

The Status of Islamic Curriculum – an Overview
By Freda Shamma
June 9, 2004

Islamic schools suffer from lack of a comprehensive curriculum of Islamic Studies. This paper is an attempt to review the current batch of Islamic curricula, both those published, and those in process. There are undoubtedly other curricula in whole or partial existence that I am not aware of, and I hope that people familiar with them will provide an addendum to this report.

Curriculum writers usually take one of two approaches. The older approach, used by IQRA among others, is to attempt to put all Islamic knowledge/thinking into one Islamic Studies class, while the remainder of the curriculum remains secular. The second approach is to attempt to rewrite the curriculum of every subject so that Islamic knowledge/thinking is integrated into every subject.

The limited curriculum approach is both more traditional and, for the time being, more practical than the integrated curriculum approach. Advocates of this curriculum approach point out that Islamic schools have to have curricula and textbooks NOW, and the integrated curriculum is years away from having any such thing (lessons, not texts, are currently being developed). In order to have something to teach, it is more practical to aim at developing a curriculum for one subject, Islamic Studies, and assume that Muslim teachers in the other subjects will do a reasonably good job of Islamising the secular curriculum. To that end IQRA has spent years and years of concentrated, dedicated work to write such a curriculum and develop textbooks to accompany it. Whether Islamic schools use their curriculum or not, almost every Islamic school has benefited from at least a few of their textbooks.

In terms of how the material is presented to the students, this traditional approach stresses the importance of the student knowing certain amounts of information very well. To take for example, the basic facts of the life of Prophet Muhammad will be taught in the first/second grade. That same material will be taught again within one – two years, with some additional facts added, and then several years later, the same material will be taught again with still more material added. This is the approach in IQRA series of books, elementary, junior and senior levels.

The advantage of this approach is that the students receive the same material many times, and, therefore, it is more likely that they will remember at least its salient

points past the end of the school year. There are two major disadvantages of this approach however. If most material is taught in multiple years, then other material, which may be equally important, may not get taught at all. To continue with *seerah* as our example, if the life of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, is taught in its traditional way, the students will read about the battles of the early Muslims at least three times, but may never study the Prophet as a father or as a husband.

There is a great deal that students need to learn about Islam. If everything has to be taught in one subject, and the taught material is repeated several years, then some extremely important aspects of Islam are missing or minimized. Let us take the subject of gossip and the subject of family as examples. If we look at the available traditional curricula, we will notice that the topic of gossip may not be included at all, or it may be mentioned once in the *akhlaq/adab* list of do's and don'ts. However, if you talk to middle school teachers, they will tell you that gossip is one of the worst and most destructive vices of their students. It is clear that in order to meet the needs of the students, this topic should be explored in depth. Unfortunately, the subject is not dealt with sufficiently in the Islamic studies class, and I urge curriculum writers to address this issue and the many others like it.

After the early years, where the traditional system deals with the idea of respecting one parents, the subject of family is generally neglected. The topic of inheritance may appear in the *fiqh* section, isolated from any discussion of male and female roles in the family, but the topic of sibling relations is usually ignored. However, over in the English/Language arts class, the subject of family appears many times every year. Mostly the topic is dealt with by omission. In the secular reading textbooks, parents are rarely consulted as the children on their own plan and execute birthday parties for each other, live in the wild on their own, seek out boyfriend or girlfriend on their own, etc. Siblings are either ignored or are ridiculed and/or despised, especially younger brothers. Students are subjected to stories where it is not the family, but the family pet, usually a dog, that is the recipient of the youth's love, respect, and care. These stories appear every year from kindergarten through twelfth grade.

The other disadvantage to this traditional approach is BOREDOM. Too many of our students dislike the Islamic studies classes because they get the same thing every year, and the material is designed to memorize instead of engage. Rather

than learn the material well, they simply 'turn off' their hearing as soon as the repeated material is introduced.

To my knowledge the two most developed curricula of this traditional approach are IQRA and IBERR. Yahya Emerick's books, aimed at middle school, also seem to follow this approach. Quite a number of Islamic schools are also attempting to develop their own curriculum along these lines. The main reason for following this curriculum for these schools is that they feel the need to develop a curriculum according to the books that are available. Since these are mainly IQRA's books, then obviously it will follow in IQRA's footsteps.

There is another approach that is still in the developing phase. This we may term the entire curriculum approach. Proponents of this approach argue that Islamic studies should be an integral part of every subject, not related to just one Islamic studies class. Instead of studying the *seerah* of the Prophet in the religion class, for example, this approach would have it taught as an integral part of the history class. And the history class would not focus on American/Canadian history as it does in the secular books, but would focus on world history with an emphasis on the history of Muslims. Because Islamic knowledge would be integral throughout the subjects, much more can be included. Taking history, biographies of the prophet's companions and famous Muslim scientists and mathematicians out of the religion class, obviously frees up time for other matters in the religion class.

Perhaps the best known of this entire curriculum approach is the [Tarbiyah Project](#) created by Br. Dawud Tauhidi. He has developed a comprehensive values-based curriculum that has *Tauhid* (God-centeredness in all its aspects) as its core content and approach. He has integrated all subject areas around significant themes (Powerful Ideas) that are to be taught through authentic instructional models, which then lead to more effective learning and life experiences for our children in the 21st century. Teaching and learning, in this Tarbiyah Project, must inspire and transform students so that they may positively effect and transform our world. In addition to the Islamic base, the Tarbiyah Project has incorporated national core curricula and brain based research. Therefore, subject matter fits the ability of the child to comprehend and attach to it so that the learning becomes meaningful rather than rote. This is an ongoing project, and it will take several years probably before they have a complete written curriculum that covers every subject, and/or written material to support the ideas.

Another project dealing with the entire curriculum approach is [FADEL's](#) (Foundation for the Advancement and Development of Education and Learning)) Integrated Islamic Curriculum. This project was started in 1995 under the aegis of the International Islamic University. With the aid of up to 25 professors from many countries, a list of Qur'anic concepts was developed that represent the most important aspects of Islam that students should be familiar with. Then specialists were sought in each academic field – history, English, Arabic language, and religious studies – to prepare the philosophical background for the subjects. Unfortunately, except for the areas mentioned and art, specialists were not available for all subjects. Nevertheless, curricula were developed for history, English/Language Arts, visual arts, and religious studies. Developing the details of each of these and integrating them with the curricula of the other subjects is in progress. Concurrently, work is progressing on several history and literature textbooks to match the curriculum. The curriculum for the Religious Studies (or Islamic Studies) is the least developed, as it is the one requiring the most input by religious scholars. Unfortunately, since the curriculum work was moved out of the Islamic University and into a small foundation in Cincinnati Ohio, religious scholars, who have the time for this work, have been difficult to find.

For schools wanting the more traditional and more limited (to one class) approach to Islamic studies, I recommend buying the IQRA Curriculum books, where the entire outline of material is given. Individual schools can then modify this curriculum to suit their students, and buy books from IQRA and other places as meet the needs of the modified curriculum. IBERR's curriculum is not explained as well as IQRA's, but they will soon have very detailed, very attractive textbooks to go with their curriculum.

For schools interested in a more widespread, integrated approach, I suggest volunteering at least one grade level to field test developed ideas of the [Tarbiyah Project](#) or [FADEL](#) Integrated Islamic Curriculum. The Tarbiyah Project would prefer, of course, to have an entire school try out their ideas. For the schools that participate in either of these curriculum approaches, it is extremely important to get back to the initiators of the curriculum to report what the teachers did with the curriculum and how the students reacted towards it. If you want a curriculum that fits your needs, you need to let the curriculum developers know how well their curriculum does fit your needs, and what else should be done or changed.

The development of an integrated Islamic curriculum will not happen unless Islamic schools commit some of their time and effort to work with the developers of the projects. Schools cannot do it on their own, neither can curriculum specialists; the two must work together, *fisabillah*.