A Reflection on the Commonalities of Islamic-American Education

Gihad Wazwaz

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Gihad:  00:10  All right, Awal Ishi (first thing) my name is Gihad Waz waz, as you know., I'm here with their Ustez (Teacher) Mohamed Diwan. Um, how, um, if you'd like to introduce yourself, just tell a few little facts.  

Mohamed:  00:18  My name is Mohamed Diwan. I am the superintendent at the Islamic school of Irving Texas.  

Gihad:  00:18  Awesome Awesome  

Mohamed:  00:18  So you're just doing the audio?  

Gihad:  00:18  Yeah pretty much. You don't have to worry about it.  

Gihad:  00:32  Um, so OK. So first question, to start off, could you please share me with how you were educated? So elementary school, Middle School, high school, just in general.  

Mohamed:  00:32  Would you say meaning, what where  

Gihad:  00:32  like, yeah, let's just go with that.  

Mohamed:  00:45  I was primarily, I did elementary in Pakistan, that's where I was born.  

Gihad:  00:45  Oh  

Mohamed:  00:52  and then a middle and high school, college mostly here. Not mostly all of it here. Primarily in, in, in Los Angeles. That's where I grew up from. And uh, then I moved. I did my undergrad. OK, let me go back. I started college as a pre-med.  

Gihad:  00:52  Wow.  

Mohamed:  01:11  I did one semester of molecular biology and uh, decided I needed to change. So I shifted to different things. I studied religion for a semester of theology and then I shifted to education. Uh, I did my bachelor's in elementary education from Cal State, Northridge and state. Uh, and uh, did my certification work and master's in Pepperdine University on the west coast.  

Gihad:  01:41  I almost went to that University. Interesting. That’s cool Why elementary education?
Mohamed 2: 01:47 Oh, I don't know if that's just a... well, uh, from what I recall, Bachelor's, it's technically it's a liberal arts degree. It's not an education degree. So liberal arts as you know, has a variety of elements focus. So my liberal arts was in elementary education. I don't even know if they, if they had secondary, um, my focus was to be an elementary education, but that was the uh, liberal arts ah, element available. So I pursued it. Uh, and then, um, when I pursued my masters is more general, just education. It's not specified, but my credential work was also a focus on elementary. Why? To be honest, I was, when I was doing my credential work, I was already teaching, I was teaching elementary grade levels. So I think that just sort of worked out, this is how I was doing that I by default pursued certification in that field or in that, that direction.

Gihad 1: 02:48 That makes sense. And you went into and just like a simple public schools, private schools or did you go to Islamic schools?

Mohamed: 02:55 For a short time, but mostly Islamic schools.

Gihad: 02:57 OK. So you had...

Mohamed: 02:59 Been in the Islamic schools from the beginning.

Gihad 2: 03:00 Here. Um, so moving fast forward, I guess. What were slash are the challenges of establishing a curriculum for an assignment school? Like how, how hard is it to find textbooks? How did you decide them? What are you studying Islamic schools?

Mohamed: 03:17 Are you referring to Islamic studies in particular or just general?

Gihad: 03:17 I'd say General.

Mohamed: 03:22 It's not difficult at all because, uh, because we follow the, I mean generally Islamic schools follow the curriculums for the state or whatever. So if it, for example, in California, the schools now are following in core curriculum which is national, right? So you just, if you're following, if you're aligning yourself with a certain educational system, then curriculum wise and you're aligned as well. Right? So here, for example, we follow the Texas state. So our curriculum is aligned with the Texas Education Agency. So we just
look at their curriculum guidelines of the books and publications that they recommend.

Mohamed: 04:05 And we choose from that, from their variety, we select what we feel is appropriate and we have the luxuries as a private school to modify things a little bit, too, to add. So we try to bring in here and there resources wherever possible and necessary to sort of add more flavor to curricula. But generally we just followed the state appointed texts when we do AP classes, which we do over here. We follow the cottage because AP classes have to be certified and approved by the College Board. So you have to follow their curriculum and teachers have to be certified through the College Board. So this is, that process is relatively simple in that regard. It besides,

Gihad: 04:05 Secular studies . . .

Mohamed: 04:47 It becomes more complex when it comes to Arabic and Islamic studies for that, uh, because for those curriculums are very limited. So that requires work, in house effort and work, to come up with objectives and see what we want to teach, what we want to use to teach those objectives and whatnot.

Gihad 2: 05:05 So, how hard is it to find, to for Islamic studies?

Mohamed: 05:09 Islamic studies has become easier over the years because there’s more and more material being published and available.

Gihad: 05:13 in English or...

Mohamed: 05:15 In English yeah, So there's more and more publishers are publishing and producing Islamic Studies, and producing Islamic studies texts for an American student, even in Europe, they're being published. Problem is still lacking in regards to Arabic as a second language. There are very limited resources available that are suitable for an American audience. So for that we have to sort of mix and match different things, and resources and bring them in, but still is there, but nothing that we feel it's, it's . . . ah . . . what we would like.

Gihad: 05:15 Yeah. So, like, it’s not like as easy as per se, like Spanish?
Mohamed: 05:15 Language arts.

Gihad: 05:15 Language arts.

Mohamed: 05:52 Or, Spanish. Spanish, you have books, you have a teacher's, you have testing, uh, assessments and whatnot. It's all there, right? And your guidelines by the, you know, so that makes it easier.

Mohamed: 06:07 So, hopefully as we move forward and progress, Arabic will change as well.

Gihad: 06:11 That makes sense. Makes Sense. Um . . . talking about AP Schools that's one of my questions I was going to ask how are you guys able to, see you guys. Um, when did you guys introduce AP school? Like a classes who came up with the idea because that's, for me, I've never seen that before in a cyber school period. And I was like, wow, when I saw that better you guys who came in.

Mohamed: 06:32 So it's not, it's not uncommon because I've been affiliated with a national education forum, so I've been exposed, have consulted with, a variety of schools and works with many schools. So, AP or IB curriculum Are you familiar with IB?

Gihad: 06:46 Yes, yes, IB, international baccalaureate.

Mohamed: 06:47 It's not, it's not uncommon in Islamic schools. I know multiple schools that are full IB schools, Islamic schools. I know many schools, many Islamic schools that offer AP classes.

Gihad: 06:58 In Texas or in California or nationally?

Mohamed 2: 07:02 Nationally. In Texas in particular. If you look at Dallas, you look at Brighter Horizon Academy. Actually, when I was a principal there, we brought in AP classes for the first time, uh, and now they're shifting away from AP towards IB. Right, uh, here. AP was already in place when I joined.

Gihad: 07:02 Really?

Mohamed: 07:02 Yes.

Gihad: 07:02 And, when did you join?
Mohamed: 07:25 I joined in 2014 when he was brought in, I think in 2012, I believe here.

Gihad: 07:25 Ok.

Mohamed: 07:33 Prior to that the high school students, especially juniors and seniors, were doing the dual credit program through the local community college.

Gihad: 07:33 Ok

Mohamed: 07:42 So, some of the parents had concerns about them wanting their kids and the environment here rather than go into college and college. So as a consequence of if you've ever brought in AP classes, so you could do it in-house because they didn't want to just offer regular track because they felt that an AP program would offer a better educational experience for that.

Gihad: 08:04 Yeah, I've done that before.


Mohamed: 08:21 Yeah it's very. I mean, uh, just like anybody else or anywhere else, you look at the resumes, you meet the person, uh, and you look at general guidelines that we have to abide through because we're accredited through SACS, that association of colleges and schools with the same entities and they have certain guidelines that they have it for, uh, to remain accredited. Your basic teacher criteria or qualifications, right? So first we ensure that our teachers are aligned with that. And then beyond that, you look at resume, you look at their education, their experience and their personality character for me personally, or one of the biggest elements is, uh, this, the teacher’s commutability to connect successfully with the student.

Mohamed 2: 09:16 The rapport.

Gihad: 09:16 Really?

Mohamed: 09:21 Yes. Because you could, you could have mastery of content, right? You can have expertise in your subject
matter, but unless you're, you have a good relationship with your student, that communication of that content matter would be challenging. So if you have good relationship with your students that you would be more successful at delivering that content to the, to the student as opposed to one who does not have that rapport. That personality comes into place. Your, your, your personal mission and vision on why you are in this field comes into play. And then your ability to, to, uh, deal with student behavior and how to manage student behavior. All of those elements contribute to the rapport and your relationship to them.

Gihad: 10:08 So it’s set up. So like for our Quran, like Quranic studies you wouldn't share, generally choose like the most hafiz magical. But he, like, let's say there's a, there's two people, right? One's a hafiz he knows everything Quran front to back. Ma sha Allah Tafsir, qulshi (everything) but he doesn't have that communication.

Mohamed 2: 10:30 Exactly. You couldn't have a, I mean you can have mastery of all the knowledge. If you cannot communicate it successfully that, that's not a benefit to the next person. Right. So then that person has to figure out where they're best suited, but not teaching. No. Teaching has to do with communication and communication and passing on knowledge. It has to do with your ability to articulate and articulation is secondary to your relationship with those who you are conveying the message to. All right, this is going to be done in a classroom setting. I’m talking about generally when you're giving a Toast Master speech or you don't have to have a rapport with your audience and in order to convince them of your argument. But in a school setting it's a different platform.

Gihad 1: 11:22 So, this was kind of, I haven't experienced this before in my previous schools. So I don't know if it is, is present. How would you describe, if there is a generation gap between like teachers and students are even with their parents to kids like first immigrants, immigrants, you know, if there is...

Mohamed 2: 11:43 We know that the generation gap... I have grappled with this concept for a long time. I even did a speech or lecture on it one time in a, in a, in a masjid. Um, and at that time, it was many years ago, I had put forward hypotheses that this concept of generation gap is somewhere, somewhat flawed;
that we're using it as an excuse to cover up our failure to communicate with a younger, or successfully connect with our younger generation. Right. So true that as we grow, right. I was a very active youth worker.

Mohamed: 12:28 um,

Mohamed 2: 12:32 And was, still am. I guess I'm working in a school, right? But yes, I do notice that my awareness of the youth culture is not at the same level where it used to be not only awareness, my, my, I don't know if I, if I use that word, understanding of youth culture, uh, but my experience has helped me to be open to the idiosyncrasies of the culture today and, and to work with it.

Mohamed 3: 12:58 Uh,

Mohamed: 13:01 So while I may be a different generation than a 15 year old . . .

Gihad: 13:01 Of course . . .

Mohamed: 13:05 I think that gap is not created by the distance in our timeline and age. It's more created by our inability to understand each other as friends and as an adult. Me fully understanding what my, what my purpose is towards the young, right. So if I understand that I'm an educator, my purpose is to help support, guidance and our, then regardless of the difference in cultural elements, I would connect with them because they will see that I'm here for their benefit, right? While I'm older, I'm different, but we're here to work together for me to help them and for them to help me. And I think that that sort of, a sort of, makes us look at the culture gap from a different perspective. You look at . . . I mean, could I give a religious references?

Gihad 2: 13:05 Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Totally

Mohamed: 13:56 Look at the prophet (SAW) Some of the key people around him, Abdullah ibn Abbas, Abdullah ibn Omar.

Gihad: 13:56 Yes.

Mohamed: 14:01 Ubaid ibn Ka ab. you know, people like that. And if you look at the four prominent Quran teachers that came from the companions, they were Abdullah ibn Abbas, Ubaid ibn
Ka ab Abdullah ibn Masoud. Three, I'm sorry not four, three. All of Ibn Abbas was barely some say for so the past again. And that time he had mastered the put on and understanding of the religion to be able to be one of the lead teachers of the religion to others. So imagine he was 63 when he passed and he was 14 when he passed, yet they had an outstanding rapport and he was one of his prime students and they were connected in that regard. So where's the generational gap? Right? So the gap is something we create based on our limitations. It's not there by default because the generation gap is there because the absence of cultural understanding, absence of changes that have happened since I was a teenager and a whole lot of other things. So. So we, we live it as generational gap but there may be legitimate because those are generational elements. But I think it could be overcome depending on who the people are and how we want to approach it.

Gihad: 14:01 If the effort is there.
Mohamed: 15:10 Yeah. If they have the effort and understanding. Right. And then some level of wisdom or insight. Right.
Gihad: 15:29 So, being a private school . . . in the beginning at least you were here for 2014, you probably know the history. Um like, was the larger community even till now, are they supportive? How has it been?
Mohamed: 15:41 Like financially it hasn't been difficult financially. Um, it is difficult and in most schools that I've been affiliated with, it is a challenge and I think that's just a, that's just poor management.
Gihad: 15:41 Really?
Mohamed: 16:04 Yeah. Ah, I have here, for example, the first year I joined in 2014, we had a $700,000 deficit on budget. Last year a 3.5 million dollar budget without any significant increases. The tuition over the past few years, while we have two percent, three percent, increase along with three percent or so salary increases, that balances it out there. We had a surplus of $200,000 when we ended the school year last year.
Gihad: 16:04 Ma Sha Allah.
Mohamed: 16:34 So, no. While, yeah, we could do other things to really improve our educational resources. Right.

Mohamed: 16:39 So, yeah. We had to crunch it and sort of, you know, bite down on things, too, to have that financial sort of a standing. And I had similar experience when I was at Brighter Horizons where other schools . . . where schools were in deficit yet with proper management, they ended up balancing the budget or even having a surplus.

Gihad: 16:59 Is it simple just careless mistakes? Or is it more like . . .

Mohamed: 17:01 Not . . . not careless mistakes. But to be honest, I don't know. I don't know. I look at previous expenditures and I see at times money being spent in places where it shouldn't be, but I don't know. For me there is no magic; is just watching your expenses and managing your income, and of course increasing your enrollment. Enrollment in these elements helped as well. So yeah, we did increase enrollment here a few years, which helped definitely the, the income level, right. But those are the things you have to strategically look at it and then see how to make, how to bring in more money and how to sort of tighten the belt so that’s this are concerned and that works.

Mohamed: 17:44 I don't know how people do that, that they ended up in those, in those scenarios. That's why I want people's Islamic schools. The generals are financial lots and I sit and every school I've worked in, we have, we have it, it's taken some time, but that hasn't been the case after the fact. Right. So this year this school has been here 22 years. They were running a deficit for 20 of those years. In the last three years we've had a surplus. I was at Bright Horizons for seven years . . . 25 years they were in debt and then, uh, my last three years of leadership alhumdulillah we had, we had money in the bank, right? So there's no secret to it . . . is just what happens is most of your school leaders, principals or principals, and there's even research done in the public sector regarding the principle of being an educator, but principals are looked upon as more than educators.

Mohamed: 18:37 They have to manage the whole vicinity where you're involved and engaged in every aspect of the school. So there was a study done, I think, I don't know if it was SMU or somewhere else and they were taking the direction
towards discussing that there should be a break between academics and operational elements of a school where you have principal who focuses on the academic setting and you have managers or operation directors who focus on the business aspect and facility aspect of the schools. So experts are aligned accordingly. All right.


Mohamed: **19:13** So I don't know. I don't know.

Gihad: **19:15** As a whole, like not just financially, how has community . . . like do you see a lot of community involvement with the school and the parents are engaged?

Mohamed: **19:23** Community . . . that you can look at statistically, there are always complaints. Not enough parents are engaged. Right. But if you ask me, parents are engaged. We have a very strong and active PTO for example here at our school. A. But I'd have to keep in mind, you know, in this day and age you have a lot of working families. You have a lot of single parent families, right?

Gihad: **19:23** Really?

Mohamed: **19:41** Yeah. Yeah. Well a lot. But I don't need like, but, but I didn't have enough off that . . .

Gihad: **19:41** To notice . . .

Mohamed: **19:48** For different reasons, right? To have an impact on the family. Right. And you have found these that are both working or you have families with multiple siblings where maybe the husband is at work and while, while, while some kids are at school, she's taking care of other kids or other needs. I have a . . . So that would naturally for me to expect that every parent to be here in volunteering, that's not, that's not fair.

Gihad: **19:48** Of course

Mohamed: **19:48** But at the same time, you have a lot of parents engaging in our school. Uh, uh, and, and uh, we have a good level of support. Sometimes too much.

Gihad: **19:48** Hahah. Well, that’s good.
Mohamed: 19:48 For some parent but too much of it. Parents naturally . . .
that's common in all the schools and private schools especially. They get overly involved and overly vocal and, and, uh, uh, you know, you're saying OK, you know, suggestions become demands. So good and bad. Right?

Gihad: 19:48 Yeah, yeah.

Gihad: 20:47 This is kind of interesting.

Gihad: 20:49 Do you ever feel an obligation to, like you probably have maybe one or two big donors are to be donors. You know when they come around, you know their faces, probably. Do you ever feel like an obligation to them to listen to them more than what you say or do you, what do you think?

Mohamed: 21:05 For sure. Will not listen to them more, right? We would listen to anybody who has valuable input, whether you were going or not donor because it would be foolish that somebody gives you something of value and I'm talking about money and not my input and then you don't receive it well or you don't appreciate it, especially if it's delivered with respect and good intention. To me . . . So no, money has no relevance in that, in as far as inputs, concern,

Gihad: 21:05 Mm hmm.

Mohamed: 21:42 So donations are to some extent for the individual for their benefit and the benefit that help the school. Would we send the thank you card or maybe a small gift at times to say thank you for supporting us or will be appreciate that support? Absolutely. If I see a donor, what I go shake his hand. It's modest, but thank you so much for her and yeah, definitely we should write. I mean, appreciate that does not mean that those who are not able to donate, we would frown upon them. No everybody has their capacity and somebody might. I have a child man, and this is a true story, right? Lady comes for admission or this was three years ago I think, and uh, I think it's in my drawer. She comes for admission and I could not. They had financial issues and financial aid and we couldn't accept them and they ended up going to another school.

Mohamed: 22:33 This lady was saying she's been in some shelters and stuff. She has zero money, ugh, right? A few days later and now alhumdullilah they're settled. She comes to me, uh, with her
son and we had a fundraising event coming up and even though they were not attending the school right here, [The lady says] "My son, he felt he wanted to donate to your school, right? Well, we have no money. So he brought me this money but he had saved and uh, and he was short. So I took some money. (Bottom dollar that she had.) "And I helped him and this is his contribution to the school." Right? Now this to me, I've kept it. I haven't even used it.

Gihad: 22:33 I can see it.

Mohamed: 23:24 And then it came in this box right because while this change and a few dollar bills that has more value than somebody a million or donating 10,000 to. Right. That has value to it because it was hard to give.

Gihad: 23:24 Right.

Mohamed: 23:32 But this. This is serious. Yeah.

Gihad: 23:32 You have only $2 and give a whole dollar seventy-five.

Mohamed: 23:38 How do I react when I see that child or the mother? I, I feel it in here. So these are serious people sitting, right? So yeah, if you see the donor, depending on donor like that, you're going to receive them with open hearts and want to serve them even though they're not here and there's no further benefit expected of them will be. Are they? Are . . . they are amazing people as far as I'm concerned.

Mohamed: 24:06 Yeah I don't want to put it in. The bank might say, hey, why don't you use it? They're funny, but it's more use to me like . . . this is fine. To me. It reminds me and yeah, it motivates me.

Gihad: 24:17 That is really cool. Yeah.

Mohamed: 24:20 Yeah.

Gihad: 24:22 Let me see here. It's the end of the list. What are the successes that like then, most notable ones you had? What's the most proud achievement here at either in general at this school are even just in general in life, like when it comes to education?

Mohamed: 24:38 OK.

Mohamed: 00:00

Gihad: 00:00 Proudest achievement.

Mohamed: 00:53 OK. Probably say, I don't know if there's a proudest achievement, honestly.

Speaker 1: 00:58 Again, this is not for religion class, right? Or this is for education.

Gihad: 00:58 Anything.

Gihad: 01:03 Yeah. No, I mean maybe you have one in mind.

Mohamed: 01:06 I was visiting California this, just a couple of years back and that's just one example. And uh, and I came across ah, I ran into one of my former student and her mother.

Gihad: 01:06 Oh.

Mohamed: 01:23 And, um, she just came to me, she shook my hand and she was the tour guide. She's already remember Deanna, Deanna, and she's like, you know, she prays still, she never misses one signal prayer and she says, that's all because of you and you're like her father and you're this, you're that. And she's crying. And I'm like, OK, all right. So that, that won't do what was right. And I had a similar experience here just a few months back. Uh, and that, that just left me sort of wondering, right? So after the Friday prayer, I run into a former student from another school that aren't worked out here.

Mohamed: 02:03 And, uh, he's now, I'm assuming he's probably graduated from college by now as well. But when he comes up to me and he hugs me and he starts. So he's all teary-eyed. And he's like, all right. And it made me like I'm a man right? So, how about those Mavericks, right? So and he says, man, you know, what you did for me is unmeasurable. I will never forget how you helped me through school or you helped me with life and then he got so overcome that he just turned around and walked off. Right. Understand. Like what, what did I do? And, and, and, and then he left and I, I know who he is. I could find him if I wanted to, but I want to say, look, what did I do? I mean I'm just doing what I
like to do, but moments like that. Yeah, I can, I can tell you about out of our 20 graduates, five students already this year have full ride scholarships, right? They've been already approved. The others are still pursuing our, you know, our, our, uh, we had a 34 on an ACT this year. Uh, so, but those are great achievements. But when I run into those events where somebody saying, hey, you affected me, you helped me right? That. That's for me. That's like, OK, we are doing something. We are doing something serious.

Gihad: 02:03 Yeah.
Mohamed: 02:03 Making people cry. Alhumdullilah.
Gihad: 03:35 Is there anything you might like to add?
Mohamed: 03:37 I think we're good. I mean I'm good unless you have any more questions.
Gihad: 03:42 That's it for me.
Mohamed: 03:42 Sounds good. Man
Gihad: 03:45 It was awesome to have you. Thank you.
Mohamed: 03:45 Jazakum Allahukhair. Alhumdullilah