

Character Building through Islamic Schools: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

This is an analytical study focusing on the role of Islamic schools in promoting character building strategies for their learners. The research is focused on the character building of an individual through Islamic Schools and its effects on an overall character and image of the society. It analyzes the status of Islamic Schools in developing lower and higher order thinking skills in students in addition to build their personalities on moral and ethical grounds.

The research has raised questions in regard with the terms Islamic and otherwise schools. It focuses on the aims and objectives set by various Islamic schools at the time of their establishment. It compares the character and the nature of various streams of education, their curriculums, their images and their impacts on society. The research consists of some findings and conclusions on the issue and few recommendations as well.

Introduction

The character building in Islam means to learn value and follow all those moral values which Islam has focused on and to avoid all those traits which Islam determines as unpleasant. The moral system of Islam enables an individual to distinguish between right and wrong and live his life accordingly. Following the Islamic moral system determines the character of an individual which ultimately lays the foundations of the character of a society.

Character building or character development is one of the most vital aspects of Islamic education. In order to achieve this fundamental goal, Islamic schools are established all over the world. These schools focus and strive to shape the lives of their students in the light of the teachings of Islam and make them good and responsible citizens.

The moral system of Islam has a close bond with the practical life of a human and it has got far reaching effects on

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the social character of a society¹. Islam has urged a great extent on basic rights of all human beings which other humans are bound to respect and observe in all circumstances. In order to ensure the fulfillment of these basic rights Islam has devised a complete moral system.

The well being of human character is directly related to various human physical and spiritual characteristics and a human being is required to be sound in these both aspects. The human character building in perspective of Islamic Jurisprudence is to reform his belief, mind set-up, thoughts and actions. It also aims to enhance his sense of responsibility, devotion to his work, compliance, good application and reassurance.²

The progress and prosperity of any society depends upon true faith and good character. If a Muslim society does not reflect the picture of the true Islamic character, it will never be able to have the favors and blessings of Allah.³

In order to highlight the significance of character building in Islam it seems appropriate to quote a few verses from the Holy *Qur'ān* and *Ahadith*.

Character Building in the Holy Qur'ān

Qur'ān is the divine book which has covered all the aspects of human life. The same is the case of Quranic teachings on character building. Allah Almighty says;

كَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا فِيكُمْ رَسُولًا مِّنكُمْ يَتْلُوا عَلَيْكُمْ آيَاتِنَا وَيُزَكِّيكُمْ وَيُعَلِّمُكُمُ الْكِتَابَ
وَالْحِكْمَةَ⁴

A similar (favor you have already received) in that We have sent among you a Messenger of your own, rehearsing to you Our Signs, and sanctifying you, and instructing you in Scripture and Wisdom, and in new knowledge.

This verse of the Holy *Qur'ān* has a mention of *Tazkīyah* before the teaching of the book which reflects the significance of *Tazkīyah*. And *Tazkīyah* means to purify, develop and cultivate. The term *Tazkīyah* embraces the purification of beliefs and outlook, morals, habits and customs, and social, cultural and political life; the purification of man's life in its totality. And again;

وَقُولُوا لِلنَّاسِ حُسْنًا⁵

And speak fair to the people.

The people who bear good character will always talk good to others in the light of the lessons and teachings of this verse.

وَأَنَّكَ لَعَلَىٰ خُلُقٍ عَظِيمٍ⁶

And verily you are on the exalted standard of Character.

Islam has set the best example of character for his followers and that is the example of Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم). *Qur'ān* says that Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) has the best character of all.

خُذِ الْعَفْوَ وَأْمُرْ بِالْعُرْفِ وَأَعْرِضْ عَنِ الْجَاهِلِينَ⁷

Adopt forgiveness and bid to good and turn away from ignorant.

The people who possess sound moral character are enriched with the attributes mentioned in the preceding verse and the following verse.

وَعِبَادُ الرَّحْمَنِ الَّذِينَ يَمْشُونَ عَلَى الْأَرْضِ هَوْنًا وَإِذَا خَاطَبَهُمُ الْجَاهِلُونَ قَالُوا سَلَامًا⁸

And the servants of (Allah) the Most Gracious are those who walk on the earth in humility, and when the ignorant address them, they say, "Peace".

Character Building in Ahadīth:

The traditions of Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) play such a vital role in the discussions of character building and its implementation in all forms. The following sayings of Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) promote and propagate the importance of good and sound moral character. He says that he was sent to perfect the good character and the best among all is the one who owns good moral character. Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) advised his companions to deal with others with the help of good character.

بُعِثْتُ لِأَتَمِّمَ حُسْنَ الْأَخْلَاقِ⁹

I have been sent to perfect good character.

إِنَّ مِنْ خَيْرِكُمْ أَحْسَنَكُمْ أَخْلَاقًا¹⁰

The best among you is the one whose character is best.

أَحْسِنْ خُلُقَكَ لِلنَّاسِ يَا مُعَاذُ بْنُ جَبَلٍ¹¹

O Mu'adh Ibn Jabal improve your character towards people.

خَالِقِ النَّاسِ بِخُلُقٍ حَسَنٍ¹²

Treat people with good character.

إِنَّ اللَّهَ رَفِيقٌ يُحِبُّ الرَّفِيقَ¹³

Allah is gentle and He loves gentleness.

فَإِنَّمَا بُعِثْتُمْ مُبَسِّرِينَ وَلَمْ تُبْعَثُوا مُعَسِّرِينَ¹⁴

You have been sent to make things easy (for the people) and you have not been sent to make things difficult for them.

يَسِّرُوا وَلَا تُعَسِّرُوا وَبَشِّرُوا وَلَا تُنْفِرُوا¹⁵

Make things easier and do not make things difficult and give good tidings and do not make them run away (from Islam).

Good character is not only about talking nice to people. It has a very wide range of meanings. The usual and normal practice is that, very simple and easy things are portrayed in a very difficult and complex manner. Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) asked his companions to provide ease to others.

لَا يَدْخُلُ الْجَنَّةَ الْجَوَاطِئُ¹⁶

He will not enter paradise that is coarse.

يَحْرُمُ عَلَى النَّارِ كُلُّ هَيْنٍ لَيْنٍ سَهْلٍ قَرِيبٍ مِنَ النَّاسِ¹⁷

The fire is made forbidden for every light, lenient, and easy going (person) who keeps close to people.

These are very few examples of the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) which highlight the significance and nature of a good sound character. As a matter of fact his *Sūrah* is the most comprehensive and practical model of an ideal character.

Prophet Muhammad as a Teacher:

The Holy *Qur'ān* says that Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) could not read and write. Allah Almighty says;

الَّذِينَ يَتَّبِعُونَ الرَّسُولَ النَّبِيَّ الْأُمِّيَّ¹⁸

Those who follow the Messenger, the Prophet, the unlettered.

On the other hand Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) said that he was sent as a teacher.

وَإِنَّمَا بُعِثْتُ مُعَلِّمًا¹⁹

I have been sent as a teacher.

The question arises that how can a man who could not read and write, become a teacher. Before we try to find answer to this very important and relevant question, we need to

understand that there are two very significant aspects of education i.e. the teaching and training. It is now easy to find the answer to the question that Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) was *Umma* in terms of teaching not training. The argument is summed up here that no education is acceptable in any form, whether it is public, private or Islamic and at any level, if it lacks in the training aspect of education.

Character Building through Islamic Schools

In the light of above mentioned argument it is very obvious that character building cannot be affiliated with Islamic schools only. Before we try to find the answer to the question that whether Islamic schools are building the character of their students, it seems appropriate to reconsider and reconstruct the question itself. What do we ultimately aim for?

Whether it is the Islamic schools which are the core of the argument or we desire a society which is build on sound moral character. Then how could this be determined that the character building is the responsibility of Islamic schools only. Can we transform all the public and private schools, colleges and universities into Islamic schools, colleges and universities? Can we close all those schools, colleges and universities which are not Islamic? If not, then we will have to rephrase the question of character building through Islamic schools.

The Term Islamic and Public Schools

The term Islamic schools seems appropriate and also justified if Islamic schools truly create real Islamic values in their students. But what about all those schools which are not Islamic? Are they unislamic schools and the character building of the students is not a part of their vision or missions? As a matter of fact public and private schools do realize the worth of the character building of the students. But both Islamic and public schools have not clearly set their goals. They do understand the significance of the character building of the students and they know that parents will opt for those schools which do focus on the character building of the students in addition to their academic development. But as a matter of fact these schools do lack the very important aim of the character building of the students. And in order to overcome or hide this

deficiency, they go for such names for their schools which they think will attract parents, such as the Aim School, *T'ameer-e-Millat* School, Contemporary and Islamic, *Adabistān* School, *Mithāl* School, *Dār Al Mūmn*, The Sacred heart School, the Camford or Oxbridge schools etc.

Another important aspects in regard with the Islamic and public schools is that if you try to find a good school for your kid and go through a number of the lists of good schools, you will be surprised to know that the lists of best schools may not include any Islamic school. This reflects two important things. One is that the Islamic value of the character building of the students is not included in our priorities and secondly the Islamic schools are not producing the results which they are expected to the Madrasah.

The character building of the individuals will ensure a nation with a good moral character and this is what is aimed for ultimately. No matter if this character building comes from Islamic schools or public schools or from *Madāris*. *Madāris* are one of the very important streams of our education system. In 1947 there were only 189 *Madāris* in Pakistan. In 2002 the country had 10,000 to 13,000 unregistered *Madāris* with an estimated 1.7 to 1.9 million students.²⁰ The number has increased with the passage of time. A big question mark lies of the role of *Madāris* in the character building of their students and ultimately their input towards the building of the overall image of the country.

The Curriculum and the Teachers of Islamic Studies:

The contents of Islamic studies in both Islamic and public schools and those who teach them have got a very vital role in what these schools are producing in terms of their students. It is obvious they these schools are not showing the results in terms of character building which they were supposed to show. Hence, there is a dire need to review and evaluate all those aspects which are involved in this failure. And two important aspects in this regard are the contents of Islamic studies and those who teach these contents. There may not be a difference of opinion that there is a lot to be done in these two aspects in order to get better results in terms of the character building of the students.

Why Do We Lack Good Character:

In the light of the foregoing the straight answer to this question is that we lack character because we do not distinguish the human level of life from the animal level; because we do not appreciate the Divine energy in us, that is, our personality, the deciding, the determining and dynamic agent in man; and because we do not care for permanent values in life as taught by the Holy *Qur'ān*.²¹

Significance of Character Building:

Anything which has a deficiency in its character will not be able to acquire acceptance. In connection with the significance of character building *Mūlānā Mūdūd* writes, 'After years of thought and reflection I have reached the conclusion that there is only one correct basis for morality and that is presented by Islam. Here we get an answer to all the basic ethical questions; an answer free from the weaknesses and fallacies from which the viewpoints expressed by secular and other religious philosophies alike suffer. The fundamental weakness of all these systems of ethics – religious or secular – is that they fail to build up simultaneously a firm and integrated moral personality of the individual and a sound and healthy organization of the body-social.'²²

How to build Character:

In order to achieve the very basic goal of the character building of the students all the schools specially Islamic schools will have to focus on the following principles of Islam. The true moral and ethical value lies in honest submission to the commands of Allah. All humans are equal in his eyes and He is absolutely free from all injustices, narrow mindedness, cruelty, wickedness, callousness, bigotry and partiality. He knows best, what is the most suitable moral and ethical code for human is. And what motivates us to bind with that ethical and moral code is the accountability that lies in hereafter. That all of us will stand before Allah and He will judge us for our actions and choices that we made here.²³

The most important teaching of the Holy *Qur'ān* in terms of character building is to inculcate the Divine awareness of right and wrong in the mind of a human being and it is the philosophical foundation of the moral system of Islam.²⁴ And this may be set as priority and prime goal of Islamic schools.

To realize the full potential of your life, to fill it with optimum joy and to lead a truly successful life is your inalienable right, provided, of course that you understand the correct mode of living and the rules and etiquettes of a successful life; moreover, not only should you be acquainted with these rules and etiquettes, but you should also be constantly striving to adorn and civilize your life by translating these rules into practice.

Civility and good manners, dignity and courtesy, neatness and purity, prudence and discretion, organization and discipline, keen aesthetic sense, magnanimity and nobility of temperament, sympathy and consideration, mildness and pleasant speech, hospitality and humility, selflessness and sacrifice, listlessness and sincerity, fortitude and perseverance, sense of responsibility and industry, fear of Allah and piety; reliance on Allah and bold initiative – these are the magnificent features of a truly Islamic life, which throw a halo of attraction round the graceful lives of the pious men and make their personalities charismatic; so much so that not only Muslims but even the non-Muslims are irresistibly drawn to them and the common mind is forced to the conclusion that the humanistic culture which confers on mankind such invaluable manners and etiquettes for adorning and reforming life and infusing it with charisma, is like air and light, the common patrimony of mankind.²⁵

Character building, is a highly personal process. Of course Islam assigns great importance to the collective spirit and this has a part to play in character building. But ultimately, the process of character-building is a highly personal one. There is no machine, psychological, sociological or ideological, which could mould one automatically into a cast of good character. It is only through personal efforts in individual's own realization, own determination and own exertion that can produce this character. Perhaps one can get a clue to this from the fact that in the *Qur'ān* Allah Almighty makes each individual accountable individually to Him for his entire life: accountability on the Day of Judgment will be individual.

Definitely the *Ummah* has certain collective responsibilities to fulfill certain collective functions to perform, but as far as the record of this life's career is concerned, it is the

responsibility of the individual. This is so because the process and the nature of character forming is such that it must be a personal process and a personal effort. So each of us will have to think out how best he can perform this function, this task. Of course, the society, the Islamic society does extend help. It assists. It co-operates. It makes things easy, but the process remains personal.

Character making is not a part time or a piece meal job. What it demands is a protracted effort. It is an unending, unceasing process, and there is no shortcut to it. It is not there for just a day, a week, a month, a year. The process is lifelong there is no end to this process. So the principle of character building is Knowledge. But knowledge on its own is not sufficient: it is definitely essential but not a sufficient source for character building. The second principle is, for want of better words, "resolve and determination" which is very different from "wish and hope". We can entertain as many wishes as we want. It is not a bad thing but it will not enable us to live a life of virtue and piety.

What is required for character building is not a simple wish but a resolve, what in Quranic terminology can be called '*Azm*'. '*Azm*' is a resolve or determination which is coupled with an urge or an idea to follow it in practice, to undertake some plan for it and translate it into practice. Once our hope or desire becomes effective and significant, then it becomes '*Azm*'.²⁶ And this is what Islamic schools will have to focus on. They will have to inculcate these qualities in their students and they produce responsible individuals which will lay the foundation of a society build on sound moral grounds.

Two Surveys:

This research includes the details and findings of two surveys. The first survey was conducted in the secondary level institutions of Karachi while the other one was conducted in the University of Haripur, KP.

Survey One

A case study was conducted in secondary level institutions in Karachi in connection with the role of Islamic education in character building of young generation. About 289 people were questioned in regard with this issue which included 107 people from public schools and 182 from private schools.

The ratio of male and female was 34% to 66%. The academic qualification of the participants was between intermediate and PhD. Half of the participants had professional qualifications as well. The questions which were asked were;

1. Are you satisfied with the contents of the textbooks of Islamic education?
2. Do you think some more ideas should be added in the textbooks of Islamic education?
3. How do you teach selected content of Islamic education?
4. Are you satisfied with the attitude of the learners?
5. If 'No' then what is the reason of the unwanted attitude of the students?

What is the curriculum of Islamic education at secondary level in Karachi and how do the teachers transfer that selected Islamic education to the students. Just to measure the outcome of the selected contents, the collected data from the served questionnaire was analyzed.

It is found from the collected data that majority of teaching staff are without any professional degree or certificate, most of the teachers are satisfied with the content of the textbooks. Most of the teachers favored additions and a large majority of the teachers are using outdated methods of teaching i.e. lectures/textbook reading approach (majority text book reading). Most of the teachers were not satisfied by the attitude of the students and they have blamed media and parents (75% and 25% respectively).²⁷

85% of the people who answered this questionnaire were satisfied with the contents of textbooks of Islamic education? 61% did not want any change in the contents of the textbooks of Islamic education. 46% people said that they use reading textbook method in which teaching Islamic studies while 42% used lecture method. 74% of them were not happy with the attitude of the students. 74% held media responsible for the unhealthy attitude of the students.²⁸

Survey Two

The second was conducted specifically for this research in the University of Haripur, KP. The participants of this survey were asked about the role of Islamic schools in the character building of the students and some other relevant questions as well. About 305 people were questioned in regard with this issue which included 10 PhDs, 33 M.Phil, 51 MA/MSc, 85 BA/BSc, 122 FA/FSc. About 60% of these people studied in private schools while the rest studies in governmental institutes. 173 of these were female and 129 were male. The questions which were asked were;

1. Are the Islamic Schools doing enough in building the character of their students?

57% people answered in the favor of this argument while the rest (43%) went against it.

2. Character building of the students is the responsibility of Islamic schools only?

3% said Yes, while 97% answered it with, No.

3. Will you support any education system which does not build the character of the students?

6% favored the idea of schools which do not address the character building of the students while 94% wanted all schools to address this issue.

4. Islamiyat Compulsory taught in public and private schools build the character of the students?

76% thought that the contents of the Islamic studies taught at all the levels are building the character of the students while 24% went against it.

5. Those who are teaching Islamic studies, also need to be morally educated?

95% were of the opinion that the teachers of Islamic studies also need to work on their character building while 5% said that these teachers are already sound in terms of character.

6. In order to have a better character building, the course content of Islamic studies may be changed?

In connection with any alternations in the curriculum of Islamic studies 74% said that it may be change while 26% were happy with the present curriculum.

7. Are the Islamic *Madāris* doing their part in the character building of the students?

In terms of the role of *Madāris* 57% of the participants said that they do serve the very vital purpose of the character building of the students while other (43%) supported the thought that even *Madāris* are not up to the mark in the character building of the students.

8. Are you in the favor of various streams of education in our country?

24% were in the favor of various streams of education in our country while other (76%) said that they want one system of education for all.

Conclusions:

On the basis of the above mentioned findings it can be very easily concluded from the first survey that majority of the people did not want any change in the contents of Islamic studies and they were very happy and satisfied with the present curriculum of Islamic studies. The methodologies adopted to teach the very important subject of Islamic studies seems very ordinary. Though majority of the participants did not want any change in the curriculum of Islamic studies, they were not happy with the attitude of the students and the percentage of such people remained 74 and they held media and parents responsible for such attitudes and none held teachers responsible for this.

The second survey concludes that people are almost equally divided into two groups in terms of the role of Islamic schools in the character building of their students. Almost all of them said that the character building of the students is not the responsibility of Islamic schools only and at the same time they stressed on the character building of students as well.

Public and private schools other than Islamic schools cannot be freed from the responsibility of the character building of students. A very important question was raised on the credibility and integrity of those who are teaching Islamic

studies at various levels. People were not clear on the ways to build the character of the students on firm grounds and it was reflected by the answers regarding the changes in the curriculum of Islamic studies at various levels. Questions were raised on the role of *Madāris* in the character building of their students.

Recommendations:

On the basis of the above mentioned findings and conclusions the following recommendations are made;

1. The curriculum of the Islamic studies in both Islamic and public schools may be improved and it should be object oriented.
2. There should be professional trainings and examinations for all those who teach Islamic studies at various levels.
3. The teachers of Islamic studies should go through tough scrutiny and relevant tests and should be selected on pure merit.
4. Islamic schools should be very clear of their aims, vision and mission statements and this should be conveyed clearly to the teachers, students and parents.
5. Various associations which are working for the improvement of education may come up with an exemplary mechanism for Islamic schools, which may be conveyed to leading Islamic schools. This mechanism may include the visions and mission statements for Islamic schools. A model curriculum, the guidelines from the selection of the teachers of Islamic studies and their professional trainings etc.

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