

Evaluating a Saturday Islamic School:



Learning from the students through a participatory needs-assessment

Submitted by:

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Introduction

The Saturday Islamic School, or SIS, is the most recent addition to the Islamic Center of Upstate New York's religious schooling system. While other schools, such as the Sunday School, Evening School, and Summer Camp, have been established for over a decade, SIS was formed in the 2001-2002 academic year as a response to concerns regarding the challenges faced by the growing Muslim refugee



population in their city. Some of their concerns centered around the psychological trauma these children were thought to have faced having come from a war-torn country. Other worries focused on the enormous task the mothers faced of having to raise their children in a country whose language, educational system, and dominant culture appeared so different from that which they knew. In response to these issues, arrangements were made to utilize the Islamic Center's building every Saturday, in order to run a tuition-free school that would serve the refugee population. This school became known as the Saturday Islamic School, or SIS.

Because SIS was created without ever having formally assessed or evaluated the needs of its students, my program evaluation was oriented to help the school formally identify and address the needs of this population. The SIS evaluation used a participatory approach to evaluation; participants included students, teachers, and administrators of SIS. Community members provided additional insights. The methods used to determine students' needs included formal interviews, informal interviews, focus group sessions, participant observation, and a survey that I created and conducted with the students. The multiple data sources helped to ensure the evaluation's validity.

The evaluation of the school resulted in interesting findings. Specifically, most of the students indicated that they enjoyed coming to the school to learn Quran and to be around other Muslims. However, many of the students conveyed frustration with the unreliable attendance of their teachers. The students from the "Youth" class, who had gone through five teachers in less than half of the academic year, were particularly frustrated. However, they also seemed to report the most enthusiasm for the school, despite the negative experience they faced with their teachers.

In this presentation I will focus on the students' experiences at SIS. In addition to highlighting the aspects of SIS that the students enjoyed, I will also share some of their suggestions with the readers, in an attempt to provide practical advice on how to respond to the problems faced by many weekend Islamic schools. I will introduce the concept of "team teaching" as a possible method that can be used to address unstable teacher attendance. Advice on the content of the curriculum will also be offered, with an emphasis on making the curriculum more accessible and relevant to the students.

Research Methods:

Participatory Needs Assessment

Program Evaluation:

Program evaluation offers a systematic way to evaluate the goals, objectives, and/or effects of a particular program. In the case of my study, the program that I evaluated was a Saturday Islamic School (SIS) located in a middle sized city in Western New York.

Needs Assessment:

Needs assessments are a particular form of program evaluation. This type of an assessment attempts to identify the needs of a particular population. For this study, I was asked to determine the needs of the students attending the Saturday Islamic School. Further, I was asked to see which student needs were being met and which remained unaddressed through the school.

Participatory Approach:

A participatory approach to a needs assessment uses the main population to perform its evaluation. In my study, since I was asked to figure out the needs of the students attending SIS, my participatory approach involved interviews, focus group sessions, and surveys with the students, teachers, and administrators of the school. Furthermore, after collecting and analyzing my data, I shared it with the students to see if I accurately interpreted their statements and responses. The position of the students as an integral aspect of data collection and analysis made my study a participatory needs-assessment.

Methods Overview:

Participant Observation

Individual Interviews

Survey

Formal Documents

Focus Group Sessions

Data Analysis:

The Structure of SIS



Grade levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- 9 grade levels- Ability grouping vs. age-based grouping
Class size:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Smallest class: 4 students- Largest class: 13 students
Teacher qualifications:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Knowledge of Islam and/or Arabic- Desire to teach- Ability to volunteer
Space:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Classroom walls made with mobile partitions- Prayer hall used for classrooms
Instructional techniques:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Whole group read-alouds (Quran)- Story Telling (Islamic history, stories about the prophet)- Independent work (Arabic, Quran)- Discussions (Contemporary Islamic issues, political issues, personal matters)- Lecturing (Quran, Arabic, Islamic history, personal matters)

Data Analysis:

Student composition

Student Age:

Most of the students attending SIS were between 9 and 12 years old, constituting 41% of the student population. 95% of the student population was under the age of 16.

Student Gender:

The student population was approximately equally divided in terms of gender. Female students constituted 53% of the population while the other 47% of the student population was male.



Student's place of birth:

The following is a list, from highest to lowest, of the places students identified as their birth place:

- Afghanistan: 48%
- United States: 21%
 - 13% of the students who identified United States as their birth place were in Kindergarten
- Pakistan: 16%
- Africa: 4%
- Iraq and Canada: 3% each
- India, Bangladesh, and Russia: 1% each

Parents' place of birth:

The following list is again from highest to lowest, indicating the places the students identified as their parents' place of birth:

- Afghanistan: 72%
- Africa: 19%
- Pakistan: 8%
- Palestine, Iraq, and India: 3% each
- Bangladesh: 2%
- United States or Canada: 0%

Data Analysis

Positive and Negative Impacts of SIS on its Students: In their own words

As I interviewed students about their experiences at SIS, there were a number of themes that emerged. I provide a brief summary of the students' view in regards to each theme, and share quotes from the students that exemplify the impact that SIS appears to have on these students' personal lives. The names of the students have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

1. **Respect and Brother & Sisterhood:** Students found that, for the most part, other students were highly respectful of them. A few students indicated that they felt a true sense of brother and sisterhood at SIS.

Aysha: Yeah. In my class, I like how we respect each other, the boys and the girls. It's not like the girls don't respect the boys. It's like we're really like brothers and sisters for real. Not like...

2. **Diversity & Camaraderie:** Students also enjoyed the ethnic diversity in the mosque, though some students voiced concern for the linguistic diversity, saying that it caused suspicion on behalf of students who could not understand that language. For the most part, however, students felt a sense of pride in being with so many other Muslims at the mosque.

Deena: We have a lot of people from different places and everybody gets to give their opinion of things and everybody gets together. A whole bunch of people and talk and we know whose there and how many people we are and there's a lot of us.

Shaza: You mean there's more Muslims than just you?

Deena: Yeah. Like before I came here I didn't know there was a lot of Muslims. I was born here. I didn't know but then we came to the mosque and I saw.

Shaza: How's that good for you?

Deena: I don't know; it makes you feel proud, and happy. That you have friends to talk to.

3. **Learning more about own culture or language:** Some students found SIS to be a place where they could reconnect with their cultural or ethnic roots. Some students felt that learning Arabic was one way to do this.

Aysha: I'm not coming here to be talking with friends or anything but I just come here to learn. Because I'm going to my country (Iraq) and I really want to learn Arabic before I go. My parents don't think we're learning so much. Probably this is why they don't want us to come here sometimes. They go like, so if you came here til now, you haven't learned anything. They want us to learn like, how to read a whole letter in Arabic. Like just to read it in front of their... I can't do that. We're learning slowly. And they thought we

were learning how to read Arabic, not Quran, you know. And we're reading Quran. Yeah so.

Despite not learning colloquial Arabic, Aysha conveyed a sense of satisfaction with the pace at which she and her classmates were learning Quranic Arabic, and seemed to value this, though she suggests that her parents did not.

4. **Having explanations to offer to peers in their public schools:** Given the immigrant and second generation American population of this school, many students appreciated coming to SIS since it provided them with explanations of their religious practices and gave them a language to express those explanations in, to offer to students in their public schools.

Krishma: I mean I'm just happy to have a teacher that's teaching me a little bit about Islamic. Now I can teach the girls in my school that laugh on me a lot. Because up here, when I was fasting those girls asked "How come you don't eat? Oh wow, this Islamic thing we don't believe it." And I'm like are you Muslim? And she said Yeah. And she roles her eyes. And I'm like fine if you're Islamic then you know everything...

Shaza: So now do you feel like you have answers for them?

Krishma: Yeah exactly. I can learn from here, I can give them answers. Why that I take fast, why I'm not doing the things they're doing.

5. **Reduced desire to continuing coming to the mosque and/or SIS:** Students in one particular class indicated frustration with their schooling experience, and said that this affected their desire to continue coming to the mosque and/or SIS. They were frustrated with the inconsistency in their teachers and the ineffective teaching methods they used. While this was an effect that corresponded closely with the quality of instruction the students received, their indication that they were disinclined to continue coming to the mosque certainly has the potential to affect their personal lives.

Ranya: We've been through five teachers.

Alia: They skip lot and lot of days. Sometimes they don't teach right.

*Hiba: There was one teacher that was very very nice. Then there was another teacher who curses; called us "a**" and "wise a**".*

Shaza: In the mosque?!

Aysha: Right over there [points to a spot in the prayer hall]. He's gone now, [name of teacher removed]. So when we blew his spot, he got mad. He tried to fight my sister. There was this other teacher, [name of teacher removed]. He was nice. He taught us from the white book. Then he just stopped coming.

Danial: That's why I don't want to come no more.

Recommendations:

Students' Concerns and Suggestions

Three major areas of improvement were repeatedly mentioned by the students in both the surveys and focus group sessions:

1. **Consistency in teachers:** Students stated that they wanted to have one teacher who could teach them throughout the school year. They expected this teacher to arrive on time, as they noted that many of their current teachers had inconsistent attendance and were often late to class.
2. **Variation in instruction techniques:** Students wanted to have a number of different activities throughout the course of the day. They made suggestions for playing educational games, or by combining classes with another teacher for a special activity. Many of the younger students asked for more time to play outdoors, when the weather was nice. They also indicated wanting to have some time where they could interact with their teachers in a more informal and playful manner.
3. **Clearly communicated expectations for students:** The students felt that they did not always know what the teacher expected from them. This was especially the case in regards to expectations of appropriate behavior. They also indicated that they wanted expectations clearly communicated because they found other students to be disruptive of their own learning. They wanted to be able to tell the student, or for the teacher to tell the student, that he/she was violating such-and-such rule, and for there to be a consequence for this student's actions.



Recommendations:**Recommended Short and Long Term Goals**

The following is a brief run-down of some of the short and long term strategies that the School can consider to use in order to help improve SIS.

Short term:

1. Try a different model of teaching
 - a. Team-Teaching: Two teachers sharing one class
2. Try to use a variety of instructional techniques
 - a. Have more than one activity planned for each week
 - b. e.g. Quran, Islamic studies, and one “fun”/low-pressure activity
3. Try to make expectations explicit to your students
 - a. Create classroom rules and expectations

Long term:

1. Try to find a person who can commit to being a “Principal” at the Saturday School
2. Create a school culture that encourages teachers and students to be on time and strives for high attendance and academic excellence
3. Generate a list of individuals who can substitute at SIS when a teacher is absent
4. Create or adopt a school curriculum that can be flexible enough to adapt to students’ diverse cultural, linguistic, and academic abilities and backgrounds
5. Create opportunities for parents to get involved in SIS
6. Begin to form connections with experienced teachers and school administrators who can provide workshops to the Islamic Center’s volunteer teachers

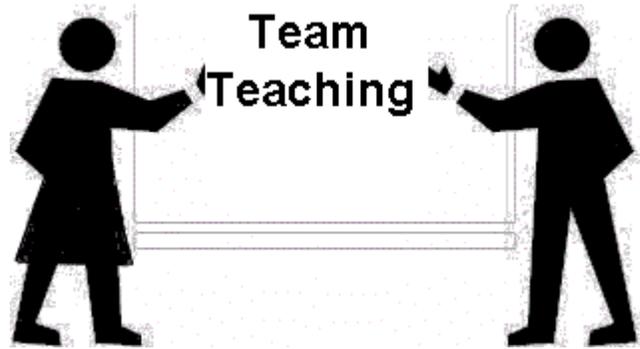
Recommendations:

TEAM TEACHING

The basics

Choosing the Team:

- Two people who feel they can communicate and work together well
- Two people who feel they have complementary strengths
 - Example:
 - Teacher 1: Knows Arabic well and can teach the Quran class
 - Teacher 2: Knows English well and can teach Islamic studies



Using both teachers' time effectively:

- While one teacher is conducting an activity, the other teacher can:
 - Work one-on-one with students who are struggling
 - Make photocopies for the next activity
 - Create a lesson plan for the next week
 - Monitor the hallways to make sure students are where they should be

Recommendations

USING VARYING INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES: The basics

Tips:

- Have more than one activity planned for each class:
 - Opening activity: Quranic reading
 - Main activity: Islamic studies, stories about the prophets, teaching how to pray
 - Closing activity: Going outside to play, having a whole-group discussion, allowing students to work on their homework, combining two classes to do an art activity
- Make sure the different activities use different skills:
 - Quranic reading: visual, auditory
 - Main activity: abstract thinking, kinesthetic
 - Closing activity: kinesthetic, social skills
- Try using games where applicable:
 - Hangman with Quranic terms or Islamic phrases
 - Jeopardy with Islamic subjects
 - Bingo with Arabic letters

Recommendations

Have Classroom Rules and Expectations

The basics

Tips:

- Make your language positive: Instead of saying “No running”, say “Walking only”
- Keep it simple! You want rules that students can easily read and remember. No one wants to read a manual! Have ten rules at the most.
- Involve your students in rule-making. Students know what is and is not appropriate. When you involve them in rule-making, the rules become all the more important, since it is something that they had a hand in creating.
- Make sure you go over the rules on a regular basis with your students and make sure that they all understand them.

Example of Classroom Rules: For kindergarten and primary aged classroom

- WALK INSIDE! Why---to keep our body safe from bumps & bruises!
- USE AN INSIDE VOICE! Why---loud noises hurt our ears & it's hard to think & learn!
- BE KIND TO OTHERS! Why---doing something kind feels GOOD to us & to our friends!
- FOLLOW DIRECTIONS! Why---so you can learn new things & know how to stay safe!
- MAKE GOOD CHOICES! Why---so you can learn, play & be safe!
- USE WORDS, DON'T HIT OR HURT OTHERS! Why---so people know what you need & can listen to you!

A STUDENT'S JOB IS TO LEARN, BE SAFE & HAVE FUN! A TEACHER'S JOB IS TO HELP CHILDREN BE SAFE & TO HELP THEM LEARN IN FUN WAYS!

