Education Research and Reform of Education in Muslim Societies

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This research note explores the benefits of conducting empirical research in education and human development to advancing the reform of education movement in the Muslim world. Evidence based knowledge that stems from all types of research methodologies contributes to meaningful and relevant programming in education and policy. Mapping the Terrain study promotes the research agenda through international partnerships and investment in local researchers as well as surveying youth and others in education systems around the world.

INTRODUCTION

The idea that development of the whole person is not getting enough attention in education spaces within Muslim societies (communities) was one of the reasons behind the interest in empirical research as part of the initiative on Advancing Education in Muslim Societies (AEMS) of the

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International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT). This doesn't necessarily mean that the various societies included in the Mapping the Terrain empirical study lack the whole person orientation; on the contrary, the Muslim world is full of rich social and cultural heritage influenced by deep religious beliefs and spiritual messages that engage the whole person. The issue is that recent efforts of many governments in the Muslim world to follow a neoliberal agenda to education that is backed by globalization and focuses primarily on preparing students for employability has emptied schooling from many of the skills and competencies needed to prepare youth for global citizenship and education for "learning to be" as one of the most important pillars of education, in addition to learning to know, do, and live with others (DeLors et. al, 1996).

For the past two years, the Mapping the Terrain study and its reports (see previous volumes of this journal) attempted to address the gaps and inspire researchers to be more intentional about examining the whole person approach among participants, especially youth, in Muslim societies (Nasser, Miller-Idriss, & Alwani, 2019). It also explored ways the new generations of Muslim youth (along with stakeholders) reconcile the constant messages they receive from "outside" cultures with higher rankings on the world stage with those coming from local social, cultural, and religious sources (Farah, 2017).

ADDRESSING GAPS

As there is a call in the world to bridge knowledge coming from the North into the sciences, humanities, and social science with accumulated knowledge from the South, the idea to integrate the knowledge in the Muslim world became more prominent among scholars identifying those links that incorporate selected Western with Islamic knowledge in an attempt not to dismiss any. In fact, the main goal of AEMS is to continue the work of the IIIT in integration of knowledge and contribute new information gathered by scholars working on the theoretical aspects of the issue. The quest at the core of this ongoing work is to find ways knowledge generated by sciences (including humanities and social sciences) can coexist with knowledge coming from religion (Quranic knowledge and other sacred sources) and ways they may interact to benefit humanity. The question regarding reconciling religion with science or vice versa is a broader one and is beyond the scope of this article, but the more relevant question here is if it is indeed possible for the integration of knowledge approach to become a catalyst for education reform in these same societies that are

thirsty for new knowledge coming through social media giants from Silicon Valley and elsewhere. Further, is there space for local knowledge in today's world where access to information (whatever kind) is only a click away? These are complex questions with disputed answers based on whose opinion is sought, starting with religious leaders, policy makers, educators, parents, and finally youth themselves. Answers to these types of questions may also vary by disciplinary engagements and schools of thought, such as those in the social sciences, Islamic studies, economics, and educational research.

In this article, I will highlight the possible contribution of empirical research (evidence-based knowledge) to this discussion on education reform as it is situated in the human development approach and its impact on education and learning in Muslim communities. It is also important to highlight that in order to have a reach that can move the masses in education reform, learning, schooling, and socialization should be defined as education. Thus, schooling and teaching and learning should be pointed out as types of education because the latter can also occur in the home, schools, the community, and in the virtual world (today more than ever before). Education is also not limited to knowledge generation in formal and nonformal/informal settings but stretches to programs targeting individuals and groups' experiences such as sports, music, and the arts in ways that impact the growth of the whole person. This broad definition aligns with the importance of the psychosocial aspects of education for the promotion of youth's development into responsible citizens.

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH AND REFORM OF EDUCATION

When investigating the connection between sources of knowledge and reform of education, the human development literature allows for the examination and drawing of conclusions that promote a reform agenda. In such a broad area of research, social responsibility literature aimed at improving people's lives may be utilized as a basis for reform. Previous research suggests a correlation between social responsibility, justice, and collaborative citizenship (Dyck, 2015). The results of the first Mapping the Terrain study (2018–2019) point out the importance of the constructs measured, such as empathy, forgiveness, and community-mindedness as components needed to increase responsibility and social responsibility. An important finding, but the question remains how these results contribute to advancing education and reform of education (Nasser et al., 2019).

The advancement of human values such as those mentioned above also contributes to the literature on social cohesion, defined by Fonseca, Lukosch, and Brazier (2019) as "the ongoing process of developing well-being, sense of belonging, and voluntary social participation of the members of society, while developing communities that tolerate and promote a multiplicity of values and cultures, and granting at the same time equal rights and opportunities in society" (p. 17). The Mapping the Terrain annual study focuses on a variety of skills such as empathy and others mentioned that contribute to a feeling of responsibility (Yob, 2016). The overarching goal is articulated well by UNESCO (2015) as the "respect for life and human dignity, equal rights and social justice, cultural and social diversity, and a sense of human solidarity and shared responsibility for our common future" (p. 14). In educational settings, promoting these values and competencies brings a sense of responsibility to inculcate in learners a life of empathy and forgiveness for self and others. The study's goals are long-term and the empirical research agenda and its improvement is a work in progress, nevertheless, the nature of this study and its multi-site and large scale approach has implications for research and scholarship that are authentic and as such promote a reform agenda. This means that conducting research and motivating partners to join from various societies is by itself a reform effort because it brings to the forefront the possibility for local knowledge grounded in deep cultural, social, and religious beliefs to converse and coexist with "Western" scholarly methods of inquiry. Some of the contributions of the empirical study were outlined by Derbi and Nasser (2020) and are listed here:

1. The evidence-based focus of "Mapping the Terrain" and the public access to the data set provides an information bank on participants in countries that are not usually open for researchers. Academics, policy makers, administrators, or others interested in education reform will find the results meaningful for a critical examination of the needs of youth and ways to achieve them. When youth, teachers, and parents agree on the benefits of these competencies and values, decision makers entrusted with the responsibility of enacting change will have guidance on ways to include those in policy, curriculum, and in pedagogy.

2. The study calls to shift the discourse on research in Muslim societies so that it is asset-based, focusing on strengths within communities, rather than emphasizing deficits. For years, funding for education reform has been motivated by neoliberal policies dictated by market demands. It takes an alternative approach grounded in positive youth development and the importance of creating supportive learning environments in schools and the larger community as a much-needed step towards reform.

3. This study also provides authentic and sensitive measures especially because it invests in culturally responsive methods. It further brings the voices of researchers and educators from the global south to the mainstream global avenues.

4. The study contributes to research capacity building. At every stage of the study, consultations with local partners and community leaders were conducted to ensure quality research. All coordinators were trained on the use of ethical research methods, especially the protection of human subjects. It is not a surprise that most of the participating countries don't have review boards setting policies for the protection of human subjects and for ethical conduct of research procedures. This study may motivate the establishment and utilization of those to improve quality and most importantly protect participants such as underage youth (p. 4).

WHAT IS NEXT: 2019–2020 SURVEY

The data for this year's study includes several groups of participants: youth ages 15–24 (in secondary education and undergraduate programs), as well as teachers and instructors of these youth. The selection criteria of target communities were based on

1. regional representation and diversity,
2. a mix of Muslim-majority and nonmajority communities,
3. size and population, and
4. access.

Sample sizes by communities varied between more than 2,000 in India and Bangladesh and 500 participants in the United States. Due to reasons such as regional differences, financial budget, host-country approvals, and location, samples were restricted to a few selected regions in few locations. However, efforts were made to randomize the selection of universities in each region and the selection of students within each institution. There was a mixture of universities that were large and of medium-sized institutions. Overall, in communities such as India, Sudan, Bosnia, Jordan, and Tatarstan, random sampling was achieved, while in the rest of the communities a mixture of sampling schemes was used depending on access. It is also worth mentioning that data collection in a few countries was interrupted because of the pandemic.

Constructs measured such as sense of belonging, collective orientation, problem-solving, empathy, and self-regulation will contribute to answering the questions raised earlier regarding reform, thus promoting the call by Ayers (2010) and others for the return to transformative education that is based on empowered communities and collective intelligence to promote

social responsibility. This requires taking a holistic approach to education that pays attention to socio-emotional aspects of learning and growth (Halbert & Kaser, 2015).

As the data from the 14 communities was collected, the survey process and data collection were conducted in consultations with our local partners and building on the experiences gained from the first wave of the study in 2018–2019. This ongoing empirical research seeks to propose educational reform policies, curriculum enhancements, and development of interventions that are locally grounded and aligned with youths' needs and perceptions in these communities.[1]

SCHOLARLY SIGNIFICANCE

Previous studies such as Yap (2014) suggest that attempts in some Muslim countries to follow the public schooling model, which separates religious values and life competencies from the academic curriculum and keeps them in the private sector, haven't been showing results in either academic or nonacademic gains. Adopting a human development approach infused with values that are both Islamic and universal brings a new and situated approach to education reform, one that is intentional and long-term as well as developmental. This in turn will increase social cohesion that is based on social justice (Vincent, 2018).

The accumulated wisdom gathered from this study and the outreach efforts exercised will increase the attention of larger global initiatives, such as the United Nations Global Citizenship agenda (https://digitallibrary .un.org/record/1287845?ln=en), to the unique developmental needs of youth and the larger community. It will also inform and enrich the various international initiatives and change the discourse on Muslim youth to one that is grounded in local knowledge combined with what we know from the positive youth development and asset-based approach and its literature.

Notes

1. The data and its code book and other pertinent files will be shared publicly on www. iiit.org early in 2021.

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