BOOK REVIEWS

Education Transformation in Muslim Societies: A Discourse of Hope

EDITED BY ILHAM NASSER

Education Transformation in Muslim Societies draws on contextually grounded scholarship to offer a multifaceted perspective of education in Muslim societies. The chapters provide an eclectic mix of writings on a range of pedagogies and practices, and the varying strands of research in and on education are uniquely woven together by the common thread of “hope in context.” The idea of hope that is woven through this volume is more than an empty signifier, however, and is a multi-layered and multi-faceted concept that falls within the realm of situated knowledge (Laclau, 1996; Haraway, 1988). The book is divided into five parts comprising ten chapters.

The philosophy of hope outlined by Webb (2013) is an appropriate background for the reader of this book. Nasser’s discussion of these different kinds of hope sets the stage for a critical appraisal of hope in the context of Muslim societies, in particular those that either historically have or currently are undergoing socio-political shifts generating conditions of inequality, despair, and alienation. Rather than taking a Western normative view of hope, it is defined as “an orientation to pursue innovation and critical thinking as well as to promote creativity and initiative” (pg. 6). The five modes of hope outlined by Webb (2013) and the transformative education model of Tamashiro (2018) are perspectives that offer insight into the contributed chapters of the book.

The chapter by Nuraan Davids takes the normative stance one step further by discussing the Quran and Islamic conceptualisations of knowledge, particularly in the context of South Africa and the history of apartheid. Using an Islamic theological perspective to critique the construct of knowledge, she offers insight into the generalized view of knowledge we may hold unconsciously; that is, one that separates the rational from the religious. Building on reasoning as a core value that brings different kinds of knowledge into dialogue, she calls for an epistemology based on
Islamic values that includes, for example, the ethics of responsiveness to one's own identity and those of others, as well as toward the entirety of God's creations. These two thought lines that discuss falsely constructed hierarchies—one in knowledge and the other in social relations—make apparent the potential for transformation and an ethic of care that befits a position founded on a vision for coexistence, humility, and respect toward all of God's creation.

The third chapter's narrative showcases lived experiences of religion and the way these can serve as reservoirs to support the individual through the vagaries of life. Mualla Selcuk takes the reader on a journey of finding lessons in Allah’s names, a sojourn that is personal and inspiring. She offers a set of questions, by no means an exhaustive list, that can be used in combination with what she calls the Conceptual Clarity Model to support learners in drawing personal meaning from a faith-based pedagogy. Her inspired writing makes the reader ponder the ubiquitous lessons in religion that can be used to cultivate a lifelong understanding of faith-based values and meanings.

In chapter four, Sulhailah Hussein discusses the underlying notions of “otherness” in majority Muslim societies. Taking an inward-looking perspective, she discusses the society from the vantage point of postcolonialism. Though she puts forth what appear to be generalised claims regarding the nature of the society, the case study presented is contextualised and offers a portrait of practice involving young Muslim women. By engaging them in dialogue and framing a critique of gender roles as predominantly understood in a specific majority-Muslim society, she argues for a separation of the religious and the cultural that will be a transformative pedagogy and offer emancipatory hope.

Where the preceding chapters discussed the theorising of hope and drew on the authors' experiences of applying innovative practices, the next two chapters seamlessly build on this foundation of contextualised understanding for a discussion of practices and policies, respectively. Chapter five overviews a teachers' professional development program that was run over the course of one academic year in Palestine. Using quantitative data analysis to compare pre- with post-intervention scores on components of the Classroom Assessment Scoring Scale, the authors showcase the program's effectiveness in creating lasting change. Participants' views on the program, gained through interviews and focus groups, offer a holistic view on its strengths and weaknesses. The case study presents an optimistic view
of hope in several noteworthy ways. First, it offers insight by walking the reader through the detailed process of incremental change that occurred over a year. Second, it discusses teachers’ professional development in an experience-based, whole-school approach rather than taking a perspective in which teachers’ previous knowledge base possibly penalizes them for causes beyond their control. Third, looking at the differences in the program’s effectiveness between the West Bank and Gaza, the authors anchor the programs in context rather than presenting them as possibly foolproof solutions independent of underlying social realities.

Chapter six is an appraisal of the Multiple Intelligence teaching approach embodied in the National Strategic Plan adopted by Egypt’s Ministry of Education in 2007. The appraisal is based on the experience of English as a Foreign Language teachers in elementary private schools. Through purposive sampling, the narrative provides a nuanced look at the often invisible gap between ideals and realities. Teachers’ narratives highlight the need for a holistic approach that takes parents on board and is both bottom-up and top-down. The author argues that without overarching change in the culture of education and understanding of the process of learning and teaching, any aim toward multiple intelligences and learner individuality will be a pipedream. The chapter is a poignant reminder that any model aimed at strengthening the education process requires a partnership among all stakeholders.

Chapter seven returns to the question of hope in a changing world, but this time from the perspective of flourishing. Kraftt reflects upon the idea of hope from a Positive Psychology point of view and brings in the personal emotive characteristics of hope as a transcendental virtue (Kraftt & Walker, 2018). Not only does he extend the idea of hope to encompass personal flourishing but also discusses the role of education in guiding the journey toward personal fulfilment. The inquiry-based learning he suggests links the support of individual flourishing with the future of the broader cosmos of which we are a part—a much-needed salve for those seeking answers to humanity’s shared dilemmas.

Tareen’s discussion in chapter eight of education grounded in religion that encourages student voices is emotionally responsive and in step with digital futures. The context of his writing is an Islamic school in North America. He ranges widely over the everyday practices in school that respond to students’ emotional needs such as breathing exercises, reflection on behavior, taking perspective of peers, and so forth. The school system
described is one inspired by a dynamic understanding of students’ emotions and Islamic principles of compassion. In this regard, he weaves in digital futures that today’s students will embrace and portrays a supportive and trusting future environment that offers safe spaces for their faith-based and educational needs.

Syeed, in chapter nine, discusses faith as a “catalyst for hope and optimism.” By centering the argument in a framework of situated and fluid production and reproduction of identity, Syeed argues for a place-based understanding of education. His model would support young Muslims in interacting within and across different cultures, enhance their cultural literacy, and help support a dialogue between their identity and the wider social realities rather than bracketing faith out. The author further recommends principles and values that educators can draw on to support learning by meeting children where they are.

The concluding chapter by Wong and Pitts is an inspiring read that offers a hopeful account of education, of and for Muslims, that builds bridges across communities irrespective of their faith dispositions. Their contribution overviews the preceding nine chapters and offers an encouraging perspective on overcoming divisions and rising above “othering” by creating third spaces that respond both to the needs of the society and those of the individual. Hope and learning can occur in a particular space across a lifelong journey. Cultivating conditions for individuals to thrive is a task best performed with a holistic understanding. Faith and hope, with all their multiple definitions and dimensions, can help pave the way for an education that offers transformative potential.

This edited book, a product of the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies initiative by the International Institute of Islamic Thought, is a timely collection of work on the education process in Muslim cultures. It is a book that pushes the discourse toward a holistic understanding of hope and faith where neither the identity of the learner or the instructor nor education as pedagogy or practice are subsumed under a deficit perspective. Moreover, the insights offered on education also respond to questions pertaining to living in harmony in a decolonial world. As Mignolo (2018) wrote:

Modern ego-centered personalities are driven by competition; decolonial and communal personalities are driven by the search for love, conviviality, and harmony.
References


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