

## Teaching Children: A Moral, Spiritual, and Holistic Approach to Educational Development

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The Author of this book is Ann Al-Muslimani who holds a PhD in Science in Botany, is a retired teacher, and the founder of the Islamic School in Seattle, USA, of which she was the founding director for over forty years. In this book, the author explores the teaching of the core principles of monotheism (oneness of God, humanity and wisdom); *Fitrah* (concept of human nature); and man's role (responsibility and agency) as Allah's successor on earth. She talks about current education system that spawns faithless frustrated new generation, necessitates a desperate need of a "reboot". For industrial society, the education system itself has become like a factory, and the final product is students who ruminate on mere truths and end up being a product that is the larger industrial complex. This legacy of a lifeless 'functional' education system fails to evolve to meet the current and future needs of students and the expectations of individuals which inevitably affect society and humanity at large.

The book starts with a wonderful forward (pp. vii-x) by Hisham Al-Talib wherein he articulates all that has been illustrated in the book. In the introduction (pp.1-5) she discussed on the enthusiasm of Muslim parents, requirements of revitalizing a paradigm of Islamic educational philosophy challenging the status quo. In such Islamic school, *Salah* is a part of the day and children learn Arabic and the Quran in a family atmosphere among both staff and students and any confusion caused by various popular cultural and moral issues is alleviated. Then she suggests that we still have a long way to go thinking the need to think deeply about our core Islamic principles not only in what we teach but also in how we teach with a vision of revival of Islamic educational philosophy. The author also beautifully mentions the recent progress by Karen Keyworth, CISNA, Nadeem Memon, Abdullah Sahin, Jeemy Henzell-Thomas and many others in education sector.

Then in the second chapter (pages 6-10) she mentioned that Muslim teachers in the west sometimes chose between two different ways of teaching. They may take their ideals as *madrasas* known as religious schools in many parts of the world or they model themselves on the dominant competing secular schools or even they often opt for a mix of the two which is a post-colonial remnant. She delves into the discussion on *taqlid*, *tajdid*, *ijtihad* and *madhhabs*. She also meticulously mentions how an elite class of Muslims emerged from these mixtures of educational systems that later shaped the social dynamics of Muslim communities around the globe at large.

In the third chapter, she focused on the discussion the factory school to the standard management paradigm. She mentions there the genuine dedication of John Tylor Gatto who extensively

worked to expose the objective of compulsory education which is known as Tylorism along with discussion of Jeremy Henzell-Thomas and John Goodlad. She talks about what a school should think carefully about its cultures based on unified, articulated vision.

Later in the fourth chapter (pages 17-31) the discussion is on the oneness of Allah which is the foundation of everything we believe as Muslims and how we want to live our lives. She suggests that the spirit of One Allah, must permeate the environment, curriculum and overall performance of an Islamic school. This inner belief will lead to clearer practices and attitudes. In the fifth chapter, (pp. 32-44) she mentions, her personal experience during her time at Seattle's Islamic school and interaction with parents. She also mentions how separating religious and secular education affect school environment. There she mentions the value of education and wisdom in Islam.

In the sixth chapter she discusses about mind, brain, and education science (pp. 45-51) where she indicates that we can use our minds to gain knowledge and understanding. The more we know about His divine plan, the more we can learn harmony with His plans. Furthermore she mentions how the human brain works has led to the works of several notable scholars who have contributed to the learning methods. Western science has always struggled with the inorganic nature of soul, spirit, mind, consciousness and heart. These concepts cannot simply be contained within the confines of reduced material science. The solution is to look into the holistic Islamic dimensions of teaching methods.

In the seventh chapter she proposes for preparation of a monotheistic unified curriculum (pp. 52-63). She argues that traditional methods of knowledge transfer rely on assumptions that are inconsistent with both the design of the brain and the unity of truth. However reductionist philosophy reduces a complex entity to the sum of its parts. In the eighth chapter she talks about Islamic term *fitrah* or human nature and behaviorism (pages 64-71). There she takes a close look at the works of classical and modern Muslim scholars and their varied and rich interpretations of *fitrah*-based on a range of linguistic and religious interpretations, she defines *fitrah* as “an innate, immutable tendency, found in all human beings at birth which leads to right action and surrender to the One Allah.”

In the ninth chapter she discusses about self-determination (pp. 72-81) where she goes telling that Islam, along with modern psychology, recognizes that a child begins his life not with *tabula rasa*, but with traits that will serve as a foundation for his later life. Given the injunction to seek knowledge so strongly in the Qur'an, it is not surprising that the innate drive to learn is part of human nature. To draw upon the hearts and minds of our most precious resources, it is imperative that we critically examine assumptions that are unquestioned simply because they have become part of school culture. The tenth chapter is on Islamic civic engagement (pp. 82-91). Our role is to serve Allah's will on earth. Allah has blessed us with the riches of creation, but those blessings come with serious commitments. We are charged with guarding and stewarding these gifts, but at the same time we do our best to ensure that they are used now and

in the future for the benefit of all creation and that justice prevail in the world. As members of humanity, we are tasked with worshiping Allah and taking responsibility for all of humanity as well as the rest of creation.

In the last final chapter (pp. 92-98), she sheds light on that education everywhere needs reform. Schools are adhering to well-established standards, but are unconscious and often at odds with good teaching and learning. It has been proven that many common practices are not only ineffective but have a negative impact on the children we are teaching. Moreover, the relentless drive towards increasing standardization makes it difficult to effect positive change. The situation is such that children are not respected, they have to sit quietly and absorb information dictated from above to perform the tasks assigned to them. Unfortunately, the current hierarchy also undercuts teachers as well. She goes telling an effective holistic educational philosophy is needed, which will give full spiritual meaning, the unity of knowledge, humanity and the reality of *fitrah* to everything a child learns.

The author raps up with two wonderful appendices one with ‘Montessori Model for Islamic Schools’ having a great similarities with what the author advocates for in her work and this has been recognized as a timeless educational paradigm and the other, ‘Exploring Themes with Students’ which passionately provides subtle ways of delicate engagements with students for yielding the core objectives of school education that consists of ‘A Science-based Theme and ‘An Example of Irish Immigration to the United States.

This work is concise yet informative, small in volume yet comprehensive. It is a superb presentation of her invaluable experience of four decades in the field of education. In a word, the esteemed author has been able to present what she wants to say in her book in a very aesthetic way and what she has presented is very heartwarmingly realistic and appealing. Her work can be considered as a milestone to overcome the plight of the present education system.

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