

## IMPACT OF READING ON YOUNG CHILDREN'S PERCEPTUAL MAKEUP

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This research article answers the question on how western secular text books adversely effect on our perceived Islamic thought structure. When we follow a western education system, we naturally have to make our children read books developed by the west for their educational pursuits. Western writings naturally depict western culture, western belief system and, western logic pedestal. No writing can be free from writer's belief overtones and undertones, which we inadvertently expose our young children to when we make them read books written by western writers. Reflecting on the theory of cause and effect it is but imperative that our young children are affected negatively, looking from Islamic perspective. Many Islamic scholars of high repute like Ibn Khuldun, Iqbal, Maulana Maudoodi, Allama Leopald Asad, Naquib al Attas, Syed Qutb, and many more have warned us of this adverse effect. This research article is a logical and rationalized representation of how reading affects on the mind of young children.

**Key-Words:** Reading, learning, children, perception, Islam

### INTRODUCTION

Why do we make our children read? What are the affects of reading on the children? How do we go about what to make our children read? These are some of the important questions to have appropriate and logic based answers to before we give any book to our children. I believe reading may be one of the most significant activities in personality and character development of our children, rather of any educated human being. In this article I have tried to rationalize my viewpoint, and have developed my ideas in a conceptual framework.

### EDUCATION AND PARENTS' RESPONSIBILITY

We have around 70 to 80 years of earthly sojourn and then an unending after life. The afterlife is dependent upon our performance in this life. Our performance here depends on how we are prepared to perform, both, by the external interventions as well as through self-development. When we talk of external interventions, that is where the parents nurturing of their children comes very first. As a famous hadith of our Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him):

Narrated by Abu Huraira (R.A.): Allâh's Messenger (R.A.) said, Every child is born on Al-Fitrah but his parents make him a Jew , a Christian or a Magian.<sup>1</sup>

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As such Al-Ghazali puts the main responsibility for children's education on the parents, who, he says, 'will take credit for their probity and bear the burden of their errors'; they are partners in everything the children do, and this responsibility is subsequently shared by the teachers.<sup>2</sup>

Al-Ghazali stresses the importance of character formation in childhood and as such the necessity to understand the "special characteristics of this period in order to deal with the child in an effective and sound manner"<sup>3</sup>. For Al-Farabi *morality* is a fundamental objective of education.<sup>4</sup>

Referring to the above quoted hadith Allama Muhammad Asad<sup>5</sup> expands the word *parents* to cover environment the child is made to live in. For him, environmental interventions too play a key role in the education of a child. For Dr. Manzoorul Haq<sup>6</sup> *education* in the Qur'anic phraseology is for the development of *Nafs*, the *self*; the personality which retains its identity throughout its career.

Another important aspect is the implication of the concept of education, for now it is used synonymous and rather exclusively for school education. The fact is, education starts from the birth of a child, rather even while it is still in its mother's womb. Parents and environment play the major role, while school is also a major intervention when the child grows up to the school going age. At what age the schooling should start can be contested and disputed. However, what is not disputed is the parents' responsibility for their offspring's education. Parents have to take the first responsibility for preparing their children for the goals of life, and prepare them to take stand on the last Day of Judgment. Parents will be held responsible for the basic years of their children's education. This calls for very serious considerations on part of the parents.

#### **KEEPING THE END OBJECTIVE IN MIND**

Now we come to the question: what is the most important goal of this life? As a Muslim it is very clearly the success in the eternal life after death. "Then, for such as had transgressed all bounds, And had preferred the life of this world, The Abode will be Hell-Fire;"<sup>7</sup> Further it is reminded that, "Whosoever seeks, other than Islam, a deen, it will not be accepted from him and he, in the Hereafter, is among the losers."<sup>8</sup> A clear reminder is narrated from our prophet, may peace and blessings of Allah subhana wata'ala be

upon him, "The son of Adam will not pass away from Allah until he is asked about five things: how he lived his life, and how he utilized his youth, with what means did he earn his wealth, how did he spend his wealth, and what did he do with his knowledge".<sup>9</sup> Correspondingly Iqbal<sup>10</sup> elaborates that this goal of success in a'akhira is only achieved by performing in this life. It is commonly said that this life is the *till* of the next everlasting life. Performance in this life will govern the results in the next. This calls for each one of us to endeavor for this very vital end, or goal, of this life. What can be wiser than to begin everything with this *end* in mind, because if we put the ladder on the wrong wall, not being definite of our life goals, no matter how efficiently and proactively we climb, we will be landing at the wrong destination. Once the destination is clear, the passage plan has to be developed, 'for without a passage plan the vessel is at a high risk of wrecking'. Dr. Muhammad Rafiuddin in his book *First Principles of Education* allegorizes:

A motorist who sets out on a journey must know his destination and the road that leads to it before he sets out. If he doubles or trebles his speed while he happens to be travelling on a wrong road, he will not come any nearer to his destination, but will rather recede further away from it all the more quickly.<sup>11</sup>

Stephen Covey warns that unless we start with a clear understanding of our destination we may find ourselves achieving victories that are *empty successes* that have come at the expense of things that we may realize were far more valuable to us. He further warns, "If the ladder is not leaning against the right wall every step we take just gets us closer to the wrong place faster".<sup>12</sup>

When a Muslim looks at the world he looks from the perspective of a Khalifa of the Creator in this world. The Qur'an says: Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: "I will create a vicegerent on earth."<sup>13</sup> This trust of Khalifa-ship the man accepted at his own peril<sup>14</sup>, and as such on the final day of judgment each *Nafs* or human will have to reply for his conduct of this earthly sojourn.<sup>15</sup>, and that will be a very tough day of this meeting<sup>16</sup>

Considering the serious implication of our belief and actions it is but imperative for us to have this end always in perspective? Moreover, when we begin with end in mind, we gain a different perspective all together<sup>17</sup>; then our learning and actions

will be more directed towards the end objectives or goals. Our endeavors in sciences and literature will be directed accordingly.

### **READING AS PROCESS OF LEARNING**

If I was a Chinese, will anyone expect me to write like a Pakistani. Doesn't *it* seem to be an unreasonable expectation? Why does a Chinese write like a Chinese and a Pakistani like a Pakistani? It is one's cultural overtone, which is impossible to avoid. A western writing will depict western culture, underlying beliefs, and core concepts of life. It is unavoidable, for we are very structured thinking beings, we make statements around our thinking, or what we call paradigm. No human being can be separated from that. Reading is a strong learning intervention; as such reading will definitely expose the reader to the culture, underlying beliefs, and core concepts of life of the writer. For a grown-up it may not be as influential as for a child who is at a very active mode of learning; for Green and Brock<sup>18</sup> experiments showed that the children exposed to the egalitarian reading material showed more egalitarian responses and in spite of time passage, despite some reduction, the affect persisted. They further elaborate that the narratives are persuasive, and the morals rooted in them affect children's worldview. Mar, Djikic & Oatley<sup>19</sup> observe that reading influences the process of learning. They claim that reading fictions has more affect, as the reader un-intentionally emulates the characters of the fiction. Hakemulder<sup>20</sup> searched through 54 reliable and valid experimental studies in which fictional narratives indicated substantial affect on moral development, norms, values, and self-concepts. Mar, Djikic & Oatley<sup>21</sup> observe that change in personality is mediated by the emotions experienced while reading. Any intellectual exercise will affect a child's learning, and reading is considered to be one of the powerful learning tools.

An important question is, how reading affects the learning process, and consequently the personality of a child? One important faculty which is utterly affected by learning processes is that of *perception*, which is synonymous to paradigm or the world view. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines Worldview as: (i) the overall perspective from which one sees and interprets the world; (ii) A collection of beliefs about life and the universe held by an individual or a group. 'A worldview consists of basic assumptions and images that provide a more or less coherent—though not necessarily accurate, way of thinking

about the world'; it is developed through culture, religion, environment, or consciously as through learning processes<sup>22</sup>. Any event or knowledge that casts an impression on human mind affects this worldview, as such it is susceptible to modification. For the first few years of life the changes are major, and as the mental maps become defined the modifications become more subtle and selective. Muslim scholar Acigenc claims that all human conduct is ultimately traceable to a worldview; worldview is the "framework within which our mind operates"<sup>23</sup>. Ibn Khaldun often compares it to a dye that lasts until the cloth to which it has been applied is destroyed<sup>24</sup>. For Wallace the worldview is "the very skeleton of concrete cognitive assumptions on which the flesh of customary behavior is hung"<sup>25</sup>. Covey claims that we see the world, not as it is, but as we are—or, as we are conditioned to see it.<sup>26</sup> He further emphasizes that we must look at the lens through which we see the world, because the lens itself shapes how we interpret the world. One of the major factors which shape this lens is an individual's learning processes.

Furthermore most of Muslim as well as western intellectuals like Miskawyah, al-Farabi, Ghazali, Ibn Khaldun, Frued, Adler, Millard, Dollard, Montessori, John Holt agree that the initial years of an individual are crucial for active personality development; which is the period of active development of a child's worldview. The learning interventions, which disrupt Islamic identity and values, will accordingly affect this personality development. Which Covey calls the farm-house rule. The farm is a natural system. The price must be paid and the process followed.<sup>27</sup> You always reap what you sow; there is no shortcut. If one makes the wrong investments/he will get the results accordingly. The nature will only follow the law of cause and effect.

With the logic constructed above, if we take the activity of reading as a learning process which significantly influences a child's worldview and in turn in the shaping of his personality, it is but imperative that we keep the above farmhouse rule in mind. Another natural rule to be mindful about is that of 'garbage in, garbage out'. If we put garbage in a child's brain, it will reflect accordingly in his worldview and personality. Any concepts which are harmful or useless from the Islamic perspective are garbage for us; for example the concept of world without a creator, human

without a soul, the implicit and explicit denial of the afterlife, and west's animalistic approach to life which is devoid of shame, these are basic precepts in secular worldviews. These concepts are the main features of the western sciences, and naturally reflect in their literature as well. The dependency on western literature is a self-inflicted tragedy by the Muslim societies. The learning interventions develop a mental map or perception which is based on western thoughts, quite contrary to the Islam based paradigm or world view. The result is we try to find our way through to the destination using a wrong map. Covey equates paradigms to conceptual maps in an individual's mind.<sup>28</sup>

### **AFFECTS OF LEARNING ON BELIEFS AND ACTIONS**

Now an important question to ask is how does the learning and the worldview affect our belief and action? Let us take a few examples: my five years old daughter came with her mathematics book and was covering a picture with her palm, insisting that it was something, which could not be shown to me. Upon my repeated requests she exposed the picture that was of a lone lady in bikini lying on a beach depicting the solitary for the numeral one. She had not yet polluted her perception with the western concept of shame. For her shame was still the map that we had created in theory; she could observe this odd picture, where as we could not observe this prior to her pointing out, which shows that we were already conditioned for this. My son was taught from a British published history book in his O'Levels that Tipu Sultan was a *rebel*. Should we blame the British for this statement? From their perspective he was; from our perspective he was a hero. A convert to Islam Laila Brence narrates:

I have noticed that my 9-year-old son is somewhat conditioned to happy endings, which once again can be influence of children's subculture and 'happily ever after' trends in cartoons, etc. Just recently he read in his reading aloud time a story, in which the main character (11 yrs old boy) died at the end of the story, and felt very emotionally crushed by such ending. He even said to me not to give to him such stories anymore, because he felt so very sad reading it. It gave us the chance to talk about the real life scenarios of sad events and how they differ from happy endings of most cartoons/fiction stories/fairy tales.<sup>29</sup>

Another example as narrated by Laila Brence for how affectively the former Soviet Union could condition the students to the Soviet requirements:

I was growing up in the communist system of the Soviet Union. The focus of government at the time was very much on the school children - to develop them into loyal citizens of the state. This was achieved by a heavy dose of ideology being pushed into young minds (which I was not aware of as a child, of course) through purposefully written school books infused with ideology and the requirement of Russian language and Russian literature courses in all schools starting from the very first grade.<sup>30</sup>

For the affect of this programming, she elaborates:

Believe it or not, the system was extremely good, and successfully produced the required results. I realized this, when after the break-up of the Soviet Union I went for studies to the US as part of a group of students from the former Soviet Union. We, the students, ourselves were amazed at how similar all of us were. I mean we came from different states of the Soviet Union, spoke different languages, had different local cultures.<sup>31</sup>

Other than the conditioning, the above examples indicate the affect of literature on a child's mind. Every written matter has a message and that is absorbed well by the child reader, much more readily and complete as compared to a grown up, as the world view or perception of a young child is still raw and in a state of formation. The affects in childhood are long-lasting and more permanent as compared to that of grown-ups, who have already developed filters due to a more established worldview. For Maulana Maudoodi, exposing youth to an alien culture will certainly result in the loosening of Islamic moorings and loss of Islamic identity.<sup>32</sup>

A revert sister reflecting of the issue of the affect of reading English books by the children cautions:

... the foreign language and cultural baggage that comes along with it, will leave lasting marks on the personality of the child and the way he/she views the

world. This aspect is especially important for us, as parents of Muslims, to understand.<sup>33</sup>

Eighty years back another famous revert Allama Muhammad Asad (Ex-Leopold Weiss of Austria) sternly warned the Islamic world in the following words:

Islam and Western civilisation, being built on diametrically opposed conceptions of life, are not compatible in spirit. This being so, how could we expect that the education of Muslim youth on Western lines, an education based entirely on Western cultural experiences and values, could remain free from anti-Islamic influences?<sup>34</sup>

The tragedy which the contemporary Muslim societies are inflicted with is the uncritical embracing of the western educational interventions and learning processes. Sayyid Qutb long ago too cautioned us that when we indiscriminately use Western educational interventions, we undoubtedly borrow as well a general scheme of philosophy and a mode of thought that underlies these interventions; 'whether we like it or not'.<sup>35</sup>

As I write this essay I observe my 14 months old granddaughter and am so awed at the intelligence which Allah has bestowed every child with. She has a different approach in behaving with each member of her close and extended family. Before me, she will avoid putting anything in her mouth, she will behave with more tenderness with my mother and has an entirely different behavior with my sister, whom she is extremely fond of. She cannot speak but understands what ever verbal conversation we have with her, and follows our verbal instructions. To think that at another two or three years' time she will be lesser intelligent to absorb the message of any literature that we read to her seems to me extremely absurd.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

We have to be extremely careful in exposing our children to any concepts alien to Islam. For certainly these will leave their impressions, no matter how much ever we try controls from our side. It is tantamount to developing intimacy with the culture and approach of the presenters. Qur'an warns us: "O ye who believe! Take not into your intimacy those outside your ranks: They will not fail to corrupt you...".<sup>36</sup> When we develop deep intimacy with alien thoughts and philosophy, we develop a cognitive



structure based on their logic pedestal. As a result we become alien to Qur'an and Islam itself. "...they have hearts wherewith they understand not, have eyes wherewith they see not, and have ears wherewith they hear not. They are like cattles, nay but they are worse. They are the heedless".<sup>37</sup> Qur'an further warns: "Who is blind here will be blind in the hereafter and yet farther away from the true path".<sup>38</sup> I find these Qur'anic verses perception related. A perception or worldview acts as a filter for absorbing selective information and processing info to fit own paradigm. "The worldview thus becomes the environment within which the mind operates and without which it cannot function at all".<sup>39</sup>

When we introduce our children to an alien language, in our case English, it is not only introducing them to another language but to another culture; a culture which is quite alien to our own *deen*, our own Islamic way of life. At the tender age that they are introduced to this conflicting culture will most certainly lead to the development of perception, a thinking style which is contrary to Islamic. I strongly recommend that children should not be introduced to languages or literature of antithetical cultures at tender age.

Iqbal quite vehemently advises us that from the educational perspective, only such literature should be used, which helps in creating higher ideals and motivate the nation towards practically acquiring those ideals. On the other hand, Iqbal warns that, this desirous nature of man can be dampened by wrong interventions; literature being an important factor.<sup>40</sup>

I will conclude this essay with a reflective insight and prudent advice from Laila Brence:

English was introduced to me at grade 4 level; however, it has not prevented me or any of my friends from achieving proficiency in it, if that's what we wanted. No European non-English speaking country uses English as medium in their classrooms - elementary level children are taught in their native languages. The fear of not becoming good enough in English, unless you start it at the age of 2.5 years and have it as your language of instruction at school, is totally baseless. If you learn how to express yourself well in your native language, you can later on do the same in any foreign language you pick up. The foreign language (English in this case) does

not magically give the child the skills of self-expression - it's the child's overall grooming and intellectual capabilities, which will make him/her good at using the foreign language.<sup>41</sup>

Allah knows the best

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