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Strengthening young Muslims: A preliminary scope and sequence of K-12 topics to protect hearts and minds against atheism

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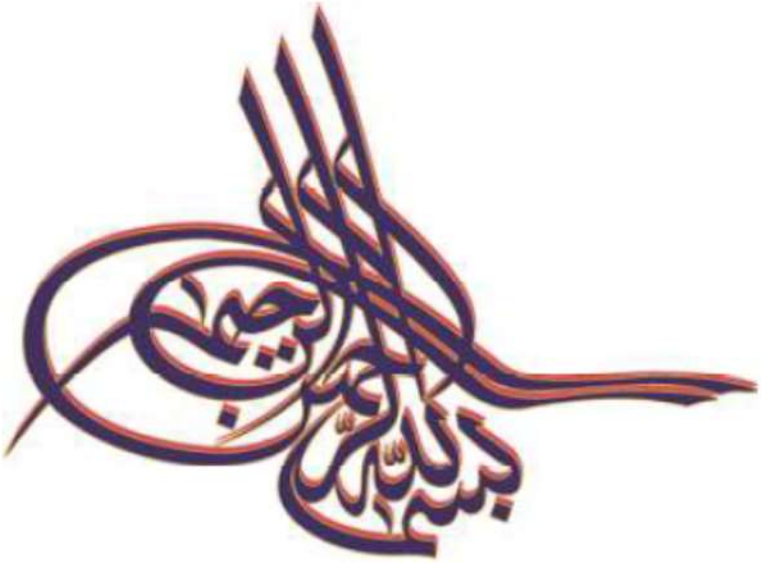
بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

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Bismillah hir Rahman nir Raheem

Introduction:

This is a preliminary attempt to develop a curriculum scope for a wide range of grade levels (K-12). It is meant to serve as a broad roadmap that can guide further development of lesson plans for students as we seek to provide them with spiritual and intellectual foundations to their faith.

The challenge of Atheism is a relatively new phenomenon for Muslim parents to deal with. Some would argue that much of this has to do with rise of "scientific" explanations for life and evolution; but I would argue that in the Islamic context, rationalism and faith are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, in many ways scientific discovery can increase appreciation of Allah's "ayat" and humbleness considering the complexity of creation. That said, the science argument is a strong one that can sway a heart and mind with weak foundation in proper faith and knowledge. Other arguments also come into play; some challenge God due to the existence of evil, others see no rational proof of God, and yet others are turned away from faith because of the hypocrisy or emotional trauma they experienced by those who claimed faith. In this brief document, I outline some findings from research I reviewed on key concerns for Muslim youth and summarize curricular topics that should be addressed in a supplementary fashion throughout the K-12 experience. Based on my review, the approach I take with these suggestions outlines a two-pronged approach, developing both the heart and the intellectual skills of the student. Lesson plans can be devised following along the outline shared here.

Key findings:

In my brief review of some existing literature on why young Christians or Muslims turn away from faith, a few themes emerged consistently.

1. Foundation is key

Adolescence is a key time in anyone's life for identity formation. Youth are exploring new ideas, experimenting with newfound freedoms, and stretching their intellect into more abstract thought. If youth do not have a strong foundation in their own beliefs, these can be easily challenged and/or replaced with new ventures into Atheism. In college, Sr. Nour, for example, felt all her college courses were pointing her to the answer that there was no God and she had no foundational Islamic knowledge to defend herself with. For this reason, the scope and sequence begins at the Kindergarten level and progresses through 12th grade. As the grades go on, the topics increase in complexity.

2. Hypocrisy matters

Young people are incredibly perceptive. We need to be constantly reminded of this and appreciate their keen observation. This is particularly important for parents and even masjid leadership. Research cited by Yaqeen institute suggests, "parents have only one good and hopefully effective way to raise children to understand and carry on their family's religion. That is for parents simply to practice their own personal faith, naturally, for its own sake and as role models for their children". Indeed, parents are an essential home influence on students. Additionally, within Islam, the Prophet (s) is the primary example through which we teach Muslim students about dealing with the world around them. Therefore, much of the heart component of this scope and

sequence is based on teaching through relationships. Initially it focuses on the relationship with Allah through knowing Him, relationship with oneself, and finally, our relationship with the Prophet (s).

3. Peers can be powerful influencers.

In high school and college years, the influence of peers can be a powerful factor in preserving faith (i.e. friends who remind each other to pray) or challenging it (i.e. friends who suggest "it's not a big deal"). For this reason, the curriculum outline below spends an entire grade level focusing on aspects of the Prophet (s) and his relationships with his (s) companions.

4. Students need to know how to fail.

Young Muslims must develop a foundational understanding of how to handle challenges to their faith. These challenges often come in the form of personal failures or mistakes. In some instances, they end up feeling as though they don't deserve to go to the masjid or are ashamed to pray because they aren't doing it well enough. Beyond that, this thought process extends into having a nuanced mental map of how to understand bad things happening in the world. In other words, how to understand the problem of evil in a world made by a Merciful God.

Using this outline:

In order to help students first and foremost develop a strong foundation to their faith, I border the specific topics we might cover with "two prongs" that are directed at a heart focus—meaning spiritual development—and an intellectual focus which aims to develop key critical thinking and reasoning skills. The chapters referenced in the chart "heart focus" headers and "intellectual focus" footer are from the text by Hamza A. Tzortsis called Divine Reality and are notated here as a convenient reference for teachers.

The first outline below includes all grade levels and includes the focus topic that would be covered in each grade level. Thereafter, this document includes more detailed graphs grouped as follows:

- Early Elementary (KG, 1st grade, and 2nd grade)
- Upper Elementary (3rd grade, 4th grade, and 5th grade)
- Middle School (6th grade, 7th grade, and 8th grade)
- High School (9th grade, 10th grade, 11th grade, and 12th grade)

Heart Focus

Gratitude
Merciful God
The Free Slave

Allah's Attributes
Denying God, Denying You
Know God, Know Good

Self Love
Life without God
(implications)

Faith in Action
The Prophetic Truth

Grade level	Heart Focus	Intellectual Focus
KG	Gratitude habit	Causality: Why did X happen
1st	Gratitude to people in our lives	Causality: Unseen forces at work
2nd	Gratitude through nature	Causality: Perfect plans happen on accident? What does creation tell us about the Creator
3rd	Allah: Khaliq and Badi	What is Ahkirah?
4th	Allah' s attributes through al-Fatiha	Signs of the Day of Judgement
5th	Allah: al-Awaal and al-Ahkir	All for naught? Isn' t ahkirah logical?
6th	Loving Allah	" We hold these truths to be self-evident" : The Constitutional claim
7th	Loving ourselves	" The stories we tell" : The history of people looking for reasons why
8th	Loving our community	What does your heart tell you? Fitrah: our natural inclination
9th	Character analysis: What kind of man was the Prophet (s)?	What does the data show us about the nature of God and His Prophet (s)?
10th	Family analysis: How did interact with and influence his family?	If Ahkirah wasn' t real, what kind of man would we have expected?
11th	Friendship analysis: Who did he (s) surround himself with?	Why do bad things happen to good people? How did the Prophet (s) handle tragedy?
12th	Community and society analysis: How did he (s) interact with the Muslim and non Muslim world around him:	Recommending a good diet: Do we need prayer or does Allah need it from us?

Intellectual Focus

Cause and Effect
Divine Precision

Ahkirah/Day of Judgement
A universe from nothing
Divine Precision

Death/purpose of life
The Divine Link
Self-Evident

Inductive and Deductive reasoning
Adversaries of Reason

Early Elementary level:

In this section of lower elementary grade levels we are focusing on the some core faith issues that might develop later on into a crisis for students if they lack a strong foundation. In addition, these early steps help build up basic skills and habits that will be developed further in upper grade levels. Hamza Tsortzis, in a lecture suggested that "Gratitude source of proper worship; also it is a FORM of worship" and further that "Arrogance is the opposite; a feeling of self sufficiency". Cultivating traits and habits of gratitude in young students helps to protect them from a sense of arrogance and self sufficiency that might later develop into a denial of God.

Furthermore, this is an appropriate stage to begin inculcating intellectual skills that will continue to be developed in upper grade levels. For the ages of 5 years old (KG) to 8 years old (2nd grade) it is appropriate to have students reflect on issues of cause and effect. Because of their developmental age, the topics here should be one in immediate proximity to students and something they can easily relate to. At these grade levels, many of the topics can be incorporated into simple everyday exercises. derst

By the end of these grade levels students should:

- Develop a daily gratitude habit
- Understand the "revelation" of nature
- Develop a sense of cause and effect; the world around us has not happened on accident

Additional resources:
Allah created everything (song) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=klZJcX9YtnQ
The Blue Sky is Blue like Blue Bubblegum (song)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G6vR22R_f4g
I am just Rock (song) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wOfrz96knv8
Islamic Lessons (book) https://www.amazon.com/Book-Islamic-Lessons-Waseem-Peracha/dp/1505924855

Heart Focus
Gratitude
Chapters : A Merciful God, The Free Slave

	KG	**1st grade**	**2nd grade**
Heart Focus	Daily practices of gratitude: Build up their recognition of Allah's role in their daily life	Stations of gratitude: Who is not grateful to people has not thanked Allah	Gratitude through nature: Reading Allah's signs
Many of the activities here are simple and can be	Goal: Even adding a daily post it in a gratitude jar and sharing a few exemplars at the	Goal: Create and write "thank you" letters to 5 people (one each day of the week) to someone in your life.	Goal: Go on a nature walk. Find something that amazes you (a beautiful flower or a cleverly shaped leaf for example). Draw it,

incorporated routinely	end of week in 'circle time' is beneficial to cultivate an "attitude of gratitude"		describe it and explain its WOW (masha'Allah) factor
Intellectual Focus	Things don't happen in the absence of a reason: Why is the baby crying? Goal: This is an early glimpse into causality. And can also be accomplished by a circle time discussion on "why did X happen?"	There are forces at work that we may not see: Gravity wind/Tornado The thrust that keeps a plane flying Goal: A higher level look at causality. So things might happen for unseen reasons. We understand gravity is there, but can't see it and yet can feel its effects and are dependent on it.	Perfect plans happen on accident? What does creation tell us about the Creator Goal: Pick an element of the human body function. Learn about. Draw it. What about it works "perfectly"?

Intellectual Focus
Cause and Effect
Chapters: Divine Precision

Upper Elementary level:

A strong sense of relationship with Allah swt starts with knowing Him through His attributes. In order to build this relationship, the upper elementary grade levels focus on certain attributes which are also connected to arguments that people might make as a case against God. If students have spent time pondering Allah's creation of the universe and His timelessness, for example, they are developing an internal defense against illogical arguments that we came from nothing and head into nothing.

On an intellectual level, students in the upper elementary grade levels learn about the akhirah, the day of judgement and our imminent death. These are not approached in a morbid way, but rather to discuss our direction and goals in life. This serves as a foundation to defend against the rather hopeless notion that our only success or failure is defined by life on this planet in our short existence.

By the end of these grade levels, students should be able to:

- Have deeper appreciation for the "free gift" of their heartbeat and body functions from their Creator
- Understand Surah Fatiha in both its meaning and function as a central dua

- Understand the journey of our souls and the function of death

Additional resources:
Nurturing Eman in Children (book) https://iiph.com/nurturing-eeman-in-children.html
An interview about the above text:
For teachers to review before teaching:
https://hidayasisters.wordpress.com/2011/05/08/nurturing-iman-in-children/

The Kalam Cosmological Argument https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6CulBuMCLg0

The Fine Tuning of the Universe
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EE76nwimuT0&t=232s

Heart Focus
Allah's attributes
Chapters: Denying God, Denying you; Know God, Know Good

	3rd grade	**4th grade**	**5th grade**
Heart Focus	Discovering Allah's attributes: focusing on Khaliq and Badi through learning about the five senses that we have Goal: Trying to develop the gratitude for basic things that are so valuable in our lives and to our existence and working toward the concept that a God who gifts us these things wants only good for us	Discovering Allah's attributes: focusing on al-Fattah, Rahman, Raheem, Malik. Here we focus on the attributes related to Surah Fatiha; and the entire component at this grade level is related to Surah Fatiha. Students are fast approaching an age where salah will be required and Fatiha, if not already, will become a central feature of the expression of their faith. Goal: Surah Fatiha is a primary link to Allah swt, students should have a nuanced understanding. It starts with hamd (praise/gratitude) and moves into a conversation (dua)	Discovering Allah's attributes: Focusing on al-Awaal, al -Ahkir. If you want to put your trust in a Friend, shouldn't it be One who is always there? Goal: Being real about the temporary state of human existence and the permanent state of Allah's existence. What does that mean for us in our lives?

Intellectual Focus	Ahkirah: What is it? Learn about Heaven, Hell Goal: What role does a final exam play in our schooling? How is the Ahkirah similar? Answering these questions helps start student thought process related to the purpose of their lives	DOJ: Signs of the Day of Judgement. Making the abstract a little more real and relevant. Goal: Many of the signs of ahkirah are becoming more pronounced, through learning about them students can be better versed to "read" the signs of the akhirah in the real world.	All for naught? There are some who believe we merely stop existing completely at death. Is this satisfying? Does this make sense logically? Goal: Moving from understanding akhirah on a "belief" level to a "logic" level

Intellectual Focus

Ahkirah/Day of Judgement

Chapters: The universe from nothing; The Divine Link, Self Eviden

Middle school level:

At these grade levels, students are starting the journey to identify themselves and their place in the world. In acknowledging the many personal changes they might be going through and a stronger need to be personally responsible for their faith; this section is rooted the idea of love. Sr. Nour powerfully stated that "If only they had taught me to love Allah before fearing Allah" she might have been able to avoid her atheistic detour on her journey of faith. From a love for Allah swt we move in this section to a sincere (not narcissistic) self love; one that wishes the best for ourselves in a positive way. Indeed, our desire to work for jannah is indicative of a deep self love and respect.

At the end of this section students will be able to:

- Articulate life goals for themselves and their community
- Describe the type of relationship they want with Allah swt
- Describe the common facts of life we will all experience.

Additional resources:

Thank you Allah (song) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zr8LOblRWp8

Guide me all the way (song) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PTjnFF7NL1k

My faith, my voice (song) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bx7uj-yFpC0

Heart Focus *Self love* Chapter: Life without God (implications)			
	6th grade	**7th grade**	**8th grade**
Heart Focus	Why do we love Allah? And if we love Allah; what should our relationship be like? Goal: In previous grades, students learned about how God wants good for them. This component of lessons builds off of that by extending students into considering developing a stronger relationship with Allah.	Why do we love ourselves? If we love ourselves, what goals do we have for our lives? For our Akhirah? Goal: Help students reflect on why we push to be the best versions of ourselves. It's in our akhirah and dunya interests but also should come from a place of deep and authentic self love (not narcissism)	Why do we love our community? If we love our community what kind of society do we want? Goal: Consider these relationship categories: • School • Home • Neighborhood • Masjid • Country
Intellectual Focus	"We hold these truths to be self evident": the Constitutional claim Goal: What are the evident truths of life?	"The stories we tell": The history of people looking for reasons why Goal: Examining the human need for cause by learning the Origin story of different societies	What does your heart tell you? Fitrah: Our natural inclination Goal: Taking a step beyond the logical to consider what makes sense to the heart
Intellectual Focus *Death/purpose of life* Chapter: Self Evident			

High School level:

This is a critical age in which students are solidifying their identity and might even be questioning key facts of their life till now. At this age, adolescents must make some concrete decisions about who they are and to what extent they will embody their faith. As mentioned in the introduction, youth here are particularly sensitive to hypocrisy and

a lack of modeling. To alleviate that concern, topics in these grade levels focus on developing a relationship with the Prophet (s). This is for a few reasons. 1. He was the best model of Islam and good character for us 2. His (s) life serves as a perfect avenue to discuss controversial topics that can be addressed at these ages (e.g. interactions between genders, treatment of women, dealing with non-Muslims etc.). It is essential that teachers at this grade level put "faith into action" and show students the relevance of their faith. What implications does their Islam have for the "real world"? How does what they learn about Islam in text jive with what they hear on the news?

At the end of this section, students will be able to:

- Explain how to solve a current problem with rationale from the Prophet (s) life
    - For example, how might have he (s) dealt with climate change?
    - How would he (s) addressed discoveries in science?
- Discuss how to think about evil in the world (Theodicy)
- Discuss how to think about things we might not be able to explain (e.g. God of the gaps argument)

Resources:
Spoken word poem: The meaning of Life
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7d16CpWp-ok&t=89s
Ya Habibi (song) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRvZuE53tgA
On Deen (song/spoken word) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dBOIORrojK0
Rise Up (song/spoken word) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1R92sYWqSts

Heart Focus
Faith in Action
Chapter: The Prophetic Truth

	9th grade	**10th grade**	**11th grade**	**12th grade**
Heart Focus	Character analysis: What kind of man was he? Goal: The Prophet (s) is our link to Allah's message; what kind of person was chosen to	Family analysis: How did he interact with and influence his family? • His wives ® • His children ® • His extended family	Friendship analysis: Who did he surround himself with? • Female Sahabiyat ® • Male Sahaba ® Goal: Using these examples, discuss what were the rights and	Community and society analysis: How did he interact with the Muslim and non Muslim world around him (s)? Goal: Using these examples, discuss how the Prophet (s) interacted with the broader community, especially the non Muslims around him. What does it mean

	carry that message? Also, Through many tumultuous events, the Prophet (s) kept his ultimate goals in mind (Ahkirah). How was that reflected in his life?	and foster mothers ® Goal: Using these examples, explore how the Prophet (s) dealt with family, especially women. What are lessons we can learn? And how can we consider common arguments that pit Islam against women?	responsibilities of men and women around the Prophet? How did they engage in jihad? Here we would cover: • education - violence - gender interactions	to be a just society? Here we would cover: • Treaty of Hudaibyah • Hilf al Fudul • Medinan charter • Letters sent to foreign leaders • The King of Abysinnia • Jewish tribes of Medina • Interaction with Christians
Intellectual Focus	What does the data show us about the nature of God and His Prophet (s)? Goal: Looking at what we know about Allah and His Rasul (s) through inductive reasoning.	If Ahkirah wasn't real, what kind of man would we have expected? Goal: Looking at the rational consequences of not believing in the ahkirah through deductive reasoning.	Why do bad things happen to good people? How did the Prophet (s) handle tragedy? Goal: Challenging our limited minds and exploring the problem of evil	Recommending a good diet: Do we need prayer or does Allah need it from us? Goal: Appreciating the role of our teachers and guides and understanding who benefits.

Intellectual Focus
Inductive/Deductive Reasoning
Chapter: Adversaries of Reason