

# Key Aspects of Current Educational Reforms in Islamic Educational Schools

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## Abstract

This paper is based on the premise that Islamic education plays a significant role in producing an integrated personality of young generation in order to fulfil the needs of present society. This study is important to address the key educational changes in pedagogy, curricular and teaching approach that relate directly to the effectiveness of the implementation of Islamic Education in Islamic schools. Questions raised in this writing is whether and how Muslim schools have transformed to meet the changes and challenges of the globalizing world and what should be done to ensure Islamic schools meet current needs. Thus, it argues that there is a need for reform in contemporary Islamic schools with particular reference to the changes in the curriculum, teaching style, role of Islamic schools and gender participation. The paper considers the possibility of integrating new perspectives across the curriculum and outlines the integrated approach to ensure the quality and excellence of their graduates.

**Keywords:** Islamic education; Islamic school; Educational reform; Pedagogy; Curricular

## Introduction

Islamic education has always been a topic of discussion in Muslim communities. This is due to the pertinent role of Islamic education in developing the well-being of Muslim children.

Islamic education has been developing from the early days of Islam with different styles and approaches in teaching and learning. Due to changes and challenges in Islamic education, the idea of education reform should be addressed in order to make it relevant and workable.

The cornerstone of reforms in Islamic educational institutions was inspired by the Egyptian scholar, Muhammad Abduh, to transform the new styles of scientific inquiry at the University of al-Azhar in Cairo by giving room to modern sciences and rational inquiry within the al-Azhar curriculum (Amir, Abdi & Ahmad, 2012). The reformists including Abduh emphasized that modern science and other subjects were not incompatible with the Qur'ān, and proposed a number of broad measures for reforming al-Azhar, such as procedures including admission requirements and examination formalization, and a number of modern subjects introduced into the Al-Azhar curriculum. Today, the question of reform in Islamic education is a continuously debated subject and had drawn extensive arguments from contemporary Muslim scholars and intellectuals such as Ismail Raj al-Faruqi, Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, Syed Hossein Nasr and Fazlur Rahman.

In the modern context, the idea of Islamic educational reform had started after the introduction of secular education by the West. They developed dualism in education system where traditional religious education exists

along with secular education (Buang, 2007). One fundamental question raised in this writing is whether and how Muslim schools have transformed to meet the changes and challenges of the globalizing world. Therefore, in recent years, the call for reforms in the Islamic schooling system has grown louder in many Muslim states.

### What is Islamic Education?

Islamic education can be defined as efforts made by the Muslim society to educate their children, to deliver Islamic knowledge based on its primary sources, the Quran and the Sunnah. (Douglas and Shaikh, 2004). Most commonly, Islamic education refers to the teaching and learning about Islam, such as the teaching of the Quran, the hadith, the biography of the Prophet Muhammad, the commentary of the Quran, jurisprudence, history and culture of Islam and Islamic ethics. This education of the Muslims can take place in mosques or schools, and other institutions established by Muslims in the Muslim community. In some Islamic educational institutions, boys and girls are separated, while in others the genders are mixed. Douglas and Shaikh (2004) argue that, it might not be accurately labeled “Islamic” to Islamic educational institution since Muslim efforts and understanding likely fall short of the ideals and principles of Islam. The education system should not be called “Islamic” because there are unIslamic elements that make the education not purely Islamic. It is also argued that education should not be associated with Islam because Islam is a divine religion and infallible whereas education system is developed by human beings who are not absolute and changing. Some institutions may teach constructive interaction of Muslims and other faith communities, while others practice a more isolated position. Some intellectuals including Barazangi (2001) support the argument that “Islamic” is not the proper title for these schools by underlining that what is being taught is influenced by cultural traditions of previous generations for their religious education rather than the book.

Islamic educational institutions in the Muslim world were known by different names such as *madrasah or dayah* in Aceh, Indonesia, *kuttab* in Morocco, *pasentren* (Muslim boarding schools) commonly found in Indonesia, *pondok* (traditional Muslim schools) largely prevalent in Peninsular Malaysia and Indonesia, *Imam-Khatip* schools in Turkey, and *Jingtang* (mosque-based schools) in Yunan Province, China (Tan, 2014 and Buang, 2014). *Madrasah* refers to seminaries for training experts in Islamic knowledge including imams and religious scholars (Moosa, 2015). Their curriculums are varied, where some solely teaching Islamic knowledge such as Islamic creeds, *Syariah*, the Quran and Sunnah, and the Arabic language. Some Islamic schools have adopted modern subjects alongside Islamic disciplines such as the English language, Mathematics, Science, and other modern subjects.

Islamic education aims at developing a person — spiritually, intellectually and physically — to generate a balanced development of the whole personality (Sarwar, 2001 and Hashim, 2006). Islamic education is concerned with the soul, the heart, the self and the intellect of the students (Boyle, 2004). Primary and secondary Islamic education started in a variety of venues such as mosques, private homes, shops, and even in the open space (Barazangi, 2001). These educational institutions were established for the Muslim community primarily to study the Quran. They served a vital social function as the vehicle for formal public instruction for primary and secondary-age children.

The curricula of these institutions were primarily directed at young male children, beginning as early as age four, and were centered on Quranic studies and basic religious obligations such as fasting and prayer (Akkari, 2004). The focus during the early history of Islam on the education of youth rejected the belief that raising children with Islamic principles was a holy obligation for parents and society. As Tibawi (1972) asserts, the mind of the child is “like a white clean paper, once anything is written on it,

right or wrong, it will be difficult to erase it or superimpose new writing upon it". The system of teaching children emphasized memorization and recitation. Corporal punishment was often used to correct undisciplined students. Memorization of the Quran was integral to the curriculum, but little attempt was made to analyze and discuss the meaning of the text.

### **Islamic educational institution and its challenges**

Islamic education institution was established to fulfill religious needs of Muslim and to develop balanced individuals in society. However, nowadays Islamic schools, specifically *madrasah* are frequently portrayed by Western media in a negative light. The West accused the *madrasah* as the breeding ground of radicalism and terrorism (Moosa, 2015). Furthermore, the *madrasah* institution is criticized for its resistance to modernization (Pohl, 2009). For instance, *madrasahs* in Indonesia have been accused of promoting and training extremists (Tayob, 2011).

The inaccurate media portrayal of Islamic institutions needs to be re-examined and refuted. The broad negative generalization of Islamic schooling is quite unjustified. It is undeniable that certain traditional Islamic schools are unreceptive to any influence of modernity, but there are many Islamic schools that accept modernity. For instance, an increasing number of Islamic schools in many parts of Asia combine secular and Islamic subjects in their curricula. In addition, *pesantrens* in Indonesia promote women's rights and interreligious dialogue (Tayob, et al. 2011). The Islamic education reformers argue that Islam is open to modern and worldly knowledge because gaining it is a collective obligation (*fard kifayah*) required for Muslims. Therefore, Islamic school's students are encouraged to acquire different forms of beneficial knowledge as long as they do not oppose Islamic teachings.

In general, there are negative perceptions towards

graduates of traditional Islamic education institutions. They are seen as narrow-minded, not creative, passive and unable to socialize with others in the society. Islamic schools are criticized for not producing students who can enter the job market, but forming prayer-leaders who are expected to live off community support rather than having an independent job (Anderson, 2011). The separation of traditional Islamic schools from the mainstream defeated the purpose of Islamic education in producing individuals with high moral values. The Islamic school is seen to have failed to provide their students with the relevant skills they need in the fast changing world (Pohl, 2009).

### **Modernizing Islamic schools in a globalizing world**

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, heated debates started over the role of traditional Islamic schools, particularly *madrasahs* (Haddad, 2009). The stereotype had developed that this type of institution fostered narrow-mindedness and Islamic radicalism and terrorism through the use of polemics that encourages sympathy towards their own sects and beliefs (Elbih, 2012, Moulton, 2008 and Buang, 2014)

Therefore, reform is needed to change the negative image of Islamic schooling to an image of schooling that cultivates tolerance, moderation and respect to others. Since the 2001 attack on the New York World Trade Centre, some efforts at 'mainstreaming' Islamic schools have intensified to portray a more positive image of Islamic schools. Some schools have reviewed critically the curriculum in order to dismiss the negative image as an obstacle to development and modernization. In some Islamic schools, the content of teaching and learning were reviewed to make them more responsive to current economic and political issues (Chong, 2010).

Over the last three decades, the sector of Islamic teaching has been opening up and diversifying in a notable way. Economic reforms emphasizing

market modernization are pushing Islamic schools to position themselves in the educational market to compete with private schools that are emerging in large numbers for the new middle and even lower classes. Islamic schools in countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia have developed and become modern and integrated secondary schools, run by the state, but also by Islamic organizations (Szyliowicz, 2001). Also, the content of education in Bangladesh was modernized and reformed by the introduction of a market-oriented curriculum. This has been done to ensure the employability of Islamic school graduates (Asadullah, and Chaudhury, 2009).

### **Effective pedagogy for Islamic education**

Muslim scholars such as Hashim (2005) and Ramadan (2004) assert that the failure of Islamic education is due to the void of nurturing critical thinking in its teaching pedagogy. Furthermore, Hashim (2007) criticizes that the methodology of teaching the Islamic knowledge is plagued with weaknesses that greatly hinder the development of students' wisdom and character. The common traditional pedagogy employed in teaching Islamic education is subject-centered and lecture-based (Tan, 2009). Hashim (2014) further argues the focus of teaching pedagogy was more on the transmitting of knowledge to the student, with little use of student-centered methods that would make them think better. Therefore, there has been little internalization of Islamic teachings into the lives of the students in the teaching of Islamic education in the school context. In order to make the teaching of Islamic education effective, it should be taught in such a way that would impact the Muslim students' lives, helping them to not only become good Muslims, but also able to face the challenges of their time, to solve problems and make good decisions.

There is also criticism that the teaching styles are outdated and the teaching of Islamic religious education is knowledge-based rather than meaning-based (Almatari, 2012 & Anderson,

2011). Thus new teaching styles that incorporate different methods of teaching besides the traditional ones such as student-centered, e-learning, experiential learning, game-based and demonstration should be encouraged among the Islamic education teachers. By utilizing these approaches, the learning is more exciting and meaningful.

Islamic school teachers also should promote a student-centered approach in their teaching. Islamic school teachers must be exposed to the relevant theories and methodologies of the student-centered approach. The teacher's manual, must therefore outline in detail and clarity how teachers should incorporate said theories into their syllabus and how they should adjust their syllabus for the new generation of students.

### **Encouraging critical thinking**

Some scholars argue that the intellectual climate in traditional Islamic educational institutions does not encourage students to question the Islamic traditions and exercise independent and critical thinking, but simply transmits rules and norms (Moulton, 2008). In addition, teachers discourage students from asking questions or offering ideas in discussions or in writing. Rote learning, authoritative teaching and the absence of debate and dissent are common phenomena in traditional Islamic teaching (Madmarn, 1999 and Tan, 2009). The pedagogy used in these institutions is a traditional and passive approach that does not allow the development of critical inquiry (Tan, 2011). The pedagogical emphasis of Islamic education remains on memorization and rote-learning (Pohl, 2009). Memorization alone is unhelpful, thus it is important to combine memorization, understanding and critical thinking. This has led to rigidity, lack of imagination and an overemphasis on memorization. These teaching methods hinder the development of critical thinking skills (Barazangi, 2001).

Another reason for the lack of critical thinking

among Islamic students is that teachers are given too much authority. The students have high respect for the teachers and try to avoid misbehaving. Thus they avoid criticism and accept what has been taught to them without question. A case study in Malaysia shows that Islamic studies is not playing a significant role in the lives of Muslims today. This was resulted by the orientation of pedagogy in teaching Islamic subjects matters more towards teaching legal rules (*fiqh*) using classic books (or yellow books), rather than being oriented around current issues (Hashim, 1994). Therefore, students should be exposed to worldwide issues in order to be able to discuss these contemporary issues and moral problems. This could lead to a better understanding of the complexity of life and the respect for differences of opinion. In turn this respect encourages openness, tolerance and moderation among students, which is essential in diverse societies. Connecting learning to the real issues in society could avoid narrow mindedness and a judgmental attitude.

The traditional method of teaching should be revised to combine with the modern teaching method and more creative pedagogy of teaching Islamic subjects should be introduced in Islamic schools. There was an effort by Malaysian educationists to improve the teaching of Islamic education by introducing a specific program call *Al-Hikmah* that could assist the teachers in making learning more meaningful to the students and help students develop critical and insightful thinking. (Hashim, 2014). Findings of the study show that the students of the program displayed tremendous improvements in terms of their ability to ask high order thinking questions, to develop their self-confidence to ask questions, to share opinions and to increase their interest in learning.

Besides the formal curriculum, the extracurricular activities also help develop students' critical thinking. For example, in some Indonesian Islamic schools, student bodies are no longer isolated from social and political issues. Students often hold debates and publish

student publications under the guidance and control of teachers. Students discuss not only theological but also political issues which have impacts for Islam and Muslim. (Szyliowicz, 2001)

### **Female Participation in Islamic education**

Girls' education has always been an issue in Muslim communities. In some Muslim societies such as in the Indian subcontinent, girls' education is not given much attention. According to Barazangi (2001), most girls in the Indian subcontinent before British colonization were denied attendance to Quranic school and the continuance of their religious education once they reach puberty. This was due to the belief that women need a different type of education because their primary concern is the home.

Historically, teaching and learning had been exclusively for boys and men. In such societies, women and girls have been hindered from participation in social affairs. Among the reasons behind the reluctance to educate girls is the idea of strictly segregated gender roles. Women are restricted to playing their roles inside their houses and in family matters while men play their role beyond the home and act as the head, protector and guardian of the family (Karlsson and Mansory, 2007).

However, the domination of the male in the Islamic education of learning slowly changed to give more room for female participation. For example, in Bangladesh, only 4.9% of traditional Islamic school students were female but in 2003, female made up 47% of the student population. Also only 1% of Islamic school teachers were female and the percentage of female teachers has slightly increased to 6.9% in 2003 (Asadullah and Chaudhury, 2009). This change was prompted by the introduction of the Islamic schools reform scheme by the Bangladeshi government in 1980. In terms of the school orientation, there was also a significant increase in co-educational Islamic schools after the introduction of the reform scheme. The

overwhelming majority of Islamic high schools (*Aliyah madrasa*) in Bangladesh today admit and educate girls (Asadullah and Chaudhury, 2009).

### **Integrated Islamic educational curricular**

The intellectual discourse that focuses on the aspects of educational dualism has gained the attention of Muslim intellectuals since the period of Western colonialism because they constitute a crucial dimension of the secularization of the educational system. Dualism in education has resulted in the divorce of modern and Islamic religious curricula that develops two different education systems, Islamic and modern education. Furthermore, a separation of *al-'Ulūm al-Naqliyyah* (Revealed Knowledge) and *al-'Ulūm al-'Aqliyyah* (Required Knowledge) and a dichotomy between ideal and practice in Muslim education has manifested the limited role of education to produce a holistic Islamic personality.

The presence of two educational systems -traditional religious education and modern secular education- is a common phenomenon in the Muslim world as a result of colonialism. For example, the Dutch introduced an educational system based on western models and sought to downgrade the existence of local Islamic education institutions of learning (Pohl, 2009). Hashim (1994) argued that the educational dualism has resulted in negative consequences for Muslims. Those who graduated from Islamic religious schools are limited to be imam and prayer leaders in society, whereas those who graduated from secular schools will occupy prestigious positions in society such as managers, lawyers and doctors. This situation created a perception among people that religious education did not provide any economic value. Consequently, those who came from an Islamic religious education background tended to stay within their own group and isolate themselves from the rest of the society. Furthermore, both systems of education produce Muslims who do not possess the integrated Islamic personality.

There are different types of curricula in Muslim education institutions. Some schools adopt a secular national curriculum as a supplement to the Islamic studies component. This makes learning religion uninteresting since it compartmentalizes Islamic faith from the rest of the curriculum. Other schools use the Quran as a dynamic framework for organizing knowledge. Others purely teach Islamic subjects without taking into account the modern subjects in the curriculum. However, many Islamic educational institutions agree that the formation of morality and behavior is central to Islamic education (Anderson et al., 2011).

Criticism was voiced for the poor quality of traditional Islamic education where the curriculum was devoid of modern subjects and skills that were necessary for the student's life. As a result, the knowledge that students acquired did not lead them to participate in larger society, but rather to isolate themselves from mainstream life. Islamic education should lead to personal development and facilitate participation in pluralistic society.

As a result, some Muslim intellectuals have attempted to address dualism by encouraging integrated curricula. In the case of Malaysia, national educational philosophy had been revisited in order to produce a balanced personality through the holistic system of education by clearly stating that the education "...is an on-going effort towards further developing the potential of individual in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious..." (Ministry of Education, 2015).

Considering the negative effects of a dual educational system, namely religious and secular, these two systems ought to be integrated based on each of their strengths. The Malaysian Education authority has made important reform by the formulation of the National Education Philosophy and the introduction of integrated curriculum at the primary and secondary

schools namely Integrated Primary School Curriculum (KBSR) and Integrated Curriculum of Secondary School (KBSM). This reform aims to produce students with moral excellence through an integrated approach such that they are balanced and harmonious intellectually, physically, emotionally and spiritually. It emphasizes the importance of knowledge and skills in an effort to contribute to the society. The Malaysian integrated curriculum also calls for the inculcation of values across the curriculum, which implies that teachers are required to instill values in every lesson that they teach whether religious or secular (Hashim, Hussein and Juperi, 2014).

Furthermore, reform is needed to formulate a holistic curriculum that does not leave the important modern subjects and professional skills to be imparted in the students learning in Muslim schools. In the case of Singapore, the Islamic school's curriculum taught mainstream modern secular subjects alongside religious subjects (Anderson, 2011). The schools also changed the medium of instruction from Arabic to English for most religious subjects and banding students based on their learning abilities (Tan and Hairon, 2008).

Additionally, modern Islamic schools in Indonesia have introduced some general subjects alongside the Islamic sciences (Lukens-Bull, 2001). They teach a national curriculum with a supplementary curriculum of Islamic sciences. In addition, they also teach vocational training and general education to prepare their graduates for the future job market. This indicates that *pasentren* in Indonesia have created an integrated system of education combining religious instruction and scientific and technical training (Zakaria and Mahalle, 2012).

## Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the flaws of Islamic education have caused many Muslim educationists to endeavor to improve the system. However, reforms of Islamic education continually need

to be addressed. The key educational reforms in Islamic education in Muslim societies include reforms of the curricula, the pedagogy of teaching, the role of Islamic schools, the role of integration of Islamic schools within the larger community, especially in Muslim minority contexts. The reform of Islamic education is inevitable due to the contemporary global changes and the new needs of modern societies. The reformed Islamic schools can adopt the format of the modern school system in order to increase the quality of the Muslim school graduates so that they may develop good characters and professional skills, while still maintaining the fundamental institutional orientation of producing graduates with competency in Islamic knowledge.

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