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Reconceptualizing Philosophy for Children through Islamic Educational Thought: A Theoretical and Comparative Framework

ABSTRACT

Despite the global expansion of Philosophy for Children (P4C), limited research has examined its integration with Islamic educational philosophy within culturally grounded contexts. Existing P4C models largely rely on secular frameworks, leaving a gap in addressing the epistemological, ethical, and spiritual dimensions central to Islamic pedagogy. This study proposes a theoretical and comparative framework that integrates P4C's inquiry-based learning with the holistic principles of hikmah (wisdom), adab (moral discipline), and fitrah (innate disposition) derived from Islamic thought. Through a critical review of literature and conceptual synthesis, the framework identifies convergences—shared emphases on reasoning, moral development, and dialogical engagement—while also mapping divergences in metaphysical assumptions and educational goals. The proposed model (Figure 1) offers practical insights for designing culturally responsive curricula that integrate critical inquiry with spiritually informed values. Findings contribute to debates on intercultural pedagogy, highlight the potential for curriculum innovation in Muslim-majority settings, and open new avenues for empirical applications and policy-oriented research in global educational contexts.

Keywords: Philosophy for Children (P4C); Islamic Educational Philosophy; Hikmah; Adab; Fitrah; Critical and Dialogical Pedagogy; Culturally Responsive Curriculum; Intercultural Pedagogy; Comparative Educational Frameworks

Introduction

Over the past few decades, Philosophy for Children (P4C) has emerged as a globally recognized pedagogical approach designed to cultivate critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and philosophical dialogue among young learners (1, 2). Although widely adopted in various educational systems, the intellectual foundations of P4C are largely secular and often overlook epistemological, moral, and spiritual dimensions that are central to culturally rooted educational traditions, particularly those shaped by Islamic philosophy. This gap becomes especially apparent in contexts where education is expected not only to develop reasoning skills but also to shape identity and character in harmony with faith-based values.

In Islamic educational thought, learning is conceptualized as a holistic process that integrates intellectual development with moral cultivation and spiritual refinement. Foundational concepts such as hikmah (wisdom), adab (moral discipline), and tazkiyah (spiritual purification) reflect an educational vision where knowledge and character formation are inseparable and

serve higher ethical and spiritual purposes (3, 4). The ultimate aim of education in this tradition is not merely cognitive competence but also the formation of a virtuous, God-conscious individual capable of contributing responsibly to society. Yet, current P4C models rarely embed these principles, resulting in a disconnect between Western-oriented inquiry frameworks and the educational needs of Muslim-majority contexts (5, 6).

The Philosophy for Children movement, initiated in the 1970s by Matthew Lipman and Ann Sharp, revolutionized the classroom environment by transforming it into a “community of inquiry” where students engage collaboratively in dialogue and reflection (1, 7). Over time, this approach gained international prominence and was adapted to various cultural and educational settings. Scholars have examined its potential to foster moral sensitivity, democratic dialogue, and ethical engagement (2, 8), as well as its adaptability to pluralistic and post-secular classrooms (9, 10). However, as these adaptations spread, it became increasingly evident that P4C is not a value-neutral pedagogy; rather, its secular epistemological foundation shapes its moral outlook and limits its resonance in religious or value-centered contexts (11, 12).

Islamic educational philosophy provides an alternative paradigm that integrates reason and revelation, ethics and spirituality, and knowledge with purposeful living (3, 5). Its key tenets—such as the cultivation of *ḥikmah*, the centrality of *adab* in nurturing moral self-discipline, and the principle of *tawḥīd* linking all knowledge to divine unity—offer a holistic vision of human development (13, 14). When embedded in educational practice, these principles strengthen moral resilience, support identity formation, and encourage critical engagement while remaining anchored in an ethical worldview (6, 15). Scholars have highlighted the importance of integrating these insights into modern pedagogy to address identity fragmentation and ethical disorientation among youth (16-18).

Although some efforts have been made to reconcile P4C with Islamic educational frameworks, the attempts remain fragmented and conceptually limited. Many adaptations add Islamic content superficially without challenging the secular epistemological assumptions at the core of P4C (14, 15). Few studies have proposed deep philosophical integration, and empirical research evaluating culturally responsive P4C models remains scarce (19-21). This leaves educators in Muslim contexts with frameworks that may be pedagogically innovative but philosophically misaligned.

The present study addresses this gap by proposing a comparative theoretical framework that situates Islamic principles—particularly *ḥikmah*, *adab*, and *fitrah*—as foundational rather than supplementary to P4C. By doing so, it responds to the urgent need for curriculum models that support both inquiry-based learning and moral-spiritual formation in Muslim-majority educational settings (7, 8). This integrative approach acknowledges the strengths of P4C—its emphasis on dialogue, critical reflection, and democratic engagement—while aligning them with Islamic epistemology and ethical commitments. It also speaks to broader educational challenges in Muslim societies, including moral disorientation, identity struggles, and the tension between globalized secular frameworks and local value systems (9, 16, 18).

By mapping the convergences and divergences between P4C and Islamic educational philosophy, this study aims to provide a robust conceptual foundation for designing culturally coherent and philosophically meaningful inquiry-based curricula. Such work holds the potential to expand intercultural pedagogy beyond superficial cultural adaptation toward deep theoretical integration, supporting educators in fostering critically engaged, ethically grounded, and spiritually aware learners.

Methods and Materials

This research employs a theoretical and conceptual methodology, drawing on critical reasoning and interpretive strategies to explore the underlying logic of central ideas. Rather than relying on empirical data collection, the study engages with scholarly literature across multiple disciplines to analyze and refine key theoretical constructs. The process centers on understanding how concepts are formed, evolve over time, and interact within larger philosophical or pedagogical frameworks.

Through comparative reading and close textual analysis, the research traces patterns, distinctions, and latent assumptions embedded in existing theories. This form of inquiry is particularly suited for unpacking complex or contested concepts, as it allows the researcher to challenge implicit biases, highlight contradictions, and identify spaces for conceptual reconstruction. The methodological stance here is not to validate a fixed model but to expand interpretive depth, generate alternative perspectives, and deepen theoretical clarity through reflective engagement with authoritative sources.

The study integrates several analytical tools, including hermeneutic interpretation, conceptual mapping, and critical synthesis. Hermeneutics offers a lens through which to understand key texts and traditions in their intellectual and historical contexts, enabling a more faithful reading of meaning and intention (Gadamer, 2004). At the same time, conceptual analysis allows the dissection of abstract terms, probing their coherence, scope, and normative implications (Rawls, 1971; Berlin, 1969). By applying a comparative strategy, the research positions different theoretical systems in conversation with one another—highlighting both shared foundations and divergent assumptions. This layered methodology makes it possible to articulate underlying worldviews and philosophical tensions while also surfacing new interpretive possibilities. Rather than aiming for closure or definitive conclusions, the study prioritizes exploration, reflection, and the careful unfolding of ideas as a means to contribute meaningfully to theoretical development in the field.

Given its theoretical nature, this study is shaped by certain inherent limitations. Since it does not involve empirical fieldwork or participant observation, its insights are derived from conceptual interpretation rather than lived data or direct experience. As a result, the conclusions drawn should be viewed as reflective contributions to ongoing scholarly dialogue rather than definitive claims. Moreover, while efforts were made to engage a wide range of relevant literature, access to non-English sources—particularly texts in Arabic and Persian—was occasionally restricted, which may have influenced the breadth of perspectives included. The study also remains limited to philosophical and pedagogical analysis, without testing its findings in practical classroom contexts. From an ethical standpoint, the research maintained a commitment to academic integrity, including proper citation, fair representation of opposing views, and sensitivity toward religious and cultural content. No human subjects were involved, thus exempting it from institutional ethics review, yet the work was guided by scholarly responsibility, transparency, and intellectual respect throughout the writing process.

Findings and Results

The analysis revealed three primary zones of convergence between Philosophy for Children (P4C) and Islamic educational philosophy:

1. Epistemological Alignment

Both P4C and Islamic thought emphasize the development of reasoning skills, but from different epistemological standpoints.

- P4C encourages children to question assumptions and engage in collaborative inquiry.
- Islamic pedagogy promotes the development of ‘aql (intellect) and fitrah (innate disposition) within a spiritually grounded framework.

2. Moral and Character Formation

Key Islamic concepts such as hikmah (wisdom), adab (moral discipline), and tazkiyah (spiritual refinement) align with P4C’s goal of fostering ethical reflection and moral imagination. However, while P4C treats morality as a humanistic construct, Islamic philosophy links morality directly to divine guidance.

3. Child-Centered Learning

P4C's concept of the “community of inquiry” shares similarities with *shūrā* (consultative deliberation) in Islamic traditions, where children collaboratively explore ideas through structured dialogue. Yet, P4C maintains a democratic and horizontal structure, whereas Islamic pedagogy frames dialogue as a process guided by wisdom and ethical norms.

Table 1. Comparative framework between P4C and Islamic educational philosophy

Philosophical Dimensions	Philosophy for Children (P4C)	Islamic Educational Philosophy
Epistemology (<i>Nature & Source of Knowledge</i>)	Rooted in constructivism and pragmatism (1); knowledge is constructed through inquiry and dialogue; emphasizes human reason as the primary source.	Rooted in revelation and reason; combines rational thought (<i>'aql</i>) with divine guidance (<i>wahy</i>) (Al-Farabi, 1998; Al-Ghazali, 2011). Knowledge seeks truth within a God-centered worldview.
Purpose of Education	Develop critical thinking, encourage autonomy, foster democratic dialogue and tolerance (2).	Cultivate <i>hikmah</i> (wisdom), <i>adab</i> (moral discipline), <i>tazkiyah</i> (spiritual purification) to achieve holistic human development (Ibn Sina, 1984; Mulla Sadra, 1999).
Concept of the Child	Views the child as an autonomous thinker capable of constructing meaning through dialogue (1).	Considers the child as <i>fitrah</i> -based (innately good and pure), guided toward moral and spiritual refinement within a divinely ordered framework (Qur'an 30:30).
Role of Dialogue	Promotes horizontal, democratic discussions in the “community of inquiry” where every opinion is equally valued (7).	Encourages dialogue rooted in guidance (<i>hikmah</i>) and respect for ethical and spiritual principles; integrates discussion with <i>ta'lim</i> (teaching) and <i>tazkiyah</i> (self-purification) (Al-Ghazali, 2011).
Moral Development	Based on humanistic ethics; morality is derived from social consensus and rational justification (Cam, 2006 — if you want this kept, please give its RIS code so I can convert it to your style).	Grounded in divine command ethics; morality flows from Qur'anic principles and prophetic teachings (Miskawayh, <i>Tahdhib al-Akhlaq</i>).
Narrative & Pedagogy	Uses secular literature and fictional stories as starting points for inquiry (1).	Relies on Qur'anic stories, hadith, and classical wisdom literature to teach values and meaning (Ibn Sina; Rumi, <i>Masnavi</i>).
Teacher's Role	Functions as a facilitator guiding inquiry rather than delivering knowledge (2).	Acts as a moral and spiritual mentor, embodying <i>adab</i> and serving as a role model while transmitting both knowledge and values (Al-Attas, 1991).
Ultimate Goal	Foster critical, creative, and caring thinking to develop active global citizens (1).	Achieve integration of intellect, faith, and character for success in <i>dunyā</i> (this life) and <i>ākhirah</i> (the hereafter) (Mulla Sadra, 1999).

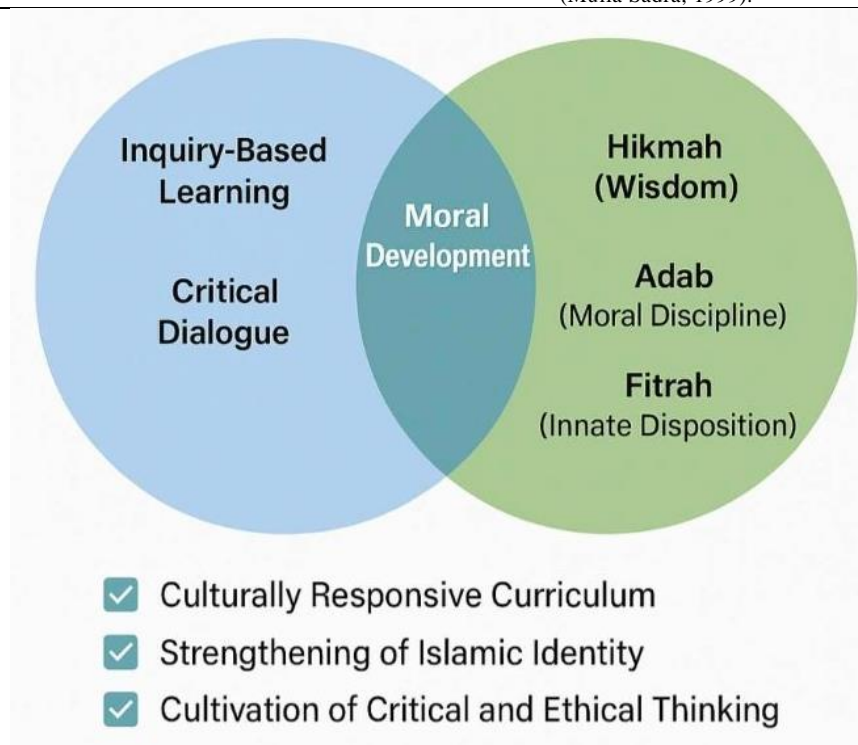


Figure 1. Conceptual framework integrating P4C and Islamic educational philosophy

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed conceptual framework developed in this study, which integrates core principles from Philosophy for Children (P4C) with Islamic educational philosophy. The left circle represents P4C's focus on inquiry-based learning and critical dialogue, while the right circle highlights the Islamic principles of *hikmah* (wisdom), *adab* (moral discipline), and *fitrah* (innate disposition).

At the intersection of these two traditions lies moral development, representing a shared emphasis on nurturing students' ethical reasoning and character formation.

This integrated model also demonstrates three broader educational outcomes:

1. Culturally Responsive Curriculum → Aligning P4C methods with the cultural and spiritual contexts of learners.
2. Strengthening Islamic Identity → Supporting value-based pedagogy that resonates with religious and moral principles.
3. Cultivation of Critical and Ethical Thinking → Combining reflective inquiry with spiritually grounded ethical reasoning.

By visually mapping areas of convergence and divergence, this framework provides practical insights for designing curricula, training teachers, and developing classroom practices that balance critical inquiry with Islamic values.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to conceptualize a robust comparative framework that bridges Philosophy for Children (P4C) and Islamic educational philosophy, addressing the epistemological, ethical, and cultural limitations inherent in conventional P4C models. The findings underscore three key contributions: the theoretical integration of Islamic intellectual traditions into P4C's inquiry-based pedagogy, the formulation of a culturally responsive educational approach for Muslim-majority settings, and the establishment of a foundation for further empirical exploration.

One of the most salient findings is the possibility of deep conceptual integration between P4C and Islamic thought. P4C, initially grounded in pragmatism and constructivism, emphasizes dialogue and critical inquiry as vehicles for meaning-making (1, 7). However, this paradigm assumes a secular epistemology that privileges human reason as the ultimate source of knowledge (11, 12). By contrast, Islamic educational philosophy envisions knowledge as both rational and divinely anchored, rooted in *hikmah* and guided by revelation (3, 4). The integration proposed here demonstrates that inquiry and dialogue do not have to exclude metaphysical and moral foundations. Rather, they can coexist within an educational paradigm that values critical thought while affirming ethical and spiritual commitments (5, 6). This insight expands the scope of P4C beyond its secular origins, enabling its adaptation in contexts where religious and cultural worldviews are integral to identity formation.

The study also highlights the potential for culturally responsive pedagogy that moves beyond superficial contextual adjustments. Earlier efforts to adapt P4C to Islamic education have tended to be limited to incorporating Islamic texts or themes without interrogating the deeper philosophical assumptions underlying the model (14, 15). Our comparative analysis clarifies how principles such as *adab* and *tazkiyah* can reshape the aims and practices of P4C to emphasize moral refinement and spiritual awareness alongside critical reasoning (13, 14). This aligns with recent scholarship urging context-sensitive adaptations of P4C in diverse moral and spiritual traditions (8-10). By repositioning the teacher from a purely neutral facilitator to a morally and spiritually aware guide, the model acknowledges that inquiry is never entirely value-free and must be situated within the ethical commitments of the community (2, 7).

Moreover, the framework responds to broader critiques that global educational models often assume cultural universality while neglecting non-Western epistemologies (16-18). By embedding concepts like *fitrah*—understood as the innate human disposition toward truth and moral orientation—the study introduces an anthropological depth missing in many secular accounts of the learner. This has implications for combating moral disorientation and identity fragmentation among youth in

Muslim societies (19, 20). Such integration could also encourage Muslim educators to reclaim intellectual agency in shaping critical thinking pedagogies rather than adopting imported frameworks wholesale.

A further contribution lies in clarifying tensions and points of divergence between the two paradigms. While P4C aims to create democratic spaces for open-ended dialogue, Islamic pedagogy emphasizes *adab* as the moral framework shaping discourse. This does not stifle inquiry but contextualizes it within a disciplined ethos of respect and humility (4, 5). Similarly, while P4C prizes autonomy and self-directed meaning-making, Islamic philosophy situates autonomy within a theocentric worldview, where intellectual freedom is harmonized with accountability and transcendence (3, 15). Recognizing these tensions prevents superficial fusion and instead promotes an honest synthesis that respects both traditions.

Finally, this theoretical model addresses an urgent educational reality. Muslim societies are increasingly grappling with ethical and identity-related challenges, including moral relativism and the erosion of traditional value frameworks under globalization (16, 18). An inquiry-based pedagogy enriched by Islamic moral and spiritual anchors can provide a compelling response, equipping learners with both critical and ethical competencies to navigate pluralistic societies. This dual focus reflects a balanced vision of education that is intellectually rigorous, morally robust, and culturally coherent.

Despite its conceptual significance, this study remains primarily theoretical and interpretive, and its proposed framework has yet to be empirically validated in classroom settings. While the comparative analysis clarifies philosophical alignment, it does not test how the model functions in practice when applied to real students and teachers. Furthermore, the study is limited to conceptual sources from Islamic philosophy and the P4C tradition; it does not incorporate field data from practitioners who have attempted cultural adaptations in diverse Muslim contexts. Additionally, the study's reliance on existing literature means its scope is constrained by the availability and quality of previous scholarship, which is itself fragmented and sometimes Western-centric.

Future investigations should test this framework empirically across varied educational environments. Classroom-based studies could explore how inquiry sessions structured by Islamic philosophical principles affect students' critical reasoning, moral development, and spiritual awareness. Comparative research across Muslim-majority and minority contexts would clarify the model's adaptability and reveal how cultural and institutional factors influence outcomes. Moreover, long-term studies could assess whether integrating P4C with Islamic pedagogy strengthens resilience against ethical relativism and supports coherent identity formation among youth. Teacher-training research would also be valuable, examining how educators can be prepared to balance facilitation of inquiry with their role as moral exemplars.

Educators and curriculum designers in Muslim-majority settings can draw on this framework to create learning environments that promote critical dialogue without compromising cultural and spiritual integrity. Teacher education programs may need to include modules on philosophical reasoning anchored in Islamic concepts such as *hikmah* and *adab*. Schools could integrate inquiry-based lessons with Qur'ānic narratives and classical Islamic wisdom texts while maintaining the openness to diverse perspectives that P4C encourages. Policymakers and educational leaders might also consider adapting assessment tools to capture not only cognitive but also moral and spiritual growth, thus aligning educational outcomes with holistic visions of human flourishing.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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