A Vision of Effective Islamic Education

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Introduction

Islamic society is founded on the principles of *belief* and *righteous conduct*. This connection between values and practice lies at the very heart of the Islamic way of life. To be a Muslim requires that one's faith be reflected in one's practice and daily moral conduct with other people. We have the beautiful teachings of the Holy Qur'an and Prophetic Sunnah, and we have many mosques, Islamic schools and organizations. Yet many Muslims today do not live in accord with the principles and values of their faith. What is amiss?

Islamic religious instruction, in the recent centuries, has been taught primarily as a body of *information*, rather than as a body of *experiences.* For many Muslim children today, Islam does not inspire, and seems meaningless and irrelevant to their personal lives and experiences. Other religious communities face these problems, as well.

The Islamic values education curriculum called for here focuses on personality and character development of children, close attention to the real needs and concerns of students, and preparation of students with the critical thinking and problem-solving skills needed to function successfully as Muslims in society.

If we hope to succeed in our goal to raise our children Islamically, Muslim educators and parents must develop a better understanding of *how* children grow and learn; we must understand the processes of moral development and the methods of effective teaching and learning. Our children will not become moral individuals simply because we want or tell them to do so. They will become moral individuals by cultivating their *minds* and *hearts*, and by having opportunities to actually *see* and *apply* Islamic values in practice.

The Challenge

The pervasive influence of secular materialism and its value system seriously challenges religious-minded individuals and communities. To a large extent, the future will depend on how well we educate our children today and to what extent we are successful in transferring to them the sacred vision of life we have as Muslims. What is at stake is nothing less than the moral and spiritual survival of our children and our communities as Muslims.

Without a proper understanding of the Islamic value system, there is little hope that the true goals, or *maqasid*, of Islamic education can be achieved. Islamic schools have a crucial role to play in providing concrete solutions and programs that will foster this understanding among students and in promoting the role and responsibility of the family in the process of Islamic *tarbiyah*.

Fortunately, a sense of renewal is in the air today and enlightened Muslims are eager to find real solutions to the problems and challenges facing the Muslim, including re-examination of both *how* and *what* we teach our children about Islam. The basic premise of this document is that Muslim educators must restructure the Islamic Studies curriculum—both *what* is taught and *how* it is taught—if our children are to develop the *spiritual survival skills* needed to survive as Muslims in the twenty-first century. This essay outlines a new vision of Islamic education which is capable of producing Muslim youth with a level of understanding, commitment and social responsibility that will both motivate and enable them to serve Islam and humanity effectively, *insha'Llah*. Islamic education must be able to produce Muslim youth that are able to identify, understand and then work cooperatively to solve the problems that face their community and the world in which they live and for which they are responsible. This, I believe, is the most effective form of Islamic *da'wah*.

This vision, in fact, is not really a "new vision," but rather a "renewed vision" of Islamic education. It is a call for the return to the classical—though not traditional or conventional—vision of Islamic education. In the lifetime of the Prophet, may Allah bless him and give him peace, Islamic education was both practical and relevant. The Prophetic model of Islamic education drew its substance from the everyday experiences and day-to-day problems of the early Muslim community. Although Islamic education will undoubtedly draw much of its content from the foundational disciplines of Islamic Studies (such as *Aqidah, Tafseer, Fiqh*, etc.), it must be done in a way that links this content to the natural concerns of students as well as the larger issues facing the world in which they live. This is the challenge of modern-day Islamic education.

The Vision

The vision of Islamic education presented here makes a fundamental distinction between teaching about *"Islam"* and teaching about *"being Muslim."* As mentioned earlier, Muslim educators, for the most part, have been content to teach "facts about Islam," since this is an easier and less demanding approach. We have not met the challenge of developing a systematic program to teach our children about "being Muslim"—which requires a more subtle and profound understanding of both the nature of children and Islam itself. The goal of Islamic education is not to fill our children's minds with information about Islam, but rather to teach them about *being* Muslim.

Several assumptions about the nature and scope of Islamic education under-gird the vision of Islamic education presented here. Islamic education, first and foremost, must focus on teaching values and emphasize issues of identity and self-esteem; furthermore, it must address the real concerns of students, and it must emphasize and provide for training in leadership. Finally, in order to achieve the goals of Islamic education it is essential to gain the active involvement of parents.

In developing our approach, we should not hesitate to benefit from recent educational research. This research suggests that several factors are essential for effective teaching and learning to occur. These factors are summarized in the statement that teaching and learning are effective when they are *meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging* and *active.* These factors are discussed in detail in *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies.* Washington, DC. National Council for the Social Studies, 1996. We believe that these factors apply to Islamic education as well and Muslim educators must become better aware of the important role these factors play in effective learning. We suggest that future programs in Islamic education must be evaluated in light of these basic factors and assumptions. These factors are briefly discussed below.

Effective Islamic teaching and learning must be *meaningful.* Students should feel that the content of their curriculum is worth learning, because it is meaningful and relevant to their lives. When learning is meaningful and relevant, students are intrinsically motivated to learn. Furthermore, students must be led to discover the larger connections between the knowledge and skills they are learning—rather than memorizing isolated bits of information. Especially as Muslims, our children must be trained always to keep their eye on the whole picture, or macro-view, whenever studying. This, in part, is the meaning of *tauhid.* Islamic teaching and learning must therefore focus on examining major themes and important topics, rather than superficial coverage of many different topics. This approach advocates that the Islamic Studies curriculum be structured coherently around the concept of *powerful ideas.*

Effective Islamic teaching and learning must also be *integrated.* It must encompass and engage the whole child, spiritually, emotionally, socially, intellectually and physically. In addition, Islamic teaching and learning should be integrative across a broad range of topics and in its treatment of these topics. It should be integrative across time and place as well as integrative across the curriculum. It must integrate knowledge, beliefs, and values with action and application. These integrative aspects have the far-reaching potential of enhancing the power of Islamic studies teaching and learning.

Most important of all, effective Islamic teaching and learning must be *value-based.* By focusing on values and by considering the ethical dimensions of topics, Islamic education becomes a powerful vehicle for character and moral development, thus achieving its real purpose. Educators must realize that every aspect of the teaching-learning experience conveys values to students and provides opportunities for them to learn about values. From the selection of content, materials and activities, to the arrangement of the classroom, to class rules and management style, students are exposed to and learn values. Teachers must therefore develop a better awareness of their own values and how those values influence their behavior as role-models and what students ultimately learn from these experiences about themselves, about others and about Islam.

Effective Islamic teaching and learning must also be *challenging.* Students must be challenged to thoughtfully examine the topics they are studying, to participate assertively in group discussions, to work productively in cooperative learning activities, and to come to grips with controversial issues. Such activities and experiences will help foster the skills needed to produce competent Muslims who are capable of presenting and defending their beliefs and principles effectively.

Finally, effective Islamic teaching and learning must be *active.* Islamic studies should demand a great deal from both the teacher and students. The teacher must be actively and genuinely engaged in the teaching process—making plans, choices and curriculum adjustments as needed. The effective teacher of Islamic education must be prepared to continuously update his or her knowledge base, adjust goals and content to students' needs, take advantage of unfolding events and teachable moments, and to develop examples that relate directly to students. Moreover, learning must be *active* by emphasizing hands-on and minds-on activities that call for students to react to what they are learning and to use it in their lives in some meaningful way.

These are the key factors for effective Islamic teaching and learning. The vision of effective Islamic teaching and learning set forth here is based on a *dynamic,* rather than static, view of Islam and Islamic education. This view is rooted in the belief that the mission of Islam is to positively affect and transform the world, and that the purpose of Islamic education is to prepare young men and women who are capable of carrying out this mission—emotionally, morally, and intellectually.

Resources

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"A Vision of Effective Islamic Education" was edited from the document "The Tarbiyah Project: Toward a Program in Islamic Values Education". The Tarbiyah Project began in 1995 and is sponsored by Dar Al Islam. The concept has been piloted in five schools across the United States; three schools have vigorously implemented it.

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