

Northwest Bait ul-Ilm Newsletters

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Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board
for the Prairies.



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Introduction

“A curriculum by itself, no matter how excellent it may be, remains inert unless the teacher breathes life into it. Teachers, of course, are the indispensable mediators who give practical expression to educational intent.”¹

Our Ta’lim curriculum, developed by the Institute of Ismaili Studies in the 1980’s has remained largely unchanged since. However, the needs and abilities of each successive generation of young Isma’ilis changes every year. These are due to sociological changes, and changes in the informational landscape in which children find themselves. While the content of the curriculum remains wholly effectual, its proliferation must be modified constantly.

“I think in terms of, let us say, the philosophical environment in which an individual lives, there is no doubt that the faith of Islam places the individual in society in the world in which he lives, in a position where he is not in conflict with his time and he is not in conflict with science and technology of his time. The eternal values of Islam are such that whether the man lived a hundred years ago or lives a hundred years from now, he is always in his correct position. There is no conflict.”²

The current trend is towards a technological landscape. In secular schools, online resources are used more and more to supplement learning materials. Children are becoming “computer literate” at a pace unmatched by previous generations and technology is becoming more and more integrated in the lives of young Isma’ilis. As educators of the new generation, it’s our duty to embrace this technological shift for the benefits of students and for the benefit of the Jamat.

“We'd like to be able to pull the kids into the RECs (Religious Education Centers) rather than push them in. Kids now have many commitments, with school, sports and extracurricular activities. REC should be a top priority as well.”³

With the overwhelming nature of life today, the overcommitment to extracurricular activities and the over-saturation of media, the three hours spent per week in a Bait ul-Ilm (BUI) classroom are inadequately allocated toward educating students about their own history and practices. Isma’ilism is an important part of any of these students lives and

¹ Dr Shiraz Thobani “The Curriculum Development Experience of Ta’lim in the Ismaili Community”

² Mawlana Hazar Imam. Karachi Pakistan, November 12th, 1985.

³ Salmin Pardhan, Executive Officer of ITREB USA

relegating its education to less than the 70 required hours per year is irresponsible for the community.

“[Ta’lim] is presented through a series of educational materials, designed to meet the needs of Ismaili Muslim students, parents and teachers living in different countries and cultures.”⁴

In order to provide an adequate religious education, we must also engage students outside of the classroom, in this case, through their parents to make sure that what is being taught for three hours per week is not being forgotten throughout the other 165 hours. Today we are faced with multitudes of Isma’ilis in the western world remaining uneducated about their own religious and ultimately leaving the faith. This epidemic cannot be combatted with conservation but with proliferation, with narrowing the gap between religious and secular education in the role we play in the lives of our students and our children.

“The welfare of the Isma’ilis is so near and dear to my heart that I cannot light-heartedly bring myself to overlook the weak points of the community. It is by recognising our own faults that we can hope to improve. Let us realise that in the matter of helping our brethren, we have much to learn from our sister communities, and that is we ever hope to achieve what we have set out to, we must resolutely follow the principles of the faith, be guided by the lives of Hasan bin Sabbah and Pir Sadar Din and concentrate on the two most important principles of life – namely, Unity and Service of Imam-e-Zaman and Community.”⁵

⁴ Summary of Ta’lim Curriculum from the Institute of Ismaili Studies

⁵ Prince Aly Khan. Ismaili, India, February 2nd, 1941.

Northwest Bait ul-Ilm Newsletters

At the beginning of this year, I sought to create an entirely new system by which we can bring BUI practices and Ta'lim curriculum into the homes of students in a constructive and accessible way. In the previous year, a number of teachers utilised the internet to allow students to “take home” their BUI learning and for parents to engage their children in class topics. These teachers used their own personal websites and emails to communicate with parents directly, informing them of classroom content and providing extra material with which to engage classroom content.

These practices were met with resounding praise from parents and from students. In addition to the provided Learning Logs, this initiative allowed parents and students to engage with topics productively outside of the classroom, as well as expand their understandings of both the intricacies and interconnectivity of BUI lessons.

As this year started, I hoped to expand this practice to the entire unit, allowing the other teachers to participate regardless of their technological literacy (not all BUI teachers host their own websites). Teachers volunteering for BUI already have a very large time commitment inside and outside of the classroom, so I sought to create a system that takes very little effort on the part of teachers but still delivers the maximum reward to parents and students. The final system requires less than two minutes of extra effort from teachers and delivers a content-rich newsletter to all parents each week.

What is included in Newsletters?

All the information for the BUI Newsletters comes straight from ITREB and BUI teachers. Most of the information comes from the weekly Grade-Wise Emails (GWE) sent to each teacher. The latter sections of the newsletters usually grow out of in-class discussions with students and are included to enhance understandings above and beyond what's covered in the curriculum.

All of the content included in the emails are public information. While steps are in place to ensure that no Tariqah-sensitive material are included in the newsletters, we haven't yet had a case where content of the newsletters would be considered questionable. The curricular content that is included in the newsletters comes from the Ta'lim Curriculum, which are publicly available, public translations of Islamic texts, as well as public secular sources.

Primary Sources

For the sake of consistency, information shared in the newsletters follows the outline provided by the Ismaili Religious and Education Board for the Prairies. This information consisted of Ta'lim book names and page numbers and lesson outlines for each week. The information was gleaned from the GWE sent out to each teacher during the week. Effort was taken to maintain the integrity of the content while also modifying its structure for the intended audience. Below, you can find a comparison between the content in the GWE and its corresponding newsletter:

BUI: Gr. 5 GWE - Term 1, week 4, Sat. Oct. 15th, 2016

Razina Nanji (PTE)
Ya Ali Madad Teachers,

I hope you are all doing well and that Meet and Greet was great! Attached is your GWE for week 4: Saturday, October 15. I know it's a couple weeks away; however, though incase you wanted it ahead of time to prepare for the class you would have it handy! Have a great long weekend!! ☺

Grade 5, Term 1, Week 4	October 15, 2016
Lesson Title: The Bazaar CSP Lesson #: 4 CSP Page #: 47-59 Topic #: 4	Ta'lim: Book 1, Everyday Life in the Fatimid Times, pages 24-31 Teacher/Parent Guide: pages 26-29 Learning Log # to be Assigned : 4

[Lesson Overview](#)

This week, student will be made aware of trade and commerce as integral aspects of Fatimid Life.

The lesson reinforces **Key Messages (# 1) and (# 2)**

The image above shows the information as it appears in the GWE. The image to the right shows the same information configured for the weekly newsletter. Teacher specific information (such as the CSP information and Key Messages) are left out of the parent newsletter.

Note: <<Test First Name>> is replaced by the first name of the student when the newsletters are sent out.

What did << Test First Name >> Learn in Class Today?

This week, we learned about trade and commerce as integral aspects of Fatimid Life.

More information can be found in the
 Ta'lim Book: Everyday Life in Fatimid Times, pages 24-31
 Parent Teacher Guide: pages 26-29

Centre-Wide information such as BUI closures and upcoming events are featured prominently on the newsletter. This information is kept brief and informative and comes directly from BUI administrators. Jamati events and events not directly pertaining to BUI are left out of the newsletters. Upcoming event and closure information is kept in two places on the newsletter. The first is at the top of the newsletter, then in the sidebar.

Learning Logs

Please bring your Learning Logs every week, to class. We've started [Ginan classes](#) and will continue each week. A CD with the Ginans can be purchased at the Literature Desk, along with the Ta'lim reading books.

Don't forget to complete **Week 4** in the Learning Log, including the Family Discussion.

[Redacted text]

[Redacted text]

[Redacted text]

[Redacted text]

[Redacted text]

[Redacted text]

[Redacted text]


[Redacted text]

Word of the Week

The word of the week is:
BALANCE
Discuss it with your child this week.

Important Dates

Nov 5: AKDN ShakeOut Drill
Nov 12: Remembrance Day, no BUI.



Snack Menu

Nachos, Salsa, and Juice

This information is kept consistent throughout the different grade-wise newsletters each week. This helps to make sure all the parents in the BUI centre are up-to-date on all BUI information and can plan and participate accordingly. Reminding parents of this information on a regular basis also helps parents accommodate BUI into their schedules, allowing for more participation in BUI.

Secondary Sources

In this preliminary test, I also encouraged teachers to find secondary sources to supplement the Ta'lim curriculum. This proved extremely useful to parents and students as it allowed students to engage with texts and media outside of the Ta'lim books, and helped build synergistic connections toward the understanding of the faith. Without a list of “approved” sources, teachers used their best judgement as to what to share with their students and included the following list in their newsletters.

Isma'ili Sources

There are many resources online for Isma'ilis, some propagated by Isma'ili institutions, others created by dedicated members of the community. These can be incredibly beneficial as they give students a chance to interact with curriculum-supplementing material as it exists in and affects the world in which they live in “real-time”. A few Isma'ili sources have been utilised through these newsletters, but more can and should be encouraged in order to foster a stronger Isma'ili community and global presence.

- [First Ismaili Electronic Library and Database](#)
- [Gat Maanhe Aavine](#) - Kindergarten (Appendix pg. 30)
- [YouTube](#)
- [Aga Khan Development Network \(AKDN\)](#) - Ta'lim 4 (Appendix pg. 85)

There are many other institutionally recognised sources, including [TheIsmaili.org](#) for current events and the Aga Khan Museum Website for exposure to Islam's rich cultural history, as well as the YouTube channels for the [Aga Khan University](#), [Aga Khan Award for Architecture](#), [Aga Khan Museum](#), [Aga Khan Foundation Canada](#), and [The Ismaili Magazine](#). Many community sources can be used as well, including: [Ismaili Gnosis](#), [Ismaili Mail](#), [Simerg](#), [Essential Ismaili](#), and the forthcoming [Ginan Guru](#). The encouragement of these sites specifically will also help students to gain varied perspectives of the faith, as well as an ability to better express themselves, as these sites are run by members of the community not unlike themselves.

Quranic Sources

- [The Noble Quran](#)

The Noble Quran is an indispensable site for Quranic studies. In addition to the Arabic text of the Quran, this site compiles a dozen recordings of the text, seven commonly accepted English translations as well as individually parsed Arabic words. This allows students not only to engage with the translation of the Quran, but also with the text itself.

- [Surah Al-Fath](#) - Ta'lim 5 (Appendix pg. 98)
- [Surah Ikhlas](#) - Ta'lim 3 (Appendix pg. 66)
- [Read With Meaning](#)

“Teaching Kids the Holy Quran” is a personal project by Toronto Writer Mezba Uddin Mahtab. He endeavours to recreate verses from the Quran visually by utilising toys, similar to [The Brick Testament](#) project. Mahtab supplies his own translations, but the emphasis is put on the illustrations. Because of the complexity of the Quranic text, illustrations may be useful in allowing students to engage with the content. The use of illustrated scripture has frequently been utilised by Judeo-Christian schools in order to enhance the understanding of the contained message.

- [Chapter 96 - Al Alaq \(The Clot\)](#) - Ta'lim 4 (Appendix pg. 77)
- [YouTube](#)

A prominent attribute of the Quran is its recitation and there are many examples online of various recitations. When it comes to reinforcing the overlap between art and faith in Islam's history, it's important to expose students to recitations and other artistic interpretations of the scripture.

- [Surah Al-'Alaq \(The Clot\)](#) - Ta'lim 4 (Appendix pg. 77)

Video Streaming

There are a multitude of video streaming sites, both for free and paid, that have become nearly ubiquitous in our world. As of yet, its content is an untapped resource that, when used correctly, can enhance education and understanding inside and outside of the classroom. While the frontier may seem daunting due to the amount of content that is not relevant to BUI, there is a multitude of content that can enhance the curriculum.

Paid Streaming - Netflix, Amazon, etc.

- [The Prince of Egypt](#) - Ta'lim 3 (Appendix pg. 69)

YouTube

- [Educational Video on Community Service for Kids](#) - Ta'lim 4 (Appendix pg. 85)
- [Focused on Nature Dinner May 2016](#) - Ta'lim 2 (Appendix pg. 54)
- [Look After Your Planet](#) - Kindergarten (Appendix pg. 32)
- [London Bridge is Falling Down](#) - Kindergarten (Appendix pg. 33)

Discovery Digital Networks and PBS Digital

There are a few resources dedicated specifically to unbiased, secular education which can be utilised easily. Discovery and PBS offer a wide selection of peer-reviewed educational video, available for free, and catered to classrooms. While both companies offer both

educational and entertaining content, I've found a number of channels to be extremely useful to parents and students: [CrashCourse](#) (and their newly launched CrashCourse Kids) cover history, religion, and science with engaging language and visuals, [Seeker Daily](#) provides unbiased coverage of news and its historical and cultural background. These and many others can be utilised to further enhance the learning experience. The following were included in newsletters so far:

- [Ancient Egypt](#) - Ta'lim 5 (Appendix pg. 93)
- [Buddha and Ashoka](#) - Ta'lim 5 (Appendix ph. 97)
- [Christianity from Judaism to Constantine](#) - Ta'lim 5 (Appendix pg. 97)
- [Islam, The Quran, and the Five Pillars All Without a Flamewar](#) - Ta'lim 5 (Appendix pg. 97)
- [What is Paganism?](#) - Ta'lim 5 (Appendix pg. 97)
- [What Is The Ancient Religion Zoroastrianism?](#) - Ta'lim 5 (Appendix pg. 97)
- [What Is The History of Hinduism?](#) - Ta'lim 5 (Appendix pg. 97)
- [Who are the Sikhs?](#) - Ta'lim 5 (Appendix pg. 97)

Other Sources

As much of what's covered in the Ta'lim books overlaps with history outside of the Isma'ili community, many scholars and organisations have created resources tangentially related the Ta'lim curriculum. A short search can yield many results.

- [Al Azhar Mosque Virtual Tour](#) - Ta'lim 5 (Appendix pg. 94)

Supplementary Sources

One of the early concerns raised by teachers was the lack of digital resources when it came to classrooms. Instead, teachers were forced to make photocopies of their CSPs with degrading quality. In an effort to "clean up" material distributed to parents, I also included digital copies of supplementary materials that could be printed without diminished quality. While this is not part of the Newsletter process, it was an effort greatly appreciated by teachers and parents.

What's not included in the Newsletters?

With the exception of the registration reminder email⁶, no personal information about students or parents were included in newsletters, except for the first name. The first name of the student was included in subsequent emails only to make them more personal and enhance engagement. While the first and last name of BUI teachers were included in the newsletters, phone numbers and email addresses were not included, except in the rare case that it was requested by a teacher. Instead, the only contact information included in the newsletter were official BUI email addresses: prairies.bui@iicanada.org and nwbui.01@gmail.com. Each newsletter was sent out as an individual email, so the email addresses of other parents were not shared, either.

The newsletters contained only publicly available information. No content from faramin or other Tariqah content was included in any of the newsletters. Safeguards were in place to prevent inclusion of this content, but the safeguards were never utilised because the Ta'lim curriculum contains little to no Tariqah content (the Ta'lim books were created for a larger public audience). Details regarding the practice of the faith inside Jamatkhana were also not included, neither was information regarding Jamati events or various majalis. However, in the feedback that we received from parents⁷, a number of responders expressed interest in including information regarding Jamati events and majalis. Due to the sensitive nature of this information, the request has not been fulfilled as of yet.

⁶ Appendix, pg. 8

⁷ Appendix, pg. 6

Moving Forward

With these Newsletters, I endeavoured to create an simple-to-use, easily replicable system that can be modularly implemented in each BUI centre, or implemented on a local or national level with little external effort. Since most, or potentially all, of the newsletters' content comes from ITREB databases, it is incredibly easy to automate the entire system, allowing parents and students to reap the benefits of this system supplementing their religious education at no extra commitment from voluntary BUI teachers. For this project, I used a third-party email service, Mailchimp, in order streamline the process. However, this system can easily be adapted into the Newsletter system already in place by the Ismaili Institutions for Canada. Since the parent email addresses and curriculum information is already held by the Ismaili Institutions, it wouldn't be difficult to create a solution simpler and more streamlined than the one I've presented here.

I hope that the value of this form of communication is not overlooked and that I've demonstrated that it can be a simple and effective tool to keep the younger generation of the Jamat (and their parents) engaged and involved, not only with their religious education, but also with their religious community.