

ARTICLES

TOWARDS AUTHENTIC BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT MODELS FOR ISLAMIC SCHOOLS - A FRAMEWORK SYNTHESISING RESEARCH

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Abstract: The purpose of learning in Islamic schools should be to facilitate transformation on the path to *ma'rifatu'Llah*. Transformation over compliance would therefore best characterise those behaviour management models most appropriate for Islamic schools. But unfortunately, behaviour management models are often adopted in Islamic schools without considered thought or evidence from tradition or empirical research. A critical examination of current behaviour management models and their embedded practices in Islamic schools is therefore required. To what extent are common practices effective, authentic and aligned with visions of Islamic education? The purpose of this paper is to produce a framework that can inform the development of future authentic behaviour management models in Islamic schools that are conversant with Islamic principles. The framework offered is based upon a synthesis of research within the field of Islamic education.

Introduction

As Islamic schools in Western contexts negotiate the next phase in their development, empirical research to assess both the appropriateness and effectiveness of their approaches to behaviour is essential. The tragedy in many Islamic schools is the assumption that certain practices are working without empirically assessing their effectiveness. With reference to building a strong school culture manifesting Islamic values and etiquettes, typically there is no indication that the systems in place fosters either obedience or responsibility. While Islamic schools want to encourage and support the latter, most often the methods applied lead to the former. This can apply to the area of behaviour management, which for the purposes of this paper will encompass classroom management, school discipline and all other terms used to denote a behaviour management model (BMM). BMMs and similar approaches can be situated

within certain educational philosophies and are themselves informed by child psychology theory. They also subsequently inform behaviour management systems (BMS).

Research suggests that discipline and high standards of conduct reflective of religious and cultural expectations are a factor for parents when choosing an Islamic school for their children.¹ Certainly, a good character inspired by the Prophetic standards, a strong and positive school culture in the spirit of Islam, dignified conduct in classrooms, and principled and healthy interpersonal relations are all arguably high priorities for Islamic schools. However, there is little by way of an established model or blueprint for achieving such standards.

There is no one singular, agreed upon philosophy of Islamic education. Rather, the discipline is dynamic in nature. This flexibility has allowed for the development of a set of principles and values which are enduring, applicable to all contexts for all time. Overall, however, the purpose of Islamic education is inextricably linked to the purpose of creation, which is to worship Allah Almighty and to be His vicegerent (representative) here on earth.² This purpose informs the broader aims of Islamic education – namely, to instill the desire to seek both the pleasure of Allah Almighty and success in the Hereafter.³ It is the duty of those who educate Muslim children to utilise educational approaches which instill these higher values throughout a student's formal school education.⁴

Whilst the philosophy, purpose and aims of Islamic education are distinct, Muslim educators are not alone in valuing effective BMMs. Currently, a continuum of BMMs guide contemporary educational approaches and practices. These variously emphasise choice, consequences, responsible behaviour, restorative justice,⁵ and positive learning.⁶ Researchers in Islamic education circles^{7,8,9,10,11} however, question the suitability of many of these contemporary approaches to behaviour management and instead suggest the consideration of a model that is more cognisant and consistent with an Islamic worldview and approach. The Islamic worldview, rooted in the ontological and epistemological basis of Islam, is the lens through which Muslims see and understand the world. The Islamic worldview provides a useful point of reference or parameter for ensuring that Islam's educational philosophy, purpose and aims inform broader educational approaches. This paper synthesises research in the field of Islamic education related to behaviour management, character education, the connections between purpose and path, and the central role of *adab* in the learning process. The resultant framework aims to inform the development of an Islamically authentic behaviour management model for Islamic schools, conversant with Islamic principles and Prophetic practices. The framework presented in this paper is currently being piloted by the Amanah Institute, a *madrassah* in Brisbane, Australia.

The Broader Context

Within a high-performing school, behaviour management is an important component. The challenges inherent to managing student behaviour and maximising their engagement and learning, however, occur against a wider backdrop of societal and generational change. This is most evident in terms of advancement in technology, particularly the impact of the internet and social networking. The result has been a generation of ‘switched on’ and ‘developmentally compressed’ students who possess broad yet shallow knowledge and who at times struggle to cope with new concepts, ideas and thinking.¹² Family dysfunction and rising mental health concerns are additional factors that impact upon schools and their focus on student engagement and motivation.¹³

Many Western schools, including those in countries like the United States, Canada and Australia, are inherently diverse, reflecting the spirit of multiculturalism. Islamic schools in the West also model this spirit, exhibiting the highest levels of diversity on almost every marker – cultural, ethnic, linguistic and sectarian.¹⁴ This, however, can present both challenges and opportunities, particularly when it comes to building a strong school culture with a shared expectation of student behaviour. In many cases, a shared faith encompassing religious principles governing good character, relationships, conduct and behaviour (including culturally acceptable notions of respect) serve as enablers to achieve the school’s aims of better student behaviour and engagement with learning.

However, no significant research has been conducted to examine the nature of student behaviour in Islamic schools in the West, including how that behaviour is managed and how it impacts on teacher-student relations. Although it could easily be assumed that these Islamic schools suffer from the same problems as other Western schools, the situation is likely to be more complex given that Western Muslim students face a unique set of pressures in the post-9/11 world.¹⁵ Since birth, these Muslim students have been exposed to an overwhelmingly negative media discourse regarding Islam and Muslims, set amidst a complex geopolitical climate. These students therefore feel pressured to negotiate and reconcile their multiple identities and sense of belonging, impacting on student behaviour and engagement with learning. Moreover, many Muslim students in Islamic schools in the West have either negotiated a refugee experience (along with the subsequent acculturation process) or are the children or grandchildren of families who have done so. This trauma is often an additional factor impacting upon behaviour. Nonetheless, the absence of research in this specific field makes it difficult to conclusively state the prevalence and causes of behaviour issues within Western Islamic schools.

Authentic Behaviour Management Models for Islamic Schools - A Synthesis of Research

In forming our synthesis, we have relied on Memon's highly respected and comprehensive Islamic pedagogy.¹⁶ We would also like to acknowledge the influence of Nasr¹⁷ and Shamma,¹⁸ who we have utilised in order to ensure that an Islamic worldview is present throughout our work. This has helped maintain the Islamic integrity, relevance and appropriateness of the BMM framework we propose. We have also accepted al-Attas's¹⁹ heavy emphasis on *adab* in the learning process; like him, we have maintained that *adab* is central to learning and that its inclusion reconciles the notions of knowledge and learning peculiar to Islamic education. Additionally, the importance of teachers in the Islamic tradition has convinced us that BMMs in Islamic schools must be teacher-modelled. We have also taken inspiration from Memon and Bacchus's²⁰ call for character education in Islamic schools in order to create a school climate with Islamic values at its heart. We have borrowed from the domain of discipline with dignity,²¹ particularly from Alam's articulation of the Prophetic principles of teaching by the maintenance of dignity.²² We added to this the pursuit of a mutually transformative experience between students and educators, the result of which would be the improvement of both parties and their overall relationship. Taken together we offer the following seven requisites as a platform for developing an Islamically authentic Behaviour Management Model for Islamic Schools:

1. Alignment with an Islamic pedagogy (why, what and how)
2. Informed by an Islamic worldview
3. An unrelenting and central emphasis on *adab*
4. Teacher-modelled, student-directed
5. Adoption of a 'whole community' approach
6. Utilisation of preventative approaches, including a character education component
7. Utilise interventionist approaches that maintain dignity and look for mutually transformative experiences.

1. Alignment with an Islamic Pedagogy

An Islamic pedagogy should be an overarching framework that defines excellence in Islamic schooling. It should be applied for its enabling function in the assessment and evaluation of approaches to Islamic schooling within a criterion of excellence. Authentic BMMs for Islamic schools best operate within an Islamic pedagogy. According to Memon,

An Islamic Pedagogy is the principles of education in Islam that inform both what we teach and learn, and the way we teach and learn... An Islamic Pedagogy provides a framework of the principles of education derived from the Islamic tradition that influence our approaches to schooling.²³

Memon further asserts,

For Muslim educators who see Islam as a central part of our being – the *tarbiyah* (nurturing of an Islamic value system), the *adab* (comportment and etiquette), and the *ilm* (knowledge about Islam) that we continue to gain shapes our educational values and by virtue defines our pedagogy.

Islamic pedagogy foregrounds the ‘why’ of Islamic education, while also aligning with ‘what’ and ‘how’ we teach and learn. The ‘why’ encapsulates the Islamic tradition, including the purpose of education in Islam. It therefore informs subsequent aims in addition to the various educational approaches that can be employed. In this case, the approaches pertain to a BMM as a forerunner to a BMS. When such a system is guided by and operates within a framework derived from the Islamic tradition, it will be both authentic and appropriate for Islamic schools.²⁴

2. Informed by an Islamic Worldview

An Islamic worldview can be defined as the lens through which a Muslim student and/or educator sees and understands the world. It is rooted in the ontological and epistemological core of Islam. Consideration of an Islamic worldview provides a useful point of reference (or parameter) for ensuring that any given educational approach is authentically Islamic. Al-Attas explains that the Islamic worldview is,

characterised by an authenticity and a finality that points to what is ultimate, and it projects a view of reality and truth that encompasses existence and life altogether in total perspective whose fundamental elements are permanently established.²⁵

In other words, an Islamic worldview is constructed around Islamic beliefs about creation, existence, purpose and destiny.²⁶ It is this worldview that should inform a Muslim student’s way of knowing, doing²⁷ and being²⁸, as well as their hopes for the Hereafter.²⁹

An Islamic worldview contains a fundamental set of principles which places all systems of meaning and standards of life and values into a coherent order.³⁰ At the centre of this worldview is *tawhid* (Divine Oneness), the ontological

foundation of all things ‘Islamic’. Since Islam is based upon *tawhid*, the development of the whole Muslim student is only possible when this concept is fully considered.³¹ It is very important to note that beyond the concept of *tawhid*, there is a great diversity of Islamic worldviews. The character and role of this fundamental element, however, will always remain the same.³²

According to Shamma, an Islamic worldview encompasses three main points:

- Allah is the Creator of all mankind. He is One.
- Unity of creation. There is no dividing line between humans and the environment, between religion and science.
- Included in Allah’s creation is a set of rules which guide all of nature; and if man chooses to follow those rules, he will be successful in this life and the life to come.³³

The goal of the Islamic school educator is to direct the student towards the Creator via an Islamic worldview. Any BMM must do so in a holistic, growth-oriented manner.

3. An Unrelenting and Central Emphasis on *Adab*

Contemporary research has identified a strong correlation between student behaviour and the quality of teaching students receive. Quality teachers who engage in quality teaching have higher student engagement and less behaviour management issues. Orderly classrooms similarly result in increased student engagement, motivation, and academic success.³⁴ These principles have been found to hold true across different schools and communities. There is, however, a nuanced (and oft-overlooked) difference within Islamic education: while contemporary research only positively links behaviour and learning with regards to the absence of problem behaviour, in Islam importance is also attached to the presence of what is referred to as *adab* (etiquette). This addition is most noteworthy.

Adab encompasses “a complex set of meanings including decency, comportment, decorum, etiquette, manners, morals, propriety, and humaneness.”³⁵ It must, play a central role in any Islamic BMS because in Islam learning encompasses both imparting knowledge and the acquisition of manners. Al-Attas posits that “no true knowledge can be instilled without the precondition of *adab* in the one who seeks it and to whom it is imparted.”³⁶ The *adab* mentioned here cannot be instructed, but rather is transferred from teacher to student.³⁷ In the Islamic worldview, *adab* is not only an essential part of the education process, but also an outcome of education^{38, 39}. This implies a heightened role and responsibility for teachers in Islamic schools.

4. Teacher-modelled, Student-directed

In the Islamic tradition, the teacher is both a *mu'allim* (a transmitter of knowledge) and a *murabbi* (a nurturer of souls).⁴⁰ To align their teaching to an authentically Islamic BMM, therefore, teachers must teach the morals, ethics and character of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and embody these traits within their own personalities. If they do not have these traits, they must strive to develop them in order to facilitate the ethical learning process of their students. Shaykh Hamza Yusuf Hanson, president of Zaytuna College in California, speaks to the historical purpose of moral education,

Regarding education, the ancients understood that its primary purpose was not economical but ethical, and while they knew ethics could not be taught, they knew it could be induced through moral example and wise childrearing techniques that ultimately resulted in moral and intellectual excellence.⁴¹

When teachers respond with *adab*, they inadvertently model the behaviour of their students. Henzell-Thomas concurs with this approach to traditional education,

In authentic spiritual traditions, the teacher is not only responsible for the instruction and training of the mind and the transmission of knowledge, but also with the education of the whole being. Such traditions never divorced the training of the mind from that of the soul.⁴²

The concept of training the soul is highlighted by numerous Prophetic traditions and is the basis for the Islamic science of spirituality. When the Prophet (peace be upon him) carried the bags of a woman who was leaving Makkah in order to avoid meeting him, she cursed “this man, Muhammad” without knowing that it was he who was walking alongside her. Not once, however, did Muhammad (peace be upon him) condemn her or return her abuse. In another tradition, the Prophet (peace be upon him) went and visited a neighbour who regularly threw filth and trash at him as he went into his house. His sole aim was to inquire about her. In both cases, the Prophet (peace be upon him) returned injustice with kindness, and in doing so became the best disciplinarian. In short, he followed the Quranic injunction,

Not equal are good and evil. Repel [evil] with what is best; you will unexpectedly see one with whom you had enmity become an intimate friend. [Quran 41:34]⁴³

Muslims recognise the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) as the ideal model of behaviour and as an example for all humanity. The behaviour of the Prophet (peace be upon him) can be found in his *Sunnah* and adhering to

it is considered a virtue. This emphasis on excellent behaviour and conduct is of paramount importance in Islam and is summed up by the Prophet (peace be upon him) in his *hadith*, “Fear Allah wherever you are. Follow up a bad deed with a good deed and it will blot it out. And deal with people with excellent character.” The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), like all messengers, is considered a teacher. Certainly, he declared “I have been sent as a teacher.” This is personified by the Prophet’s (peace be upon him) efforts to educate his earliest followers, the companions, via his model teaching approach.

The above links with Mendler and Curwin’s development of a way to address the behavioural concerns of at-risk students who have learning and emotional disabilities. Referred to as the Discipline with Dignity Framework, this model is a needs-based approach to behaviour and classroom management. The goal is to increase student engagement in a way that meets the needs of the student. This work, however, is in line with the Prophetic pedagogy: students are dignified through the conduct and character of the teacher, in what can be referred to as a mutually transformative experience. Moreover, at the root of this framework is the inculcation and deep understanding of the concept of *adab*. An authentic and Islamically viable BMM must include the emphasis on noble character and concepts of discipline with dignity, *adab*, and Prophetic pedagogy and be designed for a variety of Islamic educational settings.

5. Adoption of a ‘Whole Community’ Approach

One of the issues facing Islamic schools is the ‘split personality’ students adopt, behaving one way at school and another way at home. In some instances, the home environment is not conducive or consistent with the values presented at the Islamic school. According to Memon and Bacchus,

Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, trained his companions in character through his own example; not in any specified training session. He created an environment that was conducive to the improvement and growth of individuals through his own character and examples. He inspired others to be like him—they wanted to hear him because it was so pleasing to them. He created an environment of growth—growth in certainty of Allah. Creating such an environment begins with a willingness to improve ourselves which starts with the top: school board members, school principal, teachers, and parents – before we can ask students to reflect on their own character.⁴⁴

A successful BMM addresses this. Transformation must be community-wide, where discussions, orientation and methodology are shared by students, teachers, and administrators, in addition to board members, parents and student families.

6. Utilisation of Preventive Approaches, including a Character Education Component

Character education is a foundational aspect of authentic and appropriate BMMs for Islamic schools. It is also a sacred duty on the community as a whole. It must, however, begin with the teacher,⁴⁵ thereby bringing together the above requisites for the framework presented in this paper.

Memon and Bacchus have also highlighted the importance of character education. In a paper presented at the ISNA Education Forum in Chicago, 2015, they stated that,

The premise of character education in the Islamic tradition is to nurture an individual's attachment to their Lord. This attachment is exhibited through drawing out our innate nature to be moral human beings who naturally exhibit good character. Character education cannot therefore be reduced solely to programs, posters, and checklists. Students need to see good character around them and have the opportunity to reflect on it consistently. Seeing and reflecting on good character softens the heart and the essential elements that define character in Islam – *tazkiyah* (character refinement) and *taqwa* (God consciousness) – are connected to the heart.⁴⁶

BMMs that expand on opportunities for transformation based on these concepts will align spirituality with character education and academics with deeper sacred knowledge. A comprehensive character education programme will serve as a preventative measure towards misbehaviour. Borrowing again from Mendler and Curwin,⁴⁷ in the context of character education a successful BMM will consider the following:

1. Do the methods used preserve dignity or cause humiliation?
2. Are they primarily obedience-oriented or do they teach responsibility?
3. How do they affect a student's motivation to learn?
4. Do they lead to a commitment to change?
5. Do they work?

7. Utilise Interventionist Approaches that Maintain Dignity and Look for Mutually Transformative Experiences

The Prophet (peace be upon him) advised his companions to take the high road based on his example. Teachers should respond to offensive and/or inappropriate behaviour in a way that honours this Prophetic model. This will show students that the teacher is competent enough to respond to the issues at hand. Consistently sending a student to the office to let the principal respond to the issue, or

responding in such a way that diminishes the teacher's dignity, indicates to students that the teacher is either unwilling or unable to be a part of the solution. But, and as Mendler and Curwin have stated, every time an educator successfully defuses inappropriate student behaviour in a dignified and competent manner, he or she will also succeed in modelling effective behaviour techniques to students. In this era of impulsive, aggressive and "have-the-last-word" behaviour, teachers play a vital role in modelling the best response for students. "Good teachers intuitively know that attacking students even in a momentary lapse of weakness takes something away from themselves" and negatively impacts upon their own dignified status.⁴⁸

Teaching within the framework of an authentic BMM model results in a *mutually transformative experience*.⁴⁹ This transformation is not limited to within the Islamic school's walls; the goal is to include everyone within the community.

Conclusion

Behaviour management is an important component within any school, including Islamic schools. But while substantial studies have been undertaken to examine behaviour management approaches in other types of schools, Islamic schools have been neglected. This paper has aimed to produce a framework that can inform the development of an authentically Islamic (i.e. in tune with Islamic principles and Prophetic practices) behaviour management model (BMM) for Islamic schools. Based on a synthesis of research within the field of Islamic education, the paper has offered seven requisites as a platform for the framework: 1) alignment with an Islamic pedagogy; 2) informed by an Islamic worldview; 3) an unrelenting and central focus on *adab*; 4) a teacher-modelled and student-directed approach; 5) adoption of a 'whole community' approach; 6) utilisation of preventative approaches, including a character education component; and 7) interventionist approaches that maintain dignity and look for mutually transformative experiences.

We suggest that the framework should inform the creation of an authentically Islamic BMM for application in both Islamic schools and *madrasahs*. Such a model is currently being piloted at the Amanah Institute, a *madrasah* in Brisbane, Australia. Following this pilot, the framework will be tested more broadly in Islamic schools in Australia, America and the UK. It is hoped that this will provide much needed empirical evidence concerning the effectiveness of the BMM, given it is an essential ingredient to achieving the 'Islamic' in an Islamic school.

Notes

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