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THE YOUTH LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

A tête-à-tête with Somair Feroz, Director Youth Leadership Program

INTERVIEW BY RAHEEL FEROZE

THE YOUTH LEADERSHIP PROGRAM (YLP) is an ambitious project, but so is Somair Feroz—ambitious. He is a SAP Consultant by profession but his genuine concerns for the prevailing deteriorating education system and hopeful expectations for rewarding changes has led him today to embark on a journey that is aimed at revolutionizing not only the curriculum but also the pedagogical practices of our times. Between all the laughs and coffee-spills, here is the scoop on his YLP project.

Q1. WHAT ARE THE OBJECTIVES OF YLP AND ITS RELEVANCE IN LOCAL CONTEXT?

The Youth Leadership Program (YLP) is an initiative to empower the youth of our country with an enlightened and independent mind with strong leadership skills. This is even more so vital given the fact that we are home to one of the highest population ratio of youngsters in the world. To derive maximum advantage from this situation we need to start treating them as our national assets i.e. investing in them, and not only as consumers. Unfortunately, the government has not only failed to mainstream Education but has also failed to devise a “wholesome” Education curriculum that can truly cater the physical, mental, spiritual, and intellectual needs of the child.

Education of a child is neither a life’s luxury nor a business cash-cow—this we must all realize now.

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After an exhaustive critical analysis of the various leading school curriculums in Karachi, I have now arrived at a conclusion: that the prevailing education system is deficient of both purpose and direction. It is based primarily on the method of rote-learning with the sole objective of passing the exams and not really with character development at all. The students of this system are helplessly indecisive even in small issues and individualistic in nature having neither little or no confidence nor any passion to become effective leaders.

This is when and why I decided to launch the YLP program. Initially, I started to search for international cases/curriculums for imparting leadership skills at school level. There are a number of functional and successful programs on offer but the most attractive of them was that devised by the

International Board of Educational Research and Resources (IBERR). IBERR, which is South-Africa based, started an Islamic Curriculum to intellectually mobilize the Muslim Youth in the country. The curriculum is available online and has been formulated only by the experts in the field. Impressed by it, I have based my entire YLP on IBERR’s Youth Leadership Curriculum with relevant changes to accommodate local context. What is most impressive is its framework for incorporating both leadership qualities and Islamic values in the youth—something which is a rarity. Thanks to the management of a local institution namely Wisdom House School (a project of Al-Irfan Education Society), I was able to practically experiment with IBERR’s concept of Youth Leadership in a proper functioning school as well. The main focus in the YLP is therefore to:

1. Initiate and develop in youngsters a process of question-posing (the inquiry method). Students are encouraged to learn by discovery rather than by one-way method of transmission of information (which really is indoctrination and not education).
2. Teach youngsters research-methodologies whereby enabling them to look for information themselves, and finding answers to their own questions instead of relying on others to provide them.
3. Help youngsters to develop the ability to distinguish between credible and un-credible sources of information from any

early stage.

4. Encourage youth to develop hypotheses and draw conclusions from it.
5. Encourage group discussions and facilitate the art of effective listening and expression of one's own views and ideas freely and confidently.
6. Support open-ended discussions in matters where definite answers or final-say is not possible. The idea is to encourage exchange of ideas based on logical reasoning and solid scientific facts. These sessions are only possible if the participants have a very strong inclination towards research and thirst for knowledge.
7. Replace the role of teacher as an authority to that of a facilitator or the mediator, and a resource.
8. Create opportunities to engage students in appropriate leadership roles.

Q2. HOW DO YOU PLAN TO ACHIEVE THESE OBJECTIVES?

All International Leadership Programs mainly involve assigning some practical tasks to groups with limited resources, and mine is no different.

1. Process of Question-Posing (The Inquiry Method):

Students are provided with worksheets related to their field-visit and are asked to find answers to the questions by means of observation and research from the Internet. This lays down the basic foundation to developing analytical skills in the youngster.

2. Develop Hypotheses and Draw Conclusions:

Students are asked to either draw conclusion from a given scenario or to comment on current events of the country. This is facilitated through group-discussions with the objective of developing listening skills.

3. Encourage Youth to Reflect on their Own Experiences:

Groups of youngsters will be required to present their findings/experiences in front of a gathering which will help better their communication skills by learning to express their thoughts effectively and confidently. This will also give them an opportunity to reflect on their thoughts and learn from each other experiences.

4. Create Opportunities and Engage Students in Appropriate Leadership Roles:

Each group will appoint their own group leader who will be ultimately responsible

for the performance of the group. The leader will ensure that his group completes the assigned task within the stipulated time and given resources. This exercise will automatically develop the necessary traits in the leader to manage a team and lead them to success.

Q3. WHAT TYPE OF TEACHING METHODOLOGY OR CURRICULUM IS BEING FOLLOWED IN YLP?

The Management of Wisdom House School has given me their educational platform where I am experimenting with this curriculum along with the teaching methodology into perfection. Although my initially aim was to concentrate on the practical sessions alone, but now in order to ensure continuity, weekly sessions of theoretical nature have also been incorporated.

The complete program is divided into themes each theme having one session involving three to four theoretical lessons to build ample knowledge base of the students on a given topic and to further develop in them the skills of questioning, observation, listening, speaking, logic building and confidence. The usage of themes ensures that students concentrate on one specific subject with only participate in activities related to it.

The indoor and outdoor activities at the end of the sessions are the main crux of the program as both the knowledge and skills of the students are then put to test. Students are divided into groups and given tasks to perform after they have appointed their own group leader. In the indoor exercises, students are provided with materials and guidelines for creating models or presentations and are judged based on the effective use of these resources in the allocated time period. In the outdoor activities, students are taken to a site related to the theme and are provided worksheets to answer. Each group leader is responsible for the completion of the worksheet. This worksheet comprises of questions and exercises related to the trip with the aim of building observation and team management skills in the students. At the end of the session, students present their trip findings to a gathering. Each group is then finally marked for their performance in both indoor and outdoor activities including the final presentation.

Students are also individually marked by their course coordination for their contribution to the group's success or failure. Currently I am coordinating with a Psychiatrist to develop a test for the evaluation of leadership skills of the individual students. The test will evaluate the student's emotional strength, intelligence and communication, relationship with others, and their role in the team both as a leader and as the group's member. The test will be taken before and after each session in order to measure the actual its actual effectiveness.

Q4. WHAT MILESTONES HAVE YOU ACCOMPLISHED SO FAR? WHAT PHASE OF IMPLEMENTATION ARE YOU CURRENTLY STANDING IN? HOW MUCH MORE DO YOU STILL HAVE TO GO?

I have been able to execute one full session in Wisdom House School so far and am currently in the middle of the second session. The first session was based on the theme of water whereas the second is based on water bodies. Themes are basically the medium I use for the inculcation and development of leadership skills.

“What right now I desperately need are professional educationists to come forward and assist me in my thought-process and my research so that I can perfect the curriculum and pedagogical exercises. I need support in devising worksheets, leadership evaluation criteria, and rules for testing emotional intelligence in youngsters.”

In the first session, I have been able to:

- Inculcate the attribute of thinking and comprehension in the students. (Through the concept of discussions and question-posing in the classroom).
- Making students feel confident (via presentations before assembly of students. Even shy and quiet students have started to participate and express their ideas freely without fearing ridicule or failure of being wrong.

However, there is still much left to be desired and done. Many important shortcomings were identified in the first session which will

inshallah not be repeated in the second session. I would consider this program mature when I will be able to execute two consecutive sessions on the same pattern with tangible and good results (measured via the individual tests that is being created)

Q5. WHAT CHALLENGES ARE YOU CURRENTLY FACED WITH IN ITS IMPLEMENTATION?

The challenges faced are both in the form of hard-to-remove typical Pakistani character traits in the students and some program-execution issues as well. Students generally showed the following bad traits:

- Lack of responsibility
- No time management skills
- Poor team behavior, leader most active but non-influential. Members mostly are sleeping partners
- Poor writing skills
- Poor communication skills.
- Lack of vigor for gaining knowledge or remaining up to date.

I am currently experimenting some active ways of removing the aforementioned traits found dangerously common among all students (However, here I would like to add, that generally the girls have out-performed the boys in showing better team work and leadership skills.)

Further, students of age less than 9 years were very difficult to handle as they were more interested in pictures, games and videos. They understood simple sentences and preferred communicating in Urdu (mother tongue) for understanding.

Q6. WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF YLP?

I plan to formally launch this program (using the Al-Irfran Education Society Platform) in other schools as well. These schools will be implementation partners. The methodology for YLP will not change i.e. the concept of theme-based sessions and indoor and outdoor exercises will remain the same. However, the method of execution might be a bit different from what I am currently doing as the objective is to come up with the most optimal method of execution that will foster the right leadership traits in the students.

I do not plan to focus YLP on a special stratum of society and instead will seek to make it affordable and adjustable for all schools at all levels as the objective is to reach as many youngsters as possible in order to create true leaders of this country.

Q7. WHAT MESSAGE WOULD YOU LIKE TO GIVE TO THOSE THIRD-PARTY INDIVIDUALS/INSTITUTIONS WHO ARE INTERESTED IN BECOMING IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS OF YLP IN THEIR OWN RESPECTIVE SCHOOLS?

It is too early to imagine schools that would be interested in the youth leadership program. However I do plan to spread awareness of the need of such programs in schools by conducting seminars and giving presentations. What right now I desperately need are professional educationists to come forward and assist me in my thought-process and my research so that I can perfect the curriculum and pedagogical exercises. I need support in devising worksheets, leadership evaluation criterions, and rules for testing emotional intelligence in youngsters.

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