

The Role of Education in the Development of Spirituality and Community Empowerment: Lessons from the Approach of Prophet Muhammad (SAW)

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Abstract

From time immemorial, education has been used to empower and develop communities through equipping them with knowledge and putting that knowledge to practical use. Applied knowledge led to the development of great civilizations. In Islam, Prophet Muhammad (SAW) used education to change the course of history. Even after his death, the Islamic civilization spread far and wide covering most parts of the world. The main element in the educational approach of prophet (SAW) was the development of spirituality. Through this, he converted the harshest Bedouin Arabs into an admirable generation. Morality became the foundation of society with brotherhood as the basis of individual responsibility towards one another. In doing so, the Prophet (SAW) endeavoured to impart practical knowledge that his disciples translated into a true appreciation of meaning of life, thereby transforming themselves and creating a civil society that became a model for generations to come. This paper is intended to unpack the education strategies and processes that Prophet Muhammad (SAW) used to transform human life and how Muslim scholars practiced and conveyed them to generation after generation until when the British introduced Western education leading to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

Key words: education, spirituality, integration of knowledge, development

The knowledge economy and its turbulence have led the world into daily bloodshed and merciless killings while on the other hand, the Western culture and its education system still portrays Islam as a religion of terror and at the same time advances strategies for destruction of Islamic culture (Ceballos, 2002; Miir, 2017). Meanwhile, humanity has remained at crossroads without a clear understanding of the meaning of life due to unjust killings, and destruction of property with international organizations failing to take a firm stand on stopping such practices (Othman & Mohamad, 2014). Injustice has also continued to be the order of the day whereby Muslims have been subjected to wars against themselves. Their enemy uses all the available tools to ensure that no one admires the Islamic culture and its education system hence causing frustrations and

dissonance on the side of its followers and admirers. Moreover these experiences with their mega challenges have not only led to destruction of property but also to mass killings which have been attributed to the Islamic faith whereas in the actual sense these emanate from the imported education systems and mixed cultures that Muslims have been subjected to (Gasarch, 2014; Tull, 2007).

The total neglect of spirituality and morality in the dominant educational systems today has led to creation of generations of human beings without values, leading to rampant corruption and the collapse of social institutions. One could argue that among the biggest challenges of our developing countries is this disappearance of spirituality and morality. Therefore, there is need to reinstate the value of morals in education and through this strategy education institutions will be able to offer the society with graduates who have a code of personal integrity and a sense of community (Lewis, 2007). Meanwhile, education needs revision and integration of culture and other components of human development in order to give hope to learners that the world is an interesting and safe place to live in with others (Gasarch, 2014; Njus, 1996; Tull, 2007).

The fact that Western epistemology has failed to provide solutions to contemporary issues that are challenging the world can be attributed to its mixed goals that call for no equality and responsiveness to the challenges of man (Shobha & Kala, 2015). Western education systems agitate for selfish interests at the expense of the disadvantaged in terms of wealth, military and technological advancements. The Western dominancy and its aspiration do not provide room for critical dialogue and creative thinking with the purpose of providing real solutions to empowerment of humanity. This system has not only posed great challenges but also caused a threat among the education system, belief and the Muslim *Ummah* at large (Dzulkifli, 2015).

For a Muslim to hate or totally reject Western education and culture would tantamount to the proverbial ‘throwing away the baby with the bath water’. Muslims should endeavour to understand the contribution of modern science and relate it with the Islamic practices with an aim of creating a balanced system of education that can provide solutions to the mega challenges of the world. From this background, this paper defines education, the role of education through integration and human empowerment, the Muslim curriculum and lastly provides the Prophetic approach that led to the development of Islamic civilization.

The concept of Education

The concept of education is encapsulated with acquisition of knowledge, skills and values from the time of birth to death. It is conveyed to man by fellow man for purposes of development in terms of culture and civilization. The aim of education should be to translate knowledge into human behaviour both in words and practice with mechanisms of changing culture and the level of civility through acquisition of wisdom using both formal and informal means (Hashim, 2017). It is therefore important to note that education is a mean for changing communities through provision of meaningful knowledge to arrive at human soul or to avail the meaning of an object of knowledge to the soul (Sedik, 2015).

Since time immemorial education has been used as the most powerful tool to influence civilizations and cultures both in formal and informal manners. For instance; in 3150 BC Pharaoh used proxy leadership to educate the children of Egypt that he was God and he could achieve his target through the use of black magic techniques to attain loyalty from them. Also, Aristotle and Plato argued that education should be used to address public needs with an emphasis on virtues to achieve a common goal. Moreover, community transformation and empowerment should be advanced through a designed curriculum graded in nature to sustain democratic society and at the same time achieve the desired goal and that of the Philosopher King. In addition, at the time the Islamic empire expanded to other regions for instance Greece, Muslim scholars like Al-Farabi came across the Greek philosophy, related it to the prophetic traditions and interpreted the Philosopher King into *al Madinah alfadhilah* (the model city) with vision (Hashim, 2017). Thus education is a tool for facilitating the meaning of life while preparing humanity into *Khalifatu Allah fil Ardhi* (Vicegerent of Allah on Earth) in order to place things in the right place and at the same time be responsible for themselves and the creator. Therefore education should lead to acquisition of knowledge, skills, and virtues with the aim of transforming man into *Khalifatu Allah fil Ardhi* as revealed in the Qur'an and supported by the traditions of the Prophet (SAW).

Foundations of the Prophetic Model of Education

Before the coming of Islam, Arabs were extremely backward in all spheres of life; politically, economically, and socially. They were uncultured and uncivilized. The message of Islam played an important civilizational role for the Arab race and for the entire world. The foundation was the religious orientation which gave Arabs a superior position in relation to other nations and communities. It gave them a sense of identity and an idea of their role and position in the world and the entire universe. It was a transformational message. The centre of this transformation was an unprecedented comprehensive system of education that was both universal in coverage and encompassed all aspects of life. The following is a summary of the key areas of educational transformation that characterized the educational model of Prophet Muhammad (SAW).

The very basis of the Prophetic model was to prepare the generations that were to receive the message and transmit it to other nations and future generations. It involved not only preparing the generation of his contemporaries (*swahaba*) but also considering and planning how future generations should be nurtured. The basic process and primary curriculum of this phase of educational transformation revolved around reading, writing, memorizing, understanding, actualizing, and transmitting the revealed truth (i.e., the Qur'an and *Sunnah* or Prophetic examples). There was much emphasis on mastering the written Book (*al-Kitab* or al-Qur'an) on the one hand and acquisition of common sense and wisdom (*al-hikmah*) on the other. For a nation of non-readers, the first task was to elevate the level of reading and writing and those who mastered them in society and using national resources towards serving this goal. The social standing of

those who could read and write was so remarkable that most people desired that their children become writers.

The process of educational transformation included educating individuals as well as changing entire communities. Following is a brief discussion of what the Prophet (SAW) did in order to transform individuals and entire communities.

The first aspect of the education of the individual that was emphasized by the Prophetic model was related to physical aspects of man and society. It ranged from safeguarding genetic composition to ensuring that there were healthy physical, psychological and social environments. To ensure the right genetic composition, rules were put in place to safeguard families and children were ascribed to their rightful parents. The practice of adoption was seriously restricted and family names were to be used properly. The process of choosing a life partner with whom one would produce future generations was emphasized. A future spouse was expected to have some minimum requirements and making a family was no longer a blind response to some sexual attraction.

On the issue of the environment, rules were put in place that governed both the personal and public environments. At the personal level, believers were taught to take good care of themselves as they were bearers of the message. A strong believer was said to be better and more loved by Allah than a weak one. Here strength referred not only to spiritual strength but also to physical health and strength. Believers were expected to practice sexual modesty by refraining from having illicit sexual relations. Furthermore, they were taught to consume healthy, wholesome food (*halalan tayyiban*). Cleanliness of both body and place was elevated to be a crucial aspect of faith itself. Personal hygiene became part and parcel of religious service or worship (*ibadah*) in Islam. A Muslim was expected to bathe, trim his hair, finger and toenails, brush teeth, and always wear clean uncontaminated clothes.

Regarding the preservation of the general physical environment, Islam prohibits contamination of water sources. It was forbidden, for instance, to urinate in stagnant water. Cleaning the environment and removing any nuisances from public places was elevated to a religious duty. Moreover, Muslims were encouraged to protect the environment by not recklessly killing animals or felling trees. Doing the opposite was encouraged. Planting trees for shade or to provide food for humans and even for birds and animals was considered a perpetual work of charity (*sadaqah jariyah*). All these aspects may seem normal today, but were unprecedented in the 7th Century.

A lot of emphasis was placed on creating a healthy social environment. Faced with the social ills of *Jahiliyyan* society, Islam elevated society from being worse than beasts to paragons of virtue and the model society for humankind. Special provisions were made from the time a child is born, the way a baby is welcomed, the giving of names, prayers for blessings, training children to be virtuous, healthy and wise from the very beginning. Physical activity was stressed, teaching that healthy minds need healthy bodies. Similar emphasis was placed on psychological health. A Muslim was taught to always be optimistic,

looking beyond the present challenges and problems to the ultimate triumph in this world and eternal bliss in the hereafter. All this went hand-in-hand with creating a healthy social environment. Public display of vices was eradicated so that members of society, especially the young, should not be exposed to polluting influences.

At the center of the Prophetic educational model was psycho-spiritual education. The core of this psycho-spiritual education was the inculcation of *imaan* (faith). One of the young companions, Jundub ibn Abdallah narrated that: "We were young boys in the company of the Prophet (SAW). We learned *imaan* before learning the Qur'an. Later, when we learned the Qur'an, we had more faith in it. But today you learn the Qur'an before you acquire *imaan*." (Ibn Majah, 61; al-Bayhaqi, 5498; al-Tabarani, 1378). *Imaan* entails belief in Allah (His omnipresence, omnipotence, omniscience, and self-sufficiency), belief in revelation, that is angels, messengers, and revealed books. It entails belief in reward and punishment in the hereafter, as well as in predestination and divine justice. These pillars of faith encompass the life of a believer.

A person whose life is governed by the principles of *Imaan* must lead a divinely inspired life. When the companions of the Prophet (SAW) understood this concept, they had their eyes focused on the goal and were never swayed by temporary pleasure or pain. They were exemplars of the qualities of reliance on Allah (*tawakkul*), constant consciousness of an obedience to Allah (*taqwa*), sincerity (*ikhlas*), vigilance and self-monitoring (*al-muraqabah*), and bravery (*alshuja'ah*). With these qualities, no mountain was too high and no sea was too deep or vast to be conquered. An excellent description of their astounding personalities was made by their opponent. When the Roman Emperor sent a spy to the Muslim camp and asked him to describe the Muslim army in a few words, he was told they were "monks at night, warriors during daytime". With this spirit, they carried the message of Islam and its civilizational force far and wide. It is undeniable that the spirit of humanism and the thirst for knowledge that was kindled by the early generations of Muslims led to the revival of philosophy and sciences in the Muslim world, which later influenced the medieval Western world culminating into the renaissance and the scientific and industrial revolutions.

Part of this psycho-spiritual training involved purification of emotions. Whereas in pre-Islamic times a person would love and hate due to sectarian and tribal reasons, now everything was motivated by faith in Allah and expectation of reward in the hereafter. Emotions were purified such that a person developed a strong love for Allah, for the Messenger (SAW), the believers, and all of Allah's creatures. Similarly, a person would hate another person, group, or idea for the sake of Allah. They learned to be objective and to avoid extremism and transgression. The emotion of anger and that of fear was also brought in line with the faith. A believer would reject being subservient to or oppressed by any human being out of fear. Nor would he be worried about his sustenance (*rizq*), afraid of the uncertain future, or even death itself.

Related to that was the purification of human motives. Natural motives were given religious significance. Among the main objectives of Islamic Revealed Law (*Maqasid al-Shariah*) is the preservation of a person's life and preservation of the human species. Other motives that became exalted included innocence and purity (*al-nazaha*), justice (*al-'adl*), and effectiveness (*al-fa'aliyyah*).

It was upon the above foundations that the Prophetic model of education was based. The Islamic intellectual tradition that developed and flourished in the early years of Islam was a natural consequence of such foundations. The academic scientific enterprise that took place in the Prophet's mosque bore fruits for both social and psycho-spiritual nurturing that took place under the supervision of the (Prophet SAW) himself. He encouraged his companions to learn how to read and write and acquire all kinds of sciences that they could get access to. Scholars were elevated to the highest status in society, next to the prophets. In fact they were heirs of the prophets. The ink of their pens was considered more valuable than the blood of the martyrs. Moreover, knowledge was not supposed to be acquired as a means to the acquisition of material wealth or positions in society; it was to be used in the service of Allah for the benefit of His creatures. Scholars were expected to be sincere, honest, humble, and optimistic. It is not surprising that within less than fifty years from the advent of Islam, centers of learning and intellectual activities sprung up in Medina, Makkah, Cairo, Baghdad, Basra, Kufa, and Damascus. These eventually became among the earliest institutions of higher learning in the modern world.

The Prophetic approach to spiritual development and empowerment

The Prophet (SAW) employed divine teaching and a diverse curriculum to reshape the culture and climate of humanity. The most important component of humanity that the Prophet's teachings addressed was the soul. For instance he taught with wisdom and changed the souls of individuals like Umar ibn al-Khattab and Khalid ibn Walid. Moreover, this was attributed to the methodology and its outcome. The process was gradual in nature until when people had to give up on drinking alcohol, killing, civil wars etc. In this section, an analysis of the educational practices of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) is presented. A few themes emerge from this analysis, namely; that in his practice he emphasized the concept of *tawheed*, *hikmah*, morals, love and brotherhood, accountability and curriculum.

The concept of *Tawheed*

First of all Prophet Muhammad (SAW) used education or teaching as a tool towards completion of his task as entrusted by Allah (SWT). This was done by showing the relevance of Islam in the life of humanity through the use of divine knowledge as taught by Allah (SWT). Meanwhile, Allah taught man to discover his grassroots, the nature of events as well as discovering self-development in aspects of Monotheism (*aqeedah*), knowledge acquisition, innovation and practice (Hassan, Suhid, Abiddin, Ismail, & Hussin, 2010). The Prophet (SAW)

in his mission emphasized the concept of *tawheed* as the foundation for all human endeavors in *Dunya* (present world) and *Akhira* (hereafter) and this was in his daily teachings. Moreover, the seminars and *halaqahs* that the Prophet (SAW) carried out were composed of Muslims and non-Muslims while highlighting the relevance of knowledge towards belief and practice thus providing the sphere of Islamic Philosophy (Miir, 2017). For instance the first verses of the Quran were:

“Read in the name of thy Lord who created, created man from a clot. Read, and thy Lord is the Most Generous Who taught by the pen, taught man that which he knew not.” (Quran, 96: 1-5).

“Are those who have knowledge and those who have no knowledge alike? Only the men of understanding are mindful.” (Quran, 39:9).

The above verses of the Quran were revealed to put man to task in probing and carrying out scientific discoveries with an aim of arriving at the truth and causing strategies for innovative development. Thus Allah says *“And who bring the truth and believe therein such are the dutiful.”* (Quran, 39: 33). It means man as a *khalifah* is supposed to learn and discover solutions to challenging situations in human life.

Hikmah and Limitless Teaching and Learning

It is also important to understand that the Prophet used diverse ways to ensure that his companions get exposed to several fields of knowledge and at the same time he could also consult them to allow critical thinking and reasoning of arriving at real solutions to the problems. This was done to give room for intellectual growth and spiritual development among his disciples (Hassan et al., 2010). For instance, in one of the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) Abu Umamah reported: A young man came to the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, and he said, “O Messenger of Allah, give me permission to commit adultery.” The people turned to rebuke him, saying, “Quiet! Quiet!” The Prophet said, “Come here.” The young man came close and he told him to sit down. The Prophet said, “Would you like that for your mother?” The man said, “No, by Allah, may I be sacrificed for you. People would not like it for their mothers.” The Prophet said, “Would you like that for your daughter?” The man said, “No, by Allah, may I be sacrificed for you. People would not like it for their daughters.” The Prophet said, “Would you like that for your sister?” The man said, “No, by Allah, may I be sacrificed for you. People would not like it for their sisters.” The Prophet said, “Would you like that for your aunts?” The man said, “No, by Allah, may I be sacrificed for you. People would not like it for their aunts.” The Prophet placed his hand on him and he said, “O Allah, forgive his sins, purify his heart, and guard his chastity.” After that, the young man never again turned to anything sinful. Musnad Ahmad 21708.

The Concept of Morals

With the growing concern on the erosion of morals among the youth in the era of turbulence, the current change in behavior among the youth has been

attributed to the methodologies and pedagogies that instructors use to influence learners' experiences and formation of characters. Furthermore the Prophet (SAW) put a lot of emphasis on values and virtues. Today the world is experiencing moral decadency due to the value free education that many youth have been exposed to, whereas it is factually known that knowledge without values is meaningless. For instance the Prophet (SAW) guided the youth in emotional and behaviour control and many of them like Mu'sab ibn Ummair were changed from fantastical to real believers and later laid a foundation for formation of the great city (al-Madinatul al-Munawar) (Gloria, 2012; Grajczonek, 2010; Hassan et al., 2010; Miir, 2017). Therefore, education should be integral in nature, encompassing spiritual and moral values to bring on board issues of diversity that relate to social, economic and political aspects in human development.

Besides, Islamic integrated knowledge should be envisioned with the power of re-animating a holistic concept for generating both intellectual faculties and excellence for purposes of having beauty and virtue in individuals and all these efforts should centre at eliminating selfish tendencies for personal achievement (Hassan et al., 2010; Miir, 2017; Salman, 2002).

Love and Brotherhood

Among the key issues that the Prophet's lessons emphasized was the concept of love and brotherhood. In this he taught the companions about being careful while dealing with one another in their day-to-day life. The concept of brotherhood is comprehensive in nature and it's upon which good character and care for others and treating them fairly and justly was laid. The Prophet (SAW) endeavoured to unite the followers together upon the same common values starting from individual, family and community levels (Firdaus & Fatah, 2013). He explained the rights for each category and ensured that duties towards one another were upheld in the society. Additionally, the concept yielded true friendship that had never been seen before in the existence of mankind especially at the time of migration and formation of the city of Madinah. The *sahabahs* sacrificed their riches to others for the sake of Allah and worked together as believers towards fulfilling the goals of the *Ummah* and living under the same umbrella of divine rules and values. Moreover, Qur'an and hadiths have emphasized this issue in numerous ways for instance Allah says:

"The believers are but brothers, so make reconciliation between your brothers and fear Allah that you may receive mercy". Surat al-Hujurat 49:10.

"Hold firmly to the rope of Allah all together and do not become divided. Remember the favour of Allah upon you, when you were enemies and he brought your hearts together and you became brothers by his favour". Surat Ali Imran 3:103.

An-Nu'man ibn Basheer reported: The Messenger of Allah, (SAW), said: *The parable of the believers in their affection, mercy, and compassion for each other*

is that of a body. When any limb aches, the whole body reacts with sleeplessness and fever. Source: Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 5665.

From the above verses and hadiths, the philosophy that prophet (SAW) used was to develop into the hearts of the believers the concept of morals and virtues whose roots are traced from *Tawheed* thus impacting on their cognitive understanding, behaviours, and spirituality and this was all intertwined in the concept of education with an aim of ensuring that each component impacts on the other for purposes of achieving the vision of the *Tawheed*.

Thus empowering man with a notion of understanding the divine revelation that emphasizes the oneness of Allah, the belief in His Prophets, in human potentiality embedded with morality and spirituality, the belief that each person is responsible for his action, the belief in the universe as finite creature and in life after death hence forming a true Islamic community with people of upright morals and vision of changing the society (Lubis, 2015).

The Nature of Curriculum

The curriculum that was used by the Prophet (SAW) was holistic in nature with the sole aim of reminding man the purpose of his creation, responsibility and at the same time providing him with skills of managing responsibilities as caliphs of Allah. The guidance was espoused with continuous reminders since man is naturally weak and therefore needs religion as guidance for his entire life (Sedik, 2015). Therefore, the effort of improving and perfecting himself is the aim of education towards empowerment. Meanwhile, the curriculum should aim at constructive *Imaan* in its entirety by stipulating well the major goal as provision of guidance whose aim is to generate a balanced human in itself coupled with Islamic values. Thus the education system that the Prophet (SAW) provided was integral in nature with Islamic idealism whose sole objective was to empower man with quality mechanisms of transforming civilization.

Another characteristic of the curriculum was comprehensiveness and completeness, meaning that the materials taught should be used to impact on all aspects of man including intellectual growth, emotional control mechanisms, spiritual development and physical appearance; and that the materials covered should help man translate them into his daily behaviour that impacts on the society positively (Mpaata, 2017).

The Concept of Accountability

The Prophet (SAW) taught the companions the concept of *Mizan* (scale) on both *dunya*h and *akhira*. On this very note he encouraged the followers to always take a middle course and through this approach, he managed to overcome challenges of culture and social cohesion (Hassan et al., 2010; Lubis, 2015; Miir, 2017). The intention of addressing this important aspect of human life was to ensure that justice prevails over individual interests. Furthermore the Prophet (SAW) put it to the attention of his followers that there is accountability of every activity done by an individual on the Day of Judgment. Moreover, people were

given freedom to take any direction desired without coercion as long as they also distanced themselves from abusing community interests.

Conclusion

The essence of this paper is to orient the readers towards the role of education in empowering the community as used by the Prophet (SAW) in rescuing man from darkness to a positive culture that has been emulated for many years. The Prophet (SAW) attained stability in the community by addressing aspects of emotions, spirit, intuition, and entire life of humanity with an aim of preparing better future for generations that were to follow after his departure. Since a comprehensive curriculum was a key to attainment of this change in human history, the Prophet used interconnected realities of life as revealed to him by Allah to empower man towards provision of solutions towards human challenges and development.

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