

Book Review: A Critical Reflection on “Education and Curricular Perspectives in the Qur'an” by Sarah Risha

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ABSTRACT:

Original Paper

This paper provides a critical analysis of Sarah Risha's *Education and Curricular Perspectives in the Qur'an*, highlighting its strengths and areas for improvement. The book offers an insightful exploration of Qur'anic teachings, emphasising their relevance to modern education through an interdisciplinary lens that integrates political, racial, and gender perspectives. Risha's academic expertise and personal familiarity with the Qur'an enhance her discussion, making it a valuable resource for educators and scholars. However, the book lacks a comprehensive definition of “curriculum,” focusing on teaching methods while omitting essential components like learning outcomes and assessment strategies. It also overlooks critical dimensions such as social, economic, legal, and cultural education, missing an opportunity to showcase the Qur'an's holistic educational framework. Additionally, the discussion is limited to explicit curricula, neglecting implicit, null, and extracurricular aspects. Most importantly, the book would benefit from a more critical approach in aligning contemporary sciences with Qur'anic teachings, emphasising the refinement of human knowledge in light of sacred guidance rather than imposing modern concepts onto the Qur'an. This critique underscores the need for future editions to adopt a broader, more inclusive approach, ensuring a nuanced understanding of Qur'anic pedagogy.

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KEYWORDS: Qur’anic Education, Curriculum Theory, Pedagogy, Interdisciplinary Education

1. Introduction

This manuscript provides an overview of Sarah Risha’s book, *Education and Curricular Perspectives in the Qur’an*, accompanied by a critical analysis from a pedagogical perspective. The review aims to highlight the book’s strengths, identify areas for improvement, and offer constructive suggestions for future editions.

Sarah Risha, an accomplished scholar with advanced degrees in education (MA and PhD), brings to this work her academic expertise and her lived experience in an Islamic context. This unique combination of personal familiarity with the Qur’an and professional pedagogical insight makes her particularly well-suited to address the complex interplay between Qur’anic principles and educational theory. Overall, there is a general shortage of interdisciplinary books and research in the field of the Qur’an and education. Therefore, the present book can be regarded as a suitable resource to encourage greater attention from pedagogues to this area.

2. Brief descriptive summary of the book

The book consists of an introduction and 6 chapters and is published by Lexington Books in 142 pages in 2014. Chapter 1 examines historical discourse, highlighting the Qur’an’s emphasis on learning from the past and addressing differing interpretations of its content. Chapter 2 focuses on fostering critical thinking, freedom of choice, and holistic development, integrating social, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions. Chapter 3 analyses the Qur’an’s teaching methodology, including storytelling and vivid descriptions, as implemented by Prophet Mohammad. Chapter 4 outlines the Qur’an’s political curriculum, explaining its gradual approach to social change and the Prophet’s role in delivering it. Chapter 5 addresses race and gender, showing how the Qur’anic curriculum combats racism and promotes gender equality while dispelling misconceptions about women. Chapter 6 traces the evolution of institutionalised education in Islam, from homeschooling to mosques, schools, and universities. The book provides a concise

exploration of the Qur'anic curriculum's principles, blending spiritual, social, and intellectual growth.

3. Critical reflection on the book

This section provides a brief summary of the strengths and improvable areas of the book solely from a pedagogical perspective.

3.1. Strengths of the book from a pedagogical perspective

One of the book's most significant strengths lies in its seamless integration of insider and academic perspectives. Authored by a Muslim scholar, it offers an authentic and nuanced understanding of the Qur'an, drawing from lived experience within the Islamic tradition. This insider perspective allows the author to explore the Qur'an's teachings with a depth and contextual awareness that enriches the discussion, presenting how its principles function in real-world scenarios.

Simultaneously, the book adopts a robust academic lens, as the author is also a trained pedagogist. By applying professional curriculum theory and knowledge, the author critically analyses Qur'anic verses through the framework of modern educational principles. This dual perspective—merging faith-based authenticity with scholarly rigor—enables the author to transcend a purely doctrinal interpretation. Instead, the Qur'an's teachings are illuminated as a comprehensive and sophisticated educational framework, bridging spiritual insights with contemporary pedagogical thought. This aligns with previous studies that emphasise the importance of combining subject-matter expertise with pedagogical knowledge when reviewing a source from an educational perspective (Rajaei et al., 2021; Barari et al., 2017).

The book also excels in its interdisciplinary approach. By addressing education from political, racial, and gender perspectives, the author demonstrates the multifaceted nature of Qur'anic teachings. This aligns with contemporary pedagogical practices, which recognise that education intersects with various disciplines and societal dimensions (Joseph et al., 2024).

The third strength of this book, from a pedagogical perspective, lies in its analysis of some of the teaching methods employed in the Qur'an. For instance, storytelling, a method extensively utilised by the Qur'an over 1,400 years ago, is examined in the book through the lens of curriculum

studies. This method remains highly regarded in modern educational sciences as one of the most effective (Hofman-Bergholm, 2022) and interactive (Hosseini Zarrabi et al., 2021) approaches to teaching and human empowerment, with ongoing exploration of its mechanisms and impact. The examination of such specialised curriculum-related topics within the context of the Qur'an provides valuable insights that could pave the way for further research in the field of curriculum studies and Qur'anic education.

3.2. Improvable areas of the book from a pedagogical perspective

First and foremost, the book lacks a comprehensive definition of the term “curriculum,” which serves as the foundation for any meaningful discussion of educational theory. While Chapter 3 is dedicated to exploring various teaching methods employed by the Qur'an, it overlooks other critical components of curriculum design, such as learning outcomes, content curation, assessment strategies, and feedback mechanisms. A well-rounded discussion of curriculum necessitates an integrated examination of these components, as they collectively shape the educational experience and its effectiveness (Kartali et al., 2023).

The Qur'an, as a timeless source of guidance, contains insights and principles that can inform each of these curriculum components. For instance, learning outcomes could be derived from the Qur'anic emphasis on moral development, intellectual growth, and spiritual enlightenment. Similarly, the Qur'an's structured presentation of themes and repetition of key concepts could inspire content organisation in a curriculum. The text also suggests implicit modes of feedback, such as self-reflection (*muhasabah*) and accountability (*hisab*), which could serve as guiding principles for assessment and evaluation.

By delving deeper into the Qur'an's text, a broader range of curricular insights could be extracted, enriching our understanding of its educational framework. Addressing these overlooked dimensions in the book would not only provide a more holistic view of curriculum from a Qur'anic perspective but also offer practical applications for contemporary educators and curriculum developers. Without this comprehensive approach, the discussion of curriculum remains incomplete, limiting the book's utility as a resource for educators and researchers.

Second, while the book commendably addresses certain educational aspects of the Qur'an, such as political, racial, and gender education, it leaves several other critical dimensions largely unexplored. Key areas like social, economic, legal, health, psychological, and cultural education are notably absent from its scope. These aspects are integral to understanding the holistic educational framework presented in the Qur'an, which is designed to guide individuals and societies in diverse facets of life. While it may not be feasible to cover all these dimensions comprehensively within a single volume, even a cursory acknowledgment of these themes could have enriched the book significantly. Such references would highlight the Qur'an's multifaceted approach to education, underscoring its relevance across a broad spectrum of human concerns.

Moreover, including a brief discussion of these additional dimensions would have created avenues for further exploration, inviting scholars and researchers to delve deeper into these neglected areas. For instance, the Qur'an offers profound insights into social cohesion, economic justice, and psychological well-being, all of which have direct implications for educational practice and curriculum development. Similarly, its emphasis on health, hygiene, and community welfare can inform contemporary approaches to health education. By omitting these perspectives, the book misses an opportunity to present a more comprehensive picture of Qur'anic education. Future editions could benefit from at least introducing these themes, if not analysing them in depth, to better reflect the Qur'an's inclusive and all-encompassing educational philosophy.

Third, when discussing curriculum, it is essential to ground the analysis in a robust theoretical framework and account for various types of curriculum that align with the chosen theory. These types include explicit, implicit, null, and extracurricular curricula, as categorised in studies like Marzooghi (2016) and Rezaei-Zadeh (2014). Each type represents a unique dimension of the learning experience and contributes in complementary ways to the overall educational process. For instance, the explicit curriculum encompasses the formal, stated content and objectives of education, while the implicit curriculum involves the hidden lessons imparted through the culture, environment, and interactions within educational settings. The null curriculum refers to what is deliberately excluded, and extracurricular activities enrich education beyond the confines of the formal syllabus (Ibid). Together, these types form an interconnected framework, much like the pieces of

a jigsaw puzzle, each vital for creating a comprehensive and balanced educational system.

The Qur'an provides profound insights into each of these curriculum types, offering guidance that can shape the explicit content, implicitly influence implicit values, and even suggest what should be excluded or prioritised (the null curriculum). Additionally, Qur'anic teachings could inspire extracurricular activities that promote holistic development, such as fostering spiritual growth, community service, and critical thinking. However, the book predominantly focuses on the explicit curriculum while neglecting the Qur'an's relevance to the other dimensions. This omission risks creating a misunderstanding that the Qur'an has little to say about implicit or null curricula, which is far from accurate. By addressing these overlooked dimensions in future editions, the book could offer a more holistic interpretation of the Qur'an's educational philosophy, demonstrating its relevance to all aspects of curriculum design and implementation.

Fourth, one of the key points to consider when attempting to establish a connection between the Qur'an and contemporary sciences is to ensure that we do not impose modern sciences onto the Qur'an. The Qur'an is a book of guidance for humanity, not a text aimed at addressing human sciences. This does not prevent us from aligning our incomplete human knowledge with the elevated concepts of the Qur'an to discern the true essence of our science. However, we must avoid trying to force every aspect of human knowledge into alignment with the Qur'an.

One of the most important strategies to prevent such imposition is to adopt a critical thinking approach toward our knowledge when engaging in the interaction between the Qur'an and human science. In instances where there is a lack of harmony between our incomplete, limited, and sometimes erroneous knowledge (Collins et al., 1975) and sacred concepts, we should strive to correct and enhance human understanding accordingly. This critical approach toward human knowledge is one that has been less evident in this book.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, addressing the identified gaps in *Education and Curricular Perspectives in the Qur'an* requires a more structured and theory-driven approach. To navigate the complexities of integrating Qur'anic teachings with contemporary educational science, three foundational

theoretical frameworks are indispensable. First, a robust theory for understanding the Qur'an is necessary, one that respects its spiritual, ethical, and pedagogical depth while providing a systematic lens for its analysis. Second, an underlying theory of curriculum studies is essential to ensure a comprehensive grasp of its components, dimensions, and types, thereby enabling a nuanced application of its principles. Finally, a bridging theory is required to harmonise these two domains—linking the timeless wisdom of the Qur'an with the evolving demands and insights of modern education.

The importance of theory lies in its ability to offer a cohesive structure for inquiry, ensuring that analysis is not only systematic but also meaningful (Rezaei-Zadeh, 2023). Without theoretical underpinnings, attempts to address the book's shortcomings or advance the field will remain fragmented and insufficient. A deliberate and interdisciplinary theoretical foundation will provide the clarity and coherence needed to enrich future research and practice in Qur'anic pedagogy.

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