

## Improving the Pedagogy of Islamic Religious Education in Secondary Schools

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Improving the Pedagogy of Islamic Religious Education in Secondary Schools**, Ayse Demirel Ucan, London, Routledge, 2021, 262 pp., £36.99 (pbk), ISBN 9780367784102

This book, divided into eight chapters, considers a wide range of issues related to Islamic religious learning in schools in the UK with references to Turkey, Finland, and Sweden. In the first chapter, Ucan emphasises that this research-based book provides valuable information on how to improve the quality of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) around the world, particularly in the UK. She contends that currently IRE fails to help young Muslims in understanding and interpreting their faith in relation to God, to themselves and the world they live in. Therefore, she proposes applying Critical Realism, and the theories of Critical Religious Education (CRE) and Variation Theory (VT) in schools.

Chapter 2 discusses the enactment of Critical Realism in Islam, providing a philosophical understanding of this in synergising Islamic theology and education. These ontological and epistemological perspectives may help improve IRE practice as well as bring students to a deeper comprehension of Islam in diverse conditions. Particularly worthy of note is that, since the initial period, Islam had implemented judgemental rationality to deal with the claim of Islam to absolute truth.

The next chapter provides critical reviews of the framework of CRE and VT, and how it can be implemented in IRE. As a pedagogical approach, VT provides a theoretical framework for teachers on how they facilitate learners to engage with various phenomena and necessary learning opportunities through the phenomenographic research tradition. This chapter shows how religious literacy helps the students to comprehend their religion critically, and at the same time prepare them to sustain their religious practice in a global context. This discussion could be advantageous in helping teachers to reflect on and improve their pedagogical beliefs and practices by enacting the model of learning using CRE and VT.

Chapter 4 talks about the research methodology adopting the theoretical and pedagogical framework of CRE and VT to develop teaching and learning in IRE. The author used a phenomenographic approach by using pre- and post-study to measure the impact of the proposed framework with triangulated data comprising interviews, written tasks, and classroom observations as well as dialogue with the teachers. The data are then analysed by using phenomenography and VT approaches.

The fifth and sixth chapters could be valuable resources for teachers since they help readers to explore how CRE and VT are implemented in IRE contexts from the students' points of view on how they understand '*Islam and becoming a Muslim*' and '*equality in Islam*'. Their understanding of '*Islam and becoming a Muslim*' is proven to increase after the application of CRE and VT using a framework with four different levels. Prior to this, students' understanding was previously at level 1 and 2 where students consider Islam partially, but after the CRE and VT are implemented, the students' understanding increased to level 3 where they understand Islam in terms of both internal (e.g. faith) and external (e.g. worshipping practices and strengthening Muslim community) respects, and at level 4 emphasising personal responsibility and a more holistic understanding in

selecting and maintaining their faith. In chapter 6, the study reveals that, after the implementation of CRE and VT, the students' understanding of equality increases. Their awareness of Islamic teaching in a western context is increasing gradually up to the level where they can then interpret Qur'an and Sunnah in more diverse contexts taking account of issues such as gender, race, wealth and the diversity of beliefs and practices within, as well as between, religions.

Chapter 7 provides the RE teachers' reflection on the use of CRE and VT during the learning study of '*Islam and being a Muslim*' and '*equality in Islam*' discussed in the two previous chapters. This chapter emphasises the use of CRE and VT framework as an applicable approach to IRE. Thus, teachers may benefit professionally and pedagogically from using this framework.

In the last chapter, the author provides a brief summary of four main contributions of CRE and VT for IRE. The first is the successful application of Critical Realism's principles of ontological realism, epistemic relativity and judgemental rationality, which enables the students to gain a greater awareness of the absolute, transcendental, and subjective context-dependent features of their faith. The second contribution is that, when the students experienced the concept of equality as common to various worldviews, they became aware of the relationship between Islam and Western-secular culture, in terms not only of how these two co-exist on the basis of freedom of expression and tolerance, but also by engaging with each tradition on their own terms. The third contribution is that CRE and VT offer the use of variation learning in class. Through contrast and separation, learning objects are presented in the form of a single ontological reality facilitating the students to be able to provide different perceptions. The final contribution is that the use of CRE and VT framework made a significant development of the teachers' beliefs and practices in IRE. During the learning studies, teachers gained a thorough understanding of the characteristics and circumstances of the students' learning. This knowledge then contributed to the successful planning and designing of lessons.

Overall, this book provides a powerful argument against a view of Islam and the spirituality of Muslims as based on only one universal set of beliefs and practices. Therefore, it can be a 'must-have' volume for any teachers concerned with Islamic Religious Education either in Islamic or non-Islamic schools since it provides a strong theoretical basis in IRE as well as real classroom practices and reflection from both the teachers and students. In addition, this book contains good resources for researchers focusing on IRE and also policymakers in designing an IRE-related curriculum especially in secondary schools.

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