Transformative Learning for Sustainability: An Islamic Perspective

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The world is facing environmental, social, and economic challenges such as climate change, pollution, quality education, poverty, inequality, and sustainable economic inequality. These challenges are the result of human behaviors and practices. Allah said in the Holy Book: "Damage has appeared on land and sea because of what people's hands have earned, so that they may taste some of what they have done, so they may turn back to righteousness". Dealing with these challenges is useless unless we critically examine our behaviors. Allah said: "God does not change the condition of a nation until they change what is in themselves". The Quran and Hadith provide insights into the concept of sustainability. Sustainability is globally recognized as crucial, with education playing a key role in promoting it. Sustainability requires a fundamental shift in societal values, behaviors, and practices. The Islamic perspective emphasizes responsible stewardship of the earth and its resources. Muslims are encouraged to practice environmental stewardship. As an educator, I prioritize education for sustainability through transformative learning. Transformative learning can lead to a change in mindset, values, and perspectives, empowering learners to advocate for sustainability effectively. This approach encourages critical thinking, ethical considerations, leading to innovative solutions for complex global challenges. From an Islamic perspective, this approach aligns with core principles and teachings that advocate for stewardship, justice, balance, compassion, and contemplation of nature.

How to Cite: Alsulami, N. M. (2024). Transformative Learning for Sustainability: An Islamic Perspective. *Glocal Praxis in Elementary Education, 1*, 22-31.

The world we are living in is facing ongoing tremendous environmental, social, and economic challenges. Climate change and pollution are examples of environmental challenges. Social challenges include quality education, poverty and inequality, and conflict. Economic challenges involve economic inequality, job disruption, and sustainable economic growth. These challenges were not created by nature, animals, or plants. Sadly, we, the people of the planet, are causing these challenges through either unaware or irresponsible behaviors and practices. Allah said in the Holy Book: "Damage has appeared on land and sea because of what people's hands have earned, so that they may taste some of what they have done, so they may turn back to righteousness" (30:41). I believe that dealing with these challenges is useless unless we critically examine our behaviors, practices and activities that create these challenges. Allah said: "God does not change the condition of a nation until they change what is in themselves" (13:11). Changing the condition of the world environmentally, socially, and economically may not be achievable unless we change what is within ourselves.

Sustainability is a pressing global priority that requires a fundamental shift in societal values, behaviors, and practices to tackle these challenges. The importance of sustainability is recognized worldwide, and the pivotal role of education in promoting sustainability is widely acknowledged (Blake, Sterling, & Goodson, 2013; Taylor & Luitel, 2019). As an educator, I prioritize education for sustainability as one of the core school objectives. If education does not help us and our children, the citizens of this earth, to be responsible stewards of the planet, a question on the purpose of education should be raised. UNESCO (n.d.b) advocates for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). ESD is an educational framework and approach that seeks to educate individuals with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes needed to contribute to a more sustainable and equitable society.

The Quran and Hadith, as primary sources of Islamic teachings, provide profound insights into the concept of sustainability. They provide a framework for the spiritual and physical welfare of humanity. There are over 500 verses in the Quran giving Muslims guidance on matters relating to the environment and how to deal with it, and there are numerous examples from the Prophet Mohammed's life (PBUH) and his sayings, which provide a model for justice and equity (Aburounia & Sexton, 2022). From the Quran, several verses emphasize the importance of balance, justice, and responsible consumption. For instance, the Quran states: "Eat and drink but do not be extravagant, He does not like the extravagant" (7:31). This verse warns against wastefulness and

promotes responsible consumption, a key principle of sustainability. The Hadith also offers guidance on sustainable practices. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is reported to have said: "The world is beautiful and green, and God appointed you as His stewards in it, and He will see what you do" (Sahih Muslim). This Hadith emphasizes the role of humans as stewards of the Earth, entrusted with its care. The emphasis on community welfare, environmental preservation, and economic justice in Islamic teachings aligns seamlessly with the goals of sustainability. While the term "sustainability" might be modern, the principles underpinning it have been a part of Islamic teachings for centuries, offering timeless guidance on how to achieve harmonious and balanced development.

Islamic teachings acknowledge that humankind is not the only community to live on the earth. Allah said in the Quran: "There is not an animal in the earth, nor a flying creature flying on two wings, but they are peoples like unto you" (6: 38). Islamic environmental ethics are based on the concept that all human relationships are established on justice and equity. The Quran states: "Lo! Allah enjoineth justice and kindness" (16:90). And Prophet Mohammed asserted: "Verily Allah has prescribed equity in all things". The Islamic perspective embraces that everything on earth is created for humanity as a gift from Allah. Islamic teachings promote the responsible consumption of the natural environment without causing unnecessary harm (Khalid, 2002). It emphasizes that human activities should be in harmony with the environment, protecting people's rights and needs while ensuring that social, economic, and natural systems are not compromised now or in the future (Aburounia & Sexton, 2022).

The Islamic perspective on sustainability emphasizes the importance of responsible stewardship of the earth and its resources. Allah said: "It is He who has made you (Khalifa) on the Earth" (6:165). The concept of Khalifa in Islam refers to the idea that human beings are stewards of the Earth, entrusted with the responsibility of preserving and cultivating the Earth, ensuring the well-being of all creation. As stewards, Muslims are encouraged to practice environmental stewardship by walking gently upon the Earth, using its resources sustainably, and ensuring the equitable distribution of essential resources. By integrating the principles of stewardship, balance, justice, and compassion with educational practices, it is possible to cultivate a deep, ethical commitment to sustainability. This not only aligns with the spiritual and moral dimensions of Islam but also provides a powerful framework for fostering a more sustainable and equitable world. As we navigate the complexities of the 21st century, embracing these values can lead to meaningful and lasting change.

However, there are concerns about whether current higher education approaches and practices adequately prepare learners to address global sustainability challenges (Blake et al., 2013). Educators must not only impart knowledge and values, including Islamic principles of stewardship, balance, justice, and compassion) but also cultivate a deep understanding and ability to address complex global issues. Transforming learners' ways of thinking, acting, and valuing is essential for sustainability (Fine, 2003). Learners do not change their way of thinking, their values, their perception and their practices merely by being told. In the sake of argument, I would say that most Muslims learn that removing harm from the road is a charity, yet they probably throw rubbish on the road causing more pollution.

I argue that transformative learning is a valuable educational approach that can effectively prepare learners for the important task of promoting sustainability. Transformative learning can lead to a significant change in mindset, values, and perspectives (Mezirow, 2018), equipping learners to advocate for and facilitate sustainability effectively (Taylor, 2015). By encouraging self-critical thinking, ethical considerations, a global outlook, and a commitment to action, learners are empowered not only to do things better but, more importantly, to do things differently. Inspiring learners to do things differently prompts them to think critically about their established norms and practices. Transformative learning encourages learners to think for themselves, through emancipation from what they have taken for granted, especially their behaviors and practices in their own lives (Mezirow, 2000); their current ways of consuming, producing, economizing, living together, and creating their communities (Singer-Brodowski, 2023). This can lead to innovative solutions and creative problem-solving, especially in the context of sustainability and complex global challenges. Transformative learning for sustainability, when viewed through an Islamic lens, offers a holistic approach to addressing environmental challenges.

Sustainability

Sustainability is essential in today's world as we face urgent global challenges. It involves meeting current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainability requires a balance between environmental, social, and economic well-being. This includes preserving natural resources, reducing pollution, addressing climate change, promoting equality and social justice, and creating systems for long-term prosperity without harming communities. It encourages responsible decision-making and recognizes the interconnectedness of environmental, social, and economic issues. Sustainability is closely tied to socio-cultural perspectives, as it is influenced by human activities, interests, and cultural values (Taylor, Taylor &

Chow, 2013).

Sustainability is about recognizing the finite nature of Earth's resources and protecting the environment. It aims to minimize environmental degradation and reduce the negative impacts of human activities on ecosystems, biodiversity, and natural resources. It also promotes social equity and inclusivity, ensuring that everyone has access to basic needs like clean water, education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Social justice and human rights are key aspects of sustainability. It also seeks to promote economic growth and prosperity without harming the environment or social well-being. Responsible and sustainable economic practices that consider long-term impacts and benefits are emphasized. Sustainability is a holistic approach to addressing complex global issues, aiming to create a world where people can lead fulfilling lives while respecting the planet's ecological limits and ensuring a fair distribution of resources and opportunities for all. While achieving sustainability is a shared goal for many governments, organizations, and communities worldwide, it is often perceived as solely the responsibility of the government.

As citizens of Earth, I believe we must have a moral obligation to protect our planet and ensure fairness for all. Responsible use and conservation of natural resources are crucial to safeguard ecosystems, biodiversity, and overall planetary health. Preventing environmental degradation and securing the Earth for our future generations is essential. Addressing climate change is a pressing global issue, requiring efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, promote renewable energy, and build climate resilience. Poverty reduction, social equity, and access to basic needs like clean water, education, and healthcare are vital for improving quality of life, especially for marginalized communities. Emphasizing responsible and sustainable economic practices is key to ensuring societal benefits without resource depletion or financial instability. Resource efficiency, waste minimization, and recycling are essential to preserve finite resources. Innovation is needed to meet our needs without overexploiting natural resources. Long-term thinking is crucial to avoid short term solutions that may lead to lasting problems. As an educator, I agree that education plays a critical role in promoting sustainability and addressing these challenges (Taylor & Luitel, 2019).

Education for Sustainable Development

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is an educational framework and approach that seeks to educate individuals with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes needed to contribute to a more sustainable and equitable society. UNESCO (n.d.b) urges embracing Education for

sustainable development. There is now a growing international recognition of ESD as an integral element of quality education and a key enabler for sustainable development (UNESCO, 2014). Strategies and programs such as the UNECE Education for Sustainable Development Strategy (UNECE, 2005), the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014), the Global Action Program (GAP) on Education for Sustainable Development (2015-2019) (UNESCO, 2014), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations 2015) show efforts at the international level.

According to UNESCO, ESD gives learners of all ages the knowledge, skills, values, and agency to address interconnected global challenges. It empowers learners of all ages to make informed decisions and take individual and collective action to change society and care for the planet. ESD is a lifelong learning process and an integral part of quality education. It enhances the cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioral dimensions of learning and encompasses learning content and outcomes, pedagogy, and the learning environment itself. Target 4.7 of the SDGs specifically refers to ESD: "By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development" (United Nations 2015, p. 17).

For students to learn for sustainability, it is important for them to develop advanced cognitive and social skills. These skills include critical reflective thinking, collaborative decision-making, empathy, ethical awareness, and a commitment to taking action for personal and social action. Teachers play a crucial role in fostering these abilities in their students, and they themselves must possess these skills. Therefore, it is essential for future teachers to engage in learning experiences that go beyond the traditional curriculum and focus on the ethical aspects of education. Transformative learning provides a framework for this humanistic perspective in education (Taylor, 2015).

Transformative learning

Transformative learning is a powerful process that involves a profound shift in an individual's beliefs, values, and perspectives. It goes beyond acquiring new knowledge or skills; it encompasses a deep personal transformation that can lead to lasting change. In the context of sustainability, transformative learning plays a crucial role in fostering a shift towards more sustainable practices and behaviors. At its core, transformative learning involves challenging and

questioning deeply held assumptions and beliefs, which then leads to a reevaluation of one's perspectives and understanding of the world. It is a process of critical reflection that helps individuals make sense of their experiences and construct new meaning (Mezirow, 1997; Brookfield, 1995; Stein, 2000).

Transformative learning starts with becoming aware of unsustainable norms, behaviors, and systems that perpetuate environmental degradation, and the need for change or recognizing the limitations of our current social values and human behaviors in protecting our planet. It often begins with an experience that challenges existing values and prompts learners to question their assumptions. Then, transformative learning would involve introspection, self-reflection, and exploration of alternative viewpoints. Through reflection, learners gain insights into their own values, biases, and motivations. This reflection would then lead to engaging learners in meaningful dialogue with each other. Through sharing perspectives, engaging in discussions, and listening to diverse viewpoints, they can broaden their understanding and challenge their own beliefs. Learners can then develop a sense of empathy, compassion, and justice towards others, including marginalized communities affected by environmental degradation. Transformative learning is not just about personal reflection; it also involves taking action based on newfound insights. This action can take various forms, such as changing personal behaviors, advocating and engaging in sustainability initiatives, or participating in community sustainable projects (Mezirow, 1996, 2000, 2003).

It is important to mention that adopting sustainable behaviors is not always an easy task for learners. Living in a society fostering responsible practices may make learners feel odd sometimes. Questioning what seems to be normal behaviors may evoke intense emotions. Learners must be encouraged to not resist questioning and re-evaluating their ordinary practices.

Islamic Teachings

Islamic teachings highlight the interdependence of all living beings and the duty to care for the Earth. I believe that Islamic teachings would provide a fertile ground for transformative learning experiences that promote sustainable practices and motivate learners to live in harmony with nature. They are deeply rooted in the principles of Khilafah (stewardship), Adl (justice), Mizan (upholding balance), Rahmah (compassion), and Tafakkur fi al-Khalq (contemplation of nature).

Khilafah (Stewardship): Islamic teachings view humans as khalifah (stewards, inheritors or vicegerents) of the Earth, entrusted with its well-being, care and preservation and with the responsibility to manage its resources wisely (Quran 2:30). The Quran states, "It is He who has

made you successors upon the Earth" (Quran 35:39), highlighting the responsibility to maintain the planet for future generations. This concept promotes a shift from a perspective of dominion over nature to one of responsible stewardship. It would provide a powerful foundation for transformative learning experiences that help learners to understand their ethical responsibility towards the environment and its resources. By exploring the environmental implications of being a "Khalifah," learners can develop a deep respect for nature and a sense of duty towards its preservation.

Adl (Justice): Islamic teachings emphasize justice (Adl) encompassing all aspects of creation, including the natural world, viewing environmental degradation as a violation of this principle. Social and environmental justice are intertwined in Islamic ethics, with a focus on ensuring equitable access to resources and protecting vulnerable communities from environmental harm.

Mizan (Maintaining Balance and Moderation): Islamic teachings promote and emphasize the importance of maintaining balance and moderation (Mizan) in the natural world, and in all aspects of life, including the use of natural resources (Quran 15:19). They discourage extravagance (Israf) and promote mindful consumption habits (Quran 7:31). Transformative learning experiences can explore these concepts, encouraging individuals to critically analyze their consumption patterns and environmental impact. Workshops can empower learners to make informed choices, considering fair-trade practices and environmental footprints. These experiences can also address specific environmental challenges faced by Muslim communities, such as water scarcity in arid regions, prompting critical reflection on water conservation practices.

Rahmah (Compassion): Islamic teachings emphasize compassion (Rahmah) for all creation, including the natural world (Quran 6:54; 17:107). Transformative learning experiences can cultivate empathy for the environment and future generations, fostering open and critical discourse (Taylor, 1996) on the interconnectedness of ecosystems and the impact of unsustainable practices on all living beings.

Tafakkur fi al-Khalq (Contemplation of Nature): Islamic teachings encourage reflecting on and deep contemplation of the wonders of nature (Tafakkur fi al-Khalq) (Quran 2:164). Immersive experiences in nature, such as field trips or nature journaling, can foster a sense of awe and connection with the environment. This connection can be a catalyst for transformative learning, motivating learners to protect and conserve the natural world.

CONCLUSION

Transformative learning informed by Islamic values offers a powerful tool for promoting sustainable practices. By integrating Islamic principles of stewardship, justice, balance, compassion, and contemplation of nature into educational experiences, it is possible to cultivate a deep, ethical commitment to sustainability. This not only aligns with the spiritual and moral dimensions of Islam but also provides a powerful framework for fostering a more sustainable and equitable world. As we navigate the complexities of the 21st century, embracing these values can lead to meaningful and lasting change. Further practical research is needed to develop effective pedagogical approaches that resonate with Muslim learners and create a lasting impact on their attitudes and behaviors towards the environment. By harnessing the transformative power of Islamic teachings, it is possible to cultivate a future where environmental responsibility goes hand in-hand with faith, fostering a more sustainable and harmonious world.

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