Title: The ‘Teach Less, Learn More’ initiative in Singapore: New pedagogies for Islamic religious schools?
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Source: KEDI Journal of Educational Policy, 6(1), 25-39
Published by: Korean Educational Development Institute

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The ‘Teach Less, Learn More’ initiative in Singapore: New pedagogies for Islamic religious schools?

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Abstract

Against a backdrop of the nexus between education and national development in a knowledge-based economy, many states have extended their educational reforms to religious schools which are usually private schools not under direct state control. This paper explores how the Singapore government attempts to introduce ‘new’ pedagogies in madrasah education through new Islamic textbooks, a move that resonates with the national education initiative to ‘teach less, learn more’. The paper argues that these student-centered pedagogies are not new as they have been propagated by Muslim scholars and practiced in Islamic institutions since the medieval times. But these pedagogies may be ‘new’ or unfamiliar to many madrasahs due to the prevalent teacher-centered pedagogies privileged in madrasahs today.

Keywords: Islamic religious schools, madrasah, pedagogies, Singapore, teach less, learn more
Introduction

Circumscribed by a globalized world which increasingly values intellectual capital, many states are preparing their citizens for a knowledge-based economy through a myriad of educational reforms. These reforms tend towards neo-liberal measures, decentralization and performativity, and aim to produce the ‘globalized’ citizen who is an expert problem-solver with the drive to innovate and learn continuously (Gopinathan, 2007; Green, 2007). In the Asia Pacific region, for example, the Singapore government has conceptualized and implemented a host of educational reforms under the vision of ‘Thinking Schools, Learning Nation’ since 1997 (Tan, 2008a). This vision encompasses four main areas: critical and creative thinking, the use of information technology in education, citizenship education, and administrative excellence.

Against a backdrop of the nexus between education and national economic development, states have also extended their educational reforms to religious schools, of which a majority are private schools that are not under direct state control. Of particular state concern among the religious schools are ‘madrasahs’ or Islamic religious schools.¹ For example, India, Pakistan, and Singapore are scrutinizing the madrasahs in their countries and attempting to introduce curricular changes in these institutions (Eckholm 2002; Richardson, 2002; Tan, 2009a).

An underlying assumption to warrant state intervention in madrasah education is the perception that these Islamic institutions do not emphasize student-centred pedagogies – methods that are deemed necessary to prepare students for the knowledge-based economy. Consequently, many states are hoping to introduce ‘new’ pedagogies in the madrasahs such as group discussions and project work where the students’ critical and creative thinking is enhanced. But are these ‘new’ pedagogies really new in the Islamic educational traditions? Using Singapore as an illustrative example, this paper explores how the government attempts to introduce ‘new’ pedagogies in madrasah education through new Islamic textbooks, a move that resonates with the national education initiative to ‘Teach Less, Learn More’. The paper argues that these student-centred pedagogies are not new as they have been propagated by Muslim scholars and practiced in Islamic institutions since the medieval times. This means that the government’s goal for schools to ‘teach less, learn more’ is in alignment with the pedagogies advocated in the Islamic traditions. But these pedagogies may be ‘new’ or unfamiliar to many madrasahs due to the prevalent teacher-centred pedagogies privileged in madrasahs today. The Teach Less, Learn More initiative does not conflict with the Islamic education tradition as student-centered education used to be a prevalent practice among Islamic educators at least till the medieval time. Hence the new policy should be considered as an attempt to revive the past tradition rather than an attempt to impose changes enforced by outsiders.
The new education initiative: Teach Less, Learn More (TLLM)

A background introduction to Singapore is helpful here. As a city-state with over 4.8 million people, Singapore is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual country with 76.8% Chinese, 13.9% Malay, 7.9% Indian and 1.4% Other. A majority of the population are Buddhists (42.5%), followed by Muslims (14.9%), Christians (14.6%), Taoists (8.5%) and Hindus (4.0%). There are also adherents of other religions (0.6%) as well as those who profess to have no religion (14.8%). Religious identity in Singapore is closely tied to ethnic and cultural identities. 64.4 per cent of Chinese are either Buddhists or Taoists, 99.6 per cent of Malays are Muslims, 55.4 per cent of Indians are Hindus, and about half of “Other” are Christians. Muslim children in Singapore could choose to receive full-time schooling at a secular government school or a madrasah. There are six full-time madrasahs in Singapore and they aim primarily to produce Muslim scholars and teachers to lead the community on religious matters, as well as to produce Muslim professionals who are grounded in Islamic values. Unlike government schools that focus on the teaching of academic subjects such as English, Mathematics and Science, the madrasahs include both academic and Islamic subjects. More than 4000 students are enrolled in the six madrasahs, accounting for about 4 per cent of the total Muslim students in Singapore.

The vision of ‘Thinking Schools, Learning Nation’ (TSLN) aims to develop creative thinking skills, a lifelong passion for learning and nationalistic commitment in the young. The former Prime Minister of Singapore introduced this national strategy in 1997. He singled out the United States as a good example of people who were able to produce highly creative and entrepreneurial individuals (Tan, 2008a). He noted that the best schools in the United States produced innovative students through a diverse and challenging curriculum, and the academic institutions and research laboratories there comprised entrepreneurial individuals who contributed to scientific breakthroughs. Schools in Singapore, in his view, should nurture innovative thinkers and problem solvers to keep Singapore vibrant and successful in the future.

The TSLN vision calls for educators to ‘teach less, learn more’. First mentioned by the Prime Minister of Singapore in his National Day address in 2004, the ‘Teach Less, Learn More’ (TLLM) initiative is closely related to student-centered learning. Essentially it aims for teachers to teach better by engaging the students and preparing them for life, rather than merely teaching simply for tests and examinations (Tan, 2008a). Teachers are exalted to expand their repertoire of teaching and learning strategies to encourage their students to learn more actively and independently beyond the formal curriculum. TLLM represents cutting back on quantity (memorization of facts), injecting higher quality into the teaching process through student reflection, and giving students themselves the room to exercise initiative and to shape their own learning. Moving away from
rote learning, repetitive tests and a ‘one size fits all’ type of instruction, teachers in Singapore are encouraged to move towards more engaged learning through experiential discovery, differentiated teaching, the learning of life-long skills, and the building of character through innovative and effective teaching approaches and strategies (Ng, 2008). This means that teachers need to expand their repertoire of teaching and learning strategies to include new and innovative pedagogies so as to motivate students to communicate effectively, collaborate widely and solve problems reflectively.

The Ministry of Education aims to achieve the following: gradually reduce the emphasis on examinations and focus on a holistic education; give the students more choice in their studies so that they can shape and enjoy their learning; and encourage teachers to bring quality and innovative practices into the classroom and school. Engaged learning in TLLM does not refer to the same drill and practice from teachers. Rather, as Ng (2008) points out, engaged learning highlights construction of knowledge (not only transmission of knowledge), understanding (not only rote memorization), pedagogy (not only activity), and social constructivism (not only individual study), self-directed learning (not only teacher-directed), formative assessment and self assessment (not only summative grades), and learning about learning (not only learning about subjects).

Pedagogical changes for madrasah education in Singapore

Although the TLLM initiative is targeted at government schools and not private religious schools, it is also highly relevant to religious schools such as madrasahs. The Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs has been urging the Muslims in Singapore not to retreat from the modern world, but to understand the world around them and contribute to its development. For Muslims to be self-reliant, independent, creative and progressive, he exhorted them to “take the best of the modern world and use this together with our cultural traditions, our heritage and our belief in Islam” (Tan, 2008b, p. 38). He encouraged Singapore Muslims to be ‘reformist Muslims’ - Muslims who “recognize the importance of embracing science and technology, being innovative and generating new ideas, just as it used to be in the heydays of Islamic civilization” (Tan, 2008b, p. 37). He also encouraged the madrasahs to produce “not only religious teachers but also scholars who can deal with economics, science and technological issues at national and international levels” so that these scholars can lead the community in these areas in years to come (Noor Aisha, 2006, p. 75). It is apparent that the government is striving to persuade the Muslim community in Singapore to accept the reformist tradition by stressing the importance of learning academic subjects for survival in a globalized economy (Tan, 2007, 2009a). From the viewpoint of the government, this can be achieved if the curriculum in the madrasahs is revised to produce self
To help the madrasahs raise their academic standards and revamp their curricular and pedagogical practices, Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore), which is the highest bureaucracy in charge of Muslim matters in Singapore, has spent around S$21 million (US$14 million) on teacher training, student enrichment programmes, curriculum review and financial grants, with the Muslim community’s support. Since 2004, MUIS has also spent about S$1.5 million (US$1 million) training more than half of the 220 teachers at Singapore’s six madrasahs. Courses taken by madrasah teachers include a diploma of education (with Edith Cowan University), a specialist diploma in English, Mathematics and Science (with the National Institute of Education in Singapore) and a specialist diploma in teaching and learning (also with the National Institute of Education). Through these courses, the madrasah teachers acquaint themselves with the curriculum of mainstream schools at a deeper level and learn how to teach academic subjects confidently especially at the upper primary level. The government also announced that MUIS will set aside S$700,000 (US$473,000) to help all six madrasahs prepare their pupils for the primary school terminal examinations through enrichment and remedial programmes and teacher training, among others.

In terms of Islamic textbooks, a project that promotes ‘new’ pedagogical approaches is the Curriculum Development Project. The project is designed to produce a comprehensive, systematic and integrated educational system for the madrasahs in Singapore that would facilitate the teaching of Religious Studies with a cross curricular perspective. MUIS announced that it will spend S$8 million (US$5.4 million) to produce a new curriculum for use in the six full-time Islamic religious schools from 2002. MUIS explained that the new curriculum ensures that madrasah students can survive in today’s highly competitive world and to be forward-thinking religious leaders or professionals in another field of their choice (Albakri, 2006). In other words, The new curriculum hopes to equip Muslim students with the life skills needed to get ahead in a competitive and globalised environment (Tan, 2009a). This project involves producing the syllabi, textbooks and materials for 12 years of education from primary 1 to pre-university 2, with 156 book and 72 teachers’ guidebooks at a total cost of S$7.3 million (US$5 million). The target is for all primary 1 students in madrasahs to use the prescribed materials based on a common curriculum from 2008. Instead of Arabic for religious subjects, the medium of instruction in the madrasahs will be English.

One of the subjects offered in the Islamic Studies series is ‘Our Ummah, Our World’ (‘Islamic Social Studies’ or ISS for short) (Tan, 2009b). The books are for students from primary 1 (seven years old) to primary 6 (12 years old). Each level has two textbooks that are used for the whole year (for example, primary 1 students use 1A and 1B). A review of all the 12 ISS textbooks shows that student-centred pedagogies such as discussion, reflection and project work are underlined. Also, while the didactic approach is used, the emphasis is on the students’
understanding of the key concepts, rather than the memorization of facts. Below is a brief discussion of the main pedagogies promoted in the textbooks.

Among the student-centered pedagogies, discussion is often used to encourage responses from students. For example, the “Let’s Talk” section is placed at the end of every chapter of the textbooks for this function. This feature is reminiscent of the active participation of the Muslim students in the medieval era with their fellow students and teachers. The other component in the textbooks, which gives the opportunity for the pupils to think about issues and discuss ideas related to the lessons learnt, is found in the section called ‘Stop and Discuss’. For example, on the lesson on religious harmony, the students are asked: “In groups, discuss what you think can happen if we do not take care of the peace and harmony” (MUIS, 2005, p. 19).

To encourage reflection in the students, students are posed a number of thinking questions throughout the text books. For example, for primary 1 students, they are asked about the importance of befriending non-Muslims in a pluralistic society and of being a blessing to them. In a section on ‘Making Friends’, they are instructed: “We like to be friends with our neighbours. There are many ways to be a good friend…Look at this picture. Kam Ling has too many things to carry alone. How would you help?” (MUIS, 2002, p. 26). The picture shows a Malay boy carrying a box for Kam Ling who is a Chinese non-Muslim girl. In another example, the primary 4 students are asked: “What are the ways in which we can show our neighbours that Islam is a religion of peace?” (MUIS, 2005, p. 19). There is also the emphasis on the students’ involvement in the learning process, as the students are required to do further research on the subject matter (either internet or library search), or to conduct their own interviews to supplement their understanding. For instance, students are asked: “Make a list of activities your madrasah can organize to promote interaction and understanding between students and asatizah [teachers] of different madaris [madrasahs] and even those from the national schools” (MUIS, 2006, p. 65). As a follow-up activity, students have to complete an individual project where they submit a photo portfolio of their neighbourhood to demonstrate their appreciation of Singapore as a multicultural society.

The promotion of student-centered pedagogies does not imply that the more didactic teaching methods are discarded. However, while more teacher-centered approaches are used, the focus is not on the memorization of facts, but on the students’ understanding of key concepts. A direct teaching is often accompanied by an explanation or a rationale for the prescribed belief or action. For example, in teaching the importance of multiculturalism, the students are taught: “When we meet our non-Muslim neighbours, we say ‘hello’ to greet them. They are important to us... We also learn about each other’s customs and cultures” (MUIS, 2003, p. 17). This is followed immediately by the rationale for that action: “In this way, we become tolerant and understanding neighbours” (MUIS, 2003, p. 17). In another textbook for primary 2 students, the madrasah students learn
about other religious and cultural festivals - ‘The festival of lights’ or Deepavali for the Hindus, and ‘Mooncake Festival’ for the Chinese. The facts about these non-Muslim celebrations are supported by this explanation: “Islam teaches us the importance of respect for other people’s culture and practice. We learn and know Islamic ways of treating others” (MUIS, 2004, p. 22).

Overall, the pedagogical principle embedded in the ISS textbooks is for madrasah teachers to ‘teach less’ so that the students can ‘learn more’. Through engaged learning, the objective is for students to understand what they have learned in a social constructivist context, and not only memorize what they have learned through teacher-directed learning and individual study.

**Pedagogies from the Islamic educational traditions**

But are these ‘new’ student-centred pedagogies really new in the Islamic educational tradition? A survey of the Islamic educational traditions shows that these student-centred pedagogies are not new as they have been propagated by Muslim scholars and practiced in the Islamic context since the medieval times. If one were to peruse the historical records and retrieve those pertaining to the teaching methodology employed in Islamic education, one would see many student-centered pedagogies, consistent with the principle of ‘teach less, learn more’. Below is a list of the main pedagogies found in Islamic educational traditions.

Problem solving was extensively employed by Islamic jurists such as Imam Abu Hanifah and Imam Malik in their work as legal juriconsults. The many legal questions that were posed to these two renowned imams from Muslims all over the world became a rich resource for the two imams to employ them as a teaching tool for their students (Ghazali, 2001). Dialogue and discussion are also recommended and practiced in Islamic education. Discussion is a powerful teaching technique as it helps in strengthening the students’ understanding of the lessons and amplifying the ‘malakah’ of the students. Malakah is seen as a natural talent, which only becomes better and more refined when it is repeated frequently until it becomes part of one’s natural inclination (Abdullah, 1994, pp. 76-77). The dialogue technique was believed to be used by the Prophet Muhammad in his ‘conversations’ with the Angel Gabriel when the latter was assigned to explain the religion to the Prophet. Throughout the years, many Islamic scholars made use of dialogue and discussion, and developed them further in their teachings. Abu Hasan al-Basri, Wasi Ibn ‘Ata’, Imam Abu Hanifah and Imam Malik, among others, were known to have used discussion as their teaching method (Abdullah, 1995). Al-Abrashi avers that:

No one could argue against this method [discussion] as it harnesses the mind, strengthens one’s identity as well as provide a good training for expressing one’s views and opinions, and in instilling one’s self-confi-
dence, and enhances one’s ability to speak and discuss without texts (Abdullah, 1995, p. 213).

Traditionally, discussions were held on the lessons assigned, where the teacher urged his students to play an active role in the discussion (Mansoor, 1983). Students, although highly respectful of the views of their teachers, often engaged in lively discussions with them, and it was not unusual to have students expressing views which differed from those of their teachers (Hisham, 1989).

Related to dialogue and discussion is disputation where one reasoned, disputed and argued on a given subject. As early as 855 A.D. during the reign of Caliph al-Mutawakkil, Muslim scholars held ceremonial disquisitions at the caliphal court in honour of foreign emissaries (Makdisi, 1974). These sessions were at one time so popular in Islamic education that whenever any two students met, they began to discuss and argue with each other on certain topics (Mansoor, 1983). Such ‘verbal sparring’ sessions were the norm and public sessions among opposing councils became the main preoccupation of students and scholars during the 12th century. Disputations, while commonly used for theology, were also adopted for the fields of law and grammar (Makdisi, 1981). With more mature students, disquisitions can take place as an art of free discourse and refined argumentation although this practice unfortunately declined in later times (Waardenburgh, 1965).

The method of application was also used in the medieval times where every student was assigned some lessons from the text, in which he was supposed to go through at home, and to judge, examine, weigh and criticize almost every word (Mansoor, 1983). He was also to find the weakness in the arguments of the author, raise doubts, and question the validity of the arguments in the text. The teacher’s aid was only sought when the student was at his wit’s end. This method was used by Imam Abu Hanifah for his mature students. He was known to have encouraged his students towards independent thinking and not to blindly follow his teachings (Ghazali, 2001). He allowed his students to reject his arguments provided that they substantiated them with equally valid counter-arguments and evidences from Qur’an and/or Prophetic sayings.2)

Pedagogies in Islamic educational institutions today

The preceding shows that the student-centred pedagogies supported by the Singapore government for madrasah students are not new as they have been championed and utilized by Muslims since the medieval times. But a number of writers have pointed out that the dominant pedagogical mode in many Islamic institutions today is memorization within a teacher-centered learning environment. Talbani (1996) notes that the prevalent Islamic pedagogy is the authoritative
acceptance of knowledge, with learning often based on listening, memorization, and regurgitation. He adds that greater importance is placed on listening to a teacher who is active as a transmitter of knowledge, while the student is expected to be the passive learner. According to Zia (2006), recitation without understanding the holy text is particularly common in non-Arabic speaking countries. She avers:

Impeccable recitation of the Qur’an, committed to memory came to be prized and according to some, understanding of the text or questioning became not only unnecessary but a hindrance to successful memorization...need for such high order skills as analysis and discussion was neither expected of students nor developed (Zia, 2006, p. 33; see also Eickelman, 1985).

The premium placed on learning by rote, memorization and teacher talk exists in many madrasahs in Asia. Rahman (1967), Ahmad (1990), Sikand (2005) and Azhar (2006) assert that rote learning is generally the norm in many madrasahs in India and Pakistan. Zakaria (2008) comments that the teacher-centered methods are the most common form of teaching approach in Indonesian Islamic educational institutions. Similarly Hashim (2007) posits that students at the higher institutions in Malaysia are compelled to memorize the religious texts and not encouraged to question, discuss, debate, challenge, or argue over ideas. In Singapore, it has been observed that the dominant method of learning the Qur’an in madrasahs has been “by rote and there was little or no emphasis on understanding what they read” (Chee, 2006, p. 7). At the same time, the teachings are found to be “unrelated to the real life of students and often focused on rituals” (Noor Aisha, 2006, p. 74). Commenting on the pedagogy in madrasahs in Singapore, Abdullah (2007) asserts that the Arabic texts are often memorized without a clear understanding of their meanings. He elaborates as follows:

Lessons are mostly teachers’ centered [sic] and do not involve active interaction and participation between the students and teachers... Teachers normally adopt lecture based approach with direct instructions or repetition of information to facilitate memorization and some level of comprehension. There is significant emphasis on rote learning and memorization of text. The contemporary repertoire of teaching and learning approaches involving thinking skills, creative thinking, critical thinking, problem solving are not commonly and effectively used. Thus new approaches in learning such as cooperative learning, individualized instructions, discovery learning, project work, presentations and others are unfortunately neglected (Abdullah, 2007, pp. 17-18).

At this juncture, it is important to clarify that our discussion on the dominant
teacher-centered pedagogy does not mean that student-centered pedagogies do not currently exist in Islamic educational institutions. There are certainly some madrasahs and Islamic institutions that welcome student involvement and initiative (Abdullah, 1995; Sabri, 1993). But the point is that these examples are the exception rather than the rule. Ramadan (2004) maintains that “what is now called ‘Islamic education’ is confined to the very technical memorization of Qur’anic verses, Prophetic traditions, and rules without a real spiritual dimension” (p. 127).

Noting that students in many Islamic educational institutions are expected to remain quiet and not engaged in discussion, exchange, or debate, he adds that Islamic education is “in fact an ill-administered ‘instruction’, simply a handing on of knowledge based on principles, rules, obligations, and prohibitions, often presented in a cold, rigid, and austere manner, without soul or humanity” (Ramadan, 2004, pp. 127-128).

There are encouraging signs that things may be changing in Singapore, albeit slowly and cautiously. While it is still too early to assess the impact of the ‘Teach Less, Learn More’ initiative for the madrasahs in Singapore, given that student-centered materials such as the Islamic Social Studies textbooks have recently been introduced, at least one madrasah has responded positively to the call to ‘teach less, learn more’. Madrasah Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiah is described by the chairman of the madrasah as a ‘modern madrasah’ where the teachers “employ advanced pedagogies to deliver the curriculum within the current unique context of Muslims in Singapore as well as the challenges posed by 21st century, modern and globalized city-state” (Madrasah Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiah, 2008). Since 2003, the madrasah has been using the Islamic Social Studies teaching materials in its move towards engaged learning. Its teachers attempt to actively promote student participation through questioning, group discussion and hands-on activities such as project work. Student-centered pedagogies are also infused into the curriculum across the subjects where activities such as playing games, singing and solving puzzles are common. English language teachers adopt strategies such as the ‘Shared Book Approach’ where students participate by reading along and role-playing the characters in the story. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is embraced to encourage students to exercise their initiative and shape their own learning. For instance, the students discuss and solve Mathematics problems using interactive whiteboards, learn Arabic using the individual electronic polling devices, and learn Malay using MP3 recording (Madrasah Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiah, 2008; Onishi, 2009).

Besides subject-based learning, the madrasah also provides student-centered programmes as part of the school curriculum. The madrasah runs ‘Life Skills workshops aimed at the student’s holistic development such as character-building, communication skills and leadership qualities. These workshops are “student-centered, experiential and activity based” and include activities such as sing-along sessions, games, and role-play (Madrasah Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiah, 2008). The madrasah also offers the Learning Facilitation Programme which is a
customized academic mentoring programme to nurture students to be independent learners and team players in their study. Another programme to develop the students’ independence and autonomy is the ‘School Stay’ programme where students stay in school overnight to study, play, eat and sleep together, with the teachers as facilitators. While further research is needed to see how effective these programmes and activities are, what is evident is the madrasah’s resolve to take the initial step to adopt student-centered pedagogies in their curriculum.

Conclusion

This paper explored how the Singapore government attempts to introduce ‘new’ pedagogies in madrasah education through new textbooks for Islamic Social Studies. It further pointed out that the Islamic traditions, especially in the medieval era, had left educators with a rich treasure of pedagogical practices which many madrasahs unfortunately have not utilized fully today. Such a student-centered teaching approach, with understanding as the core of learning, resonates with the Singapore government’s initiative for teachers to teach less so that students can learn more. By incorporating the pedagogies promoted in TLLM, madrasahs are exalted to move away from rote learning, repetitive tests and a ‘one size fits all’ type of instruction, towards more engaged learning through experiential discovery and other innovative and effective teaching approaches and strategies. This does not mean that more traditional modes of teaching such as lecture, dictation and recitation should be jettisoned in madrasah education. In fact some religious subjects such as the study of the Qur’an require a careful memorization of the holy texts. Rather, what is recommended is for madrasah teachers to enlarge their reservoir of teaching strategies to include more student-centered learning so as to enhance their students’ understanding of the lessons learnt – an educational goal that is consistent with that advocated by Muslim scholars from the past to the present.

Our study shows that some positive changes can be found among some Islamic schools, even though more extensive and empirical studies need to be followed. As this paper is primarily based on literature review and content analysis of Islamic textbooks, it will be interesting, for further research, to carry out classroom observations to see how the madrasah teachers use the textbooks in classroom teaching, and conduct fieldwork to examine the perceptions of the madrasah students, teachers, parents and the Muslim community on the new textbooks and pedagogies promoted. Comparative studies between Singapore and other countries such as the Philippines where similar madrasah reforms have been launched in recent years will also be valuable for educators and policymakers. The findings of such endeavors will hopefully reinforce the message that the ‘Teach Less, Learn More’ initiative does not promote ‘new’ pedagogies for the madrasahs; rather, these pedagogies are old pedagogies that Islamic scholars
have endorsed through the ages, and should be embraced by all the madrasah stakeholders today.

1) Madrasah means ‘a place of learning’ or ‘school’ in Arabic but it is commonly translated as ‘Islamic religious school’ or ‘Islamic school’ in Singapore and other parts of the world. The plural form for ‘madrasah’ is ‘madaris’ in Arabic but this paper follows the convention in spelling it as ‘madrasahs’. By describing madrasahs as ‘Islamic schools’, we do not imply that these schools exemplify the ideal Islam. As noted by Douglass and Shaikh (2004), these schools are understood as Muslim schools that strive to achieve the “goal of living up to the standards of Islam, rather than implying its achievement” (p. 8).

2) The discussion on student-centered pedagogies does not mean that only student-centered pedagogies are encouraged in the Islamic educational traditions. More teacher-centered techniques are also present and they include lecture, dictation, and memorization. It is important to note that memorization in Islamic theory does not preclude understanding or enlightenment; on the contrary it is meant to be a precursor to both (Boyle, 2006). Other teacher-centered pedagogies such as lecture and dictation are also compatible with helping the students to personally understand what is taught (Wagner & Lotfi, 1983). However, we have tried to argue in this paper that what we see in many parts of the Muslim world is a gap between theory and practice, leading to an accent on memorization without an equal emphasis on understanding the content.

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References

Pedagogies for Islamic religious schools


