Teaching Children: A Moral, Spiritual, and Holistic Approach to Educational Development

ANN EL-MOSLIMANY
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Dr. Ann El-Moslimany is a pioneer in the education of Muslims in the United States. She earned that distinction not merely for founding a school in Seattle, Washington; she is an innovator whose contributions were based upon practice in the classroom and intensive study of educational ideas and research. She shares both her investigations into ideas and her practical experience in this book.

El-Moslimany pioneered the creation of a holistic vision of education, honed in developing integrated curriculum across disciplines infused with Islamic values. The book offers a treasure-house of experience and thought based on what education should be, built upon a solid foundation in the history of education in the modern world and in the United States. On the other hand, she demonstrates with her work that Islamic (or Muslim) schools can offer more than a veneer of identity over a standard-issue educational model. Her book, like the school in which she worked for years, provides a model of what an education should be. If Muslim schools would cease to be viewed as exotic outposts of parochial education, or institutions that just happen to teach the three R's alongside religious indoctrination as some outsiders like to portray them, then their value in fostering holistic education could begin to be appreciated. It would also become a source for renewal in modern education overall if such ideas as she puts forth are taken seriously.

El-Moslimany dissects the relationship between religion and science, between materialism and spiritual life in both the Western and the Islamic cultural context. Her critique of the oft-lamented decline of Islamic thought and science is incisive. Her analysis does more than glorify a bygone past that Muslims often defensively deploy against Western claims of superiority in human innovation. Instead, she pinpoints the problems identified by scholars so that educators can pick up from where these historical losses occurred. One of those is the fairly early division between revealed and acquired knowledge, which eventually created a divide between religious and secular knowledge and the scholars who devoted themselves to one or the other. This was a key reason why religious scholars ceased to be well informed about worldly sciences, and vice versa. Western education

further developed this divide, especially through the conflicts between scientific advancements and church dogma and authority. Modern education not only underlined this division but legislated it into the system of government-funded schools.

El-Moslimany advocates for drawing upon the best of both Islamic and Western thought in education in overcoming this fatal division and makes a strong argument for placing the unity of Creation based upon *tawḥīd*, the Unity of God, at the center of educational thinking. She seamlessly incorporates the work of Muslim thinkers past and present with the work of progressive Western thought. El-Moslimany brings important books and ideas to the reader's attention for further study and captures their essential ideas in weaving her argument.

The most eye-opening aspect of her book for many educators is the way in which she draws upon critical historical studies of the rise of modern education systems. In forming Muslim schools, many American Muslims have taken for granted that the basic system of modern schooling is necessary and adequate and could merely do with the addition of courses in Islam and Arabic language, plus a school culture that protects students from the most damaging aspects of contemporary culture. She traces the history of modern education, both the industrialized system of government schools and its spread to colonized countries, with its managerial principles and de-individualization. Most especially, she homes in on the fragmentation of knowledge that occurred as subjects were separated into regimented compartments with rote knowledge to be "covered" unquestioningly, and the division of the secular subjects and religious subjects, the latter of which in the United States and some other countries were simply excluded from the curriculum. She contrasts this system with elite private and often progressive schools, which follow a different and more integrated curriculum. Some private schools' curricula are somewhat hidebound as well, but none so widely as Muslim schools, which have taken public education as their model, with few exceptions.

The thrust of the book's argument is that integrated learning both celebrates the unity of knowledge and corresponds with what science has shown about the way the brain learns. If knowledge is to become meaningful and retained in the learner's storehouse, it must build upon prior knowledge and be related in complex, creative ways. Learning must therefore be individualized and based upon making connections. It must involve all of the senses—for every student, not according to a scheme of learning types. She also cites many educational authorities in a progressive vein, who argue

for a balance of physical activity and concentrated study, incorporating movement and student expression, a learning program that involves the students in decision-making, allows critical thinking to form, and returns motivation from extrinsic to intrinsic. In short, the industrial management model of fragmented education is not only ineffective, but contrary to the nature of the universe and the richness of the *tawḥīdic* model of God's oneness. A citation by Vincent Cornell succinctly expresses how Islamic education can bridge the religion/secular education divide and sets out an ideal for balanced education: "participatory learning based in interleaved reading of the scripture and the created, lived world. It teaches humans about the nature of Divine Reality … The world is a book to be studied and learned by the person of knowledge. Both the scripture and the world are two registers of divine discourse—the texts of the Arabic Qur'an and the natural world."[1] In short, education is a seamless process that intertwines "sacred" and "secular," rather than separates them.

Just as the world and everything in it is the object of study, learning must not be limited to the closed world of the classroom or school. In accord with Islamic principles, it must be outward-facing, engaging with the world to guide students toward positive social contributions. As El-Moslimany wrote at the end of Chapter 7, "The end goal is to instill God-centered habits of mind that will enable our students to look critically at every problem, idea, event, controversy that they will experience in relationship to His guidance for how to live their lives on earth" (p. 43).

Another pillar of her argument is the contrast between behavioral psychology and its managerial bent—Behaviorism and the Islamic concept of *fiṭraḥ* (the inborn proclivity to doing good in each child). Cultivating the child's natural inclination to do good, to awaken the moral and spiritual sense, lies at the heart of this vision of education. In the beginning of Chapter 8, she asks, "Are we guiding and nourishing their *natural* tendencies to love God, to learn, to be the very best they can? Or are we assuming the worst, convinced that it is our job to rescue them from laziness and evil tendencies through regular, unrelated payoffs? Are we attempting to fill 'empty' minds with our own 'superior' wisdom, demanding silence and acquiescence while discouraging creative thinking, questioning and discussion?" (p. 45) The book takes the reader through a wide range of educational research on how children learn, how to establish equitable teaching practices for all students, and especially how to empower students to take charge of their learning and develop lifelong intrinsic motivation. She shows in myriad ways how the grammar of modern schooling relies

upon extrinsic motivation of rewards and punishments, teacher- rather than child-centered methods, and a resulting downward slope of the desire to learn in many students at alarmingly early ages. Based on her own experience as a teacher, and citing the experiences of other educators, she points the way toward integrated, holistic learning. Her argument is very convincing, but she makes no claim that the path is an easy one. It requires commitment, continuing study, and collaboration across the school over many years. With the help of this book, which should be read by teachers, administrators, board members, and parents, communities willing to innovate can find a way forward based on research and practical experience.

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Notes

1. "Teaching and Learning in the Qur'an" by Vincent Cornell, *The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (October 2005), http://jsr.shanti.virginia.edu/back-issues/vol-5-no-3-october-2005-teaching-and-scriptural-reasoning/teaching-and-learning-in-the-quran/.

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The Power of Education

JEREMY HENZELL-THOMAS
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The educational predicament in Muslim societies has drawn continuous consideration of academicians and researchers all over the globe. Various scholars have endeavored to spell out the issue by creating a niche in the present social order, but most are left with a cliff-hanger rather than any solid conclusion. Comparatively, slight attention has been given to the existing state of Muslim intellectual melancholy. The work *The Power of Education* is a better attempt to expound on the concept of education,