

A Comparative Study: Islamic Education and Contemporary Theories on Alternative Holistic Education

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to compare examine the general contemporary alternative holistic education theories with the basic outlook of Islamic education. This article will first start with a brief description of alternative education in the West that challenges mainstream education. This alternative holistic education criticizes mainstream education for its excessive focus on materialism, cognitive intelligence, standards, and marks. On the other hand, alternative holistic education theories speak about the improvement of the social, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual aspects of the individual through such education. When looking at the Islamic educational terms and theories, it is possible to see some similarities with these new holistic contemporary educational theories.

Keywords: Islamic Education, Holistic Education, Alternative Education, Cognitive Intelligence, Spiritual Intelligence, Social Intelligence, Emotional Intelligence

Introduction

The main focus of this article is the comparison between the theories found in contemporary alternative Holistic Education to the theories of Islamic Education. The main argument of the holistic outlook is that education and sustainability in our contemporary times can only arise from a worldview that encompasses all our personal and social lives. It maintains that the sustainability of society and humanity can truly only be developed and endorsed when human beings have a world view that offers society a holistic outlook that combines the main integral parts of the human being's intelligence. Thurstone, Gardener, and Sternberg, acknowledged contemporary developmental theorists, hold that intelligence is like a tree with many different branches, each representing a specific form of intelligence. Although they formulate distinct theories of what intelligence is, they agree that it should be defined as higher-level capabilities, such as the ability to learn, comprehend and convey emotional knowledge, ingenuity and imagination, and an ability of adaptability in order to meet the challenges of the social environment efficiently.¹ Similarly, although it may be argued that education in Muslim history has been varied across their nations and cultures, for instance, Muslim scholars such as Maturidi (d.944), Al-Ghazali (d.1111), Nasir al-Din Tusi (d. 1274), Ibn Khaldun (d.1404) and Abd al-Wāhid ibn 'Āshir (d. 1631) all discussed the concept of knowledge and education and come up with various routes of defining and understanding it. Yet it is evident that four main Arabic terms have continuously been utilized to explain education in Islam. These Arabic terms are 'tarbiyyah', referring to the social character development of an individual, 'ta'lim', referring to the acquisition of revealed and accrued knowledge, 'ta'dib', referring to good and polite manners and behaviours, and 'ma'rifa', referring to the attainment of wisdom or spiritual knowledge through *tazkiyyah* and the grace of God.²

Holistic and Islamic Education

In recent years in the west and the wider world, an alternative education pedagogy to the current mainstream “Cartesian-Newtonian” worldview has arisen in the form of holistic education. Although it is grounded in the new age thinking of the West, it has its background in a number of indigenous cultures. It is from this direction that the terms emotional intelligence, spiritual intelligence, and social intelligence have arisen. In fact, the main protest of this very wide and eclectic movement is that contemporary mainstream education has solely become about academic knowledge, materialism, and the obsessive focus on standards and testing.³ After all, exam and assessment results, rankings, and employment statistics are the most quantifiable signs of quality in our times, but the truth is that they are not evidence of the quality of education. Moreover, this quality is incessantly quantified by cognitive intelligence alone. Yet, there are several approaches to understanding intelligence, including the psychometric, cognitive, biological, cultural/contextual, and systems approaches. Each approach is distinct in focusing on different aspects of what is known as intelligence.⁴

So how do we understand these in the Islamic cultural context? It appears recent research in alternative education may shed some light upon not only the Arabic educational principles just noted, but also on development that perhaps could assist in achieving a holistic education for Muslims. Yet it is initially imperative to admit the fact that Islam is a religion whose civilizational growth expanded rapidly from its early years throughout the then known world, which covered an area of three continents; so its civilizational achievement cannot be reduced into a detached single experience. Furthermore, it is not possible to ignore the fact that Muslims live and experience their living world in a wide geography through numerous cultures, languages, and countries. Therefore, education for Muslims has historically and socially accepted much diversity in its approach. Yet, as stated earlier the basic groundwork for education for Muslims could be based upon some essential similarities arising from the primary sources of Islam, which is where we find the educational terms *tarbiyyah*, *ta’lim*, *ta’dib*, and *ma’rifa*.

Concerning contemporary alternative holistic education, which has in many ways arisen from several indigenous cultures that have been explored in the West, the argument is that academic or cognitive intelligence has for more than two centuries been unduly the only focus of our contemporary education. It is maintained that, although it has its benefits, there seems to be a continuous widening lack of moral values and the non-materialistic approach in everyday education. It is evident that the majority of present-day practices related to sustainability are awash with cognitive learning and in some cases physical learning, which is focused upon the learning of facts, betterment of the physique, and critical analysis that may assist us to intellectually understand and solve contemporary problems.⁵ Yet what is truly missing is the building block in education that promotes not only cognitive intelligence, but also emotional intelligence, spiritual intelligence, and even social intelligence. For example, one educationalist, Rudge, argues that such holistic education theorists adopt the integration of ideals arising from numerous types of spirituality and humanisms⁶, which is rejected by mainstream education.

Amongst the proponents of holistic education, there is a unanimous agreement that its main purpose is to nurture the inherent possibilities of human advancement. Instead of simply the procurement of knowledge and acquisition of skills at the work market, an overall improvement of the physical, intellectual, social, emotional, and spiritual aspects of the individual is developed.⁷ Emotional intelligence is explained as “the ability to (a) perceive emotions, (b) use emotions to facilitate thought, (c) understand emotions, and (d) manage emotions, to promote emotional and intellectual

growth”⁸ In other words, emotional Intelligence (EI) is how we may use our emotions appropriately, control our emotion under certain emotional situations, and manage our behaviour and our interactions with the other in the social environment. These abilities are now being studied and tested incessantly through the social sciences of psychology, sociology, and education studies using a number of scales and models.⁹ The study of social intelligence commenced with Thorndike in the early 20th century dealing with the intelligent interaction of others.¹⁰ Later, academics such as Gardner would define it as the ability to perceive and respond successfully to others’ moods, wishes, and their dormant or inert state of mind and capabilities.¹¹ Meaning it is linked to our social control, social expression, and social sensitivity. Goleman went onto describe social intelligence as the intelligence we use to proceed in our inter-personal world. He very acutely described our good social relations as much-needed vitamins and bad social relations as poison. The dark side of social intelligence is defined as narcissism and Machiavellianism.¹² Finally, we come to spiritual intelligence. If cognitive intelligence is about learning facts and thinking, social intelligence is about interacting, and emotional intelligence is about feeling, then spiritual intelligence is about being in tune with the transcendent and actualization. According to some western thinkers, spiritual intelligence means being able to know something in multiple ways and being able to integrate the spirit with the outer life in the world.¹³ Others define it as a set of capacities and abilities that enable people to solve problems and attain goals in their everyday lives through the capacity for transcendence, heightened spiritual states of consciousness, entering everyday life with a sense of the sacred, utilize spirituality as a resource to solve problems in everyday life, and the capacity to engage in virtuous behaviour.¹⁴

Now, how does this relate to Islamic principles of education? It is maintained by most Muslim scholars that Islam as a faith has always promoted holistic teaching. Although transmission and advancement of knowledge are very highly regarded in Islamic tradition, it has never truly been separated from altruism, virtuous life, spirituality, and wisdom. Moreover, Islam promotes the building of and advancement of society based upon social values accrued from Islamic texts and Muslim experience. In fact, without stress on these social values in the education milieu, Muslims may omit the emphasis that Islam puts on social brotherhood, empathy, kindness, and public welfare, and through their faith not be able to counter destructive emotional and social feelings and actions such as classism, racism, bullying, and fanaticism.¹⁵ This is where perhaps *tarbiyyah* is the best suited Islamic terminology for the contemporary term ‘social intelligence’. In general, the term *tarbiyyah* refers to a wholesome education, but specifically, the term refers to an upbringing within a social structure. In Islamic terms, the family is regarded as the smallest social unity where the upbringing and education of the human being first take place. This education is characterized by social roles, social care, social collaboration, upbringing, and protection. In brief, this is where first the human being learns social intelligence. According to the classical scholar Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, the root words *al-rabb* of *tarbiyyah* have numerous meanings where one meaning is *al-tanwiyyah*, meaning growth and development. Furthermore, Abu Nasr Ismail ibn Hammad al-Jawhari, who was a lexicographer and the author of a notable Arabic dictionary, propounded the meaning of *tarbiyyah*, *rabban*, and *rabba*, with sustenance, nourishment, and nurture, which all arise from types of socialization. Yet, there is no doubt that *tarbiyyah* incorporates knowledge, manners, spirituality, and the instilling of ethics, however, the main focus of *tarbiyyah* is the nurture of a human being within a social setting, i.e. socialization.¹⁶ It is through such development that a human being may understand the concept of socialization such as social justice (*‘adl*) and communal participation (*shura*).

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If that is compared with Goleman's thoughts on social intelligence where he argued that human beings according to the latest findings in biology and brain science are wired to connect socially. He maintains that human beings have a built-in predisposition toward empathy, collaboration, and altruism, but the condition for such a predisposition to thrive is that human beings have to develop a social intelligence that nurtures the capacity of empathy, mutual aid, and kindness.¹⁷ This is very similar to what Naquib al-Attas maintains that human beings are encouraged to do in the Qur'an, which is to lower the wings of humility based upon the love their parents showed them during their upbringing, in other words, their compassionate and affectionate socialization.¹⁸

With regards to the acquisition of knowledge and thinking, then that comes under the rubric of *ta'lim*, i.e. cognitive intelligence. This type of intelligence develops from standardized processes of learning from both divine and acquired human knowledge that stresses the capacity to understand, learn, recall, think rationally and solve problems.¹⁹ The history of *ta'lim* can be found throughout the history of Muslim education under various religious and non-religious sciences, which were transmitted and developed over numerous centuries.²⁰ Since *ta'lim* is integrated with science and refers to science, it has the meaning of acquiring knowledge. However, it should be noted that in the Muslim world historically this transmission and development of knowledge was never truly separated from ethics, manners, and spirituality.

This meant that education was filled with the notion of moral and ethical commitment based upon Islam, which is what *ta'dib* denotes in education. This term refers to the awakening of the moral and ethical values within the student and should be seen as the education of emotional intelligence within the Muslim so that one can live a life of virtue. The hadith tradition is filled with the notion of *adab*, which refers ultimately to the heart knowing that an action is good or bad, and behaving in accordance with the rules of ethics and manners. *Ta'dib* comes from the basic meaning of disciplining yourself to be polite with good behaviour and manners, in other words perfecting the character as stated in the famous hadith "I was sent to perfect character."²¹ According to the scholarly work *al-Mu'jam al-Wasith*, the term *adab* means to discipline the self in order to obtain the appropriate behaviour and focus the mind to be expected to practice the knowledge attained. This means that the person perfecting his or her character must recognise God, the creation, and him/herself.²² This understanding cannot be simply cognitive but it must be emotional. All of these relationships of the individual, to be truly applicable, must be known through the heart and emotionally connected, otherwise, such relationships, be they environmental, social, or divine, would be mere rituals with no trace of true feelings. So, sincerity in worship (*ibadah*) and in social and legal relationships, which the Qur'an strongly promotes, can only be truly virtuous with emotional intelligence. In other words, emotional intelligence refers to a paradigm of emotional comprehension that involves the ability to read and access emotions of oneself and others in order to regulate and discipline the human character, and to utilize such emotional information in everyday life virtuously. As stated by David A. Pizarro and Peter Salovey, "The ability to be effective in dealing with emotions—accurately perceiving them, using them to guide thinking, being knowledgeable about complex emotional states, and being effective regulators of emotions—comprises skills that come into play in being a moral individual."²³

Finally, we have spiritual intelligence, which is paramount in Islam. In contemporary Western society spirituality and religiosity are regarded as totally distinct. Most academics in the West maintain that although religiosity and spirituality are connected in some ways they are two very distinct variables. In fact, in recent years

it has become common in the West to hear people claim that they are spiritual, but not religious. Although traditionally, even in the West, the definition of spirituality was the core of what being religious meant, however, the post-modern definition of spirituality is devoid of any identification with religion at all. In most such cases, spirituality has become an alternative for those who do not have a specific belief structure and are reluctant to be identified with the word religion for numerous reasons. In fact, “spirituality is uncommonly broad, inclusive, and detached from any particular faith or creed”²⁴

This type of differentiation between religiosity and spirituality applies to the modern western countries due to their historical, social and cultural context but it appears no such differentiation can be made for Islam and the Muslim populations who still perceive spirituality, according to both religious text and field data, as the core of what it means to be religious.²⁵ Spiritual knowledge in Islam is commonly known through the terminology of *ma'rifa* and through the action of *tazkiyyah*, which means purification. It is maintained in most Muslim scholarship that Muslims can attain such spirituality and wisdom over the years by bringing into line their inner and outer emotional, cognitive, and social character. For such a spiritual intelligence to develop in education, the mainstream edification requires the coming together of faith, morality, ethics, virtues, and active transformation. This type of spirituality is normally found under the rubric of Sufism.²⁶

Conclusion

Just like the criticism of alternative holistic education proponents, it could be argued that in majority Muslim countries such a pedagogy is missing in contemporary schools and universities. In fact, a combination of these intelligences is unfortunately absent from our pedagogy in schools and universities. The question of if and how such a pedagogy can be implemented and developed requires much further research within the Muslim majority countries. Furthermore, perhaps it is important to note at this junction that through such a holistic education schools should not be regarded as the only source of edification. In fact, schools should instead impart the simple lesson that edification is a lifelong process. Yet, in modern education, the notion is that lessons are only attained in classes, and the outcome of education is only perceived through assessments and exams. In this type of scenario, how is the individual supposed to appreciate that throughout her or his life there are constant opportunities to appraise and enrich one's types of intelligences, which require neither the classroom nor the assessments that follow in our contemporary education system. So what can we do? The fact is that every Muslim society must develop their own education as best they can and even then they are bound to disagree and create different valid avenues. Yet, Muslims cannot succeed in education if they do not develop these four manners of knowledge holistically in the mainstream education of Muslim countries. Moreover, these do not need to be the only aspects that are equivocal to the four main Islamic terms of education; there could be further elaboration from these four aspects. Therefore, more research and analysis is needed in both the theory of curriculum development and in surveys of national curriculums in Muslims countries. Furthermore, what has become clear in recent times in the west during the Corona Virus pandemic is that their society show much sign of narcissism, selfishness, and materialism, which demonstrates that excessive focus on only cognitive intelligence in education, exclusive of social, emotional, and spiritual intelligence, can be very destructive to the ethical and moral value of society.



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