

DYNAMICS IN CLASSICAL ISLAMIC EDUCATION: BETWEEN NONFORMAL AUTONOMY AND MADRASAH HEGEMONY (650–1250 CE)

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Abstract: Classical Islamic education played a central role in shaping the scientific architecture and social structure of Muslim societies from the 7th to the 13th century CE. Examining this period is essential for tracing the epistemological roots and institutional dynamics that continue to influence contemporary Islamic educational systems. This study employs a conceptual-analytical approach and a historical-critical method to investigate both formal institutions (*madrasah*) and informal ones (*halaqah*, *maktab*, *bookshops*), including the characteristics of their curricula, modes of knowledge transmission, and the authority of teachers. The main findings reveal a dualism between the academic freedom of informal systems and the scholarly authoritarianism of standardized *madrasah* affiliated with state power. While informal education offered autonomy and flexibility in the pursuit of knowledge, both systems ultimately contributed to epistemological conservatism due to the dominance of textual authority and limited space for innovation. The implications suggest that the epistemic and political structures of classical Islamic education fostered a scholarly culture that was passive and resistant to interdisciplinarity. This study is limited in its geographical scope and does not fully address the dynamics of contemporary praxis. Therefore, a reconstruction of the Islamic educational system is needed—one that balances the authority of revelation and reason, and fosters a scientific ethos, intellectual freedom, and more transformative scholarly dialogue.

Keywords: classical Islamic education, *madrasah*, *halaqah*, teacher authority, *ijāzah*

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INTRODUCTION

The classical period of Islamic education represents a critical epoch in shaping not only pedagogical structures but also the epistemological and political trajectories of Islamic civilization. Re-examining this period is essential to unravel

how educational systems emerged as agents of civilizational renewal rather than merely as instruments of religious transmission. The first Qur’anic revelation, *Iqra*, positioned literacy as both a theological imperative and a civilizational foundation, thereby redefining the role of knowledge in society. This emphasis is reinforced in verses such as Q.S. Al-‘Alaq (96): 1–5, Al-Baqarah (2): 31–32, and Al-Mujadalah (58): 11, which collectively constitute the doctrinal basis for a knowledge-centered culture in Islam. Hence, the institutionalization of education during the early Islamic period was not a passive process but a conscious strategy for socio-political formation, legitimization, and intellectual expansion.¹

The socio-religious landscape in pre-Islamic Arabia was largely characterized by orality, where knowledge transmission occurred primarily through memorization and poetic forms. Formal educational institutions were virtually non-existent, with only a handful of literate individuals among the Quraysh.² The Prophet’s policy of freeing prisoners of war in return for teaching literacy illustrates a profound pedagogical vision rooted in transformative justice.³ Islam’s early encounters with literacy, through the Qur’an and Hadith, fostered a dual system that emphasized textual authority and oral authentication via *sanad*.⁴ These traditions became foundational for the emergence of distinct educational forms such as *kuttab*, *halaqah*, *maktab*, *masjid*, and later *madrasah*—each institutionalizing Islamic education while simultaneously entrenching specific epistemological norms.

From the second century of Islam onwards, educational networks became increasingly formalized. The mosque, initially a multifunctional space, evolved into a center of intellectual activity where *ta’lim* (instruction) and *tadris* (teaching) flourished.⁵ The *madrasa*, established under the Seljuk vizier Nizam al-Mulk, institutionalized Sunni orthodoxy through the systematic teaching of *fiqh*, *kalam*,

¹ Mehdi Nakosteen, *History of Islamic Origins of Western Education: A.D. 800–1350* (Colorado: University of Colorado Press, 1996); Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Bandung: Pustaka, 2000).

² Ahmad Shalabi, *History of Muslim Education* (Beirut: Dar al-Kashshaf, 1973).

³ H M Taufik, “Transformasi Sebuah Tradisi Intelektual: Asal Usul dan Perkembangan Pendidikan Islam,” *al-Jamiah* 63, no. VI (1999).

⁴ Afrida Arinal Muna and Munirul Ikhwan, “Ibn Mujahid’s Canonical Legacy: Examining Sanad Authentication and Political Factors in the Standardization of Qirā’at Sab’ah,” *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-ilmu al-Qur’an dan Hadis* 24, no. 2 (2023): 359–382.

⁵ Rahmadi Rahmadi, Zulfa Jamalie, and Husnul Yaqin, “Banjarese Scholars and the Evolution of Islamic Education in South Kalimantan Circa 1900–1950,” *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam (Journal of Islamic Education Studies)* 12, no. 1 (2024): 63–94; and T. Aziz. Noorhidayati, S., “Hadith Studies in Indonesia: Vernacularization and Teaching Methods of Sahih Al-Bukhari in Traditional and Contemporary Islamic Educational Institutions,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 15, no. 3 (2023): 60–80, <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85193381047&doi=10.24204%2FEJPR.2023.4182&partnerID=40&md5=51ac510dfb2f89937b1576422ff9a65b>.

and other Islamic sciences.⁶ However, informal systems continued to flourish alongside, particularly through the *halaqah* model and the transmission of knowledge via personal *ijazah*. These informal systems not only preserved educational autonomy but also facilitated epistemic diversity across regions.⁷ The interaction between formal and informal models points to a pluralistic educational ethos, where legitimacy was derived from both institutional frameworks and the authority of transmission.

Several studies have contributed to the historiography of Islamic education. Fazlur Rahman (2000) emphasized the dynamism of early Islamic thought but critiqued the later stagnation due to the rigidification of *fiqh*-based curricula.⁸ Nakosteen (1996) underlined the influence of Muslim scholarship on Western intellectual history, particularly during the translation movement.⁹ Stanton (1994) focused on higher education in Islam and the political motives behind the *madrasa* system.¹⁰ Meanwhile, Idriz and Nurhamidah (2019) examined the *ijazah* tradition as a mechanism of academic certification and epistemic transmission.¹¹ Other recent studies explore philosophical debates over the inclusion of rational sciences (*'ulum al-'aqliyyah*) in Islamic curricula,¹² the role of early Sufi epistemology,¹³ and the pedagogical configuration of *kuttab* in early Damascus.¹⁴

⁶ Charles M Stanton, *Higher Learning in Islam: The Classical Period, A.D. 700–1300* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1994).

⁷ A Nakissa, "An Epistemic Shift in Islamic Law Educational Reform at Al-Azhar and Dar Al-Ulum," *Islamic Law and Society* 21, no. 3 (2014): 209–251, <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-84905372333&doi=10.1163%2F15685195-00213p02&partnerID=40&md5=376d42fdice3481boda7af496025597a>; E A Samier, "Authentic and Inauthentic Constructions of Islamic Educational Administration and Leadership: Contrasting Discursive Formations of Myths, Assumptions, Stereotypes, and Exclusions," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Educational Leadership and Management Discourse* (University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, United Kingdom: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 1429–1448, https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85159027949&doi=10.1007%2F978-3-030-99097-8_76&partnerID=40&md5=77d804ea860e383fe8d05de5f4255d39.

⁸ Rahman, *Islam*.

⁹ Nakosteen, *History of Islamic Origins of Western Education: A.D. 800–1350*.

¹⁰ Stanton, *Higher Learning in Islam: The Classical Period, A.D. 700–1300*.

¹¹ Mesut Idriz and Idha Nurhamidah, "Tradisi Penganugerahan Ijazah Dalam Sistem Pendidikan Islam: Kajian Selayang Pandang," *Ta'dibuna: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam* 2, no. 1 (2019): 1–14, <https://ejournal.radenintan.ac.id/index.php/tadibuna/article/view/4396>.

¹² Nur Ali, "Integrating the Program of School Curriculum and Pesantren Education: Case Study on the Pesantren Located in the Madrasah at Malang City," *Abjadia* 5, no. 1 (June 29, 2020): 1, <http://ejournal.uin-malang.ac.id/index.php/abjadia/article/view/9527>.

¹³ S I Ullah, "Postclassical Poetics: The Role of the Amatory Prelude for the Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 3, no. 2 (2016): 203–225, <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85057523552&doi=10.1017%2Fppli.2016.11&partnerID=40&md5=a3bobafdo66fbo7fd9ea4c83b82526>.

¹⁴ A Giladi, "Individualism and Conformity in Medieval Islamic Educational Thought: Some Notes with Special Reference to Elementary Education," *Al-Qantara* 26, no. 1 (2005): 99–121, <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0->

The literature may be further classified into four clusters. First, institutional-historical studies emphasize the rise of *madrasas* and mosque universities.¹⁵ Second, civilizational approaches focus on the transmission of knowledge to Europe and its philosophical implications.¹⁶ Third, theological and pedagogical critiques analyze how educational systems internalized or resisted dogma.¹⁷ Fourth, critical-epistemological inquiries probe the normative frameworks that underpinned knowledge validation.¹⁸ Despite their diversity, most studies remain fragmented, lacking a cohesive framework that synthesizes institutional, epistemological, and political dimensions.

This article seeks to fill that gap by offering a conceptual-analytical study of classical Islamic education using primary classical texts and contemporary scholarship. It argues that Islamic education during the classical period served not only as a medium of spiritual and moral formation but also as a mechanism of social regulation and political legitimation. This study foregrounds intertextual interpretation, historical sensitivity, and critical engagement across genres and traditions. By analyzing the political function of educational networks and their epistemic structures, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of how Islamic knowledge was structured, transmitted, and contested in its formative period.

The article is organized into five sections. The first explores the doctrinal and socio-political context that necessitated the formation of Islamic educational structures. The second maps the institutional typologies of education, distinguishing between formal and non-formal models. The third section examines the epistemological logics of *sanad*, *ijazah*, and canonization. The fourth analyzes the political implications of educational control in relation to state-

60949936037&doi=10.3989%2Falqantara.2005.v26.ii.11&partnerID=40&md5=843f6e1e6ec9f9d279097893c8a497e4.

¹⁵ Stanton, *Higher Learning in Islam: The Classical Period, A.D. 700–1300*; Giladi, “Individualism and Conformity in Medieval Islamic Educational Thought: Some Notes with Special Reference to Elementary Education.”

¹⁶ Nakosteen, *History of Islamic Origins of Western Education: A.D. 800–1350*; A Kasdi et al., “Development of Waqf in the Middle East and Its Role in Pioneering Contemporary Islamic Civilization: A Historical Approach,” *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 12, no. 1 (2022): 186–198, <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85133470323&doi=10.32350%2Fjitic.121.10&partnerID=40&md5=bc9b896e354548f7bf55a6e825585a59>.

¹⁷ R W Hefner, “Islamic Schools, Social Movements, and Democracy in Indonesia,” in *Making Modern Muslims* (Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs, Boston University, United States: University of Hawai’i Press, 2009), 55–105, <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-84872713643&partnerID=40&md5=b5c6766336e0667397d47d42dd53d006>.

¹⁸ Idriz and Nurhamidah, “Tradisi Penganugerahan Ijazah Dalam Sistem Pendidikan Islam: Kajian Selayang Pandang”; Imran Hussain Khan Suddahazai, “Reflecting on Teaching Practice: Adopting Islamic Liberatory Pedagogies within Muslim Institutes of Higher Education in UK (MIHEUK),” *Religions* 14, no. 2 (February 7, 2023): 223, <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/14/2/223>.

building and sectarian identity. The final section offers a reflective critique on the relevance of classical Islamic education for contemporary Muslim intellectual revival.

DISCUSSION

Historical Background and Theological Foundations of Early Islamic Education

The Command “Iqra” as the Foundation of Literacy and Epistemic Consciousness

The first Qur’anic revelation in Sūrat al-‘Alaq (96:1–5), beginning with “*Iqra’ bismi rabbika allaḍī khalaq...*,” affirms literacy as a sacred act rooted in divine command. Reading, writing, and teaching are not secular undertakings but theological imperatives reflecting *rubūbiyyah* (Lordship) and the epistemic order ordained by Allah. The linkage between creation (*khalaq*), pedagogy (*‘allama*), and writing (*qalam*) places knowledge at the core of Islamic civilization.¹⁹ This command was revealed to a predominantly oral society where literacy was rare, yet it catalyzed a transformation into a text-centered religious community.²⁰ Thus, literacy in Islam is both a form of spiritual awakening and a civilizational mandate.

Qur’anic literacy laid the epistemological foundation for institutionalized learning. Subsequent verses—Q.S. al-Baqarah (2:31–32) and al-Mujādalah (58:11)—further emphasize the centrality of knowledge. The former recounts the divine instruction given to Adam, while the latter elevates those “endowed with knowledge” in rank, indicating that education in Islam is not only a normative principle but also an ontological status. These theological imperatives inspired foundational educational policies, such as the Prophet Muḥammad’s decision to release literate captives after the Battle of Badr on the condition that they teach Muslims to read and write.²¹ Such initiatives illustrate how literacy was strategically deployed as infrastructure for *da’wah* and societal development.

Accordingly, “*Iqra*” is not merely an exhortation to read, but a declaration of Islam’s epistemic worldview. Knowledge is a divine trust bestowed upon humans as *khulafā’* (vicegerents), who are equipped with reason (*‘aql*), heart (*qalb*), and sensory faculties. This foundational revelation generated an educational ethos that integrates theology, ethics, and social responsibility.²²

¹⁹ Rahman, *Islam*; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (Indiana: World Wisdom, Inc, 2007).

²⁰ Stanton, *Higher Learning in Islam: The Classical Period, A.D. 700–1300*.

²¹ Nakosteen, *History of Islamic Origins of Western Education: A.D. 800–1350*.

²² Fella Lahmar, “Islamic Education: An Islamic ‘Wisdom-Based Cultural Environment’ in a Western Context,” *Religions* 11, no. 8 (August 7, 2020): 409, <https://www.mdpi.com/2077->

Orality, *Sanad*, and Pre-Modern Epistemology in Islamic Education

Pre-Islamic Arab society relied extensively on orality as the principal medium for preserving knowledge, values, and collective memory. Poetry, genealogy, and narratives were transmitted through meticulous memorization and public recitation rather than through writing.²³ Rather than displacing this oral tradition, Islam restructured it via the epistemological institution of *sanad*—the chain of transmission that connects learners to credible authorities. The *sanad* system Islamized oral culture by embedding it within a framework of moral integrity, traceability, and scholarly authentication.²⁴

Sanad functioned not only in the transmission of *ḥadīth*, but also across disciplines such as Qur’ānic exegesis, jurisprudence, theology, and linguistics. It conceptualized knowledge as fundamentally relational and ethical, with legitimacy derived from direct teacher-student relationships rather than the mere presence of written texts. Authority resided in scholars who embodied learning through moral uprightness (*‘adālah*), precision (*ḍabt*), and truthfulness (*ṣidq*), forming a pedagogical culture rooted in accountability and trust.²⁵ This oral pedagogy thrived within *majālis*—scholarly assemblies where knowledge was performed, debated, and internalized.

Through *sanad*, Islamic knowledge circulated across vast regions via *riḥlah*—intellectual journeys undertaken in pursuit of teachers. Students traveled to prominent centers such as Mecca, Kūfah, Baṣrah, and Baghdad to obtain scholarly authorizations and extend the chain of transmission. This created a decentralized yet coherent transregional epistemic space in which authority was predicated on personal transmission rather than institutional bureaucracy.²⁶ In

1444/11/8/409; Muhammad Yusuf Fadhil and Saliha Sebgag, “Sufi Approaches to Education: The Epistemology of Imam Al-Ghazali,” *Nazhruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 4, no. 1 (March 1, 2021): 91–107, <https://e-journal.uac.ac.id/index.php/NAZHRUNA/article/view/834>.

²³ Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

²⁴ Jonathan A C Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad’s Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009); M C A Macdonald, “Literacy in an Oral Environment,” in *Literacy and Identity in Pre-Islamic Arabia*, ed. M C A Macdonald (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 49–118.

²⁵ A Sahin, “Critical Issues in Islamic Education Studies: Rethinking Islamic and Western Liberal Secular Values of Education,” *Religions* 9, no. 11 (2018), [https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-](https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85056287591&doi=10.3390%2Frel910335&partnerID=40&md5=f92737a827e66dffa5238d9e7729e074)

85056287591&doi=10.3390%2Frel910335&partnerID=40&md5=f92737a827e66dffa5238d9e7729e074; Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad’s Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World*.

²⁶ Z Lessy, “Understanding Multicultural Dimensions in the History of Progressive Science in the Classical Period of Islam (610–1258 CE),” in *Interfaith Engagement Beyond the Divide: Approaches, Experiences, and Practices* (Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training, State Islamic University Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta, Indonesia: Springer Nature, 2023), 133–145, https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85206146523&doi=10.1007%2F978-981-99-3862-9_7&partnerID=40&md5=c42816eb65003ec875beb9776aa8a444; Noorhidayati, S., “Hadith Studies in Indonesia: Vernacularization and Teaching Methods of Sahih Al-Bukhari in Traditional and Contemporary Islamic Educational Institutions.”

this context, orality was not a vestige of pre-literate culture but a sophisticated system of scholarly accountability and epistemic mobility, sustained through embodied human transmission.²⁷

Social-Political Context of Pre-Islamic Arabia and the Rise of Knowledge Institutions

Pre-Islamic Arabia was structured around tribal kinship systems, where lineage and military prowess determined leadership and social hierarchy. There were no formal institutions for education, governance, or public administration; authority was grounded in blood ties rather than intellectual merit.²⁸ In this context, knowledge held no institutional value and was not regarded as a source of legitimacy or societal transformation. Islam emerged within this milieu not merely as a spiritual doctrine, but as a civilizational corrective to social fragmentation, structural ignorance (*jahiliyyah*), and aristocratic dominance. The Qur'anic revelation addressed not only personal piety but also articulated a vision for a morally and intellectually egalitarian society.²⁹

From the earliest years of prophethood, Islam began to embed knowledge into its social fabric through community-based educational models. The house of al-Arqam, the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, and the *ḥalaqahs* of the Companions functioned as formative spaces for ethical and intellectual development. These institutions, though informal and fluid, operated as powerful centers of learning and character formation, emphasizing moral integrity over formal accreditation.³⁰ Reputation, transmission chains (*sanad*), and the trustworthiness of teachers became the primary bases for scholarly legitimacy, as opposed to bureaucratic certification. This early educational architecture emerged not through imitation

²⁷ Giladi, "Individualism and Conformity in Medieval Islamic Educational Thought: Some Notes with Special Reference to Elementary Education"; R El Hour, "Teaching and Learning in the Islamic West: Some Ideas Regarding the Almohad, Marinid, and Naṣrid Educational Systems," *Religions* 16, no. 2 (2025), <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85218963189&doi=10.3390%2Frel16020139&partnerID=40&md5=63e00a4d74dd2ab6f9194fbcdf457fdb>.

²⁸ Isnain Mardiansyah, "Pre-Islamic Arab Societies: Uncovering Cultural Heritage, Social Systems, and Belief Systems," *International Journal of Religious and Interdisciplinary Studies* 1, no. March (2022): 67–84, <http://ijracs.rumahpeneleh.or.id/index.php/home/article/view/56>.

²⁹ Ahmed Renima, Habib Tiliouine, and Richard J Estes, "The Islamic Golden Age: A Story of the Triumph of the Islamic Civilization," in *The State of Social Progress of Islamic Societies*, ed. Habib Tiliouine and Richard J Estes (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 25–52, http://link.springer.com/10.1007/978-3-319-24774-8_2.

³⁰ M Idriz, "Educational Tradition of Ijāzah in Islamic History with Reference to Persian Milieu," *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 12, no. 2 (2022): 179–195, <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85144656416&doi=10.32350%2Fijtc.122.13&partnerID=40&md5=6895121d989c865b19069cco94f704b>.

of Persian or Byzantine systems, but as an internal necessity shaped by the normative force of revelation.³¹

As Islam expanded geographically, these early models evolved into more structured institutions such as *kuttāb*, *madrāsah*, and *ḥalaqah*, which facilitated broader access to knowledge. These institutions produced literate, articulate, and ethically grounded individuals equipped to engage in law, theology, linguistics, and governance.³² Islamic pedagogy was fundamentally relational, with authority grounded in personal transmission and ethical credibility rather than impersonal textual institutions. This model allowed Islamic education to function not only as a medium of religious instruction but also as a vehicle for political formation and social mobility. Knowledge thus became both the symbol and substance of a newly emerging Islamic civilization, rooted in divine revelation and communal transformation.

The Prophetic Role in Educational Transformation through Revelation and Strategy

The Prophet Muḥammad established the foundations of Islamic education not solely through the oral transmission of revelation, but also through strategic social policies. A pivotal example is his post-Badr decision to release war captives in exchange for teaching literacy to Muslims, prioritizing knowledge over material gain.³³ This initiative reframed education as a matter of public policy and embedded it within the broader framework of societal reform. By positioning education as a public good, the Prophet set a precedent for integrating pedagogy with moral and civic governance. This approach reflects a profound educational philosophy that regards intellectual merit as central to civilizational vitality.³⁴

³¹ A Sahin, “Love of Learning as a Humanizing Pedagogic Vocation: Perspectives from Traditions of Higher Education in Islam,” in *Higher Education and Love: Institutional, Pedagogical and Personal Trajectories* (Department of Education Studies, University of Warwick, Warwick, United Kingdom: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 137–187, https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85164629322&doi=10.1007%2F978-3-030-82371-9_8&partnerID=40&md5=389f8e3a6df223be2e052db01dda3280; Samier, “Authentic and Inauthentic Constructions of Islamic Educational Administration and Leadership: Contrasting Discursive Formations of Myths, Assumptions, Stereotypes, and Exclusions.”

³² Lessy, “Understanding Multicultural Dimensions in the History of Progressive Science in the Classical Period of Islam (610-1258 CE).”

³³ Maralottung Siregar, “The Role of Waqf In The Classic Islamic Education Period,” *International Journal Of Humanities Education and Social Sciences (IJHESS)* 3, no. 3 (2023): 1438–1446; Asma Afsaruddin, “Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought and Praxis,” in *The Cambridge History of Socialism*, ed. Marcel van der Linden, vol. 1, *The Cambridge History of Socialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 56–78, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/product/16B6B2EBBA8FC0913A69407F2AAE70BC>.

³⁴ M A Haidar, M Hasanah, and M A Ma’arif, “Educational Challenges to Human Resource Development in Islamic Education Institutions,” *Munaddhomah* 3, no. 4 (2022): 366–377, <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0->

Beyond Medina, the Prophet dispatched teachers to newly converted communities to disseminate the Qur'ān, basic legal principles, and core Islamic beliefs. This decentralized educational strategy democratized access to learning and disrupted elite monopolies over literacy and knowledge (Berkey, 1992; Supani et al., 2025).³⁵ Furthermore, the progressive revelation of the Qur'ān over 23 years allowed the Prophet to align educational content with evolving sociocultural conditions.³⁶ In this model, pedagogy was historical, contextual, and responsive—deeply embedded in the lived realities of the Muslim community.³⁷ Early Islamic education thus emphasized formation over formalism, integrating instruction with ethical cultivation and communal responsibility.

The Prophet's Mosque in Medina operated as a comprehensive learning environment where worship, moral instruction, and political deliberation coexisted. It was a civic-pedagogical space in which education occurred through leadership selection, treaty negotiation, and conflict resolution.³⁸ The Prophet functioned not only as a teacher but as a moral architect and social strategist, blending education with daily governance. The mosque represented a participatory and relational model of pedagogy, wherein instruction and civic engagement were inseparable. Through this integrative approach, Islam established an educational paradigm grounded in revelation, historical awareness, and collective ethics.

Non-Formal Education Institutions: Scholarly Freedom and Teacher Centrality

Non-formal education institutions during the classical Islamic period exhibited diverse organizational forms that reflected the social, cultural, and epistemological dynamics of Muslim societies at the time. Institutions such as *maktab*, *halaqah*, mosque schools, court academies, bookshop schools, and literary

85188095097&doi=10.31538%2Fmunaddhomah.v3i4.309&partnerID=40&md5=03005e7f15e079e46do61157f67f9228.

³⁵ Jonathan Porter Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), <https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691034098/the-transmission-of-knowledge-in-medieval-cairo>; Nelly Lahoud and Malcolm H Kerr, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism: Egypt and South Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-origins-of-islamic-reformism-egypt-and-south-asia-9780197200020>.

³⁶ Sahin, "Critical Issues in Islamic Education Studies: Rethinking Islamic and Western Liberal Secular Values of Education."

³⁷ Lessy, "Understanding Multicultural Dimensions in the History of Progressive Science in the Classical Period of Islam (610-1258 CE)."

³⁸ Samier, "Authentic and Inauthentic Constructions of Islamic Educational Administration and Leadership: Contrasting Discursive Formations of Myths, Assumptions, Stereotypes, and Exclusions."

salons adopted more flexible and open instructional models—far removed from the systemization and bureaucratization often associated with formal education.³⁹ For example, the *maktab* emerged as a foundational institution teaching literacy and Islamic teachings, but in many contexts it also served to foster ethics, calligraphy, and numeracy.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, the *ḥalaqah* featured a dialogic learning model that laid the groundwork for early academic interaction between students and teachers in an egalitarian yet scholarly hierarchy. With the mosque as its central learning space, the *ḥalaqah* facilitated an open and fluid educational system, allowing students to move between teachers and disciplines.⁴¹ Some classical Islamic non-formal education institutions include:

1. *Maktab*

The *maktab* arose in the first century AH and spread widely in classical Islamic society.⁴² Its primary function was to teach reading, writing, and Islamic fundamentals. In some locations, it also served as a venue for character training, grammar, calligraphy, and even social skills such as poetry and horseback riding. Often located in teachers' homes, *maktab* reflected close social relationships in the learning process. Its curricula were typically localized and adjusted to meet the needs of the local community.⁴³

2. *Ḥalaqah*

The *ḥalaqah* represents one of the most flexible learning models in early Islamic education, typically held in mosques or public spaces.⁴⁴ Participants sat in a circle, with levels based on student expertise. The teacher sat at the center, and students chose *ḥalaqahs* based on intellectual interest and teacher reputation. Between the 2nd and 4th centuries AH, this system was dominant and a hallmark of higher education in metropolitan centers like Baghdad and Cairo.⁴⁵ This model fostered direct interaction between teacher and student in authentic, liberated scholarly contexts.

3. Court Academy

Court academies, or *madrasah al-qaṣr*, flourished during the Abbasid caliphate—particularly under Harun al-Rashid and al-Ma'mūn.⁴⁶ Designed for

³⁹ Rahman, *Islam*; Nakosteen, *History of Islamic Origins of Western Education: A.D. 800–1350*.

⁴⁰ Stanton, *Higher Learning in Islam: The Classical Period, A.D. 700–1300*.

⁴¹ Giladi, "Individualism and Conformity in Medieval Islamic Educational Thought: Some Notes with Special Reference to Elementary Education."

⁴² Nakosteen, *History of Islamic Origins of Western Education: A.D. 800–1350*.

⁴³ Satadru Sen and Francis Robinson, "The 'Ulama of Farangi Mahall and Islamic Culture in South Asia," *Pacific Affairs* 75, no. 4 (2002): 621, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/4127372?origin=crossref>.

⁴⁴ Shalabi, *History of Muslim Education*.

⁴⁵ Rahman, *Islam*.

⁴⁶ Nakosteen, *History of Islamic Origins of Western Education: A.D. 800–1350*.

the elite, these academies prepared children of the nobility for leadership. Curricula included rhetoric, literature, history, chivalric etiquette, and socio-political decorum. Teachers, known as *mu'addib*, held considerable authority in delivering material. These institutions aimed more at forming ruling elites than disseminating knowledge to the general public.

4. **Mosque School**

By the 3rd century AH, mosques had become communal learning centers and public educational institutions.⁴⁷ In Baghdad alone, over 3,000 mosque complexes served dual roles as sites for *halaqah* and open instruction.⁴⁸ State-sponsored in terms of infrastructure and teacher remuneration, mosque schools covered various disciplines, from Qur'ānic exegesis and ḥadīth to logic and philosophy, forming the backbone of urban knowledge dissemination.

5. **Bookshop School**

During the Abbasid era (8th–10th century CE), bookshops functioned not only as manuscript vendors but also as study and discussion hubs.⁴⁹ Prominent scholars like Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghāzalī spent much of their time reading and writing in these venues. Bookshops reflected a renaissance in literacy and scholarly culture within urban Islamic societies, serving as informal universities where networks of writers, translators, and editors spread knowledge across regions.

6. **Literary Salon**

Literary salons emerged around Abbasid courts in the 9th century CE—especially under al-Ma'mūn.⁵⁰ These elite forums addressed philosophy, theology, grammar, and poetry under a regime of tolerance and scholarly dialogue. Attendees, both Muslim and non-Muslim, adhered to strict seating protocols based on social standing. Salons were key platforms for exchanging ideas and testing theories through open debate, representing a cosmopolitan apex in classical Islamic education.⁵¹

A defining feature of classical non-formal education was autonomy in choosing teachers, content, and learning venues. This academic freedom supported independent—even radical—thinking. Students freely selected intellectual traditions and pedagogical styles aligned with their preferences. Scholars such as al-Ghāzalī, al-Fārābī, and Ibn Sīnā developed philosophical, theological, and medical ideas within highly individualized traditions, interacting

⁴⁷ Shalabi, *History of Muslim Education*.

⁴⁸ Rahman, *Islam*.

⁴⁹ Nakosteen, *History of Islamic Origins of Western Education: A.D. 800–1350*.

⁵⁰ Shalabi, *History of Muslim Education*.

⁵¹ Suddahazai, "Reflecting on Teaching Practice: Adopting Islamic Liberatory Pedagogies within Muslim Institutes of Higher Education in UK (MIHEUK)."

with numerous teachers and diverse works.⁵² Intellectual engagement in literary salons and scholars' homes cultivated vibrant dialectics and critique—underscoring the role of non-formal education as a driver of Islamic intellectual dynamism.⁵³

One notable aspect was the *ijāzah* tradition, which conferred individual scholarly legitimacy. An *ijāzah* represented an official license from a teacher to transmit learned knowledge. More than a certification of completion, it symbolized personalized intellectual authority anchored in a transmission chain believed to trace back to Prophet Muḥammad. Awarded through direct teacher-student relationships, *ijāzah* underscored teacher-centered learning and affirmed scholarly exclusivity grounded in personal tutelage.⁵⁴ Many students were recognized by their teacher rather than their institution, as reflected in classical scholarly biographies.

However, such reverence for teacher authority and transmission chains often fostered passive scholarship. Knowledge was treated as inheritance rather than innovation. Learning emphasized memorization and literal comprehension over synthetic or critical interpretation.⁵⁵ The culture of *sharḥ* (textual commentary) was privileged over methodological exploration or innovation. Culturally, this system generated conservative academic communities resistant to external intellectual renewal.⁵⁶ Thus, the paradox of classical Islamic non-formal education emerges—it allowed learning freedom yet implicitly constrained critical thought.

Over time, this system attracted criticism for perpetuating scholarly passivity. Students were socialized into loyalty to specific knowledge traditions, with limited space for critical evolution. The formation of scholarly schools (*madhāhib*) solidified orthodoxy and codified knowledge.⁵⁷ Innovation began to

⁵² Idriz, “Educational Tradition of Ijāzah in Islamic History with Reference to Persian Milieu”; M Bano, *Female Islamic Education Movements: The Re-Democratisation of Islamic Knowledge*, *Female Islamic Education Movements: The Re-Democratisation of Islamic Knowledge* (Oxford Department of International Development, Brasenose College, University of Oxford, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2017), <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85044940908&doi=10.1017%2F9781316986721&partnerID=40&md5=9dbf6f222cef226482a775844aa7ad45>.

⁵³ Giladi, “Individualism and Conformity in Medieval Islamic Educational Thought: Some Notes with Special Reference to Elementary Education.”

⁵⁴ Rahman, *Islam*; Stanton, *Higher Learning in Islam: The Classical Period, A.D. 700–1300*.

⁵⁵ Sahin, “Critical Issues in Islamic Education Studies: Rethinking Islamic and Western Liberal Secular Values of Education.”

⁵⁶ Samier, “Authentic and Inauthentic Constructions of Islamic Educational Administration and Leadership: Contrasting Discursive Formations of Myths, Assumptions, Stereotypes, and Exclusions.”

⁵⁷ Giladi, “Individualism and Conformity in Medieval Islamic Educational Thought: Some Notes with Special Reference to Elementary Education.”

be seen as deviance. Internal and external critics—including reform-minded scholars—called for revitalizing Islamic learning methods and ethos.⁵⁸

Despite its limitations, the classical non-formal educational system offers valuable lessons for contemporary Islamic education. The fluid learning spaces, personalized instruction, and academic autonomy are elements worth integrating into modern pedagogy. However, authority structures and epistemic norms must be reformulated to embrace pluralism and interdisciplinarity. Developing integrative curricula, fostering dialogue across disciplines, and adopting research-based learning are essential responses to modern challenges—akin to the practices of scholars during Islam's intellectual golden age.⁵⁹

Madrasah: Formal Educational Institutions and the Centralization of Scholarly Discourse

The emergence of the *madrasah* as a formal educational institution in classical Islam marks a pivotal stage in the development of Islamic educational systems. Historically, its rise was driven by the limitations of non-formal education such as the *halaqah* and *maktab*, which lacked structural management, standardized curricula, and consistent funding.⁶⁰ The *madrasah* developed in response to society's need for an educational institution that was administratively organized and independent of worship spaces, particularly the mosque.⁶¹ One of the most influential founders of the *madrasah* was Nizām al-Mulk, vizier of the Seljuk Dynasty, who in 1065 CE (456 AH) established the Nizāmiyyah *madrasah* in Baghdad.⁶² However, historical evidence suggests that *madrasahs* existed earlier, such as the Madrasah Miyan Dahiyah (circa 883 CE / 270 AH) and Madrasah al-Baihaqī (circa 1023 CE / 414 AH), indicating deeper institutional roots within Islamic history.⁶³

The Nizāmiyyah *madrasah* not only introduced a systematic institutional framework but also standardized curricula and formalized teacher recruitment.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Bano, *Female Islamic Education Movements: The Re-Democratisation of Islamic Knowledge*.

⁵⁹ Lessy, "Understanding Multicultural Dimensions in the History of Progressive Science in the Classical Period of Islam (610-1258 CE)"; Idriz and Nurhamidah, "Tradisi Penganugerahan Ijazah Dalam Sistem Pendidikan Islam: Kajian Selayang Pandang."

⁶⁰ Nakosteen, *History of Islamic Origins of Western Education: A.D. 800-1350*; Suddahazai, "Reflecting on Teaching Practice: Adopting Islamic Liberatory Pedagogies within Muslim Institutes of Higher Education in UK (MIHEUK)."

⁶¹ Shalabi, *History of Muslim Education*.

⁶² Stanton, *Higher Learning in Islam: The Classical Period, A.D. 700-1300*.

⁶³ Nakissa, "An Epistemic Shift in Islamic Law Educational Reform at Al-Azhar and Dar Al-Ulum."

⁶⁴ Novianti Muspiroh, "Madrasah Nizamiyah: Sebuah Momentum Dalam Sejarah Pendidikan Islam," *Jurnal Tamaddun: Jurnal Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Islam* 5, no. 1 (October 10, 2017), <http://syekhnurjati.ac.id/jurnal/index.php/tamaddun/article/view/1997>.

Its curriculum included Islamic sciences such as *fiqh*, *ḥadīth*, *tafsīr*, and *kalām*, as well as Arabic language and logic, aimed at strengthening the authority of Ash‘arite theology and the Shāfi‘ī school of law.⁶⁵ Unlike the flexible structure of the *ḥalaqah*, the *madrasah* implemented classroom hierarchies, educational levels, and formal evaluation systems, effectively laying the groundwork for Islamic higher education.⁶⁶ Administratively, *madrasahs* were managed hierarchically, with a *nāzīr* (head of school) overseeing academic and administrative policies. This professionalism and standardization made the *madrasah* a dominant model replicated across Islamic centers such as Damascus, Cairo, and Nishapur from the 11th to 13th centuries CE.⁶⁷

A defining feature of the *madrasah* was its ideological alignment with state interests, which set it apart from non-formal institutions. The Nizāmiyyah *madrasah* was founded within a political context aimed at countering Shi‘ite dominance and promoting Ash‘arite Sunnism as state orthodoxy.⁶⁸ Within this framework, education became a hegemonic tool used to secure political authority and suppress alternative religious thought.⁶⁹ Teachers were selected based on their loyalty to state-sanctioned doctrines, and the texts taught were carefully curated to reinforce dominant narratives. Thus, the *madrasah* functioned not only as an academic institution but also as a site for reproducing state ideology.⁷⁰

This hegemonic function is evident in the *madrasah’s* commitment to a single legal-theological school and the exclusion of others from formal curricula.⁷¹ Such exclusivity led to the creation of religious orthodoxy, wherein Islamic discourse became uniform and unresponsive to new intellectual dynamics. As a result, scientific creativity was stifled, and educational institutions were transformed into mechanisms for knowledge reproduction rather than production. In some instances, *madrasahs* even served to censor ideas that challenged political authority. Over time, this function contributed to intellectual

⁶⁵ Idriz and Nurhamidah, “Tradisi Penganugerahan Ijazah Dalam Sistem Pendidikan Islam: Kajian Selayang Pandang.”

⁶⁶ Stanton, *Higher Learning in Islam: The Classical Period, A.D. 700–1300*.

⁶⁷ Shalabi, *History of Muslim Education*.

⁶⁸ Giladi, “Individualism and Conformity in Medieval Islamic Educational Thought: Some Notes with Special Reference to Elementary Education”; S Kenan, “The Formative Period of the Modern University,” *Osmanli Arastirmalari - Journal of Ottoman Studies* 2015, no. 45 (2015): 333–367, <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-84946722932&doi=10.18589%2Foa.570017&partnerID=40&md5=5b9e513a52bbfe8140687e200abeecfo>.

⁶⁹ Samier, “Authentic and Inauthentic Constructions of Islamic Educational Administration and Leadership: Contrasting Discursive Formations of Myths, Assumptions, Stereotypes, and Exclusions.”

⁷⁰ Sahin, “Critical Issues in Islamic Education Studies: Rethinking Islamic and Western Liberal Secular Values of Education.”

⁷¹ Bano, *Female Islamic Education Movements: The Re-Democratisation of Islamic Knowledge*.

stagnation, especially when *madrasahs* failed to adapt to contemporary challenges through interdisciplinary approaches.

The *madrasah's* dependence on state funding and *waqf* (religious endowments) also compromised academic independence. Most *madrasahs* were financed by rulers or high officials with political agendas influencing curriculum development.⁷² The *waqf* funds used for operational expenses were often managed by state elites, thus academic direction and faculty selection were not entirely autonomous.⁷³ In many cases, teaching positions in *madrasahs* became part of political patronage networks, requiring ideological conformity to retain one's post. This contrasts sharply with *halaqahs* or bookshop schools, where teachers enjoyed significantly greater independence due to their detachment from state or institutional authority.⁷⁴

Nevertheless, *madrasahs* played a major role in the institutionalization of Islamic higher education. Prominent institutions such as al-Azhar (founded 972 CE), Zaytūnah in Tunisia, and al-Qarawiyyīn in Fez became pioneers of advanced education and remain active today.⁷⁵ The *madrasah* provided a foundational framework for the emergence of the university in the Islamic tradition, with organized curricula, academic tiers, and evaluation systems. Many great Muslim scholars of the classical period were associated with *madrasahs* as teachers or alumni. Thus, despite its limitations, the *madrasah* has profoundly shaped the institutional model of modern Islamic education.

In conclusion, the *madrasah* represents a synthesis between academic needs and political demands. It became a space of negotiation between knowledge and power, intellectual independence and ideological control. To understand the epistemological dynamics of classical Islam, it is essential to view the *madrasah* not merely as an educational institution but also as a site of power contestation and ideological affirmation. The historical role of the *madrasah* in shaping classical Islamic discourse is inseparable from the structures of authority that surrounded it. Therefore, a critical evaluation of the *madrasah* as an educational model remains vital in constructing a more reflective, open, and transformative Islamic educational system in the contemporary era.

⁷² Kasdi et al., "Development of Waqf in the Middle East and Its Role in Pioneering Contemporary Islamic Civilization: A Historical Approach."

⁷³ Nakosteen, *History of Islamic Origins of Western Education: A.D. 800–1350*.

⁷⁴ Rahman, *Islam*; Idriz, "Educational Tradition of Ijāzah in Islamic History with Reference to Persian Milieu."

⁷⁵ I F Gesink, *Islamic Reform and Conservatism: Al-Azhar and the Evolution of Modern Sunni Islam, Islamic Reform and Conservatism: Al-Azhar and the Evolution of Modern Sunni Islam* (Baldwin-Wallace College, Berea, OH, United States: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2009), <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85185209427&partnerID=40&md5=dc53946ca4f38e70bc45195092b66f2c>.

Curriculum and Epistemology in Classical Islamic Educational Institutions

Between the 7th and 13th centuries CE, classical Islamic education developed around two main institutional poles: non-formal institutions such as the *halaqah* and *maktab*, and formal institutions such as the *madrasah*. The fundamental differences between these institutions lay not only in their organizational structures and management systems but also in the epistemological character shaping their respective curricula. Non-formal institutions were rooted in particularistic approaches, emphasizing personal teacher-student relationships and memorization methods, whereas the *madrasah* introduced a standardized, systematic, and hierarchical curriculum. Although the *madrasah* represented progress in educational structuring, both institutional forms displayed strong tendencies toward conservative knowledge reproduction. The dominance of textual models and reliance on past authorities were defining features of the epistemological framework of this period.⁷⁶

Non-formal education curricula were generally shaped by the teacher's intellectual preferences and local scholarly traditions. Instruction focused primarily on the Qur'an, *hadith*, *fiqh*, and *naḥw* (Arabic grammar), with little systematic integration of rational sciences such as logic, mathematics, or philosophy. While flexible and adaptive to students' needs, this model led to the fragmentation of intellectual discourse and lacked collective mechanisms of validation. By contrast, the *madrasah* curriculum formally incorporated canonical texts, established proficiency levels, and initiated subject differentiation.⁷⁷ However, this did not necessarily constitute substantive reform, as the curriculum remained grounded in the legitimization of authoritative texts and avoided experimental approaches.

One significant consequence of this curricular structure was the emergence of a stark dichotomy between religious sciences (*al-ʿulūm al-dīniyyah*) and rational sciences (*ʿulūm ʿaqliyyah*). Religious sciences were granted the highest epistemological status and treated as the foundation of the educational system, while disciplines like logic, rhetoric, medicine, and astronomy were marginalized—often regarded with suspicion. In many cases, the teaching of rational sciences was limited to elite intellectual circles and was not mainstreamed into official *madrasah* curricula.⁷⁸

This reinforced a polarization between revelation and reason, contrary to the integrative scientific ethos of early Islam, exemplified by *Bayt al-Ḥikmah*, which

⁷⁶ Nakosteen, *History of Islamic Origins of Western Education: A.D. 800–1350*; Rahman, *Islam*.

⁷⁷ Idriz and Nurhamidah, "Tradisi Penganugerahan Ijazah Dalam Sistem Pendidikan Islam: Kajian Selayang Pandang."

⁷⁸ Rahman, *Islam*.

promoted a synthesis between rational inquiry and sacred texts.⁷⁹ This epistemological imbalance later became an inherited feature influencing the structure of Islamic education into the modern era.

Pedagogical methods further reflected distinct epistemic approaches. In both *halaqahs* and *madrasahs*, memorization (*hifẓ*) and textual commentary (*sharḥ*) were the primary methods. Knowledge mastery was measured not by the exploration of new ideas but by the extent to which a student could recall and interpret authorized texts. This educational culture of *taqlīd* (imitation) ensured scholarly stability but hindered creativity and innovation. The tradition of elaborating commentaries upon previous commentaries often expanded textual authority without extending the horizons of knowledge.⁸⁰

Sharp criticism of this educational model emerged by the 17th century, notably from Kâtip Çelebi, who lamented the loss of vitality in Islamic education. He argued that the system had become verbalistic and anti-experimental, creating a rift between the Muslim world and global scientific progress.⁸¹ Çelebi's concerns echoed those of Ibn Khaldūn, who emphasized that knowledge must serve practical and societal relevance. This reveals that epistemological issues not only led to intellectual stagnation but also impacted the Muslim world's civilizational positioning. The failure to harmonize revealed and rational knowledge became a principal cause of the rupture in the continuity of scientific innovation in Islamic thought.

Nonetheless, there were marginal efforts to synthesize these epistemic traditions. The early Abbasid *Bayt al-Ḥikmah* exemplified this, where large-scale translation of Greek and Persian works into Arabic laid the foundation for rational sciences within an Islamic framework. In this environment, logic, medicine, and astronomy were not only accepted but further developed by Muslim scholars such as al-Kindī, al-Fārābī, and Ibn Sīnā. Unfortunately, this integrative spirit was not sustained in post-11th-century *madrasah* curricula, which increasingly emphasized orthodoxy as the basis for scholarly legitimacy. The curriculum and epistemological structure thus became reified, distancing itself from the principle of *tajdīd* (renewal), which should have characterized the Islamic intellectual tradition.⁸²

Considering this broader historical trajectory, the primary challenge of classical Islamic education lies not merely in the existence of institutions, but in its epistemological architecture. When educational systems prioritize textual

⁷⁹ Nakosteen, *History of Islamic Origins of Western Education: A.D. 800–1350*.

⁸⁰ Shalabi, *History of Muslim Education*; Idriz, "Educational Tradition of Ijāzah in Islamic History with Reference to Persian Milieu."

⁸¹ Idriz, "Educational Tradition of Ijāzah in Islamic History with Reference to Persian Milieu."

⁸² Rahman, *Islam*; Nakosteen, *History of Islamic Origins of Western Education: A.D. 800–1350*.

authority while marginalizing rational experimentation, the result is knowledge reproduction devoid of innovative capacity. Therefore, the comparison between formal and non-formal institutions reflects deeper divergences in knowledge paradigms. Revisiting the epistemological structures of Islamic educational history is essential for devising systems that are both faithful to classical traditions and responsive to contemporary challenges.

Table 1. Comparative Curriculum and Epistemology of Classical Islamic Educational Institutions (650–1250 CE)

Aspect	Non-Formal Institutions (<i>halaqah</i> , <i>maktab</i> , bookshops)	Formal Institutions (<i>madrasah</i>)
Curriculum Structure	Non-standardized; teacher- and text-dependent	Standardized; systematized
Knowledge Focus	Traditional religious sciences	Religious sciences (<i>fiqh</i> , <i>kalām</i>); limited logic
Learning Methods	Memorization, repetition (<i>tikrār</i>), Q&A	Memorization, commentary (<i>sharḥ</i>), formal debate
Epistemological Approach	Textual, particularistic, local	Textual, hierarchical, dogmatic
Revelation–Reason Relationship	Separated; revelation dominant	Reason limited, subordinated to revelation
Scholarly Output	Fragmented, locally specialized	Textual reproduction; minimal innovation

The table above illustrates that both non-formal and formal institutions during the classical period exhibited a strong textual orientation, albeit through different mechanisms and structures. Non-formal institutions offered flexibility but lacked evaluative systems and epistemological synthesis, while the *madrasah* introduced standardization at the expense of critical and interdisciplinary engagement. These differences reflect an unresolved epistemological dichotomy between revelation and reason. This imbalance contributed to the stagnation of Islamic scholarship and reinforced educational conservatism for centuries. Therefore, reforming the curriculum and epistemology of Islamic education requires a reconciliatory approach capable of bridging classical legacies with modern intellectual demands.

CONCLUSION

The study of classical Islamic educational institutions and their characteristics from the 7th to the 13th century reveals a fundamental dualism within the educational system: on one hand, non-formal systems such as the *halaqah* and *maktab* promoted intellectual autonomy, scholarly mobility, and curricular flexibility; on the other hand, the *madrrasah* as a formal educational institution introduced systematic structures, standardized curricula, and ideological control by the state. This duality created epistemological tensions between academic freedom and doctrinal hegemony. Within this framework, both teachers and institutions played a crucial role as gatekeepers of knowledge transmission, where intellectual authority was defined more by chains of transmission (*sanad*) and *ijāzah* than by modern institutional validation. Nevertheless, while non-formal education promised a more fluid space for intellectual experimentation, its reliance on personal authority and traditional dogma rendered it less adaptive to evolving scientific methods and contemporary challenges.

The stagnation of scientific progress in classical Islamic civilization can largely be traced to an epistemological orientation that prioritized knowledge reproduction over knowledge production. Curricula in both educational systems centered on authoritative texts and repetitive content, with memorization and commentary (*sharḥ*) serving as core pedagogical methods—hindering the development of critical dialectics and interdisciplinary innovation. The epistemic imbalance between revealed sciences and rational sciences reflected a fragmented and tense knowledge system, wherein revelation was elevated as the dominant source while reason was subordinated. These findings suggest that the classical Islamic educational model helped shape a conservative intellectual disposition resistant to empirical and rational inquiry. Therefore, revitalizing the legacy of classical Islamic education requires a critical reassessment of its epistemological foundations, rather than a mere romanticization of its institutional forms.

Given the limitations of this study, which focuses on institutional and epistemological analysis during the classical period without fully addressing local dynamics and contemporary praxis, it recommends further research into the modern Islamic educational system, which continues to reproduce classical models structurally and epistemologically—in curricula, teaching methods, and institutional orientations. Reconstructing the Islamic education system should aim to strengthen a progressive scientific ethos by balancing the authority of revelation with the potential of reason, promoting intellectual freedom, and encouraging interdisciplinary dialogue. This reformulation should not abandon the classical tradition but instead use it as a foundation for building a more

reflective, contextualized, and transformative Islamic educational system capable of addressing the challenges of the 21st century.

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