

Cross-Cultural Effects on Personality Development

The challenges of raising children and Muslims in a non-Muslim environment is a challenge that needs a unified effort from parents, educators, community, and the society at large. Muslim immigrants have moved to the United States for a better and prosperous life and like many other immigrants, they are striving hard to establish their families on sound economical grounds in the hope of providing a strong foundation for their future generations.

In the quest of providing a strong financial status Muslim parents are neglecting an essential aspect of investment, that of rearing their children in the light of Islam. The idea that as long as the young ones are taught the reading of the Quran, either at home or through Sunday schools, the Muslim identity will be well established is a myth. The responsibilities of parents are not fulfilled until their young ones are nurtured in molded into a true Islamic personality. Personality consists of, but is not limited to character, temperament, adjustment, interests, beliefs, attitudes, culture, habits, etc.

An Islamic personality belongs to an individual who has accepted and lives by the certainty that there is one Allah who is responsible for all of creation and to whom he, the human being, acknowledges his dependence, and accepts His laws as the rules which guide his life. Such an individual has rejected the supposition that there exists nothing but the material world, and submits to the guidance of Allah in a righteous and God-fearing manner. Since personality is largely a result of environment, cross-cultural immersion is a hindrance for the development of a true Islamic personality.

The factors that determine a personality are namely three: **home**, **school**, and **society**. All three institutions are important in the development of a child's personality,

but the focus of this paper is on the effect of cross-cultural immersion in non-Islamic schools. Children spend the majority of their time in schools and what really happens during this time is of little or no concern to parents as the priority lies on academic rather than moral or Islamic education. Moral and religious education is totally lost in almost all public schools and academically schools are not excelling either. Educational reform reports like: *A Nation at Risk* (1983), published by the National Commission on Excellence in Education; *A place Called School* (1984), by John Goodland; and *High School* (1984), by Ernest Boyer; are some of the reports which have opened the eyes of parents to the hard reality of the American education system that we are all so proud of.

Schools have major responsibilities with respect to mental health and personality development, because children spend a major part of their waking hours, perform much of their purposeful activity, obtain a large share of their status, and interact significantly with adults, peers, and the demands of society. Unfortunately, schools are expected to fulfill the role of intellectual development while the moral and religious development has been trusted on other socializing agents such as the home and the church. This separation of religion and academics has resulted in producing inadequate personalities.

Thomas Sowell, in his book, “*Inside American Education*” writes that the school curriculum has been invaded by psychological-conditioning programs which promote an emotionalization and anti-intellectual way of responding to the challenges facing every individual and every society. Worst of all, adds Sowell, it undermines the parent-child relationship and the shared values which make a society possible. As a result schools are “producing students who are morally confused, emotionally alienated, and socially maladjusted.”

Religion and moral courses in schools have been replaced by a variety of courses and programs called values clarification, decision-making, affective education, drug prevention, and sex education. Muslim children are taught about these matters not in the light of the Quran and the Sunnah but through anti-Islamic means of brain-washing and conditioning. For example, sex education does not involve only biological or medical information but is focused towards “re-shaping of attitudes, not only toward sex but also toward parents, towards society, and towards life.”

Values clarification is another anti-Islamic approach where children are taught to focus on the feelings rather than religious or intellectual analysis. Central to this teaching is the questioning of the authority in the child’s life—the parents who are not presented as guides to follow, but as problems to avoid. The concept of right and wrong or heaven and hell is the core concept of Islamic belief and without this concept it is hard to see what “values” really mean. Hence the term values clarification end up leaving Muslim children confused and rebellious. For example, when parents tell their children not to steal or not to have premarital sex, “clarification is neither required nor attempted. Instead, values are downgraded to subjective preferences of individuals or blind traditions...” as children are told that they have the option to choose for themselves what to believe and value as there are no “right” or “wrong” ways.

Another aspect of the education system is the “melting-pot” concept of assimilation which is an attempt to unite the nation and its different ethnic groups. Unfortunately, Muslim children and their parents think that the road to success in this society is not to be different than the rest of the society. In order to be one another the majority of Muslims are gradually getting immersed in cultures contrary to Islam.

Muslim families are not free from dating, pre-marital sex, divorce, abortion, and broken families. Schools are stripping the Muslim children from their Islamic values and morals.

A child who has not been given sufficient knowledge and practice in Islam is in danger in a free society. Islamic personality and character development of Muslim children is at stake as character can be at its best only when “deen” exists. As Martin Luther King Jr. had said, “I have a dream that my children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judging by the color of their skin but by the contents of their character.”

How then can the Muslim community save its future leaders from losing their Muslim identity? The practical solution to this problem is to provide an Islamic environment both at home and at school. The home and school should coordinate their efforts in order to produce a true Islamic personality. According to Arthur Combs, a personality that is truly healthy, adequate, and self-actualizing has the following characteristics:

(a) A positive view of self, (b) identification with others, (c) a rich and available perceptual field.

What then is the solution to the problems of public schools? Full-time or part time Islamic schools is a question that has for long been debatable. Whether it is the full time Islamic school, or evening school or Sunday school is not the real issue. What in reality is the end result of such an education is an issue of great concern. As educator Jacques Barzun once said, “In teaching you cannot see the fruit of a day’s work. It is invisible and remains so, maybe for twenty years.” Thus one cannot judge whether a few hours of memorization of the Quran and hadith would help Muslims produce a strong

generation of Muslims or whether providing an environment and Islamic education at home and at the school would be the solution.

How can we then define Islamic education? It should be one that is based on the model of the Unique Quranic Generation, and one that can help produce a strong Islamic personality.

Model of the Unique Quranic Generation: (Qutb, 1990)

The Unique Quranic Generation is the generation of the Companions of the Prophet (may Allah be pleased with them) as “no other generation of this caliber” can every again be found. According to Qutb, the following were the main reasons for this generation to be unique from other generation to be unique from other future generations:

First, the curriculum for this generation was nothing but the Quran in its **pure** form. “The spring from which the Companions of the Prophet, peace be on him, drank was the Noble Quran; only the Quran, since the hadith of the prophet, peace be on him, and his teachings were an offshoot of this fountainhead.” For example when Aisha, May Allah be pleased with her, was asked about the character of the Prophet, peace be upon him, she answered, “His character was the Quran,” as the Quran was the only mold after which they modeled their lives. In another such example when Umar, may Allah be pleased with him, brought some pages from the Torah, the prophet, peace be on him, expressed his displeasure saying “By Allah, even if Moses had been alive among you today, he would have no recourse except to follow me.”

Second, the method of instruction was not solely for seeking knowledge and enjoyment but the **understanding** that instruction is for **action**. The Quranic generation came to gain the knowledge of the Quran with the “spirit of knowing with the intention of

acting upon it” to become a way of life, a way dedicated to Allah. Quran was not revealed in order to be only a book of knowledge, or a book of literature, or history, but was also imparted in a gradual manner, to be read at intervals and to practice. Thus the knowledge of the Quran became a significant part of their personalities, lives, and character.

Third, the Quranic generation was unique in the sense that as a result of their belief and faith in the Quran as a way of life they **totally got cut off from the jahiliyyah society** to start a new life in the light of Islam. This helped them to become totally absorbed “into the Islamic community under a new leadership,... which was parting of the ways and the starting of a new journey, free from pressures of the values, concepts, and traditions of the jahili society.” The true Islamic values can never enter the hearts when the whole environment, people’s beliefs and ideas, habits and art, rules and laws are non-Islamic.

Fourth, the Quranic generation had a **greater vision in life**. The vision of Islam was the vision of life, reality, and the world. The mission of the prophet and his Companions, peace be upon them all, did not stop at changing themselves but it was more deeper and wider, it was to change the community and the world! Islam was “to penetrate into the veins and arteries of a society and form a concrete organized movement designed to transform it into a vibrant dynamic community.” Islamic knowledge took shape in “living souls, in an active organization, and in a viable community, and... a movement struggling against a jahili environment.”

Finally, Islam was not a national, economic or political movement but was a **dynamic movement built solely on faith**. It was faith not knowledge that provided the

criteria to create values, the authority from this criteria was derived, and a system that prescribed reward and punishment. “Islam never was an abstract theory devoid of practical existence,” but it was the only divine movement that brought out the “noblest human characteristics, developing and using them for the construction of a human community.” It was a unique movement that “comprehends the morals, manners, values, and standards of the society, according to which persons, actions, and events are measured.”

As Muslim parents in a challenging western society, we should strive to raise a generation based on the above model of the Unique Quranic Generation. There is not much time for parents and educators to debate over trivial issues of full-time or part time schools, but to focus on major issues of saving a generation from the prevailing ills of the society, dignity, and integrity, of worth and importance.

Since Islam is a **way of life**, Islamic education becomes meaningful when it is integrated in the school environment rather than being provided at a supplementary level. If parents want what is best for their children, not only in terms of the physical necessities of life, but in terms of the growth and development of the total child; the functioning human being who will one day have to make his or her way in this world; then they need to provide the best Islamic environment possible, both at home and at school. In the words of the famous philosopher and author Kahlil Gibran, parents are the bows from which their children as living arrows are sent forth. Let the living arrows then find the target, so that the mark may be rich, fulfilling and rewarding Islamic life for them and by projection, for all of humanity.

Full time Islamic Schools are the hope to re-program the Islamic values and morals that are gradually and unnoticeably washed away by cross-cultural immersion. Islamic schools can produce what famous psychologists like Maslow and educators like Combs define a self-actualized personality. A personality that is developed accordingly to please Allah and following the example of the Unique Quranic Generation. Such a personality develops within the context of Islam as not merely a religion or a belief system rather as a “deen”, total frame or reference, a complete system and way of life which embraces the entirety of man’s existence.