Sparking the Sunnah with Charger Pride:

PBIS at Islamic Foundation School

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Abstract

Islamic Foundation School implemented the PBIS program to improve behavior and create a positive school climate. Enhancements and adjustments were made to ground the program in the Islamic traditions. The program continued for two years and changes were made to increase success, sustainability, and accessibility. Data was recorded and analyzed to measure success.

**Presenting Problem**

Islamic Foundation School is located in Villa Park, Illinois. It serves students from grades PS-12th with over 650 students. The administration is led by the principal and two assistant principals. The Elementary Assistant Principal focuses on grades PS-5th. The Middle/High School Assistant Principal focuses on 6th-12thgrade. 73% of students are South Asian, 21.5% are Caucasian (Arab and Eastern European), 3.1% are African or African American, and 2.2 % are Multiracial. One-third of our students qualify for the Illinois free school lunch program.

The discipline policy varied from one grade level to the next. The idea was to address the needs and development of the students when assigning responsibilities and consequences. Prior to the 2014-2015 academic year, behavior regulation and discipline policy were largely based on the individual classroom management plans. Each homeroom teacher created a discipline system within the classroom. Some teachers chose to deal with all behavior infractions within the classroom regardless of the enormity of the situations. Others referred all cases to the administration to handle. It was emphasized that the elective teachers follow the homeroom discipline policy, yet this seldom happened. Each individual teacher decided how and when the discipline policy was applied.

Lack of uniformity in discipline led to unfortunate problems. There were some classrooms that, regardless of how grave the situation was, teachers internally dealt with the problem, not wanting to get the student in trouble. It was only when the problem had reached to the limits that the teacher was unable to cope that the administration was called in for assistance. In some situations, by the time the administration was informed of the situation, it was too late to rectify. In other cases, discipline measures were being used that were too harsh based on the age and development of the child. Frequent use of time-outs, standing outside of the classroom and other such punitive measures were being used to discipline the child. This led to humiliation of the student and increased destructive behavior or hyper activity. A simple scenario can elaborate the above point. In one classroom, Ali (pseudonym) misbehaved during the homeroom teacher’s class time. Homeroom teacher, understanding the developmental level of the child, decides to discuss with the child and give him time to reflect in the quiet reading corner for a brief period of time. After which, he is whole-heartedly included in class. Ali misbehaved again in another class taught by an elective teacher. This same child is taken outside of the classroom and told to sit in the hallway for the remainder of the class period. The child is then confused to why the same action in the same classroom would cause such different reactions from a teacher. These types of discrepancies were common and contributed to the decrease of morale amongst students and staff.

Some students sought negative attention as a means of stimulation. When constant misbehavior was present, they would be referred to the school social worker for assessment and support. The social worker may attribute the negative attention seeking to underlying concerns in the students’ home-life. She would recommend acknowledging the negative behavior as little as possible and using positive reinforcement and structured feedback. However against the recommendations, the negative behavior was overly-recognized and students were punished severely, making the underlying concerns worse.

When the administration met during the summer of the 2013-2014 academic year, there was one primary goal in mind; finding an alternative to the current individual teacher based behavior system which focused on negative behavior. The school needed a behavior model that would emphasize positive behavior and create alternatives to time-outs, referrals, and excluding students from the class. Our school required a model that would encourage self-motivation and an intrinsic desire to behave properly with individual and collective responsibility in mind.

The principal and assistant principals spent the summer researching different behavior models that have been used nationally and have brought positive behavioral changes among students. We desired a model that could be used uniformly across the school, encourage positive behavior, and would be aligned to the values of Islam and the life of the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) was a model that is utilized nationally with schools reporting increased success amongst students and improved positive school culture and climate. IFS felt that it would take the core components of PBIS and integrate the core elements of the Islamic tradition to create a unique system that was aligned with the school’s faith commitments.

The administration team appointed the school social worker, (whose background is Psychology and Islamic Studies) to lead the efforts to create the culturally and religiously competent model. During the first year, administration largely left the program to the school social worker without providing the needed structure and executive support. After realizing that PBIS required the entire school team to be on board, administration mandated a committee. The school leadership decided that they also had to be proactive in their support and collaboration. Team members were appointed that reflected teachers from all different grade levels throughout the school. The role of the Islamic studies teacher was also important as we wanted to emphasize how the system was in sync with our religious beliefs.

**Literature Review**

The first conceptualization of PBIS began in the 1980’s when school systems realized they needed preventative programming for students with behavior disorders, (Berler, Gross, & Drabman, 1983). Research also shifted towards finding effective methods of measuring positive social, emotional, and academic outcomes through data collection, (Sugai & Horner 2002).

In 1997, the *Individuals with Disabilities Act* funded a national center dedicated to developing positive behavioral interventions and supports. The center first focused on aiding schools in implementing evidence based practices for students with behavioral disorders and then branched out to the student body as a whole, (Morgan & Jenson, 1998).

Currently the center has evolved into a National Technical Center and has helped over 20,000 schools add PBIS to their programming through technical assistance and professional development opportunities. The center is run by the Department of Education office. The organization also has a website that offers a variety of evidence based models that may be used for a plethora of behavioral problems in the school setting, (Horner, Sugai, & Anderson, 2013).

PBIS is defined as an approach used to enhance implementation of evidence based practices to support academic achievement and social competence while preventing problem behavior in all students, (Sugai et al., 2000). PBIS is a Response to Intervention (RTI) model. It consists of three tiers and many modes of intervention. (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Tier I of the model consists of a school-wide approach to increase positive outcomes for all students. Tier II involves 15% of the student body whom are identified as at-risk or needing extra support. Tier III involves 5% of students who are not responding to level two interventions and require additional links to resources, (Sugai & Horner, 2009).

PBIS focuses on three main modes of intervention: behavior shaping mechanisms, character education, and clear expectations. The approach utilizes data collection to measure whether certain programs are successful. The data is then analyzed and the program is modified based on the analysis. (Eber, Sugai, Smith, & Scott, 2002).

When deciding what types of interventions to use organizers must consider the culture of their school and student body. A culturally competent school takes into account the culture of its’ students and staff, the school as a whole, and keeps in mind to create policy, teaching methods, and programming, (Carter-Black, 2006). Learning is made relevant and meaningful to students when their own cultural context is taken into account, (Lewis & Garisson, 1996). Culturally competent teaching has been found to improve a student’s self worth, need for success, and cultural pride by using culturally-relevant material and encouraging discussion and actions that honor their cultural and linguistic heritage, (Cartledge & Milburn, 1996 ).

Group interventions may be beneficial to students who come from collectivist cultures where the need of many is valued over the individual. Within that context, involving families of the students to participate may also be helpful, (Canino & Spurlock, 2000). When programming incorporates cultural stories and oral traditions it aides students to take ownership of the activities and gives them a sense of ownership and responsibility in their schools, (Baumann, 1992).

Unfortunately no scientific journal articles or research was found on the use of PBIS programming in Islamic Schools. Furthermore after conducting a google search and studying some Islamic School’s websites, it can be inferred that a handful of Islamic schools have began to implement the approach. However, no Islamically relevant PBIS curriculum was available or published when this review was written.

In order to develop our own curriculum which incorporates Islamic Psychology, we heavily utilized *“Purification of the Soul”* by Maulana Wahiuddin Khan. This book lists many diseases of the heart and their cures taken from the Quran and Prophetic Teachings.

**Methods**

This section seeks to describe how Islamic Foundation School used the PBIS approach to meet our needs.

**Level I:** a school-wide effort to increase positive school culture and the occurrence of expected behavior by involving all school stakeholders. Every student is active in implementation at this stage. Level one is outlined in detail below.

**Level II:** constitutes approximately 15% of the whole student body. These students may be having behavior or emotional difficulties which somehow affect their performance academically. These students are referred by parents, teachers, or through the students themselves to the Student Services Team. Islamic Foundation’s team consists of a clinical social worker, academic counselor, and a special education coordinator. The social worker uses the evidence based curriculum “Zones of Regulation” for students with behavior and social-emotional concerns.

**Level III:** describes approximately 5% of students. These students have already utilized Level Two supports with little to no improvement using evidence based practices or are too severe to attempt interventions by the Student Services Team. These students are referred to the local public school district to seek services through an IEP or receive accommodation through a 504 plan.

**Development of PBIS at Islamic Foundation School**

The first challenge of our Level One program was creating Islamically relevant interventions. Unfortunately published curricula specifically for character education in Islamic schools are scarce as discussed in the review section of this paper.

Therefore, our team researched the Islamic science of *tazkiya* (purification of the heart) to collect character qualities which have strong roots within the Islamic tradition. We then devised a comprehensive list of “Vice and Virtues of the month” to focus on during the school year. We also developed our own curriculum which combined stories from the Quran and Prophetic teachings with child psychology.

Another aspect was adding in Islamic guidelines into our PBIS expectation posters, ie: eat with your right hand, say the bathroom prayer, etc. Using our school mascot, “the Charger” to boost school pride and morale, we modified our behavior shaping mechanism the “Charger Check,” to include slogans like “Spark the Sunnah!”

During the first year of implementation our PBIS program experienced a soft start. We executed the program at all grade levels, K thru 12. During this year our Islamic Character Education was developed from scratch. We also created an advisory panel of teachers to help with the development of the project. We measured success by feedback surveys from staff and rate of referrals, comparing the 2013-2014 school year to the 2014-2015 school year. The surveys indicated that more buy in from administration and all staff members was integral in creating lasting positive change. After receiving feedback from students, staff, and parents the team made necessary changes for the 2015-2016 school year which emphasized a cohesive uniform effort from administration, all staff, and parents, etc.

In the second year of implementation, the project was scaled down to the elementary school with further plans to perfect the project. Administration played a key role in the execution of the project and mandated all staff to participate. The advisory panel became a fully functioning committee with representation from each grade level. Selected teachers were sent to professional development courses on PBIS and instructed to train staff on the intervention models. The behavior shaping mechanism, “Charger Checks” were redesigned to decrease instant gratification, increase an intrinsic drive for achievement, and recognize positive behavior.

**Description of Culminating Project**

Traditionally Level One of a PBIS program consists of three types of interventions: Clear Expectations, Character Education, and Behavior Shaping Mechanisms.

**1). Clear Expectations:** the primary way to promote positive behavior at school is to define and model how we wish students to behave.

***Posters:*** Around our school we display large and colorful posters that list the expected behaviors in a specific school setting, ie: bathroom, prayer hall, cafeteria, and hallway. Along with these posters we have added smaller pictures which illustrate the rules. The pictures portray actual children from the Elementary school so the students feel more invested in the PBIS process. The teachers in each grade are given the posters and pictures in a packet that they may periodically revisit with their own classrooms.

***Video:*** Students and staff created a short video outlining and modeling all expected behaviors in specific settings as well as the “wrong way” to do things. The video is meant to be comical and easy to remember so that guidelines are accessible to our young students. Staff may review the video with students at any time through a link on YouTube.

**2) Behavior Shaping Mechanisms:** the secondary way to promote positive behavior and school climate is through a token system to increase the expected behaviors through rewards.

***Charger Checks:*** Each staff member is given a booklet of “Charger Checks.” The word CHARGERS is used as an acronym to define qualities that deserve merit and recognition.

The staff is able to clearly define these qualities by referencing an expectation matrix that examines each letter’s quality and how it should be exhibited in different school settings, ie: bathroom, hallway, cafeteria, prayer hall, etc. The Charger Check System promotes positive school culture and general good will by also helping staff to look for positive actions in their students and recognize them.

Once a student has displayed a positive behavior a staff member may reward them with a Charger Check. Each booklet contains a carbon copy of the checks so that the staff may keep track of who was awarded and when. The student will then place their copy of the check in a large bucket displayed in the front office. Every Friday, the Principal draws five names from the bucket and let the students pick from a collection of trinket toys.

If the administration or classroom teacher is trying to stress and reinforce a specific behavior, ie: walking on the right side of the hallway, they would give many charger checks to various students on a certain day for that specific behavior without informing students.

Homeroom teachers keep track of each student’s Charger Checks with a quarterly chart. Once a student has received a Charger Check for each letter in “CHARGERS” they are eligible to attend a special lunch provided by the administration and hosted by the principal at the end of each quarter.

***The Marble System:*** All staff will also switch to the marble system to promote management and evaluate cooperation at the classroom level. This is to promote a cohesive and uniform measure for all grade levels. Each classroom will start with an empty jar and add marbles to promote good group behavior. When the jar is full, the class gets a treat of some sort.

**3) Character Education: Vice and Virtue of the Month**

Each month the entire school focuses on specific qualities that have a strong source in Islamic Character Building (Tazkiyah) through:

* Monthly themed assemblies hosted by each class section
* A Monthly Letter Home for parents on the specific characteristics and family activities that can be done at home.
* Monthly Khutbah dedicated to the topic
* Bimonthly social-emotional lessons
* Teacher’s Reminders
* Monthly Islamic Studies Teacher’s Lessons
* A Bulletin Board (changed once a month) showcasing the students’ work towards specific behaviors and characteristics
* Elementary wide on-going projects hosted by the respective class section

*Vice and Virtues of the Month for School Year*

August: Building Character is a process, the nafs vs. the heart

September: Respect/ Sins of the Tongue (Bullying)

October: Patience/Trust in Allah

November: Gratefulness/Envy

December: Sharing/ Selfishness

January: Responsibility/Moderation

February: Humility/ Vanity

March: Honesty/ Lying

April: Empathy/Tolerance

May: Building a Community/ Social Justice

June: Brotherhood/Friendship

**Measurement of Success**

In order to continuously gage the accessibility, sustainability, and viability of the program the PBIS committee meets once a month to discuss the program highlights, successes, and needs for improvement. The PBIS team also uses surveys given to staff, students, and teachers once a semester to garner feedback for better results. The program’s success is measured by rate of referrals and is compared on a month by month basis.

**The Future of PBIS at IFS**

The success of implementing PBIS will be measured constantly through out the 2015-2016 school year by the measures described earlier. The team will then reflect upon what changes are needed to improve the program. The school social worker is trained in Zones of Regulation, an evidence based behavior modification program that is also a component of Level II interventions at our school. Administration has future plans to have the school social worker train the entire elementary faculty in using Zones with all of their students.

IFS will also work on creating home-school connections so the lessons learned in school can be reinforced at home. The school social worker provides a Character Program newsletter to all elementary parents but we would like to add in updates on PBIS programming by the administration, newsletters by the homeroom teacher, and Islamic Studies’ teacher. This way PBIS is encouraged to be discussed in the home setting as well.

As we perfect the PBIS model in the elementary level, IFS will extend the program to the middle school and high school as well, modifying according to their specific developmental needs. The culminating goal of inculcating PBIS in the children from a young age is to promote a system of behavior that encourages civic responsibility among children so that they may grow up to become responsible, respectful, Muslim American Citizens.

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