



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Promoting the values of peace and tolerance within an international climate of turbulence and instability is an essential responsibility for governments and schools. Threats to tolerance include the circumstances of societal challenges, instabilities in the region, and the increasing risks of social media. Ways to nurture and instill tolerance through the subject of Islamic education in UAE high schools is a key concern. Through a case study of the written, taught, and learnt curriculum of UAE Islamic education, this paper investigates the teaching and learning of tolerance in UAE high schools. It provides recommendations on how Islamic education classes, built on an awareness of the Islamic value of tolerance as a foundational component, can be utilized for shaping educational experiences that promote open mindedness. Curriculum-aligned Islamic education resources need to be further developed and teacher professional learning programs should be launched to empower teachers to achieve this intended aim.

Tolerance in the UAE Islamic Education Curriculum

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Introduction

The literal meaning of tolerance in Arabic (*Tasāmuḥ*) refers to generosity, ease, and vastness (Ibn Manzur, 2003). Tolerance as culture has acted as the heart of Shaikh Zayed's philosophy for life and governance (Al Suwaidi, 2019), and has been established in the UAE as a key pillar since its foundation. Recent national initiatives aim at institutionalizing this legacy of tolerance during the present and ensuring its contribution to the sustainable social cohesion and peaceful coexistence in the future. The promotion of tolerance in the UAE extends beyond social and political discourse to include the educational spheres. For example, the Grade 10 Islamic education textbook in UAE high schools emphasizes that 'tolerance is one of the fundamental principles that [the Quran] relied on in conveying its message to people' (MoE, 2017, p. 213). Thus, recent reforms to the Islamic education program in the UAE have placed emphasis on the themes of tolerance, mutual respect, and acceptance of the other. This is of utmost priority as education is considered the most effective means of preventing intolerance (Declaration of Principles on Tolerance, 1995).

In the context of globalization, GCC nations have become increasingly multicultural societies. The UAE is a nation composed of more than 200 nationalities with various religious and ethnic communities (Chaudhry, 2016). In light of these realities, the values of tolerance, mutual respect, and acceptance are essential for fostering a cohesive and peaceful society. The UAE political leadership has sent a strong message of emphasizing tolerance through its highest support and commitment. Referencing the position of middleness (moderation) in religion, the UAE government documents commonly precede the terms 'Islam', 'Islamic education', or 'Islamic values' with 'moderate' in order to distinguish a national perspective on Islamic education and values (Bakali et al, 2018). A number of initiatives were launched in the UAE to promote the notion of tolerance at a national level. A Minister of State for Tolerance was appointed in 2016, and 2019 was declared as the year of tolerance (MyBayut, 2019). In July 2015, H. H. Sheikh Khalifa issued Federal Decree Law No. 2 of 2015 on Combating Discrimination and Hatred. The law aims at protecting everyone in the UAE and provides a solid legislative grounding for the environment of tolerance, coexistence, and acceptance (UAE Government, 2019).

Islamic education, along with the teachings of Abrahamic and other religions and human philosophies, all act as powerful countermeasures to violent religious extremism through their basic teachings on peace, coexistence, the universality of human dignity, and the respect for religious differences (Bin Bayyah, 2019). However, a proper understanding of religion is critical to nurturing and instilling tolerance. Bin Bayyah (2019) argues that "religion is like energy; it can bring prosperity and stability, but it can also bring about ruin and destruction. Religion is in essence an energy of peace, love, and harmony. But the industry of religion can turn from mercy to resentment" (n.p).

This paper provides unique insights into the Islamic education curriculum in the UAE while contributing to the emerging field of education for tolerance and tolerance in Islamic education in the region and beyond. A brief discussion of the context and background of the study is followed by a description of the research methodology. The paper presents a synthesis of the findings and concludes with recommendations which will be aimed at facilitating the development of curricular resources and pedagogical practices of Islamic educational programs in the UAE and its promotion of the values of tolerance.

Context

The importance of religious education in promoting tolerance has been investigated widely. Numerous schools and programs worldwide have been dedicated to the spreading of tolerance and coexistence (Nasser & Ouboulahcen, 2016; Akseer & Kavinthan, 2017; Rashed, 2015). The Preamble to the Constitution of UNESCO declares that "since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed" (UNESCO, 1995). Hundreds of schools and programs worldwide have been established to promote the spreading of tolerance and co-existence. One such initiative that claims achievement of these objectives are Imam-Hatip schools in Turkey (Aslamaci & Kaymakcan, 2017). Schools in Singapore have also attempted to promote religious harmony by actively promoting the values of peace and tolerance in their Civics and Moral Education curricula (Tan, 2008). Furthermore, the themes of religious tolerance have been investigated in Islamic education high schools in Indonesia (Wekke, Mokodenseho, & Firdaus, 2017) with the intent of understanding how peace education was conceptualized in these schools (Taufik 2016). However, a gap in the literature exists with regards to how Islamic Education curricula in the UAE can be employed to promote tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Reinforcing the values of peace and tolerance

in a climate of turbulence is an essential responsibility for governments and schools. Some have argued that certain Islamic education institutions in Muslim majority nations around the world have promoted values contradictory to peace education (Elbih, 2012; Etzioni, 2005).

Instilling the values of peace and tolerance is considered a national goal of the UAE (UAE Vision 2020). Promoting such values are the means for nurturing open-minded citizens as well as for preventing and countering violent extremism (P-CVE) (GCTF, 2014). The Ministry of Education has reviewed the Islamic education curriculum to ensure their promotion of peace and tolerance values. The Ministry of Education has also launched multiple projects, such as the promotion of tolerance between public and private schools, a project that was developed and implemented in cooperation with the Ministry of Tolerance (Ministry of Education, 2018).

Research Methodology

This research was conducted in three-phases: (1) qualitative content analysis of grades 10-12 Arabic and English Islamic Education textbooks; (2) classroom observations of senior secondary Islamic education teachers; and (3) analysis of teacher participant interviews.

A textual analysis of the Islamic education textbooks was utilized through directed qualitative content analysis¹ (Potter and Levine-Donnerstein, 1999; Mayring, 2000; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). The process of textual analysis took place through five steps: tolerance category development derived from a review of the literature; testing our coding system for accuracy; the coding of the textbooks; doing a consistency check of our coded data; and finally an analysis of our coded data. This process enabled us to derive verifiable thematic content on topics related to tolerance from the textbooks to better understand how tolerance is understood, framed, and conceptualized through the Islamic education curriculum at the secondary level.

In phase two, classroom observations of teachers teaching the Islamic education curriculum at the secondary level were conducted. This phase involved recruiting 20 teacher participants from the emirates of Abu Dhabi and Ras Al Khaimah. The research team observed both Arabic and English Islamic education classes. This phase of the research study provided a basis for understanding how/if teachers addressed the themes of tolerance, mutual respect, and acceptance in their classrooms and how students reacted to and interpreted these themes as concepts within their Islamic education instruction.

Teacher interviews constituted the final phase of the study. The process involved in-depth interviews with the

¹ Qualitative content analysis aims at identifying reoccurring categories and themes and their properties. This approach doesn't contain statistical figures and counts and focuses instead on understanding the complexities of the patterns that emerge from the exploration process.

20 participants who were previously recruited in phase two. Interviews were semi-structured, posing open-ended questions relating to: (1) the Islamic education curriculum content; (2) their teaching experiences with the curriculum; and (3) how, if at all, the themes and values of tolerance, mutual respect, and acceptance manifest in the curriculum at the secondary level and students' reaction towards them. Furthermore, we also questioned teachers regarding observations that were made by the research team throughout phase two for clarifications and to glean further insights regarding the link between how Islamic education is conceptualized in the curricula and how it is taught by teachers.

Findings

Textbook Analysis

In our analysis of Islamic education textbooks, we found that there were dedicated lessons on the concept of tolerance in both volumes of the Grade 10 textbooks. These textbooks rooted the concept in authentic Islamic discourse. In volume one of the Grade 10 textbook, 'tolerance' was discussed through the Prophetic model, historic examples, respect for the 'other', forgiveness, and the importance of tolerance in our lives. The second volume of the Grade 10 textbook included an entire chapter devoted to the theme of 'tolerance'. The four main components of tolerance, as conceptualized in these texts were: mercy towards others, forgiveness of people's transgressions, kind dialogue in disagreement, and doing good to others. Furthermore, the concept of tolerance in these texts implied a rejection of violence as a means for resolving disputes. The texts also discussed tolerance in terms of acceptance of differences from normative Sunni Muslim practice, and not compelling others to act in accordance with one's will. Moreover, tolerance in this chapter implied promoting justice and equity for all people. In addition to explicit discussions of the value of tolerance in the textbooks, various other chapters in the Grades 10–12 textbooks touched on related themes such as civic engagement, respect for diversity, justice and equity, compassion for humans, conflict resolution, as well as the lack of tolerance and its connection to extremism and extremist ideology. In discussions of extremism and extremist ideology, the textbooks did not delve into the complexities of the issue. Extremist views can be violent or non-violent; however, there was no differentiation in the textbook between the two types. Furthermore, there was a tendency in the textbooks to directly link intolerance to extremism. The textbooks did not discuss the different levels of intolerance and how intolerance leading to extremism was generally an exceptional situation rather than a normative reaction.

² Weak tolerance is tantamount to suffering or suspending one's negative responses towards actions and beliefs that they find disagreeable.

Findings from Classroom Observations and Teacher Interviews

In our examination of Arabic and English Islamic education classroom observations and teacher interviews it was clear that the value of tolerance was promoted in several ways. Both teachers of the Arabic and English curricula created spaces in their classrooms where students were able to discuss issues of diverse opinions within Islamic theology and jurisprudence, learn about the different sects within Islam, as well as respect for other religious traditions. Through our analysis of teacher classroom observations, it was apparent that there was a typology of tolerance that emerges in comparison between the Arabic and English Islamic education classes. In Arabic Islamic education classrooms, it appeared that weak tolerance² (King, 1976) was more exercised. This manifested in the type of disagreements or questions raised by students with their teachers. Typically, in the Arabic Islamic education classes, students raised questions or concerns about juridical issues in Islam, issues related to women's dress, or prohibitions within Islam. The frame of reference for these students was formulated around a 'Muslim' world view. The teachers in the Arabic Islamic education classes created a safe space where students were free to raise any questions. However, the questions posed by these students were not as radical as the questions posed within the English Islamic education classes, some of which probed foundational truth claims in Islam such as beliefs about God's attributes within the Islamic tradition. Arguably, teachers of Arabic Islamic education classes were not required to engage in stronger levels of tolerance, as the student populations in these classes were less diverse. Conversely, English Islamic education teachers were working in spaces where strong tolerance (King, 1976) was required, as the student body in their schools were far more diverse with students coming from various religious backgrounds and cultures. Furthermore, the Muslim students within these schools had heterogeneous backgrounds with regards to religiosity of parents, faith tradition of parents, and cultural beliefs and practices. As such, the types of questions that were posed by students were more related to foundational issues of practice and theology.

Arabic Islamic education classes and teachers placed higher emphasis on the notion of citizenship. A possible explanation for this could be that most of the Arabic Islamic education classes we observed were public schools, which are composed primarily of Emirati students. Arabic Islamic education teachers perceived the notion of citizenship as a deterrent to extremist views, as they felt that the way citizenship was promoted in the Islamic education curricula demonstrated how the UAE was a tolerant nation at its very essence. Hence, an underlying assumption held by Arabic Islamic education teachers was

that the promotion of tolerance underlined by belonging and citizenship curbed extremist views. However, this assumption did not necessarily take into consideration the complexities of radicalization and extremism as a multifaceted process impacted by class, politics, and other social factors. Rather, they held the simplistic view that extremism sprung from being intolerant towards the 'Other'. The English Islamic education teachers' interviews and classroom observations did not demonstrate a similar linking of themes or association between the notion of citizenship and tolerance as a possible deterrent to extremist views.

The theme of tolerance was clearly an important value for students in both Arabic and English classes, as was observed in classroom visits. However, tolerance for the most part was addressed in a superficial manner in classroom discussions. In classroom observations, students discussed how tolerance was an important aspect of daily life in the UAE. However, discussions about the challenges that tolerance may pose in a diverse society, and if it was implemented in meaningful ways, were absent. Teacher interviews affirmed this to some extent. Most teachers felt that Islamic education teachers needed more professional development and resources to be able to address this important topic in a holistic, meaningful way that went beyond the curriculum. Therefore, the intersection of school culture, school curriculum, and student population act as indicators of the emphasis on pedagogies of tolerance in UAE senior secondary Islamic education classes.

Recommendations

Instilling moderate and genuine Islamic values and equipping students with accurate Islamic knowledge inevitably leads to embodying the attitudes of tolerance and peace. Students' acquisition of a moderate understanding of Islam contributes to instilling tolerance. Vergani et al. (2018) have found that "knowledge of Islam and religiosity are often negatively associated with radicalization" (p. 10). A report by Davies (2018) reaches a similar conclusion and includes the international educational initiatives in counter extremism that effectively work. Davies (2018) argues that ideological interventions that teach traditional versions of Islam and that provide a sound theological framework have the potential to prevent violent religious extremism. A similar finding was concluded by Shakeel and Wolf (2017) who studied the educational backgrounds of Western educated terrorists. They have indicated that the vast majority of Islamic and reactionary terrorists attended traditional public schools and had no religious education. In light of these findings, defining the body of knowledge in terms of genuine Islamic values that the students need to acquire is critical through an investigation of the learned curriculum.

Based on our analysis of the findings, we propose a tolerance education taxonomy that is organized under three categories: teaching about tolerance, teaching for

tolerance, and teaching through a pedagogy of tolerance. *Teaching about tolerance* refers to the dedicated topics that represent the theme of tolerance. *Teaching for tolerance* refers to the topics that are related to tolerance and support nurturing tolerance amongst students. *Teaching through a pedagogy of tolerance* refers to the pedagogical approaches that foster tolerance.

The recommendations are framed around the three themes defined in the findings section: *education about tolerance*, *education for tolerance*, and *education through tolerance*.

Education about Tolerance:

Teaching students not only about tolerance but the ways to embody and exhibit this attribute is a necessity. Strategic and systematic efforts are required to ensure that instilling the values of tolerance is an institutionalized endeavor across UAE schools and is reflected in the written, taught, and learnt curriculum. This starts with student attitudes toward the 'other' who differs in opinion and extends to tolerant coexistence in society at large. Within this scope, the culture of tolerance needs to be adopted by the school through a serious commitment by the school leadership. Tolerance instruction through curricular and extra-curricular activities should also be part of the curriculum. For such a program to succeed, schools will need to invest in a variety of resources that support teaching about tolerance, including appropriate literature, multimedia, and role-play scenarios.

In the case of Islamic education, the Ministry of Education should issue a document that specifies how Islam fosters tolerance and also defines a framework for teaching tolerance through Islamic education. This document would form the basis for developing curriculum materials as well as other support materials, such as enriching resources that include educational technologies and teacher professional learning programs. Additionally, it is important to review the Islamic education textbooks based on such a framework in cooperation with specialized organizations, such as the General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments, to ensure the alignment of the tolerance underpinning concepts vertically (across the different grade levels) and horizontally (in the different subject areas in each grade level) based on an appropriate sequence. Teachers will need to be empowered with the knowledge and skills that will enable them to recognize and deal with the roots of violence and extremism effectively.

Education for Tolerance:

The Islamic education curriculum considers protecting students from extremism as one of its main objectives (G10, P1, p. 7). For the textbooks to effectively achieve this goal, they need to discuss the theme of tolerance in a way that addresses the local push and pull factors leading to radicalization (Elsayed, Faris, and Zeiger, 2017). For example, internet and social media (e.g. Facebook and Twitter) are the main platforms that are employed for

radicalization and recruitment of the youth by extremist groups (Elsayed et al. 2017). However, we have found that these platforms and the student code of conduct in the cyberspace were not discussed in the written and taught curriculum and hence need to be incorporated. The curriculum needs to include lessons that teach students how to transfer the Islamic values and practices to the field of digital citizenship.

Education through a Pedagogy of Tolerance:

Tolerance can become alive in the classrooms, schools, and eventually in the society when teaching and learning practices demonstrate this attitude. This will require a comprehensive professional learning program along with establishing professional learning communities that inquire into manifesting the pedagogies of tolerance in the Islamic education classrooms. Such a program would immerse teachers in active learning experiences, appreciating differences, addressing sensitive issues, and facilitating open discussions. This should be done through a hands-on setting that empowers teachers to transfer these experiences to their Islamic education classrooms. Approaches of teaching need to transcend the literal and the superficial level to incorporate rational higher order thinking skills, ethical reasoning, and logic in a way that is aligned with the *Maqasid* (the higher objectives of *Sharia*)³. References to authoritative texts and to authentic resources are essential in order to accustom students to valid and reliable methods of seeking religious knowledge. Additionally, teachers in their classes need to recognize differences and accept a variety of views within the Islamic tradition⁴ which enriches students, generates wisdom, and leads to conciliation in heterogeneous societies.

In conclusion, promising opportunities exist for the UAE Islamic education curriculum to develop further and to deliver its intended outcomes. Furthermore, the curriculum is explicit in its dedicated and committed effort to nurturing and instilling tolerance through Islamic education. Thus, the UAE Islamic education curriculum is unique and worthy of investigation and evaluation as a case from which other international educational entities can learn.

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³ Maqasid al-Shariah or 'the higher objectives of law' is a system of higher objectives that was developed by Muslim scholars and indicates the purpose and principles behind its rulings. The Maqasid include the following objectives: the preservation of the self, the preservation of reason, the preservation of religion, the preservation of property, and the preservation of lineage.

⁴ The Islamic tradition refers to the canonical texts that all Muslims adhere to, the Qur'an and the Prophetic tradition (Hadith), and to the recognized expansive literature both classical and contemporary of interpretation and analysis of these canonical texts.

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