduled events
 - c. Remind everyone that it is wrong to skip Salatul Dhuhr in jama'ah
 - d. Briefly ask for forgiveness of Allah for self and everyone else
 - e. Briefly praise Him and thank Him for His blessings

- f. With Suratul 'Asr
- g. With salaam