

BOOK REVIEWS

Improving the Pedagogy of Islamic Religious Education in Secondary Schools: The Role of Critical Religious Education and Variation Theory

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Routledge, 2021, 262 pages.

Muslim youth undertaking Islamic Religious Education worldwide face challenges in engaging with the repetitive and simplistic learning methods employed in their institutions. In contrast to non-religious subjects that benefit from dynamic and interactive approaches in learning institutions, the traditional teaching and learning of Islam often lack relevance to the real-life experiences of youth, leaving them ill prepared to navigate the complexities of the modern world. Ayse Demirel Ucan (2021) addresses these challenges in her book by proposing a new theoretical and pedagogical framework based on Critical Realism (CR), Critical Religious Education (CRE), and Variation Theory (VT). Her overarching objective is to revitalize Islamic Religious Education (IRE), align it with its intended purpose, and facilitate meaningful teaching and learning. She advocates for implementing the above framework in an Islamic studies classroom to enhance student learning and to provide Muslim youth with learning spaces to develop a strong Islamic identity. Her analysis assesses Islamic studies curricula from both a constructivist and a confessional approach, in a framework where authors avoid plurality within religion and explorations of Islamic movements or varying ideologies within Islam, and offers recommendations to enhance student experiences of IRE.

Demirel Ucan is a distinguished researcher in the religious education department at Marmara University, Türkiye, and her expertise in this study stems from her previous experience teaching religious studies to young girls in schools in Türkiye. Her experience as a teacher provides valuable insights into Muslim youth, and her proficiency in lesson planning was instrumental in implementing the intervention for this study. This book represents the culmination of her PhD study, showcasing her dedication to advancing the field of IRE.

She sets the stage for her study by offering an effective and powerful dichotomy critiquing the two leading trends in IRE: the confessional Islamic rote memorization and liberal/constructivist approaches, demonstrating a troubling identity crisis in IRE learners. She highlights the shortcomings of the confessional framework as rooted in the ontological truth claims of Islam, where the learner inhabits a state of passive learning devoid of agency and meaning-making. Additionally, she contrasts the liberal/constructivist methods in IRE, framing knowledge as constructed, contingent on perspectives and context, and subject to error. She criticizes the influence of such an approach on multicultural and multi-faith religious education contexts in Western countries. Her portrayal of the liberal approach as a myth is on point. She suggests it poses a contention between ultimate truth claims and modern ways of life, thus creating cognitive dissonance for learners and threatening multicultural ideals.

Ucan further asserts that IRE should go beyond the confessional and liberal approaches of mere knowledge acquisition and foster a deep understanding of core Islamic concepts; it is intended to guide learners through a transformative process known as *tarbiyah*, preparing them for a life of purity and sincerity (Badawi, 1979, p.110). She advocates for a more contextually relevant approach to IRE that acknowledges the existence of ultimate truth claims while making space for learners' experiences, autonomy, and diverse perspectives within the Islamic ontological and epistemological framework.

The book features a coherent arrangement of eight chapters, following the structure and style of a doctoral dissertation, with each chapter addressing a crucial aspect of IRE reform. This format suggests that its intended readership includes researchers and graduate students who are familiar with such structure and can engage with the content of some chapters. The initial three chapters delve into the philosophy of CR and VT with respect to the study. The fourth chapter outlines the research methodology used—a combination of interviews, videos, and written text—that provides a varied and diverse set of data that Ucan brings into cohesion. Phenomenography and VT were employed as analytical approaches, ensuring a robust and evidence-based approach to her findings. The subsequent three chapters provide new insights and information on the practical implementation of CRE and VT in RE lessons. Chapter seven delves into teachers' perceptions and practices before and during the learning study, providing valuable perspectives for curriculum developers and policymakers. Finally, the book concludes with a discussion chapter, which provides evidence for outcomes

contrary to those of the current IRE. Demirel Ucan's practical recommendations for the transformation of IRE practices include suggestions for lesson planning that consider students' diverse religious understandings and highlight the students' ontological and epistemological dimensions of their faith.

The study employs a combination of data that allows for a more authentic representation of the participants' voices. It encompassed two empirical research studies conducted at girls' secondary institutions in London, England, comprising one Muslim and one non-Muslim community school. A total of 58 participants, including both learners and teachers, were involved in the study. The author administered multiple consecutive lessons as interventions on "Islam and Being a Muslim" and "Equality in Islam." The researcher amassed multiple sources (such as interviews, written submissions, and video recordings from the participants, including teachers) at different times (pre-lesson, during the lesson, and post-lesson), contributing to both the reliability and depth of the research and corroborating information from various angles.

Throughout the book, Ucan references the limitations she identified at the beginning of her study, including the conflict between confessional and constructivist approaches, the disengagement of the youth, and the lack of diversity in IRE. She then illustrates how application of the theories helps resolve these challenges. Through the lens of critical realism, she brings together these oppositional approaches to create a rich and nuanced method that focuses on the existence of a reality independent of one's experience (ontological realism) while also acknowledging that individual knowledge is dependent on perspectives and experiences (epistemological relativity). Additionally, this combined approach uses the third foot of the critical realism stool—judgmental rationality—by honoring the learner's prior knowledge and experiences, which activates their capacity to critically assess and make informed judgments.

Second, to facilitate a deeper understanding of Islam and Muslims, the author incorporates VT while designing the intervention lessons of this study for students. This pedagogical choice of applying variance and invariance allows for different perspectives to be presented in an Islamic studies curriculum. For example, by contrasting Islam with other religious and secular worldviews, learners gained a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter, discerning predetermined critical aspects of "Islam" and being a "Muslim" along the way. Moreover, the inclusion of different variations in each lesson provides a customized approach to student needs and

enhances the students' learning experience. The author's teaching expertise emerged in her co-lesson planning with the teacher, and her previous experience teaching Muslim youth IRE. This combination of factors played a significant role in bringing the learning objectives to fruition, a task that only skilled teachers can accomplish.

Third, Ucan debunks the myth of presenting Islam in the IREs in the West from one perspective, which will purportedly lead to empathy and tolerance. She demonstrates that providing diverse religious perspectives assisted students in genuinely developing meaningful tolerance toward other worldviews and cultures. The author argues that without intra-religious and inter-religious diversity, students are left with a rigid, narrow, and superficial understanding of Islam. She advocates for the use of CRE to offer students opportunities to critically examine religious ideas and principles, encouraging exploration of the social, cultural, and historical contexts of religions while questioning assumptions and stereotypes. She is able to use her pre-study and post-study data to make sound analysis of the effectiveness of the lesson on this topic. For example, in her pre-lesson, students belonging to second and third-generation Muslim families exhibited tendencies to pass judgment on fellow Muslims who did not conform to certain expectations. Additionally, they perceived Islam in simplistic terms, failing to grasp its vibrant, social, and cultural nature. In her post-lesson data collection, after the deployment of CRE, Muslim pupils were able to acquire a nuanced understanding and differentiated perception of Islam vis-à-vis other religions.

It is important to note that while the author does not claim that students attained exhaustive religious literacy through a CRE approach, the findings highlight the students' ability to engage with Western-secular traditions and the Islamic worldview on their own terms. This reflective learning and higher level of understanding emphasize the potential benefits of incorporating CR principles into the educational context.

Educators who aim to explore the new pedagogical approaches discussed in this text may find certain sections theoretically dense. As it stands, this book is not suitable as a practical in-classroom tool for educators teaching IRE, but serves as an essential foundational text that can inform curriculum development at the institutional level. Despite the book's limitations, the findings offer great promise in reinvigorating IRE, as students become actively engaged and view their Islamic studies classes as dynamic, relevant, and applicable to the complexities of contemporary life. There are some entry points for IRE educators to incorporate the

lesson planning process enacted in this study. Educators can create a more engaging and effective learning experience by identifying critical aspects of learning and replicating the methods used in the study. By planning lessons with variations, encouraging critical reflection, connecting concepts to real-life scenarios, promoting student participation and meaning-making, and regularly reflecting and adjusting their teaching practices educators can foster a deeper understanding of Islamic religious concepts without the need for formal research. The release of a more teacher-friendly format based on the study's methods and findings may be readily accessible and beneficial for classroom teachers and curriculum developers in the field of IRE.

Demiral Ucan's study marks a significant contribution to the field of IRE. She provides a resource for overhauling IRE to create meaningful learning experiences, fostering an understanding of Islam that extends beyond memorization and embraces diversity and critical engagement. The book demonstrates that enriching Islamic education is possible to meet the needs of modern Muslim youth and create a nuanced, reflexive foundation for IRE.

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