PROMOTING PEACE THROUGH ISLAMIC SCHOOLS:

Lessons from the Salam Institute for Peace & Justice

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Introduction

Islamic schools play a vital role in shaping both the academic and spiritual lives of students. These institutions go beyond conventional education by integrating Islamic teachings with modern subjects, ensuring that students gain knowledge while staying connected to their faith. Through religious instruction, students learn the Qur'an, Hadith, and Islamic law, helping them develop a strong moral compass. At the same time, these schools offer subjects like science, mathematics, and humanities, preparing students for professional success.

Beyond academics, Islamic schools act as community centers, fostering a sense of belonging among Muslim students, particularly in non-Muslim-majority countries. They provide a safe space where young people can explore their identity without fear of discrimination. Moreover, these schools emphasize social responsibility, encouraging students to engage in acts of charity, interfaith dialogue, and community service. By combining knowledge with ethics, Islamic schools prepare students to be not only educated individuals but also compassionate members of society.



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They incorporate Islamic values into daily learning, ensuring that students see their religion as an essential part of life. The curriculum blends religious and academic studies, teaching students that science, history, and ethics can all be understood through an Islamic lens. Arabic language learning is also a priority, helping students access religious texts in their original form.

Islamic schools maintain a strong emphasis on character development. Through daily prayers, ethical discussions, and acts of service, students cultivate discipline, patience, and compassion. Modesty is encouraged, and school environment fosters a deep sense of respect for teachers, parents, and peers. Perhaps most uniquely, these institutions create a community where faith is celebrated, not just practiced. Whether in a madrassa in Pakistan or an Islamic academy in Canada, these schools provide a holistic approach to education that nurtures both the mind and the soul.

Salam Institute for Peace and Justice

Salam Institute for Peace and Justice works with Quranic schools to promote education for peace through training programs aimed at building the capacity of teachers and students in critical thinking, interfaith dialogue, and conflict resolution. Through partnerships with universities and research organizations, the Institute has contributed to developing educational methods that help instill values of tolerance and pluralism.

Between 2016 and 2018, Salam Institute partnered with Arab Barometer and Northwestern University on a special project aimed at promoting research and education for critical thinking in Lebanon, Jordan, and the West Bank. From 2008 to 2020, Salam Institute also carried out various projects in Chad that focused on building the capacity of Muslim and non-Muslim religious leaders, particularly within Quranic schools and civil society. These trainings emphasized peace

education, interfaith dialogue, conflict resolution skills, and reconciliation.

In addition, Salam Institute collaborated with the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD), through a USAID West Africa office grant, to conduct research and build the capacity of teachers and students in Quranic schools in Chad and Cameroon, enhancing their skills in conflict resolution and peaceful communication.

More recently, between 2021 and 2022, Salam Institute implemented a project in Pakistan and Iraq to offer secondary trauma support to religious freedom defenders, including civil society organizations, religious and community leaders, and members of the Freedom House (FH) referral network who work directly with victims of religious persecution.

Methods and Initiatives

Salam Institute relies on a mix of formal and informal methods to implement its educational programs. Formal methods include integrating concepts of education for peace into Quranic school curricula and organizing training workshops for religious leaders and teachers on religious pluralism and tolerance. Informal methods include community dialogue sessions and collaborative initiatives with civil society to promote a culture of peace among students and teachers.

Through the work in Pakistan and Iraq between 2021 and 2022, Salam Institute supported defenders of religious freedom working with victims of religious persecution, helping to enhance their psychological and social



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resilience. The focus was also on providing safe spaces for dialogue within schools and local communities, which helped reduce tensions between different religious groups.

These initiatives have had a positive impact on students, teachers, and communities. For students, the programs increased their awareness of the importance of religious pluralism and tolerance, enabling them to discuss sensitive issues constructively. Teachers gained new teaching skills and became better equipped to present religious curricula in ways that promote peaceful values. At the community level, these efforts helped reduce religious tensions and fostered cooperation between religious leaders and civil society.

In Chad and Cameroon, Salam Institute observed a gradual shift in community attitudes towards education for peace, with

Quranic schools becoming more open to integrating conflict resolution concepts into their curricula. Schools also became centers for community dialogue, where students and teachers interacted with religious and community leaders from different backgrounds to promote peaceful coexistence.

With the trust gained from the community, Salam Institute was able to change prevailing opinions regarding girls' education, advocating for the right to education for all children and creating more space for girls in schools and their communities.

Partnerships and Their Role in Supporting Education for Peace

The success of Salam Institute's programs relies on strategic partnerships with religious leaders, teachers, and local and international organizations. Collaboration with ICRD and USAID helped develop excellent training programs for Quranic schools in West Africa, enhancing their ability to address conflicts peacefully. Cooperation with the Arab Barometer and Northwestern University also served as an important model for integrating academic research into the development of critical thinking curricula in religious schools.

Additionally, Salam Institute strengthens its partnerships with local civil society organizations to ensure the sustainability of its programs, training local staff to follow up on project implementation. Religious leaders are also involved in designing educational programs, which increases their legitimacy within local communities and ensures the effectiveness of the programs even after Salam Institute's project ends.

Challenges

These initiatives face several challenges, most notably community resistance to certain ideas related to religious pluralism, especially in areas experiencing sectarian tensions. Moreover, the lack of resources and funding poses a barrier to expanding the scope of the programs. To overcome these challenges, Salam Institute relies on a gradual approach, starting with building trust with targeted communities and working from within through their religious leaders.

The integration of modern educational methods is a major challenge faced by Quranic schools, as they often rely exclusively on rote learning and memorization. This traditional approach limits both students and teachers from engaging with contemporary teaching techniques, leaving graduates and educators ill-equipped to adapt to modern educational frameworks. Most Quranic schools focus almost entirely on memorizing the Qur'an with little to no room for other subjects like Arabic, French, Mathematics, or other Islamic theological and legal disciplines. This narrow focus significantly impedes the development of well-rounded students, hindering their overall educational growth.

Additionally, many Quranic school teachers lack the necessary skills to employ diverse teaching methods. As a result, they often resort to corporal punishment as a disciplinary tool, with the threat of punishment serving as the primary motivator for students. This not only stifles student engagement but also fosters a culture of fear rather than one of constructive learning. There is also a lack of investment in expanding the educational dimensions and

values within the curriculum of Quranic schools. Furthermore, the absence of a unified curriculum outlining the skills and competencies that students should acquire during their studies exacerbates the disorganization and lack of clear direction in these institutions.

The physical conditions in many Quranic schools are substandard, with inadequate sanitation, poor ventilation, and unsuitable classroom spaces that negatively impact the learning environment. Basic infrastructural improvements, such as the addition of mats, roof coverings, and water points, could greatly enhance the conditions for learning.

The lack of economic opportunities for Quranic school graduates further complicates their future prospects. Many students and graduates face limited job opportunities, as their education does not prepare them for formal employment.

Moreover, there is a significant gap between Quranic schooling and formal education systems, with few pathways to bridge the two. This makes it difficult for students to transition from traditional religious education to formal schooling, impeding their social mobility and future prospects. The lack of professional development opportunities for Quranic school teachers, many of whom are economically vulnerable and rely on low stipends or volunteerism, further exacerbates these issues. Additionally, the lack of governmental support and interest in developing Quranic schools leaves these institutions struggling with outdated methods and limited resources.

Finally, the competition between formal schooling and Quranic education disrupts students' educational progression. The lack of systematic and comprehensive assessment methods, aside from the evaluation of memorization, leaves little opportunity for students to demonstrate their broader learning and competencies. These challenges reflect the broader issues faced by Quranic schools in adapting to modern educational standards and ensuring the future success of their students.

Strategies to Overcome the Challenges

To overcome the challenges faced by Quranic schools, several strategies have been implemented to improve education quality and student outcomes. Modern educational methods, including critical thinking and interactive learning, have been integrated into the curriculum, complementing traditional memorization practices. Teacher training programs help educators adopt these methods and move away from using corporal punishment, instead fostering constructive, nonviolent disciplinary approaches.

The curriculum has been expanded to include subjects such as Arabic, French, Mathematics, and Islamic theology, providing students with a well-rounded education. A unified curriculum has also been developed to ensure students acquire essential skills and competencies, aligning with both religious and academic standards.

Teacher training and professional development have been prioritized to help educators use motivating, nonviolent methods and enhance student engagement. Additionally, investments in physical infrastructure, including sanitation, ventilation, and basic facilities like mats and

water points, have improved the learning environment in many schools.

Efforts to bridge the gap between Quranic and formal education systems have led to the creation of flexible curricula that allow students to transition between the two, enhancing educational opportunities. Economic vulnerabilities for teachers have been addressed through initiatives providing more stable incomes and professional development.

Collaboration with local governments and NGOs has helped secure funding and advocacy for Quranic schools, ensuring greater support and recognition. Furthermore, new assessment methods have been introduced to evaluate students holistically, focusing on critical thinking and problem-solving, rather than solely on memorization.

Additionally, there is a focus on involving women and youth, as experience has shown that they play a key role in spreading a culture of dialogue and tolerance.

Conclusion

Through these efforts, Quranic schools prove to be not just religious institutions but powerful platforms for spreading peace and promoting education based on tolerance and pluralism.

Support for Quranic schools is vital because they offer not only academic learning but also foster community identity and moral development. They can become powerful platforms for spreading peace, promoting tolerance, and encouraging pluralism. By investing in these institutions—improving teacher training, curriculum development, and infrastructure—and fostering partnerships, Quranic schools can provide a more comprehensive education that benefits students academically, socially, and spiritually. Supporting these schools is crucial for shaping future generations that are equipped to navigate the complexities of both their faith and the modern world.



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