

# *Teaching Children*

A Moral, Spiritual, and Holistic Approach  
to Educational Development



## TEACHING CHILDREN

A MORAL, SPIRITUAL, AND HOLISTIC APPROACH  
TO EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

ANN EL-MOSLIMANY

IIIT Books-In-Brief Series

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Ann El-Moslimany

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The International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT)  
P.O. Box 669  
Herndon, VA 20172, USA  
[www.iiit.org](http://www.iiit.org)

IIIT London Office  
P.O. Box 126  
Richmond, Surrey  
TW9 2UD, UK  
[www.iiit.org.uk](http://www.iiit.org.uk)

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**Series Editors**

Dr. Anas S. Al-Shaikh-Ali  
Shiraz Khan

*Typesetting by Shiraz Khan*  
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## **IIIT Books-in-Brief Series**

The IIIT Books-in-Brief Series is a valuable collection of the Institute's key publications written in condensed form designed to give readers a core understanding of the main contents of the original. Produced in a short, easy to read, time-saving format, these companion synopses offer a close, carefully written overview of the larger publication and it is hoped will stimulate readers into further exploration of the original.

Ann El-Moslimany, an experienced teacher who has taught for decades and run her own Islamic school, joins a growing chorus of respected voices both in the East and West, calling for an educational philosophy and approach that is holistic, and which gives full spiritual meaning to all that a child learns.

It begins with a fundamental premise – that each and every child is born with a spiritual, moral, and intellectual purpose, the function of which is not simply to seek knowledge to pass exams, but to know the Divine, its own nature as well as place in the universe, and ultimately to translate this into good actions that benefit humankind. Thus, to enhance the entire learning experience, it is this perspective that should guide the development and evolution of a viable education system.

The author contends that nurturing a child's moral understanding of the universe together with a holistic worldview, connection with all that has been created, awareness of civic responsibility to make the world a better place, and ability to co-exist and work in collaboration with others, is vital to the growth and progress of each and every child, allowing for greater realization of their given potential.

She goes on to explain that away from the competitive dictates of streaming, grading, reward and punishment (a ruthless system that undermines children's confidence and creativity and of whose efficacy there is little or no proof) children will flourish. And that furthermore,

fossilized facts are to be lifted away from textbooks and brought to life by relating them to real-life situations and activities, in order to see their broader underlying and multi-layered contexts utilising a theme-based approach, to give the child a fuller understanding of key issues (and abstract ones) thereby allowing for the development of their understanding on vital emotional and social levels.

The work also calls for the use of the latest innovative tools and technologies to make the educational experience an inspirational one. This would make of the actual learning environment (the classroom, and school) a dynamic and interesting place, wherein the teacher is not a 'site foreman' but a wise role model able to nurture the best in the child.

And finally for Muslim schools, the Divine should always be at the heart of what is taught, not in a mechanistic rigid way as is current practice, but in a manner which elicits deep love and appreciation both for God, His prophets, revelations to mankind, and the Qur'an, and in which children are taught to see His working in all things. Mixing with children of other faiths, and being taught to respect the beliefs of others, as well as the rights of all people, children are to be given not a bi-polar version of reality, but a multi-faith, and multicultural perspective, which allows for integration in the wider society whilst maintaining a strong identity.

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### **Abridged Edition of Ann El-Moslimany's Original**

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

This book represents my struggle to unearth the process of education in Islam and was initiated by the frustration of trying to educate our own children both in the US and overseas. They were already young adults before four other Muslim women converts joined me in the effort to begin one of the early American Islamic schools. We had not developed or discovered any Islamic pedagogical system when we plunged into our work. It was not until years later, when my husband and I unexpectedly found ourselves at the helm of this project that I began to think more deeply about what Islamic education should be. Authentic English books on Islam were not common at the time. However, I had the blessing of coming across what was perhaps the first book published by the International Institute of Islamic Thought as they began to formulate the Islamization of Knowledge project. The focus, in the early work of the late Ismail al-Faruqi, was on education of University students, not children, yet I was inspired by his insistence that an educational system must encompass the unity of God, and the ensuing unity of creation, of humanity, of truth and action, and related principles. Thinking Muslims have recognized these principles as fundamental to Islamic philosophy, but teaching from these foundations will require continuing prayer, introspection, study, and conversation. How can we as educators ensure that our Muslim students leave our schools not simply prepared for financial success and with some religious knowledge, but fully grounded in their love of God, understanding of creation, and a commitment to fulfill their collective and individual roles of life on earth? God willing this book will help stimulate discussion and inspire others to come forward with their thoughts and ideas. Just as Muslim scholars of the past not only preserved the knowledge of other civilizations but also did their best to infuse it with an Islamic perspective, we must scrutinize what modern educational theory has to offer, discarding what is contrary to Islamic values and systematically rebuilding the best around a *tawhīdic* framework.

## Chapter Two

### Expanding Our Choices

Of all of the earthshaking changes that occurred in the Islamic world during the time of colonialism, there may have been none more devastating than the impact it had on the educational system. Secular schools with alien subjects, and teachers were imposed. Enrollment was formal, age-based, and impersonal. Promotion was no longer based on individual mastery but on exams, grades and specified spans of time.

As the Western countries continued to expand in power and wealth, the Muslim world assumed that their methods of education must be superior and rushed to emulate them. Religion became a tacked on subject or a course of study in a special religious school.

As Islam flowers here in the West, Muslim educators sometimes choose as their model the religious schools, called madrasas in many parts of the world, where the emphasis is on the memorization of ancient texts; or they pattern themselves on the post-colonial competitive, main stream, secular schools found not only in the West, but also, now, throughout the world. Often they choose a combination of the two – a remnant of postcolonialism – with ‘Islamic’ subjects taught madrasa-style and ‘secular’ subjects using the methodology, curriculum, and texts of Western education – an apparent solution with its own set of problems. We must scrutinize methods of education that seem to discourage reflection, critical thinking and creativity, and also avoid incorporating the myth of the essential superiority of secularized schooling. We must take a long, hard look at the common practice of incorporating the two of these impaired systems into a dualistic framework that separates religion from real life. In such schools ‘Islam’ is often just another subject with a similar methodology to other courses taught in modern-day schools.

The *‘ilm* we seek to instill in our children cannot be a combination of two diametrically opposed views of life, but a unified vision of the truth. Truth is from God and we cannot isolate any part of it from His purpose for us and the ultimate end of living our lives in obedience, worship, action, and justice.

## Chapter Three

# From Factory School to the Standard Management Paradigm

Powerful groups within a society build institutions, including schools, to serve their own purposes. Just as a primary intent of the colonial powers was to train clerks for the imperial administration, the public schools in industrialized Europe and North America adopted a system that would train workers for their factories.

John Taylor Gatto, New York City and State Teacher of the year, became so disillusioned with the educational system in the US that he left the classroom and devoted his life to exposing the true objectives of compulsory education. He showed that the primary purpose was to train lower-class youth to accept their roles as subservient to the industrial elite.

This was capped by the mania that took the country by storm around what was called scientific management. Scientific management developed by efficiency experts, revolutionized factories with closely supervised, assembly-line control. It soon was applied everywhere including schools. As in the factories, this would require that students – and teachers – produce not by their own initiative, but execute the orders of management. To accomplish this, engineers would make a thorough study of the raw material (the students); of the factory (the building); the directorate (the school board); the work force (teachers); and the markets (industry and society).<sup>1</sup>

To make sure that spaces within the school were always in use, the same thing would be taught over and over to groups of children moving through the building according to strictly scheduled periods of time.<sup>2</sup> Students would learn exactly what everyone of the same age learns, at exactly the same time, in exactly the same order. They would keep quiet and listen; be fed everything in small, unrelated pieces.

In middle and high schools bells still ring every forty to fifty minutes and, “just as with Pavlov's salivating dogs, children shift out of their seats and lurch toward yet another class”.<sup>3</sup> (Although younger children may move from one place to another only for specialty subjects, their day too is segmented into separate subjects devoid of unification. “Put away your reading books now. It’s time for math”. It is, indeed, very



much as if our children are on a conveyor belt. As they pass each workstation of unrelated topics, a forty-five minute measure of facts predetermined by the powerful is poured into their heads. Testing assures quality control.

With the decline of manufacturing, the essence of the factory method did not die but simply morphed into what has been called the Standard Management Syndrome, focused on an engineered, goal-driven, segmented, disciplinary curriculum. Both the factory model and the SMP model were designed and put into place not by educators but by the powerful corporate world through their financial alliance with government.

The educational publishing industry is huge. The politicians they lobby, whether on local school boards or those making state or national policy, are not only lacking in knowledge of how children learn but also have goals that differ from those in the classrooms. This makes it easy for those who pay their campaign expenses to convince the politicians that what the schools need is more of the same – newer, up-to-date textbooks, more tests, tougher standards, and more management based on the factory/SMP model.

The high-tech classrooms jointly promoted by the Gates Foundation and the massive educational text publisher, Pearson, epitomize the Standard Management Paradigm. Students use their tablets purchased from Microsoft to learn predetermined material determined by Pearson. The role of the teacher is little more than that of a functionary – to keep order. The financial benefit to Microsoft and Pearson of this high tech learning is, of course, tremendous!

It is indeed unfortunate that many of those who control our Islamic schools have bought into the prevalent ideas of the politicians, insisting that we have no choice; that if our children are to truly be successful in this society then we have to go along with the ideas of teaching to the test; excessive competition; extrinsic motivation; moving away from perceived time-wasters such as physical education and the arts; and embracing a curriculum that is not simply lacking in Islamic values, but often contrary to them.

We have a vision; we have the vision! – a vision far from that of the corporate world. And our vision is unified as it is based on the foundational Islamic concept of *tawhīd*. We have dedicated our lives

to teaching Muslim children. We have a strong spiritual and intellectual Islamic foundation and have embraced the roles that God created us for, always struggling for justice for humanity and all creation. We have access to the ideas of numerous Muslim intellectuals, as well as to knowledge of established educational research on how children best learn. Educators of conscience, Muslim and others are speaking out. It is up to us to apply our vision within our schools wherever it is found, into a unified vision of the truth.

## Chapter Four

### **Unleashing the Power of *Tawhīd***

There is no god, but God. This statement, so simple yet so profound, is the basis for everything that we, as Muslims, believe and how we are expected to live our lives. As teachers it is incumbent upon us to build on this basic gift providing the children in our care the framework for the Islamic way of life. As we plan our lessons, establish rules and traditions, relate to our students and staff, there must be a conscious effort to remember that we are obligated as Muslims to keep this concept of *tawhīd* as our guiding principal. We have been blessed with a comprehensive worldview that guides us to a vision of unity in which action is part of faith; to a lifelong struggle against injustice and oppression.

The belief in one God prescribes *taqwā* (God-centeredness). The mercy and compassion of God are mentioned in each surah of the Qur'an and it is these attributes that should be stressed. Islam is best promoted through the wonder of God's creation, an appreciation of His limitless love, kindness, and compassion, and the realization that He guides us through the Qur'an to live the best possible lives for our own sakes.

Qur'anic revelation is not ours alone, but a universal gift. Twelve different times in the Qur'an, God specifically addresses the whole of humanity. Clearly, Allah loves all of his creation and is the God of everyone. Humanity is a rich mosaic of individuals – all from a common origin, but who became geographically separated to form distinct populations and cultures, superficially different but meant to know and learn from one another. Furthermore, there are numerous non-Muslim individuals and organizations striving for justice. Isolation can never provide the answer to the needs of Muslims in non-Muslim communities. They are allies – actual or potential.

If we are truly meant to “know one another” why then should we seclude our children within an Islamic school which stands in stark contrast to what children will be forced to experience later in their lives? Here’s why – children are fragile and easily influenced. When we put them into an alien environment we do it with the understanding that they will ‘sink or swim’. Indeed, a child well grounded in his faith and with a strong personality may be empowered by his ability to stand up to negative encounters. But what is the affect on those who feel humiliated or who hide their faith in an attempt to fit in?

Our primary purpose, however, must not be protection, but rather preparation, preparing our children to be an integral, God-centered part of the greater society. It takes thoughtful planning and prayer to avoid the feeling of separation from the real world and yet to give our children a strong background and understanding of how to live their Islam in a culture where many behavioral norms are contrary to our beliefs.

We can only come to know others and have them come to know us when we are accessible. There are two conditions that must be met to truly commit to the unity of humanity.

1. We must struggle for diversity (and diversity does require a struggle) by welcoming non-Muslim children and, at the very least, by including and celebrating Muslims of all colors, sects and ethnicities. Children need to see that even within Islam there is diversity.

It is essential that the children entrusted to us learn to appreciate how much good exists beyond those who call themselves Muslim. History, biographies and current events are replete with examples that anyone can learn and benefit from. Beyond this, there must be a conscious effort to provide opportunities for children in an Islamic school to interact with non-Muslim others. This could be through community service; partnership with other schools; participation in community events etc.

2. We must strive for an education that is socially just. A socially just education questions who benefits from conventional thinking and practices and how that came to be. It focuses on inequalities associated with race, class, language, gender and looks to eliminate them.

## *Unity of Creation*

And among his wonders is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your tongues and colours: for in this, behold, there are messages indeed for all who are possessed of [innate] knowledge! (Qur'an 30:22)

The oneness of God is reflected in His creation; a creation that is purposeful, integrated, and highly ordered. The interconnectedness, the precision, the harmony of each component demonstrates the unity of the Almighty who has created patterns that are maintained throughout time and space and beyond. Only one God could have created a universe that follows specific laws so consistently. The Creator in His infinite wisdom established a role for every entity that exists. Whether we look at the perfect meshing of the systems of the body, the mind-boggling structure of a single cell, the precision of an atom, or the order of our solar system we cannot help but know that all of this is the result of a plan. Even more incredible is that each of these is connected in numerous ways to one another. Nature is so much more than the physical, each of its wonders is an *āyah*, a sign, of the one God.

The unity of creation has implications for all aspects of the curriculum, but becomes particularly important in the study of science related materials, subjects that often are very fragmented. A science text is generally made up of a series of disjointed topics with little relationship to one another other than that they are all considered 'science'. Each subject is quickly finished so that the class can move on to the next, robbing the children of the time it takes to see and appreciate the interconnections that bind Allah's creation into a marvelous whole. It takes time to think, contemplate, and wonder at the signs of God in the world.

## Chapter Five

### **The Unity of Truth**

Occasionally a visitor came into the Islamic School of Seattle and ingenuously asked, "Do you teach both the religious and secular subjects?" At those times, it was difficult to keep myself from jumping upon my soapbox and shouting, "No! No! No!" The concept of

secular is alien to Islam. The separation of ‘Islamic Studies’ from the ‘regular’ subjects in a school setting only feeds into the mentality that sees religion as something separate from life. The notion that there are two truths, one that we gain through revelation and another that comes through reason, is contrary to the central Islamic concept of *tawhīd*. The pathway through which knowledge reaches us varies, but all truth is from the one God. We absolutely cannot assume that by sprinkling a little – or even a lot – of ‘Islamic studies’ into the mix we now have Islamic Education. The whole concept of ‘Islamic Studies’ is a Western construction!

Islam is not a blind faith. Yet in spite of the commands urging Muslims to reflect, consider, contemplate, there are many Muslims who are afraid to think, afraid that wonder and questioning will damage their faith. Unfortunately, there has been very little effort to learn from the successes of the past when Muslims boldly and bravely confronted the knowledge of several civilizations with very different belief and value systems. In spite of major struggles, disagreements, and setbacks, Muslim intellectuals were ultimately successful in integrating the vast body of translated knowledge into a unified – but not uniform – body of *‘ilm*.

## Chapter Six

### **The Mind, Brain, and Education Science**

Our Creator designed our brain so that guided by revelation we could use our intellect to pursue knowledge and understanding. Western science has always struggled with the nature of the soul, the self, the mind, consciousness, and the non-physical heart. These concepts simply cannot be contained within the boundaries of materialistic, reductionist science. Thankfully we have moved beyond the earlier scientism that taught that the human mind was simply equivalent to the physical organ we call the brain. Rather than totally withdrawing from applying ‘brain-based’ learning in the classroom due to earlier problems, it is our responsibility to seriously look at the tremendous body of well-documented studies on how the human brain is designed to learn.

For instance, how a student feels emotionally has a great impact on how he or she learns. Depression impedes learning by affecting the hippocampus, the part of the brain that is involved in long-term memory.

Hormones produced under stress can physiologically hinder learning, even causing certain areas of the brain to deteriorate. Test anxiety can become so severe in some students that it blocks access to memory. Obviously, the effects as well as the causes of stress will vary from one person to another. Alertness is maintained by challenge, suggesting that low levels of stress can be positive. Yet, what is simply challenging for some students will be too stressful for others, emphasizing once again the importance of knowing our individual students. Teachers should be aware of their own facial expressions and tone of voice as both are quickly and involuntarily judged for threat level. Humor and laughter enhance learning although the mechanism through which this occurs is not known.

The classroom environment above all must provide children with a sense of emotional security. There should be respect among students and between the teacher and students. Students must feel free to express themselves without fear of ridicule or discouragement. Negative classroom experiences strongly affect the ability to learn. Collaboration should be the rule. In sharing ideas conceptual understanding is augmented. Teachers need to take the time to design interactive activities, some of which include children of similar abilities, and others with a range of abilities to encourage peer teaching that can benefit both the teacher and the other students. Teacher-centered activities should be kept to a minimum.

Although learning and memory are linked they are not the same thing. Memory is the storage of information and learning is the process of taking that information in and making it a part of the brain. Memory is very complex, but perhaps the most important thing to know is the difference between short-term and long-term memory. Most things we remember for only a short period of time. Unless a memory is reinforced it will disappear. Only by giving it attention, connecting it with pre-existing knowledge, and reinforcing it by revisiting it, will it become part of long-term memory. Different senses move information into the brain through different pathways so it is helpful to teach in ways that stimulate various senses. Learning requires attention, the selective processing of information. Concentration is energy intensive and cannot be sustained indefinitely. Few students are able to focus their attention for more than twenty minutes, particularly under teacher-centered, lecture-type conditions. Any sort of change or activity that allows a short break will encourage refocusing. Movement has a

positive effect on learning, perhaps due to the refocusing that a break allows, or to the increased oxidation that movement causes. Even when the children are interested in the activity they need to be given time to reflect both individually and as groups, particularly after any sort of intense concentration.

It is nearly universally recognized today that there are innate qualities that are not the result of our positive or negative experiences but are there from birth. The child's mind is not a blank slate and knowledge cannot to be spoon-fed or forced onto an individual, but only encouraged through active and student-centered environments within which students construct their own learning through the continuous modification of patterns within the brain. MBE science thus supports developmental and constructivist learning and the rejection of behaviorism.

The current understanding of how knowledge is incorporated into the long-term memory can be summarized as follows:

- No two individuals learn in exactly the same way
- Learning is based upon pre-existing knowledge.
- Child-centered learning is more effective than teacher-centered learning.
- Content should be relevant.
- Learning requires reflection.
- Movement positively affects learning.
- Learning occurs best when more than one of the senses is involved.
- Emotions have a powerful affect on learning.
- True learning must be individually constructed.

## Chapter Seven

### **Towards a *Tawhīdic* (Unified) Curriculum**

The systemic nature of reality, the seamless way the brain perceives it, the organizing process that aids memory, the relating process that creates new knowledge, the conceptual networking that yields fresh insights, the meshing of two seemingly unrelated ideas that underlies creativity—all rely on holistic, systemically integrated and related thought. And it's not being taught.<sup>4</sup>

The conventional methodology of imparting knowledge is based on assumptions that are incompatible with both the design of the brain

and the unity of truth. God designed the human brain to be combatable with the unity of knowledge. New information is organized within the brain itself, first absorbing the whole and then making its own unique connections, forming patterns based on individual background, family, ability and especially prior knowledge.

When reductionism is applied to curriculum the result is a fragmented, sequential, and standardized array of facts, obstructing the pattern making that is essential to learning. What is worse, we are most likely to use this with those who are considered underachievers, reducing information down into pieces so small that the pattern required for understanding has disappeared!

In most schools the curriculum is tied to texts that thinly cover an encyclopedic amount of material, preventing students from delving deeply into topics that are the most relevant to their own lives and interests, and prevent the teacher from focusing on authentic learning that will become a part of the student's long-term memory.

As widespread as this standard curriculum is, commitment to integrating knowledge into a coherent whole, nevertheless, has a long history. As the 'school as a factory' model took hold, others tried to promote curricula based on the developmental interests of children and adolescents, instituting democracy and projects. As early as 1932 enough schools were experimenting with this model that the classic 'eight-year study' could be carried out. Students from high schools with an integrated curriculum were compared to those from separate-study schools. 1475 pairs of students were followed through high school and college. Each pair was composed of one student from innovative schools with an integrated, student-centered curriculum and one from a standard, teacher-directed, separate-study school. Students from the schools with an integrated curriculum were found to be more intellectually curious, more motivated, more resourceful and more concerned with world affairs.

Beginning in the mid-forties, however, such schools became the targets of right-wing critics. During the McCarthy era, attacks escalated. Progressive education of any kind was labeled Communist. Thematic education in the public schools never recovered.

Among educational specialists it would be difficult to find more than a very few who actually support the standard curriculum in use in



almost all of our public schools today. Unfortunately, however, there appears to be little hope of any widespread move beyond the ineffective, century-old division of subjects. In the name of educational reform, powerful business and industrial leaders shove educators aside and with the help of their political allies take over the schools. In recent years this has resulted in a plethora of standardized testing that forces teachers to teach to the test and discourages holistic learning.

It is important to note that these stated problems are the problems of government-operated schools. Islamic schools, like other private schools, are not under the control of these special-interest groups, yet most persist in taking the public schools as the standard. Our children deserve more. We cannot only do just as well, but better than exclusive private schools because our thematic curriculum will be centered on God, embracing the principles that He gave us in the Qur'an, principles that will benefit the future generations, serving to enrich and guide their lives as leaders in both the Muslim and the larger communities of which they will be members. Our thematic curricula will encourage critical thinking and the use of reflection, intuition and other deeper ways of knowing.

Certainly the textbooks that have been prepared for schools that by law, put materialism – not God – at the center cannot be the foundation of a school that is truly Islamic. It simply is not reasonable for a Muslim teacher in an Islamic school to teach from a prescribed syllabus that deliberately and totally eliminates *Al-Khāliq*, the Creator. Surely, this not only dishonors God but is also an injustice to the children for whom we are responsible.

Using a *tawhīdic* curriculum, students will not be presented with a series of facts to be sequentially fed, memorized, and cycled back to the teacher without thought or reflection. This means that any typical textbooks including those that might be designed specifically for use in Muslim schools are ineffective, except perhaps as a reference. In a typical textbook-oriented course material will be taught as several discrete topics, each of which must be completed over a relatively short period. Often the time becomes even more truncated when the end of the year approaches and the book has not been finished. Moreover, the practice of teaching from a textbook is based on the patently false assumptions that each child in the classroom has the same prior knowledge, interests, and skills as every other child of the same age and therefore will – or should – learn in unison with one another.

Books – real books – are essential, of course, but not everyone will read or learn from the same book nor will they read all the material available to them. Instead of rushing through a multitude of pre-arranged facts, each student will be able to take the time to build upon her prior knowledge, follow her own interests and seek answers to her own questions and truly come to understand that which is most relevant to her. What is needed is a plethora of interesting books of all types and at various levels.

Thematic or multidisciplinary teaching has been discussed by numerous educators. Obviously they differ in details, but there is general agreement of several important factors.

The teacher must have a deep, underlying goal for the theme(s) presented. Proponents have used different terms for this underlying goal – broad conceptual understanding, essential question, organizing center, the big picture, overarching goals, powerful ideas, conceptual structure, enduring understandings. I recommend that these overarching goals be specific Islamic principles. It is preferable that the students are led to discover for themselves and internalize the relationships between the subject matter and these broad Islamic principles, but it is the role of the teacher to guide them to this understanding.

Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins<sup>5</sup> have outlined their requirements for what they call ‘essential questions’. They should:

1. Be open-ended, typically without a single, final correct answer.
2. Be thought provoking and intellectually engaging.
3. Point towards important ideas that are transferable.
4. Raise other question that will encourage further inquiry.
5. Require support and justification—not simply an answer.
6. Result in understanding that can (and will) be revisited over time.

Almost all who have promoted an integrated curriculum agree on the importance of the role of the students in planning. Students and teachers should work together to identify topics, gather information, pose questions and design activities, projects and field trips. Prophet Muhammad\* (ṢAAS) was the direct recipient of the word of God, the teacher par excellence. And yet he was ordered by the Qur’an to

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\*ṢAAS) – *Ṣallā Allāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam*: May the peace and blessings of God be upon him. Said whenever the name of the Prophet Muhammad is mentioned.

consult with those to whom he was superior in every way. “And take council with them in all matters of public concern” (Qur’an 3:159). Abū Hurayrah reported, “Never have I seen anyone more prone to seeking council than was the Messenger of God”. An atmosphere of freedom and truthfulness within the environment promotes the desire to develop the alacrity to exchange opinions and advice freely and truthfully.

Not every student will be expected to participate in every activity that is developed. One of the most important advantages of an integrated curriculum is that it allows for differentiated instruction. There must always be a level of choice as individuals or groups of children work according to their unique ways of learning, their specific needs, and to more deeply pursue their own interests and questions.

Because networks of thought processes become interconnected as new learning relates to pre-existing knowledge, learning must be relevant, not mere interests or fads but around substantive issues. Learning must be subject to modification depending on the social and political environment in which we find ourselves, or on some event that occurs unexpectedly in the classroom or school. The personal significance of attempting to understand a situation that is impacting the lives of our students can not only offer immediate insight, but also provides a foundation that will serve them in the future. What better example can we have than how our Prophet taught. Almost every lesson was in response to a situation that was actually occurring. An important aspect of understanding the Qur’an was to relate the words of God to the events that were unfolding within the environment.

Facts and skills are tools. They should be taught neither in isolation nor for their own sake. The teacher must carefully embed the skills, theme, and subject matter into the overarching goals so that there is a synergism among them.

Children should be given the precious gift of time, time to think, to explore, and enjoy. For lasting understanding students need the opportunity to reflect, to discuss, to ponder, to allow time for the new skills and subject matter to be related to prior knowledge. Facts hastily learned and tossed back without input of thought or creativity will seldom be remembered for long.

We are aware from what we know of the brain that the more senses

involved in the process of learning the more likely it is that the knowledge will become part of our permanent memory. Projects, research, role-plays, independent study, field trips and guest visitors all present a variety of learning experiences.

The teacher does not need to be an expert, nor even particularly knowledgeable. Teaching is especially fulfilling when you can learn right along with the students. Expertise other than that of the teacher can be in the form of youtube, videos, specialized colleagues, books, guest speakers, field trips and students themselves as they pursue the passions that develop.

We are reminded in the Qur'an over and over again that we are expected not only to believe, but also to confirm our beliefs with good works. Believing and obtaining knowledge is not enough. Belief and knowledge must lead naturally to action. Thus, students should be encouraged to participate in public gatherings, visit public officials, write letters, make phone calls, and circulate petitions. Community service has become common in schools and it requires special attention in our schools. Almost any of the Islamic concepts we choose as our over-arching goals will lead naturally to community participation.

It is up to us to assume the task of designing curricula that will prepare the next generation of Muslims – curricula that are truly *tawhīdic*. Every overarching goal that we choose should be consciously linked to *tawhīd*, as well as to the purpose of our lives, to worship God and do His will on earth. It is these Islamic principles, essential to living as Muslims that should serve as the foundation, with the content of the theme itself built around these concepts.

The concept of justice can be addressed in many contexts as can the unity of humanity, establishing peace, forgiveness, seeking knowledge, cooperation, honesty, relationships, the detrimental effects of tribalism and nationalism, dealing with adversity, and migrating for the sake of God. The end goal is to instill God-centered habits of mind that will enable our students to look critically at every problem, idea, event, and controversy that they will experience in relationship to His guidance for how to live their lives on earth.

## Chapter Eight

### ***Fitrah* or Behaviorism?**

*Fitrah* is a gift given to each of us by the Creator, a gift that is maintained to some extent throughout our lives. Yasien Mohamed, in his book on *fitrah*, looked closely at the works of both classical and modern Muslim scholars and their richly diverse interpretations. Based on a combination of linguistic and religious explanations, he defined *fitrah* as “an inborn natural predisposition which cannot change, and which exists at birth in all human beings...that is inclined toward right action and submission to Allah, the one God.”<sup>6</sup> He speaks of *fitrah* as original goodness as opposed to original sin, the doctrine of original sin being irreconcilable with the Islamic concepts of divine mercy and human responsibility. He has observed that *fitrah* is a human quality, endowed in each of us by God, which, though subject to environment, cannot be totally extinguished.

Actualizing our *fitrah*, assuming the role that God intended for us, should be the goal of every human being. Our intellect allows us to distinguish between right and wrong and our free will to choose which path to follow. The Qur’an addresses the Muslims as those who believe and do good. These God-given characteristics – *fitrah*, free will and intellect – provide the basis on which we, as educators, will achieve our mission and raise righteous individuals who love God and strive for justice.

Since the child’s *fitrah*, pure at birth, is clearly subject to the influence of the environment, it is our responsibility to see that the child is nurtured within an environment that is truly Islamic. Educators have no more important task than to contribute to building the Islamic personality of the children we teach and to aid in their development of understanding the purpose of their time on earth – the actualization of their *fitrah*. Are we, as teachers, respecting the close relationship that naturally exists between the child and God? Are we guiding and nourishing their natural tendencies to love God, to learn, to be the very best they can? During their days of childhood and adolescence children must be given the opportunity to learn to make choices and to use their reason to make these choices. It is the role of the teacher to prepare them for the difficult decisions they will be required to make in a future that we cannot even begin to imagine. Free will means choice. How can it be that we, as mere humans, could have the authority to take away the God-given right of free will?

Behaviorism, on the other hand, is based on the notion that the conduct of an individual is due solely to the rewards or punishments that he has received in response to his behavior. Behaviorism came to dominate the field of education during the first half of the last century and has become deeply entrenched. Ideas prevalent in behaviorism are (1) that humans and animals differ only in the behavior that they display (2) there is no such thing as free will (3) humans are born with a *tabula rasa* (blank slate) and their development is determined strictly by the stimuli to which they are exposed.

As Muslims, we know that we have a special relationship with God. Our purpose would be meaningless if we fulfilled our role automatically as other created entities do. We are specifically created to worship God and carry out His will on earth. The human is not a passive victim of his environment, but a thinking, rational being with the choice of how, or even whether, to live his/her life as a servant of God.

We must become acutely aware of tendencies to overlook the influence of popular thought on our way of life and question practices that are based on assumptions contrary to the Islamic paradigm. Behaviorism can be particularly damaging when used in combination with competition. Teaching competition as a social value, in which one wins at the expense of others who, incidentally, lose is beyond the realm of what Islam teaches. Instead we should be encouraging cooperation and collaboration. When children are expected to work together and to help one another a spirit of community naturally develops. Most of the serious problems of society are the result of the undue emphasis on individual rights; the exploitation of the weaker members of society, destruction of the environment, obsessive materialism; hedonism, including sexual promiscuity, alcoholism, and drug abuse.

## Chapter Nine

### **Self-Determination**

Numerous psychologists today are concentrating their research on motivation or on the related topic, interest. Babies are born with an intense, initiative to learn, a fundamental part of human nature. The Self-Determination Theory is compatible with free will, reason, and *fiṭrah*, characteristics behaviorists dismiss as non-existent.

Intrinsic motivation is present when something is inherently interesting or enjoyable. It promotes a love of learning, higher quality learning and understanding, increased creativity and a positive attitude. The opposite, extrinsic motivation, refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome. We have all seen intrinsic motivation at work in small children and may have questioned why the attitude toward learning undergoes a dramatic change after the preschool years. Excitement that came from understanding or being able to do something new seems to have vanished. This loss of motivation is not inevitable, but like other God-given qualities inherent to human nature, intrinsic motivation must be nurtured in order for it to continue to grow and bloom.

Three psychological factors encourage the growth of intrinsic motivation, (1) autonomy, (2) feeling competent, and (3) relatedness. Autonomous people experience their behavior as self-endorsed and congruent with their values and interests. It results in more creative learning, lower stress, increased energy and vitality and positive socialization. Such personal endorsement can be and, indeed, often is the desire to conform to family – and religious – values. Individualism and independence are not equated with autonomy. Studies show that autonomy increases the strength of relationships.

Autonomy is undermined by control and perceived control in the form of orders, threats, deadlines, competition, contingent rewards, grades, certificates and even praise, causing the purposefulness to become more dependent upon external factors.

Intrinsic motivation is enhanced by competence, or the perception of competence. Teachers must avoid the comparison and competition that detracts from a child's feeling of competence. How much apparent mediocrity or failure can an ordinary child take before giving up?

Relatedness, or a sense of belonging, is a basic human need and is essential to intrinsic motivation. Children must feel connected to those with whom they would like to feel connected – an important concept in defense of Islamic schools. Relatedness is easily implemented by the classroom teacher, but only if the teacher is aware of the need for children to feel a sense of community and acceptance. Classrooms where teachers encourage participation by all of the students, focusing on cooperation and individual mastery, as opposed to competition, are most likely to exhibit a strong sense of community. When teachers are

perceived as warm and supportive, providing assistance but holding high expectations, a sense of community prevails.

Ability grouping, the sorting of children according to a perceived innate capacity for learning, has been conclusively shown to be destructive of intrinsic motivation. This is the case whether it is done within the classroom or within the school. The result of sorting children in this way does not result in a valid hierarchy of mental ability, but merely magnifies the disadvantages between those children who are minorities and from lower-class, less educated families, and children whose families are affluent and more highly educated. It has been conclusively shown that those in lower tracks experience no remediation but simply fall further and further behind causing the children who often have the least in their lives outside of school to get the least from their school experience as well.

## Chapter Ten

### **Islamic Civic Engagement**

We offered the Trust to the heavens, the earth, and the mountains, yet they refused to undertake it and were afraid of it; mankind undertook it – they have always been inept and foolish. (Qur'an 33:72)

Our role is to carry out God's will on earth. Such an honor, but what a responsibility! We are blessed with the riches of creation, but with these blessings come serious commitments. We are charged with guarding and managing these bounties, but also with doing everything we can to assure that they are used for the good of all creation, now and in the future, and that justice prevails on earth. Inner belief is not enough. We must also assume action. Nothing we are able to pass on to our students is more essential.

You who believe, uphold justice and bear witness to God, even if it is against yourselves, your parents, or your close relatives. Whether the person is rich or poor, God can best take care of both. Refrain from following your own desire, so that you can act justly – if you distort or neglect justice, God is fully aware of what you do. (Qur'an 4:135)

And if we don't succeed in securing justice? According to the Qur'an what is required of us is not to attain, but to always seek justice. If each of us – or even most of us – within the human family assumed this



sacred duty, we would not be living in a world torn by misery, war, and abuse. We must encourage our children to be aware of the injustice around them and to appreciate that they can begin to actively improve their world here and now. Is a classmate being ridiculed or bullied? Does the news inform us about an innocent being treated unfairly? Is each one open to being there for a friend or an acquaintance in need? They should question what they would and should do. Would they change it with their hand? Would they speak out? Or would they condemn it in their heart? What are they doing now to counteract the atrocities that continue. Let us stress to those we have in our care the message that is repeated over and over again in the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet that belief without action is not enough; that worship without good works means little. It is most often the small incremental acts of justice done by many that can and have changed the world for the better.

We most often think of injustice in regard to individuals, but generally it is imposed upon an entire group of people, or upon an individual who belongs to a specific category. Abuse is regularly based on tribal, ethnic, religious or racial origin – anything that places the victims outside what is seen as the norm. Our children need to be encouraged to search their own hearts to ensure that they harbor no negative feelings based on stereotypes or prejudice.

It is only humanity that has been given the power and the responsibility to protect physical creation. God tells us in the Qur'an that He has spread out the earth for all living things not for humanity alone; thus, assuming stewardship, we must protect creation not only to better the lives of people everywhere and of generations to come, but also for the sake of the other living things with whom we share this world.

Creation provides us with physical needs, but it also feeds our souls. By contemplating nature we increase our understanding of God, of His wisdom, and His power. Let us lead our children to an appreciation of the wonder, of the fantastic network of relationships, the purposefulness of each created entity. Everything in creation has a purpose and is Muslim in the sense that it is fulfilling the role God has assigned to it.

This modern notion that life demands the accumulation of wealth and material possessions is affecting our children who are subjected to a constant bombardment of advertising socialization. Can we help them

to understand that the goal of attaining more and more ‘things’ results in the depletion of resources, the devastation of the environment, and the continuing impoverishment of those less fortunate? Conditions that we must be working to prevent, not to aggravate! To help young children understand why they are here, for a child to appreciate that he can, himself, begin to plan and work toward spiritual success in life is positive and powerful.

Muslims are blessed with the most exemplary of role models in Prophet Muhammad. As educators, we can especially benefit from the example of his behavior and particularly how he dealt with children. The Prophet never struck nor spoke harshly to a child. He was patient, loving, and respectful.

Role-model education is less based upon the delivery of information than on the inbuilt tendency of attachment-seeking to instill appropriate lifestyle, attitudes, and worldview. Informal and experiential education demands a less formal relationship between student and teacher. Project-oriented classrooms where cooperative learning is emphasized naturally result in the less formal relationships that role-model education requires, as do field trips, camps, practical-life experiences such as cooking or gardening, and involvement of the classroom teacher in extracurricular activities.

The Islamic personality that develops as the *fiṭrah* of the child is becoming actualized includes identity. The Muslims of the United States and Canada are far from being a monolithic society with a single culture. This can – and often does – cause Muslims to withdraw into their own cultural space where they feel safe. Yet this environment of multiculturalism presents an amazing opportunity to benefit and learn from others. Here we have the opportunity to consciously consider a variety of Islamic practices and viewpoints that will enhance our appreciation of this religion.

We will be required to embrace the reality that our children will be Muslims who primarily identify with the country in which they have grown up. Culture is inevitably and effortlessly absorbed from surroundings – from family and close friends certainly, but also from acquaintances and associates, neighbors, and the media – and increasingly, social media. It is our duty to prepare our students for any situation that they might face in the future. We do this by giving them the tools to think critically about the most fundamental elements

of the Qur'an and the examples of the Prophet, and their thoughtful application to unpredictable challenges.

Obviously, there is no part of the child's environment more important than the home. The family is paramount. Children raised in a home emotionally safe and filled with love for God and one another are most likely to become righteous men and women. As educators we know how difficult it is to overcome the negative examples of those closest to the child and that building upon the example of a good home is nearly effortless.

Without parents who are motivated to investigate for themselves what a quality education entails, we cannot move forward. Most parents of Muslim children growing up in the West assume that it is a given that their offspring will grow into adulthood as active and practicing Muslims. Many who have taken the important step of placing their children in an Islamic school overlook the environment outside of school. Television, social media, and video games can expose our children to the worst parts of popular culture. The appeal is strong and it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to restrict children from participating.

The situation worsens when parents themselves are unaware of what their children are experiencing. Too often adolescents perceive of their parents and teachers as being ignorant of the 'real' world. Our children need to understand that our fears are real. Open communication rather than top-down control is needed, helping children to recognize and appreciate that the concern is for their spiritual well-being, and that both parents and teachers are available to discuss their questions and uncertainties.

To actualize the purpose for which we were created obligates us to responsibility and knowledge. The ability to think clearly and be responsible comes from the constant awareness of God. Our teaching must always have an overarching goal of understanding all activities in light of God's expectations of humanity.

## Chapter Eleven

### **Moving Forward**

This chapter basically summarizes the difficulties and hopes for our

Islamic schools. The problems in the public schools are massive and in spite of valiant efforts to reform, progress is slow. Sadly when reform does take place there is a tendency for it to fade and to eventually disappear. This does not have to affect Islamic schools. We, and other private schools have more freedom to provide effective, state-of-the-art education, a role that is proudly assumed by many independent schools. However, far too often, Islamic schools meekly line up behind the mediocre public schools.

These pages stress the necessity of renewing our schools in the spirit of Islam, if we are to prepare coming generations as contributing, vibrant Muslims changing the world positively. Being outside the mainstream, we have considerable authority over what and how we teach. But this authority must be seized, treasured, and supported. As Muslims is it not our sacred duty to be the very best example for others to follow? Allah has provided us with an intellect that encourages us to question our own purpose. He has given us guidance. And He has given us free will, the right to choose among the choices with which we are faced. With these gifts comes responsibility.

Our Islamic schools often have their origins in the very real fear of parents that their children may not grow up as Muslims within a cultural context that eliminates God and in which they may even meet with animosity toward Islam and Muslims. Often when a school opens, the founders have only decided that it is to be an Islamic school, but often have not thought further on what this means.

During my decades at the Islamic School of Seattle, I struggled to nurture a school that met the criteria that I have outlined in this book as being Islamic – not only in teaching Qur’an and Arabic, coming together for prayer and teaching the fundamentals of Islam, subjects that I have barely touched on here, but in patterning our teaching on the basic principles that would prepare our students to truly live their religion. It is not easy.

Parents often find it difficult to trust an Islamic school that appears to them as unconventional. In most parts of the country the majority of parents are immigrant Muslims who often resist change, never having really questioned the history of the education that they themselves experienced ‘back home’. These can roughly be divided into two groups, the first of whom came to this country for their own studies and who see the primary purpose of education as preparation of their

children for future financial success, and who especially value high scores on standardized tests – albeit within an Islamic environment.

A second group of immigrants, from smaller towns, are often looking for a school similar to what they had back home, a school that stresses memorization of the Qur'an. The 'secular' component in both groups is generally taught with no attempt to analyze from an Islamic perspective. Among the first group of immigrants it tends to be the Islam that is tacked on. Within the second group, fearful of anything that seems too far removed from the Islamic orthodoxy to which they are accustomed, it is the so-called secular subjects that are appended.

At this stage in our history we may not be able to appeal to the majority of Muslims in the West most of whom have never deeply considered what Islamic education should be. Yet there are those who are willing to look critically at established notions of education, in particular, Muslims who have grown up in this society. For several reasons, it is reflective parents and educators in the Western world who may be best positioned for renewing our schools everywhere in the true spirit of Islam. Our Islamic schools are relatively young and less entrenched in the folk pedagogy or 'grammar of schooling' that is so deeply engrained in schools of today. Secondly, those who have grown up in the West are less likely to be encumbered by the feelings of inferiority that often plague those living in the neocolonialism of Muslim countries. Also, the prevailing culture of thoughtful and creative questioning of the status quo encourages our own acumen as well as acknowledging ideas of non-Muslim intellectuals, ideas that today often manifest as Islamic.

Thankfully, state-of-the-art Western epistemology has allowed several important concepts considered as Islamic in these pages to have become less discordant with Western thought today than in the past. That members of the human race are inherently equal, fundamentally similar, and have a common ancestry is now widely accepted by educated, reasonable individuals. There has been a move away from reductionism; behaviorism, and the idea that the child's mind is merely a blank slate.

A non-Muslim couple from the Harvard Graduate School of Education showed up at our door soon after the event of September 11th seeking to take an active role in countering the Islamophobia they were seeing. Their years of guidance served the Islamic School of Seattle well, leading to an appreciation of how our understanding of 'Islamic'

education merged with the cutting-edge pedagogy that was being promoted at Harvard.

A friend had an Islamic school for many years and went through one daunting experience after another with her board and the local mosque. Tired of being bogged down in struggles she decided to give up the school and move on. She became trained as a Montessori teacher and eventually began a new school that is under her personal control and is very successful.

A school can only thrive when parents understand, agree with, and commit to the deeper mission. If the founders are aware and clear about what they want to establish and do so with faith in Allah, commitment to Islamic principles, and dedication to preparing future Muslims, they cannot fail.

## APPENDIX A

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### MONTESSORI: A MODEL FOR ISLAMIC SCHOOLS

Montessori's scientific investigations into how children learn many of which have been confirmed by current research; her brilliantly designed teaching materials that are self-correcting and involve all of the senses; the mixing of ages; the insistence on child-sized furnishings; learning by doing; the importance of intrinsic motivation, are all testimony to her genius and are generally accepted by many educators today, particularly by those who educate the youngest of children. The methodology of Montessori, however, is only the apparent manifestations of the deeper spiritual and philosophical basis that has caused so many Muslim educators to embrace her pedagogy.

Several principles that she held in common with Islam include an understanding of human nature that corresponds to the Islamic concept of *fitrah*; a commitment to the unity of creation, of knowledge and of humanity; an emphasis on the role of humankind and a dedication to peace education.

The Islamic School of Seattle was once featured in a publication that focused on the choice of Montessori education in three religious schools, our Islamic school as well as a Catholic school and a Jewish school. Montessori's mystical worldview is encompassed at the heart of the shared belief in a purposeful Creator and the conviction that humanity is His agent here on earth.

Montessori made the decision to resign from the medical profession and devote her life to educating children. She announced that she had committed to all the children of the world, born and unborn. Her influence was global. She did not differentiate among culture or class and her schools spread globally. To reiterate she believed that the primary role of education is to encourage peaceful cooperation and shed prejudices in order to achieve the will of God.

Her ultimate goal was peace and she was nominated three times for the Nobel Peace Prize. She believed that peace must start with the child who is free of the prejudices of adults.

Freedom of choice resulting in self-knowledge would allow the development of creativity and self-respect allowing each individual to

recognize his or her function in life. This genuine self-respect would naturally lead to a collaborative, non-competitive relationship of understanding among peers, eventually expanding outward to include all of humanity as well as an appreciation for the whole and interconnectedness of creation. Peace education is stressed in a Montessori classroom, cooperation is promoted and competition discouraged. Children are provided with the space and time to settle differences peacefully and naturally.

Indeed numerous Muslim educators believe that Montessori has come very close to developing an entire system that embraces many very fundamental Islamic principles. Montessori has the additional advantage of being complete with training, specific materials and a century worth of thought and expertise from her followers.



**The Author**

ANN EL-MOSLIMANY holds a science PhD in Botany, is author of Islamic books and science research papers, and is retired Educator and Founder of the Islamic School of Seattle, USA, of which she was Founding Director for just over forty years. .

## Notes

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**IIIT Books-In-Brief Series** is a valuable collection of the Institute's key publications written in condensed form to give readers a core understanding of the main contents of the original.

Ann El-Moslimany explores education from the essential principles of *Tawhid* (Oneness of God, humanity, knowledge); *fitrah* (concept of human nature); and the role of humans as vicegerents of God on earth (responsibility and stewardship).

The current education system dates back a hundred years or more, and is in desperate need of a 'reboot'. In developing the industrialised society, the education system itself became like a factory, the end product being pupils who merely regurgitate facts, and themselves end up as cogs in the machine that is the wider industrial complex. The legacy of this is a soulless 'functional' educational system that fails to develop pupils to meet the present and future needs of individuals and their expectations. This failure inevitably impacts on society and humanity at large. Society has long since moved beyond the industrial revolution and into an age of global connectedness where the sum of human knowledge is freely available via the internet. It is an age where people are generally more well informed and on a variety of issues.

An effective holistic educational philosophy is required, one that gives full spiritual meaning to all that a child learns. It should equip children with spiritual awareness, morals and values, social responsibility and accountability, self-discipline and self-determination, self-confidence and empowerment, ambition and aspiration tempered with thoughtfulness and a sense of gratitude.



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