Supporting Muslim American Adolescents:
Beginning a dialogue to create standards for youth programs

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Youth programs, such as Muslim Student Associations or Muslim youth groups, are becoming increasingly common in Islamic schools and mosques across the United States and America. These programs offer Muslim American adolescents an opportunity to discuss issues of concern to them, develop critical leadership skills, and develop strong identities that represent their diverse backgrounds, beliefs, and goals. Though these groups are typically led by youth, educators and other adults in the community often supervise their conduct and activities. This presentation is geared towards the adults who work in that supervisory role.

Specifically, this presentation discusses the importance of youth programs and provides research-based findings on the characteristics of effective youth programs. Through examples from the author's home town, Rochester, New York, concrete recommendations derived from the literature on youth programming are provided. The presentation concludes with an acknowledgement of the need for a dialogue between educational researchers and educators and adults who work with youth, which will help create standards and guidelines that can inform the creation of effective youth programs for Muslim American adolescents.

Introduction: Benefits of Youth Programs for Muslim American Adolescents

The phrase "youth programs" (or youth development programs) refers to a broad range of activities that are geared specifically towards the adolescent age group, considered by many to span from the age of ten to twenty-two (Lerner, 2002). These programs include after-school clubs, competitive sports, and mosque and church-based programs, among others. Although these programs are often overlooked as an important element in the education of Muslim American youth, research has consistently shown that they hold numerous benefits for adolescents.

Specifically, research conducted on major youth programs, such as Girl Scouts or the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), has shown that successful youth programs help adolescents develop supportive peer groups, establish a sense of belonging, take on meaningful leadership roles within the program and broader community, and feel safe and valued (Perkins & Borden, 2003). Although there is very little research on youth development programs for Muslim Americans, two studies in particular (Gilliat, 1997; Zine, 2000) find that they are extremely important for Muslim adolescents as well.

For example, Gilliat's research (1997) describes three youth programs for British Muslims. Based on her study, the author concludes that "youth organizations provide the ideal basis for the consolidation of identity that naturally comes about through living in a minority situation while particularly taking account of the aspirations of an up-and-coming third generation [of British Muslims]" (p. 107-08). Zine (2000) looks more broadly at Muslim students in Canadian public schools. She finds that "Collectively, through Muslim Student Associations (MSAs), Muslim students are able to form a corporate basis for challenging Eurocentrism in public education, and develop the social and institutional basis for an Islamic subculture within schools" (p. 295).

Both of these studies illustrate how youth programs provide a venue in which Muslim youth become resources for one another, working together to help maintain and strengthen their identities as Muslims and residents of non-Muslim countries. In some cases, the programs have been shown to help Muslim youth resist oppressive forces in their society, empowering them to speak up against injustice. Thus, though more research is needed to completely understand the effects of youth programs on Muslim adolescents, these studies suggest that youth programs do indeed have the potential to support Muslim American adolescents as they confront many challenges and opportunities associated with their positioning as religious and (sometimes) racial/ethnic minorities in the U.S.

Youth Programs: Practical Recommendations

Though there is little mention of Muslims in the literature on youth programs (i.e. studies on the Girl Scouts, YMCA, summer camps, etc), these articles still provide insights into elements of effective youth programs that can be incorporated into Muslim youth programs. Though "effective" is a subjective measure, in this context it is defined by the program's ability to support, engage, and entertain youth. Each recommendation that follows emphasizes the central place that youth must play in the formation and implementation of any youth development program. It also stresses the importance of understanding the context in which the youth are growing up. Since research on Muslim youth programs is lacking in the literature, my own experiences with programs in Rochester, New York are used to supplement this discussion.

1. *Understand the youth*

Recent research on adolescence and youth development programs emphasizes the need to understand who the youth are. Often there is an assumption that youth from similar religious, racial, or socioeconomic backgrounds share certain characteristics and face similar challenges. While it is true that the institutional structures of society create similar challenges for social groups, various other factors (such as genetics, family structures, etc) affect the development of each individual. In order for organizers to create effective programming, they must make concerted efforts to get to know each individual student through conversation, activities, and outside interaction.

The effort to understand youth has to be one in which previous assumptions and judgments are suspended. This of course is an extremely difficult task, but a necessary one. I have personally attempted to do this as a teacher in the mosque's weekend, evening, and summer schools and camps by designing a number of classroom activities that allow my students to share information and experiences from their own personal histories and family backgrounds. These activities involve an emphasis on building personal relationship with the students based on love and respect for one another.

2. *Believe in the youth*

Too often, youth are perceived as being "less than" human, "less than" civilized, or "less than" capable. Yet at the core of the research on effective youth programs is the finding that these organizations truly believe in the ability of youth to make a difference in their own lives and in the world. They view youth as capable human beings who have a variety of interests and strengths. Their programs and activities reflect these beliefs as

they engage youth in all levels of decision making and organization and facilitate youth involvement in community activities.

In the past, when the Muslim community in Rochester, New York hosted regional ISNA conferences, adults relied on the youth as their central resource. Playing only a supervisory and organizational role, these adults allowed the youth to divide into subcommittees where they were in charge of all planning and implementation related to their tasks. There was full confidence in the ability of the youth to responsibly and effectively follow through on their plans, and enough guidance and support was provided to allow for this to truly occur. Therefore, belief in youth was expressed not only through adults' words, but also through their actions.

3. *Engage the youth*

Effective youth programs develop activities that engage the youth in personal, academic, and spiritual growth. They create activities that include topics that are meaningful to the youth themselves, which relate to issues that they have to deal with every day. Sometimes, the programs include activities that are essential to their career development, such as college and career fairs. On yet other occasions, engaging the youth means providing creative outlets for their artistic energies. Often, a curriculum or theme bridges the various activities under a common framework. This helps direct all of the activities towards a shared goal and therefore makes them more meaningful to the youth.

As in other communities, Muslims in my home town of Rochester, New York have realized the role of artistic venues to support adolescent development. For several years now, a "Muslim choir" has practiced and performed at several events attended by

Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Through this musical outlet, Muslim youth have learned the 99 names of Allah and have learned more about the Prophet's life as well. They have also developed long-lasting friendships with their fellow choir members. Additionally, the youth have helped write, narrate, and act in plays about Islamic history and contemporary society. This has encouraged some to write their own plays and, with their peers, perform in front of several audiences.

4. *Appreciate the youth*

More difficult than preparing and implementing youth activities is recognizing the efforts and accomplishments of those youth. Yet this is a crucial element of effective youth programs. The people who work in these successful organizations make a point of recognizing, acknowledging, and appreciating their participants' accomplishments and efforts, both related and unrelated to the youth organization.

This appreciation can occur on a formal or informal level. On many occasions, I have heard adults in our community praise the work of certain youth for their academic and artistic achievements, or for their service to the community. Other times, such as during my own teenage years, the mosque presented plaques and awards to youth who volunteered in their weekend schools and summer camps.

5. *Ask the youth*

It is critical that any program interested in effectively supporting the development of adolescents ask the youth on a regular basis for their feedback and input. The feedback should then be used in the constant reevaluation and possible restructuring of youth

activities. Given the rapid changes occurring in their environments, the youth programs must also continue to evolve to remain effective. Formal and informal methods of "asking" the youth facilitate these goals.

In Rochester, evaluations have been used to assess the needs of students at its Saturday Islamic School. The needs assessment was an extensive research project that involved observations, interviews, and focus groups, and resulted in a written report that was shared with the school's imam and principal and other Muslim educators throughout the United States. In contrast to the evaluation, our most recent youth conference utilized surveys to gauge participants' feelings about the conference activities. These surveys asked the youth to rate each conference session and to describe any additional topics they would like upcoming programs to address. When we prepare for the next conference, these surveys will be used to improve the quality of the event.

Conclusion: Towards supporting *all* Muslim youth

Given the potential value of youth development programs, it is imperative that we continue to explore the role that youth programs are playing (or *can* play) for these populations. In these conversations, we must continue to examine how the programs take into account the adolescents' unique environments, and how the programs empower the youth to effectively respond to marginalizing factors within their environment.

In addition to examining the effects of these programs, we must also examine how and if Muslim youth find these programs to be marginalizing in ways different from their broader societal context. This involves a critical examination of the mosque culture and an acknowledgement of the highly segregated nature of several Muslim communities, which are

divided by racial, ethnic, theological, and socioeconomic differences. In looking at these factors and others, our goal must be to find ways to create environments that are more inviting to and supportive of *all* Muslim youth. The implications of this goal are far-reaching, requiring educators and adults who work with youth to be more inclusive and flexible, but within the precepts of Islam.

Having made this remark, it is acknowledged that there is little research and literature on the concerns of Muslim educators who work with Muslim American adolescents, and it is here that a dialogue is necessary. Through this dialogue—in which questions, concerns, opinions, and research all intermix—standards and guidelines for Muslim youth programs can be developed, helping Muslim American youth and adults in their community work together to build a strong, positive future for Muslims in America.

References

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