BOOK REVIEWS

Curriculum Renewal for Islamic Education: Critical Perspectives on Teaching Islam in Primary and Secondary Schools

NADEEM A. MEMON, MARIAM ALHASHMI, AND MOHAMAD ABDALLA, Eds.
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A number of edited volumes on Islamic education has been published in the last decade. These include volumes that survey education in the formative and classical periods of Islam (e.g., Günther, 2020); a global portrayal of the varieties of Islamic education that exist (e.g., Daun and Arjmand, 2018); and international perspectives on reform (e.g., Tan, 2014). Although Tan’s work dedicates a section to questions of reform and curriculum with a heavy emphasis on presenting primary data, the work under review here is the first of its kind that is dedicated to providing guidance for curriculum renewal in Muslim schools. Specifically, the editors focus on Muslim minority contexts in order to empower educators to conduct curriculum renewal themselves.

The contributors are educators and/or academics who have all worked in schools on curriculum development with varying degrees of leadership. This is evident in the insightful critique provided in many chapters on selective educational resources typically used in Muslim schools. The book is generally written from a Sunni perspective, though its guidance could have broader relevance and appeal. The intention of the editors is not for this work to be a prescriptive set of guidelines; instead, they take a broad approach, attempting to benefit educators in a variety of institutions and contexts. The work clearly demonstrates cognisance of denominational differences, and there is no proposal of a one-size-fits-all or standardized curriculum. Instead, this work offers a loose framework, and draws attention to the processes and considerations for those devising a curriculum in primary or secondary schools.

The introduction by Memon and Abdallah begins by stressing that every learning context in which Islam is taught is unique. They emphasize the importance of identifying the curriculum orientations of different institution types. These orientations include madrasa, Islamic school, Islamic studies/religious education, and world religions/multi-faith education. Once the
educators embarking on curriculum renewal have determined which of these orientations is most appropriate for their institution, they can then prioritize and focus on areas that accord with their context-specific aims, objectives, and desired outcomes. Consequently, the overriding curriculum orientation can assist in driving renewal, helping to strengthen existing curriculum orientation, and facilitating the recalibration of the curriculum in order to directly focus on neglected aspects.

The book is divided into three parts, with a total of 15 chapters. Part 1, entitled “Islamic Studies Curriculum,” provides a critical perspective on the teaching of traditional subjects namely, Quran, Fiqh, ‘Aqīdah, Sirah and Akhlāq. After critiquing existing curricula, each chapter provides pertinent suggestions for curriculum renewal. One notable contribution in Part 1 is Mohamad Abdalla’s chapter entitled “Fiqh (Practical Living) Curriculum Realities and Ideals.” Abdalla advocates for what he terms “Learner Responsive Fiqh,” in which the curriculum emphasizes flexibility and adaptability, reflecting students’ perspectives. He carefully draws on his own empirical research, balancing expectations from stakeholders (students, teachers, and parents) and encouraging an engaging, relevant, and ultimately contextual approach to Fiqh. One suggestion for readers as to how this might be achieved includes heightening awareness of legal methodology through teaching usūl al-fiqh, qawā’id fiqhiyya, and maqāsid al-sharī‘ah. Abdalla also provides a list of contemporary legal discussions, suggested to achieve a more “Learner Responsive Fiqh” and including questions centered around civic engagement, gender relations, and financial ethics.

Part 2, “Islamic Worldview Shaping Curriculum,” focuses on the integration of Islam with oftentimes contentious subjects (such as history, science, health and physical education, and music) across the school curriculum. This second part of the book is where its greatest strength lies, as it demonstrates that Islamic education is not merely about appending additional subjects to the national curriculum. Rather, the starting point is conceptualizing an Islamic worldview, thereafter beginning a process of integration. The four chapters in part 2 are rich with practical examples and lesson plans with sensitivity to different contexts.

One example is chapter 9, where contributor Dylan Chown draws on past studies of students’ experiences of health and physical education (HPE), as well as his own experience of curriculum renewal in an Islamic school. Chown demonstrates how HPE offers the opportunity for critical religious reflection on practical ways that faith informs healthy living. In chapter 10, Frances J. Leap et al. tackle the contentious question of music
and arts education, while thoughtfully navigating divergent opinions on the permissibility of musical instruments and limits of artistic expression. The chapter includes a detailed and practical list of instructional examples for teaching art and music, even providing lessons plans which might function as a template for untrained or novice teachers.

In chapter 8, Omar Qureshi provides a critique of the way science is taught today and offers considerations for Islamic schools in redeveloping science curricula. Drawing on his own extensive experience in the classroom, Qureshi notes that the tensions arising between theology and science lead to two outcomes. The debates are either skipped, because of demands to focus on the national curriculum, or simply dismissed as not consistent with Islam but something students need for their exams. The solution provided is that science teachers in Islamic schools require a natural sciences education as well as the necessary theological, philosophical, and social sciences training to address current challenges. Although this chapter offers guidance in the form of further reading, curriculum planning frameworks, and some personal reflection, it also demonstrates the extensive demands on science teachers in Islamic education settings. The philosophical thinking that Qureshi encourages through a rigorous kalām/mantiq lens is unlikely to be something science teachers can develop themselves. Not only does it demand a high level of critical evaluation of science education through concepts such as causality and propositional logic, but its success also depends on teachers’ professional development and seeking further education in an unfamiliar discipline. This seems like a tall order.

The chapters in the third and final part, “Islam Inspired Curriculum Renewal,” look at human development in Islamic education, approaches to learning and teaching derived from Hadīth Jibrīl, and pedagogical features gleaned from the history of Islamic education, ending with advice for educators on evaluation, redevelopment, and action planning. This final grouping of chapters is the most disjointed and at times can read like academic musings. Nonetheless, it is packed with benefits for the intended readership; for example, in chapter 11 where Claire Alkouatli encourages readers to think about who, when, and how they teach. By drawing on previous literature on Islamic dimensions of human development, relevant empirical studies, and Vygotskian sociocultural approaches to learning and development, Alkouatli provides suggestions for pedagogies that would cohere with Islamic human development.

Also noteworthy in part three is chapter 12 where Farah Ahmed provides a stimulating educational commentary upon an interaction between
the Prophet Muhammad and the Archangel Gabriel that was witnessed by the Prophet’s companions. Ahmed compellingly demonstrates how an academic or practitioner is able to draw out foundational concepts from prophetic narrations, which deepen understandings of Islamic education. She then weaves concepts traditionally derived from this particular hadith, namely *imān*, *islām*, and *iḥsān* with *ṭarḥiya*, *ṭalʿīm*, and *ṭāḥīb*, respectively. This particular contribution is another example of the possibility of a holistic, interdisciplinary education from an Islamic worldview, rooted in the tradition’s primary sources.

One limitation of this work is the surprising absence of chapters on Arabic language education, which is a hallmark of Islamic schooling, both formal and informal. The second limitation is the lack of guidance on assessment, which is a key component of any educational system. While readers might be able to gain insights and develop action plans from the varying contributions around learner objectives, course content, and pedagogy more generally, there is nothing offered as to how such proposed frameworks might be evaluated or how students could be assessed.

Overall, this volume provides an excellent resource that highlights contemporary research in the field while offering new directions for future research. Most contributions offer useful guidance for teachers and curriculum developers in primary and secondary schools. While a few are less practical, they do at the very least offer introductory explorations that could form the basis of discussion for curriculum renewal teams.

References


Ricky Bains
Lecturer in Islamic Studies with Arabic
Markfield Institute of Higher Education (MIHE)
Markfield, UK

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