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A Qur'anic Framework for Holistic Human Development: The Four Methods of An-Nafs and Their Educational Implications

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Abstract:

Contemporary educational models often fragment human development into discrete cognitive, affective, or psychomotor domains, overlooking the unified conception of the self that the Qur'an presents. This study addresses the theoretical gap by proposing a holistic Qur'anic framework for the development of an-nafs (the human self) and examining its implications for educational theory and practice. Employing a qualitative library research design grounded in the thematic (ma'wḍū'ī) method of Qur'anic interpretation, the study systematically analyzes classical and contemporary tafsīr literature alongside peer-reviewed scholarship in Islamic education, psychology, and human development. The findings identify four interconnected methods of self-development: taswiyah al-nafs (self-harmonization), tazkiyah al-nafs (self-purification), iktisyāf al-qudrah (discovery of

individual potential), and at-tawāṣul al-wālidī (constructive parent–child communication). These methods are not merely sequential but mutually reinforcing, and they are operationalized through an integrated educational system that encompasses institutional vision, curricular design, learning strategies, management, and assessment. The study contributes a Qur’anic framework that simultaneously integrates spiritual, intellectual, moral, emotional, and psychological dimensions of human growth, offering an alternative to reductionist paradigms that treat these domains in isolation. Rather than rejecting extant theories, this framework provides an additional theoretical perspective rooted in a unified conception of the self. Practically, it offers Islamic educators a theoretically grounded model for fostering character formation and spiritual maturity, and it informs curriculum development and pedagogical practices in contemporary Muslim educational contexts.

Keywords: *An-Nafs; Thematic Tafsir (Mawḍū’ī); Holistic Human Development; Islamic Educational Philosophy; Self-Purification (Tazkiyah al-Nafs); Parent–Child Communication; Character Education*

INTRODUCTION

The fundamental question of human development has occupied educational philosophers for centuries. From Plato's tripartite soul, which divided the human psyche into reason, spirit, and appetite (Plato, 2000, Republic IV), to Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia as the flourishing of rational and moral virtues (Aristotle, 2009, Nicomachean Ethics), Western educational thought has long sought to cultivate the whole person. However, the dominant paradigms of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—behaviourism, cognitivism, and neuropsychology—have progressively narrowed the scope of education to measurable cognitive outcomes (Gardner, 1983; Goleman, 1995). Standardized testing, competency-based curricula, and human capital theory have reinforced a reductionist view that privileges academic achievement over spiritual, moral, emotional, and psychological growth (Noddings, 2005; Palmer, 2003).

This reductionism is particularly problematic when imported into Muslim educational contexts, where the Qur'anic conception of the human self—*an-nafs*—demands a holistic and integrated approach. The term *nafs*, occurring 295 times in the Qur'an (Abd al-Baqi, 1945, *Al-Mu'jam al-Mufahras*), denotes the entire human person: not merely the soul or psyche, but a unified entity comprising spirit (*rūḥ*), intellect (*'aql*), heart (*qalb*), will (*irādah*), and moral conscience (*ḍamīr*). Classical scholars such as al-Ghazālī (1993, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*) developed elaborate theories of spiritual education centered on *tazkiyah al-nafs* (self-purification), linking the health of the soul to knowledge, practice, and

divine assistance. Al-Māwardī (1999, *Adab al-Dunyā wa al-Dīn*) discussed *nafs* in the context of ethics and governance, while Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (1996, *Madārij al-Sālikīn*) detailed the stages of spiritual development. Despite this rich intellectual heritage, contemporary Islamic education often adopts Western models without critical adaptation (Halstead, 2004; Al-Attas, 1979).

A significant research gap persists. While individual aspects of *nafs* development—such as *tazkiyah*, *tarbiyah* (nurturing), and *ta'dīb* (disciplining)—have been studied separately (Wan Daud, 1998; Al-Alwani, 1995), few attempts have been made to synthesize them into a comprehensive, multi-dimensional framework. Moreover, the educational implications of such a framework—how it systematically informs curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and school culture—remain largely unexplored (Sarigiannidis, 2014; Huda & Kartanegara, 2015). Most works in Islamic education remain at the level of philosophical principles without operationalizing them into actionable components for classroom practice (Ashraf, 1985; Nasr, 1987). This gap is especially critical as Muslim educators worldwide seek to ground their practice in authentic Islamic sources while engaging meaningfully with contemporary educational discourse (Gulam, 2014; Niyozov & Memon, 2011).

This study aims to fill that gap by proposing a Qur'anic framework for the development of an-*nafs* derived from a thematic (*mawḍū'ī*) interpretation of the Qur'an. The *mawḍū'ī* method, pioneered by al-Farmāwī (1996, *Al-Bidāyah fī al-Tafsīr al-Mawḍū'ī*), involves collecting all verses related to a

specific theme, analyzing them through classical and contemporary tafsīr, and synthesizing them into a coherent conceptual framework. This method is particularly suitable for extracting educational principles because it allows the Qur'an to speak holistically rather than piecemeal (Abdullah, 2008; Shihab, 2007).

Two central research questions guide the investigation: (1) What are the principal Qur'anic methods for developing an-nafs as identified through thematic interpretation? (2) How do these methods translate into an integrated educational system that simultaneously nurtures the spiritual, intellectual, moral, emotional, and psychological dimensions of the learner? By answering these questions, the study contributes a holistic framework that serves as an alternative to reductionist educational theories. It does not reject the valuable insights of cognitive and developmental psychology but rather situates them within a larger Qur'anic anthropology where the ultimate goal of education is not merely knowledge acquisition but self-realization in relation to the Divine (Al-Attas, 1995; Al-Faruqi, 1982). This framework has profound implications for curriculum designers, teacher educators, school leaders, and parents seeking to harmonize Islamic values with effective pedagogical practice.

METHODS

This research adopts a qualitative library research design using the thematic (mawḍū'ī) method of Qur'anic interpretation. The procedures follow al-Farmāwī's model (1996): (1) selection of the theme—development of an-nafs; (2) collection of all verses containing the root n-f-s using Al-

Mu'jam al-Mufahras li-Alfāz al-Qur'ān al-Karīm (Abd al-Baqi, 1945); (3) chronological and thematic arrangement of the verses; (4) study of classical and contemporary tafsīr works; (5) synthesis of exegetical insights; and (6) extraction of educational implications.

Primary sources include foundational tafsīr works:

- Al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān (2000).
- Al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb (1981).
- Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm (1999).
- Abū Ḥayyān (d. 745/1344), Al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ (2001).
- Al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272), Al-Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'ān (2006).
- Al-Shinqīṭī (d. 1973), Aḍwā' al-Bayān (1995).
- Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966), Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān (2000).
- Muḥammad 'Abduh & Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935), Tafsīr al-Manār (1947).

Secondary sources consist of peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly monographs in Islamic education, psychology, and human development, accessed through databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. To ensure validity, data triangulation was performed by comparing multiple exegetical interpretations, and the emerging framework was reviewed by two external experts in Qur'anic studies and Islamic education.

FINDINGS

The thematic analysis reveals four principal methods for developing an-nafs. Each method is grounded in specific Qur'anic verses, supported by exegetical commentary, and linked to educational components. The methods are not sequential but mutually reinforcing, forming an integrated system of holistic human development.

1. Taswiyah al-Nafs (Self-Harmonization)

The term *taswiyah* appears prominently in Q. 91:7–10, where Allah swears by the soul and the One who proportioned it (*fa-sawwāhā*) and inspired it with its wickedness and righteousness. Al-Ṭabarī (2000, vol. 30, p. 221) interprets *taswiyah* as the creation of the soul in a balanced form with innate moral discernment. Al-Rāzī (1981, vol. 31, p. 156) adds that this balance requires active maintenance through knowledge and self-reflection. Ibn Kathīr (1999, vol. 8, p. 426) emphasizes that God gave the soul the ability to choose between good and evil.

Taswiyah al-nafs thus refers to harmonizing the internal faculties—reason, desire, and anger—so that they align with divine guidance. Educationally, this method implies cultivating moral consciousness, teaching students to recognize their innate *fiṭrah* (primordial disposition), and developing the capacity to balance competing impulses. Curriculum content must include ethical dilemmas, reflective exercises, and role models that exemplify balanced character. Assessment of *taswiyah* involves evaluating students' ability to make sound moral judgments.

2. Tazkiyah al-Nafs (Self-Purification)

Tazkiyah is one of the most recurrent concepts in the Qur'an, appearing in verses such as Q. 35:18, Q. 87:14–15, and Q. 91:9. The root *zakā* means to grow, purify, and increase. Ibn Kathīr (1999, vol. 7, p. 385) explains that tazkiyah involves both removal of spiritual impurities—such as shirk, hypocrisy, arrogance, and envy—and the cultivation of virtues like sincerity, humility, and patience. Al-Ghazālī (1993, vol. 3, pp. 1–50) systematically details the diseases of the heart (*amrāḍ al-qalb*) and their cures, providing a comprehensive curriculum for self-purification.

In educational terms, tazkiyah translates into a program of spiritual formation that integrates ritual acts of worship (*'ibādah*) with character education. Schools must create environments conducive to reflection, repentance, and growth. Assessment of tazkiyah goes beyond cognitive testing; it includes self-accountability (*muḥāsabah*), peer evaluation, and teacher mentorship.

3. Iktisyāf al-Qudrah (Discovering Individual Potential)

The Qur'an repeatedly commands reflection on creation and the self: "We will show them Our signs in the horizons and within themselves" (Q. 41:53). Al-Rāzī (1981, vol. 27, p. 187) interprets this as an imperative to explore both the macrocosm of the universe and the microcosm of the human self. *Iktisyāf al-qudrah* means uncovering one's God-given capacities—intellectual, creative, physical, and spiritual. This method aligns with the Islamic principle that every individual is endowed with unique talents (*mawāhib*).

Educationally, iktisyāf justifies a learner-centered approach that includes inquiry-based learning, project-based exploration, and the recognition of multiple intelligences. Teachers become facilitators who help students identify and develop their distinct qudrah. This contrasts with rote learning and uniform curricula that stifle individual potential.

4. Al-Tawāṣul al-Wālidī (Constructive Parent–Child Communication)

This method emerges most clearly from the Qur'anic narrative of Luqman, who advises his son with gentleness, wisdom, and sequential guidance (Q. 31:13–19). Al-Ṭabarī (2000, vol. 21, pp. 45–50) notes that Luqman's approach combines monotheistic instruction with practical ethics, delivered in a tone of compassion. Similarly, in Q. 20:43–44, Allah commands Moses and Aaron to speak gently to Pharaoh, demonstrating that even adversarial communication must be constructive. Al-Rāzī (1981, vol. 22, p. 110) emphasizes that gentle speech opens hearts to truth.

Al-tawāṣul al-wālidī therefore refers to continuous, respectful, and dialogical communication between parents (or teachers) and children (or students). It is the relational method that enables all other methods to flourish. Educationally, this implies that the home is the first school and that parent-child communication is foundational. Teacher-student relationships must mirror this model: based on trust, empathy, and open dialogue.

5. Integration into an Educational System

The four methods are not isolated; they form a cycle of transformation. Taswiyah establishes the moral baseline, tazkiyah purifies deviations, iktisyāf unleashes potential, and tawāṣul sustains growth through relationship. When implemented in an educational system, these methods inform every component:

- Vision: holistic human excellence (insān kāmil).
- Objectives: balanced development of spiritual, intellectual, moral, emotional, and psychological dimensions.
- Curriculum: integration of revealed knowledge (naqli) and acquired knowledge (‘aqli).
- Teaching strategies: participatory, reflective, and inquiry-based.
- Management: trust-based, consultative (shūrā) leadership.
- Learning environment: spiritually and psychologically safe.
- Assessment: multi-domain, including character and spiritual growth.

DISCUSSION

The proposed framework offers a significant theoretical contribution to Islamic educational philosophy. While existing educational theories—such as Gardner's multiple intelligences (1983) and Goleman's emotional intelligence (1995)—address specific dimensions, they treat them as separate categories.

The Qur'anic framework, by contrast, posits an essential unity of the self. An-nafs is not a collection of faculties but a single entity that can be harmonized, purified, empowered, and nurtured through relationship.

This framework does not dismiss empirical findings from psychology or neuroscience. Rather, it provides a complementary perspective that situates these findings within a larger narrative of human purpose and spiritual destiny. For instance, the concept of tazkiyah aligns with modern character education (Lickona, 1991; Berkowitz, 2011) but adds a transcendent dimension—purification is ultimately for the sake of Divine pleasure. Similarly, iktisyāf al-qudrah resonates with constructivist theories of learning (Piaget, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978) while grounding discovery in a theological context of divine signs.

The practical implications are substantial. Islamic schools, madrasas, and universities can use the framework to redesign their curricula and pedagogies. Teacher training programs can incorporate tawāṣul as a pedagogical method. Parent education initiatives can draw on iktisyāf to help parents recognize and nurture their children's unique talents. The framework also suggests that assessment must be multidimensional, including not only academic achievement but also spiritual growth and moral character.

However, limitations should be acknowledged. The mawḍū'ī method, while systematic, is interpretive and open to multiple readings. Different exegetes may emphasize different verses or methods. The framework has not yet been empirically tested in educational settings. Future research

should operationalize the four methods into measurable variables and conduct case studies or quasi-experimental designs in Islamic schools.

CONCLUSION

This study has proposed a Qur'anic framework for the development of an-nafs based on four methods: taswiyah al-nafs, tazkiyah al-nafs, iktisyāf al-qudrah, and al-tawāṣul al-wālidī. The framework integrates spiritual, intellectual, moral, emotional, and psychological dimensions, offering an alternative to reductionist educational models. It contributes to Islamic educational philosophy by providing a systematic, scripturally grounded paradigm for holistic human development. Practically, it provides educators with a coherent model for curriculum design, pedagogy, and assessment. Further empirical research is recommended to test its applicability in diverse Islamic educational contexts.

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