

ISLAMIC SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL LEARNING:

A SUBCATEGORY OF MORALITY.

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### Abstract

The following paper is concerned with what might a model for Islamic Social/Emotional Learning, or SEL, look like. The basis for this exploration bears into view that SEL has been interpreted differently by different cultures and organizations. In the west, there's a plethora of programs to choose from. Some focus on leadership, while others on self-management, some on empathy, and others on self-control, and the list goes on. Three popular programs are summarized in this paper: CASEL, The Leader in Me, and Panorama Education. Even though the programs are credible, their visions noble, and their competencies research-based, they're still not entirely rooted in Islam. The aim of this paper is to start the dialogue on what might an Islamic version of SEL be or look like. It's not the aim of this paper to offer a final model for Islamic schools to adopt, rather, it outlines how Islamic schools might explore and develop their own SEL programs. It appears that many Islamic virtues can be translated into pro-social/emotional behaviors. The question is which ones ought we to pursue? The paper somewhat evolves into a guide for school leaders and administrators; it suggests that school leaders should focus their improvement and leadership efforts on three areas of school work: Skills or competency generation, school climate/culture, and instructional tools or strategies for teachers.

## **Introduction**

In an interview about social-emotional learning, or SEL, David Osher, the Vice President of the American Institute of Research, explains that “The work in the U.S. and Western Europe on social-emotional learning has largely been done by well-intended people that look like me... and I’m someone of Jewish and Caucasian descent” (Brown and Osher 2017). David believes that, even though there’s a set of social-emotional needs that exist across places and cultures, more work has to be done by people of different cultural backgrounds. The need for “culturally relevant” SEL revolves around the reality that people handle challenges and conflicts, and even each other, differently from culture to culture. People in the US, for example, might express resilience differently than people in China. People in France might show politeness differently than people in Afghanistan. And so it goes; for SEL to work, or be done correctly and purposefully, it has to be defined with a culture in mind. David includes that adults have to be “creative” when adapting SEL to diverse cultures (Brown 2017).

The question that Islamic school leaders have to assess is, on the one hand, how do we make our SEL program attend to our cultural values, attitudes, and beliefs? How do we escape what Abdulhamid Abu-Sulayman refers to in his book, *Revitalizing Higher Education in the*

*Muslim World*, as “imitation and duplication of the west,” and develop a model that “takes into consideration the characteristics and values of Islam?” And on the other hand, how do we help students develop and practice these social-emotional skills and competencies? What instructional tools do we rely upon to teach students? And finally, what does being “creative” entail?

It’s the general purpose of education to improve the way people behave, think, and even feel. One is not born to be selfish or selfless, one acquires these traits and skills like one acquires athleticism or musical proficiency (Hunter 1998). Social-emotional skills and behaviors can be taught, and competencies can be developed, observed, and measured (Seemiller 2016). But before one can start teaching, one must decide on what to teach.

### **Popular SEL Programs**

The development of social/emotional competence during childhood years is an important foundation for children’s later success (Yates, Ostrosky, Cheatham, Fetting, Shafer, Santos 2008). The National Academy of Sciences reported that 60% of children enter school with the cognitive skills needed to be successful, but only 40% have the social-emotional skills needed to succeed in school. Research has repeatedly shown that children’s emotional and behavioral adjustment is important for their chances of school success, yet the emphasis on cognitive and academic preparedness often overshadows the importance of children’s social-emotional development (Yates, 2008). But in addition to the academic advantages that come with social-emotional growth, the mere learning of empathy, for example, is an end goal

in itself. A teacher does not allow students to help each other so as to improve their performance alone, she also wants them to build a sense of good-will towards each other. It's a mistake to focus on how SEL can promote academic growth, and ignore how it promotes better human beings altogether. "Social competence itself is a valuable development outcome representing positive social and moral development" (Cheung, Lee 2009).

There are many programs that focus on SEL (too many to summarize), but three programs have come to occupy the limelight so to speak.

CASEL, or Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, is an organization dedicated to advancing the science and practice of school-based social and emotional learning. According to CASEL, social and emotional growth is best done through effective *classroom instructions*, student engagement in positive activities in and out of the classroom, and broad parent and community involvement in program planning, implementation, and evaluation (CASEL Guide for Social and Emotional Learning). CASEL outlines five core competencies for schools to focus on: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Responsible decision making. They also define each competency. Self-Management for instance is "the ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations." (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Guide, 2012).

If an Islamic school were to focus on developing Self-Management, the language, the material, and the content would have a stronger claim if it's culturally relevant, if it attends to our values, if it's rooted in Islam.

The Leader in Me, authored by Stephen R. Covey, is another model that focuses on teaching kids the “7 Habits:” to Be Proactive, to Begin with End in Mind, to Put First Things First, to Think Win-Win, to Seek First to Understand then to be Understood, to Synergize, and to Sharpen the Saw. A.B. Combs Leadership Magnet Elementary School in Raleigh is an example of a school using the Leader in Me model. School leaders were able to extract and focus on competencies like Responsibility, Accountability, Problem Solving, Adaptability, and Team Work. All are translatable to behaviors and thus application (Covey 2008).

Another popular SEL program is Pandora Education. According to Pandora Education, social-emotional learning (SEL) describes the mindsets, skills, attitudes, and feelings that help students succeed in school and career. Some of their competencies include growth mindset, grit, and sense of belonging at school.

Even though the above-mentioned programs are noble and worthy of investment, they are not uniquely Islamic. The task for Islamic schools is for stakeholder groups to come together to answer the following questions: What features should make the social/emotional program of our school unique? How can it be more rooted in Islam? How can the language, the verbs and terms and adjectives be aligned with Islam?

### **Developing a Vision for an Islamic SEL Program**

In their book, *Principal as Curriculum Leader*, Alan Glatthorn and Jerry Jaijall explain how school leaders can go about developing a vision for a school curriculum or program. According to the authors, there are four advantages to schools developing their own program goals: it

creates a unifying focus for the teachers, it gives a clear sense of direction for instructional work, it provides an occasion for professional dialogue, and it creates a common language (Glatthorn and Jailall 2009). For Islamic schools, when trying to unify a people around a goal or a cause, it's all the more meaningful to connect it to Islam.

Glatthorn and Jailall recommend using the following process for developing a home-grown program:

1. Assemble participants and organize them into groups of six. Participants could include parents, students, and educators.
2. Explain the importance of the meeting or vision-making process, and stress its future use in shaping the SEL program for your school.
3. Develop the knowledge base for the group by reviewing elements such as changing society, the characteristics of the community, teaching and learning, among other things.
4. Explain to participants that they should individually complete a philosophical statement that the leader provides. Without group discussions, each person should complete the statement by writing ten adjectives.
5. Each person should write down a statement or two that defines or describes two of the adjectives they chose.
6. The participants share their adjectives with the group while the leader writes down adjectives on the board.
7. Leader raises questions about meaning of words and asks participants to share their definitions.
8. Each person then has three minutes to advocate for one of the adjectives listed on the board. After the advocacy, each member gets to vote for any of the adjectives listed on the board.
9. After voting, the group discusses further the entire list and agree that the adjectives with the largest number of votes are those they support the most.
10. Each group presents its results to the larger group, and the facilitator of the session helps find commonalities.

When choosing a list of competencies or goals to focus on, it would behoove school leaders to focus on quality instead of quantity (Carlin 2017). The old axiom that less is more applies to competency generation. Also, the list of competencies should include global constructs, like compassion, or *Ihsan*, or leadership, from which specific behaviors can be extracted. Indeed, global constructs should be translated into specific behaviors (Carlin 2017).

Once the behaviors have been identified, worded, and agreed upon, the school is ready to start teaching them. At this juncture, creativity and inventiveness is highly needed. In addition to the instructional strategies to be adopted and professionally developed in teachers, school leaders must create the environment – the culture and climate – in which social and emotional growth could thrive. Indeed, the environment is a prerequisite to social-emotional growth (Wood and Loftis 2017).

### **School Culture and Climate.**

Before a school begins with the instructional component of their SEL program, school leaders would benefit from creating a positive social/emotional culture and climate. According to Kyle Carlin, SEL has to be embedded in a school's discipline program. School rules, classroom management, procedures and routines, are all areas in which SEL must be integrated (Carlin 2017). For example, if respect has been identified as a global construct, what daily routines or procedures could incorporate respect? Is it the daily greeting at the door that teaches students respect? Is it the rule of allowing others to speak during group work? Maybe it's the daily ritual whereby a different student opens the door for others. The idea is to develop routines, rules,

and procedures that provides students with opportunities to engage in respectful behaviors. Students are thus training to be respectful every day. They're engaged on the practice end of the construct, and not just the awareness end. Repeated practice, by way of routines and rituals, creates culture.

Rituals and routines are the bedrock of a school culture. If one walks into a school and sees the students worshipping, one would infer that piety or devoutness is part of the school culture. Imagine, for example, if a principal allows students to skip in the hallways, imagine if it was a routine to skip down the hallway as opposed to just walking. Undoubtedly, within a matter of weeks, a culture of fun and play would evolve.

In addition to culture, school leaders must create the ideal climate for students to thrive socially and emotionally. One key strategy towards creating a healthy climate is positive human relationships (Wood 2017). Establishing strong teacher-student relationships, and deliberately building a sense of community, both foster students' feelings of belonging and allows students to feel safe (ASCD 2017). Feelings of belonging and safety are prerequisites to positive social/emotional growth.

School leaders could establish formal structures for positive human to human interaction. This is aligned with the Islamic value called *Mua'mala*. It's often said "Al deen al mua'mala;" that your religion, is but a social transaction. *Mua'mala* thus describes social interactions. It's how people treat one another, how they interact, the social dynamic they create, and the social rituals they practice. If I stand up to greet someone for example, it's a

form of *Mua'mala*. Imagine if there was a formal structure in place for admins and other teachers to visit sick students after they've returned to school from being absent. It would certainly build relationships and foster a climate of care and compassion. School leaders could creatively explore other formal structures that provide opportunities for positive human to human interactions.

One popular structure is morning meeting. Morning meetings help create community and reinforce social skills in a fun and interactive way (Davis 2012). Normally, students gather around in a circle on the floor, and they proceed to greet one another, share with each other, and complete a group activity. Each component of morning meeting can be connected to an Islamic value or skill. When greeting each other for example, students could practice the skill of extending peace to someone. When sharing, they could listen attentively, and be reminded that we only become true believers when we want for our brothers and sisters what we want for ourselves. We want to be heard, and we want others to be heard as well.

### **Instructional Strategies**

In the event that a school generates an SEL vision, with all its individual competencies and goals, and develops also the means to generate a healthy social-emotional environment and culture in which the competencies could flourish, the school is ready to assess the instructional program or component. Firstly, it would serve educational leaders well to remember that, ultimately, the purpose of an SEL program is to develop in its recipients a sense of social and emotional uprightness. Plato is famous for defining morality as "the willingness to

do good and the ability to do good well.” Prophet Mohammad SA also included, in one of his authentic hadiths (narrated by bukhari), “What is most likely to send people to paradise? God-consciousness and good conduct or mannerisms.” The emphasis on mannerism in Islam is an emphasis on good social habits, and good emotional practices, ones that do not create trouble for one’s self and others.

It would also serve educators well to review the difference between Learning for Recall and Learning for Transfer. Learning for Recall is knowing and memorizing the knowledge. Learning for Transfer means students are able to apply the skills and knowledge they developed during learning to different contexts. Everything we do requires not just knowing knowledge, but using it. In a sense, teaching for transfer is a general goal in education. The goal in SEL is the same, it’s to move beyond Learning for Recall and pursue a model that focuses on Learning for Transfer, whereby students are practicing the skills on a daily basis.

Learning for Transfer is also aligned with an Islamic Tradition. Ibn al-Qayyim – rahimahullaah – said: “There are six stages to knowledge: Firstly, asking questions in a good manner. Secondly, remaining quiet and listening attentively. Thirdly, understanding well. Fourthly, Memorizing. Fifthly, teaching the material. And sixthly: and it is the fruit: acting upon the knowledge and keeping to its limits.” Acting upon the knowledge is applying the skills one developed during learning. This dichotomy between learning and applying has been described in many ways: *l’lm* and *A’mal*, awareness and ability, *tarbiyah* and *ta’leem*, and finally declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge.

Many Islamic schools focus on monthly themes, like respect for example, which is a pro-social competency. But to talk about one trait or another, include a story, or incorporate an activity, only teaches students on the level of awareness, or Learning for Recall. In order to teach students for transfer, school leaders could borrow from several instructional models that build up procedural knowledge, or, in other words, allows students to transfer the knowledge and apply it to different contexts. Three models that have been used to gain procedural knowledge are Inquiry-Based or Project-Based Learning, Interactive Modeling, and Cooperative Learning.

Project-based learning is, in itself, a whole approach to education. But one of its components, namely how it incorporates 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, could be leveraged to teach other skills, i.e. social-emotional skills. When students work on projects in teams, it's best practice for teachers to communicate all their expectations, and to include rubrics and checklists for students to keep track of what their being evaluated for (Hallermann and Larmer 2011). Indeed, rubrics could be created to evaluate students for social-emotional skills.

When teaching the intended social-emotional skills, there are two things that teachers have to think about and invent or arrange for. One, what opportunities will be provided to students to demonstrate and practice the skill, and two, how will you assess that skill.

Take for example the ability to disagree politely with others, or as the Prophet (SA) advised Aisha (RA), to be gentle with others, and avoid aggression. The following format could be used to observe and evaluate gentleness in students.

Social-Emotional Skill	Opportunities for students to demonstrate skill	How to assess skill?
Gentleness with others.	Periodic meetings or instances to give each other feedback without negative words and comments.	Use rubric to assess for kind words and absence of impoliteness.

When thinking about the opportunities, a teacher must think about the skill. For example, in their book, *PBL in The Elementary Grades: Step-by-Step Guidance, Tools and Tips for Standards-Focused K-5 Projects*, the authors provide a list of opportunities to teach critical thinking (a skill). One example to allow students to demonstrate critical thinking is that students get “to explain the quality of various solutions to a problem before deciding on one” (Hallermann 2011). Teachers evaluate that ability or skill by simple observing it and recording the times it was observed.

Once Islamic schools translate their competencies into behaviors, then they’ll be more able to embed skills into project-based learning experiences, invent opportunities, and evaluate students for attainment.

Another Instructional strategy is Interactive Modeling. In his book, *The Art and Science of Teaching*, Robert J. Marzano explains that the best way to introduce procedural knowledge is to provide students with a “clear model of the procedure, and a chance or two for students to try it themselves (Marzano, pg. 80). Interactive Modeling is a Responsive Classroom,

straightforward, seven-step process used to teach children skills, strategies, or procedures that you want them to do in a specific way. The following is a summary of the steps:

- 1- Briefly state what you will model, and why.
- 2- Model the behavior exactly as you expect students to do it. (Don't narrate unless you need to "show" an internal thinking process.)
- 3- Ask students what they noticed. Prompt them to notice essential details.
- 4- Invite one or more students to model the same way you did.
- 5- Again, ask students what they noticed.
- 6- Have all students practice.
- 7- Provide feedback.

In an Islamic school setting, Interactive Modeling can be used to teach Salah or Wudu', but it could also be used to show students what saying salaams sounds like, what inviting others looks like, what it looks like to help the poor, to respect your parents, to be gentle with others, or to be forgiving in one situation, and assertive in another. If a school decides on what it wants to teach, then it could use Interactive Modeling to teach it.

A last, but certainly not final instructional approach is Cooperative Learning. If a school leader understands the significance and efficiency of Cooperative Learning towards teaching social skills, then he or she will leverage it to teach their desired social-emotional competencies.

### **Conclusion**

Societies all over the world are grappling with a variety of problems and issues. Many are trying to find solutions to their problems; many are scrambling to address the needs of their

people. It's important to acknowledge that societal problems, even environmental and political ones, are products of human behavior. Indeed, there's a connection between human crises and the way people behave, produce, and interact. But when considering this connection between problems and human behaviors/interactions, educators might as well consider how schools could reverse or at least help slow down the worsening of things. Islamic Schools could develop programs that teach more constructive behaviors, inhibit destructive or problem-producing interactions, and contribute to a more conscientious population. The question is which ones? Not just which behaviors does society need, but which behaviors do Muslim Communities need? Which behaviors merit the focus of Islamic Schools? And what kind of social/emotional program could Muslim children benefit from? School leaders ought to play a pivotal role in answering these questions, and focusing on improving three areas of school work: identifying skills or competencies, cultivating a positive school climate/culture, and training teachers on certain instructional strategies.

It's important to remember that schools are the organizations most obliged to correct world issues, to populate the world with people who are more willing to do good than harm, more willing to build than to destroy, and more willing to love than to hate. SEL is a vehicle towards more positive mindsets, attitudes, and pro-social skills. When considering the definition of *Khalifa*, someone that takes care of the earth, we might as well consider that a *Khalifa* is a well-rounded person, who's socially and emotionally adept. Islamic school leaders ought to play a role in moving their schools beyond academics, Islamic Studies, and character,

to pursue a more purposeful program towards social and emotional growth. Indeed, that's one way of moving from good to great.

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