Muslim Education Reform
Prioritizing Empathy and Philanthropic Acts

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This article argues that third space education reform can be a bridge to Muslim traditions of philanthropy and empathy (one form of which is compassion). By connecting education reform efforts to Muslim tradition, reformers will have greater success due to buy-in from local Muslim populations. By examining primary sources of Islam and using social scientific research on empathy, this article examines the importance of philanthropy in Islam, the intersection of traditional

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philanthropy and education reform in Muslim societies, and the role of empathy in education. This article links education reform and the science of empathy to further education in Muslim contexts. The authors conclude that reformers should approach education reform in Muslim societies from an empathic and third space lens.

Keywords: empathy, Muslim philanthropy, compassion, education reform, third space education

INTRODUCTION

Education reform conversations have been focused heavily on the development of individual and collective human capital, framing education as an investment in national and regional GNP or as a means of economic development (Nasser et al., 2019). These reforms have promoted ideas of privatization, standardization, accountability, school choice, and testing. Countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan have received large amounts of aid from the U.S. government to reform their education systems but have shown little improvement in education attainment (Colclough et al., 2010). It is unclear whether local populations embrace these reforms, and whether these reforms have delivered as promised (Nasser et al., 2019). Furthermore, an examination of education initiatives in the Muslim world such as *madrasah*s (educational institutions) and *waqf*s (religious endowments), suggests that these goals do not align with the traditional role of education within Islam.

There has been little attention given to what scholars term the third space of education reform (Miller-Idriss & Siddiqui, 2019): education that goes beyond employment (first space) or citizenship (second space) agendas, and that encompasses human well-being. This approach places socioemotional, cognitive-behavioral, and moral-religious aspects of education on the same level as the knowledge and skills traditionally deemed necessary for academic achievement (Nasser et al., 2019). As such, it broadens the purpose of education to incorporate the holistic development of human beings. New efforts, like the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies initiative at the International Institute of Islamic Thought, attempt to focus reform efforts on such a human-centric approach, which could be a valuable investment in reducing hate, promoting tolerance, enfranchising the disenfranchised, and creating a sense of belonging in children. This article expands upon such new efforts by examining the role of philanthropic acts,

especially those motivated by empathy, as a means to further education reform.

By putting pressure on school systems, administrators, and teachers to focus on rigid quantitative metrics (e.g., standardized testing), reformers have limited their ability to develop such a human-centric approach. Recent reform mandates seem to revolve around the idea that we want schools to produce economic actors (*homo economicus*) who add to the national GDP, rather than prosocial members of society (*homo empathicus*) who add to the national character. Yet, there have been limited educational improvements despite receiving financial aid intended to improve them (Colclough et al., 2010; Nasser et al., 2019). The picture is bleak on dropout rates, achievement on international tests, and gender gaps (World Bank, 2018). For example, although specific investments aimed at increasing enrollment in countries like Iraq, Egypt, and Lebanon did have a positive impact on attendance, it did not actually increase the quality of education (Farah, 2017). In other cases, local communities have resisted international organizations' investment in educational activities, such as those that promote civic education in Muslim societies (Kapoor, 2014), especially when such initiatives do not consider local religious and cultural traditions and beliefs (Hargreaves et al., 2001; Sahlberg et al., 2016).

In this article, we argue that third space education reform provides an important bridge for Muslim traditions. This article examines policy initiatives, primary sources of Islam, and existing research on the science of empathy. We adopt the definition of Nasser et al. (2019), who defines third space reform as "an education for well-being, an approach that views acquiring values and skills (for example, empathy and forgiveness) as integral parts of learning on the same level of academic achievements as mathematics and sciences" (Page 8). By connecting such reform with traditional Muslim notions of compassion and philanthropy, we believe that reformers can further education transformation in Muslim societies.

This article examines the importance of philanthropy in Islam, the intersection of traditional philanthropy and education reform in Muslim societies, and the role of empathy in education. Modern definitions of philanthropy focus on individuals' *voluntary actions that are intended for the public good* (Payton & Moody, 2008). The idea of Muslim philanthropy goes beyond giving and volunteering, similar to such broad scholarly definitions. Muslim philanthropy includes, but goes beyond, those who can afford to give of their wealth. It also includes those who have nothing and

can give nothing, suggesting that they may still give charity by refraining from doing evil deeds (Siddiqui, 2010). Therefore, Muslim philanthropy includes voluntary *inaction* for the public good as well.

This article links education reform and the science of empathy within Islamic education contexts. In particular, it links empathy to Muslim philanthropy. Empathy in itself, even without action, is deemed as charity within a classical Islamic conception of philanthropy. One form of emotional empathy, *empathic concern*, is considered synonymous with *compassion*. Compassion, or *rahmah,* is central to Islamic tradition. Given that empathy is the main motivation behind Muslim philanthropic decisions, we maintain that education reformers will have better success in furthering such reform in Muslim societies if they draw upon the Islamic roots of empathy. Hence, this article begins by analyzing the concept of philanthropy and compassion within an Islamic context. Next, it reviews the historic role philanthropy has played in education in Muslim societies. Lastly, it provides an overview of scientific research supporting the importance of empathy in education. We conclude with a call for the need to approach education reform in Muslim societies from an empathic and third space lens.

MUSLIM PHILANTHROPY

Philanthropy in Islam is understood to mean the Muslim's moral obligation to do good for God (McChesney 1995). For Muslims, this moral obligation has been primarily defined by Islamic sources of law: the Quran and the recorded traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (Fawzia 2013). In the Quran, philanthropy is referred to as *zakah*, *sadaqah*, *birr* (righteousness), *amal al-salihat* (good deed), *khayr* (goodness), and *ihsan* (virtue) (Fawzia, 2013). Islamic law also allows Muslims to assimilate local tradition into religious practice, as long as the tradition does not conflict with basic religious principles. For example, during the time of the Prophet Muhammad, early Muslims adopted aspects of Sassanid law (or the law of Sassanid empire) to help define religious endowments known as *waqf*s (Hassan, 2017). Philanthropy is a central feature of the Islamic faith and is considered one of Islam's five pillars (Siddiqui, 2010). Both primary sources of Islam have many examples that promote philanthropy.

Three key examples illustrate Islamic philanthropy: *zakah*, *sadaqah* and *waqf*. The Quran defines *zakah* as a means for purification and growth (Singer, 2008). There is debate about whether *zakah* is charity or a tax.

We agree with scholars who argue that *zakah* is a charitable obligation and therefore philanthropy (Khan & Siddiqui, 2017; McChesney, 1995; Siddiqui, 2010). By giving a fixed proportion of one's surplus, the remainder of wealth is purified. Growth signifies God's promise to multiply the givers' generosity many times over. Muslims are required to give 2.5% of any of their surplus wealth and assets toward particular charitable causes. While the Quran provides eight specific categories of recipients of *zakah*, in closer examination, these categories are very broad. *Zakah* can be used for the poor and needy, employees of *zakah* administration, to support those who are thinking of converting to Islam, to free slaves, to deliver people from debt, for the service of God, and to help travelers. Depending upon historical or local context, at times the state has taken on the responsibility of collecting and distributing *zakah*. Only six of the world's Muslim-majority countries governments collect *zakah* (Libya, Malaysia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Yemen).

The second form of philanthropy in Islam is *sadaqah*, which is voluntary charitable giving, as compared to the obligatory *zakah* (Singer, 2008). The word has a strong connection to justice (translated as *adl* in Arabic). Muslims, who fail to give *sadaqah* are not committing a sin. However, they are promised great religious rewards if they engage in this voluntary practice. There are no limitations on *sadaqah*, and it is presumed that most non-*zakah* charity by Muslims falls within this category. According to Siddiqui (2010), *sadaqah* encompasses all forms of Muslim philanthropy. This includes both required and voluntary forms of philanthropy. In this realm, even a smile would be considered a form of philanthropy.

The third institutionalized form of philanthropy is the *waqf* or endowment. The *waqf* originates from a hadith in which Umar ibn al-Khattab acquired a property and asked the Prophet Muhammad whether he should donate it for charity. The Prophet replied, "If you like, you may hold the property as *waqf* and give its fruits as charity" (ISNA Development Foundation, 1997). Umar instructed that the property could not be sold, and its income was to be donated for specific charitable purposes. Thus, a *waqf* is a form of charity that is designed to support a philanthropic purpose in the love of God in perpetuity.

Philanthropy and philanthropic acts are frequently mentioned in the Quran and Sunnah, and they are also central features of lived Muslim identity. The best illustrations of this are the stories of enslaved women in North America who despite their circumstances sought to practice this aspect of their Muslim identity. Many slaves brought to America were

Muslims for whom the continued practice of their faith was forbidden (GhaneaBassiri, 2010). Despite this, some Muslim slave women would put aside a small portion of their daily rice. Once they had enough rice, they would make rice cakes, invite slave children to come, and then distribute the rice cakes to the children in an act of charity. Despite the circumstances, it was important to these women to practice philanthropy as a central feature of their Islamic faith (Diouf, 1998).

The modern Western and secular perception of philanthropy is very different from its historic roots. Philanthropy today is most often misunderstood in terms of formal giving to nonprofit organizations, including donating money or time through volunteerism (Dillbeck & Flikkema, 2010). Payton and Moody's (2008) definition goes beyond volunteering and charitable giving, by including any type of giving, helping, sharing, even informal prosocial acts, and the definition even considers the motivation behind the act. Yet classical Islamic definitions of philanthropy are even more expansive. God says, "*But forgive them, and overlook their misdeeds: for Allah loveth those who are kind*" (Ali, 1983, Quran V:13). To forgive others for their misdeeds is considered a charitable or philanthropic act in Islam. God does not limit one's charity to the amount of money one can give. Otherwise, this would limit the spiritual benefits of philanthropy to only those who could afford to give.

Prophet Muhammad states, "*Every Muslim has to give for charity*. They asked, *O Prophet of Allah, How about one who has nothing to give?* He said, *He should work with his hands and benefit himself and also give in charity.* They said: *If one cannot do even that?* He replied: *He should help one who is eager to have help.* They said: *And if he couldn't do that?* He answered: *Then he should do good action and abstain from evil, this is a charity for him*" (ISNA Development Foundation, 1997). Thus, all Muslims can participate in the benefits of philanthropy. Those who can afford can give of their wealth, and those who have nothing, and can give nothing, can give charity by refraining from doing evil deeds. Therefore, Muslim philanthropy includes voluntary *inaction* for the public good as well.

Furthermore, philanthropy in Islam is not just about the benefits that society gets from charity, but the development of compassionate, caring, engaged, empathetic human beings after giving. Just as important as the giving is the effect that giving has on the donor. The act seeks to draw the individual closer to God through transformation of oneself by transforming those around us. Philanthropy in the Islamic tradition is a partnership between the individual and God. The individual is responsible for

discerning social problems, recognizing the need to act, and making the intention to act. At the point when a human being makes an intention to act, Muslims believe that God gives them credit for their intention, even if they do not act for some reason. Muslim philanthropy pushes individuals toward being aware of the dilemmas around them, and to be thinking of ways to solve those issues. Muslims are taught that God takes the responsibility of whether or not the action results in success. Since giving is one of the key pillars of Islam, this may help to promote compassion among Muslims by making them aware of others' needs.

PHILANTHROPY AND EDUCATION IN MUSLIM SOCIETIES

Islam places great importance on the attainment of knowledge as well as the provision of charity. The literature review below illustrates that Islamic education and Muslim philanthropy have been integrally linked from the very beginning of Islam to contemporary times. It also shows that as Muslim societies devolved in the era of colonialism, followed by Western-influenced systems of statehood, the practices of Islamic education and Muslim philanthropy evolved both in their conceptualization as well as their implementation. As a result, it is apparent that while Islamic education has privatized over time, Muslim philanthropy has diversified. These changes represent the transformations experienced by the *ummah* (Muslim community) as a whole.

The very first verses revealed to Prophet Muhammad enjoined him to read and informed him that God taught man everything that he never knew before. "*Read! In the name of your Lord who created: He created man from a clinging form. Read! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One who taught by [means of] the pen, who taught man what he did not know*" (Abdel Haleem, 2005, Quran, 96:1-5). In another place, God exhorts the believers to ask Him: "*Lord, increase me in knowledge!*" (Abdel Haleem, 2005, Quran, 20:114). Furthermore, God constantly tells humankind to reason, to reflect, and to analyze throughout the Quran.

Prophet Muhammad himself extolled the benefits of knowledge and wisdom. For example, he once said, "*The seeking of knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim*" (Sunan Ibn Majah 224 in Majah, 2008). Additionally, he stated, "*He who goes forth in search of knowledge is in the way of Allah till he returns*" (Tirmidhi 39:2, as cited in Ahmad, 2011). Prophet Muhammad valued literacy so much that he would promise literate prisoners of war freedom if they taught Muslims how to read and write (al-Mubarakpuri, 2002).

One of the common forms of *sadaqah* (charity) has been the institution of *waqf* (endowment), defined as a fund set aside in perpetuity for the purpose of supporting public goods or services (Kahf, 1995). *Waqf* (pl. *awqaf*) dates back to the Prophet Muhammad's life, during which there were several recorded instances of land and orchards being set aside for the purpose of communal or charitable use, including the erection of the mosque of Quba on endowed land, as well as orchards being dedicated to the benefit of the impoverished (Mahmud & Shah, 2010).

Likewise, the intersections between education and philanthropy can be traced back to the nascent days of Islam when its followers would practice their faith in secrecy. Al Arqam bin Abi l-Arqam (d. 675), a companion of the Prophet Muhammad, dedicated his home in Mecca to the teaching and learning of Quran so that the new Muslims would have a safe haven, away from the persecution of the Meccans (Lings, 2006). Once the Muslims were established in Medina, the Prophet's mosque became the site for study circles (*halaqas*) and the shed on its back wall evolved into a refuge for seekers of knowledge with meager means who were cared for by the Prophet Muhammad himself (Lings, 2006).

As Muslims spread and consolidated their rule over vast swaths of land, stretching across Northern Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, the spirit of learning and giving continued full force. Housed in *masjid*s and governed by *waqf*, *maktab*s initiated children with the proper recitation and memorization of the Quran along with *madrasah*s that were established as early as the eighth century for further studies and advanced subjects, including both revealed and rational sciences, because any distinction between the secular and the religious in these educational institutions was unimaginable (Riaz, 2008). As an institution coming into its own, the development and prosperity of the *madrasah* in the tenth and eleventh centuries can be "traced through Muslim philanthropic activity" as *madrasah*s were endowed by the wealthy to support scholars (Makdisi, 1981, p. 28). *Waqf* gave institutions of learning financial independence in perpetuity beyond the donor's lifespan. *Madrasah*s were traditionally tuition-free and often part of an "educational charitable complex" (Arjomand, 1998) that was funded by endowments established by "rulers, governors, merchants, and members of the military and civilian elite" (Hefner and Zaman, 2007, p. 7). In that sense, charity was predominantly an elite endeavor with individuals paying their obligatory *zakah* to state-sponsored institutions (Latief, 2016). The rich drew their wealth from "war booty and tax revenues" from which charitable distributions were made regularly; the

most common and lasting form of their philanthropy was endowments (Singer, 2011, p. 559). The Ottoman nobility contributed to charitable causes in various ways such as the sustenance of schools and mosques through income generated from markets on endowed lands, along with the legacy of structures still standing in testament to Turkey's cultural heritage (Singer, 2011). There was phenomenal growth of educational institutions under the Mughals in India, with *ulama* (religious scholars) holding respected positions in society and graduates of *madrasah*s finding "employment in royal courts and various branches of administration" (Riaz, 2008, p. 61).

The onset of colonialism, particularly colonial practices in the 19th century onward, disrupted both education and philanthropy irrevocably. The introduction of Western education pushed religious education to the private sphere, heralding a hitherto unknown divide between the religious and the secular (Tan, 2014; Riaz, 2008; Hefner & Zaman, 2007; Malik, 2008). Government support was assured for educational institutions teaching secular subjects, relegating religion to a discrete subject among others[1] (Riaz, 2008; Langohr, 2005). The adoption of English over Persian as the official language of the higher courts in British India and the requirement to employ only Western-educated and English-speaking individuals for government and civil service decimated any chances of Persian-speaking, *madrasah*-educated folks (Riaz, 2008). The bifurcation in education also led the *madrasah*s to focus only on religious education, initiating a separation between the sacred and the worldly that permeated into an overall attitude of resistance to and insulation from Western influence (Riaz, 2008; Malik, 2008). The proliferation of indigenous religious movements, such as the birth and rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, has been linked to this suppression and privatization of religion (Langohr, 2005), as this divide led to the creation of "new social space for religio-political activism" (Riaz, 2008, p. 71).

The decline of *waqf* also took place during colonial times and due to Western influences (Hoexter, 2005). For example, family endowments in Algeria were attacked because the French colonists saw endowed land as an obstacle to economic progress, since such properties were no longer available in the free market (Powers, 1989). Likewise, there was a weakening of *waqf* in the Ottoman empire and the Turkish republic (Singer, 2011). In India, the *waqf* became increasingly irrelevant for Muslims after Independence (Taylor, 2018), while in Pakistan and Egypt endowments have long been absorbed by the postcolonial governments (Riaz, 2008).

In contemporary times, religious education continues to be privatized, whereas Muslim philanthropy has increasingly diversified, as described below. The lack of state-led social welfare systems has led to a growth in *madrasah*s (Riaz, 2008) as well as the formation of faith-based philanthropic organizations, many of which are extensions of religio-political movements (Yasmeen, 2012; Kirmani, 2012; Singer, 2013; Latief, 2016). Moreover, despite many efforts at reform, most *madrasah*s continue to operate independently and rely on donations for their sustenance. *Madrasah*s fear loss of autonomy, since reforms may also mean government funding and control (Riaz, 2008; Malik, 2008; Butt, 2012). The changing times have morphed the concept of "elites" too. The nobility of olden days has been replaced with "merchants, bankers, industrialists, and businesspeople" (Singer, 2011, p. 560). In addition, the rise of the middle class has meant a surplus in individual *zakah* contributions, as tracked by Taylor (2018) in India. Foreign, state-sponsored inflows (Malik, 2008; Hefner and Zaman, 2007) have also replaced *waqf* funds together with an influx of modern foundations by the new elite, international relief organizations (Singer, 2011; 2013) and indigenous faith-inspired welfare trusts (Kirmani, 2012). Furthermore, the prevalence of private Islamic schools in the United States is predominantly dependent on the philanthropy of their local communities (Khan & Siddiqui, 2017).

Today, education and philanthropy continue to be intertwined in Muslim societies, having adapted to changing social and political contexts. This enduring relationship is directly linked to the significance of each within the Islamic faith.

COMPASSION IN ISLAM

The terms *compassion* and *compassionate* are central to the Islamic tradition. In fact, one of the 99 names of God in the Muslim tradition is *Rahman*, or compassionate. Muslims are encouraged to start every meal or important action with the phrase, "I begin in the name of God who is compassionate and merciful." In the very first chapter of the Quran, the first and third verses mention compassion (In the Name of Allah—the Most Compassionate, Most Merciful ... the Most Compassionate, Most Merciful. Khattab, 2016, Qur'an, 1:1, 3). Muslims believe that God sent the Prophet Muhammad as mercy, or out of God's compassion to the world. They also believe that a true follower of the Prophet Muhammad must exemplify compassion and mercy toward all. The Quran repeatedly emphasizes philanthropy toward the disadvantaged such as orphans, widows, poor, and slaves. Furthermore, compassion is institutionalized

through *zakah*. The word "compassion" and its derivatives are used 326 times in the Quran (Engineer, 2018).

EMPATHY

Compassion, which is one type of empathy, is a central focus in Islamic tradition and its texts. Empathy includes both cognitive and emotional responses to others (Davis, 1983). Cognitive empathy, also called *perspective taking*, involves tuning in to others in order to imagine the world as they see it. Dozens of social science studies find that when people imagine others' perspectives, this activates their emotional empathy, also called *compassion* or *empathic concern*: feelings of care, compassion, and concern for others (Batson, 2011). Empathy and compassion are also inextricably linked in the Islamic concepts of *ihsan* (perfection, excellence) and *adab* (just action), urging individuals toward internalizing high moral character (Davids & Waghid, 2016). Furthermore, an understanding of education based on concepts such as compassion and empathy, together with other elements of ethical being in Islam such as forgiveness, justice, and generosity, will lead to more tolerance and opportunities for coexistence despite our apparent differences (ibid).

Empathy can be a personality trait, meaning that some people habitually tune in and show care to others (Davis, 1983). But it can also be activated in certain situations, for example, people often experience empathy when they see someone vulnerable in distress (Batson, 2011; Batson et al., 2005). Religious practices at times can lead to increased compassion and giving, perhaps because of regular reminders of others in need (Norenzayan & Shariff, 2008). Indeed, research finds that Muslim youth who are more genuinely interested, regularly committed, and emotionally involved in their faith score higher in both perspective taking and empathic concern/compassion (Guleryuz et al., 2020; Haneef Khan et al., 2005).

Empathy can be seen as a character trait in that it has a moral dimension and is associated with other key character traits: more empathic people score higher on wisdom, gratitude, and forgiveness (Booker & Dunsmore, 2016; Kim et al., 2018; Macaskill et al., 2002). Empathy also motivates caring action on behalf of others (see "Empathy Benefits Others," below).

EMPATHY IN EDUCATION

With the increasingly narrow focus in educational contexts on literacy and math in recent years (McMurrer, 2008), some may wonder whether it makes sense to include broader lessons that address character traits like

empathy within schools. Yet there is an emerging interest in character education, both by researchers and educators.

For example, the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham produces interdisciplinary research on character traits such as empathy, provides resources for parents and educators, and even offers a master's degree in Character Education. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) in Chicago, Illinois, conducts and disseminates research on social and emotional learning: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.[3] Likewise, the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies (AEMS) initiative of the International Institute of Islamic Thought has produced two reports (Nasser et al., 2019; 2021) based on multi-site global research on socioemotional skills among students and teachers, chief among them being empathy and other connected constructs, such as forgiveness, sense of belonging, and meaning making. Regardless of whether the term "character" or "social and emotional learning" is preferred, both include empathy as one core aspect of youth development within educational settings.

Schools that are concerned about the costs of such programs should be aware that on average every dollar invested in social-emotional learning programs has a return of $11 (Belfield et al., 2015).

IMPLICATIONS OF EMPATHY WITHIN STUDENTS

Empathy Benefits Others

Psychologically, empathy inspires people to help others and avoid harming them. Research has consistently found that empathy is associated with more *prosocial behaviors*, which are voluntary behaviors that are intended to help others.[2] For example, people with more empathic personality traits are more likely to help others, volunteer their time, and donate their money to nonprofits (Davis, 2015; Davis et al., 1999; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Hoffman, 2008; Kim & Kou, 2014). In fact, just being reminded to imagine another person's perspective (cognitive empathy) can activate feelings of compassion, which make people more likely to help others in distress (Batson, 2011). Moreover, research finds that participating in school-based social and emotional learning programs increases prosocial behaviors (Durlak et al., 2011). However, to date, there is very little research that examines the implications of school-based social-emotional learning or empathy training within Islamic educational contexts. This is a promising area for future research.

Empathy Also Benefits the Self

Psychological implications

Empathy also has surprising implications for empathic individuals. For example, empathic people have a good quality of life: they are happier, have more meaning in life, and are less depressed (Crocker et al., 2017; Konrath & Brown, 2012). Researchers compiled the results of 213 school-based social and emotional learning programs, with over 270,000 K-12 students, and found that children who experienced these programs had less emotional distress compared to children in control groups (Durlak et al., 2011). In addition, empathy may help people to manage stressful situations; research finds that empathic people have fewer stress hormones during stressful events (Abelson et al., 2014; Ho et al., 2014). Other research has shown similar effects for people who spend their time and money on others, including those who regularly volunteer or make charitable donations (Konrath, 2016; Konrath & Brown, 2012). Although the psychological benefits of giving time and money have been found in most countries worldwide (Aknin et al., 2013; Calvo et al., 2012), we know of no research that examines these within Islamic educational institutions, thus suggesting another area for future research.

Academic implications

Children with higher social and emotional skills, including empathy, have better academic outcomes, such as higher grades, even when controlling for demographic variables and IQ scores (Bonner & Aspy, 1984; Feshbach & Feshbach, 1987; Green et al., 1980; Márquez et al., 2006; Wentzel, 1993). However, these studies find that socioemotional and academic skills go together, but not which causes which.

On the one hand, some research suggests that intellectual strengths can help children to decode social situations (Caemmerer & Keith, 2015). But it is also possible that empathy and other socioemotional skills can promote children's learning. There is also evidence for this, suggesting that learning is a social and relational process (Feldhusen et al., 1970; Feshbach & Feshbach, 1987; Fleming et al., 2005; Green et al., 1980; Konold et al., 2010; Lim & Kim, 2011; Malecki & Elliot, 2002; Spinrad & Eisenberg, 2014; Teo et al., 1996; Zins, 2004).

One of the longest-term studies available followed 753 low-income American children for 19 years. It found that children who were rated by their teachers as more prosocial in kindergarten were more likely to graduate high school and college, and were more likely to be employed when they

were young adults (Jones et al., 2015). Kindergarten children with more prosocial skills were also less likely to be on public assistance, less likely to be arrested or imprisoned for a crime, used less alcohol and marijuana, and were less likely to be on psychological medications when they were young adults (Jones et al., 2015). These results were not explained by family income, children's early academic skills, or other demographic characteristics. However, with studies that simply follow children over time, it's not possible to know for sure whether prosocial skills actually cause academic outcomes. This is because it's possible that being prosocial comes along with other attributes or resources that actually explain the academic boost.

Even though long-term studies cannot determine the exact cause of the positive outcomes in more prosocial children, *randomized control trials* can. In these types of studies, some children are exposed to one type of program (treatment group), and the other children (control group) get a different program or no program. Researchers compiled the results of 213 school-based social and emotional learning programs, with over 270,000 K-12 students, and found that these programs led to an *11% increase in academic competence* compared to control groups (Durlak et al., 2011). This suggests that education reform should consider focusing on third space development, not only traditional areas like math and reading. Other studies that have specifically focused on teaching empathy and kind behaviors also find academic benefits (Flook et al., 2015).

Again, this research has not specifically focused on Islamic education environments, pointing to a need for further research within these contexts.

IMPLICATIONS OF EMPATHY WITHIN TEACHERS

Many character education and social-emotional learning programs focus on teaching *children* to be more empathic. This makes sense considering the research reviewed above. But it is also important to promote empathy in *teachers*.

Teacher Empathy Benefits Students

Higher empathy in teachers is related to higher student motivation and effort, in both correlational and longitudinal studies (Coffman, 1981; Goodenow, 1993; Roorda et al., 2011; Waxman, 1983; Wentzel, 1998). Students rate caring teachers as more competent and trustworthy (Teven, 2007a), and students feel more attached to school if they believe their

teachers care about them (Hallinan, 2008). Not surprisingly, an examination of over 100 studies found that more relationship-oriented teachers had 31% fewer behavioral problems in their classes (Marzano et al., 2003).

More caring teachers also have students with better academic outcomes, ranging from elementary to postsecondary schools (Aspy & Roebuck, 1972; Chang et al., 1981; Davidson & Lang, 1960; Den Brok et al., 2004; Robinson et al., 1981; Roorda et al., 2011). Many of us have had the experience of becoming excited about a subject because we had a caring teacher who was enthusiastic about it. This suggests that learning is intimately embedded within safe and trusting relationships.

Most of the studies described above are based on correlational designs, making it impossible to know whether teacher empathy actually causes these beneficial outcomes for students. There are fewer studies that use randomized control designs, yet these show that training teachers to improve their empathy can cause better outcomes for students. For example, one study gave teachers brief online training in empathy or another topic (technology in learning) and found that teachers who received empathy training had a *50% reduction in suspension rates* over the academic year (Okonofua et al., 2016). The empathy training also affected students' feelings of respect for their teachers. High-risk students (i.e. those who had previously been suspended) rated their teachers as more respectful after their teachers had the empathy training. Even difficult students deserve to be treated with understanding, and even these students deserve to reach their full potential.

Another randomized control trial gave some pre-service teachers stories written by African-American students describing a racism experience, while others read about integrating technology into elementary teaching (Whitford & Emerson, 2018). Future teachers who reflected upon the racism experiences scored lower in implicit biases against African-Americans compared to those in the control group (Whitford & Emerson, 2018). Implicit biases likely have a role in suspensions, if teachers think of students in terms of ethnic or racial stereotypes, rather than as individual children with complex life situations. Empathy can help teachers to see and encourage their students' potential.

As with the other research on empathy in education, we know of no research examining teacher empathy within the context of Islamic educational institutions. We hope that this review will inspire researchers to examine whether teacher empathy has similar benefits for students within these contexts.

Teacher Empathy Also Benefits Teachers Themselves

Teachers who score higher in empathy or emotional intelligence report experiencing less burnout than those with lower empathy or emotional intelligence (Chan, 2006; Colomeischi, 2015; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Saiiari et al., 2011; Teven, 2007b). These results have also been found in other professions like healthcare (Dyrbye et al., 2010; Năstasă & Fărcaş, 2015).

The Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE) professional development program teaches emotional intelligence, empathy, and mindful practices. Randomized control trials have found the CARE program leads to increases in teacher emotional intelligence, well-being, efficacy, and mindfulness, and decreases in burnout, time-related stress, psychological distress, and daily physical symptoms such as headaches or pain (Jennings et al., 2017; Jennings et al., 2013). Yet again, these research questions have not been explored within Islamic educational contexts.

Empathy Can Be Learned

There are many ways to encourage empathy and other emotional skills within the classroom. Although we provide a few examples here, we point readers to more comprehensive reviews (Brackett & Katulak, 2006; Durlak et al., 2011; Malti et al., 2016). We also note that there is currently limited scholarly information available that documents the prevalence or implications of empathy-building programs within Islamic educational contexts, or among Muslim students in secular educational contexts. However, compassion is of central importance within Muslim writing and practice, and as such, we would expect that it is frequently woven into school lessons—both in content, and in practice. Documenting the prevalence of such practices—and their implications—is an important topic for future research.

Empathy training programs for students

One way teachers can promote empathy is to structure classroom activities so that they are cooperative, rather than competitive. An example of this is called the *jigsaw classroom*, in which different students are each responsible for a piece of a project and work together to learn a topic (Aronson, 2002). Not only does this increase empathy, but research finds that it also improves academic performance, especially among those who are struggling the most (Aronson, 2002).

The Kindness Curriculum teaches mindfulness and empathic practices to preschool children, and has been shown to increase academic outcomes

(Flook et al., 2015). The Roots of Empathy program brings a baby into an elementary school classroom for a series of guided lessons on empathy for that baby (Gordon, 2003). It has been shown to help students develop their social and emotional skills (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2012). There are also mobile phone based programs that can help to promote empathy in youth (Konrath, 2019; Konrath et al., 2015).

Finally, we recommend consulting Ashoka, a nonprofit organization that promotes empathy in education. It provides free resources and exercises to help teachers get started in their classrooms (Ashoka, 2019). In addition, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is another excellent resource.

Empathy training programs for teachers

Teachers can also be taught to increase their empathy and other emotional skills (Brackett & Katulak, 2006; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). As previously mentioned, the Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE) program teaches emotional intelligence, empathy, and mindful practices (Jennings et al., 2017; Jennings et al., 2013). Another innovative program, FuelEd, based in Houston, is rooted in attachment theory, teaching educators to be aware of themselves as secure bases to children from difficult backgrounds, and to address any unresolved trauma in their lives that serves as a barrier to empathizing with their students.[4]

In addition, shorter exercises exist, such as those that help teachers to reflect on students' experiences with racism (Whitford & Emerson, 2018), those that help interpret disruptive behaviors empathically (Okonofua et al., 2016), those that help to promote social skills (Higgins et al., 1981; Warner, 1984), role play others' experiences or take their perspectives (Barak et al., 1987; Batson, 2011; Kelly et al., 1977), and actively listen and identify others' feelings (Kremer & Dietzen, 1991).

CONCLUSION

This article examined the important role philanthropy and empathy/compassion plays in the Muslim tradition. We then examined the rich history and intersectionality of traditional philanthropy and education reform in Muslim societies. Character education or *akhlaq* education has long been considered a central element of Islamic education. It was our aim to show how third space reform efforts that include the role of empathy

in education can help develop positive change for Muslim education systems. By connecting modern scientific terms like empathy to traditionally accepted terms like *rahma* or compassion, grassroots Muslim communities are more likely to embrace such reform due to their connection to Muslim religious tradition and theology.

By linking third space education reform and the science of empathy to an Islamic context, we believe that such education reforms would be embraced as culturally relevant and religiously appropriate. We maintain that education reformers will have better success in furthering such reform in Muslim societies if they draw upon the Islamic roots of empathy. Hence, this article began by analyzing the concept of philanthropy and compassion within an Islamic context. Next, we reviewed the historic role philanthropy has played in education in Muslim societies. Finally, we provided an overview of scientific research supporting the importance of empathy in education, for both students and teachers.

We conclude with a call for the need to approach education reform in Muslim societies from an empathic and third space lens. Training students and teachers to be more empathic has the potential not only to develop their character, but to improve their academic outcomes and the school climate. Whichever empathy-building technique is chosen, it is important to use ones that are based on published scientific research. However, for such reforms to succeed, local communities must embrace them. This is less likely if these third space reforms are seen as externally imposed mandates. Connecting these reforms to Muslim notions of philanthropy and *rahma* builds important bridges with local Muslim societies. These societies are already aware of the deep connection between philanthropy, empathy/compassion, and education. Therefore, not only are these ideas more likely to be welcomed as reclaiming Islamic heritage, but philanthropy's involvement in furthering these reforms will be seen as a continuation of past success. Commitment, as shown by Muslim nonprofit institutions like the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) to the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies initiative with a focus on "third space reform" that draws upon Islamic knowledge, is a welcome recent effort in this area. While this endeavor is new, it embraces a rich history of Muslim philanthropy's engagement in Islamic education.

Notes

1. Interestingly both Riaz (2008) and Langohr (2005) remark that most grants were awarded to missionary schools who were posing as secular institutions, even though conversion was crucial to missionary activists.

2. Note that this definition is highly overlapped with Payton & Moody's (2008) definition of philanthropy.

3. https://casel.org

4. http://www.fueledschools.org

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