

## بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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Islamic Studies Curriculum and Instruction:

### **Challenges in developing a balanced Islamic studies Curriculum**

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#### **Abstract**

The issue of Islamic Studies curriculum in American Muslims schools is considered as one of the most challenging issues in its nature and philosophy. The need to develop and design a balanced Islamic Studies curriculum that meets the need of the community is essential. The purpose of this paper is to attempt to provide Muslim schools with constructive guidelines for an Islamic Studies curriculum by examining the issue from theoretical and practical perspectives. The guidelines should be able to establish a methodology in examining and analyzing the knowledge that reflects what the student learns through certain curriculum. The methodology should facilitate the construction and development of students' capabilities in transferring the knowledge from the theoretical level into the practical level. Developing creativity and building a critical thinking in Muslims minds to contribute effectively to the Muslim Ummah and humanity in large is the purpose of designing this curriculum. The focus of the paper should introduce three themes. **First**, a thorough explanation will be presented on the meaning of all the relevant concepts that are related to building the Qur'anic Model in this regard. **Second**, the theme will identify students' major problems and obstacles in this stage that hinder their productivity. **Third**, the theme will introduce the major qualifications of the teachers including education, skills and experiences that should be adopted and developed in different areas to improve their contribution on all levels. However, the paper will also provide the teachers with suggestions that enable them to develop creative methods and skills to overcome upcoming problems.

#### **Course of action**

Over a century now Muslim scholars, intellectuals, and activities have been attempting to revive Muslim societies. They almost all agreed that the decline of the Muslim community is related to its deficient educational system, which suppress intellectual curiosity and does not maintain positive character and behavior. Since then until now the call for educational reform took different phases, the beginning of the twentieth century focused on integrating science with religious education. In the seventies and eighties scholars came to a decision that the use of the philosophy of secular teaching

led to the deficiency of educational system, therefore, the goal was to call for Islamizing contemporary knowledge. Later at the end of the eighties and the nineties the educators noted that the problem took a new turn, which lies in the nature of the curriculum of Islamic Education and the weakness of teaching methods. The need to develop and design a balanced Islamic Studies curriculum that meets the need of the community was the main goal for that period of time to accomplish. Muslim educators worked hard in developing the right curriculum for Islamic schools<sup>1</sup>. Today, developing an accurate and sound curriculum that reflects the Islamic teaching is still the major challenge for Muslims educators. The purpose of this paper is to examine the goals and objectives of Islamic studies (religion class) curricula, teachers and teaching methods from theoretical and practical perspectives.

### **Guiding principles:**

The coherence of the central belief system in Islam is based on the relationship between the act of submission and its consequences in a state of peace. At the core of this relationship is the concept of *tawhid* by virtue of which submission is transformed into a dynamic and ongoing act. This is the meaning of *ibada* (devotion, worship); it begins by an active commitment to pledge one's being to the fulfillment of the Will of God in all one undertakes.<sup>2</sup> God has invested man with His trust as "*IstiKhalaf*"; the Divine trust is the fulfillment of the ethical part of the divine will. As a result, a Muslim by virtue of submission in *tawhid* is committed to a lifetime of striving in the way of God to enjoin what is good and forbid what is wrong, altogether to fulfill the purpose of humankind's creation as "*Khalifah*."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Study the work of Freda Shamma, Rosnani Hashim, Abidullah Gazi, dawud Tauhidi and many others who are still working hard in this critical area of development.

<sup>2</sup> Mona Aul-Fadl, *Introducing Islam from within*, the Islamic Foundation, UK. 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Al Najjar: *The Vicerency of Man* pp19

The foremost quality of mind and character that flows from this commitment is a state of constant vigilance or an awareness of the presence of God, the All-Knowing. *Tazkyyah Purification* is the important process to build this quality of God-Consciousness "*Taqwa*". *Taqwa* is at the heart of the traits cultivated by the basic duties, which are the pillars of Islam. These basic duties serve to build up the moral character of both the individual and the community. The purpose of the Qur'anic guidelines is to guide people to pursue the right path (*Sirat Mustaqim*) and achieve the ultimate success (*Falah*) in this life and hereafter. Practicing *taqwa* is the essence to establish a moral society, based on piety, love, justice, wisdom and cooperation among people. In addition, Qur'anic guidelines focus greatly on defining human relations especially man/woman relations by defining their roles, rights and responsibilities within marital relations, parent-child relations, family care, relatives, neighbors, friendship relations.

Qur'an also outlined the relationship between human beings and the *universe*, which as was described in hundreds verses. Thus, the verse " He who has made the earth your couch and the heavens your canopy..." 2:22, in view of that it is our home and we should preserve and improve our home in the most efficient manner. Human beings are equipped to interact with the universe in a way that actualizes *khilafah* duties and establishes the feelings of closeness and harmony between man and universe.<sup>4</sup> This is a great departure from the atmosphere of tension, fear, and animosity, which is groundwork of non-religious paradigm. The creation of universe should be utilized to appreciate and comprehend the concept of *Tawhid* in Islamic paradigm. Qura'n extensively describes

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<sup>4</sup> *And He has subjected to you, as from Him, all that is in the heavens and on earth: behold in that are Signs indeed for those who reflect. Q 45:13*

*"But seek, with the (wealth) which Allah has bestowed on thee, the Home of the Hereafter, nor forget thy portion in this world: but do thou good, as Allah has been good to thee, and seek not (occasions for) mischief in the land: for Allah loves not those who do mischief." Q 28:77*

different aspects of the Universe; space, plants, animals, and galaxy to motivate human kind to interact and learn from natural world positively.

Thus, the school can play a great role in helping apply the Islamic paradigm by educating young people through its curriculum, teaching methods, and its peaceful environment. In contrast, there are some serious indications showing the failure of Islamic education. The five prayers have been taught automatically as ritual with little understanding of spiritual meaning. Similarly, recitation of the Qur'an no longer inspires the heart and changes the person's behavior. Teaching the *Seerah* (the life of the Prophet PBUH) fall short to study and analyze his life seriously as a role model (*Iswa Hassanh*). The Islamic Studies curriculum concentrates greatly on the names of the Prophet's ancestors and the battles he led, but fails to focus on analyzing his behavior and methods of guiding people to change their moral system and attitude to the best. Consequently, what happened recently in dealing with the issue of "cartoon" among Muslims around the world; reveal the need of new teaching methods in studying and understanding accurately our main sources Qur'an and Sunnah. As it is observed, most of the teenagers performed the prayers to avoid Hellfire rather than seek the pleasure of Allah.

Therefore the suggested model focuses on "*Constructing Moral personality*". It is expected to create a holistic, moderate and balanced view of Islam and its application. In addition, the curriculum should equip the students and prepare them to be engaged in the contemporary "modern" world with all of its challenges.

***General Goals and objectives of the curriculum of Islamic education:***

Since "*Constructing Moral personality*" is the critical goal of the curriculum of *Islamic Studies*, therefore many steps should be taken theoretically and practically to

achieve this goal. Identifying the major Islamic concepts that build the world view of the student is essential. *Tawhid, Ishtikhlaf, Ibada* in its broad meaning, the Qur'anic concept of prophet-hood, and the sealed of prophet-hood, the meaning of the universality of the message of Islam, the meaning of studying the Sunan (the universal and social laws) that the Qur'an emphasizes on, the Islamic structure of family and society in holistic view.

Additionally, it is important to teach the students how to set goals for changing behavior; in this regards, some secular-based sciences<sup>5</sup> and its methodology can be useful. Monitoring the student through the training-period and observing their specific behaviors by skillful teacher and counselor is compulsory. Working on *character building* needs obtaining religious knowledge through the main sources, Qur'an and Sunnah<sup>6</sup>.

- 1- Building the love of the Qur'an: Students should learn how to consult the Qur'an in every movement in life. In order to accomplish this goal, long-life teaching process should be taken in consideration. It might start with learning how to recite Qur'an correctly and learning the Arabic language. Learning the importance of being active reader when we approach the Qur'an is significant in this process. Teaching students about the unity of the Qur'an and its themes is one of the most important methods. Understanding the process practically may start with teaching the students the methodology of forming Questions that related to their daily life. Next, how to formulate the Question in order to find the answers is a very critical

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<sup>5</sup> Tremendous studies have been done regarding improving and changing personality through Psychology, counseling, and the field of education as well.

<sup>6</sup> Rosnani Hashim. Rethinking Islamic Education in facing the challenges of the twenty-first Century, The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences. 2005, vol.22 #4. Pp132-147.

- stage. This process requires from the teacher and the students spiritual and mental preparation to reach the highest level of *tadabur* or contemplation. Teachers must be trained for applying this methodology of understanding the Book of Allah.
- 2- Building the love of the Prophet: The Sunnah and the seerah (the life of the Prophet and the early Muslim community) stand as a source of high morality, greatness, sacrifice and sincerity for the Muslim Ummah across time. Students must learn how to study and analyze the events carefully in order to comprehend the wisdom of specific events. It is important for the students' growth process to continue seeking new dimensions from the Qur'an and Sunnah within its general outlook.
  - 3- The following are general goals that the curriculum of Islamic Education should encourage in the young Muslims: 1) Promoting an Islamic moral attitude that sees that good deeds are the only criteria recognized by Allah (*amal salih*); 2) Developing sincerity (*ikhlas*) through observing one intention behind each action. 3) It is essential to promote peace in all levels mentally, spiritually, and physically; 4) Developing and practicing the principle and value of Justice, equality, patience and perseverance (*sabr*), trusts in the help of Allah (*tawakul*), tries to purify the heart from jealousy and conceitedness (*hasad* and *ghuroor*), works on abstinence from revengeful feelings (*ghil*), and avoids the paths of double-standards (*nifaaq*). 5) Studying and analyzing the complexity of the Islamic history and the modern world and its historical development; 6) Building a clear understanding of the foundations of American society's strengths and the roots of its weaknesses; 7) Developing a sense of belonging to the Ummah and understand

the Islamic civilization that brought about impressive achievements as well as the reasons behind its decline; 8) To be motivated to reflect an honorable example of a Muslim and have the knowledge to create institutions that authentically represents and adequately educates about Islam and Muslims.<sup>7</sup>

4- In order to develop and improve our Students behaviors and attitude; they should be evaluated and tested efficiently in this regard. Counselors, Psychologists, and other experts in the field of changing behaviors and personalities should be involved in developing this type of test and later the evaluation survey and questioner forms.

### ***Teachers and teaching Methods:***

It is known that the methodology of teaching Islamic education is enfold with weaknesses and it is a greater hindrance to developing wisdom and building Muslim students' character. Observing the teachers' teaching methods reveals a tendency for moral prescription or blind indoctrination. "You must pray, because if you don't you will end up in hellfire!" This method will not empower students to use critical thinking. The teaching method needs to be improved by presenting Allah as the most Merciful and Compassionate. The students should be encouraged to gain His love and pleasure for its significance, rather than to fear Hell or to acquire heaven. It is time for a paradigm shift; teachers' focus should be shifted into "***Constructing Moral personality***", which requires different teaching methods, skills and knowledge.

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<sup>7</sup> There is an excellent attempt in building a detailed curriculum that it may support building strong characters, but it is not published yet. It is developed by: Mazen Hashim & Riad Adhami, Youth Projects for after school and weekend programs: A resource for an Integrated Islamic Curriculum. The American Center for Civilization and Intercultural Studies, Canada. [accis@accis.net](mailto:accis@accis.net).

Students raised through this educational method do not consider context and cannot judge unfamiliar situations correctly. Since teachers are the most important agents in achieving the goals of Islamic education, we must focus on selecting them as role models in conduct, thinking process, and character, not because of their Diploma. Therefore, training teachers of Islamic studies through skillful teams is a must<sup>8</sup>. The teacher is the only one who can make a shift from a dead *information-feeding* approach to an approach that simultaneously addresses the mind and fosters the feelings of connectedness to God. The teacher needs to be aware of basic academic principles in teaching by: 1) Being a role model; 2) Creating interest in the subject through emotional immersion and connection to students' lives; 3) Allowing for critical thinking to take place by posing appropriate challenging questions and stimulating discussions.

### **Recommendations for teaching methods and activities:**

Different types of activities can be suggested: Group and individual projects, debates and discussions, practicing different activities such as simulating courtrooms that present some modern cases, which must be designed and played by students. Field trips are very important to broaden students' views and understanding. Sharing in different social service activities such as visiting senior homes, or local shelters, helping in feeding the homeless and the poor, cleaning public places such as streets, parks, etc. The following are more suggested activities:

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<sup>8</sup> There are some certified educational centers who are specialists in training teachers and grant them with a teaching certificate such as: Department of Education: Occidental college/ California.



- Creating small groups to teach the students how to discuss different issues related to different fields such as education, health, economics, law, social work and politics.
- Train the students to present their ideas and reflections; then allow other students to discuss it openly to teach them the ethics of differences and expressing themselves courageously.
- Storytelling is one of the most effective activities that can lead to changing one's behavior. It was used largely as a learning tool in the Qur'an and the Prophet (PBUH)'s *Hadith*.
- Performing constructive plays and skits by the students to illustrate many historical and cultural events along with effective people's life stories through drama or comedy.
- Games are a unique way to develop the thinking skills and model strategic interactions among students in all levels. Gaming theory is now being taught in classrooms in programs of economics and other subjects.<sup>9</sup> However, games can be applied to any level because it provides challenges adjusted to the player's ability. In addition, games have roles and structures, which teach the participants discipline in a safe environment. The main challenge to the teacher is how to design or use games that get students to understand different issues and can be transferred outside the game setting into the real world. Recently a

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<sup>9</sup> Shubik, M. (1989). Gaming: Theory and Practice, past and Future. *Simulation & Games*, 20 (2), 189-194.  
 - Games to teach Project-MIT. Online. [www.educationarcade.org/gtt](http://www.educationarcade.org/gtt).

psychology professor created a game, which was designed to promote global understanding and modeling a new paradigm for building cooperative structures instead of a competitive system to enable people to live, communicate and work together for the good of humankind.<sup>10</sup> These include:

- Developing researching skills and writing critical reports.
- Teaching students “Reflective Conversations” through prayer; it might be *Dhuha* prayer or just two *rak’a* (during the day) in a quiet setting in an environment that is suitable for such a session.

***Conclusion:***

The challenges of constructing the moderate curriculum are observable in our Islamic education. It becomes one of the most important priorities for Muslims to work together in designing and developing a curriculum that fulfills the needs of the Muslim Ummah. We need to develop a pilot curriculum at National level; along with a research institutions helping in this regard. Teachers’ training especially Islamic studies teachers becomes imperative. Philosophical and practical aspects should be reintroduced and taught from different angles that enable the new goals and objectives to be achieved.

***“Constructing Moral personality”*** requires serious adjustment in different levels. In order to build a balanced personality, spiritual, cognitive, physical, and ethical domains should be taught and understood in a holistic view. Thinking, praying, and remembering Allah will purify the soul and the heart from all the heart’s diseases. The need to work

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<sup>10</sup> Rosalyn M. King, New World Quest: A Game to promote Global Understanding and Build a world community. [www.psyking.net](http://www.psyking.net). roking@nvcc.edu.

hard in teaching ourselves and the students how to be purified mentally, physically, and spiritually is important. This type of guidance enables people to practice Justice and live in a peaceful world.