Redesigning Islamic Preschool Globally

Zaliza Alias, founder of GENIUS AULAD

When GENIUS AULAD was established 20 years ago, it unveiled a fresh take on what Islamic early childhood education could be. Appealing to discerning parents who want education to go hand in hand with wholesome spiritual values and creative learning, the concept took on like wildfire. Today, there are 71 GENIUS AULAD outlets nationwide and in Indonesia, and the numbers are growing. We speak to Zaliza Alias, GENIUS AULAD's dynamic founder about her passion and vision for the preschool, and how she plans to take it to greater heights.

Can you share a little about yourself and what inspired you to start GENIUS AULAD as a business and also your decision to embark on a franchising model?

20 years ago, wholesome early childhood education is something that is almost unheard of. In those days, there was more emphasis on how-tos and technicalities. Children were graded based on quantity i.e., how many words they memorised or pages they read, rather than quality and the intrinsic value that they gained from the activity. You can't measure that by the number of pages!

I also saw a need for preschools to be seen as a professional industry and for preschool teachers to be seen as professionals in their own right. After all, they play an important role in developing young minds. I believe that it is important to be the change we want to see around us rather than to wait and see, and so I decided to take up the challenge to bridge the gap to provide quality early childhood education based on a character-building framework and Islamic values.

We expanded into our first branch five years into the business in 2005 and ventured into franchising in 2008. We decided to grow organically rather than expand aggressively because in this industry, it is vital to have the right people and a well-equipped system on the onset. While it is important to grow the business, we need franchisees who will never lose sight of our mission and passion in educating the children.

Can you describe briefly about GENIUS AULAD Learning System - the GENIUS AULAD Preschool, GENIUS AULAD Beyond Preschool and GENIUS AULAD Play-school and how they are different from other early childhood education programmes?

GENIUS AULAD Learning System is built to cater to children as soon as they are independent enough to be in a group setting. As such, we created a learning system that addresses the needs of children in different stages of development. Our playschool is designed for children between the ages of 2 ½ to 3 years old, while preschool caters to children from the ages of 4 to 6 years old. With the increasing demand from working parents to place their child in full-day childcare centres, we have developed the GENIUS AULAD Beyond Preschool programme to fulfil this full-day educare need while providing a more relaxed learning environment for the child.

As seasoned early childhood education practitioners, we acknowledge that literacy plays a big role in a child's development. And through our 20 years of extensive experience and research, GENIUS AULAD has developed a unique method in developing a child's literacy skills to suit various learning styles that emphasise on socio-emotional development to build the children's character and love of learning.

Here's another good news in our pipeline now - we are establishing GENIUS AULAD Infant Care centres to address the needs of various corporate buidings to have a professional day care service for their employees' children aged 6 months to 6 years old. The journey of early childhood is a never-ending passion indeed.

Can you share more about the iLOVE Lesson Plans and how it functions?

In the two decades that we have been in this business, we have seen the shift of parental expectations towards their children. 10 years ago, parents want their children to be able to read as early as 3 years old, but now the demand has shifted to a balance of character-building that goes hand-in-hand with academic excellence.

Hence, GENIUS AULAD iLOVE (Islamic, Literacy, Original Arts, Value and Excitement) lesson plan is based on the love and care character-building and practical life skills, which is an important part of development for toddlers. Activities may range from the excitement of play pretend to various ways of expressing their feelings. The lesson plans are compact and include fun play, songs, reading and games. Our energetic teachers make sure the students' different needs are fulfilled and that they experience a happy learning environment.

In your opinion, what are the advantages of home-grown pre-school programmes compared to foreign ones?

Every country has its own unique culture that impacts education needs. However, the basic need to build literacy skills is the same. The differentiating factor is the methods used to facilitate this learning need.

A home-grown preschool caters to the needs of the local children. The environment plays a major role in the development of children.

Children learn best through various methods like playing, drawing storytelling and more, rather than just through books alone.

GENIUS AULAD bridges the gap to provide quality early childhood education based on a character-building framework and Islamic values.

At GENIUS AULAD, we tailor our learning programmes to suit our international markets. For example, at our Indonesian centre, the content of the programme is tweaked to resonate with the culture of the local children there in order to make learning more effective. GENIUS AULAD Learning System includes various parental involvement so there are various values being shared to enrich the school's learning environment and culture.

How has the reception been towards these tailored programmes?

We believe that every child develops at their own pace. At GENIUS AULAD, each student will have a one-to-one reading session with their teachers on a daily basis. Over the years, parents have testified that it has helped their children in developing their reading skills. This one-to-one session also involves communications and interactions which make reading meaningful and wholesome for the children.

How does one become a GENIUS AULAD franchisee and what are the benefits and support a franchisee can expect to receive?

The first step on becoming a GENIUS AULAD franchisee is easy: just log on to our website and submit your application. You will then be invited to attend our Franchise Briefing.

GENIUS AULAD is very careful in providing the highest level of education quality consistently throughout the years. As such, we are very selective in choosing our franchisees as we would like to ensure that they are not only looking to venture into a business but most importantly, they need to have what it takes to be an educator. This is because only those who are passionate in education would understand what it takes to operate our school and to ensure that all of the students are getting the same level of education quality, no matter which GENIUS AULAD centres they are enrolled in.

Every GENIUS AULAD centre will need to adhere to the standard GENIUS AULAD centre kit, where every centre will have the standardised interior design, safety features, educational materials, lesson plans and events line-up. We will also train the teachers twice a year on how to provide care and education to the children. This will not only ensure that the same level of education quality can be met but most importantly, new franchisees who are looking to open up a GENIUS AULAD learning centre will not need to go through the stress of starting the business from scratch. Additionally, we will guide and help the franchisee every step of the way on their journey with GENIUS AULAD.

What are the traits that a franchisee should possess to succeed in this business?

Our main goal in this business is to play a partnership role with parents in their parenting journey. So, I would say the most important trait to become a member of GENIUS AULAD is passion.

A good franchisee will always put the children first. Only with passion can a good franchisee work towards providing a high quality of education. This is an important part to thrive in the education sector as we need to build trust and rapport with our parents. We treat our franchisees as part of our family, and we respect each other's professional guidelines and boundaries, so we enjoy a warm and pleasant working environment.

GENIUS AULAD facilitates our children's learning by understanding how they learn, their abilities, needs and interests.

As you celebrate your 20th anniversary this year, can you share some of the milestones and achievements in your GENIUS AULAD journey?

To date, we have nurtured more than 75,000 children. We have been constantly growing for the past 20 years at a minimum rate of 15%. We hold the record of zero-closure of franchise centres, with franchisees being with us for more than 10 years and growing more centres. For the past several years, we have received numerous awards for Best Preschool at the national level.

In 2018, we grew beyond our borders with the opening of our first international outlet in Indonesia. Currently, we plan to expand overseas and are looking for partners, joint ventures or Master Franchisees to collaborate with us.

Where do you see opportunities in terms of locations, demographics, etc., that GENIUS AULAD can expand to?

Within Malaysia, we are expanding steadily to meet the demands of our local market both within the city centre and the outskirts of the city centre. At the same time, we have also noticed that the need for Islamic education is increasing within the ASEAN countries, and as such, we are looking to meet this demand.

What motivates you to keep pressing on in growing your business to greater heights?

No two days are the same, so you don't get bored in this business! When it comes to early childhood education, there's always something new to learn and explore. I'm still very much hands-on and involved in clowning and puppeteering activities with the children. It's amazing how things appear when we see them through their eyes. It keeps my perspective fresh.

When we first started the business, early childhood Islamic education was not at the forefront of the industry. So in that sense, we were the pioneer in that field. What I had and still have is an unwavering belief and passion to develop quality and reputable Islamic preschools that incorporate aspects of creative learning and character-building on top of basic literacy skills. Through GENIUS AULAD, my aim has always been to make consistent improvement in the happiness of learning.

For our relentless passion, GENIUS AULAD has also been entrusted as the Education Consultant for various children's talent TV programmes and animations, such as the recent phenomenal animation Omar & Hana on ASTRO channels in Malaysia as well as several international TV channels.

Being in the industry for two decades, what are your observations of the changes in educating the children of today and how can GENIUS AULAD continue to play a significant role in the nation?

I would say that the children of today are more empowered and have no qualms in exercising their right to choose as opposed to kids of yesteryears who would ask for guidance to, say, colour a drawing in a certain way. As such, the education system should evolve around this change. As educators, we facilitate our children's learning by understanding how they learn, their abilities, needs and interests. This has always been the very foundation of GENIUS AULAD and as we expand and grow, we will definitely make an impact in the nation and region.

KEY FACTS

Company Name:	Genius Aulad International Sdn. Bhd
Holding Company :	GAINS Education Group Sdn Bhd
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Website:	www.geniusaulad.com.my
Facebook:	geniusaulad.com.my
Year Established:	2000
Country of Origin:	Malaysia
Email Address:	business@geniusaulad.com.my
Type of Business:	Education
Types of Franchise Available:	standard
Number of Units:	71
Size of units:	Min 3000 sq ft
Franchise Fees:	RM50,000.00
Franchise Term (years):	5 Years
Royalty:	RM 40 / month / student (for Preschool Program - Half Day) RM 80 / month / student (for Beyond Preschool Program - Full Day)
Marketing / A&P Fund:	RM20 / student / year
Estimated Initial Investment:	RM350,000.00

To find our more information about the GENIUS AULAD franchise, please visit www.geniusaulad.com.my or email business@geniusaulad.com.my