



A Renewed Vision of Islamic Education

Implementing the Tarbiyah Project in Your School

RESOURCES AND REASONS WHY

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The purpose of this document to begin a dialogue; a dialogue among Muslim educators about how best to educate our children. Curriculum reform efforts of the past have sought to Islamize conventional textbook knowledge. What is now needed is a comprehensive curriculum that has *Tauhid* (God-centeredness in all its aspects) as its core content and approach. Integration of all subject areas around significant themes (Powerful Ideas), taught through authentic instructional models, will lead to more effective learning and life experiences for our children in the 21st century.



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Why Tarbiyah?

WHY TARBIYAH?

There are many buzzwords in the field of education: whole language, holistic learning, constructivism, back to basics, standards, higher standards. Hundreds of buzzwords arise as the educational pendulum swings back and forth from one theory and philosophy to another. So-called new theories are often just the same tried and true methods, renamed by a new generation of theorists and educators.

Some of this change is good, because it reflects the fact that education is a dynamic enterprise for both teachers and learners. Children are people, not products, and are as diverse in outlook and understanding as the rest of us. One can think of a classroom as a room full of individual brains, each processing information through intricate, yet unique, pathways of neurons that have begun their development in the womb.

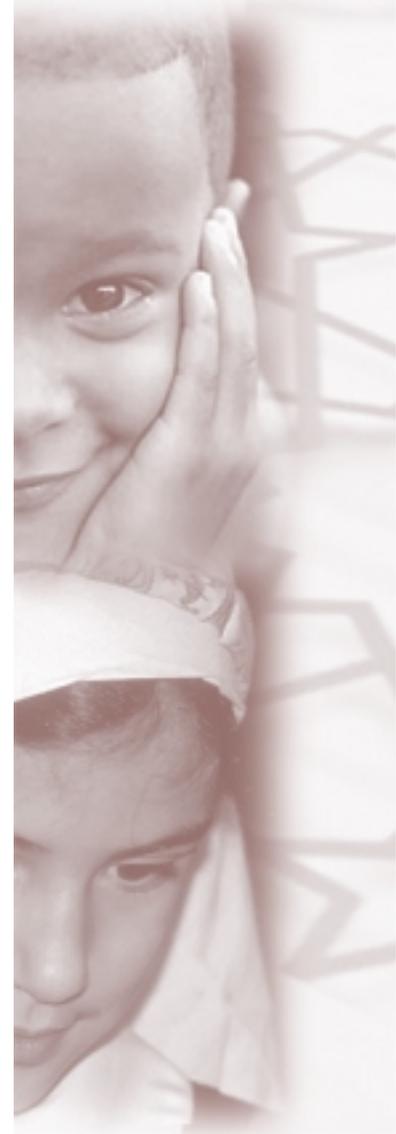
Each brain is therefore unique in its “software”. The more we learn about how we learn, the further away we move from a “one size fits all” theory of education. From a brain-based point of view, curricula that seek to integrate essential content around themes connected to the overall development of the individual make more sense than information-driven curricula that focus on transmitting factual knowledge.

The Tarbiyah Project has produced a framework for curriculum development that is student-centered and transformation-driven. It is student centered because it is directly linked to the developmental growth of the child. It is transformative, as opposed to merely informative, because its goal is not merely to transmit information but to transform the child into a confident, capable young Muslim with a *tauhidic*, God-centered, outlook on life.

The scaffolding of the framework is a set of twelve “Powerful Ideas”, or themes. They are: *God, the World and Me, Knowing Yourself, Becoming a Moral Person, Understanding and Being Understood, Getting Along with Others, A Sense of Belonging, Drawing Strength From the Past, Islam for All Times and Places, Caring for Allah’s Creation, Facing the Challenge, Making a Difference, and Taking the Lead*. The long-range goal of the Project is to

RATIONALE

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produce a curriculum for Islamic schools that is centered, in all grade levels and subject areas around these twelve themes. Taking just one idea, *God, the World and Me*, for example, it is possible to create a spiral curriculum extending from lower elementary through middle school, that integrates this central concept of Islam across the depth and breadth of many subject areas.

THE PRIMARY CONNECTION

The goal of *God, the World and Me* is to reaffirm and strengthen the relationship we have with Allah (ﷻ). There is no doubt that we are born with a connection to our Creator. A hadith says, “Every child is born on the fitra. It is his parents that make him a Christian, a Jew or a Magian.” We are all born Muslim in the sense that every human being is born with a conscious connection to Allah (ﷻ). Brain studies have demonstrated that infants are born with billions of neural connections already in place. Some of these connections represent understandings or patterns that the child already possesses at birth. As the infant experiences life in the world, connections are gradually refined. Those that are essential to the individual’s overall development and functioning remain. Those connections that are not strengthened by use atrophy. At the same time, new connections form as the growing child experiences the world around him. This process continues throughout our lives but never at quite the same rapid rate as it does in infancy and early childhood.

When we call the *athan* or the *iqamat* in a newborn baby’s ear, we are reinforcing and further strengthening a consciousness of Allah (ﷻ) that already exists in the infant. As the baby, the toddler and the child matures, that connection is further strengthened or weakened by its use or disuse. Daily life provides countless, natural opportunities for the young child to perceive the presence of his Lord through observing and experiencing aspects of His creation. All it takes is a loving, God-centered parent to make the connection explicit.

Jumping ahead to school days, when the child enters preschool, the environment in which she is immersed will either reinforce or neglect the God consciousness that already exists in the child. By definition, Islamic schools exist to nurture the seeds of *iman* and *taqwa*, implanted in our brains before birth by the Creator Himself. With some planning and foresight, we can make this noble goal the focal point of our entire curriculum.

MEANINGFUL RELEVANCE

Alhamdulillah, we now have syllabi and curricula that describe some of the content and subject areas to be taught in Islamic schools. These documents were the first pioneering steps in Islamic curriculum reform and development. We must now align the content we wish to teach with the best of what is known about how children learn. *The Tarbiyah Project* provides a new, contextual framework that can reach the 21st-century children we want to educate. Islam is relevant to all times and places. The difference is in how the information is taught, received and processed by each succeeding generation.

In order for the brain to process and remember, the context of all new learning must be grounded in meaningful life experiences and prior knowledge. For example, I want to teach my kg-2nd graders the names of Allah (ﷻ) that mean All-Seeing (*al-Baseer*) and All-Hearing (*al-Sami*). How do I start building an understanding of those meanings? As with any concept I would teach in Science, Math or English, I would start with the students' prior knowledge. Of what do we have the most prior knowledge? Of ourselves, of course. We can hear and see. We have our five senses, through which we process all our information about the world. Our theme, *God, the World and Me*, will include science concepts because we will need to study our senses and how they work, adding more and more sophisticated knowledge about our sensory organs as we progress through the grade levels of this spiral curriculum.

At the same time, in our Arabic lesson, I will be teaching the words for eyes, ears, seeing, hearing and Allah's names for those qualities (All-Seeing, All-Hearing). I would ask my students about the limits of our hearing and seeing. Do all creatures of Allah have the same systems for seeing and hearing? Do some animals have better hearing or different visual systems than humans? Why might that be? Is Allah's vision limited to any of those systems? I bring the appropriate verses of Qur'an into the discussion and that becomes part of my Qur'an class. In math, we can talk about how many or how much of something we can see and hear. Can Allah's sight be infinite? What is infinity, anyway?

The possibilities of such curriculum development and planning are too numerous to count. They are limited only by the scope of teachers' knowledge and creativity. That is why it's the nature of such planning to be collaborative: group work done by people with knowledge and expertise

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CONNECT

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in a variety of subject areas, including knowledge of child development and learning theory. Those people are educators.

TOWARD A CURRICULUM OF POWERFUL IDEAS

The ongoing development of the Tarbiyah Project at Crescent Academy has been the collaborative effort of many dedicated teachers and staff members. The purpose of the rest of this paper is to share some of our teacher-developed unit plans and related projects with you. Our main goal in doing so is to spark your creativity, fueled by your love of Allah (ﷻ) and the children that you serve. Curriculum development is an ongoing, dynamic process. Each and every teacher has a role to play in this enterprise.

Vignette: Curricular Connections

The quality of our life in this world is very much dependent on our ability to connect meaningfully with others and establish successful relationships. Our first ties are to our mothers, fathers and other family members. The relationships we establish within this family circle form the building blocks of all future relationships. One of the major focuses of early childhood education is socialization, helping the child to realize his role in relation to others: sharing with friends, working and playing together. Through the concepts of the *jamaat*, and the *ummah*, Allah (ﷻ) and His prophet (ﷺ) have placed much emphasis on working together for the common good in our family and community lives.

When we link the universal theme of relationships to the content of our curriculum, we form meaningful connections between the child's own life experience and the new learning he is to master. The theme of cooperation and interdependent relationships can be discovered in all fields of study, as is apparent in Sr. Bayyinah Mohammed's curriculum piece on the Powerful Idea: *Relationships: Cooperation and Getting Along with Others* .

“Many of us constantly reflect on the connectedness of the universe. How many times do we say, “small world”, or see coincidences that seem so well planned? Things fit together like a giant puzzle. And when we human beings

see these pieces fitting together, when we observe how life makes sense, we learn it's lessons. We learn by making connections, seeing how everything fits because the world was created that way. We as educators need to teach kids in that way. *The Tarbiyah Project* gives that framework. A framework for kids to marvel and learn from the oneness of the creation.

My success with using the Powerful Ideas has been in seeing them as a different way to explain the content of an already existing curriculum. I can reformulate the content that I need to cover in my fifth grade curriculum by organizing that information into units based on the Powerful Ideas. What follows is an example of how such planning is done.

I chose the powerful idea of *Relationships: Cooperation and Getting Along with Others*. Then I look at the subjects I will be teaching in terms of this theme. Social Studies deals with relationships and people, so I start there. My curriculum includes: Explorers, U.S. Colonization, and the Building of America, among other topics.

The relationships the immigrants arriving from Europe had with each other, their monarchs, and the indigenous peoples, all profoundly influenced the settlement of the colonists in North America. The relationship the Native Americans had with the land comes to mind. The colonists didn't belong to the land and couldn't tame it or make it prosper until they strengthened their relationships with the Native Americans, who had a well established, cooperative relationship with the land and helped the Europeans survive in their early years here. The colonists were no longer members of the European countries they had left. They came upon new sets of issues to deal with. Their resentment towards the rulers, who were only using the settlers for profit, caused that relationship to suffer and a war to ensue.

Wars are conflicts that break out as a result of unsuccessful relationships. So are struggles and liberation movements. What was the relationship between the slaves and the people who bought and sold them? How did the African Americans, who contributed to the making of this nation, feel when they were excluded from it? Did their sense of wanting and deserving to belong to this society spark slave revolts, escapes and later, the Civil Rights movement? And what role did Islam play in the liberation of American converts like Malcolm X, Elijah Mohammed, and our own friends and relatives?





When your students begin to see Social Studies as the study of relationships between real people, their interest peaks. Adding the emotion to the actions brings their understanding close to home. They have experienced relationships with their own families. They know the anger and pain of exclusion, for example. They live that daily at a crowded lunch table where they can't fit or a game at recess when they are told they cannot play. They have personally experienced the unfairness of life and can readily understand those injustices to people in history, if we provide the bridge and help them make the connections between these relationships. I'm always on the lookout for field trips, videos, plays or other supplemental activities to make history more appealing and meaningful. An historic reenactment of an episode from colonist life and a play about the Underground Railroad are a couple that I've used.

In literature, I've found it more meaningful to use trade books rather than reading anthologies and basal readers, simply because you have more freedom to choose the content of the reading and can therefore match it to the Powerful Ideas or themes. *Maniac Magee* is an excellent relationship novel.

Jeffrey Lionel Magee, a.k.a. Maniac, is a homeless, wandering orphan. After leaving the unloving home of his aunt and uncle, he eventually finds himself in the town of Two Mills, where black and white people are divided along racial lines. Being color-blind himself, Maniac becomes a human bridge between the two halves of the town as he crosses the color line and performs amazing feats of courage and daring. In the process, he affects many lives, including that of Grayson, an old man from the park, whom he teaches to read, and Amanda Beale, a young black girl with whom he shares a mutual love of knowledge.

The students and I would discuss how the unhappy marriage of Jeffrey Magee's aunt and uncle led to his running away. We would also explore the reasons why people of different colors or religions sometimes do not have favorable relationships. They could then discuss why the town of Two Mills is divided. Do they know any towns that are divided? Are there visible signs of division in their town or city? On what basis are the people divided?

Our hero, Maniac Magee, is able to create an entirely different relationship with each of the opposing sides of the town. What yardstick is he using to judge people? Is he

biased and prejudiced, or is he more in tune with what Allah teaches us in the *Qur'an*? As Muslims, are we prejudiced? Do we hold certain stereotypes about other cultures? We know that others may negatively view us as well. How can each one of us help to change the relationship our *ummah* has with the world? Will some of the strategies encountered in this novel work for us? The relationships in *Maniac Magee* provide much food for thought.

Social Studies and Literature are the most obvious subjects with which to make these people points. Science and Math are a bit more of a challenge. Place value, for instance, could be viewed as the relationship of numbers in multiples of ten. And to explain the distributive and commutative properties of numbers, can't we teach them as the relationships numbers have? It all really works. In the lower elementary grades, we even teach fact families because of the relationship between $2+8=10$, $8+2=10$ and the related subtraction facts.

Fractions are the relationship of parts to a whole. As educators, we simply must rethink the curriculum. I suspect that if we begin to make these connections with students, we wouldn't have to re-teach these topics from year to year, but could build upon them more successfully. The meaningful connections need to be made clear to the brain. Using concrete objects to illustrate math concepts is helpful in this regard.

Science is the ultimate relationship subject. All of us must marvel at the huge connectedness with the Creation. This year, one of our modules was fun in motion. In order for things to move, you must have friction, which can be explained as the relationship matter has to other matter and forces in nature. There are laws of motion and forces that act on moving objects like gravity. Will the relationship between a wheel and ice be different from a wheel and dirt? What will the results of each be?

All kids love gym and sports. They could explore the relationship between their brain and nerve cells, bones and muscles that allow them to kick or hit a ball. The soccer ball was in a state of inertia until a foot became the force that moved it. There is thus a relationship between the ball, the foot and the mind that had the thought and directed the foot to do the kicking! Allah (ﷻ) tells us to look for signs of Him within all of creation, including our own bodies. Awe of His power should deepen our faith.





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In a fully integrated curriculum, our Arabic and Islamic Studies classes are also taught within the context of *tarbiyah*. As part of the relationships unit, we would be teaching vocabulary related to cooperation (*ta’awun*) and relationships. In Islamic Studies, *Quranic* verses about cooperation and human relationships could be studied, as well as *hadith*. We would discuss the relationships Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) had with the *Sahabah* (رضي الله عنهم) and the *Quraish*. The *Hijra* became necessary because of unfavorable relations between the Muslims and non-Muslims. The *Sahaba* (رضي الله عنهم) who went to the *Negus* in Ethiopia established a positive relationship with him and his kingdom. How and why were those relationships successful?

Of course, we want the impact of all this study to translate not only into knowledge acquired, but knowledge used to transform. What are the Islamic guidelines we have for relationships? How did the Prophet and *Sahabah* apply them in their daily lives and how can we do so? Conflict resolution and group problem solving would be essential personal skills we would want to develop as part of our thematic study.

The point is that we educators don’t need to be stressed out over yet another task to do. If we get used to thinking outside the box of standard, traditional curricula, we can embrace and develop this new paradigm of powerful ideas. The *tarbiyah* concepts fall into place easily because they provide a God-centered perspective to teaching and learning. “

School Programs

Maybe your school is not ready to realign its whole curriculum around the twelve powerful ideas of *tarbiyah*. Several programs have been developed to function as enrichment activities to complement any Islamic school curriculum. The following sections will discuss two of those programs.

1. VALUE OF THE MONTH

This program focuses on one core value each month. These values are universal qualities. It is designed as a school-wide program, but could be modified for use by individual classroom teachers. This program is easy to

implement from the beginning of the school year. The administrator sets the tone in morning assemblies. Classroom teachers have found creative and meaningful ways to integrate the monthly values into their curriculum planning.

Our value for the month of March was Determination. Our first-grade teachers were able to integrate this important concept into a “March Madness” reading contest. The goal was for the entire school to collectively read 1,000 books. This took a great deal of determination on the part of the student body. In morning assemblies, I introduced verses from the Quran and hadith that stressed determination and perseverance, for example, *Surat al-Asr*. In class, teachers found stories, such as *Gifted Hands*, and *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* (5th gr.) that emphasized determination to overcome obstacles and reach a particular goal. Students applied the value to their own learning as they mastered difficult concepts in math and science and improved their study skills. When we help our students make meaningful connections to their own lives through values and themes, we increase the possibility that they will retain and utilize the learning.

Various aspects of implementing the Value of the Month program are described below. I’ve also included some brief suggestions regarding teaching the value of faithfulness. The teachers found such suggestions helpful in planning ways to incorporate the values into their teaching.

CORE VALUES PROGRAM

Administrative Responsibilities:

- Select and order the value to be highlighted each month. This should be done at the beginning of the school year.
- Assign classes to design monthly bulletin boards about each value.
- Provide teachers, especially new ones, with notes and suggestions from previous years and/or an outline description of each value (see below)
- Introduce and discuss the monthly value during morning assembly through *hadith*, *Quranic* verses, stories and other media.
- Plan a monthly values assembly with class presentations of values-based projects, skits, songs, etc.





- Review teachers' weekly lesson and monthly unit plans featuring core values integrated across the curriculum.
- Facilitate meetings and inservice days to discuss, plan and implement curricular integration of core values and powerful ideas in all aspects of school life.
- Write articles about core values implementation in the school newsletter to inform parents. Provide suggestions for the implementation of the values at home.

Islamic & Quranic Arabic Teachers' Responsibilities:

- Incorporate the values into daily, monthly and yearly unit/lesson plans and syllabi.
- Help students make connections between the five pillars and each value.
- Teach students verses from the *Quran* that express and illustrate each value.
- Select *hadith* and stories that show how the Prophet (ﷺ) and *Sahabah* (رضي الله عنهم) applied each value in their lives.
- Develop vocabulary lessons that feature Arabic words, including the names of Allah that relate to each value.
- Connect practices of worship, such as *wudu* and prayer, *Quranic* recitation, fasting and charity, and remembrance (*zikr*) to the values they represent.
- Document work in the form of a monthly unit plan that describes the integration and implementation of the core value within the curriculum.

Classroom Teachers' Responsibilities

- Incorporate core values into daily, monthly and yearly unit/lesson plans and syllabi.
- Connect core values to daily classroom activities
- Integrate subjects, curricula and textbook material with core values.
- Document work in the form of a unit plan that shows this integration and implementation.
- Assign daily student sermonettes featuring core values as applied by the students in their own lives.

Core Value for September: Faithfulness

Sample Notes to Teachers

FAITHFULNESS

- Belief in Allah (ﷻ)
- Declaration of Faith (*Shahadah*)
- Understanding the Oneness of Allah (*Tauhid*)
- Using the first half of the *shahadah* (*La ilaha illa Allah*, There is no god worthy of worship except Allah) to understand the Oneness and majesty of Allah (ﷻ) and our relationship to Him.
- What does it mean to be faithful to Allah?
- How is faith expressed in the way we live our lives?
- What is our relationship with Allah, ourselves, our family and our community?
- How does faith impact on those relationships?

Quran classes: Recitation, memorization and meaning of *shahadah*, *S. Ikhlas*, *Ayatul Kursi* and other *suras* that emphasize *Tauhid* according to the grade level of the students (spiral curriculum). Activities that will help develop an understanding of the concepts in the *suras*.

Arabic classes: Developing a working vocabulary of the concept, according to the grade levels of the students: i.e., *ahad*, *samad*, *ikhlas*, *tauhid*, etc.

Islamic Studies: Practical applications of how we make *wudu* and pray and WHY we do so (i.e., as an expression of faith and worship, to maintain a healthy, wholesome lifestyle). Development of behavior that shows sincere belief (i.e., proper behavior in the *masjid*, regular prayer). With older students, history of the *shahadah*, prophets' methods of *dawah*, conditions of *jahiliyyah*, etc.

Reading/Lang. Arts: Use of stories from textbooks or other sources that show faithfulness and belief in Allah. Also, use of stories that show belief in ourselves, (self confidence and self reliance), and loyalty to family and community, which are also expressions of faith.

Math: Development of understanding the concept of oneness, singularity and indivisibility of that number in relation to Allah. Older students: introduce some history of famous Muslim mathematicians, with emphasis on how belief guided their studies.

Science: Exploration of Allah's attributes as the Creator of the Universe and all that is in it. How the perfection of creation attests to His oneness. For older students, introduction of the concept of oneness as a liberation from





polytheism and therefore the beginning of scientific exploration (resource: Islam: Creator of Modern Science, by Wahiduddin Khan). Verses of Quran that refer to aspects of the natural world and human anatomy could be used to introduce and reinforce units of study.

Social Studies: Exploration of grade level concepts regarding family, community and society. What role does faith play in shaping those concepts within particular cultural contexts?

2. CHILDREN OF CHARITY PROJECT

The *Children of Charity Project* at Crescent Academy International was inspired as part of a vision for education of Muslim children which would include opportunities to participate in acts of kindness or service projects. We wanted Muslim children to feel compassion for the suffering or needs of others and to respond with an outpouring of kindness as benevolence in charity. Charity is an integral part of the Islamic way of life, a learned behavior that is acquired by example and through hands-on-practice. Our curriculum includes lessons in *sadaqa* which teach children a sense of social responsibility and instill a desire to actually “do” something to help others.

The *Children of Charity Project* is a service learning program for actual practice of charity work as well as fund-raising for good causes. The primary focus is not on collecting money for some cause or organization. We emphasize providing concrete opportunities for students themselves to develop the important value of giving and sharing, as well as collective decision making (*shurah*), prioritizing and evaluating service projects of merit, and cooperation in planning, executing and describing the projects.

Goals of Charity Learning

Knowledge: Service learning is an integral part of our curriculum, with the intention of broadening students’ knowledge about themselves, their community and the world at-large. This serves as a base for intelligent informed decisions and actions, as well as career choices.

Attitudes: Students gain a worldview that will predispose them to act charitably in adult life, with compassion, a

sense of brotherhood, responsibility and a desire to share wealth in kindness.

Skills: The Children of Charity aims to develop key skills necessary for responsible giving:

- prioritizing tasks and causes that are being considered for our charity
- collective decision-making to come to a collective resolution about which form of action is best suited to a recipient's need and the abilities of the giver
- cooperation in planning, implementing and acting
- Da'wah – the ability to convey a message or need or to inspire a response to a call for assistance
- Application – Action to apply sadaqah in real life.

Designing the Charity Program

Students learn that every act of kindness is charity. A smile is charity. Helping a neighbor sweep their yard or picking up litter is charity. Giving money, gifts, time or assistance through an aide project are all forms of charity.

Project design components:

Fundraisers for good causes and food drives offer opportunities to give money, but our primary emphasis is on structured "action" projects at each grade level.

Inspiration: There is an effort to infuse inspiration that will strengthen, sustain and direct the course of efforts. We use drama, literature and biographies about exemplary persons and philanthropists in a variety of careers. In Islamic Studies we highlight examples of charity from the Quran. Videos on charity or invited speakers help to touch students' hearts and spirits and to inspire them to charity. **Project Ideas:** We ask teachers at each grade level to select a project for their class, with student input and recommendations. Areas of service could be children, the elderly, handicapped, hungry, sick or lonely persons. It could be a literacy project, or some effort to save the environment or an ecosystem.

Collective Decision-Making: Students participate in selecting and planning the project, meanwhile developing a state of mind that is compassionate and caring.

Structures for Planning: Teachers are given rigorous structures by the administration to ensure responsible planning for each service project, scheduling of dates,





transportation, equipment and materials, contact links, parental involvement etc.

Sensitivity Training: This helps students develop concern or empathy so that relationships with recipients of charity are wise, appropriate and diplomatic.

Documentation: Teachers and students document the process, meaning and value of the project through essays, learning logs, journals, portfolios, thank you letters, photographic displays or exhibit posters.

Culminating School-wide Event: The school plans a final event named a Children of Charity evening or a values fair which gives each class the opportunity to exhibit pictures and records or stories about their project. This encourages parents to become inspired and enlists their support for sadaqa practice in their homes.

Assessment of Outcomes: Student self-reflection, teacher assessment and project evaluation forms are a few ways of looking back and reflecting on improvements.¹

In Conclusion

The Tarbiyah Project is a work in progress. We hope you will try some of these ideas in your own schools, with your own modifications, adaptations and improvements. Please share your efforts with us as well. Your input and ideas are most welcome.²

¹ Schools that want to implement sadaqa projects can obtain a copy of the Children of Charity Manual by contacting the Tarbiyah Project online at www.Tarbiyah.org or by calling Crescent Academy International at (734) 729-1000.

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