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Editorial

We are exceptionally proud to share that, after just four years, JEMS has been accepted for Scopus, Elsevier’s abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature, which puts powerful discovery and analytics tools in the hands of researchers, librarians, research managers and funders to promote ideas, people and institutions. Scopus is curated by independent subject matter experts who are recognized leaders in their fields and covers nearly 36,377 titles (22,794 active titles and 13,583 inactive titles) from approximately 11,678 publishers, of which 34,346 are peer-reviewed journals in top-level subject fields. (https://www.elsevier.com/data/assets/pdf_file/0017/114533/Scopus-factsheet-2022_WEB.pdf) In its letter to the JEMS co-editors, the Scopus Content Selection and Advisory Board indicated that:

- JEMS consistently includes articles that are academically sound and relevant to an international academic or professional audience in the field.
- Although the scope of this journal is narrow, it addresses the need of an important niche audience.

This milestone affirms the commitment of JEMS to publishing academically rigorous research, book reviews, and essays. It also confirms our dedication to seek out and foreground research that examines the complex aspects of the broadest interpretation of education in Muslim societies. There has never been a time when research and scholarship were so important to the advancement and sustainability of Muslim societies, especially in the current age when artificial intelligence is taking over educational spaces and content. Education is a foundational imperative of Islam—not only for the purposes of knowing, but also how to be and to act—that can manifest Islam’s message that seeks socially just societies, communities, and relationships. The acknowledgement by Scopus also opens to the rest of the world the emerging scholarship generated in majority Muslim societies and engages a larger number of researchers in the academic pursuit of relevant new knowledge.

We know all too well the immense challenges facing Muslim societies and education given the myriad submissions to JEMS on topics ranging from early childhood development to higher education, and including pedagogies, policies, leadership, and management. These challenges sometimes
emanate from within Muslim societies that are struggling to frame and construct educational discourses that respond to a world increasingly out of equilibrium. At other times, the challenges, as well as provocations, are external and intent not only on propagating misinformation but also reflecting a growing atmosphere of denigration and Islamophobia. To cite one example, burning of the Quran, under the so-called auspices of democratic freedom, is an act devoid of any rationality that seeks merely to provoke and disparage Muslims and Islam. The only worthwhile response resides in Islam’s foundational paradigms of debate and deliberation even in the face of obvious incitements. In matters like these, the critical importance of reading, writing, thinking, and reflecting is especially pertinent, and the responsibility of research and researchers cannot be overstated.

Research should respond not only to contemporary crises and controversies, but should also study the possibilities of renewed forms of consideration, engagement, and peaceful co-existence. Research is motivated by a curiosity about the world and the inexhaustible scope of human existence. We are all connected in a “web of human relationships” (Arendt, 1958, pp. 183–184), despite geopolitical constructs in the form of borders and the resulting otherness they create. What happens elsewhere affects all of us. The more we scratch the surface of our existence and overarching inter-relatedness, the greater the need for more extensive and deeper questioning. There is no end to what we do not know and what we need to know. And hence, the unequivocal obligation to research and the resulting publications that cross the divides.

Our latest issue brings together an eclectic collection of contexts, insights, and arguments. In their article, “Negotiating Language Arts and the Islamic Identity,” Adrian Rodgers and Firman Parlindungan argue that faith-based settings provide an opportunity for children’s literacy development that intertwines religious literacy practices with the process of knowledge and identity building. In this regard, the role of teachers with diverse language and cultural backgrounds in the selection of texts and classroom activities is important. Kefah Barham, in “The Use of Reflective Journals in the Development of Teaching Skills and Teacher Education” maintains that reflective journaling practices, when applied in the Palestinian setting where people, including teachers and students, face challenges and hardships, can be a powerful tool for them to record their experiences and lessons learned. The author also argues that reflective journaling can assist Palestinian teachers and educators in processing their emotions, gaining insight into their thoughts and feelings, and developing a better grasp of themselves and their surroundings as well as developing constructive coping mechanisms. It can also be used to document the everyday struggles of living in an occupied
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territory, such as movement restrictions, a lack of essential services, and human rights violations. Furthermore, reflective journaling can provide a forum for educators and students to share their experiences with others to increase awareness of the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories.

Next is Khurram Shahzad and Muhammad Qaiser Shafi’s “Impact of Sense of Belonging on Forgiveness and Gratitude among Muslim Students: Mediating Role of Collectivism and Moderating Role of Religiosity.” They assert that inculcating values in the education process is necessary for belongingness, collectivism, forgiveness, gratitude, and religiosity and is essential for healthier relationships in daily life. Specifically, they show that a sense of belonging plays a positive role in enhancing forgiveness and gratitude in close interpersonal relationships and that understanding that need can help individuals be aware of and care about other people’s feelings. In our fourth article, Mahshid Tavallai analyses “The Representation of Iran (Persia) in the Young Children’s Picture books in North America” and reports that the common themes found in these books were relatively limited in scope with an emphasis on Nowruz stories and folktales. In turn, the predominant setting of the fiction stories, either partially or wholly, is outside of Iran, resulting in most of the books not shedding light on the contemporary life of Iranians. Our final article, “U.S. Islamic Schools’ Promotion of Physical Education and Physical Activity” by David Kahan, Thomas L. McKenzie, Maya Satnick, and Olivia Hansen utilized content analysis to examine the promotion of PE/PA on U.S. Islamic school websites. They found a hidden agenda in which the mention of PE was subordinate to nearly all other subject matter. Religious subject matter was prioritized which aligns with what parents most value about Islamic school education. This created impressions that PE and Islamic religious studies are not complementary.

In addition to these articles, we trust that our readers will benefit tremendously from an array of book reviews, a review essay, as well as an interview by our book reviews editor, Isra Brifkani, with Dr. Fathi Hasan Malkawi.

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References

In this article, we present a case study of a sixth grade English Language Arts teacher and her students at an American Islamic school. The perception in the literature is that schools are an important bridge for immigrants to engage with their adopted culture. We examined the curriculum and instructional practice of sixth grade ELA teacher Sarah El-Ahmed, who was teaching second generation immigrant Muslim children at Bright Star Muslim School (names are pseudonyms). We also examined the students’ responses to the teacher’s efforts to foster an Islamic identity orientation and integrate the beliefs and practices of Islam with those of the pupils’ adopted home. Our findings suggest an appropriate level of teacher support can be transformative for meaning and identity and help solidify an Islamic perspective in an intersection between secular and spiritual worldviews. This study suggests that the teaching of literacy may extend to reading secular as well as sacred texts to accommodate the sociocultural needs of the students.

Keywords: English language arts, Islamic identity, literacy practices, reading, Muslim school

The United States is home to Muslims from a diverse range of indigenous communities and Muslim countries (Mccluskey, 2018). Although Muslims in America face many challenges (Jackson, 2014; Elbih, 2015), including Islamophobia and anti-immigrant issues
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(Ghaill & Haywood, 2017), the Islamic community has worked hard to help its members assimilate a new life and culture (Barakat, 2018). This includes educating Muslim children to deal with what it means to be Muslim, American, and Muslim American (Khan & Siddiqui, 2017). Islamic schools in the United States therefore play a strategic role in helping Muslim students both deepen their faith and ease their integration into the fabric of America (Dangor, 2005; Davids & Waghid, 2016; Memon, 2011).

Despite this advocacy, the challenges facing Islamic schools have included issues related to financing, sustainability, professionalism, curriculum, and culturally relevant pedagogy. In addition, negative publicity and the growing discourse on violence linked to Islam (Boyle, 2006) have contributed to an increased level of scrutiny by education officials and policymakers, giving rise to questions such as “Do Islamic schools teach civic engagement?” and “Do Islamic schools teach students to be critical?” (Jasser, 2011). Despite challenges faced by Islamic schools in the United States, El-Atwani (2015) argues that they make possible a valuable multicultural education environment that teaches students how to develop themselves in different aspects of life while still maintaining Islamic traditions.

Research on identity (re)construction has received much attention particularly regarding its important contribution to students’ learning and development. In considering identity, we align ourselves with Gee (2001), who defines it as “being recognized as a certain kind of person in a given context” (p. 99), a process that includes language learning (Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; van Lier, 2007).

Zine’s (2008) examination of the role and functioning of Islamic schools for a Muslim diaspora in Ontario, Canada is relevant to this study. Through a lengthy ethnographic analysis, she found that Islamic schools serve the community as safe places for the reproduction of Muslim identity and lifestyle and are pivotal in creating a counterculture that is an intersection between what is right according to Islam and what is accepted in the larger sociocultural context of Ontario society.

Moreover, there is a growing consensus in the literature that conceptualizes children’s interaction with literacy (i.e., reading and writing activities) as a meaning-making practice (Glenn, 2018). Some have documented literacy practices in schools (Rodgers, 2014; Cardinale, 1999; Gutierrez, et al., 1999; Heer et al., 2016), faith-based settings like places of worship (Chao & Manterro, 2014; Garcia-Sanchez, 2014; Moore, 2008), and the significant role of home-literacy environments (Lily, 2011; Parlindungan, 2017; Wise-man, 2009). These studies suggest that interaction with literacy might be a
useful tool to learn language and culture because literacy is closely tied to larger sociocultural contexts and societal systems which change over time. Literacy connects children's identities and community heritage to the new world in which they reside (Heath, 2010).

Unfortunately, little is known about the teaching and learning of literacy in Islamic schools in the United States where students learn and develop general literacy skills and religious literacy (i.e., reading and writing activities in a sacred language) at the same time. However, current scholarship has demonstrated that faith or religious literacy activities (i.e., reading, writing, or memorizing sacred texts) in faith-based schools mediate students’ interactions with print and digital sacred texts and other secular texts (Fader 2009; Lytra et al., 2016; Rosowsky, 2008).

In this study, we posed two questions:

1. How does Sarah El-Ahmed focus her teaching of language arts in her classroom at Bright Star Muslim School?
2. How do students respond to the teacher’s attempt to implement a Muslim identity in school work?

**Theoretical Framework**

We used Vygotsky’s (1978) perspective on language learning to focus on how social interactions help people create meaning. For Vygotsky, learners actively construct meaning in interaction with others. Without denying learners as unique individuals, learning occurs in line with language development through social and cultural practices. Vygotsky maintains that language is not only a medium for learning but also learning itself. Children use language in the interaction of cognitive and social processes with their peers by presenting their ideas and experiences verbally in social learning environments.

The work of Lantolf and Thorne (2006) and Wertsch (1991) also underlines the importance of language and texts as they provide the opportunity for teachers to support student learning at points of difficulty. Learning may occur with the use of scaffolding language by teachers or knowledgeable adults when children are unable to solve the problem independently. Later, learners gradually internalize higher cognitive inputs that become thought. Learning happens first in the intercognitive process where children share their social speech and then moves to the intracognitive process where they use their private speech to problem solve (Wood,
1998). After that, children internalize higher cognitive inputs in which adult language is not merely appropriated but also transformed into their inner speech. That is how thinking and language develop according to Vygotsky (1978).

**Methods**

We used a narrative case study because we were focused on the teacher and students’ activity in their setting (Hammersley, 2013; Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). We chose a case study because it refers to a particular setting and time. We chose a narrative approach because we wanted to tell the story of one teacher and her students. We used the descriptive-holistic-analysis approach proposed by Barone (2011) to tell the stories of individuals (Creswell, 2014). For this study, the case is the teacher and her students in the ELA classroom.

**Participants**

We identified a teacher we knew named Sarah El Ahmed who was working in an Islamic school (all names are pseudonyms). She is 32 years old and has eight years’ teaching experience. She is an American-born Egyptian who speaks English as her primary language and Egyptian-Arabic as a second language. She holds a graduate degree in pedagogy from an education program ranked among the top 25 in the United States and a state teaching license in the content areas she teaches. She was selected because of her teaching excellence and the authors’ belief they would see appropriate pedagogic examples to help answer the research questions.

Sarah’s students in this study are considered second-generation immigrants because they were born in the United States to one or two foreign-born parents. Most of the parents speak a language other than English at home. They come from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds and their parents hold varied nationalities. However, they speak, read, and write in English. After confirming Sarah’s interest in continuing with the study, we completed our institution’s review process and received written permissions from the school, the teacher, and the students’ parents. We protected the anonymity of the participants by using pseudonyms. The participants were 20 sixth graders and their ELA teacher. Table 1 shows the teacher’s demographic information.
### Demographic Information of the Teacher Participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Information</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of teacher participants</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching experience</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language background</td>
<td>• English as the primary language</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Arabic as a second language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural background</td>
<td>American-born with Middle East heritage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational background</td>
<td>Master's degree in middle childhood education (Licensed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current position at the school</td>
<td>• Middle school ELA teacher (grades 6–8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Middle school lead teacher for social studies and ELA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Demographic information of the student participants can be found in Table 2 which was created based on a short questionnaire completed by the teacher. Some students spoke other languages, but all spoke English which allowed them to participate in the all-English classroom environment of the ELA classroom.

### Demographic Information of the Student Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total participants</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male students</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female students</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age range</td>
<td>11-12 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language background</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Somali</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Arabic</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Turkish</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Hindi</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ Country of Origin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Somalia</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Syria</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Egypt</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Turkey</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• India</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Based on Byrne’s (2016) recommendations, we collected the following data:

**Classroom Observations**

The first author observed every 2-hour ELA class for the second academic quarter which ran from October 2018 to January 2019 and also took field notes during that time. About 50 observations totaling 100 hours of instruction were made. The class and teacher interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded.

**Field Notes**

Using Richardson’s (2000) suggestion, the first author made observational, methodological, theoretical, and personal notes.

**Teacher Interviews**

Based on Kvale’s (2007) work, the first author conducted two types of teacher interviews: two semi-structured hour-long interviews at the beginning and end of the quarter with in-depth questions about teaching approaches and curriculum and short 1-2-minute interviews before and after lessons focused on clarifying teacher activity. Interview questions are reported in Appendix 1.

**Teacher and Student Work Samples**

Based on Bretschneider, et al. (2017), we collected teacher and student work samples. Teacher texts included work or guide sheets given to students and written prompts such as questions written on the board. Sample student texts included completed work or teacher guide sheets with written student responses. Figure 1 is an example of a student response to a guide sheet.

**Data Analysis**

To examine the teacher’s focus we first considered document analysis of the state’s ELA standards, the school’s published mission statement, the teacher interviews, and field notes from classroom observations. Data were transcribed using Duranti’s (1997) transcription convention, and categories from audio transcriptions were also applied to field notes and classroom documents. A second level of coding looked for patterns or themes across the data. Borrowing from Saldana (2016), provisional and sub-codes were made. Concepts, description, and literary methods were subsequently coded. Finally, thematic codes were added.
Provisional Codes

Initial codes like “vocabulary” and “power” were then sub-coded to, for example, “vocabulary = definition / ability to use” and “power = Islamic relations / hadith / expectations”.

Concept Codes

Concept codes considered both the relationship between the text and the students and students’ decision-making regarding the text. “Text = published/teacher made/student response” is an example.

Literary Codes

Literary codes included themes in classroom written materials. We applied multiple coding tags to data so we could track students’ vocabulary engagement. Table 3 shows how the codes are used.
### Coding Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conversations</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>First level</th>
<th>Second level</th>
<th>Third Level</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Publications</td>
<td>-Teacher Questions</td>
<td>-Student Questions</td>
<td>Engaging Questions that initiate conversation or that invite a member to contribute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Publications</td>
<td>-Teacher Questions</td>
<td>-Student Questions</td>
<td>Restating Questions that utilize the students’ words in a different way for better understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Publications</td>
<td>-Teacher Questions</td>
<td>-Student Questions</td>
<td>Clarifying Questions that try to make a question or comment clearer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Publications</td>
<td>-Teacher Questions</td>
<td>-Student Questions</td>
<td>Leading Questions that try to take the students somewhere or to bring them to a particular direction or understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Publications</td>
<td>-Teacher Questions</td>
<td>-Student Questions</td>
<td>Probing Questions that dig deeper beneath the surface of the initial student response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Publications</td>
<td>-Teacher Questions</td>
<td>-Student Questions</td>
<td>Extending Questions that push the conversation deeper without having a particular direction in mind</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Each category that was relevant and related was grouped into a larger category, while some of the data that was not relevant in the first round of grouping was merged or omitted. Data were tabulated on a lengthy tracking instrument with headings like participant, observations, curriculum text, learning, student generated text or assignment, supports, and other opportunities. This approach supported the confirmation of categories across data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

As a university professor, the second author had previously taught the case study teacher. The second author also supervised the project research and was the only non-Muslim involved with the study. Data gathering and coding were undertaken by the first author, so we were primarily concerned with faith aspects of his position. The first author shares the participants’ religious beliefs and feels he has similar cultural values. He was born and grew up in a family practicing Islam, learned Arabic in secondary schools primarily to understand the Quran and develop basic reading skills. He also learned English as a foreign language in elementary school but never used it conversationally until arriving in the United States in 2015.

The first author had limited interaction with students and situated himself as an observer on the participant-observer continuum (Barone, 2011; Brooks, et al., 2014). He would make casual conversation with the students before or after to limit disruption during the class session.

We focused on the degree to which the investigator’s conclusions correctly portrayed the data collected (Bloor & Wood, 2006) to support rigor. This included member checks, peer debriefings, negative case analysis, and data triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A peer debriefing strategy was also used to establish credible data analysis. Peer debriefing involved asking peers experienced in qualitative data analysis to review several transcripts and discuss the coding process to check for emergent themes and ideas (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefings were conducted with doctoral students in literacy who were engaged in qualitative research. Additionally, a university faculty member was included in the peer debriefing process.

There were 100 hours of observations made to enhance the depth of the analysis. We also checked with the teacher and learned that the curriculum and instruction in the second quarter were similar to other quarters. Based on these factors, we are confident as to the rigor of the study.
Findings

Two themes emerged from the analysis:

1. The teacher focused on literacy learning and the school’s religious mission.
2. The students were able to construct sacred meanings from both secular and sacred texts.

Negotiating Standards, School, and Parental Demands

As a private institution, Bright Star Muslim School complies with the curricular and managerial guidelines established by the state. However, some practical adjustments have been made, such as additional lessons on Arabic, Islamic, and Quranic studies, and particular codes of conduct regarding Muslim teaching, to serve the specific needs of the school community. Ms. El-Ahmed explained that she integrates state standards with Muslim beliefs.

The state ELA standards are built on integrating skills through reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language strands. Since these standards relate to and complement each other, Ms. El-Ahmed usually develops her teaching by simultaneously integrating multiple standards in the lessons. For instance, the state standards in the reading strand put greater emphasis on comprehension, so that plays a facilitative role in the language strand. Based on field notes and a review of the syllabus and unit plans, Ms. El-Ahmed designs learning that situates students to engage in discussion about the text. She frequently fosters student-teacher, peer, small group, and whole class discussions about published writing students read and sometimes about students’ writing.

Drawing on our codes related to vocabulary such as “ability to use,” Ms. El-Ahmed further indicated that in order to understand a text, the students may require particular vocabulary and the development of fluency to facilitate comprehension. She explained:

I explain to them the students, you know reading is for comprehension . . . The meaning of text starts from the vocabulary . . . so they need to know the vocab first . . . but if anybody is reading and they are not fluently reading, it’s harder for them to understand what they are reading . . . If they are stuttering or they keep pausing . . . they don’t understand.

Ms. El-Ahmed normally focuses on vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension, though in some instances when focused explicitly on teaching vocabulary in a first or second period class, she may introduce some new words and have the students practice them with partners or in small groups.
Again, drawing on our analysis, we note that Bright Star Islamic School adheres to the beliefs and teachings of Islam. The expectation is that in the process of knowledge building the students should perform appropriate modes of behavior rooted in the Quran and the hadith. The Quran is Islam’s holy book containing the words of God dictated to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) by the Angel Gabriel. Hadith are the recorded sayings of the Prophet constituting his daily practice, called the sunnah.

Ms. El-Ahmed explained that the parents of Bright Star Muslim School students did not want their children exposed to non-Islamic holidays and felt that most public schools fail to accommodate Muslim religious needs and practices:

The parents that I have spoken to and that have expressed their feeling why they bring their kids to this school, it's mostly because . . . they don't want their child to go to a school where they celebrate Christmas and other holidays that are not Islamic . . . So our school is pre-school through eighth grade, so they want their kids to grow up with Islamic values, and once they understand their religion, then they can go . . . make their own choice somewhere else . . . In public schools, there are a lot of things going on (like un-Islamic behaviors). So, they don't want their kids to be exposed to that at such a young age.

Ms. El-Ahmed believed she could meet the parents’ goals through a setting and pedagogical approach focused on study of the Quran and the hadith, their relation to secular texts, and the intersection between the two.

Developing Student Agency and Citizenship

Ms. El-Ahmed argued for students’ agency in developing their identities rather than external power or control from parents or the school. She explained as follows:

I actually had this conversation with our principal like a few weeks ago, and I was pushing for her to express to the other teachers, Islamic studies teacher, Quran teachers, everyone, that we need to incorporate more of the why things are not Islamic, you know. So, we are always saying, you know, it’s haram to have a boyfriend, drinking alcohol, or partying, you know, why though? The kids know that this is not okay, or they know that the hadith or ayat in the Quran, but do they actually know what it means? How does it relate to them today? You know, so they can make that connection.

In addition to gaining agency in the identity development process, Ms. El-Ahmed also focused on citizenship and leadership skills in her classroom. She explained that:
We want them to grow as role models and leaders of Muslim Americans, not just Muslim Pakistani, Muslim Egyptian. Muslim Americans living in America and be able to defend Islam or answer questions about Islam to people who may have questions, like sincerely asking why do you wear hijab? Because I have to, but why do you have to? So, we want them to grow up knowing how to answer specific questions and defending who they are if they need to.

As a lead middle school teacher, Ms. El-Ahmed used her position to negotiate with the principal her concerns on the importance of integrating Islamic knowledge and values in the curriculum. She said that:

... We need to incorporate why things are not Islamic... and what the hadith and the Quran say... and how does it relate to them today...

She wanted all teachers to engage the students to examine what is inscribed in the doctrinal texts and what is culturally acceptable in American social norms such as dating, consuming alcohol, and partying. She indicated that this conversation or curricular integration of secular and Islamic perspectives may create what Zine (2008) said is a counterculture that transforms the status quo of the Muslim students’ identity into cultural capital and a change agent (Heffner & Zaman, 2007).

**Using Discussion to Integrate the Curriculum with Islamic Values**

In the classroom context, Ms. El-Ahmed integrated her ELA teaching with Islamic knowledge and values. She designed post-reading activities as a means of implementing her philosophy. The primary emphasis centers on self-understanding, self-representation, and controversy surrounding the concept of Islam in the society. For example, Ms. El-Ahmed explained her strategy of integrating Islam in her ELA class using Islamic-themed texts as follows:

So, like you saw in the sixth grade I try to get themes and stuff from the book that we read and have them connect them to Islam and how it connects to today’s new world. So, like the group that said that the boy was praying at school and he was bullied, and there was a girl who was wanting to convert to Islam in the other group. I try to connect it that way with whatever we are working in with the curriculum. How it relates to Islam and how it relates to them in real life. And then I brought in Miss. X, to ask them questions based on her not being Muslim. So, she was asking them, in Islam you said this, this, and this, but why is it like this? So, they have to think like ‘Wow, okay, why does Islam say that?’ And I think that they do a great job with the hadith and things like that, and explaining the meaning of it.

Ms. El-Ahmed focused on deep levels of understanding applying ideas that could be identified through coding. Here we can see the focus was on
students building their own agency by applying ideas in authentic contexts like responding to classroom visitors. Student agency is crucial in learning because it embodies setting goals, evaluating, and taking responsible action to bring about change (OECD, 2022).

One of Ms. El-Ahmed’s strategies for integrating Islam with the lessons was asking the students to create common themes found in texts, either written or spoken. They were then asked to find connections between those themes with Muslim values written in the Quran and the hadith with the current socio-cultural norms in which they are embedded. The students defended their arguments in a question-and-answer session led by a non-Muslim classroom guest. This discussion complemented the ELA lessons in which the students’ learning of the secular texts was extended to the sacred texts. By secular texts, we mean commonplace stories and novels in the language arts curriculum that are not explicitly about Islam. In other words, this strategy is a way to mediate the students’ understanding of the world through a Muslim lens that may broaden their perspectives about different socio-cultural practices and beliefs and may strengthen their own self-representation as Muslims.

The classroom discussion often revolved around Islamic knowledge and values and took place not only during reading but also in specific activities that connected reading and Islam. For example, Ms. El-Ahmed had her class read the book *Bud Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999). The book tells the story of a young boy in Michigan during the Great Depression who is sleeping in a shed after living in an orphanage and escaping from a foster home. He is traveling on his own to find a musician named Herman E. Calloway whom he believes to be his father. Ms. El-Ahmed then assigned the students a small group project in which each group was assigned a theme derived from the book such as:

1. Discrimination and racism
2. Compassion and forgiveness
3. Knowledge and wisdom
4. Family
5. Helpfulness
6. When God closes one door, He opens another, or Opportunities

In this assignment, the students had to research Muslim perspectives for each theme. They then presented their themes and findings in the form of a “freeze frame,” pantomime, or role play. They were graded based on their:
1. Group work
2. Individual work
3. Accuracy and relevant information
4. Clarity
5. Volume and confidence while presenting
6. Ability to support the claim

In one lesson, four students were working in a small group and talking about their project. This conversation was representative of many responses by students in the class.

Fatimah: Let’s go over some hadiths. So, basically The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, said that ‘there is no superiority for an Arab over a non-Arab, nor for a non-Arab over an Arab. Neither is the white superior over the black, nor is the black superior over the white—except by piety.’

Husna: Is that about the racism?

Fatimah: Yeah, also discrimination.

Nuh: Did you guys add anything to the story? Because remember when how Ibrahim was trying to help, and . . .

Ibrahim: Let’s see this one. We’re going to also explain the hadith. ‘The real patience is at the first stroke of a calamity’ and then on the bottom of it write a problem.

Fatimah: So what is calamity?

Ibrahim: Calamity is like problem, so on the bottom write problem. Patience has to do with racism.

This short transcription reveals a number of thought processes. First, we see students grappling with vocabulary. Second, we see students considering religious instruction. Third, we see students trying to make connections to social problems, and fourth, we see them beginning to puzzle over creating explanations. The students take turns and begin a collaborative discussion of alternatives and evaluation. In this discussion they are trying to convey the meaning of the hadith and ensure that it is aligned with the meaning from secular texts.

After reaching a consensus about their presentation, the group performed a role play for the entire class in which a Muslim child was bullied by other students when he was praying in a public school. Ms. El-Ahmed then asked them a few questions relative to their performance and argument about the theme:
Nuh: Introducing the characters.

Husna: So basically I hate him—pointing at Nuh—explaining the perspective of a character in the reading and not her own perspective. I was like why is he praying at school, so I bullied him because he has different religion and . . .

Ms. El-Ahmed: So what was your theme?

Students: Discrimination

Fatimah: We have some hadiths about it.

Ms. El-Ahmed: Before you say the hadith, what does Islam say about bullying and stuff?

Nuh: Islam says that it’s not okay to bully because they are a different race, or religion, or they believe in something else. It’s still not okay. You should actually be having a nice talk about it. You should be able to share your differences to each other. The Prophet, peace be upon him, said: ‘There is no superiority for an Arab over a non-Arab, nor for a non-Arab over an Arab. Neither is the white superior over the black, nor is the black superior over the white—except by piety.’

Husna: The Prophet, peace be upon him, said ‘The real patience is at the first stroke of a calamity.’

Fatimah: So basically, what the hadith says is if someone is being racist to you or someone does bad things to you, you should not be backfired or something. You should remain calm and be patient. At the end of the day you’ll be a better person.

Nuh: So basically, you know when bullying causes someone else to feel sad and alone, and actually make them angry. This is what we are doing. So, I was bullied right. And if someone was helping me, he will eventually get bullied too for being friends with me. So that’s the consequences of being friends with the one who is bullied.

Ms. El-Ahmed: So what does Islam say about standards?
Nuh : Islam says about standards—even if we were gang bullied, by standard, you should be helping other people even though they were being gang bullied, you know, discriminated, just because being a different race or different religion, they still should, you know.

Fatimah : Also, Islam says about if something bad happens, if you can’t stop them by hands, then you should stop them with your tongue. If you can’t stop them with your tongue, then you should pray for them in your heart.

Here students apply knowledge about Islam discussed in the small group to the whole-class presentation where Ms. El-Ahmed further contests their arguments. Readers can see that Ms. El-Ahmed makes four carefully placed queries. Three of them are quite short and prompt students to move from one-word responses to higher order thinking that applies sacred values to a secular text. The coding scheme that identified clarifying and probing was especially helpful to identify this teaching technique.

DISCUSSION

It is not possible to generalize from this study to other studies or, for that matter, beyond this classroom. Nevertheless, concepts developed in this study could be used for future research to determine applicability to other settings.

Ms. El-Ahmed considered state standards and the viewpoints of the school and parents to support her students in developing deep levels of understanding that bridged secular and sacred texts with the goal of facilitating student agency in identity construction.

Ms. El-Ahmed was able to implement state standards in a way that aligned with the mission of the school and the parents’ goals. She focused students’ reading, writing, and responding, skills identified in the standards on secular texts, but was also able to support students in integrating Islamic knowledge and values through literacy activities or instructional tasks directed by her. This study extends the work of Zine
(2008) in that Ms. El-Ahmed did not focus on classroom interaction with text during literacy teaching. We found that classroom knowledge appropriation, in which the students’ awareness of the world is obtained from secular texts, is filtered through the lens of Muslim beliefs and values inscribed in the sacred texts (Zine, 2008) and facilitated by the teacher’s pedagogical techniques. Meaning-making practices connect student identities and their home culture to the new world in which they reside (Heath, 2010).

Ms. El-Ahmed structured the literacy events in her classroom so that students could make meaning based on texts and then extend that to deep levels of application. This mediation of language and talk about or around texts (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Wertsch, 1991) helped support identity construction through social relationships between the teacher and students and among the students in classroom conversations.

Ms. El-Ahmed’s classroom changed when the discussion topic shifted from textual information to Islamic content. The student talk was extended and there was less control of turn taking from the teacher in discussing Muslim misconceptions compared with that of textual information. Although student talk was longer, the teacher nevertheless made carefully considered, often short clarifications and probes to support depth of understanding. One of the reasons was that the students held interpretive authority on the topic, derived from their prior knowledge and cultural proximity.

Reading secular texts through a religious lens may be a possible gateway for every member of the learning community to use both secular and spiritual knowledge as a legitimate way of knowing and understanding the world in a changing learning environment. In this way, knowledge may be produced, formed, and transformed in an intersection between secular and spiritual worldviews (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Shahjahan, 2005).

All student participants in this study are considered second-generation immigrants born in the United States to one or two foreign-born parents, and most of them speak a language other than English at home. Since they have diverse cultural backgrounds (Bourdieu, 1977), reading texts that connect their identities and home cultures may help them better understand the new social environment (Heath, 2010) and
mediate comprehension (Drucker, 2003; Toppell, 2015). Furthermore, children’s engagement with sacred texts in religious education practices strengthens the connection between language, literacy, and identity on a daily basis.

CONCLUSION

The major theoretical claims made in this study are that faith-based settings provide an opportunity for children’s literacy development that intertwines religious literacy practices with the process of knowledge and identity building. Since this study’s findings are not generalizable and may not be reflected in other contexts, readers need to evaluate the question “What is this the case of?” and examine the “inferential bridge” (Shulman, 1997, p. 14) between this and other cases.

This teacher’s careful examination of what texts and classroom activities were options for students with diverse language and cultural backgrounds may be a fruitful approach for other teachers. Teaching literacy to students with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds requires selection of texts that address both the target culture and the students’ own culture. The proximity between the two cultures represented in the texts may facilitate students’ reading comprehension. Additionally, culturally relevant texts may mediate student understanding of the larger sociohistorical contexts in which they reside. If the school is a religious school like Bright Star Muslim School, text selection could consider the schools’ religious values so that students have opportunities to develop knowledge and identity which are aligned with their community.

References


**APPENDIX: EXAM PAPER**

1. What informs (theory) your perspective of teaching and learning?
2. Describe your theoretical framework in teaching literacy.
3. Describe your instructional goals and how they align with the school, state, and national standards.
4. Are these goals what your students need?
5. What kinds of teaching strategies do you use? Can you describe?
6. Describe the types of difficulties English Language Learners (ELLs) face in your literacy class.
7. How do you define reading?
8. Describe how you see students as readers.
9. What are the criteria of successful readers?
10. How do you think assessment results influence children’s attitudes toward reading and toward learning in general?
11. Can you give an example of the types of assessments you use on a regular basis? Why do you use these regularly? How do you use the results?
12. Describe the types of behaviors you would like to see in a student you consider an ELL.
13. What kind of support do you provide for ELLs? In what context?
14. Describe other opportunities that you think can help improve your ELLs’ literacy development.
15. Do English monolingual students receive/need similar support? Why or why not?
16. What types of texts do you provide for all students?
17. Are there additional/supplemental texts for ELLs?
18. Do you consider text complexity in selecting text? Why (why not) and how?
19. Describe the kinds of discussions you have around texts with all students and ELLs.
20. What aspects of discussion do you think help ELLs improve their literacy? How? Give an example.
21. What kinds of assignments do you design for all students?
22. Are there additional/supplementary assignments for ELLs?
23. Describe how these assignments are relevant to what you teach.
24. Is there anything else you would like to discuss that has not been mentioned?
There is a significant literature on the value of journaling to support teachers in reflecting on their pedagogical practices as well as their duties and obligations as educators. Institutions of teacher education should therefore provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop their self-reflective skills. A mixed-method action research approach was used in this study to examine the perspectives of teacher candidates in the occupied West Bank on reflective journaling (RJ). The development of professional reflective and critical thinking is one of the goals of higher education (Berger & Youkeles, 2000). The use of reflective journaling as a teaching tool may be of use to professionals learning the abilities required to lead a classroom. The key question this study addresses is: What are teacher candidates' experiences with RJ during their practicum course? A triangulated, mixed-method approach was employed and converging quantitative and qualitative data were collected through questionnaire responses and interviews. The study's findings suggest teacher candidates benefited significantly from writing reflective journals in developing motivation and self-confidence and strengthening their writing skills.

**Keywords:** reflective journals, reflection, pre-service teachers, Palestine, practicum

Educational experts generally concur that reflection is critical in the field of teaching and teacher education (Hojeij, et al., 2021; Jenkins & Clarke, 2017; Boud & Walker, 1998). Self-reflection and reflective practices are a vital part of the educational curriculum, as they foster higher-order thinking and self-regulation ability in students (Kovanovic, et al., 2018). Boud and colleagues (1985) define reflection as encompassing “intellectual and affective...
activities in which individuals engage to explore their experience in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations” (p. 33).

In this study, I reflect on the positive impacts of journal writing in teacher preparation and explore how this might look in the context of Nablus in the Palestinian Occupied Territories. To this end, I asked registered students in practicum courses at An-Najah National University’s Faculty of Education to keep reflective journals during their practicum fieldwork. Specifically, I wanted to look at these teacher candidates’ use of journals and observe how they react to the journal writing experience. The study is designed to answer the following questions:

1. How did the teacher candidates perceive their reflective journal writing experiences in the practicum course?
2. What are the benefits of the reflective journal as perceived by teacher candidates during their practicum course?

I was curious about the use of reflective writing and its impact on students in the Palestinian environment because it was their first experience writing reflective journals. Furthermore, stakeholders’ (instructors, university faculty, and department policymakers) critical assessment of what happens when teacher candidates employ reflective journaling in the practicum course may help them increase the quality of the practicum experience to prepare better qualified future teachers.

**Literature Review**

Educational researchers tend to agree that reflection is critical in the field of teaching and teacher education (Apgar, 2022; Hojeij, et al., 2021; Kolb, 2015). One primary way to engage in reflective practice is through journal writing both to inform and record teachers’ learning and growth (Afzali, 2018; Cengiz, 2020; Dumlao & Pinatacan, 2019).

Current research reveals that journal writing helps educators during all phases of their careers in refining their knowledge (e.g., pedagogical, conceptual, theoretical), teaching practices, and the self-evaluation of their performance (Alt & Raichel, 2020; Lindroth, 2014). Lee (2008) argues that journaling can activate teacher candidates’ thinking and encourage meaning-making during the learning process. The journal-writing process can help learners (including teachers) examine their thoughts and guide them to succeed as they move forward (Burton & McNamara, 2009). Researchers frequently refer to this process as *critical reflection*, wherein writers generate deeper meaning from their experiences at a more advanced
stage (Cengiz, 2020). As a result, reflective writing is a pedagogical method that can improve critical thinking (Han, et al., 2018) and an important tool for encouraging introspection (Khanjani, et al., 2018).

A significant number of research studies have investigated and highlighted the usefulness of reflective writing in influencing teacher candidates and in-service teachers’ professional development and improvement (Denton, 2018; Hojeij, et al., 2021; Khanjani, et al., 2018; Cengiz, 2020). Reflection allows teacher candidates to develop knowledge by asking questions, criticizing, assessing, and assisting them in bridging the gap between their imagined beliefs and the realities of teaching (Denton, 2018). Reflection assists prospective instructors in critically examining their work and making sensible and practical decisions about what to do in certain situations (Hojeij, et al., 2021; Khanjani, et al., 2018). It is vital to prepare teacher candidates for critical thinking and reflection-based instruction. The interaction of their knowledge and beliefs with the teacher education curriculum, including field experiences, will help instill in them more sophisticated views of the teaching and learning process (Hojeij, et al., 2021; Lee, 2008). As Lee (2008) explains, journaling is reflective writing that requires prospective teachers to develop knowledge by challenging their beliefs about teaching and learning.

Journaling also is essential to bridge the gap between theory and practice and establish professional and personal competencies (Khales, 2016; Raba’ & Tanni, 2016), which is why practicum courses have long been a crucial component of any university-based teacher preparation program (Afzali, 2018; Astuti & Drajat, 2022; Raba’ & Tanni, 2016). The practicum component allows teachers to practice inside the classroom, and prepares them for authentic teaching and learning environments, cultivating their classroom experience while developing pedagogical and practical skills (Farrah, 2019; Khales, 2016). Raba’ and Tanni (2016) emphasize that the quality of every practicum experience can be improved if teacher candidates are guided in finding and utilizing learning opportunities and are engaged in a structure that helps candidates examine and analyze their settings in ways that build on prior knowledge. As a result, colleges of education, government education bodies, and schools should work closely together to achieve their intended outcomes for all stakeholders.

Reflection is a self-examination and self-discovery process that can help us understand our own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. It is an
The Use of Reflective Journals in the Development of Teaching Skills

Barham

essential tool for psychological development and growth. Several reflection theories have emerged over time, each offering a distinct viewpoint on how we can use reflection to improve our lives (Irvine & Johnstone, 2007). The most influential theorists in the area of reflection on whom this study will center are Kolb (1984), Schön (1984), and Brookfield (2017).

The Experiential Learning Model developed in 1984 by psychologist David Kolb proposes that learning is an active process in which individuals construct their own knowledge and understanding through reflection and experience. The model offers a useful framework to understand how people learn through experience and reflection. It divides learning into stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

The first stage of concrete experience entails direct involvement with a situation or action. The model’s second stage, reflective observation, involves reflecting on and analyzing the experiences obtained during the first stage to gain insight into what was learned. This can be accomplished by writing or conversing about one’s experiences, or through activities such as brainstorming or journaling. The third stage of abstract conceptualization applies what was learned in the first two phases to new situations or contexts to viewing things from various angles and employing creative problem-solving to generate new ideas or solutions. Finally, the model’s fourth stage of active experimentation puts what was learned during all three previous phases into practice in real-world situations.

Donald Schön (1984) has had a significant impact on our understanding of professional practice and what it takes to become or train a professional. Schön’s contribution was to place reflection at the heart of what professionals do by introducing the reflective practice and reflective practitioner concepts within the learning process. This process encourages practitioners to reflect on their own experiences to gain insight into their own behavior and beliefs. It focuses on bridging the connection between theory and practice and is rooted in the idea that practitioners can learn from their mistakes and apply what they have learned to improve their performance. Through Knowing-in-Action, Reflection-in-Action, and Reflection-on-Action, Schön (1984) claimed reflective practitioners should be able to spot problems, analyze them, devise solutions, and then evaluate the outcomes of their efforts.

Stephen Brookfield (1995) developed the concept of the four lenses of reflection, which suggests there are four distinct ways of looking at any situation or experience that can be used to gain a more comprehensive
understanding. The autobiographical lens reflects one’s own experiences and emotions and urges people to consider how their personal experiences have shaped their perspectives and beliefs. The critical incident lens focuses on investigating a specific event or situation to determine what went wrong and why. This lens helps people identify patterns in their behavior and determine strategies for development. The critical analysis lens examines a given situation from different angles to gain a more complete understanding and encourages the study of different viewpoints and objectively evaluating them. Finally, the fourth dimension is the collaborative inquiry lens which involves engaging with others to jointly explore ideas and solutions (Brookfield, 2017).

Many teachers already think about their teaching; they may initiate a process of reflection in response to a specific problem that has developed in their classroom, or they may just engage in considering ways to strengthen their teaching as they proceed in their careers. Farrell (2019) found that a good teacher could think through a situation and make judgments based on that reasoning. Through their reflections, they may figure out why things happened (Mohamad, 2013) and may generate remedies or strategies to ensure things go differently in the future. Teachers can record their thoughts in reflective journals and record concepts, experiences, or interactions to obtain insight into self-awareness and learning (Thorpe, 2004). These reflective journals can then become a permanent record of one’s ideas and experiences. Teachers could use those journals to review their own performance or create an academic relationship with a mentor to further strengthen their teaching (Denton, 2018). Schön (1984) defined this cycle of thinking as reflection in action and deemed it a crucial component in the development of teacher candidates.

To summarize, reflective journaling is an effective method for pre-service teachers to gain insight into their own teaching practice and reflect on their classroom experiences. Pre-service teachers can also pinpoint areas for development and devise strategies to address them.

According to Lee (2008), four types of journals are commonly used in teacher preparation: discussion or dialogue journals, response journals, collaborative/interactive group journals, and teaching journals. As Lee (2008)
explains, discussion or dialogue journals involve teachers and students writing and exchanging writing in the same document or book to engage in mutual reflections and discussion. In response journals (or diaries), students record "their personal reactions to, questions about, and comments on what they read, write about, see, listen to, discuss, do, and think" (Parsons, 1994, p.12, as cited by Lee, 2008). Teacher candidates participate in collaborative/interactive group journals by writing and exchanging journals with peers.

Response and teaching journals, as opposed to conversation journals, emphasize the teacher candidates engaging with themselves in a reflective process that develops self-understanding and reflectivity. In contrast, collaborative/interactive group journals focus on group dynamics and synergy created by requiring teacher candidates to take responsibility for learning by sharing ideas and developing insights among themselves, as well as considering a variety of viewpoints among colleagues. This ability will help them throughout their careers (Lee, 2008).

A response journal is "a notebook or folder in which students record their personal reactions to, questions about, and reflections on what they read, write, observe, listen to, discuss, do, and think in a variety of formats" (Parsons, 1994, p. 12 as cited by Good & Whang, 2002). It encourages teacher candidates to ask questions, confess confusion, establish connections, identify with others, and grow and change philosophically by inviting them to actively engage in reflective thinking (Good & Whang, 2002).

In a study at Alquds University in Palestine, Khales (2016) investigated the function of reflective dialogue to help student instructors overcome problems in a practicum course. Khales discovered that reflective dialog alleviated practicum students’ challenges, raised their self-confidence, and enhanced their capacity to communicate with their students and among themselves.

This research was conducted at An-Najah National University in the northern part of the Occupied West Bank, Palestine, in the Faculty of Educational Sciences and Teacher Training, which prepares students to be future teachers.

Palestine became a political entity following World War II as a result of the 1948 Palestinian War, and the area designated by the UN partition has been occupied by Israel ever since. In 1967, Israel seized East Jerusalem and occupied the West Bank and Gaza, establishing the Occupied
Palestinian Territory (Nicolai, 2007). Officially, the West Bank and Gaza occupation ended with the 1993 Oslo agreement, although Israel’s occupation on the ground continues to this day.

The Palestinian education system developed in its formative years against a backdrop of ongoing crisis, recurrent emergency, low standards, and challenges in engendering a common Palestinian ideology and vision. The establishment of the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) under the Oslo Accords put Palestinians in control of and gave them the opportunity to prioritize their own national education system (Affouneh, 2007; Mikki & Jondi, 2010; Nicolai, 2007).

Despite enduring great hardships under occupation, Palestinians continue to put a high value on education and view it as a critical component of resistance and the hope of living a better life. Education is the Palestinians’ primary political weapon against the existing situation of routine violence and Israeli occupation; the ability to learn inspires the desire for justice and independence (Pherali & Turner, 2017).

It is clear in this context that teacher preparation is of the utmost importance in Palestine. According to Barahmeh (2016), practicum courses in Palestinian institutions follow three stages: observation, participation, and evaluation. During the observation stage, teacher candidates spend their time in cooperative schools where they can observe school norms and environments. They attend lessons with their mentor teacher in these institutions to become familiar with the procedures and activities that occur both inside and outside the classroom. For several weeks during the participation stage, the student teacher engages in educational activities, experiences, and responsibilities both within and outside the classroom. They are obliged to participate in school committees, events, and tasks at this point. They must design and facilitate lessons as well as deliver some instruction with the guidance and support of the cooperating teacher. Academic supervisors make on-site visits to provide orientation, advice, suggestions, and support to candidates.

In the final evaluation stage of the practicum experience academic supervisors visit student instructors at least twice during the training term. On the initial visit, the supervisor provides encouragement and criticism, as well as observing and analyzing teaching aids and lesson planning. On the second visit, the academic supervisor evaluates and grades the student teachers’ performance. The portfolio is the most critical component of this strategy, as each teacher candidate has been tasked to prepare a portfolio that includes instructional aids, CDs, charts, daily diaries, and lesson plans.
During their term of study, teacher candidates are based in school settings and engage in six sequential practical courses. The first begins with minimal observations in schools and the last one includes 120 hours of teaching in a classroom setting. At each of the six levels, teacher candidates go through the three stages described above: observation, participation, and evaluation (Barahmeh, 2016). The study described in this paper is focused on three sections of practicum 5, wherein teacher candidates have 90 hours of contact within a school.

The course is divided into theoretical and practical components, with 16 hours spread over the semester. The theoretical sessions take place at the university to examine theory connected to practicum and teaching techniques and procedures. The course also includes 90 hours spent by student teachers in practical education schools under the supervision of academic supervisors and teacher mentors. Students go through the three levels of practicum observation, partial teaching, and entire teaching, just as in any other practicum course. This teaching of skills in each level covers all aspects of the educational environment, such as designing and implementing a unit of study, classroom management, teaching tactics, student evaluation, creating instructional aids, and the use of educational technology. Within this level, the student-teacher implements various classroom circumstances by teaching a full day, serving as a support teacher, and assisting the mentor teacher in following up with students to accomplish classroom activities.

**Participants**

This study focuses on three sections of a practicum course for teacher candidates who are in their third- and fourth-year curriculum of their undergraduate degrees. Table 1 presents information on the number of students and their majors across three sections of the practicum course for teacher candidates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practicum Course Sections</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Majors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Section 1</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Teaching Lower Elementary Grades, English Language Teaching, Other Teaching Methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Teaching Lower Elementary Grades, English Language Teaching, Other Teaching Methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Teaching Lower Elementary Grades, English Language Teaching, Other Teaching Methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>71</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Creswell and Clark (2018) stress the strength of mixed-method exploratory research designs in achieving broader understanding of an investigated topic. This study adopts a mixed-method approach that combined quantitative data from questionnaire responses with qualitative data interviews. The quantitative questionnaire responses will help answer the second research question focused on students’ five perceptions in the practicum drawn from a reflective notebook compiled during the course. I expect this approach will incorporate the strengths of both data collection methods while removing their limitations (Creswell and Clark, 2018).

The qualitative aspect of the research was for the richness and nuance in-depth interviews (Farrah, 2019) would offer researchers to help them address the “how and why” issues. The semi-structured interview used ensured the responses would address the research topics and help determine how teacher candidates perceive their reflective journal writing experiences in practicum courses.

The mixed-method research design relied on responses and interviews from a questionnaire that was created based on the my examination of the literature. I created an appropriate questionnaire to understand students’ perceptions and experiences using the reflective response diary. Farrah’s (2012) study and other literature affected the construction of the questionnaire statements. The questionnaire contained 30 statements graded on a 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree).

Two experts from An-Najah University’s Faculty of Education verified the content validity of the questionnaire. The two experts provided feedback on the questionnaire format and statement structure. The necessary revisions were made and put into the final questionnaire based on their suggestions.

To further understand the experiences of the 71 study participants, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 of them, which was sufficient to reach saturation. The interviews lasted 30–45 minutes and were guided by an interview protocol that covered the following topics related to the research question:

1. How did teacher candidates receive journal writing?
2. What are the perceived benefits and difficulties in writing reflective journaling, if any?
3. What is the impact of reflective journal writing on teacher candidates?
The teacher candidates were told on the first day they would be expected
to write response journals throughout the course and submit a reflective jour-
nal. I met with the three teacher candidate sections in the first course meeting
(I was also the practicum course instructor), and after an in-depth discus-
sion the candidates stated their concerns about and benefit objectives for the
course. The candidates mentioned that they were unsure of what to focus on
while at school, and so I saw this as an ideal chance to convey the concept of
reflection to the teacher candidates through journal writing and daily diaries.

Burton's (2009) explanation of the reflective writing process served as
a guide for the research. Because students had never written nor heard of
reflective journals, I decided that a response diary would be an excellent
tool (Burton, 2009; Dunlap, 2006). This kind of reflective journal would
guide their attention and focus during observations and help them find dif-
ficulties would they encounter. I spent six hours instructing the candidates
on the reflective writing process, and how to make the most of their time
in their school settings.

I then asked the teacher candidates guided questions to help them stay
focused, which was especially important given their lack of expertise with
reflective writing. These guided questions might aid teacher candidates in
focusing their attention during school visits. According to Abu Alainin
(2018), guided journals can create better critical reflection by redirecting
reflection away from the natural drive toward emotional release. These
guided diaries are more structured and targeted in terms of the insights
gained on instructional methods.

The participants' ethical clearance was requested at the conclusion of
the semester after they had submitted their journals. I explained to the
teacher candidates that their participation was completely voluntary, and
they were free to skip any questions they did not feel comfortable answering
to avoid bias in their answers. I also assured them that their involvement
would have no bearing on their academics or final grades.

The participants completed a questionnaire after giving their consent to
engage in this research. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded
in Arabic. Pertinent quotations were translated from Arabic to English.

The survey data were analyzed using the statistical software package
SPSS 21, and the data collected from the respondents was described and
summarized using descriptive statistics. Other statistical analytic techniques, such as a T-test, were employed to examine the effect of teacher candidates’ gender on their perceptions and experiences while reflective journaling. A one-way analysis of variance test was used to determine the effect of specialization and general practitioner characteristics on their replies and perceptions.

As I was also the instructor and oversaw the study and course processes, the interview replies were coded and categorized during data analysis. The procedure improved the interpretation of the data and the conclusions drawn from the discussion as well as the summarization of the findings. I developed the codes based on the recurrence of certain words and thoughts (Creswell, 2003). Following Rossman and Rallis (2003), I employed eight steps in the data analytic process to include an immersive approach of listening to the recorded interviews, taking notes, and compiling a verbatim transcription of the interviews in Arabic. I used manual analysis to determine initial codes by rereading the entire transcribed data set, taking marginal notes as part of the preliminary analysis, and then structuring the data into concise themes that made sense of the reported experiences and appropriately addressed the study’s research objectives (Creswell & Clark, 2018).

The transcription and translation from Arabic to English were done by me. I then had a bilingual colleague verify the accuracy of the translation to guarantee data quality. Researchers who perform qualitative insider research and translate their own data are better equipped to analyze cross-language data (Abalkhail, 2018). According to Abalkhail (2018), being an insider qualitative researcher and translating the research data as a researcher is an opportunity for close attention to specific points in the text that can add value to the analysis by improving the validity of interpretations.

According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), the validity of cross-language, qualitative research is a challenge to researchers, and the translation of qualitative data may introduce an additional layer of bias in data production. I drew on Guba and Lincoln’s work for the trustworthiness and authenticity criteria for judging the quality of the study and to guarantee reliable and valid data. Creating a trustworthy account requires four principles: trustworthiness, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Several methods were used in this study, including audio recording, taking notes, and consulting a native bilingual colleague with education and teaching method background.


Discussion

As this is a mixed-methods study, this section summarizes and discusses each discovery by first providing numeric data and then the qualitative interpretations. The primary research topic for this study is teacher candidates’ perception of their experiences writing reflective journals during their practicum semester and the benefits they get from the reflective notebook process. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were calculated for the questionnaire items to help answer the research questions. The estimated averages and standard deviations of the items are shown in Table 2. An asterisk is used to identify negative statements which are on a reversed scale. The responses to negatively stated items (n = 4) were inverted so that the highest response score indicated a favorable opinion of each statement for all items. Again, candidates were asked to evaluate the statements on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly agree” (5) to “strongly disagree” (1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 A reflective diary helped me talk about my experiences.</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 A reflective diary has helped me express my thoughts and opinions.</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 A reflective diary helped me respond to my thoughts and feelings.</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 A reflective diary stimulated my critical thinking skills.</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 A reflective diary stimulated my creativity.</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 A reflective diary is a way of thinking about exploring my learning.</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 A reflective diary is an opportunity to gain self-knowledge.</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 A reflective diary has helped me understand what I am learning.</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 A reflective diary has helped me understand what I see in class.</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 A reflective diary has helped me connect what I learn in lectures to what I see in schools.</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 A reflective diary enables me to describe what I understand.</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 A reflective diary allows me to develop and enhance my writing skills.</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 A reflective diary enhances my communication skills.</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A reflective diary motivates me to engage in practical education and classroom observations. 4.00 .73

I did not understand what to write in a reflective diary. 3.51 1.11

I did not have enough time to write in a reflective diary. 3.22 1.18

A reflective diary is a waste of time. 3.88 1.23

I learned nothing from writing in a reflective diary. 3.88 1.20

Writing in a reflective diary should be encouraged and continued. 3.90 .93

I would like to share with my colleagues what I write in the reflective diaries. 3.45 .96

A reflective diary has helped me combine my teaching methodologies. 3.63 .84

A reflective diary has helped me distinguish between what I know and what I need to know. 3.96 .89

Reflective diaries are helpful for practicum courses. 3.94 .99

The reflective diary has given me ideas for planning what I will teach in the next lesson. 3.88 .94

A reflective diary has helped me make my teaching more effective. 3.81 .92

I apply reflective diary writing in all my academic courses. 2.99 1.11

I only write reflective diaries when asked to do so. 3.49 1.05

My reflective writing practice helps me set future goals. 3.78 .83

I make better decisions and steps based on my reflective writing practices. 3.76 .83

Overall, the experience of daily reflective writing was well worth the effort. 3.97 1.02

*Indicates reversed items.

As indicated in Table 2, teacher candidates’ overall reflective journal writing experience assessment is favorable and well worth the effort. The interviews (with 25 participants, all conducted in Arabic) showed the positive perspective was because journaling was a novel form of professional practice to them. As one teacher candidate stated during the interview, “This is the first time I’ve used a reflective journal in any of my practicum courses.” Others commented similarly, noting, “This is my first time writing a reflective paper in which I describe what I’ve seen and then comment on and evaluate it.”

Positive perceptions are associated with the type and purpose of reflective diaries. As shown in the interviews, writing reflective diaries helped
teacher candidates remain focused, because it compelled them to observe other teachers more intently. Several participants remarked upon this aspect of the process, noting:

Student 1: “Prior to using reflective diaries, we were daydreaming and paying little attention to the classes we observed. This reflective journal aided in our concentration.”

Student 2: “Keeping honest reflection diaries was an important step we took throughout the practicum. Because before this phase, we went to school, sat in classrooms, saw teachers, and were frequently bored. However, reflective journals compelled us to pick up a pen and a piece of paper and record our observations within classes, comment on them, adapt to what was positive and avoid negative.”

As a researcher and instructor of the course, I find it beneficial to understand teacher candidates’ perceptions of reflective diaries. Assigning teacher candidates to a response journal aided their concentration, as they had never seen reflective journaling previously. It accomplishes its assigned objective throughout the practical course. According to Alt and Raichel (2020), employing unstructured reflective journaling presents substantial challenges, posing questions to establish a routine practice of assessing experience and planning. It may also function as a scaffold that guides students through the reflective process.

Reflective journaling is an essential tool for bridging the gap between theory and practice: “Reflective diary helped me in discussing my experience” (mean = 4.09). It helps teachers analyze their thoughts and feelings: “The reflective diary has aided me in expressing my thoughts and opinions” (mean = 4.06). It makes connections between what is learned in class and how it pertains to their lives: “The reflective diary has helped me link what I learn in lectures to what I see in schools” (mean = 4.03).

These benefits were evident in other statements as well:

Student 1: “I’ve observed numerous issues with teachers’ behavior. Several of these issues include intimidation of students, a failure to listen, and a failure to comprehend concerns. For instance, a student was a great achiever but also hyperactive. Every class, the teacher asks her to stand next to the board, holding her book, and she continues to participate and answer the questions. I was not a fan of that and advised the teacher to search for other ways to resolve the issue.”

This story of a teacher candidate demonstrates how reflective journals allow them to practice reflection in their practicum and develop more profound and individualized ideas on how to employ consciousness and knowledge in their classroom.
Stephen Brookfield mentioned the critical incident lens in the second lens of reflection, which involves analyzing a specific event or situation to determine what went wrong and why (Brookfield, 1995). This perspective was evident in one of the attendees, who is studying English Education:

Student 1: “Reflective diaries helped me notice things I would have overlooked otherwise. As a result, when I observe, I make notes on some of the observations I think I should avoid when teaching and assisted me in recognizing things that I would have missed otherwise. A sixth-grade teacher for example, frequently interrupts students when they talk, preventing them from finishing their sentences. What the teacher does is incorrect; how will students learn from her mistakes? Teachers should give students opportunities to speak and practice speaking.”

Instructor: So, before reflective journals, you would not have noticed that?
Student 1: “No, it helped me focus more on the details.”

Considering Brookfield’s four lenses, the teacher candidates claimed journal writing helped them become more reflective and critical. The questionnaire results indicated the statement “Reflective diary boosted my critical thinking skills” had a relatively high average of 3.90. Teacher candidates’ comments emphasized the value of this tool. For example, “It encouraged critical thinking, an important component of reflective journaling. Reflective journaling encourages us to think about what happened in class, change it, and improve if possible. If something bad happens, we look for methods to make it better” (Student 1) and through reflective journaling “analyzed what I witnessed and expressed my view on those techniques, as well as what I would do in her shoes” (Student 2).

Individuals can use reflective journaling to track their progress over time. Teachers who write down their thoughts and emotions on a regular basis can look back at previous entries and see how far they have progressed (Dumlao & Pinatacan, 2019). This gives them the opportunity to reflect on their performance because the records help them make logical and practical decisions about what to do in specific situations (Khanjani, et al., 2018).

Comments included this telling statement:

Student 1: “By recording your notes, you ensure that you will not forget them because they are in your handwriting. Later on, as you read and reread it, you may discover details that make you question how you did it that way. As a result, it aids in tracking your progress.”

These critical thinking and evaluation skills will aid teacher candidates in their future teaching planning. “Reflective journaling helped me in planning a whole class in which I evaluate the positive aspects of what I saw
and avoid the downsides” (Student 1). “After graduation, when I become a teacher, I will use this reflective paper as an evaluation tool to encourage students to share their thoughts and opinions about my teaching and the strategies I will employ” (Student 2).

The results show reflective journaling assists teacher candidates in improving their teaching by identifying the negatives and positives of teaching practices and the influence this has on students. This is explained by one of the teacher candidates:

“Reflective journaling helped me focus on the elements I needed to incorporate into my teaching and the elements I needed to avoid; I considered this when planning for teaching, and as a result, I used different methods when teaching an entire, complete class; I received positive feedback from my professor, and the school principal noticed when they came to evaluate my teaching.”

Journaling also aided teacher candidates in developing and enhancing their writing ability. The teacher candidates registered strong agreement with the statement (item 12 of the questionnaire) “A reflective diary enables me to grow and strengthen my writing abilities” (average = 4.03). This point was underlined repeatedly during the teacher candidate’s interviews:

Student 1: “I recoded my observation notes in English, which aided my English writing skills and vocabulary.”

How did it help?

Student 1: “When I need to write their specific terms in my journal, I check them to ensure this specific term suits this context. As a result, I ended up with a lengthy list of terms and concepts and their possible applications. Additionally, writing aided me in developing my sentence structure.”

These findings corroborate Kim’s (2018) assertion that journaling aided in the development of students’ vocabulary, as some students spent time using search engines and dictionaries to look up English words. As pointed out by Tuan (2010), using English to write journals in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) situation is an exercise that can contribute greatly to the development of language ability.

In general, and based on their replies to interviews and the questionnaire, teacher candidates’ embraced the journal writing experience and the use of response diaries to foster a reflective approach to teaching and learning. Although they were unfamiliar with the reflective diary, teacher candidates recognized the benefits and importance of establishing a thoughtful disposition while learning to teach:
Student 1: “Certainly, it is pleasant, but much depends on the student. Personally, I like it and benefited from it, therefore I would not object to recreating it.”

Student 2: “To be completely honest, I wrote the reflection paper because it was assigned to us. However, after observing the effect on our practicum performance, I became inspired and driven to do so.”

A primary justification for reflective practice is the realization that merely accumulating experience is insufficient for acquiring knowledge; instead, it is necessary to actively reflect on that knowledge to grow from it. In practice-based professional learning environments, where individuals learn from their own professional experience as opposed to formal learning or information transfer, reflective practice can be a useful technique. It is potentially the single most useful resource for advancing one’s career. The ability to see and name patterns of thought and theory in the context of one’s work is a key benefit of reflective practice, which is also essential in bridging the gap between theory and practice. Because it encourages students to think critically and regulate their own behavior, self-reflection and reflective writing play a crucial role in helping students gain a firm grasp of topics and become more competent and professional.

Educators who value reflection are particularly important in the Palestinian context. It is imperative that teacher education programs in Palestine offer teacher candidates the opportunity to enhance their degree of reflection and emphasize the relevance of reflective thought to improving the quality of educational programs. Teacher preparation also should provide an atmosphere conducive to developing candidates’ reflective practice, pedagogical knowledge, and pedagogical disposition.

**Summary & Implications**

The purpose of this study was to examine teacher candidates’ experiences with reflective journals during their fifth practicum (of six) at An-Najah University in Nablus, Palestine. I discovered that teacher candidates enjoy journal writing for reflective practice and that it adds to their individual growth. The findings indicate reflective journal writing is an excellent tool for assisting teacher candidates in developing professional knowledge, constructing their identities, beliefs, and metaphors, which may bring with them a plethora of experiences, assumptions, and beliefs about teaching and learning. Teacher candidates regarded reflective journals as a pleasurable experience that aided in the organization of their thoughts and the connection of theory to practice (Afzali, 2018). Their experiences with
reflective journals substantiate Boud’s (2001) assertion that journal writing can be interpreted as a kind of self-expression, a record of occurrences, or a type of therapy, and can be an excellent tool to prepare candidates for the field of teaching (Dumlao & Pinatacan, 2019).

Reflective journaling practices, when applied in Palestinian settings where people, including teachers and students, face challenges and hardships, can be a powerful tool for them to record their experiences and emotions. Reflective journaling can assist Palestinians in processing their emotions, gaining insight into their thoughts and feelings, and developing a better grasp of themselves and their surroundings. It can also be used to document the everyday struggles of living in an occupied territory, such as movement restrictions, a lack of essential services, and human rights violations. Furthermore, reflective journaling can provide a forum for people to share their experiences with others to increase awareness of the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories.

This study must be viewed in light of its scope and limitation. It was conducted in particular classes handled by one researcher/instructor and depended on reflection details provided by one group of teacher candidates. Accordingly, replicating this study with a larger learning cohort and different courses could help validate the findings.

The research findings revealed several strategies that could be used to guarantee the successful implementation of reflective journaling in pre-service teacher education programs. First, faculty members should establish clear standards for what should be included in the journals and how frequently they should be written. Faculty members should also provide guidance on how to successfully express thoughts and feelings about teaching through writing. They should also foster an atmosphere in which students feel safe sharing their thoughts without fear of judgement or criticism.

Finally, this study brings attention to reflective writing as a method in teacher preparation and poses questions that may require further investigation such as the longer-term application of this tool among in-service teachers and whether they will continue to use it after they enter the field.

References


This study examined the relationship of a sense of belongingness with forgiveness and gratitude among Muslim students and the mediating role of a collectivistic orientation. We also studied the moderating role of religiosity/spirituality between a sense of belonging and collectivism. Using publicly available data, quantitative responses about values collected from students in secondary schools and higher education institutions in 15 countries with majority Muslim populations were analyzed using SPSS and SmartPLS. The findings reveal that a sense of belonging is positively linked with forgiveness and gratitude, and that collectivism mediates both relationships. However, the moderating role of religiosity between sense of belonging and collectivism is not in accord with our prediction. Policy implications and future direction are discussed.

Keywords: Muslim students, sense of belonging, forgiveness, gratitude, collectivism, religiosity

An integral part of human well-being and development is to feel a sense of belonging, that is, to feel connected, to feel part of something, to feel one fits into an environment or group and can identify

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with values, ideas, and roles (Maslow, 1943). In recent times, educational researchers have investigated how a sense of belonging at school affects students in multifaceted ways (Allen et al., 2018). Yet no studies have explored this construct and its outcomes in Muslim societies. This research paper attempts to fill this gap by presenting findings from a quantitative study conducted by the International Institute of Islamic Thought in which data were collected in fifteen Muslim-majority societies with a focus on students in secondary schools and higher education (Nasser, et al., 2020).

The study results point out the importance of values, such as the sense of belonging, forgiveness, and gratitude and ways they increase individual and social responsibility, but the question remains how do these values link together (Nasser et al., 2019)? Researchers have studied sense of belonging and classroom collaboration (Frey, 2019) and its relationship to life satisfaction (Zhang, et al., 2021). In this research, we seek to extend the current literature by associating sense of belonging with forgiveness and gratitude among Muslim students.

McCullough (2008), using an evolutionary functional approach to forgiveness, suggests that a sense of belonging in an offender is associated with forgiveness and gratitude across cultures. Hofstede’s (1980) research on cultural dimensions, in particular collectivism and individualism, has received considerable attention among a wide range of researchers (Singelis et al., 1995). According to Hofstede (1980), individualism is focused on individual independence, while the underlying supposition of collectivism is that people are interrelated and entrenched in mutually dependent social relationships. In Muslim societies, people are encouraged to find a meaningful position in social networks, emphasizing social bonding and adjustment. This leads them to be more communal and accommodating of others. People who tend to have collectivist views are more caring, forgiving, and cooperative (Solomon et al., 1996). Collectivist societies centralize common values such as well-being and forgiveness and common goals (Shulruf et al., 2007; Oyserman et al., 2002). We therefore suggest that cultural differences such as collectivism may act as a bridge between a sense of belonging and forgiveness and gratitude as suggested in previous research in Western countries (Kane, et al., 2021; Hook et al., 2009).

For many individuals, religion is a central part of their lives. Religion is vital to understand individuals and cultures, and is innately cultural (Cohen, 2015; Mansori et al., 2020). The relationship between belongingness, religious attitude, and cultural orientation such as individualism/collectivism is an important discussion that has not been previously explored
Impact of Sense of Belonging on Forgiveness and Gratitude among Muslim Students

Shahzad & Shafi

Belongingness has an impact on an individual’s values and behavior, e.g. collective well-being (Bhuian et al., 2018), but this relationship may become stronger for individuals who have religious/spiritual orientation because it allows adherents to enhance self-esteem by developing a close relationship with all others.

Religion is a sociocultural factor that explains differences in the values and behaviors of individuals, and religiosity is positively related to collectivist values (Cukur et al., 2004). All religions promote unity, harmony, and collective good and well-being. Therefore, religious/spiritual people are most likely to pay a price to improve collective welfare (Olivola et al., 2020). Islam as a religion is a complete code of life, and it guides all aspects of human life—individual and social, economic and political, material and ethical, cultural and legal. The goals of Islamic educational institutions include the social, emotional, academic, and spiritual development of students (Nuriman & Fauzan, 2017). It is therefore imperative to understand whether and how a sense of belonging fosters other values among Muslim students, and it would be assumed that a high level of religiosity/spirituality would strengthen the relationship between belongingness and collectivism among Muslim students.

Our research study makes several contributions to the growing knowledge of values and competencies among Muslim students. Using the theory of need for belonging, the study reveals a potential antecedent in the sense of belonging as a predictor of values such as forgiveness and gratitude among Muslim students. Second, it focuses on the indirect effect of the sense of belonging on Muslim student values such as forgiveness and gratitude by examining collectivism as a mediating mechanism. Third, the study examines the moderating role of religiosity between sense of belonging and collectivism. We finish by offering recommendations to schools and institutions to improve their student and teacher recruitment, training, and development processes using these values.

Defining Sense of Belonging

According to Macmillan and Chavis (1986), sense of belonging is defined as “the human emotional need to associate with and be accepted by group members” (p. 9). It includes the need to belong to a particular group or team at school or work, to be socially accepted, or to become part of any religious group. According to the need to belong theory given by Baumeister and Leary (1995), people have a basic need to be connected to
others (i.e., not derived from other motives) that is vital for well-being and psychological health. Therefore, the need to belong has significant emotional effects, directs mental functioning, guides behavior, is active under all but the mainly unfavorable conditions, relates to people of all cultures, and is linked with negative psychological and physical outcomes when it is not met. The claim that people have a basic need for a sense of belonging provides not only a unifying theme for much of the social psychological literature up to now, but it also has stimulated new research directions and ways of conceptualizing established constructs (Leary et al., 1995). Hughes (1993) defined forgiveness as letting go of angry thoughts and feelings toward others who have hurt you and replacing them with positive thoughts and feelings. According to Richman and Leary (2009), forgiveness can be a way of restoring closeness in a world in which establishing new social ties is not always easy or possible. In light of the above reason, it seems probable to expect a positive linkage between the belongingness and forgiveness, i.e., students who have a strong need to belong are more likely to extend forgiveness to wrongdoers than those whose need to belong is less strong. This point is not very dissimilar from the hypotheses proposed by researchers who have studied the impact of social exclusion on violence. Based upon the need to belong theory, these researchers have argued that social exclusion must direct to compensatory behaviors aimed at attaining social acceptance (Twenge et al., 2007; Leary, et al., 2006; DeWall et al., 2009). Hence, based on the above, the following can be hypothesized:

**Sense of Belonging has a Significant and Positive Impact on Forgiveness among Muslim Students.**

Gratitude is “a general tendency to recognize and respond with grateful emotions to the role of the benevolence of others in one’s positive experiences and outcomes” (McCullough et al., 2002, p. 112). Evidence has shown that individuals with a greater sense of belonging display a stronger sense of empathy (Locklear, et al., 2022). So, we can say that students who have strong sense of belongingness may have fewer behavioral problems and a positive attitude toward others. Findings by Kleiman and colleagues also suggest that college students who can settle for the good and persevere with the bad are likely to develop a stronger sense of gratitude in their lives (Kleiman, et al., 2013). College students in Canada and the United States who demonstrated a stronger sense of belonging also showed stronger positive effect (Hill, et al., 2016). On the basis of the above arguments, it is therefore assumed that:

**Sense of belonging has a significant and positive impact on gratitude among Muslim students.**
Hofstede’s (1980) theory of cultural dimensions is a framework used to understand differences in culture between countries. It states that collectivism means people are interrelated and rooted in interdependent social relationships. Practices emphasizing belongingness and collaboration over competition have also been associated with better peer relationships (Slavin, 2015; Osterman, 2000), and this pattern was found to hold across countries (Roseth et al., 2008). Following the social interdependence model and need to belong theory to explain the positive impact of a sense of belonging on cooperation and well-being (Slavin, 2015; Johnson et al., 2008), it is a sense of cohesion that creates a more conducive atmosphere for learning that facilitates its positive impact. This atmosphere depends more on students’ understanding of—and preference for—collaboration than on the level of actual collaboration observed in the classroom. In line with this conceptual understanding, a research study of Iranian, German, and Canadian students showed that all preferred cooperative learning environments and collectivism over competition, and they all also showed superior performance in a cooperative atmosphere (Huber et al., 1992). So, we can say that students have a need for belongingness that emphasizes interdependence, harmony, social connectedness, in-group goals, and collective well-being. On the basis of the above arguments, it is hypothesized that:

**Sense of belonging significantly and positively affects collectivism among Muslim students.**

Collectivist worldviews interpret the self as socially entrenched and emphasize collective well-being, norms, and relationships. Accordingly, in collectivistic societies forgiveness and gratitude may primarily be conceptualized as interpersonal constructs (Joshanloo, et al., 2021; Ho, 1993; Markus & Kitamaya, 1991). In contrast, individualistic worldviews see the self as independent and self-reflective and emphasize personal well-being and personal responsibility. Consequently, in individualistic cultures, forgiveness and gratitude may be conceived mainly as intrapersonal constructs (Hsu, 1985; Markus & Kitamaya, 1991). In a collectivist society, good relationships with group members are highly appreciated, and forgiveness and gratitude can be seen as the most precious skills for upholding group harmony (Suwartono, et al., 2007). Giving and receiving help is an expected part of everyday life for members of collectivistic cultures, rather than an uplifting surprise, as it can be for members of individualistic cultures.
(Lilian et al., 2020). On the basis of the above arguments, therefore, it is hypothesized that:

**Collectivism significantly and positively affects forgiveness and gratitude among Muslim students.**

Based upon the hypotheses referred to above, we further argue that individual level cultural values of individualism versus collectivism play a mediating role in the association between a sense of belonging, forgiveness, and gratitude among Muslim students. Many studies have shown a relationship between a sense of belonging, empathy, and a range of measures of forgiveness. Researchers have found that all major world cultures have structures that promote forgiveness (Tsang, et al., 2005; McCullough & Worthington, 1999). To maintain harmony in relationships with in-group others requires a higher sensitivity to interpersonal contextual cues, including concerns for belongingness and dependence, which further leads to collectiveness. Collectively oriented individuals tend to have a higher motivation to be compassionate, empathetic, forgiving, and caring (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Fiske (2002) recommended thinking of individualism and collectivism not as culture per se, but as mediators in research analyses. On the basis of the above arguments, it is hypothesized that:

**Collectivism mediates the relationship between a sense of belonging and forgiveness among Muslim students.**

**Collectivism mediates the relationship between a sense of belonging and gratitude among Muslim students.**

Religiosity is considered a significant socio-cultural antecedent in predicting individual differences in a variety of aspects of values and behaviors (e.g., Villani, et al., 2019; Gorsuch, 1988). Most religions promote certain values, norms, and attitudes, which result in links between individualism-collectivism and other cultural constructs. For instance, significant relationships have been found between religiosity, political ideology (Duriez et al., 2002), prejudice (Billiet, 1995) and identity formation (Youniss, et al., 1999). Empirical explorations of the linkage between religiosity and individualism-collectivism are rare. However, many scholars and political philosophers of the twentieth century recognized the relationships
between these constructs. Sampson (2000) suggested that individualism-collectivism can be embedded in core concepts of religion. Religions such as Islam are based on concepts of human nature like care for other people and are therefore more in line with collectivism (Ahmad, 2011). Previous work on similar topics, i.e. belonging, moral judgment, well-being, cooperation, and religiosity focused primarily on Jewish-Protestant differences (e.g., Cohen et al., 2006; Cohen & Rankin, 2004). Unfortunately, much previous work has neglected to include Muslim communities. Religiosity encourages individuals to work with a commitment to help and support peers (Brown, 1986). Religiosity promotes a relationship-oriented culture that emphasizes support and cooperation toward peers and society. We assume that the combined effect of sense of belonging and religiosity will strongly increase the level of collectivism among Muslim students. Figure 1 shows the theoretical model of the study and hypothesized relationships among study variables.

Religiosity moderates the relationship between a sense of belonging and collectivism among Muslim students in such a way that the relationship is strengthened when religiosity is high.

The methodology described in this section and the empirical results presented later are based on a sample of Muslim students from 15 countries (Bosnia, Indonesia, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, Morocco, Tanzania, Tatarstan, Bangladesh, Algeria, India, Kenya, Mauritius, Sudan, Malaysia, and the United States) taken from the publicly available quantitative study conducted by the International Institute of Islamic Thought (Nasser, et al., 2020). Data for this study were collected from four distinct groups of respondents (n = 18,601): schoolteachers, school students, university instructors,
Figure 2. Distribution of Survey Respondents by Country

Table 1. Demographics of Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>School Student</th>
<th>University Student</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Religion (Islam)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bosnia</td>
<td>707</td>
<td>761</td>
<td>1,380</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>333</td>
<td>575</td>
<td>812</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyrgyzstan</td>
<td>670</td>
<td>515</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1,169</td>
<td>407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>723</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>773</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>444</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanzania</td>
<td>690</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>791</td>
<td>425</td>
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<tr>
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<td>263</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>1,075</td>
<td>149</td>
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<td>227</td>
<td>584</td>
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<td>Algeria</td>
<td>755</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>756</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>323</td>
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<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>1,956</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>1,883</td>
<td>851</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>347</td>
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<td>275</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mauritius</td>
<td>357</td>
<td>96</td>
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<td>306</td>
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<tr>
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<td>485</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>467</td>
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<tr>
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<td>38</td>
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<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>113</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
and university students. However, our focus in this study is only on school and university students, making the sample size for our study 13,023. The largest respondent groups were from India (n = 2,215) and Bosnia (n = 1,468), while the smallest respondent groups were from the United States (n = 252) and Tatarstan (n = 263). Figure 2 illustrates the group distribution by country. Table 1 shows the demographic distribution of the respondents. The largest target group is youth who are younger than 18 years old (64%), followed by those aged 18-24 (32.6%) across the 15 countries. School students were 71.1% while the university students were 28.9%. Students from public institutions were 51.3% and from private institutions 43.6%. Male students were 41% while the female students were 59%.

Measures

All ratings were made on a 4-point Likert scale where 1 represents “Never,” 2 “Sometimes,” 3 “Often,” and 4 “Always.” There were 13 reverse coded items; five items of sense of belonging (items 4, 5, 7, 14, and 18), six items of collectivism (items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6) and two items of gratitude (items 3 and 6). We reversed the score of these items by changing 1 to 4, 2 to 3, 3 to 2 and 4 to 1 accordingly.

**Sense of Belonging** was measured using 18 items. The sample item is “I feel like a real part of my school community.”

**Gratitude** was measured using six items. The sample item is “Grateful to a wide variety of people.”

**Forgiveness** was measured using nine items. The sample item is “Likelihood to forgive a friend starting an untrue rumor about you”.

**Collectivism** was measured using 14 items. The sample item is “If a peer gets a prize, I feel proud.”

**Religiosity** was measured using five items. The sample item is “How important is it for you to belong to a religious group?”

A one-way ANOVA test was performed to check the variation in the dependent variables forgiveness and gratitude across demographic categories. The results suggest a significant difference in the mean value of the first dependent variable forgiveness among respondents across country code (F = 288.91, P < .000), school type (F = 96.37, P < .000), gender (F = 14.53, P < .000), age (F = 24.33, P < .000), grade (F = 7.6, P < .000), degree (F = 2.6, P < .000), language (F = 2.68, P < .000), ethnicity (F = 74.5, P < .000).
Similarly, the findings indicated a significant difference in the mean value of the second dependent variable gratitude among respondents across country code ($F = 59.33$, $P = .000$), school type ($F = 29.11$, $P = .000$), gender ($F = 133.72$, $P = .000$), age ($F = 6.55$, $P = .000$), grade ($F = 9.23$, $P = .000$), degree ($F = 7.9$, $P = .000$), language ($F = 30.84$, $P = .000$), ethnicity ($F = 22.97$, $P = .000$).

**Correlation Analysis**

The correlation analysis results in Table 2 show that all variables are positively associated with each other. The results indicate that sense of belonging is positively correlated with forgiveness (0.038, $p < 0.000$) and gratitude (0.375, $p < 0.000$) among Muslim students. Collectivism is positively correlated with gratitude (0.130, $p < 0.000$) but shows no significant relationship with forgiveness (0.011, $p = .195$) among Muslim students. Sense of belonging has a positive relationship with collectivism (0.153, $p < 0.000$) among Muslim students. Level of religiosity among Muslim students also is positively correlated with their level of collectivism (0.145, $p < 0.000$).

**Table 2. Mean, Standard Deviation, Correlation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. SOB</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. COL</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>.153**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. FOR</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>.038**</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. GRAT</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>.375**</td>
<td>.130**</td>
<td>.057**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. REL</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>.284**</td>
<td>.145**</td>
<td>.034**</td>
<td>.307**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$N=13,492$, **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

**Structural Model**

Using Smart-PLS (Hair et al., 2014), the structural model was calculated to look at the direct, indirect, and interactive paths to assess the overall study model. The structural model was evaluated via bootstrapping (5000) to conduct path analysis. Figure 3 depicts the results of the structural model.
The results of regression analysis for the direct, indirect, and interactive effects are presented in Table 3. The results reveal that sense of belonging significantly and positively predicts forgiveness ($\beta = .076$, $p < .001$), gratitude ($\beta = .424$, $p < .001$), and collectivism ($\beta = .314$, $p < .001$) among Muslim students, thus supporting $H1$, $H2$, and $H3$ respectively. Collectivism significantly and positively affects forgiveness ($\beta = .121$, $p < .001$) and gratitude among Muslim students ($\beta = .087$, $p < .001$) thus supporting $H4$, and $H5$ respectively. The results show that sense of belonging has a significant indirect effect on forgiveness ($\beta = .038$, $p < .001$) and gratitude ($\beta = .027$, $p < .001$) via collectivism among Muslim students thus supporting $H6$ and $H7$ respectively. Hypothesis 8 was tested by moderation analysis technique using SmartPLS. The overall summary of findings presented in Table 3 indicate that religiosity/spirituality weakens the relationship of sense of belonging and collectivism ($\beta = -0.043$, $p < 0.01$). Though religiosity has been found to moderate the relationship between sense of belonging and collectivism, this finding contrasts the outcome predicted for $H8$ in our study.
### Regression Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Original Sample (O)</th>
<th>Mean (M)</th>
<th>Standard Deviation (STDEV)</th>
<th>T-Statistics (O/STDEV)</th>
<th>P-values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1</td>
<td>SOB—FOR</td>
<td>0.076</td>
<td>0.077</td>
<td>0.011</td>
<td>6.869</td>
<td>0.000</td>
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<tr>
<td>H2</td>
<td>SOB—GRAT</td>
<td>0.424</td>
<td>0.422</td>
<td>0.026</td>
<td>16.35</td>
<td>0.000</td>
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<tr>
<td>H3</td>
<td>SOB—COL</td>
<td>0.314</td>
<td>0.314</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>19.77</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4</td>
<td>COL—FOR</td>
<td>0.121</td>
<td>0.123</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>9.928</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5</td>
<td>COL—GRAT</td>
<td>0.087</td>
<td>0.089</td>
<td>0.015</td>
<td>5.869</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H6</td>
<td>SOB—COL—FOR</td>
<td>0.038</td>
<td>0.038</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>9.395</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H7</td>
<td>SOB—COL—GRAT</td>
<td>0.027</td>
<td>0.028</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>6.136</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H8</td>
<td>SOBxREL—COL</td>
<td>-0.043</td>
<td>-0.043</td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td>4.725</td>
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</table>

SOB: Sense of Belonging; FOR: Forgiveness; GRAT: Gratitude; COL: Collectivism
This study examined the predictive power of sense of belonging on forgiveness and gratitude as outcome variables in a cross-cultural sample focused mainly on Muslim communities. Our theoretical model described the effects on forgiveness and gratitude levels through a collectivist worldview and a religious orientation.

According to our prediction, sense of belonging was found to significantly and positively predict forgiveness and gratitude (H1 and H2) among participating students. These findings are in line with previous studies (Turnage et al., 2012). A sense of belonging plays a positive role in enhancing forgiveness and gratitude. According to the need to belong theory, the higher an individual’s need to feel belonging, the higher the person’s gratitude and forgiveness. A sense of belonging improves interpersonal relationships because belonging is a foundational need to facilitate the communication required in social relations. More specifically, someone’s need to belong may weaken their motivation to avoid and retaliate against the person who wronged them and to give them more generous affection.

A significant and positive direct effect of sense of belonging on collectivism was confirmed (H3) by our study. These results are consistent with earlier studies (Slavin, 2015). According to Kitayama et al. (2000), compared with individualistic cultures, individuals in collectivistic cultures are more likely to see themselves as a component of social relationships and to have their cognitions and actions influenced by the perceived thoughts and anticipated behaviors of significant others. Markus and Kitayama (1991) note that the sense of belonging can be sufficiently powerful for the individual to think of the relationship rather than the self as the functional unit of conscious reflection. In individualistic cultures, people tend to prioritize personal over in-group goals, while those in collectivistic cultures tend to do the opposite (Triandis, 1989, 2001).

Collectivism was found to have a significant and positive effect on forgiveness and gratitude (H4 and H5), which was in line with previous research (Hook et al., 2009). Students with a collectivistic worldview experience increased levels of forgiveness and gratitude toward their peers and give them more generous causal and responsibility attributions. Mediation analyses showed that collectivism significantly strengthened the relationship between sense of belonging and forgiveness and gratitude (H6 and H7). People with a high sense of belonging
and a collectivistic orientation are more motivated to forgive and show gratitude to other people. Sandage and Williamson (2005) said that the motivation to forgive may be a specific characteristic of collectivistic-oriented people.

The hypothesis that religiosity/spirituality strengthens the relationship between sense of belonging and collectivism is not supported (H8). Rather than strengthening the relationship as we hypothesized, religiosity in fact weakens it. This unexpected and interesting finding requires further exploration as it suggests that sense of belonging matters more for people with low religiosity in the collectivist case.

Promoting a strong student-teacher relationship is a key factor in improving students’ sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2018). Barron and Kinney (2021) state that “a supportive relationship with one or more teachers is the strongest predictor of school belonging for an individual student” (p. 27). The results of our study also suggest forgiveness education should be taught and modeled, especially in high school and college curricula, because it does not come intuitively. School administration and teachers nurturing an attitudinal sense of belonging, collectivism, forgiveness, and gratitude in their academic culture will bring both individual and institutional benefits.

The data were gathered from only 15 countries, so the findings may be limited to those cultural contexts. The results also are not necessarily representative of the 15 countries as the samples were not always randomly collected. Further studies should also include non-Muslim countries to enhance generalizability. The study was based on cross-sectional data. Future studies should use longitudinal data and experimental designs to achieve a higher order confidence of causality. They should also widen the number of values from the five we included to explore others such as self-efficacy, empathy, and so forth. We also did not test the impact of demographics on these values, which should be included in future research. We analyzed the role of sense of belonging in predicting collectivism through the moderation of religiosity/spirituality, but future studies could examine other dispositional factors such as personality traits (extraversion, conscientiousness) or empathy as moderators.
Inculcating values in the education process is necessary for students’ psychological well-being. Values make us humane, and understanding things such as belongingness, collectivism, forgiveness, gratitude, and religiosity is essential for healthier relationships in daily life. The results of this study show a sense of belonging plays a positive role in enhancing forgiveness and gratitude in close interpersonal relationships. Understanding the need for belonging can help individuals be aware of and care about other people’s feelings. Feeling others’ suffering and happiness promotes a sincere approach to apologizing to people in need.

This study showed that forgiveness and gratitude are influenced by sense of belonging through the mediating mechanism of collectivism, but that the effect of religious involvement on collectivism is very small among young students. Administrators and teachers should consider formalizing systems to orient and welcome new students to help them develop a sense of belonging, collectivism, forgiveness and gratitude. A buddy mentor system should be introduced where senior students can guide newcomers and provide them companionship at recess, lunch, and even after classes. At present, it is still unclear to what extent countries, societies and education systems are addressing these values.

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References


There are a few empirical studies that examine the portrayal of the Middle East and its people in young children’s picture books. Many of these books depict Muslim life and celebrations without delving into the specificities of each Middle Eastern country. This study, which focuses on Iran as a non-Arab Muslim majority Middle Eastern country, investigates how Iran and its diverse cultures are represented in children’s picture books published in North America. The analysis was conducted on a sample of picture books written in English between 2000 and 2021, targeting children aged three to nine. The findings reveal that a significant number of these books revolve around Nowruz celebrations, the Persian New Year, or ancient Persia, often presented through popular folktales. These findings underscore the need for books that depict the contemporary lives of Iranians, both within and outside the country, through narratives and illustrations.

Keywords: Iran/Persia, young children, picture books, multicultural literature

With the contemporary social movements toward equity, diversity, and inclusion for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in North America, there is a critical need to enhance the equitable understanding of diverse cultural backgrounds in children’s curricula and library resources (Panjwani, 2017; Short, 2018). Recently, researchers have shown an interest in multicultural education to promote the appreciation

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The Representation of Iran (Persia) in Young Children’s Picture Books in North America

The words Iran and Persia are used interchangeably in this research. While both names referred to the same country in ancient times, Iran
of diverse cultures among young learners (Baghban, 2007; Bennett, 2001; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Hansen-Krening, 1992; Klefstad & Martinez, 2013; Morgan, 2009). Multicultural literature was primarily developed in recognition of the presence of people of color in American society and, as Botelho and Rudman (2009) frame the argument, “it is the literature by and about people of color” (p. 73). Despite the importance of multicultural literature, Harris (2015) reported, “out of the 5,000 plus children’s books and 2,000 young adult literature books published, less than 10 percent are written and/or illustrated by individuals that are African, Asian, Latino, or Native American” (p. 11). Other scholars have indicated that many regions, including the Middle East, are still underrepresented in children’s early resources such as elementary school curricula and picture books (Callaway, 2010; Jackson, 2010; Panjwani, 2017; Raina, 2009; Short, 2018; Torres, 2016). The underrepresentation of scholars from diverse backgrounds in authoring children’s literature precludes access to authentic textual materials for the diverse populations living in North American society.

Despite the emphasis of multicultural literature on the authentic presentation of people of color, many Middle Eastern and Muslim students face multiple challenges imposed by the socio-political context of the American education system. The post-9/11 backlash against Arabs and Muslims depicted all members of this community, regardless of their residential status or political and religious beliefs, as threats or potential enemies (Fadda-Conrey, 2011). Reinforced by the Islamophobic attacks of the 2016 Presidential campaign in the United States, it is necessary to educate the young generation about Islam and what Muslim countries and their peoples are like. However, this cannot be done without differentiating between the Middle Eastern cultures and countries. Many people use the terms Arab and Muslim interchangeably, leading to the misconception that all Middle Eastern people are Arab or speak the standard Arabic as their official language. By focusing specifically on Iran, a country situated in the Middle East and predominantly inhabited by non-Arab Muslims, this paper aims to delve deeper into the portrayal and depiction of Iranians in picture books that are published and accessible in North American public resources.
became the nation’s official name in 1935 to reflect the diversity, both ethnic and religious, of its people. Though the majority of Iran's population is Shia Muslim, not all of them are ethnically Persian (Daniel & Mahdi, 2006). If language were used as a distinguishing feature of ethnicity, barely half of the population speaks Farsi (Persian) even though it is the country’s official language. Other languages include Turkic (of different dialects such as Azeri, Turkmen, Qashqai, and Shahsavan), Kurdish, Baluchi, Luri, Arabic, Gilaki, Assyrian, and Armenian (Sanasarian, 2004; Tohidi, 2009). The Turkic-speaking people are considered the largest and most linguistically diverse ethnic group after Persians.

Tohidi (2009) reports Iran’s ethnic classification as of 2003: “Persian (51 percent), Azeri (24 percent), Gilaki and Mazandaran (8 percent), Kurd (7 percent), Arab (3 percent), Lur (2 percent), Baluch (2 percent), Turkmen (2 percent), and other groups (1 percent)” (p. 300). Sanasarian (2004) introduces the Azeris, Kurds, Baluchis, Qashqais, Bakhtiaris, Turkmans, Arabs, Shahsavans, and Lurs as politically significant ethnic groups, among which the Kurds and Baluchis are overwhelmingly Sunni.

In addition to Iran’s ethnic and linguistic minorities, there are non-Muslim religious minorities of “Armenians, Assyrians, Bahais, Chaldeans, Iranian Christian converts, Jews, and Zoroastrians” (Sanasarian, 2004, p.1). Among the non-Muslim religious minorities, the Bahais, Jews, and Zoroastrians speak Persian as their mother tongue. Bates and Rassam (2001) report that Jews have been living in Iran since ancient times, and even though their native language is Persian, “they maintain a strong sense of separate identity fostered by close intermarriage, residential segregation, and a focus on a number of shrines and pilgrimage centers within Iran” (p. 104). Bahaism is a complex case in Iran because it is the country’s largest non-Muslim religion, but after the 1979 Revolution it was introduced as a “misguided sect” with no “legitimate claim to be one of the acceptable revealed religions” (Daniel & Mahdi, 2006, p. 59).

In addition to such diverse religious minority groups in Iran as Bahais, Jews, and Zoroastrians, who speak Persian as their mother tongue, there is a significant Armenian presence in eastern Anatolia and the surrounding areas of Mount Ararat dating back to prehistoric times. Both Persian and Greek sources refer to this region as “Armenia” and identify its inhabitants as “Armenians.” Sanasarian (2004) argues that although Armenians were under the direct or indirect rule of the Persians for twelve centuries and were influenced by their religion and
culture, they still retain their unique characteristics as a nation. In the early 17th century and under the reign of Shah Abbas of the Safavid dynasty, a large number of Armenians were forced to relocate from the city of Julfa and their ancestral lands in Northwestern Iran to the New Julfa in Isfahan.

The Assyrians are a non-Muslim minority in Iran that speaks an Aramaic dialect and belongs to the Nestorian church. According to Sanasarian (2004), the majority of Christians in Mesopotamia and Persia belong to the East Syrian Church or Nestorian Church and comprise the two main groups of Assyrians and Chaldeans. While a large number of Assyrians live in Urumiyeh, a city in northwest Iran, the Chaldean population that adheres to Catholicism resides in Khuzestan province (in southwest Iran) and is concentrated in Ahvaz (Sanasarian, 2004). Exploring complex identities and embracing multiple perspectives enables a thorough investigation of individuals, ultimately enriching our understanding of diverse human experiences.

This research originated from a graduate course literacy project in the United States, where I was tasked with enhancing the literacy skills of a second-grade Iranian student. Upon recognizing the student’s deep connection to Persian culture, I proposed introducing Persian picture books as a means of improving the student’s overall literacy. Picture books, which combine visuals and written content, are a valuable resource for enriching children’s literacy experience (Wert, 2023). However, there are limited options for picture books about Iran, most that are available focus solely on Nowruz (the Persian New Year), and the illustrations in them are of poor quality. Few of the books explore life in Iran beyond the Nowruz celebration, which leaves a gap in understanding peoples’ everyday life and other aspects of their culture and diversity.

Given the various ethnic and religious minorities in Iran, the current research set out to examine and gain insight into how this diversity is portrayed in children’s books distributed in the United States and Canada. The study is guided by two main research questions: (1) What are the primary themes and topics explored in American children’s picture books about Iran and its cultures published between 2000 and 2021? and (2) How do these children’s picture books depict Iranians’ contemporary practices and cultures?
This research is grounded in Rudine Sims Bishop’s notions of children’s literature as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (1990). Literature plays a significant role in promoting multicultural values. It is a source through which children and young adults are exposed to other cultures and dialogues on issues regarding diversity. Bishop (1997) emphasizes the dual role of multicultural children’s literature as a mirror in which the child’s life is reflected in books and as windows which are an opportunity to see into someone else’s life. While Bishop (2012) emphasizes the balance between the two, children from historically underrepresented groups “had been offered mainly books as windows into lives” whereas the children from the dominant cultures were exposed to “mainly fiction that mirrored their own lives” (p. 9). There are few children’s picture books in English about contemporary Middle Eastern cultures and individuals. Many include teachings about Islam or Muslim rituals and celebrations in a non-fiction format. Others mostly fall into the main categories of war, historical figures, folktales, and ancient times (Gultekin & May, 2020).

While many published books and articles in the area of children’s literature have depicted the experience of Blacks/Africans, Asians, Indigenous, and Latinxs, relatively few studies have portrayed Middle Eastern people and their cultures. In her dissertation, Raina (2009) examined 72 children’s and young adult books about Muslims that focused on areas such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh as well as some Middle Eastern countries. Her analysis noted the dominance of Western world views regarding the culture on the part of both outsiders and insiders. Raina (2009) believes the authors’ access to English language publications rather than those in their own language was what influenced their content selection to suit an English-speaking audience.

Furman (2014) analyzed the portrayal of Arabs and/or Muslims in America or the Middle East in juvenile fiction and fictionalized nonfiction picture books. Her comprehensive analysis found that almost 50% of the books she reviewed were about ancient civilizations such as those in Egypt, Arabia, or Babylonia. Furman (2014) also believes this accounts for the “inordinately large number of stereotypical portrayals of mummies, pyramids, camels, pharaohs, and shy, attractive subservient maidens” (p. 135). Another unexpected finding in her analysis was the number of books with war and refugee themes, although a very critical topic to share with youngsters.
In addition, Torres (2016) examined the presentation of Muslims from preschool to the third grade. In her review of 56 books, she identified many with flat character portrayal and a concentration on Islamic teachings. Torres (2016) counted the lack of “well-written and culturally appropriate children’s literature related to Muslims” as the primary implication of this research (p. 205). Further, Panjwani (2017) drew on the Ontario Trillium list as the primary focus along with the use of other resources within the Canadian context. Although the milieu of each literary piece may have been different according to its location, she believed the overall plot and characterization of the analyzed books were largely one-dimensional and did not capture the experience of all Islamic civilizations.

Finally, as many teachers and parents turn to award-winning books for quality literature, Gultekin and May (2020) examined the Middle East Outreach Council’s Middle East Book Award collection to analyze the region’s presentation and its authenticity. Their analysis showed that one third of the award-winning books were set in the three countries of Iraq, Iran, and Morocco but nonetheless failed to capture the diversity of the people that included Kurds, Druze, and Yazidis. Moreover, some illustrations, including Demi’s (2003) Muhammad ص, are controversial because of Islam’s prohibition of graven images, especially of Prophet Muhammad and his family. Gultekin and May (2020) argue that the books’ insufficient treatment of underrepresented communities should not lead to an increase in the stereotypical and inauthentic representation of these groups.

The key to accurately representing Middle Eastern people in children’s literature is to first recognize the diversity of its cultures. Classifying the entire Middle East as Muslim or Arab may confuse readers and not allow further identification of the uniqueness of each country. Moreover, stereotypical representation of a region with more than 400 million people, reinforced by the negative influences of the media, perpetuates a single vision of these people mostly as terrorists (Jackson, 2014). Unfortunately, media plays a significant role in shaping people’s perceptions of reality, including how teachers design their curricula (Kaviani, 2007). As teachers and parents rely on various media for updated information and resources, it becomes essential to have access to a wide range of reliable materials that present an authentic portrayal of different ethnic and religious groups to children.

This study conducts a comprehensive investigation of children’s picture books centered on Iran, a country of more than 80 million people, and published in 2000-2021 in the United States and Canada, to examine how they portray the cultural diversity and practices of contemporary Iranians.
The study reviewed 27 picture books published and available in North American library collections about Iran. The initial search began with “Iran and/or Persia”, “picture books”, and “children’s literature” as keywords for books published between 2000 and 2021 and written in English. Since story picture books are read more often in early childhood and elementary settings, and this is an age in children “when ideas about other cultures begin their formation” (Torres, 2016, p. 194), the inductive analysis investigated the themes and contexts of the available fiction picture books about Iran for early and primary ages. The data resources used for this research consisted of library data on Iran and other Middle Eastern categories in repositories such as the University of Arizona World of Words Center for literacy, Cooperative Children’s Book Center, New York Public Library, Middle East Outreach Council, Toronto Public Library, and the Amazon website.

While searching for texts, certain criteria were developed to aid the researcher in categorizing books. Since this paper concentrates on fiction picture books, non-fiction and information series about Iran were not reviewed. Furthermore, to investigate how Iran and its diverse cultures are portrayed in children’s picture books published in North America, translations and books written in both Farsi/Persian and English were excluded. Dual language books are normally written for an Iranian audience and are seldom found in public libraries.

Finally, to keep the focus on contemporary fiction, books with the theme of “Shahnameh” or “Book of Kings” were not counted in this research (Daniel & Mahdi, 2006, p. 71). *Shahnameh* is one of the world’s longest epic poems about the struggle of good against evil that is set in pre-Islamic Persia and thus is devoid of familiar elements existing in contemporary life. Sung (2009) believes “traditional tales and historical fiction have “obvious” otherness due to time difference, fantasy elements, and presentational styles” (p. 71), so these topics were excluded to concentrate on contemporary settings and elements.

Table 1 presents an organized overview of the selected books arranged according to publication date, titles, and name of the respective author or illustrator. The themes were based on the book’s genre, plot, and the context in which the story takes place. An understanding of the themes in these books offers valuable insight into how Iran is perceived by young readers in North America and how that contributes to their cultural awareness and understanding.
List of the Books

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author/ Illustrator</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>The King and the Three Thieves: A Persian Tale</td>
<td>Kristen Balouch</td>
<td>Folktale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>The Persian Cinderella</td>
<td>Shirley Climo/Robert Florczak</td>
<td>Fairy Tale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Mystery Bottle</td>
<td>Kristen Balouch</td>
<td>Fiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Count Your Way Through Iran</td>
<td>James Haskins &amp; Kathleen Benson/ Farida Zaman</td>
<td>Fictionized Non-Fiction</td>
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<td>2009</td>
<td>Pea Boy and Other Stories from Iran</td>
<td>Elizabeth Laird/Shirin Adl</td>
<td>Folktales</td>
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<td>The Earth Shook: A Persian Tale</td>
<td>Donna Jo Napoli/Gabi SwiatKowska</td>
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<td>2009</td>
<td>Gala and Her Friends Celebrate Norooz</td>
<td>Karen McCormick</td>
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<td>2010</td>
<td>The Secret Message</td>
<td>Mina Javaherbin/Bruce Whatley</td>
<td>Folktales</td>
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<td>2012</td>
<td>The Conference of the Birds</td>
<td>Alexis York Lumbard/Demi</td>
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<td>2013</td>
<td>The Girl with a Brave Heart</td>
<td>Rita Jahanforuz/Vali Mintzi</td>
<td>Fiction</td>
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<td>2014</td>
<td>Two Parrots</td>
<td>Rashin Kheiriyeh</td>
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<td>The Heart’s Garden: Based on a Poem by Rumi</td>
<td>Omid Arabia/Shilla Shakoori</td>
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<td>2016</td>
<td>The Moonlight Princess: A Persian Cinderella Story</td>
<td>Sarak Ardestani/Whitney Mattila</td>
<td>Fairy Tale</td>
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<th>Title</th>
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<td>Gail Hejazi/Christina Cavallo</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>The New Year's Goldfish: A Nowruz Story</td>
<td>Solmaz Parveen/Tata Bobokhidze</td>
<td>Nowruz</td>
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<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>The Story of Spring and Norooz: An Untold Tale of Persian New Year</td>
<td>Nazanin Mirsadeghi/Sanam Hooshvar</td>
<td>Nowruz</td>
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<td>2017</td>
<td>Niko's Nifty Box of Books</td>
<td>Sheila Salamat/Kaveh Taherian</td>
<td>Nowruz</td>
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<td>2017</td>
<td>Navid's Story: A Real-Life Account of His Journey from Iran</td>
<td>Andy Glynne/Jonathan Trope</td>
<td>Biography/Fiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Grace Learns about Persian Culture</td>
<td>Ellie Fard/Somayeh Royaee</td>
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<td>2018</td>
<td>Hooray! Hooray! Nowruz is here!</td>
<td>Mojgan Roohani</td>
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<td>Saffron Ice cream</td>
<td>Rashin Kheiriyeh</td>
<td>Fiction</td>
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<td>2019</td>
<td>My Grandma and Me</td>
<td>Mina Javaherbin</td>
<td>Fiction</td>
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<td>2020</td>
<td>Goodnight Joon: A Persian Parody</td>
<td>Nasrin Zadeh/Sarah &amp; Ari Roven</td>
<td>Parody</td>
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<td>2021</td>
<td>Seven Special Somethings: A Nowruz Story</td>
<td>Adib Khorram/Zainab Faidhi</td>
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</tr>
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<td>2021</td>
<td>The Shape of Home</td>
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<td>2021</td>
<td>Maryam's Magic: The Story of Mathematician Maryam Mirzakhani</td>
<td>Megan Reid/Aaliya Jaleel</td>
<td>Biography/Fiction</td>
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<td>2021</td>
<td>Maryam Mirzakhani-Women in Science and Technology</td>
<td>M. M. Eboch/Elena Bia</td>
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In this research, inductive content analysis was used as the methodology to allow the investigation of the themes as they emerge. In fact, content analysis is used by researchers to “make inferences from texts and to make sense of these interpretations within context surrounding the texts” (Johnson et al., 2017, p. 13). Therefore, in the first phase of this research, books about Iran in different libraries and data resources available both in the United States and Canada were located. The primary focus of this study is on picture books written in English for ages three to nine. In the second phase, the books were read to get the holistic idea of the storyline and the emerging themes within their context. After the initial coding was conducted, the qualitative content analysis was applied to examine the literary and visual elements of picture books.

All the books selected for this study were published in English. In only a few books, Farsi words appeared in background illustrations or within the text, such as bababozorg (grandpa) in the Mystery Bottle by Balouch (2006). Another example is the use of the words namaz and chador in My Grandma and Me (2019). Namaz is the Persian word for prayer and chador is the type of hijab Iranians use while saying their prayers or on other occasions. Additionally, Kheiriyeh’s immigrant stories of The Shape of Home (2021) and Saffron Ice Cream (2018) are sample illustrations with Farsi words on their background pictures. The depiction of a bakery in Iran in The Shape of Home and the scenes of a home kitchen and the ice-cream seller in Saffron Ice Cream are good examples of the use of Farsi words and scripts in illustrations.

In reviewing the 27 books about Iran, the most prevalent theme emerging from them was that of Nowruz, the Persian New Year. Many of the books attempted to introduce the most important celebration of Persians to the English-speaking audience using a narrative form. Following Nowruz, the remaining themes were categorized into distinct sections of fiction, folktale, fairy tale, biography fiction, and others. Although themes overlapped across the picture books, their overarching content was the basis of classification for analysis.

This section is organized based on the prominent themes and topics identified during the analysis of the referenced books in relation to question 1. The categories are as follows: Nowruz, fiction, folktale, fairy
tale, biography fiction, and others. Each category is elaborated upon in the subsequent sections. To explore the second question of this study, which focuses on how picture books portray contemporary Iranians and their culture, the analysis revealed two additional categories of religious practices and contemporary culture. These categories are further discussed in the subsequent sections.

Nowruz. The majority of books reviewed for this study were about Nowruz, the Persian New Year. While Nowruz is written in different formats such as Norooz or No rouz, they all refer to the same event. Among Nowruz picture books reviewed for this study, three had a different approach and could be categorized as Nowruz fiction stories rather than presenting informational content. The New Year’s Goldfish by Solmaz Parveen and the illustrations of Tata Bobokhidze are in this category. Reflecting a second generation of Iranian Americans, Parveen’s collection comprises coloring and activity books to introduce Persian culture to children in fun and interesting ways. The New Year’s Goldfish in picture books narrates the story of Keyan, who in preparation for Nowruz goes to the pet shop and buys a goldfish. Although goldfish are one of the elements of the Nowruz Haftseen table and are usually returned to free water after the two-week celebration, many believe they should not be part of the Haftseen table due to the increasing respect for animal rights. Therefore, in the last page of the book Keyan reflects, “Goldfish had found her way to the stream that ran through his very own backyard. She had found a home with fresh water, plenty of food and other friends” (Parveen, 2016).

The second Nowruz fiction is The Story of Spring and Norooz: An Untold Tale of Persian New Year (2017). This book is a different version of the Nowruz story, from a girl named Bahar, which means “Spring” in Farsi. Having the elements of fantasy, Bahar spends the entire year sleeping in the skies except for the last day of winter when she wakes up to welcome the spring. The last book in this category is a sample of contemporary fiction. Seven Special Somethings: A Nowruz Story (2021) is written by Adib Khorram, an Iranian American award-winning author who lives in Kansas City, Missouri. In this book, Khorram introduces Kian, the fun-loving protagonist, who tries to include his cat, Sonny, as one of the Haftseen table items all of which start with the letter “S” and symbolize notions that include health, wealth, and prosperity, among others. But Sonny messes up the Haftseen table and Kian has to come up with his own unique table, and
he replaces his superhero, sugar, sneakers, soap, scarf, and some seeds with the original Haftseen elements. But the last “S” is missing until the whole family “smiles” for a family picture. This creative book is accompanied by Zainab Faidhi’s colorful and captivating illustrations.

**Fiction.** The fiction books found and reviewed in this category were of different themes, settings, and characters. Kristen Balouch’s *Mystery Bottle* (2006) is the story of a boy who is carried by a strong wind from Brooklyn to his grandfather’s house in Iran. There, they have tea with sugar cubes together and then climb the tallest mountain. Up there, grandpa holds an empty bottle and asks the boy to breathe in the wind and, with some added love, blow it back to the bottle. Afterward, he packs the bottle into the boy’s bag and reminds him that when having a cup of tea at home the scent of the opened bottle would bring him to his grandfather. With its dynamic illustrations, this biographical fantasy takes the reader over time and space despite the political and geographical barriers between the two countries. *The Earth Shook: A Persian Tale* is by Donna Jo Napoli (2009), who is a professor of linguistics and the author of children’s and young adult fiction. The book narrates the story of Parisa, who is left alone in Bam’s earthquake in Iran. However, instead of living in despair, she inspires all the animals around with her human spirit. Although the tale’s setting is realistic, the plot and the characters, except for Parisa herself, revolve around fictional animals.

In *The Girl with a Brave Heart: A Tale from Tehran* (2013), Rita Jahanforuz suggests the book’s setting is Tehran, Iran, although the story itself is an adaptation of the Grimm’s fairy tale, Mother Hulda. This story is about Shiraz, who was born after her mother’s death in Tehran. Her father soon marries a woman with a daughter the same age as Shiraz, and the two grow together like sisters. Things change, however, when Shiraz’s father dies, and her stepmother makes her do the housework while her stepsister, Monir, continues living her life as before. Illustrated by Vali Mintzi, the pictures match the plot by depicting ancient times. *Two Parrots* (2014), *Saffron Ice Cream* (2018), and *The Shape of Home* (2021) are three works of fiction authored and illustrated by Rashin Kheiriyeh, an internationally recognized Iranian artist, illustrator, and animator currently living in Washington, D.C. While *Two Parrots* is inspired by a tale from Rumi, *Saffron Ice Cream* and *The Shape of Home* depict Kheiriyeh’s own immigration stories and comparisons she draws between Iran and the United States. *Saffron Ice Cream* is about Kheiriyeh’s family trip to Coney Island beach in Brooklyn where she remembers her childhood memories of the
family trips to the Caspian Sea. Whereas in *The Shape of Home*, the author narrates her memories from schools in Iran while looking forward to her new experiences in the United States. Similarly, Mina Javaherbin’s *My Grandma and Me* (2019), shares Mina’s own stories with her grandma filled with elements of Iranian culture. She explains that her grandma used to live with them when she was growing up in Iran and that they would do everything together from cooking to saying prayers and visiting neighbors.

**Folktale.** For this category, the definition of folktale is drawn from Thompson’s (1977) explanation of prose tale as: “the story which has been handed down from generation to generation either in writing or by word of mouth” (p. 4). In this regard, *Pea Boy and Other Stories from Iran* (2009) by the British writer Elizabeth Laird is a collection of Persian folk tales illustrated by Shirin Adl. Although a British author, Laird has traveled around the world extensively, including the Middle East and Africa, and has particularly worked on collecting folk stories in Ethiopia. Shirin Adl is also an Iranian illustrator who currently lives in Oxford, the UK. The other book from this author and illustrator is *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings* published in 2012.

Mina Javaherbin, the author of *My Grandma and Me*, retells the story of the parrot and the merchant based on a poem of Rumi. *The Secret Message* (2010), one of Javaherbin’s favorite childhood stories, with its subtle humor and the vibrant images of Bruce Whately, is a good introduction to Persian history, literature, and culture. It is a story of a Persian merchant whose speaking parrot from the Indian forests attracts many customers to the shop. Although the parrot yearns to be free again, the merchant continues keeping him in the cage. One day the merchant decides to embark on a journey to India and the parrot asks him to deliver a message from him to other parrots in the Indian forest. The forest parrots’ subtle unity in response to the encaged parrot and the secret message they delivered set the merchant’s parrot free. Similarly, *The Conference of the Birds* (2012) by Alexis York Lumbard, an American Muslim children’s book author, is based on the ancient story by Attar, the Persian poet. The book describes the spiritual journey of a thousand birds of which only thirty make it to their destination at the court of “Simorgh,” which literally means “thirty birds.” Demi does the illustrations of this book featuring only birds as characters. To this collection can be added *The Heart’s Garden: Based on a Poem by Rumi* (2015). Authored by Omid Arabian, this volume is inspired by Rumi’s holistic worldviews and his unity with the universe. Kristen Balouch’s *The King and the Three Thieves: A Persian Tale* (2000) is another
item in this category which narrates the story of King Abbas in the faraway land of Persia and his curiosity about the common people. Disguised as a beggar, he shares his dinner with three ordinary folk and gets caught up in their scheme to enter the palace. Eventually, the king remembers his vizir’s advice that “power can be used for good and for evil,” and he decides to use it for good by not letting anyone in his kingdom ever stay hungry again (Balouch, 2000).

**Fairy Tale.** Categorized in this section are *The Persian Cinderella* (2001) and *The Moonlight Princess: A Persian Cinderella story* (2016). The former, written by Shirley Climo and illustrated by Robert Florczak, is the well-known Cinderella story plot. It is unique and different, however, in that the setting is ancient Persia and the characters, especially the main character Setareh, are all Persians. On the contrary, the story of the “Moonlight Princess” or “Mah Pishooni,” is actually a Persian fairy tale that is similar to its European counterpart, Cinderella. It is retold by Sarak Ardestani, the daughter of Iranian American parents, who first heard it at the age of six and was eager to share it with the English-speaking world. The story’s opening is very similar to the *A Girl with a Brave Heart*, with Mah losing her mother and her father remarrying a woman with a daughter almost the same age as Mah, but the narrative continues along the lines of Cinderella with its context and illustration in ancient Persia.

**Biography/Fiction.** The first book in this genre is *Navid’s Story: A Real-Life Account of His Journey from Iran* (2017) by Andy Glynne. Told in Navid’s own words, this is an immigrant story about a family of Kurdish refugees who had to flee Iran and relates what they experienced on the way to their destination. The second book is Megan Reid’s *Maryam’s Magic: The Story of Mathematician Maryam Mirzakhani* (2021). As its title suggests, the book is about the Iranian mathematician Maryam Mirzakhani, who was the only female recipient of the prestigious Fields Medal in mathematics. There is another publication of this book named, *Maryam Mirzakhani—Women in Science and Technology* (2021), which was written by M. M. Eboch and illustrated by Elena Bia. While both genres are in contemporary fiction, the stories take place only partly in Iran with the rest depicting the main characters’ lives outside the country.

**Others.** James Haskins and Kathleen Benson’s *Count Your Way Through Iran* (2007) is a fictionalized nonfiction work that introduces Iran and its culture through counting in Farsi numerals. The book is illustrated by Farida Zaman, a Bangladeshi artist based in Toronto. The book opens with a general introduction about Iran, its population, and official language and
then continues to count the numbers in Farsi; yek, doh, and . . . However, each number represents an Iranian symbol. For instance, one (yek) stands for one national car, Paykan, which is only made in Iran. Two (doh) represents the two Towers of Silence near the city of Yazd, where it was built by Zoroastrians. The other book that could not be grouped within other categories is Goodnight Joon: A Persian Parody (2020). This book by Nasrin Zadeh is an imitation of the famous book Goodnight Moon that describes a home full of Persian decor. “Joon” in Farsi means “dear” and the entire book centers on a parent/grandparent’s love for their child filled with Farsi phrases. In a fully Persian setting, this retold story depicts Persian cultural elements such as a Persian cat, rug, delicacies, and other traits of the room.

**Religious Practices.** Although Iran is a Muslim majority country and wearing hijab in public has been compulsory since the 1979 revolution, none of the books directly reference Islam as a religion or mention other Muslim practices. There are only subtle indications of the religion, such as when Mina’s grandma was saying her prayer in My Grandma and Me (2019). The findings suggest that older people or females in ancient times are depicted wearing scarves, unless they are part of contemporary fiction that is set in Iran. For example, in the Seven Special Somethings (2021), the grandma is depicted with a scarf while Kian’s mother does not wear one. While many families in the diaspora or the major cities of Iran do not wear hijab at home gatherings, elderly women keep it as a belief or tradition. In addition, Megan Reid’s Maryam & Magic: The Story of Mathematician Maryam Mirzakhani (2021) is an instance of depicting women with hijab in an Iranian context. The initial pages that narrate Maryam’s school experiences in Iran portray all females in accordance with the Iranian school dress code. However, the depiction of Maryam’s geometry teacher wearing a long-sleeved shirt and skirt is incorrect as teachers are obliged to wear outfits similar to those of their students, including manteaus and pants, while also wearing the school hijab called Maghnaeh.

Moreover, none of the books refer to Muslim celebrations, a fact that also is evident in the survey by Paige, et al. (2015) of Iranian Americans who were unwilling to disclose their religious affiliation. The authors assumed this might be due to “fear of social marginalization or discrimination” (Paige et al., 2015, p. 11). However, the prevalent theme of Nowruz demonstrates the strong connection Iranians have to their cultural traditions. Rooted in pre-Islamic Persia and the secular Zoroastrian tradition,
Nowruz is celebrated by all Iranians, regardless of their ethnicity. Therefore, for Iranians, Nowruz, more than any other Muslim celebration, represents their cultural identity and unity which has been preserved for over a thousand years and predates the advent of Islam in Persia.

**Contemporary Culture.** Another dominant theme emerging from the books’ reviews is the presence of folktales derived from the works of great Persian poets such as Ferdowsi, Rumi, and Attar. Although the majority of these books, which were not included in this study, are inspired by the “Shahnameh” or “the Book of Kings,” the analysis of the folktale section proves the popularity of folktales in Persian culture among all generations. These folktales not only recount the heroic deeds of ancient Persians; they also subtly convey morals and spirituality which may captivate a diverse audience. However, another way to increase awareness of Iranians’ daily lives and practices could be through the biographies of famous contemporary figures in children’s picture books. In this regard, the books on Maryam Mirzakhani’s life were the only ones written by non-Iranian authors Megan Reid and M. M. Eboch. While there are many other prominent Iranian figures, from both ancient and current times, no biographies have been written about them. Depicting the lives of famous people in various fields would serve as an inspiration for younger generations and could foster unity and positive interactions among diverse nationalities as well.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

It is important for curricula and library resources to be representative of the student population and provide a mirror in which students can see themselves and other people from their own community. In this regard, picture books should integrate ethnic and cultural themes into the curriculum. As Morgan (2009) points out, children’s books not only teach reading but also transmit values. While multiple perspectives encourage readers to engage in more complex analysis of the text, it is essential to ensure an adequate availability of multicultural books for students.

The analysis of 27 children’s books about Iran revealed a relatively limited number of common themes and those were primarily focused on Nowruz stories and folktales. Although many of the authors and illustrators were Iranian or had good familiarity with the culture, most of the books do not provide insight into the contemporary life of Iranians. This aligns with Furman’s (2014) findings in which the majority of analyzed books were set in ancient times and revealed little information about
contemporary practices. Gultekin and May (2020) also shared similar findings that their analysis of the Middle Eastern cultures inadequately encompassed the full diversity of the region, resulting in the propagation of stereotypical and inauthentic representation of this group.

In addition, the settings of the contemporary fiction stories were often located either partially or entirely outside of Iran. This may be attributed to the growing number of Iranians in the diaspora and the limited resources available about Persian culture in North America, particularly in the domain of curricula and picture books. As a result, readers are unable to delve into the specifics of Iranian culture. For instance, none of the books reference diasporic ethnicities or characters speaking languages other than Persian or specific dialects. Raina (2009) had similar findings in which she believed the authors’ access to the English publishing industry rather than their own language was what influenced their content selection to suit an English-speaking audience.

Furthermore, in the books reviewed the exact setting of several books was unclear and, if mentioned, was generally referred to only as Iran. Only a few books explicitly mentioned locations such as Tehran or Kerman. In some books like *The New Year’s Goldfish* (2016), the setting could be assumed to be in North America based on the author’s background and the presence of English signs in the illustrations. The books reviewed also provided limited information on gender or political facts about Iran, which did not seem to be the result of a deep understanding of the sociopolitical and cultural context of Iran. For example, in *Navid’s Story* (2017), the author and illustrator do not provide much information about the Kurdish community that Navid is from, despite the Kurds being a distinct ethnic group in Iran. Similarly, in *Maryam’s Magic*, Reid (2021) explains Maryam’s attendance at school after the Iran-Iraq war (1980–88) as follows:

... during the war that tore her home country of Iran apart, girls and women hadn’t been allowed to attend school with boys—or sometimes even at all. But after the war was over, politicians started new schools to allow girls’ talents to grow. ‘You are part of a lucky generation,’ Maryam’s mother told her.

Gender segregation in schools has been a policy predating the revolution, and girls in major cities like Tehran have been allowed to attend schools. Only in institutions established by foreigners (missionaries) or in remote areas where the total number of students was low, were boys and girls allowed to attend school together. However, after the revolution certain talent schools both for boys and girls started to grow, and
Mirzakhani was a graduate of one of these talent schools. Therefore, the paragraph mentioned represents an instance where inadequate and/or false information may have contributed to stereotypes. As Short (2018) explains, “the lack of contemporary depictions is problematic in that children may develop the misconception that other parts of the world are set back in time” (p. 295). This statement aligns with the findings of Torres (2016) and Panjwani (2017), as both studies identified issues with flat characters and one-dimensional plots. Therefore, to provide an authentic portrayal of Iran in children’s literature, resources on the contemporary life of Iranians should be expanded to capture the experience of a multicultural society.

In conclusion, the analysis of children’s books about Iran revealed a limited representation of contemporary Iranian life, with a focus on Nowruz and folktales. The settings often extended beyond Iran, and important aspects of Iranian culture, such as diasporic identities and languages, were not adequately addressed. Gender, historical, and political facts were sometimes inaccurately portrayed, leading to the perpetuation of stereotypes. To foster an authentic and comprehensive understanding of Iran, it is crucial to expand resources that reflect the contemporary experiences of Iranians and their multicultural society in children’s literature.

References


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Among Muslims, the states of spiritual well-being and physical health complement each other and should be developed in youth. Regular physical activity (PA) in childhood is associated with multiple health benefits immediately and persisting into adulthood. Schools are ideal venues for children to be physically active owing to curricular e.g., physical education (PE), co-curricular e.g., recess, classroom activity breaks, and extracurricular e.g., intramural and interscholastic sports opportunities. Most schools utilize websites to convey and promote information about what they feel is important for website visitors to know. Previous studies on how PE/PA are promoted on school websites excluded U.S. Islamic schools. Therefore, we conducted a content analysis of U.S. Islamic school websites to determine the prevalence of images and verbiage promoting PE/PA and associated characteristics. Our descriptive findings suggest that PE/PA are emphasized less compared with other subject matter. PE was mentioned on 53% of websites, intramurals on 29%, and interscholastic sports on 21%. Thus, the holistic education of children in the Islamic tradition may be compromised.

Keywords: school websites, afiyat, sports, content analysis, youth
Regular physical activity (PA) during childhood is associated with many benefits in the short term (e.g., lower body fat, improved cognitive function, reduced symptoms of depression) and into adulthood (e.g., lowered risk for heart disease, hypertension, and type 2 diabetes) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). The United States has an estimated 1.35 million Muslim children (Pew Research Center, 2017). Data on the prevalence of physical inactivity and overweight in this population are unavailable, but among 373 Muslim American adult women, 64% reported exercising at least 30 minutes a day for four or more days a week and 42% reported being overweight (Budhwani et al., 2018). Meanwhile, among 447 Arab-Muslim American mothers of young children, 76% reported not performing any strenuous PA during the previous week (Eldoumi & Gates, 2019). Muslim mothers regularly communicate their cultural and religious values about PA to their daughters with their national origin largely determining the acceptability of and conditions for being physically active in the United States (Al-Jayyousi & Myers-Bowman, 2022). Yet Muslim families experience a diminution in collective family time after migrating to the West (Ashbourne et al., 2012), which may curtail conversations and reduce co-participation in PA.

Schools can supplement the role of parents in this regard by promoting PA and getting children engaged in it. Indeed, for decades schools have been encouraged to provide physical education (PE) to improve the public health of students (Sallis & McKenzie, 1991). More recently, a comprehensive school PA program approach recommended schools offer additional opportunities for PA during school (e.g., recess, intramural programs) and before- and after-school (e.g., active transportation, interscholastic athletics) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). Yet many Muslim youths report mixed experiences in school PA settings. For example, Australian Muslim girls eagerly played various inter-school sports, but were less enthusiastic toward PE due to not being accommodated during Ramadan and being required to participate in high-contact PA with boys (Knez et al., 2012). In the United Kingdom, compared with Christian girls, Muslim girls: (a) were more self-conscious about their bodies and participating in a mixed-sex environment; (b) did not enjoy PE or felt it was unimportant; and (c) expressed being uncomfortable about multiple aspects of the PE uniform (Elliott & Hoyle, 2014). As a final example, Muslim Greek girls felt their religious and cultural identities did not impede their participation in PE and that teachers understood their needs; however, they felt these
same schools offered insufficient and uninteresting extracurricular PA for girls (Dagkas & Benn, 2006).

Given these mixed results from public schools, it seems reasonable to infer that the delivery of PE/PA at Islamic schools would be more consonant with students’ and families’ faith-based beliefs and values. Indeed, boys at one secondary Islamic school in the United Kingdom felt participating in PE and sport was inextricably linked to forming and solidifying their identities as Muslim men in becoming more self-disciplined, rational, and united (Farooq & Parker, 2009). Moreover, as over 40,000 youths attend Islamic schools in the United States (Council for American Private Education, 2017), providing quality school PA experiences would address the community’s public health. From an Islamic perspective, Allah loans a corporeal body to us for life during which time we are enjoined to behave in ways that emulate the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH1). It is thenceforth to be returned and accounted for on the Day of Judgment. Safeguarding the body therefore requires that healthful behaviors such as engaging in PA and exercise be performed regularly (World Health Organization, 1997). Indeed, consistent with the times, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) led a vigorous physically active lifestyle that according to the Sunnah2 included participating in and/or promoting archery, equestrian activity, swordsmanship, swimming, running, walking, and wrestling (Haddad, 2017). Moreover, the Hadith3, which encourages teaching children swimming, archery, and horseback riding continues to be cited in modern times to justify participating in PA (e.g., Al-Jayyousi et al., 2019). It is disappointing then to read of Islamic schools falling short of these ideals as Chown (2021) related:

...it would have been fair to say that sport wasn’t an active part of the emerging identity of the school, that there wasn’t a culture of HPE (health and PE) or sport; that in the absence of a HPE department, there had not been a vision for HPE and sport in the context of an Islamic school nor coordinated whole-school structures, traditions, or approaches. (p. 133)

Unsurprisingly, students and their parents do not foreground PE and sport as salient reasons for attending an Islamic over a public school. Instead, immersion in Arabic, Islamic studies, Tartee4, performing salat5, and education within an Islamic framework often drive the decision to attend an Islamic school even when secular subject matter is poorly or inadequately taught (Nur-Awaleh & Mohammed, 2022). Even so, Islamic schools desire their graduates to be on a pathway toward careers in medicine, law, and engineering which results in “HPE along with humanities and arts”
viewed as the “soft subjects” that consciously or unconsciously get sidelined” (Chown, 2021, p. 132).

Meanwhile, most schools maintain websites to communicate information to parents, students, and stakeholders about the school’s mission/vision, values, policies, academics, student life, and other topics (Gu, 2017). Additionally, independent schools tailor website content for marketing to a target audience, and they often highlight certain offerings when competing with rival schools to recruit prospective students (Wilson & Carlsen, 2016). Unfortunately, the promotion of PE/PA on independent school websites is scarce—52% of 759 U.S. charter schools did not mention even one of five frequently offered PA programs at schools: PE, recess, intramurals, interscholastics, and clubs (Kahan et al., 2019). Studies of private school PE/PA website content have been conducted, but they have either commingled or excluded Islamic schools (e.g., Kahan & McKenzie, 2021; Kahan et al., 2020). Tangentially, Kahan (2018) found only 27% of 773 U.S. mosques mentioned PA programming on their websites; an encouraging sign, however, was the various PA program types (i.e., camps, fitness classes, sports leagues, youth groups) available to youth on mosque websites that mentioned any PA.

Coming full circle, Chown (2021) argued that Islamic education is more coherent when PE and sports are not treated as afterthoughts:

HPE/sport constitute essential disciplines for the integrated or tawhidic vision of education and are key sites to advance often common aspirations for Islamic schools: To prepare Muslim learners with a strong sense of identity (inclusive of their multiple identities); a strong grounding in faith; and a sense of belonging. (p. 148)

This premise can be conveyed on Islamic schools’ websites if deemed sufficiently important and would be manifest through verbiage related to PA (e.g., lists of facilities, sports teams, PE curriculum and dosage) and images of students engaged in PA. Therefore, we conducted a content analysis of the websites of all U.S. Islamic schools to determine the prevalence of verbiage and images related to PE/PA. Our curation of data from the websites was intended to answer questions such as: (a) How prevalent is the mention of PE relative to other subject matter? (b) How much PE is required/offered? (c) Who teaches PE? (d) What venues are available for PA? (e) What opportunities are available for extracurricular PA and are they equitable between genders? (f) Are images of PA provided and who is depicted in them? In answering these questions, we attempt to bridge the binary division between Islamic and Western educational
philosophies that in Islamic Education Studies is giving way to curriculum and pedagogical approaches that acknowledge and integrate both traditions (Sahin, 2018).

**Methods**

We used three electronic directories to create a sampling frame of 714 schools (Figure 1). After removing duplicate entries, we screened the 374 remaining schools and removed an additional 152 schools for 11 reasons—the most common being that a school did not have a functioning website (Figure 1). The final analytic sample consisted of 222 schools with all having a physical location and serving students from kindergarten to twelfth grade. Schools were most commonly K-12 (n = 111, 50.0%), K-8 (n = 73, 32.9%), and K-5/6 (n = 34, 15.3%). The schools were in 37 different states, with California (n = 31, 14.0%) and Florida, New York, and Texas (n = 20 each, 9.0%) most frequently represented.

**Data Curation**

The study was exempt from IRB approval because the websites were freely available in the public domain; thus, there was no need to interact with schools to obtain the data. Between November 2021 and August 2022, the websites of the schools were searched line by line for the mention...
of PE and related content (i.e., curriculum, teachers), intramural PA, interscholastic sport offerings, and PA facilities. (We could not access password-protected parent and student portals on websites and thus were unaware of their content as it related to PE/PA.) We also searched for PA images on the homepage, because website images convey marketing information representing aspects of school culture (Maguire et al., 1999). (We additionally searched for mention of all religious and secular academic subjects.) We started on the homepage or landing page of each school, then navigated and searched the drop-down menus of tabs typically titled “About Us,” “Academics,” “Athletics,” and “School Life” or “Community.” (Operational definitions of the data we searched for are presented in Table 1.)

### Operational Definitions of Physical Education (PE) and Physical Activity (PA) Content Extracted from School Websites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PE mentioned</th>
<th>If PE, physical education, or gym was mentioned anywhere on the website except in the naming of staff or faculty (0 = not present, 1 = present).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PE dosage</td>
<td>Refers to lessons per week, lesson length, credit hours, and/or PE volume. If PE volume (min/week) was not mentioned, it was calculated if lesson frequency and lesson length were provided.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PE curriculum</td>
<td>If there was mention of the content of a PE course (0 = not present, 1 = present) and further qualified by scope. Scope was categorized into general and specific (0 = general, 1 = specific). “General” referred to terminology such as sports, games, fitness. “Specific” referred to the names of activities such as jump rope, basketball, soccer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PE teacher</td>
<td>If the term “physical education/PE/gym teacher” was associated with Coach first name or Coach/Mr./Ms./Mrs. last name, excluding athletic trainers (0 = not present, 1 = present). Total number of PE teachers per school was tallied. The teacher’s gender (0 = male, 1 = female) and religion (0 = non-Muslim, 1 = Muslim) was tallied. When gender was not apparent because a picture of the teacher was not provided and/or we were not familiar with the forename, we used <a href="https://www.prokerala.com/kids/baby-names/muslim/s/to">https://www.prokerala.com/kids/baby-names/muslim/s/to</a> distinguish gender. When religion was not apparent because a picture of a female teacher did not show her in hijab, and for male teachers we used <a href="https://www.familyeducation.com/baby-names/surname/origin/muslim">https://www.familyeducation.com/baby-names/surname/origin/muslim</a> to distinguish religion.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
Images | Posed or unposed images of movement in recess, dance, PE, or sports setting of any age students considering only the homepage (0 = not present, 1 = present). We excluded movies or slides in which users must click to see the entire presentation. The total count of distinct images present on the homepage was tallied. The gender composition of each image was tallied (1 = all male, 2 = all female, 3 = mixed). For images with females, the number wearing hijab was tallied.

Intramurals | Before, during, or after school programs or clubs that included a PA component excluding interscholastic sports (0 = not present, 1 = present). Excluded before- and after-school childcare for students below first grade. The total number of programs or clubs offered was tallied. The name of each listed activity was tallied (e.g., aikido, kickball).

Interscholastics | Included sports in which student teams compete against other schools (0 = not present, 1 = present). Further included the total number of interscholastic sports offered for female, male, and coed teams for specific school levels (middle or high school). The name of each listed activity was tallied (e.g., cross country, volleyball).

PA facility | If there was mention of the school having a facility where PA is typically performed. The total number of facilities was tallied. The name of each listed facility was tallied (e.g., gym, soccer field).

The data were extracted by two trained students and the senior author who had extensive experience assessing website content. Student data collectors were trained separately, being first introduced to the different categories and then iterating each category in their own words to demonstrate understanding. Next, between 10-20 websites in alphabetical order were examined to show the most common locations for finding the desired data. The trainees observed the senior author code and later simultaneously coded with the same author to ensure reliability. Both the trainees and senior author coded in real-time and compared results. The trainees then independently coded websites in batches of 5-10 and compared codes with the senior author until they surpassed an 80% inter-rater reliability. The trainees were then assigned to code the remainder of the schools independently.

We analyzed data using Microsoft Excel and Social Science Statistics (https://www.socscistatistics.com/). We calculated frequencies, proportions, and measures of central tendency and variability. For the latter
two metrics, we performed the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality to determine whether the data were normally distributed. When data were normally distributed, we calculated mean/standard deviation; when they were not, we calculated median/interquartile range.

Results

PE ranked 7th relative to the proportion of websites mentioning it compared with other subject matter areas—ahead of only fine/visual arts (Table 2). At 52.7%, the mention of PE trailed the other remaining subject matter areas by at least 20%. Quran/Islamic studies and Arabic were the only subject matter areas mentioned on more than 80% of websites (Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quran/Islamic studies</td>
<td>87.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>85.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>78.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>78.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English language arts</td>
<td>77.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social studies</td>
<td>73.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical education</td>
<td>52.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fine/visual arts</td>
<td>47.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, 17.1% of school websites mentioned PE dosage (i.e., lesson frequency, lesson length, credit hours, and/or volume) (Table 3). At the elementary/middle school levels, PE was offered a median of 2.0 ± 0.5 days/week. At the high school level, a median of 2.0 ± 1.0 credits of PE was required to be taken. Only one school mentioned lesson length (i.e., 45 min) and six schools mentioned weekly volume. Of these, four elementary schools mentioned offering PE an average of 87.4 ± 39.9 min/week.

Overall, 18.0% of school websites mentioned PE in their curriculum. Of these, 45.0% described their curriculum generally (i.e., sports, games) and 55.0% described it specifically (i.e., specific names of activities) (Table 3).

Overall, 33.3% of school websites mentioned 110 different PE teachers by name, with one PE teacher per school most frequently mentioned (66.2%) (Table 3). Of all PE teachers mentioned, the majority were female (54.5%) and Muslim (73.6%) (Table 3).
Table 3. Prevalence of School Websites Mentioning Physical Education (PE) Characteristics (n = 222)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dosage</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>45.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>55.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PE teacher</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>54.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>73.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, 23.9% of school websites mentioned PA facilities (Table 4), with 107 facilities tallied. Among those mentioned, 85.9% were concentrated among four types: playgrounds, gyms, basketball courts, and soccer fields (Table 5).

Table 4. Prevalence of School Websites Mentioning Physical Activity (PA) Characteristics (n = 222)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interscholastic sports</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual image of PA</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PA facility</td>
<td>23.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intramural PA</td>
<td>29.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, 21.6% of school websites included at least one PA image on their homepage (i.e., the only location we checked) (Table 4), with 105 images displayed ($Mdn \pm 1.0 \pm 2.0$ images/homepage). Among these websites, 28 (58.3%) displayed images that depicted mixed-gender scenes or presented a combination of male-only and female-only images; 13 (27.1%) displayed only images of males, and the remaining 7 (14.6%) displayed only images of females. Among the 59 PA images depicting females, we tallied the frequency of students in hijab and then divided by the total number of female students in the images to derive a percentage for each website. There was considerable variation ($Mdn \pm 25.0 \pm 100.0$ females covered/website).

Intramurals and Interscholastics

Overall, 29.3% of school websites mentioned intramurals (Table 4), with 146 activities identified ($Mdn \pm 2.0 \pm 2.0$ activities listed/school when a school mentioned any). Three activities comprised more than 50% of the offerings: soccer ($n = 30$), basketball ($n = 23$), and martial arts ($n = 22$) (Table 5).
### Table 5. Most Frequently Mentioned Facilities, Intramurals, and Interscholastic Sports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Total Mentioned</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Facility</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playground</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>32.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gym</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>28.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soccer field</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basketball court</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intramurals</strong></td>
<td>146</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basketball</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martial arts</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walk/run</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports (specific)a</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field day</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports (general)b</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racquet sports</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitness</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archery</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interscholastics</strong>c</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>123</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basketball</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>46.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>29.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross country</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Track</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Football</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>103</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basketball</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>46.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volleyball</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross country</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Track</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*aSports (specific) represents a combined tally of sports mentioned by name (e.g., hockey, volleyball).

*bSports (general) represents website verbiage that stated sports were provided but without naming them.

*cCounts for a particular sport represent the sum of mentions for middle and high school sports.
Overall, 21.2% of school websites mentioned interscholastic sports (Table 4), with 228 sports teams across middle/high school grade and gender combinations representing 12 different sports (Mdn = 4.0 ± 4.0 sports teams/listing school). Only two websites listed coed sports teams (middle school cross country, high school badminton). For both males and females, basketball and soccer teams combined represented more than 70% of offerings (Table 5). Several sports were preponderantly represented by one gender. For males it was football (100% of seven teams identified); for females, it was volleyball (84.6% of 11 teams identified). Among the 47 websites that listed at least one sport, 28 (57.4%) mentioned the same number of sports for males and females, while 8 (17.1%) and 7 (14.9%) websites mentioned one and two more sports for males, respectively.

**DISCUSSION**

Utilizing content analysis to examine the promotion of PE/PA on U.S. Islamic school websites, we uncovered a hidden agenda in which the mention of PE was subordinate to nearly all other subject matter. Religious subject matter was prioritized which aligns with what parents most value about Islamic school education (Nur-Awaleh & Mohammed, 2022). Similarly, Kahan et al. (2019) previously found 68% of charter school websites that did not mention PE still mentioned math and English language arts. Our finding is regrettable as Chown (2021) posited that PE and Islamic religious studies are interlaced and complementary to one another: “Hence, with the correct intention (niyah) and action (amal), HPE and sport, like other activities, can be elevated to an act of worship (ibadah), with the potential for growth through expressions of consciousness” (p. 127), and “HPE offers opportunities for engagement in critical religious reflection on practical ways that faith informs and enhances health/healthy bodies/healthy living, wellbeing, justice, and understandings of contemporary issues relevant to learners’ lives” (p. 148). Chown’s comments closely relate to afiyah or overall well-being (including health), which Muslims may ask for in their du’a (supplications).

A majority (55%) of the listed PE teachers were female, which affords opportunities for female students to regularly interact with same-sex role models of PA. Additionally, potential concerns of female students and their parents about PE being taught in a mixed-gender environment might be lessened when the teacher is female. A majority (74%) of listed PE teachers were Muslim, which similarly affords opportunities for all students to
regularly interact with co-religionist adult role models of PA. The figure coincides with data—albeit not updated—that indicate between 10% and 30% of U.S. Islamic school teachers are non-Muslims (Keyworth, 2011).

Playgrounds and gymnasiums were the most frequently identified PA facilities, representing over 60% of those mentioned. Similarly, among 94 K-8 and K-12 Jewish day schools, gyms and playgrounds were also most frequently mentioned (Kahan et al., 2021). Slightly more than 20% of school websites’ homepages showed any images of students engaged in PA, which is more than 50% less than those shown among California private elementary schools (Kahan & McKenzie, 2020). Website images are purposively selected by faith-based schools to communicate and market their meanings of tradition and community to site visitors (Wilkins, 2011). Although most websites posting PA images showed images of both males and females, nearly twice as many posted PA images of only males. Doing so may send an unintended, gendered message that PA is more appropriate for males than females. This is concerning as it perpetuates a deficit model of female Muslims participating in PA and tacit exclusion from full connection and agency in their community and larger society (Toffoletti & Palmer, 2017).

For intramurals, soccer, basketball, and martial arts comprised more than 50% of offerings mentioned on the websites. Similarly, martial arts, basketball, and soccer were the most mentioned intramurals among elementary and middle school grades on Jewish day school websites (Kahan et al., 2020). Basketball and soccer are ranked 2nd and 4th among sports in which U.S. youth regularly participate, while average annual family spending for these three sports ranges between $427 (basketball) and $777 (martial arts) (The Aspen Institute, 2019). These figures, combined with the observation that a social gradient with increasing income exists for regular participation in sport (The Aspen Institute, 2019), makes Islamic schools offering these and other intramural PA vital to students’ well-being.

For interscholastic sport, mentions of basketball and soccer teams represented over 70% of teams for both males and females. Similarly, Jewish day school websites mentioned interscholastic basketball (i.e., 90% by school level/gender) and soccer (i.e., 66% by school level/gender) more than any other sport (Kahan et al., 2020). According to 2021–2022 high school participation data, basketball ranked first for boys and girls and soccer ranked 7th for boys and 6th for girls by number of schools fielding a team (National Federation of High Schools, 2022). From an Islamic perspective, basketball is considered Muslim American male
youths’ favorite sport with notable Muslim representation in the National Basketball Association and National Collegiate Athletic Association, and Muslim recreational and Islamic center leagues exist in larger metro areas (Sacirbey, 2012; Thangaraj, 2015). Soccer’s popularity in the United States pales in comparison with basketball. Nonetheless, Muslim immigrants to the United States frequently hail from countries in which soccer’s popularity is supreme, and international stars are regularly seen embracing their Muslim identity in the face of fatwas banning participation in soccer (Shavit, 2019). In our study, 32% of websites mentioning interscholastic sports listed one or two more teams for boys than girls. Interestingly, in the United States the number of boys’ high school sports teams declined by 3.4 teams per school over a six-year period compared with a decline of 2.1 teams for girls (Veliz et al., 2019). Overall, the mean difference between the number of boys’ and girls’ teams was 0.4, which was the same difference found between genders among Jewish day schools’ sports teams (Kahan et al., 2020).

Previous studies analyzed the PE/PA website content of 2,785 California charter schools, California private elementary schools, U.S charter schools, and North American Jewish day schools, the latter representing a religion that also holds canon requiring safeguarding the body (Kahan et al., 2019, 2020, 2021; Kahan & McKenzie, 2020, 2021). Table 6 displays percentages of websites mentioning seven PE/PA characteristics for comparison with the current study’s findings. Greater proportions of U.S. Islamic schools mentioned PE/PA characteristics compared with California (5 of 5 comparisons) and U.S. (4 of 5 comparisons) charter elementary schools (Kahan et al., 2019; Kahan & McKenzie, 2021). Conversely, greater proportions of California private elementary schools (5 of 6 comparisons) and North American Jewish day schools (6 of 6 comparisons) mentioned PE/PA characteristics compared with U.S. Islamic schools (Kahan et al., 2020, 2021; Kahan & McKenzie, 2020, 2021). Although not documented, California private schools and Jewish day schools may have greater financial resources than the state’s Islamic schools, allowing them to provide more and more diverse PE/PA programming that could be promoted online. Indeed, Islamic schools walk a tightrope of setting a tuition threshold that is affordable but may still be considered high by some parents (Nur-Awaleh & Mohammed, 2022). Meanwhile, the average tuition of Jewish day schools was $22,910 (Prizmah, 2020), and the median income of families living within a California private elementary school’s zip code was $76,500 (Kahan & McKenzie, 2020).
Our current study has multiple strengths. Functionally, we completed a national audit of all Islamic schools with working websites. We used the same operational definitions and strategies in searching as previous studies, which allowed us to compare them directly (see Table 6). Islamic schools’ promotion of PE/PA fell between that of California and U.S. charter schools and California private and North American Jewish day schools. If data had been gathered by interacting with school staff through mail, electronic, or phone surveys, we most likely would have identified social desirability biases. As to the former, for example, the Islamic Schools League of America (ISLA, 2021) emailed surveys to 300 school principals about the impact of COVID-19 and received 79 usable responses (i.e., 26% response rate).

Our findings apply only to the content found during a fixed period; updates and changes are expected over time. Also, some programs and—

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Islamic schools (n = 222)</th>
<th>CA private ES (n = 990)</th>
<th>CA charter ES (n = 520)</th>
<th>U.S. charter ES (n = 759)</th>
<th>NA Jewish schools (n = 516)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PE</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PE curriculum</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PE teacher</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interscholastic sports</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intramural PA</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual image of PA</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PA facility</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Reported values are rounded. CA = California. ES = elementary school. NA = North American. — = not mentioned.

*Kahan et al., 2019.
*Kahan et al., 2020.
*Kahan et al., 2021.
practices mentioned may not actually be occurring. Follow-up with direct observations could determine whether schools do what they promote online, but with over 200 schools spread over the United States, this was beyond our capacity. Of the 152 schools excluded, 71 had no or a non-working website, used Facebook, or had a website with no content. These schools may have offered PE/PA, but no assessment was possible. There were 17 (7.7%) school websites that mentioned PE, intramurals, and interscholastic sports; there were 3 (1.4%) school websites that mentioned curriculum, PE teacher, and facilities, and included an image. We would consider these schools to be optimally using their websites to promote their programs and practices, but do not know the reasons they did this. Follow-up with principals would be insightful.

CONCLUSION

Given that in some geographic areas (e.g., Houston, Philadelphia, metro New York City) there are sufficient Islamic schools to afford parental choice, schools may or may not choose to highlight PE/PA on websites depending on their target audience. Parents—who choose their child’s school—hold favorable attitudes toward PE (Graham, 2008), yet they may lack knowledge or be misinformed about what goes on in PE (Barney & Pleban, 2010). Creating a PE webpage or augmenting PE/PA content on existing pages offers a public medium for demonstrating the role of PE/PA in educating the whole child. Recommendations written in lay terms for what to include are available (Tucker & Hill, 2009).

Our content analysis of school websites observed the confluence of policy, practice, and promotion as they relate to PE/PA. Websites were not originally intended as surveillance portals; however, researchers have used them to examine policies and practices in education. For example, in New Zealand, the magnitude of outdoor education content on secondary school websites depended on school administrators’ priorities for what they wished to promote (Campbell-Price, 2018). Overall, it appears that surveillance of school website content can reveal the possible existence of a hidden agenda, although its limitations would require follow-up with various school stakeholders to confirm.

Beside the PAs we found, Islamic schools might consider other means of engaging students in PA. For example, Virtual Umra was conducted at one school for six weeks during which time students wore pedometers during the school day to virtually complete scaled steps/mile from San Diego,
CA to Mecca, KSA (Kahan & Nicaise, 2012). In the U.K., South Asian parents, Islamic leaders, and Islamic religious settings workers and managers recommended multiple approaches for enhancing PA in a madrassa setting (Dogra et al., 2021). Examples we believe could be translated to U.S. Islamic school settings include teaching how Muhammad (PBUH) was a role model for PA, providing classroom activity breaks, improving/providing PA infrastructure, encouraging active transportation to/from school, and promoting Prophetic sports (Dogra et al., 2021). A six-month mosque-based exercise program for women in Canada resulted in increased attendance over time, increased sense of importance of exercising and confidence to exercise, and increased time spent in PA (Banerjee et al., 2017). Adaptations of such a program that would bridge Islamic schools and their sponsoring/affiliated mosques as well as bring mothers and their daughters together seem appropriate.

There are three practical suggestions emanating from our study. First, schools without a website should consider the advantages of having one (i.e., central resource/repository accessible to all stakeholders, means of showcasing a school for the purpose of student recruitment). Second, these schools and those already with websites should at a minimum offer basic information about PE/PA to include PE, recess, and sports schedules; curriculum overview and differentiation by grade level (e.g., elementary school vs. middle school); identification of PE teachers and their qualifications; and several prominently displayed images of students engaged in PA. Third, schools should periodically update content and in the process audit their own and other Islamic schools’ websites to identify omissions and worthwhile content, respectively. Any gaps between what is promised and delivered should be remediated. For example, if a school’s website claims children have a daily 20-minute recess and in practice they do not, the deficit should be corrected.

Eighty-six percent of U.S. Islamic schools are accredited or in the process of applying (ISLA, n.d.). The accrediting body, the Council of Islamic Schools in North America (CISNA) “addresses all areas of institutional quality through an Islamic lens, and the process focuses on the spiritual life of the school” (Azmat & Shatara, 2023, p. 120). Its “Teaching and Learning standard covers curriculum and assessment, teacher qualifications and expectations, professional development, and student programs and activities” (Azmat & Shatara, 2023, p. 122). It would be advisable for CISNA to formulate distinct standards for quality PE/PA informed by professional standards/outcomes for PE and sport (Gano-Overway et al.,
2021; SHAPE America, 2013) and imbued with Islamic *Din* and culture. Policies and standards are only useful if implemented. It is ultimately up to schools to enact the Hadith that health is second only to faith in what we ask and are granted by Allah (https://sunnah.com/ahmad:10).

**Notes**

1. Peace Be Upon Him (PBUH) is a translation of *alayhi as-salām* and is used to show respect.
2. Traditions and practices of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) that are to be emulated.
3. Refers to the words, actions, and tacit approvals of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) that have been passed down over centuries.
4. Rules explaining proper recitation of the Quran.
5. Ritual prayer of Muslims performed five times daily.
6. As used in education, getting students to see the big picture based on the oneness of God and the unity of knowledge, humanity, and creation.
7. Formal ruling or interpretation of Islamic law given by a qualified legal scholar.
8. Refers to the way Muslims lead their lives through beliefs, character, and deeds to comply with divine law.

**References**


INTRODUCTION

Education is not a modern innovation that emerged from Western civilization. It is as ancient as the human experience and intrinsic in the human psyche to learn, grow, and develop. Contemporary scholars and practitioners in education worldwide continue to grapple with the conundrum of the definition of “sound education,” from its higher objectives and philosophical underpinnings to pedagogical understandings and delivery modes. There has been an increased emphasis on repealing and undoing the standardization of education that has shaped the modern education system due to the industrial revolution, free market economy, imperialism, and colonialism, among other factors. Within the context of Muslims and Islamic education, the call for the renewal of education has been echoed in most educational circles worldwide. This renewal and paradigm shift in education necessitates an objective rather than a problem-based approach to inspire a new vision in Islamic thought and education based on divine guidance and embedded in wholism and interconnectedness (Auda, 2021).

Isra Brifkani holds a doctorate in education and has over fifteen years of experience in educational research and practice. Her research focuses on holistic education approaches to teaching and learning. Dr. Brifkani has led numerous transformative educational initiatives as an academic researcher and school improvement expert to foster a paradigm shift and inspire renewal in education.
A paradigm shift in Islamic education necessitates a redefinition of concepts and the design of new conceptual understandings of what it means to educate, the modes of delivery, and the outcomes of the educative process within an Islamically rooted worldview. Accordingly, this inquiry seeks to gain a deeper conceptual understanding of the modes and methods of education found in the Holy Quran as it relates to learning through experience. The scope of this paper is centered around the notion of experiential education and learning and its manifestations in the Quran as a pedagogy for guidance and transformation as higher objectives of Islamic education. Importantly, this inquiry also proposes a model for experiential learning that does not neglect spirituality and meets the needs of Muslim learners.

Before delving into an Islamic perspective on the role of experience in learning, in the mainstream literature, cursory research on learning through experience highlights two terms that are often synonymously used: experiential learning and experiential education. In schools and educational settings, these terms often imply educational programs presented as add-ons to the curriculum; thus, on a cursory observation, not enough emphasis is placed on the role of experience in education as an intentional and integral part of learning. Experiential learning is considered a “progressive” educational philosophy, influenced by John Dewey’s epistemology (1938). His work influenced many other scholars to shift the educational paradigm from positivism and standardization to one that nurtures all realms of development and adopts a constructivist approach, albeit the spiritual dimension has been greatly neglected. Experiential education is multidisciplinary and refers to constructing meaning and knowledge through experience. Learning from experience plays a pivotal role in learning, whether consciously or subconsciously. It is also imperative to note that not all experiences are equal and have a positive impact on learning and the learner. The benefits of learning through experience depend on the quality of the experience.

Designing learning experiences can be overwhelming for educators to understand how to apply the concepts in educational settings. David Kolb (1984) established a model for experiential education influenced by Dewey’s Model of Experiential Education. The model emphasizes the holistic and integrative nature of experiential learning and highlights that knowledge
is a process, not a product. It emphasizes the notion that human beings continually adapt, and that learning is a continuous process built on experience. Experiential Learning Theory indicates that learning is “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 2015, p. 38). He further elaborates that experiential learning is whereby work, education, and personal development are linked and interconnected and discusses the importance of the notion that learning is a process rather than a fixation on outcomes. The theory underscores the importance of learning and relearning as part of the experiential process.

From an Islamic and religious perspective in general, one of the challenges of contemporary and progressive schools of thought is that they are secular and disregard transcendent reality and spirituality as part of the education process. In addition, contrary to Islamic beliefs, many of these philosophies advocate that universal truths are relative, and that the origin of knowledge is not sourced from the divine. In an Islamic worldview, the transcendent and ultimate reality is at the center of a practicing Muslim’s life, and all aspects of life revolve around that inner core, including education, forming a harmonious whole. The Islamic perspective on education is holistic and implies that education is a process that aims for a balanced development of the whole person. It aims to nurture all aspects of an individual’s life, including spiritual, rational, and social dimensions. Nasr (1987) states that “The Islamic educational system never divorced the training of the mind from that of the soul and the whole being of the person” (p. 123). Holiness being related to wholeness; the Islamic worldview of education concerns itself with the whole beings of the people it aims to educate.

Another point of contrast between an Islamic worldview of knowledge and the mainstream and progressive schools of thought is the nature of knowledge and its creation. From an Islamic perspective, the source of knowledge is the divine, and human beings are merely uncovering, reflecting, analyzing, and understanding knowledge through different means. Islam encourages lifelong learning for the betterment of the self, community, and most importantly, a stronger conviction in the divine. In dissimilarity, Kolb (2015) states that “Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 49). Delving into the scope of the role of experience in learning from an Islamic perspective, one can understand that some of the foundational underpinnings differ, such as the end goal of learning, the construction of knowledge, and the purpose of education.
In the Arabic lexicon, the word “experience” can be understood as “خبرة” *khibrah*, which denotes a combination of a deep knowledge base and awareness coupled with application. A well-experienced person with a deep knowledge base regarding a specific subject is called a *khabeer*. From a cursory Quranic analysis, it can be inferred that experience is a form of pedagogy presented in the Holy Quran for human guidance and transformation. Thus, from an Islamic perspective, the role of experience in education is not a contemporary educational epistemology. Reflecting on the stories of prophets relayed in the Holy Quran, starting with Prophet Adam, one can notice the role of experience in the process of divine guidance. Examples of transformative experiences from the Quran include the transformational process of building the Kabbah for Prophet Ibrahim and his son Prophet Ismail and how God led Prophet Musa through multiple experiences for guidance and enlightenment. For Prophet Muhammad, the multiple physical and spiritual journeys he embarked on signified the importance of physical and spiritual journeys to gain a deeper understanding of the divine. These are several examples, among many others, relayed in the Holy Quran that depict the notion that learning is not confined to the four walls of the classroom and that learning through experience is embedded in Islamic educational thought.

A renewed conceptual understanding of education from the perspective of revelation indicates the holistic nature of education from an Islamic perspective. In the Quran, there are many examples of the value placed upon reflection, *taddabur*, *tafakkur* on the creation of the heavens and earth to achieve conviction. The process is experiential in nature, as learners learn from experiences and thinking about the experiences. In the Quran, storytelling is utilized extensively to communicate the experiences of prophets, nations, and people as proof for conviction and understanding. Thus, learners learn from direct experiences, thinking about their own experiences and learning from other people’s experiences as a source of learning and transformation.

In describing experiential learning, Kolb (2015) elucidates that experiential learning is spiral in nature, contending that as learners go through experiences, knowledge is built on previous experiences and expounded in a spiral fashion. In the experiential learning model developed by Kolb (2015), experiential learning is a cyclical process that involves concrete
experiences, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. While the model has been widely used and referenced, Kolb (2015) addresses the criticism that the model has received as well in terms of its simplicity and individualistic nature: “The learning cycle describes an individual model of learning that ignores the historical, cultural, and social context of learning” (p. 52).

An experiential learning model that addresses the needs of the Muslim learner is needed that is built on the foundations of Islamic educational thought and rooted in divine guidance and transformation. This inquiry proposes a cyclical model, indicating that learning is an ever-evolving process (Figure 1). In contrast to Kolb’s model, the center of the model highlights the central and foundational impact of divine guidance and transformation that permeates all the steps in the model. This is a significant distinction from the mainstream experiential learning model and one that considers the vital role of spirituality, divine guidance, and the presence of transcendent reality. In doing so, learning is not devoid of spirituality.

![Figure 1. Proposed Islamic (Religious) Experiential Learning Model](image-url)
In the proposed Islamic Experiential Learning Model, the process is cyclical and has two main stages: the immersion stage, and the transformation stage. In both stages, the learner is an active participant in the learning experience. The starting point for experiential learning or experiential education is an inquiry or a question. The role of questioning in education is essential, especially critical thinking questions that stimulate thought and drive further learning. Literature on education highlights the importance of essential questions that drive higher-order thinking. These questions do not demand a simple answer but “stimulate thought, provoke inquiry, and spark more questions” (McTighe & Wiggins, 2013, p. 4). In addition, reflecting on the critical role of the question’s intent and why it is being asked in the learning process is essential. Starting the inquiry with a deep and intentional question will further drive inquiry to higher levels of learning. In the Quran, countless examples portray the essential role of questioning to stimulate thought and reflection.

The next step in the proposed model is the process of pondering. It allows the learners to wonder about the inquiry and take their questions to a deeper level of thinking before they embark on the active experience stage. Pondering allows the students to actively think about the inquiry versus the traditional transactional model of education where the teacher transfers knowledge to students. The active experience stage in the model refers to the experiences the learners embark on to gain deeper knowledge and understanding that can lead to transformation. This refers to wholesome experiences that engage with the environment and consider the whole person. The process must include the spiritual dimension, encourage critical thinking and problem-solving, utilize different modes and modalities of learning, encourage flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), and be situated within the learner’s Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978), with facilitation from an experienced individual, among other pedagogical methods that encourage holistic learning. Csikszentmihalyi’s (1997) concept of flow refers to activities where the individual or group is fully immersed in an experience, a feature which is lacking in many educational settings.

In today’s fast-paced learning environments that stress the standardization of education, little emphasis is placed on the critical role of reflection in the learning process. The next step in the proposed model is the reflection stage, which is the process whereby learners actively think about their learning or metacognition. Reflection helps learners internalize learning, meaning making, and the understanding of essential takeaways that can aid in transformation. From an Islamic perspective, reflection (tadabbur
and taţākur) is essential in spiritual development. The action stage in the proposed model refers to the application of the learned knowledge with self, others, the community, and the environment. Hence, knowledge is not attained but with purpose and intentionality. The transformative process of experiential learning aims to result in the transformation of the individual and the community.

**CONCLUSION**

Experience is an integral part of human learning and development. The modern era’s standardization of education resulted in a teacher-centered approach to learning that does not emphasize developing holistic competencies and centers on academic achievement. A renewed understanding of education necessitates thinking beyond the boundaries of a positivistic paradigm that heavily emphasizes rote learning and not enough on innate learning modes such as experiential learning. This inquiry proposes a model that addresses the Muslim learner within the experiential learning paradigm. The Islamic Experiential Learning Model can aid educators and practitioners in designing learning experiences that develop the whole person and can result in transformation.

**References**


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 overarch- ing 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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The Arab world has more than 700 public and private universities that enroll more than 13 million students and have 183,000 faculty members. *Higher Education in the Arab World: Government and Governance*, edited by Adnan Badran, Elias Baydoun, and John R. Hillman, addresses the issue of education in the Arab context from the perspective of the lower standing of Arab universities in international ranking tables and the relative weakness of the Arab economies relative to those of the West. The volume’s topics range from the need for urgent change in Arab universities because of the unique challenges they face to potential pathways to a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship and improved government and governance in these institutions. The individual chapters for the most part shed light on essential aspects of higher education in Arab and Western countries to identify key challenges, update the current status of the issues, and offer possible models and solutions to address the underperformance of Arab universities.

The three distinguished editors of this volume joined the 19 other contributors to produce 14 chapters that explore and analyze the key governance issues facing universities in today’s Arab world. The perspective of government and governance that runs through all of the contributed pieces is one of proposing constructive recommendations for improvement. Taking the position that in the modern era governments and universities are inextricably linked, Shibli et al. claim that “Governance with respect to academic systems is the central tool for improving quality in all aspects of higher education” (p. 122). With that in mind, it is noteworthy that the book focuses more on universities than on other institutions of higher learning: “Although university education is a post-secondary level of education, it has to be differentiated from tertiary education that includes all education after the secondary cycle of technical, vocational, and community-college models of education” (p. 98).

While the earliest universities were established in Arab countries, such as Al Zaytounah in Tunisia and Qarawiyun in Morocco (734 AD and 859 AD, respectively), modern universities in Arab countries were established only as recently as the 20th century. Against that long historical arc,
however, Shibli et al. note in their contributed chapter that despite “the countless efforts of the Arab world to improve its educational sector and make it more rewarding and contributing, little, if any, has come to fruition. Instead, socio-economic development over the years has exhibited a downward trend” (p. 119). Several of the book’s contributors pick up on the historical aspect by identifying what governance and government mean and the origins of these words that were derived from the Greek verb *kubernao* (Chapters 1, 2, and 8). The governance concept was first implemented in early modern England in the late 15th century, when it referred to the arrangements governments undertook to govern and rule a country. The practical aspect of governance began to change in the 17th century, however, when an early corporate dispute in Denmark reflected ongoing changes in the social environment.

The book’s lengthy first chapter provides a contextual background that delves into the social-political factors, such as colonialism and the policy context following independence, that had an impact on national government policies and higher education in the Arab world. Hillman and Baydoun claim that “Arab governments are incapable of such an undertaking and since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire have fully deserved international assistance” (p. 69). They list a wide range of factors to include political instability, ingrained corruption, poor infrastructure, weak public finance, and inadequate quality and relevance of education systems. Their assertions in this regard could be interpreted as making a case against decolonization.

Hillman and Baydoun go on to state that

complaining about governments is a long-standing feature of most countries. The level of dissatisfaction varies according to prevailing economic and social conditions and is not always dependent on the standard of living because expectations rise with time, particularly as comparisons are made with other seemingly more successful economies. (p.7)

They point out that Arab countries have generally been viewed as zones of conflict and crisis in the period since the Israeli occupation of Palestine, a characterization that was bolstered by the Arab Spring and the effect that had on democratic norms. For example, “several governments show great reluctance to allow people unrestrained use of the internet” (p. 22). According to the analysis of Shibli et al. in chapter five, corruption, political instability, and security-oriented governments continue to underpin socio-economic crises and human-rights violations that impede the growth and prosperity of academic institutions. To avoid such failings, Hillman and Baydoun maintain that “governments should base their policies on Adam
Smith’s values of an “ethically based liberal democratic system’ and ‘moral commitment’” (p. 28). Nonetheless, “governments are expected to plan for the future, not least by supporting or permitting the advancement of soft infrastructures . . . and should be obliged to invest in universities and advanced education institutions through various mechanisms” (p. 5). At the same time, universities should be expected to foster independent social and analytical analysis and develop learners’ competencies.

A number of chapters in the book are devoted to different paradigms of university governance such as Trackman’s model (academic, corporate, trustee, and representational) and Braun’s cube of governance (Findikli, 2017) which, according to Zabalawi et al.,

positions higher-education systems into three blocks: 1) A non-utilitarian/utilitarian culture, with a degree of service and client orientation; 2) A loose/tight procedural model, allowing for a degree of administrative control by the state; or 3) A loose/tight substantive model, where there is a degree of goal-setting capacity of government.

(p. 201)

There is also a fairly wide-ranging geographic orientation among the volume’s chapters that explore different aspects of education governance in Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Morocco (Chapter 6), Jordan (Chapters 7 and 8), Lebanon (Chapters 9 and 10), Morocco (Chapter 12), Suhar University in Oman (Chapter 11) and Syria (Chapter 13). These case studies for the most part describe models and examples of governance that have been deemed by most observers to involve practices that have improved the quality of the education systems.

Hillman and Baydoun summarize the factors that affect universities’ complex relationships with governments. The wide-ranging analysis delves into funding models, legal and organizational structure, and decision-making capabilities, as well as overregulation, management transparency, and the need to reform corruption. Chapter 9 presents a detailed study of Lebanon to show how government and governance has evolved in a society with a variety of religious and ethnic minorities. Throughout most of the book’s chapters the authors try to portray models or guidelines that can help identify the indicators and dimensions in different forms of governance because “higher-education institutions need to develop a creative balance between academic mission and executive capacity, and between financial viability and traditional values” (p. 128). At the same time, these analyses sometimes conclude that indicators such as ranking systems may not always give an accurate picture. For example, wealthier universities can use the tactic of “appointing established eminent foreign-based academics,
often without those new staff members actually being based in the university but benefit from their publications and other measures of esteem” (p. 42). The point also is made that “at the professorial level, university professors currently lack a much-needed motivation; in general, they have lost their morale and sense of good citizenship towards their institutions and countries” (p. 128).

Education leaders in the Arab world clearly need to develop competencies that will help them address the introduction of new specialized areas of learning, the adoption of new teaching methodologies, and the impact of internationalization and technological change on higher education. The book appropriately emphasizes that the dissolution of stakeholder involvement poses an unprecedented challenge. Sharaf and Helal suggest that the most critical competencies will be those that facilitate networking with other local and international academic institutions and building relationships with university boards of trustees and other governance bodies. The dominant underlying theme of the book is that institutions of higher learning will have to connect with other national groups, remove the gaps within their own industry, and connect with their international counterparts. Entrepreneurship, interdisciplinary mobility, self-learning, competition, and innovation skills will frame the right pathway for the future of students and institutions.

The book sheds light on an important and timely topic as it uses contemporary voices to reimagine education in the aftermath of the pandemic, but the editors and authors do not effectively clarify an underlying epistemology or methodology in the presentation. While higher education is the title’s subject, the individual chapters focus only on universities and neglect to mention other institutions, such as international branch campuses, community colleges, and vocational centers, that are of increasing importance to the education process. One exception appears in chapter eight by Zabalawi et al., where they state that community colleges “should not be viewed as a refuge for students who perform poorly at school but rather as a valued and valid experiential means of learning as an alternative to the traditional academic pathway” (p. 210). The fact that many highly valued companies, such as Google and Microsoft, offer certificates instead of traditional degrees, and that many countries have changed their policies might have been mentioned.

Despite the overall strength of the book’s presentation, many sections should have been supported by references and the authors could have been more straightforward in clarifying their positions on the issues discussed.
For instance, some chapters lacked a clear connection to the main theme, such as the discussion in the second chapter on universities in the UK that offers no linkage to similar institutions in Arab countries. This omission seems particularly pertinent as universities in Arab countries often have international branch campuses. In addition, several of the authors focus on defining governance and government without adequately clarifying their own definitions of leadership, management, and administration. The book essentially follows Western approaches in exploring higher education without bringing into the discussion the uniqueness of Arabs’ and Muslims’ contributions during the Golden Ages or how educators could build on an approach focused on both this life and preparing individuals for the afterlife (Sellami et al., 2022).

Religion affects higher education directly or indirectly, so this text might have been expected to explore and highlight clearly either issues related to Islamophobia or the depth of curriculum design and research methods. Religion also is connected to the scope of academic freedom, which affects not only scholars but student leadership and international contributions as well. The book presents several organizational structures without clarifying how to promote a research culture that supports administrative and non-teaching faculty or pracademics (Chaaban et al., 2022) to open a pathway for higher-education communities in these nations. The book nonetheless offers encouragement to researchers to investigate higher-educational leadership in Arab countries with a focus on producing knowledge and recognizing indigenous Arabs’ and Muslims’ contributions.

References


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The unprecedented challenges of the 21st century confront Islamic education with the pressing need to recenter its foundations to empower students through holistic flourishing. Against a backdrop of volatile uncertainty and ambiguous complexity, *Supporting Modern Teaching in Islamic Schools: Pedagogical Best Practice for Teachers* is a much-needed contribution to an under-explored field of study. Shedding light on contemporary educational practices in Islamic schools across the world, the book comprises both theoretical and empirical studies that address the gap in existing literature through insightful recommendations and a review of best educational practices. Edited by Ismail Hussein Amzat, an Associate Professor in the Department of Social Foundation and Educational Leadership at the International Islamic University Malaysia, the volume’s diverse array of studies unravels the richness and multiplicity of educational practices in Islamic schools that nonetheless are faithfully aligned and in tune with the heterogeneous nature of the Islamic *Ummah*.

The book’s three parts cover a panoply of topics ranging from classroom instructional practices to whole-school approaches. The first part tackles content knowledge, pedagogy, and teaching methods. Chapter one sheds light on effective and ineffective pedagogies in teaching Islam among Canadian Muslim educators who, coming from 17 countries, represent the nature of education in a globally diverse *Ummah*. Moving from the present to the past, chapter two explores the contemporary landscape of Islamic education through a historical lens and proposes a pluralist framework centered upon the multifarious needs of students. Chapter three presents an inspiring case study of a green initiative undertaken by an Islamic boarding school in Indonesia. The case demonstrates how religion can play a progressive role in raising awareness about environmental education through an innovative, project-based approach. The discussion in chapter four focuses on the assimilation of Western traditions in English Language Teaching in Islamic schools in Thailand and the neglected role of non-native norms, proposing that the learners’ sociocultural realities should be represented in textbooks. Chapter five alternatively explores the need for adopting student-centered teaching approaches, underscoring the value of
integrating prophetic instructional strategies as well as inductive, deductive, and constructivist methods to prepare learners for the 21st century. The “community of philosophical inquiry” method is explored in chapter six as it can be used in Islamic education to promote deep learning as well as boost higher-order thinking skills in a stimulating, learner-centered environment. Chapter seven advocates integrating instructional design models and technology in Islamic education to create more relevant and authentic learning experiences for “digital native” students.

The volume’s second part contrasts the first by addressing professional development, responsibility, and lifelong learning with the aim of innovating teacher practices in Islamic education. Beginning with chapter eight, the focus shifts to the role of measures of physiognomies in predicting teachers’ development and professionalism in Integrated Model Schools in Nigeria. Chapter nine recommends the assimilation of different instructional resources to develop teacher professionalism, presenting guidelines on the processes of their selection and application. Exploring the relationship between boosting self-motivation and professional development, chapter 10 showcases a successful case study of an Islamic boarding school in Indonesia. Chapter 11 presents a theoretical exposition of Islamic education, considered as a regeneration of the soul, that explores the role of family and society as factors affecting teacher professionalism. Returning once again to Indonesia, chapter 12 reviews how Islamic schools there aim to utilize and implement the multiple intelligences theory to the best interest of their students. Chapter 13 is a conceptualisation of lifelong learning in Islamic studies that offers a lengthy discussion of the significant role it plays in educational attainment and teachers’ professional development.

The book’s third section is focused on assessment, Islamic curriculum reform, and the Islamization of knowledge. The research-to-practice gap is addressed in chapter 14, where the authors examine a research-based methodology used to reform and develop the curriculum of madrasas in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Shifting to another continent, chapter 15 examines the educational strategies employed in Arabic teaching at Australian Islamic schools. These draw on the relevant literature to suggest educational policies and practices that help teachers create meaningful learning experiences. The Islamization of knowledge and its related theoretical framework are the subjects of chapter 16, highlighting the holistic nature of education that should aim at nurturing the learners’ spiritual, intellectual, and moral capacities. Exploring how Muslim children in the United Kingdom engage in Maktab learning (studies undertaken outside
full-time schooling), chapter 17 delineates relevant findings to help Muslim teachers develop their makātib in relation to well-being, safety, and holistic development. Tackling a different topic, chapter 18 addresses the issue of Islamic religious education in the Netherlands in relation to sex education and presents recommendations for the professional development of teachers. Based on an extensive study of around 50 different madrasas, chapter 19 then examines the role supplementary schooling plays in developing the Islamic identity of Muslim young people in Europe, analyzing the strengths and limitations in that structure. Rounding out the book, chapter 20 proposes methods to help teachers in Islamic studies more effectively conduct assessment and evaluation strategies to best address the needs of their students and their own learning skills.

Supporting Modern Teaching in Islamic Schools makes a significant contribution to the growing canon on Islamic education. It resourcefully presents a mélange of pedagogical practices and reforms that could make meaningful contributions to address the challenges Islamic education currently faces. Strengthened by the academic and cultural diversity of its contributors, the book brings together and enriches the traditional, holistic objectives of Islamic education and the reimagined promises of its development in the 21st century. As it spans a multitude of topics, the book will be a valuable resource for researchers and academic scholars as well as a practical guide for teachers, educators, and practitioners working in Islamic educational settings.

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Islamic-Based Educational Leadership, Administration and Management: Challenging Expectations Through Global Critical Insights

EDITED BY KHALID ARAR, RANIA SAWALHI, AMAARAH DECUIR, AND TASNEEM AMATULLAH

The prevalence of Islamophobic bigotry across the Western world underscores the need for an academic discourse centered on Islamic-based educational experiences. In response to this challenge, *Islamic-Based Educational Leadership, Administration, and Management: Challenging Expectations Through Global Critical Insights*, edited by Khalid Arar, Rania Sawalhi, Amaarah DeCuir, and Tasneem Amatullah, appears in the Educational Leadership for an Equitable, Resilient, and Sustainable Future series by Routledge. The narrative is a timely and valuable resource for both Muslims and non-Muslims seeking a nuanced understanding of the topic. This review of the edited volume emphasizes its essential contribution to discussions on contemporary perspectives, practices, and assumptions concerning Islamic-based education.

The volume is divided into three parts across which the contributing authors share insights around educational leadership, management, and administration. They also address the broader aspects of learning, policy implementation, and community engagement from different perspectives that include both Muslim majority and minority spaces. With national perspectives from countries such as Malaysia, Turkey, Egypt, Qatar, the United Kingdom, and the United States, the volume offers insight into cross-cultural experiences that are relevant to leadership, administrative, and management issues in Islamic-based education systems. The collected essays explore in nuanced fashion the unique world of Islamic education, presenting a wide range of perspectives and real-life encounters that raise questions about many commonly held assumptions. This critical investigation will serve as a catalyst for researchers to bridge the historical aspects of Muslim scholarship with contemporary developments and should encourage development of analytical methods to enhance leadership in Islamic-based educational contexts.

While the editors posit that the volume “does not aim to redefine education leadership” or simply tag the title of Islam to the phrase, the contributing authors have been given leeway to define the parameters of what constitutes Islamic-based educational leadership (p. 265). In doing so, this
collective work offers a fresh perspective and a framework that is a faith-oriented lens through which to examine management and administrative issues in Islamic education. The book begins by looking at the historical underpinnings that relate to leadership and education within a religiously inspired paradigm. Tracing the trajectory from the Golden Age to contemporary times, it offers an overview of how the Muslim discourse on leadership has evolved to address and adapt to the times. The opening discourse centers solidly on religious leadership but moves to bring in clarifications on what it is that constitutes an Islamic education. The discussion moves from a white-centric approach to one that seeks culturally relevant pedagogies that respond to the needs of Muslim students in secularized spaces. The discussion argues that “no framework was constructed to articulate what we understand as Islamic-based education leadership” (p. 266). In that sense, this volume puts forth a bold stance that centers on a spiritual rendering and disrupts a narrative of neutral secularity.

The collection thus fills an uncomfortable void that exists due to invalidating, silencing, avoiding, or outrightly rendering invisible the lived experiences of Muslims in a global context. Muslim-centric knowledge has often been ignored and minimized because of stereotypes that have grown up around the demographic. This book contests the academic lack of interest in the Muslim perspective and offers a paradigm of Muslim scholarship that showcases a faith-based orientation in both secular and religiously affiliated settings from different parts of the world. The challenge it grapples with is the wide-ranging scope of just what constitutes Islamic-based educational leadership. The book recognizes that while the narrative is not a monolithic representation, it must nevertheless remain connected to an engagement with Islam. These parameters are drawn around some intersection with a religiously inspired presence—whether the leadership is Muslim or non-Muslim—that addresses the needs of Muslim or non-Muslim students in the hope of applying Islamic educational principles in their work. In this way, the volume succeeds in running a common thread through the various chapters of the contributing authors (as each chapter itself examines the definition) while accounting for a necessary variation in experience.

There are diverse entry points in the book to understand Islamic educational approaches while recognizing that this does not require a spiritual worldview that assumes conformity with the religion’s dogma and principles. It is instead based on the critical reflectiveness of scholar-practitioners in the field as the foundation of an Islamic-based approach. Engaging with this framework requires the reader to consider the implications of Islamic-based
leadership in practice as this shapes the vision with which leaders operate, the higher purposes they work toward, the necessary engagement in uplifting human relationships, community service, and ethical and moral responsibilities to the society at large. In an effort to further shape the Islamic-based educational leadership framework, the editors have created a visual representation of an ecological model that opens a space for the scholar-practitioner’s beliefs and identity. This primary and innate level in turn is situated in a larger circle of contextual understanding of the interactions between people and the universe. These two circles are placed in a larger sphere of skills, dispositions, knowledge, and emotions that are a part of the individual’s experience. Surrounding these three levels, however, is the largest fourth sphere, called future thinking, which is the space in which the editors have connected all Islamic-based leadership work to the higher purpose of success in the afterlife. This framework emphasizes critical reflection and social responsibility which, with a focus on the afterlife, are the foundational pillars. Based on these principles, the editors recommend four elements of Islamic-based educational leadership: Centering Islamic knowledge through the Quran and Sunnah/Hadith, self-development of the leader, community work, and constructing an Islamic-based culture.

*Islamic-Based Educational Leadership, Administration, and Management: Challenging Expectations Through Global Critical Insights* is thus an invaluable compilation that weaves together a diverse array of case studies, experiences, and analyses across several countries and academic scenarios. This synthesis is a rich tapestry of perspectives on Islamic-based educational leadership, administration, and management. The book adeptly portrays educational leadership across nations and contexts, encompassing both countries with Muslim minorities and those where Muslims form the majority, thereby fostering multicultural environments within educational institutions. Although there are some gaps in the coverage of educational leadership practices in different Muslim countries and communities, the volume will be an inspiration for scholars and researchers to generate fresh insights into the convergence of Islam and educational leadership.

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In Conversation With
Dr. Fathi Hasan Malkawi

Isra Brifkani

INTRODUCTION

Dr. Fathi Hasan Malkawi is a Jordanian educator and university professor. He holds a PhD in Science Education and Philosophy of Science from Michigan State University, a Master’s in Education Psychology from the University of Jordan, an Advanced Diploma in Science Education from the University of Reading, and a Bachelor of Science in Chemistry and Geology from Damascus University. He worked at the Ministry of Education and Yarmouk University in Jordan for thirty years. He joined the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) in 1987 as a part-time academic advisor, and has been full-time at its headquarters in Herndon, Virginia since 1996. At IIIT, he has held the positions of Executive Director, Director of Research, Regional Director, Editor of the American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences (in English), Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Islamization of Knowledge (in Arabic), and currently holds the position of Academic Adviser and Senior Researcher.

Dr. Malkawi has been a member of the Jordan Academy of Arabic Language since 2006. He has lectured in 35 countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the United States on various education and Islamic thought topics. He has published widely and some of his recent books include:

2. Mapping Intellectual Building and the Construction of Thought and Reason, IIIT, 2020, in English
3. Contemporary Islamic Educational Thought, IIIT, 2020 (in Arabic)

Isra Brifkani: You are a prolific writer and researcher. Please share a little about your intellectual journey and what motivated you to research and write extensively about education.

Fathi Malkawi: In my teaching career at the university, I was keen to give teaching and supervision of graduate students the most precious time I had. During that period, the books and research work I published were, at the minimum, required of a university professor, limited for the purposes of academic promotion. However, during that period, I was a part-time academic advisor to the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), where I volunteered to edit the works of a number of IIIT conferences in 10 volumes, which may have sparked the IIIT’s main office to propose that I join the Institute in a full-time capacity. As most IIIT scholars at that time were engaged in other activities, I had many tasks and responsibilities that occupied most of my time and effort. As a result, I had few opportunities to write original work, but I was able to write a number of academic papers for the conferences I attended as a representative of the Institute and a few editorials for its AJISS journal.

Then, in 2007, I assumed the position of editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Islamization of Knowledge* and the chair of the Arabic Publishing Committee at the Institute for 13 years, in addition to the organization work of a number of academic and business conferences and workshops. All of these were heavy tasks regarding the material that had to be read to make decisions and determine the necessary changes to be eligible for publication or presentation at conferences. All those tasks did not afford me the time to be a prolific writer. However, those works were valuable experiences that I have documented in two books, namely: *A Manual for Academic Activities at the International Institute of Islamic Thought* (2011) and *A Manual for Publishing in the International Institute for Islamic Thought* (2013).

Some specific factors may have prompted me to start writing books. The first factor may be related to the work I was doing in conducting the training courses under Islamization of Knowledge, later referred to as “Islamic Methodology,” and finally to the title of “Integration of Knowledge” or “Epistemological Integration.” In preparation for such courses, I had to write specific material for each topic in the course. Each time, the material would be edited and updated, and finally, it turned out to be the book titled *Methodological Integration: Essentials of Islamic Methodology*, published in 2011. Luckily, the book received much attention, reprinting, translation, and distribution. This encouraged me to continue writing and
publishing and to request an exemption from some administrative tasks, providing me with more writing time.

Another factor may be the accumulation of papers I have presented at academic conferences on a particular theme. At times, I assume that only some updates and filling of specific gaps were needed to complete the map of a book, but it was worth doing the difficult task of a new book! A third factor is my involvement in the Arabic journal of IIIT called Islamiyat al-Marifah, whether in writing editorials in my name, book reviews, or independent research papers, which I felt it was necessary to combine those in each theme, updating the material, supplementing where it was needed, and publishing. Thanks to Allah Almighty, my published works in the last 10 years were at the rate of one book a year.

As for writing on education issues, it is mainly to meet the requirement of my academic specialization, Education at the Faculty of Educational Sciences at the university. However, due to my involvement and interest in using Islamic thought as a frame of reference in whatever I talked about, I was invited to teach some courses about “Education in Islam” at the Faculty of Sharia and Islamic Studies for graduate students at the university. Of course, I had to look at what was considered required reading for students, and I felt dissatisfied with those readings because the focus was limited to Islamic Educational Heritage. So, I had to meet the challenge I used to discuss: “If you don’t like a certain situation, make a better one!” So, I presented some critical opinions, ideas, and conclusions that were the basis for later detailed writings. The five volumes I have completed on Islamic educational heritage and Islamic educational thought may be the product of my attempt to face the challenge, employing the concept of Epistemological Integration that we have been calling for during the last four decades.

However, my other writings, especially on issues of worldview, values, and intellectual construction, seem to have received more attention than other writings, especially those that have been translated into other languages.

IB: You have written on epistemological integration within the Islamic discourse. Please briefly acquaint our readers with this concept and your assessment of its application in theory and practice.

FM: The idea of epistemological integration has been part of my Islamic understanding, which I employed in my early university education in science and geology and my school teaching career as a committed Muslim educator. During my engagement in school education as a teacher,
educational supervisor, or school textbook author, I was known among my colleagues to be an advocate of the idea of integrating Islamic understanding of any topic with the knowledge part of that topic. I used the term “Knowledge Integration” (in English) in a term paper I wrote about “Islamic Philosophy of Science” at Michigan State University in 1982, and I remember that I was asked by my professor to explain this concept. I also used the term in a statement I made at a conference held at the International Islamic University in Malaysia, IIUM, in 1989. Then, I have been using the term Integration of Knowledge as an alternative to divergent trends of debating the term “Islamization of Knowledge” and what it means for thinking, research, and university teaching. Among the useless debates over the term is the attempt to identify the person who should be credited for first using the term, the adaptation of the term in order to be consistent with what may be appropriate Arabic linguistic roots, the enticing task of the phrase in linking concepts with contemporary Islamic civilizational reform efforts, or to reject the term altogether on the pretext that true knowledge is neutral toward religion, and ideology.

I have been committed to the belief that the methodology of integration of knowledge about the visible world and knowledge about the written text can dispense much of the controversy, especially since the idea of “Combined Reading,” reading of “Revelation and Creation,” or reading the “Text in the Context” is directly guided by many verses of the Noble Quran, and that scholars paid good attention to this idea of integration, as we find it clear in the texts of Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, Fadhrudin al-Razi, Ibn al-Qayyim, and others. In my training courses on Islamization of Knowledge early in the 1990s, I used the term “Islamic Methodology” as a practical and procedural implication for this concept of “Islamization of Knowledge,” as it is the methodology of the Muslim mind in dealing with any knowledge. Finally, I began using “Integration of Knowledge” and “Epistemological Integration” as they describe the modus operandi of the Muslim mind as it should be.

What is important in my book Methodology of Epistemological Integration: Essentials of Islamic Methodology is the emphasis that any researcher who wants to deal with a specific topic through research must understand the topic as presented by contemporary human experience in its latest state and at the same time internalize this knowledge in his or her Islamic frame of reference related to that topic, but not necessarily with the intent to prove or disprove a particular argument, but rather to implement the Islamic frame of reference in a critical analysis of contemporary knowledge,
revealing theoretical and philosophical underpinnings, and trying to formulate the result in an intact academic work based on the “Methodology of Epistemological Integration.” Integration here is the combination of contemporary knowledge as absorbed, modified, and internalized by the Islamic worldview that helps the contemporary Muslim mind acquire, test, and employ contemporary human knowledge for useful purposes.

The idea of Integration of Knowledge has gained great momentum over the past fifteen years and has become the title of many books, research works, conferences, study programs and educational materials. However, I noticed that most of this interest did not go beyond talking about the concept: its importance, its presence in the Holy Quran, in the Prophetic Sunnah, and the heritage of Muslim scholars. Minimal effort has been devoted to practicing that methodology in real situations. This fact of the matter has shifted my effort to search for specific examples where researchers have practiced Integration of Knowledge Methodology to analyze some of these examples and use them in writing a book entitled Manual of Integration of Knowledge Methodology.

In this venture, I have presented several lectures and conducted several workshops to emphasize the statement that I advocate: “Stop talking about integration, just do it.” Unfortunately, the progress in this field is still slow. I think that IIIT, IIUM, and other universities interested in this reform venture should give priority to developing specific projects and recruit a number of professors to conduct studies and research within an appropriate period of time, in which researchers practice what we call “Integration of Knowledge Methodology” with the necessary financial and administrative support and follow-up, to choose appropriate examples, to analyze them, and write the pilot copy of the desired manual.

**IB:** In your most recently published book, you discuss the importance of the integration of values in academic and higher education settings. Please expound on why you chose to write about this topic and what changes you hope to see in colleges and universities in Muslim societies.

**FM:** The book you are referring to is titled *University Values: Philosophy, Frame of Reference, and Manifestations*, published in June 2023. My interest in this subject came in the context of my interest in the subject of values in general. I have published 17 works on values, six of them were on university education, but the controversy that has begun to emerge recently about missing the traditional value of university education with regard to knowledge and truth, the doubt of value of a university degree in the labor
market, and the frequency of cases of violation of values among prominent personalities in university administration, academic research, and teaching, compelled me to go back to what I have written in the past, update with contemporary material, and deal with pressing issues and questions about realities of university values as presented in different sources of knowledge.

The university professor was the target of this book in the first place. This professor is expected to be constantly conscious and concerned about various levels and types of university values. All university personnel: heads of departments, deans, presidents, rectors, or vice-chancellors are university professors. As for students, they are the target population of university education. I tried to make this book a description of how various stakeholders think about values in the university, values of the university, what research says about university values, and how Islamic thought would view knowledge about university values. The book explains what is meant by the philosophy of values and its relevance to the basic tasks of university education, and it reveals the manifestations of values in what the contemporary university adopts in its official documents and what it practices in its various tasks.

We have found that higher education institutions and governments are not content with being proud of the values they set for themselves but rather try to spread their values as universal. However, we have to see that much of what the dominant powers in the contemporary world are promoting is mixed with blatant images of violating the fundamental values of individuals, groups, and people. This is what necessitates deep consciousness about values, value scrambling, mutual respect for values, and thinking about the “value of values.” We do not exaggerate when we say that consciousness about values may be decisive in determining the future of human life.

In this context, I highlight the Islamic intellectual frame of reference and its desired manifestations in university values, theory, and practice. Islamic thought is a reflection of understanding Islam as a religion, and it has become necessary to be exposed to the distinct way in which Islam is present in the knowledge and values of university education. University values are a broad system that includes categories of academic, cognitive, institutional, and cultural values, and each category has its own vocabulary of values that is based on the morality of behaviors of a person, inside and outside the university, and that preserves the personal dignity in front of the self and others. The values Islam calls for are innate in nature and rational human values, so, unsurprisingly, we find people and institutions calling for and practicing such values.
Hence, the call for the presence of Islamic thought stems from a perspective that interacts efficiently with the contemporary world and appreciates difference and plurality, taking into account the problems and value pressures that globalization poses in university education and, at the same time, the opportunities and possibilities it opens for Islamic university education to develop models of distinct value experiences. While we call for the reform of university education in the perspective of Islamic thought, we affirm that this reform deals with the value of human nature, the value of the nature of university knowledge, and the value considerations of the intellectual and value affiliation of the people to their own nation. We also affirm that Islamic thought in the field of values gives priority in legislation to the positive aspect of guidance over the negative aspect of punishment. Therefore, it is hoped that the value reform in university education will emphasize the positive direction that builds a moral environment that would narrow the chances of violations.

**IB:** *In the age of globalization and connectivity, geographical boundaries are becoming less prominent in terms of thought. Having written on the subject of Islamic thought in comparison to Western thought, what do you think is the best approach to shed light on Islamic thought in the modern, global, and digital world?*

**FM:** Thought is the result of the thinking process and is influenced by the beliefs and aspirations of the thinker. He who thinks with an Islamic authority is expected to produce Islamic thought. However, there are different levels in understanding Islamic authority and the degree of its presence, which confirms the importance of considering the plurality and diversity of what we call Islamic thought while making sure to highlight the common monotheistic features in Islamic thought. The same applies to what we call Western thought.

Modern media and communication means have made available many sources for those who seek knowledge about ideas carried or produced by any group of people in this world. We find that the bearers of every type of thought are keen to feed the sources of modern knowledge in the databases available with their thought, calling for it, endearing it, defending it, and criticizing or refuting other ideas, objectively or otherwise! Because the digital space is available to everyone who uses it in search of what they ask for, a great deal of responsibility lies with Islamic intellectual institutions and individual scholars in feeding the digital space with Islamic intellectual material in different languages and with appropriate methods of
presentation, organization, and clarification, to make it more attractive and persuasive to those who view it—especially in its expression of the monotheistic dimension of Islamic thought—which leads to its universality and moderation, in terms of its relevance to the common human instinct, and its tolerance in dealing with differences, as long as there is a possibility to meet thought with thought.

Among the problems that limit the correct understanding of Islamic thought is the paradox between Islamic thought, in its innate values, its human horizons, and its civilizational ambitions, on the one hand, and the realities of life in Muslim societies, on the other, where unfortunate examples of civilizational backwardness prevail, represented clearly by the failure of political, economic and social development efforts, and the continued dependency on others in various fields. Dealing with the pressures of globalization is not helped with weak apologetic methods and random reactions. Rather, it needs an integrated plan in which official governments, regional organizations, civil institutions, the media, and individual initiatives carry out complementary tasks to strengthen Islamic identity in our societies. What is published in the media about political, economic, and social globalization trends that clash with Islamic values should be dealt with positively, objectively, and rationally, not just with negative random reactions.

Muslims have the right to fortify their educational curricula and social practices in the face of glamorous and deceptive trends and slogans. Many globalization statements may penetrate the basics of religious faith, social cohesion, and human instinct. Efforts should be exerted to protect and fortify elements of Islamic identity to face the danger of being melted or distorted in the crucible of globalization. The dangers of globalization on Islamic thought continue to multiply in its effects to generate feelings of Islamophobia and distort the image of Islam and Muslims. These negative effects are being reinforced by weak and frivolous reactions of the official authorities in Muslim countries and the spontaneous emotional reactions and practices of the public in these countries.

IB: In reflecting on your research and writings, which scholar/s, past or present, most impacted you and influenced your work?

FM: Whenever I read or heard such a question addressed to someone, I tried to ask myself the same question, which I always find difficult to answer. During the stages of my life, I encountered many thinkers and scholars. I read the writing of many of them, who usually are of great diversity and different orientations, specializations, and interests. I did not
have the opportunity to stay with any of them for a long time, in permanent direct contact with one of the contemporaries, or be fully dedicated to the writings of one of the earlier scholars. Therefore, I can say that the impact on my intellectual formation is attributed to the environments in which I lived and the experiences I acquired more than specific names of individuals or schools. It is difficult to attribute the direct impact of one person in an environment rich in diverse people and ideas.

The first environment that had an impact on all subsequent stages of my life was perhaps the environment of Damascus, characterized by richness, plurality, and diversity in the Islamic religious presence, in which I spent four years studying for my first degree in chemistry and geology at Damascus University. In that environment, I had the opportunity to have good acquaintance with different schools of thought, including fiqh, ṭasawwuf, hadith, adab, and political orientations, in their Masajid and cultural forums, without an organic affiliation to any particular school, that may deprive a person of benefiting from others. This social-cultural environment was also strengthened by the academic-religious atmosphere that was imparted by the professors of the Faculty of Sharia at the University, who were famous in the Muslim World, such as Muhammad Al-Mubarak, Mustafa Al-Sibai, Mustafa Al-Zarqa, Ali Al-Tantawi, Nasser Al-Din Al-Albani, Adeeb Al-Saleh, and others, with a generous possibility of attending their lectures, directly listening to them and reading their works, in addition to having personal company and friendship with of many of their students who became famous scholars later on.

My academic specialization in physical sciences also may have contributed to my intellectual formation. My diverse religious background was always an authority and a frame of reference in making natural scientific knowledge the other wing of epistemological integration and its presence in the intellectual construction I was to practice later in my school and university teaching. I feel it is important not to forget, in this context, scholars of Islamic culture from the Faculty of Medicine, such as most notably Shaukat Al-Shatti, who was one of the founders of Damascus University, whose one-year course I attended in science and medicine in the history of Arab-Muslim civilization, with required reading of his book on this theme which he was writing during the course, and giving us a part of in each lecture.

A second environment that was a source of my intellectual formation was my life experience in the West, which began in Britain in 1971, studying for my first Master’s degree in science education, with a close
relationship with the Muslim Students Society. That environment was a lively gathering of primarily graduate students of various specializations from different countries of the Muslim world. It was a forum of active interaction, integration, and exchange of rich experiences. My experience in that environment was nurtured later in the United States, where I lived for six years, from 1978 to 1984, studying for my doctorate degree. In both the United Kingdom and the United States, I had the opportunity to hold different responsibilities in cultural, educational, and administrative positions with direct contact with scholars and thinkers of the Muslim world and Muslim minorities in the West. This second environment has undoubtedly added much richness to my experience.

This will bring me to a third environment that may have shaped my intellectual life. It is the the that of my relations with the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT). Earlier in my stay in the United States, in 1979, I came into direct contact with the group that instituted the organized Islamic work and institutions in the West, who later on established IIIT. I continued contact with the group after leaving for Jordan in 1984. Then I joined their work in a part-time capacity as an academic advisor to establish the IIIT office in Jordan in 1987. I then joined the Institute’s headquarters full-time in 1996, where I have been closely related to the group from that time until now. I had the pleasure of having a good acquaintance with many individuals of IIIT and through them with many others worldwide.

At IIIT, I would happily remember my acquaintance with the trio of the Institute, Ismail Al-Farouqi, Taha Al-Alwani, and Abdul-Hamid Abu Suleiman, who were considered the scholars and thinkers of the Institute. However, the other trio of IIIT, Jamal Barzinji, Ahmad Totonji, and Hisham Altalib, were no less influential in shaping the Institute’s activities and creating its image. My relationship with the group has been deepening since 1979 until the death of those who died, may Allah have mercy on them, and with the remaining two until now. Although my meeting with Al-Farooqi was only three times, his rich heritage in writings and activism has been a lasting legacy in the presence of Islam in U.S. academia. As for Al-Alwani and Abu Suleiman, I have had direct and resonant contact with each of them for long periods in residence and travel, and I claim that I read everything that each of them wrote, sometimes before it was published.

Here, I would say that the environment in which the presence of these three thinkers of IIIT in my life may have left an impact on my intellectual formation and my written work. It will be difficult to refer to the personal impact of each IIIT individual. It may be a combined and integrated
impact of the group. Subhan Allah, I have seen each of them as a self-contained personality, distinguished by his own giving; none of them was a copy of the other or a shadow for him. What is essential in this overall environment is the critical mentality and the courage to express opinions, the tendency to review and test many of the settled and prevailing ideas and elements of Islamic culture.

There should be no doubt that the Islamic intellectual heritage should be considered an environment on its own, despite the fact that my interest in reading has been spread over most areas of Islamic heritage. However, I would not forget the names of a number of scholars whose heritage I was keen to rely on more than others: Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, Ibn Hazem, Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Al-Qayyim, Ibn Rushd, Al-Shatibi, and Ibn Khaldun. As for the contemporaries to whom I read most of their books and had the pleasure of sitting in their hands, listening to them and having a dialogue with them, even visiting them in their homes and hosting them in my house, the most important whose company I should not forget were Muhammad Al-Ghazali and Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, may Allah Almighty have mercy on them.

IB: What current projects are you working on, and what impact do you hope to make with your work?

FM: I may be a person whose ambitions for accomplishment increase with age despite poor health. I do not know how to describe the quality of those who feel such a feeling. What I mean by accomplishment here is to continue writing, accepting invitations to present papers, and giving lectures at conferences. This feeling may be related to a degree of satisfaction with what I was able to have in recent years at a remarkable pace. Such achievement has given me a good experience in writing, reduced the fear of starting a new project, and a strong commitment to continue and finish work.

There are a few projects that I have already started and failed to complete so far, perhaps because they were designed to be joint works with others who were unable to accomplish what was expected of them. It may also be due to the particular type of effort needed for each project. Considering past experiences of cases like this, it should be possible, Allah willing, and with the needed determination, commitment and follow up, to produce the following three projects in particular.

The first of these projects, in which I collaborated, consulted, and discussed with scholars and researchers in different countries, is a practical Manual of Integration of Knowledge Methodology. The crux of what this guide
needs are examples of research in which researchers practiced the identified methodology, given that Integration of Knowledge is a methodology of the Muslim mind in achieving what IIIT called “Islamization of Knowledge,” the “Two Integrated Readings” or the “Islamic Rooting of the Social Sciences,” etc. There has been much talk about the Integration of Knowledge in recent years, but we do not find good representative examples of research in which researchers practiced that desired methodology.

The second project is a university textbook on values, as there have been many projects and institutions established to deal with values in various sectors: education, health, economics, media, politics, etc. This was accompanied by a continuous debate about many issues related to values: its philosophy, its specificity and universality, absolute or relative, the origin of values in religion, science, philosophy or economics, the scramble of values, the position of values in rights and freedoms, etc. The result of such debate has made most of the writings on values come in partial topics, responding to urgent issues, lacking the clarity of the overall perspective that puts all these matters in their proper framework of an intellectual map of values.

The third project is one whose realization has been much delayed. We do not find among the hundreds of books published by the IIIT a single book that explains the updated statement of IIIT’s mission and vision. The book Islamization of Knowledge written originally by Al-Faruqi, (1982), the book The Crisis of the Muslim Mind, written by Abu Sulayman (1986), and Reform of Islamic Thought written by Al-Alwani (1989), will continue to document the development of thought in IIIT’s project, as each of them was written in certain circumstances of time and place and the individual experience of the writer. I feel that IIIT needs to address issues related to Islamic thought in the contemporary world, respond to present challenges, and clarify misunderstandings. The desired book should be a reference book for university use, good reading for training courses, and an appropriate update clarifying IIIT’s vision and mission.

**IB:** What advice do you have for early career researchers in the field of education in Muslim contexts?

**FM:** It should be useful to imagine how someone asked a question of this type would answer. It is a question that usually comes at the end of an interview, in which the person would say what he did not say in his answers to the previous questions, and his answer would serve as a concluding remark of the interview. I imagine that this person will scoop his answer from the experience in his life, cite certain remarkable successes,
or avoid obstacles that hinder such success, or think about hot issues that were on the table at the time of the interview because of their urgency or importance. Since the target group that should benefit from the answer to this question is the category of researchers in education, in an Islamic context, I would remind those researchers of a few things that should be well known to them.

First, research in contemporary terms means the material that a researcher writes has to be published in a specific journal, submitted to a specific research center, to obtain a university degree, or to publish in the form of a book. Each of these lines in which the research material will go along has its own terms and requirements that the researcher must be fully aware of.

Second, doing research in an Islamic context needs a researcher who is cognizant and well-versed with the Islamic frame of reference, which means being able to perform critical analysis of the ideas and theories of knowledge to uncover what may be some philosophical underpinning of that knowledge, and to deal with it properly.

Third, there is something to be said for beginners in the work of writing, doing research, and writing practice in general. It is clear that the novice in these fields may feel afraid and hesitant to enter these fields because he or she would compare himself/herself with some famous researchers and writers. This fear is the first hurdle to be overcome. There is no way to learn writing other than writing, and there is no way to acquire the skills of doing research other than just doing it. There are tips offered by some writers and training experts in this regard that should be useful to read.

Fourth, the beginner should be conscious of the benefit of his accumulated experience. For example, he should find that each article he writes makes the next article much easier, and every research work he does makes the subsequent one easier, more thorough, and intact. What matters here is the person’s consciousness of the experience and a determination to build upon it.

A lesson from someone may continue to be a good lesson for the rest of a person’s life. I took a useful hint on writing during the night I spent along with a group of colleagues with Ismail Al-Farouqi, may Allah have mercy on him, in Chicago, in 1980. My question to him was: You are a professor who works in teaching and supervising graduate students, and you travel a lot and attend many conferences, and yet we find you with such large volumes of writing. What makes you accomplish all of this? He answered,
“I took it upon myself not to sleep any night before I had finished writing ten pages.” The lesson I learned that night is that organization, planning, and determination would create barakah in time and life!

Fifth, setting an annual plan for the minimum writing that the researcher estimates he/she must accomplish, with a determined adherence to that plan, should be essential to keep the researcher’s compass in the right direction. At the sidelines of the plan, it should also be possible to seize available opportunities, such as programmed events and conferences of professional associations and other casual events, to do some work that would add to the original plan.
From its roots in the Qur’an and the life of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) to its branches in contemporary political and social movements, Islam has always been concerned with the question of social justice. The promise of a just order on earth has motivated both the reflections of the community of scholars and the actions of Muslims who have striven to realize it within their societies. This concise volume focuses on some of the ways that the theme of justice is explored in emerging currents of Islamic thought. Chapters discuss new theological and ethical proposals in the light of contemporary philosophical developments; ideas of gender justice that provoke a reformist challenge to the received tradition; and regional contexts, such as Turkey, Iran and Japan. The contributions to this collection raise the prospect that if justice can be imagined more perfectly as an Islamic ideal, perhaps it can be brought into reality.

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