**Hands-on Books Closed: Tackling the Islamic Weekend School Effectively**

**About the Authors:**

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Aishia Neal has taught students ranging in grades three to eight for over 10 years.  Working in Islamic schools has encouraged her to explore ways to integrate and “islamify” the curriculum taught in her core content classes.   Mentoring others as a Lead Teacher, she has been one who strives to promote application of the latest research based strategies, and the importance of creating a classroom environment that is safe, stimulating, and supportive to all learning styles. After developing practice and assessment curriculum for an EdTech company, Aishia returned to school and is currently pursuing her Masters degree in Instructional Design.

**Introduction**

Weekend schools have always played an important role in religious communities. They provide an opportunity for the youth to gain valuable knowledge about their religion, encourage socialization among peers, and offer opportunity to train youth for leadership roles within their communities and beyond. Al-Hasan ibn Ali (Radi Allahu Anhu) said,

"Educate yourselves today, for today you are the youth of the community but tomorrow you shall be the seniors.” (Alshareef 2012)

While weekend schools can prove to be one of the most valuable tools in educating and providing religious knowledge, a weekend school where teachers are untrained and lack resources can cause youth to loose interest and choose less desirable ways to spend their weekends. An unorganized, uninspiring weekend classroom, that has the opportunity to enlighten a child, has now become a student’s dreaded task every weekend. This paper will examine common challenges of weekend schools, provide practical strategies for overcoming these challenges, and offer research based strategies that will help turn an unorganized weekend classroom into a vibrant interactive learning environment.

**Weekend School Challenges**

Expectations of Volunteers

One major concern surrounding weekend schools involves lack of training provided to teachers. Understanding that the majority of teachers who volunteer at a weekend school are not formally trained in education helps to put the various challenges into perspective. Lesson planning, classroom management, incorporating current educational trends into instructional deliverance can all be very foreign to a college student, or parent that wants to volunteer at their local masjid’s weekend school.

Holding high expectations of weekend teachers and providing the basic teacher training necessary is critical, and should be conducted before the start of a new school year. Although it is the administration’s responsibility to provide workshops on classroom management, lesson plans, interaction with students, discipline, and so on, a motivated weekend teacher can find information about all this easily on the web. These are all tools that will provide a successful school year, and more often, the tools that most volunteers lack.

To an untrained weekend teacher the best option to teaching, is delivering instruction right from the textbook and utilizing the workbook. This method, although most utilized, is not always most effective. Research has proven that students today learn best with hands-on interactive activities, discussion, and opportunities to engage in problem driven projects. Again, to a volunteer, taking this step can be overwhelming and confusing. Volunteer teachers require strong support and guidance from the administration, which in most cases, are not teachers themselves, and need assistance navigating the world of Islamic education as well. It is up to administration and teachers alike to work together to develop workshops and resources to help alleviate the burden managing all the variables of instruction.

Classroom Management

Another concern for weekend schools is classroom management. Certified and experienced full time teachers have been trained in different classroom management techniques, while the volunteer weekend teacher often has not. Remembering that whether a weekend teacher is formally trained or not, we as Muslims, have the best training directly from Prophet Muhammed (Sallahu Alayhi Wa Salam).

As a Muslim learning the Seerah of the Prophet can provide valuable tools when interacting with students. Classroom management is not limited to disciplining a disruptive student; it is how the teacher manages his/her classroom on a daily basis. It is also how the teacher treats their students when they are sad or excited. These manners are all found in the Seerah of our beloved Prophet (Sallahu Alayhi Wa Salam). Another important aspect of classroom management is setting routine and clear procedures that are reinforced within a classroom.

“Procedures are what will make your students (and you) successful and reduce your stress. It seems difficult at times to practice (and practice, and practice), but the benefits are enormous-so stick with it!” (Wong and Wong 2006)

With a well-planned classroom management system, students know exactly what is expected of them whether it is what they do when they enter the classroom or something as simple as turning in a worksheet. This is a major concern of weekend schools, because teachers understand the importance of setting up these procedures, but may be at a lost as to how to implement them.

Time and Resources

The final challenge that weekend schools face is lack of time and resources. Weekend schools teachers are constantly challenged with time for teaching, as well as searching for ideas to create exciting lessons. They are dismayed when trying to manage the immense curriculum in one weekly one-hour period. Understanding time limitations and how to manage is critical to success. Once mastered, finding time to develop ideas, projects, resource materials, and more becomes an attainable goal.

**Strategies to Overcome Challenges in the Classroom**

Holding High Expectations

When in the school or classroom, it is important to have basic standards for behavior. This, in turn, will aide in creating a healthy and safe environment that will allow students to build confidence while promoting positive growth emotionally, socially, and intellectually. It is also very important to have a classroom management plan in place that offers students a clear description of the teacher’s expectations for appropriate behaviors as well as the consequences that can occur when the student does not meet expectations.

It is important to foster intrinsic motivation as well as teach them how to self regulate their behavior. Scaffolding by starting with some tangible rewards as well as intangible rewards, can build good behavior and habits. In addition to scaffolding, having high expectations for all students in the class is essential in instruction. It is important for the teacher to clearly define her expectations and for the students to understand these expectations before proceeding to completing required tasks. When setting expectations for any age, a teacher will have to reflect on what type of behaviors are needed for student success based on their age group and what is expected of them.

After reflecting on the types of expectations a teacher should have for her students, she then should systematically list the steps needed to take to ensure success for all students. Keeping in mind demographics, learning abilities, and learning styles, while planning how the best way to clearly communicate high expectations is vital.

Strong Classroom Management

Establishing procedures and a solid routine is crucial for the weekend teacher. There are many variations of beginning and end of day routines as well as ways to effectively deliver a lesson and transition a student from one activity to the next. Exploring different routines and reading teacher comments on the web can help the weekend teacher determine what will work best.

For the beginning of the day procedures, it is very important to have the students get into the habit of putting up their belongings when entering the classroom. Turning in homework as soon as they enter helps to foster responsibility. Then having a morning Warm -Up allows time for latecomers to get into their seats while others are getting straight to work. Concluding this routine with a transitioning step, “meet on the carpet”, gives the students a definite ending to Warm-Up time.

At the end of the day, giving time for students to clean up around the desks, and collect homework gives students more practice with being responsible learners. Respect for the school, their class, and their belongings, grow when the student keeps their area clean. Any questions about homework can be discussed while students listen for their names, and it gives students opportunity to reflect on the learning for that day.

Transitions can be very difficult. Many students cannot handle stopping abruptly one task and immediately beginning another. Giving students a five-minute warning, allows student to mark their places in their books, finish a center activity, or complete a round in a game.

Time and Pacing

Pacing, or the speed at which a teacher delivers an instructional lesson, is important in every way to student performance and acquisition of new knowledge. A teacher should monitor both the pacing of her daily lessons and the pacing of the whole curriculum for the year. Monitoring pace is essential because if a teacher goes too fast, struggling students can get lost. If the teacher moves too slowly, a good portion of the class can become bored, lose interest and behavior problems might arise. Pacing considerations are also important to keep in mind when planning for a class that includes students who know little about Islam. Different strategies should be used to keep pace but not to loose those students who are still acquiring knowledge about Islam.

Along with curriculum and discipline, time management, or pacing of lessons, is important to ensuring higher student engagement (Hofmeister & Lubke, 1990). There is a need in the classroom for good pacing. Good pacing in the classroom produces positive outcomes, such as holding students attention. Students who pay attention learn, and this circumvents a lot of the re-teaching that results from ineffective pace.

Another reason to think about pacing in the classroom when planning pertains to classroom management and discipline. When the pace is too fast students can get lost and frustrated and act out to express this frustration causing discipline challenges. This can happen in a class where the pace is too slow as well. Students in this case can become bored and resort to finding ways to entertain themselves, and many times others, which can be disruptive. Maintaining a steady pace that is comfortable for the majority of the class is important. With regards to new instructional material, the pace should be slower than material previously taught or that is more familiar.

The weekend teacher will have difficulty with maintaining pace in her classroom, using current trends such as the “flipped classroom” can often cut instructional time in half. Flipping the classroom and providing students with a video recorded lesson to watch at home during the week, prepares the students to engage in active discussion or projects during class time.

**Hands-On, Books Closed**

Once the basics of holding high expectations for students, developing a strong classroom management system, and establishing a good pace, the weekend teacher can explore ways to create an exciting interactive classroom. In fact, there are a multitude of ways the weekend schoolteacher can foster the love of Islam and learning in her classroom without the traditional lecture. Three research proven strategies such as involving students in social causes and community work to foster empathy, utilizing visual hands on activities to facilitate information acquisition, and allowing students to take ownership in what is learned in the classroom, can all help ensure success in the weekend classroom.

An Empathetic Classroom

Understanding how to manage emotions is important for children as they grow. Setting up a classroom that fosters empathy by engaging students in community projects and discussion about world issues is an effective strategy. Many adults still struggle with being empathetic, and starting early with careful instruction is important. Elias states that it’s “understanding how to mange emotions means being able to regulate feelings so that they aid rather than impede the handling of situations” (2003). It is important to achieve this skill because before a person can build meaningful relationships with others, a person must be able to control his or her emotions. Anger, anxiety, melancholy, are all feeling that a healthy adult has learned to control. According to psychologist Abraham Maslow there is a hierarchy of basic needs necessary for every human being to positively grow until he reaches self-actualization, or finding a meaning to life that is important to that person. Maslow also lists several behaviors leading to self-actualization, and “listening to your own feelings in evaluating experiences” is one of them (McLeod, 2007).

Being able to identify with others thoughts and feelings, or showing empathy, must be fostered at an early age. Empathy is being able to feel what another feels, and the being able to step into the shoes of someone else and not think only of your needs. Showing empathy is a slowly diminishing skill in our ever-increasing narcissistic society. Media, and entertainment are large contributors to this problem. Children of today are bombarded with video games that deaden emotion and where characters are killed and resurrected, blood splatters constantly, and the goal, many times, is to achieve points through destruction of life. In the news there are stories filled with poverty and crime followed immediately by stories of well being which can give no time for the viewer to absorb the information and reflect and empathize with others.

As psychologists continue to learn more about the emotional and social development of children, it becomes more apparent that empathy is a major component of emotional intelligence. Howard Gardner, psychologist and author of *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, states that intrapersonal intelligence is the “capacity to understand the intentions, motivations, and desires of other people” (Gardner, 2011). In order to maintain healthy successful relationships at work and home a person must have empathy.

According to M.J. Elias, appreciating diversity is “understanding that individual and group differences complement one another and add strength and adaptability to the world around us”(2003). Appreciating diversity is more than recognizing and accepting diversity. Appreciation of diversity is seeing that without it, innovation ceases, and creative thought becomes limited. It’s important for a child to learn to appreciate diversity because it is essential with the increasingly global communities and workplaces.

Graphics and Visuals

Students in the 21st Century are known to rely heavily on learning through graphics and visuals. Using videos, media, art, graphic organizers, etc. not only helps the weekend teacher deliver important information, but can help students retain information. Graphic organizers are visual tools that communicate ideas and concepts by relating the information in way that is easier for the learner to understand. This is why many teachers have opted to use graphic organizers to assist students in organizing challenging information into more easily understood relationships and /or patterns. Concept maps, Venn diagrams, flow charts, and KWL charts are a few examples of types of graphic organizers.

Before instruction, using an organizer such as a KWL chart can support the extraction of prior knowledge from students by helping to identify key concepts on a topic. Other organizers can support pre-instruction learning by setting up structure for note taking. During instruction, an organizer can give students the opportunity to process their information by organizing what they have learned to that point and then allowing them to reorganize it supporting Assimilation of information can occur after instruction and aide students in summarizing key concepts. Graphic organizers such as web organizers and sequence charts, used after instruction can help with elaborating on topics, identifying relationships and related details.

Student Leadership

A final suggestion to overcome challenges facing the weekend teacher is to approach the class as a facilitator of learning. As mentioned earlier, student engagement is essential to learning and retaining information. An excellent way to increase student engagement is to have students take the lead as to what is learned in the Islamic Studies class. Increasing autonomy by allowing students to choose Islamic projects and topics to explore and guiding them through their exploration, can give them a sense of understanding of who they are and how to be contributing citizens in their community, their country, and globally.

Service learning projects are a great way for students to build their character and learn how to be leaders. Weekend schools have the amazing opportunity to take students out of the typical learning environment and involve them in community service projects such as organizing food drives, visiting the elderly, preparing and feeding the poor, and so on. These skills are critical in developing not only their social and leadership skills, but also their empathy as mentioned above. It’s easy to teach a lesson on the seerah about examples of civil engagement. Imagine the impact of a child who takes that and then applies it within its own community through service learning projects.

**Conclusion**

Coming to the undeniable conclusion that weekend schools hold an extremely important role within the community, the importance of supporting the weekend teacher becomes paramount. This role, held by dedicated volunteers, essentially helps to mold the character of many of our future Islamic leaders. These students will go on to lead, not only within our Muslim communities but also beyond, sharing the knowledge acquired in their weekend classes. Yahya ibn Humayd said,

“We went to Imam Hammad ibn Salamah once and found him sitting with children narrating hadith to them. When he completed and the children left, we approached him and said, 'O Abu Salamah, we are the seniors of your tribe. We have come to you to learn. Why do you leave us and turn instead to these children?'" "He replied, 'I once saw in a dream that I was sitting on the banks of a river, bending over with a bucket to get water to drink. After drinking, I turned around and saw these children standing there, and so I gave them the bucket of water after me'" (Ibn Abee Ad-Dunya, Kitaab al-Ayaal).

Identifying the challenges of being a weekend teacher, and finding ways to overcome those challenges is not only essential to the success for that school year, but the success for the students in this life and the Hereafter. The Muslim youth today are the leaders of our future. With practical strategies and basic training, weekend teachers can overcome the challenges faced in order to make a difference in the Muslim youth today.

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