

## Reflections on Teachers and Teaching: A Historical Perspective

**Imran Mogra**

*Birmingham City University,*

*Birmingham, England.*

*imran.mogra@bcu.ac.uk*

### ABSTRACT

In the fast changing world of education, the quest of producing well-rounded Muslim individuals continues unabated. In this context, this article briefly surveys and, thus identifies some educational ideas prevalent during the period around 632 – 1150 C.E. It shows a broader understanding of the concept of teachers and teaching. Some of the activities in the educational process such as teacher autonomy, nature of curriculum and pedagogy, and the type of learning environment and student relationships, reveal some ingredients for realising the aims of Muslim education.

**Keywords:** teachers, teaching, Muslim, history.

### INTRODUCTION

Muhammad (ﷺ) was an educator and, therefore, a promoter of teaching and learning. His declarations about his status as a teacher, the theological foundations which emphasised knowledge and learning, and the actions he undertook to eliminate widespread illiteracy from his immediate community, and in distant cities, are evident in the books of his *Sirah* and *hadith* literature (Al-Qazwini, 1993). His contributions in the field of teaching, with specific reference to his pronouncements regarding the significance of teaching, and the practical measures he adopted to promote and train teachers, demonstrates that one of the most significant activities in any community is the continued provision of teachers. Based on the evidence, mainly drawn from the primary sources of Islam, it is therefore, argued that teaching should be reconceptualised and be considered a practice (*sunnah*) of Muhammad (Mogra, 2010).

However, for a fuller understanding about teachers and teaching, it would be insufficient to limit the understanding of teachers and teaching to the period of Muhammad and his Companions only. This is because Muslims, thereafter, had reached a much wider geographical area, interacted with various cultures and civilisations and lived under different political and socio-economic conditions. Therefore, this article surveys a historical era to show how the concept of the teacher and teaching in Muslim societies had evolved and diversified.

A brief descriptive historical analysis of the development of the concept of the teacher and teaching in Muslim societies following Muhammad to cover the period around (632 – 1150 C.E.) is relevant so that the flexible nature of the concept of a teacher and teaching becomes manifest. In part, this article will allow educators to gain a deeper awareness of the Islamic intellectual heritage. Having said this, a complete survey is beyond the scope and purpose of this article and, therefore, only selected salient features, to demonstrate some of the various meanings attached to this concept and the range of terms that evolved to reflect their diverse roles and other key activities are considered. Essentially, the primary role of the teacher remained the same: to impart holistic knowledge, to be a model personifying *adab*. However, as educational institutions became formalised, several features were also formalised to enhance their role, organisation, and recognise their status and to celebrate their contributions.

The aim of Muslim education is to produce a good person. In such a conceptualisation of education, the inculcation of *adab* which consists of spiritual and material well-being is an essential component. Al-Attas (1979) contends that it is *adab* that instils the quality of goodness that Islamic education seeks. Therefore, Muslim education is multifaceted involving all aspects of learning: intellectual, religious, physical, moral, social and personal.

## AFTER MUHAMMAD (ﷺ)

After Muhammad, his deputies followed in his steps in popularising teaching and learning. By this time, Islam had been accepted beyond the Arabian Peninsula; hence, a more organised approach was warranted. Azami (1992) has noted that ‘Umar (d. 644 C.E.), entrusted his governors with the responsibility of teaching the Qur’ān and *Sunnah*; and, to ensure a wide spread of teaching, he dispatched teachers for this purpose in large numbers.

Muhammad had assigned and dispatched teachers (Al-Qazwini, 1993). However, ‘Umar, cognisant of the changing situations and conditions, began to focus on other matters as well, in the absence of the prophetic-teacher. He sent inspector-teachers to various areas to determine and assess the extent of education (Azami, 1992). In fact, teaching, as before, was not restricted to the Qur’ān only, now qualified persons taught jurisprudence as well. Further, he stressed archery, swimming and horse riding as part of the widening curriculum.

Moreover, Hanifi (1964) provides additional details about the policy enacted by ‘Umar. In the year 17 A.H. (627 C.E.), for public education, he appointed learned men to lecture in the mosques of Kufa, Basra and Damascus and other regions. Furthermore, attending lectures on Fridays meant that large numbers could hear official announcements and discourses for their personal betterment. Consequently, as before, mosques continued to be places for worship, education and venues to receive weekly guidance and admonitions and were places to share and update knowledge and get individual queries answered. It should also be noted that mass education was also achieved through storytellers and preachers.

Upholding the dignity of knowledge and of the teaching profession was a duty fulfilled by teachers and, as such, their behaviour was expected to be reserved and distinguished in public. The teachers’ status and prestige was measured by the size of the assembly that gathered and by the number of distinguished scholars who attended their circles (Alavi, 1988). To this, other factors may be added such as the geographical location, the level at which the teacher taught and the popularity of texts. Consequently, such influential positions would not go unnoticed by rulers. Hence, some teachers were often appointed as ambassadors and ministers because of their eloquence, scholarship, and influence. Others, on the other hand, were monitored as they were seen as a threat to the political establishment. Still, there were others as advisors and counsellors to leaders (Asma, 2013).

Indeed, there were some whose character were untainted and their integrity unshakable. It is due to such reasons that they commanded universal respect and confidence, though their emoluments were small. The spiritual force of their character could not be doubted and the efficiency of their teaching was never called in question (Alavi, 1988). One of the ways through which such dignity was maintained for teachers was through the impressions created by modelling. In addition, students were provided with detailed instructions about the attitudes, behaviours and customs in relation to their teachers - a custom which prevails in many of the contemporary

Muslim traditional higher learning centres around the world (Al-Zarnuji, 2000). Nevertheless, there were other intrinsic motives too. Muslim teachers were shown such respect because they followed in the footsteps of the ideal teacher - Muhammad (Saqeb, 1996). A further observation is that scholars are inheritors of Messengers and, hence, the respect that is to be afforded to them is obvious. Therefore, such respect was extended to teachers.

### Typology of teachers

As time progressed, the role of teachers diversified due to the evolution of various subjects, societal demands, and introduction of formalities for administration. There were teachers, called *mu'allim* and/or *ustādh* who mainly taught the Qur'ān to children in the elementary school (*maktab*). Overall, such teachers were held in good esteem. However, in some sections, socially, the *mu'allim* was not as laudable as could be (Shalaby, 1954). The second type of teachers may be termed as tutors, *mu'addib*, who engaged in teaching children of the higher strata as well as those of princes and caliphs. This class of teachers was perceived to be superior to the former. Finally, there were *mudarris*, teachers of higher learning and professors of advanced scholarship at *madāris*. These were specialists in the teaching of logic, mathematics, rhetoric and jurisprudence as a result the public held these academics in high respect (Hanifi, 1964). A *Shaykh* was a master teacher, the title indicating academic, spiritual, or theological excellence. An *Imām* was the supreme religious teacher. Whilst this typology is useful in conceiving the nature of teachers, among the learned class, in the Middle Ages, it is noteworthy that there was no distinction between teachers who taught and those who did not. They were all occupied in teaching whether formally or informally (Shalaby, 1954). This also suggests the existence of overlap and hierarchy in the use of these titles, and that for some their specialisms were used for designating titles. This may include, for instance, *mufti*, a jurist and *mufassir*, an exegete, *muhaddith*, an expert in *hadīth*. Others had encyclopaedic knowledge and, consequently, multiple titles were attached to them, both men and women (Asma, 2013).

Before the institutionalisation of education, teachers were usually appointed by a senior teacher usually on the basis of their suitability for the occupation, their reputation among students and their successful career as *mu'id* (assistant) (Alavi, 1988). Subsequently, after further development of the education system and with the increase in the number of *madāris*, some of which were founded by philanthropists and princes, the appointment of the teachers was made by the *mutawalli* (manager) or the patron of the *madrasah* (As-Sibā'ee, 2005).

Teachers and poor students were supported by the income derived from endowments attached to mosques, shrines, hospitals and from donations. In addition, the royal treasury provided allowances for some. Teachers lived in simplicity and were for the most part contented people, caring less for worldly luxuries. Some even denounced salaries (As-Sibā'ee, 2005). In the state owned institutions of higher learning, teachers received allowances similar to those given to scholars. Endowments from princes and philanthropists were sometimes used for paying salaries. In addition, aid from the public exchequer was also utilized and grants from privy purses were offered (Alavi, 1988). Furthermore, it should be noted that some had their own occupations which made them financially autonomous.

### Teachers' charter

In order to assist teachers to uphold the model of Muhammad, and to maintain the crucial relationship with their students and to remind both of their responsibilities to each other, clear guidelines were available as exemplified in the work of Ibn Jama'ah. Teachers were expected to be observant of God, preserve knowledge, adopt abstinence, purify knowledge from worldly

desires, avoid mean professions and be regular in reciting the Qur'ān. In their social conduct, they were to adopt good manners and ward off bad manners, acquire knowledge even from the lower classes and be engaged in authoring and composing (Ghifari, 1991).

Of particular significance, in this famous text, is the pedagogical guidelines offered to teachers. It was necessary for teachers to prepare for their teaching by giving due thought to the fundamental parts and schedules of a lesson. This resonates with contemporary lesson plans where teachers are expected to identify learning outcomes, the structure, and process of their delivery and the success criteria for their learners. They had to facilitate comprehension and give due regard to the intellectual ability of the students and were encouraged to question and test students. Moreover, Ibn Jama'ah advocated independent original research and publication for multiple purposes (Ghifari, 1991).

It was important to maintain equality so that preferences based on affection, attainment and religiousness were avoided since favouritism could devastate and depopulate the heart (Ghifari, 1991). However, occasionally, the more industrious students received more respect to encourage others to adopt such vigour. Nevertheless, preferential treatment in their turn of teaching was not to be given unless it was considered appropriate by the teacher on welfare grounds or for the provision of additional attention. This applied to both the industrious and less industrious students.

Teachers were duty bound to cater for their academic needs as well as take charge to develop their etiquettes and conducts. Teachers were to make an effort for the welfare of the students by enquiring about absentees and, if students were sick, they offered affection, prayer and visited them (As-Sibā'ee, 2005). They were to deal with them in humility and present themselves with a cheerful countenance (Ghifari, 1991). Thus teachers were concerned with the holistic development of their students. Many books on ethics and education had chapters devoted to the ideal conditions of upbringing and educating young students and on preparing student to undertake further studies (Nasr, 1987).

### **Teacher autonomy, curriculum and pedagogy**

In an age of technology-assisted learning where learners are able to design and select their programme of study, it is fascinating to ponder over the nature of such flexibility and personalised learning during this period. Students, after acquiring elementary knowledge, usually travelled to the next great town to attend lectures there. Likewise, it was common for established scholars to do so in the absence of a fixed syllabus. In some colleges, professors were free to teach whatever they wished (Albert, 2012).

The curriculum was flexible or self-directed but the appointment of teachers was not always as such. Sometimes founders of schools had the right of appointment and removal of professors and sometimes the state interfered in cases where religion was in danger (Hanifi, 1964). On the other hand, sometimes leaders reconciled disputes between prominent teachers (As-Sibā'ee, 2005). Students and scholars travelled to enhance their authentication and links since the worth of teachers and learners depended on the quality of their chain of transmission (*isnād*) going as far back to Muhammad himself. Often, learners completed all the learning that could be done from one teacher and then moved on. So, it seems learning was directed by texts, reputation of scholars, institutes, geographical location and *isnād*.

However, in addition to such learning, teachers and students continually sought and were concerned about their spiritual and personal development. Since the growth of human personality is endless, Ashraf (1979) maintains that a wide knowledge of many subjects helped the growth of

personality. To achieve this, he suggests that a person learnt how to behave in accordance to knowledge and knew how knowledge and action were integrated into a total framework of life. In other words, the knowledge, actions and perspectives of a person possessing *adab* ought to be dynamic, since *ta'dib* unsettles and enriches all these three through experiences in pursuance of goodness.

It was not unusual for a master of a subject and experienced professor to know a text by heart and lecture without referring to a book. Unsurprisingly thousands of students thronged to such teachers although smaller classes did exist too. In some places, students were provided with resources to assist them in note taking. For instance, at least a thousand ink-pots existed in the assemblies of a scholar in Khurāsān, demonstrating his popularity (Asma, 2013).

During the session, teachers taught different disciplines, they heard and offered criticisms to students, and answered their queries and satisfied them in all the issues they raised (Shushtery, 1976). Importantly, however, the teacher was not content with delivering the lesson only. The teacher encouraged, considered the participation of the student as paramount, and ensured that students followed and understood the materials. The teacher would present questions to the students and invite them to offer a challenge so that a scenario of a debate ensued. Many teachers when discussing the subject, left their seats and mixed with the students (cf. Hanifi, 1964). Therefore, to study in higher schools meant intellectual engagement and not merely listening to lessons and a thorough drilling in the subjects was expected. Consequently, the students after satisfying their teachers that they had been well grounded in their subjects could request and obtain certificates. This also indicates the affectionate relationship between teacher and student. Such was the intensity of the academic activity that a classical treatise on the instruction of the students on how to study instructs students to select teachers who were most learned, most pious and most advanced in years (Al-Zarnuji, 2000). The teacher, in other words, was not seen exclusively as an academic but was a counsellor as well from whom advice was sought on all matters – personal, spiritual, and academic.

As the years moved on, mosques became more complex as places of learning. A vivid portrayal of the activities of teachers within study circles in a mosque is provided by Stanton (1990). He states that the *halaqah* (circle) was focussed around a *shaykh* - a learned person- who attracted people to his discussions by the power of his speech and his insights. Originally, the teacher would settle and the role was 'assumed'. The followers of the *shaykh* and his students accorded the status to him. Eventually following formal preparations, the head of a study circle would be appointed, occasionally, to a permanent position among the staff of the mosque. The voluntary participants and students could choose to attend any of the discussions and could come and go at will. Stanton (1990) continues stating that unusually popular *shaykhs* drew a devoted following whose members became identified by the instructor's names. Indeed, that such practice continues to be in vogue in modern day Europe, Australia and the Americas, needs to be recognised.

As regards to the curriculum content in these circles, Stanton (1990) notes that its selection was geared to satisfy individual participants' search for a deeper understanding of the Qur'ān. This implies that the teaching was student orientated. In other words, sometimes students requested an expert to teach them a text in a discipline or a subject, or that a student chose a teacher for the subject that they wanted to master as stated earlier. Indeed, another function of the *halaqah* was to strengthen the faith of the believers and to encourage them to live more religiously orientated lives. Many contemporary mosques continue to do the same through discourses on Qur'ān, *hadith* and subjects of relevance such as medical and financial ethics. The other variation of the-

se *halaqah* would emphasise spiritual aspects, which is another tradition that has been maintained. In both cases, as rightly pointed out by Stanton (1990), they provided ‘a source of counsel as well, for - since everything in Islamic life centres around the message of the Qur’ān - people brought their problems, difficulties, and questions to the *shaykhs* and asked them for guidance and resolutions.’ It is to be noted that freed slaves were also part of the teaching force and that teaching was not exclusive to the Qur’ān and *hadith* because the ‘Umayyad caliphs had taken interest in some branches of science known to foreign nations and sent learned slaves to teach in Egypt (Watt, 1974). Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) has discussed the pedagogy for the Qur’ān and other sciences (Dawood, 1989). He acquaints readers with instructional methods of the people from the Maghrib, Spain, North Africa and the people of the East and with the nature of the curriculum of that time and discussed the diversity of pedagogy and curriculum in these regions.

It is important to recognise that the application of knowledge and experiences are subject to individual circumstances, environmental factors, resource availability, the context of a teacher and that of their students and other socio-political factors, which might influence teacher autonomy. As a result, some Muslim teachers set up their own *halaqah*, wrote their own texts wherefrom they taught and some tended to be encyclopaedic masters using an integrated curriculum. Often they were independent of governments although in some cases they challenged the state for just causes to the detriment of their life. In this manner they enacted *ta’dib* to its maximalist conception (Waghid, 2011). However, scholars also worked in parallel with the state in sponsoring and developing ancient knowledge, translations, advancing various sciences and diverse institutions, sometimes using endowments and personal funds (Makdisi, 1981). Some scholars believed that their autonomy resulted from the inheritance of the Prophet (SAW). This heritage sometimes created varied relationships with the state and influenced some of their attitudes to teaching and learning. Hence, a person of adorning *adab* is an autonomous person in this sense. Nevertheless, simultaneously, such a person functions relationally with God and humanity to materialise the aims of Islamic education. Therefore, contemporary teachers should be responsive to societal issues in a just manner as well (Waghid, 2011).

### **Assessment and achievement**

Teaching, learning and assessment are inseparable. Assessment provides an indication of the quality of teaching and learning and when learning has been successful, it is obvious that it has to be recognised and celebrated. These features were evident among Muslims in this period and before. Alavi (1988) notes the absence of formal examination for awarding degrees in the early days. Teachers assessed learners and sometimes students had to undergo a public test in the form of a debate or a lecture. At the end of the course, students were awarded a certificate of permission to teach (*ijāzah*). Students who completed their education were vested with an academic gown and the certificate (Alavi, 1988). In turn, qualified teachers established their own schools in villages and enrolled pupils for teaching. This was another feature of their autonomy. The role of providing students with *ijāzah* has endured as well. One of the benefits of this is that it maintains the tradition and link with the previous generations. To achieve longevity, sometimes minors were taken to established scholars for *ijāzah*. In institutes of higher learning, students usually sat exams although prominent scholars sometimes granted written or oral permissions. Nasr (1987) observes that even in the most formal type of learning, oral teaching will accompany the written texts. In addition, the significance of actually hearing teachers and receiving an *ijāzah* from them personally keeps alive a chain of transmission which is of paramount importance in preserving and perpetuating the Islamic educational tradition.

Whilst the above process may preserve the external elements of knowledge (*zāhir*), similarly esoteric elements (*bātin*) were maintained too. These were sometimes achieved through close contacts between teachers and the students. Their lengthy companionship and association had 'much to do with making possible the transmission of the spirit as well as the letter of the various branches of knowledge, which have always been instrumental in the normal functioning of Islamic society' (Nasr, 1987:73-74). The issuing of a 'certificate' may be a later development, although the principle of recognising, celebrating and publicising the talents of individuals is established from the proclamations of Muhammad. There were other ways of recognising the talents of students as well. According to Alavi (1988) before the existence of colleges, teachers of great learning taught at their residence or in a corner of a mosque. However, after the establishment of colleges, with an increased number of students, the teacher was occasionally assisted by an assistant (*mu'id*). Among the responsibilities of the assistant, who were usually appointed from the more intelligent students, was to repeat the lesson before the class for elucidation of difficulties and teachers were regular in their work and demanded vigorously the same from their pupils (Alavi, 1988).

### **Learning environment and student relationships**

Regarding their dress, it is noted that teachers appeared in a formal dress, which was usually a turban, and a long flowing garment, this being a hallmark of the scholarly class (Alavi, 1988). However, there was much variation in the caps, cloaks, shawls and turbans worn by scholars (As-Sibā'ee, 2005). Some of these features were shared between the diverse Muslim communities. Regarding the teaching personnel of the *madāris*, Nasr (1987) observes that in both Shiite and Sunni schools, the pattern has been more or less the same. The classes are directed by a *mudarris* who is comparable to a professor, who has a *nā'ib* (substitute professor) and also a *mu'id* who acts as a 'drill master', the latter repeating the teachings of the professor, like the *répétiteur* of Western universities (Nasr, 1987). Although there were distinctions between the curricula in the Sunni and Shiite schools, the general atmosphere of the *madāris* has been the same throughout the Islamic world (Nasr, 1987). A highly personalised aspect characterised the learning process. Continuing to elaborate this relationship, Nasr (1987) maintains that the student, instead of searching the institution would search the teacher, and thereafter would wholeheartedly submit to the chosen teacher. A highly intimate relationship would flourish, wherein the student revered the teacher as a father and obeyed him. This obedience went beyond formal studies to include personal matters too. Nasr (1987:73) continues to depict the environment and learning ethos:

*The atmosphere of these schools has been very relaxed and informal, without there being any great academic or financial pressure upon the student. All religious education has been free; in fact, the student receives his room and board from the religious endowment of the institution in which he studies. Nor has there been the strong incentive to receive a diploma and then seek to benefit from its social and economic advantages, prevalent in so many modern educational institutions.*

Unsurprisingly, often a student would continue to be a student for the entire life. The student would perhaps ensure that they had taken the opportunity of learning from all the teachers available in the home town and then travel to other cities. Alternatively, the student would begin to master one subject after another until an encyclopaedic knowledge was acquired.

## CONCLUSION

Muhammad categorically encouraged his followers to engage in teaching. This had far-reaching implications and contributed immensely to the development of education in the early days of Islam. This development continued through many centuries and a brief survey of teachers and teaching during the later period has revealed a complex system of education which influenced many parts of the world.

From the above considerations, it is evident that the concept of the teacher evolved over time. Initially, they were both teachers of the Qur'ān and specialists in different disciplines. Later, varied titles for specific designations or to reflect the hierarchical level at which their teaching was undertaken were applied, although in some cases some titles were used interchangeably.

With the spread of Islam and the settlement of Muslims in distant lands, Muslim teachers and their learners became diverse in terms of their culture, geography, and heritage and function in educational settings. These have been multi-faith and multi-cultural in nature.

At the heart of teaching and learning lies *adab*, because of this, scholars produced texts and guidelines, as charters for teachers and learners, which assisted them in fulfilling their responsibilities in respect of their religious obligation of teaching and learning.

There are implications for teachers in considering a holistic approach to education for their students. As has been observed, generally, teachers were concerned about the total well-being of their learners. In terms of their personal development, both academically and spiritually, they are valuable accounts to encourage teachers to participate more in research and scholarship activities, and to extend their role beyond teaching.

There was room for teacher autonomy in pedagogy and students choice in curriculum and as such, there are implications for contemporary Muslim educators to rethink some of their current practices in view of the flexible and adaptive nature of the above educational theory and practice.

The teaching and learning environment and ethos were imbued with the fervour of *adab* in the totality of the educational process. This meant that students and teachers embodied *adab* for one another and for all their resources, which included their places of study too. In other words, it was recognised that knowledge itself was insufficient for building a rounded and balanced Muslim personality. Therefore, the contemporary Muslim teacher has the scope of recognising the opportunities and challenges presented by globalisation, rapid technological advancements in communication and accessibility of information and, as a result, advance the causes of common good by moving away from isolationist tendencies and proactively engage with organisations and systems to improve the situation of communities; importantly, their sense of responsibility to God should be an integral part of this so that they become embodiments of *adab*.

There is also a need to recognise the absence of the compartmentalisation in the philosophical conceptualisations of knowledge (Waghid, 2011). In other words, they should not be solely concerned with transferring knowledge but transforming personalities as well.



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