

The Issue of Competitiveness in Islamic Dimension: The Paradigmatic Case of Iranian Child Education

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Abstract

Drawing on field-based ethnographic research, this essay examines the public primary school system of the Islamic Republic of Iran under Āyatollah Khāmenei's leadership, foregrounding the distinctive and pervasive role played by competitiveness. The analysis shows that, within the reward structures of these state-run institutions, pedagogical practices are oriented towards forming educated citizens and morally upright Muslims, whose qualities of will and intention are cultivated primarily through extrinsic motivational devices. While examining the dynamics of competitiveness and success, the article argues that, in Iran, syncretic pedagogical approaches inspired by Montessori's philosophy of education—which explicitly privilege intrinsic motivation—may create more favourable conditions for competitiveness to evolve beyond its traditionally antagonistic configuration. In this emerging framework, competitiveness may be reconceptualised as a propaedeutic force capable of supporting the fullest realisation of each individual's potential. Such a reorientation would aim to prevent the dissipation of competitive energy in emulation, superiority-seeking, or the avoidance of inferiority and exclusion, redirecting it instead towards the healthy flourishing of each child's natural dispositions.

Keywords: *competitiveness, Iran, Islam, reward, Montessori.*

INTRODUCTION

The relevance of competitiveness in Iranian educational contexts significantly emerged during the ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the country to assess the potential reception of syncretic methods in primary school settings.

As the research revealed, over the past few decades the reward system has gradually become dominant in the Islamic Republic, replacing former forms of physical punishment with reinforcements and rewards, considered disrespectful towards the child and, at any rate, far less effective.

In accordance with the predominant tendencies characterising Islamic educational settings, competition among peers in Iranian public primary schools is currently fostered

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through the establishment of prizes obtainable upon achieving a predetermined point total. Classrooms display a poster that records the hierarchical distribution of the scores obtained by each child during exercises and homework. Every time a pupil performs well—that is, whenever he or she performs in the way considered most appropriate by the teacher—they earn points and climbs up the ranking. Once a predetermined number of points is reached, the child receives a small reward (a pen, a toy car, a ball, a book, clips, stickers) or permission to engage in a desired activity. Scores are accumulated through good grades, good behaviour, and well-executed homework, and pupils are ranked on the basis of the point total they obtain throughout the year.

After the ranking is drawn up, a poster is hung on the wall displaying the names and close-up photographs of the three most commendable pupils. The picture of the most praiseworthy one is displayed centrally and in a larger format than those of the other two; alternatively, it appears at the top of the poster, followed by the photographs of the children awarded second and third place. Those judged the best win a camp or a trip to visit a city, while the others can do nothing but witness the applause and congratulations that teachers and parents reserve for the winners.

The use of extrinsic motivational tools has become widespread in the country, to the point that most teachers acknowledge their difficulty in adapting to a system in which learners do not receive grades or rewards and are not included in merit rankings. Having themselves grown up and been trained in a competitive environment—one in which not only teachers' expectations regarding pupils' excellence but also those of parents have remained consistently high—they struggle to imagine alternative approaches.

During our conversation, one of the primary school teachers in attendance commented on the arguments presented at the event, expressing her reservations in the following words:

To motivate the children, for daily positive behaviour or good work, we give them immediate recognition: they can earn stars, stickers, a smile or a "Good Job!". These are quick rewards that they usually collect in groups of two or three over the days. Since the system we use is cumulative, when they manage to reach ten quick rewards in total, they can get a book, some food or a piece of cake, or even choose a small toy from a special box we keep for this purpose. [...]. We have always been used to working this way [...]. We see how enthusiastic the children become when they receive prizes, which makes it hard for us to let go of this form of emotional gratification—both for them and for ourselves.

This reticence illustrates how deeply such practices have become embedded in the sphere of primary education.

Nevertheless, according to the founder and supervisor of the didactics of the Mofid schools of Tehrān—who has led Montessori method workshops across the country and whose work has consistently underscored the importance of nurturing children's intrinsic motivations and respecting their individual learning needs—a reward-based system generates competition, hierarchisation, and comparison among peers. It induces a sense of inadequacy in children who accumulate lower scores or receive punishments, which may even include being denied lunch. As the Iranian educational psychologist explains, ignoring or isolating a child is as harmful as the physical punishment prohibited by law,

because humiliation deprives the child of the opportunity to satisfy essential needs, such as feeling adequate and accepted.

The experience of humiliation, punishment, and isolation leaves lasting traces and is accompanied by burdensome memories, as emerged from in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with young parents and teachers about their personal experiences during primary school—a legacy that found immediate bodily resonance in the closed and retracted posture adopted during the interviews, triggered by the memory of past punishments; a disposition which, in one case, manifested as a fetal-like posture, explicitly reflecting internalised experiences of vulnerability and fear of violation. This is yet a further reason why, in training teachers, the aforementioned educational psychologist insists on the need to foster mutual respect, both between teacher and pupil and among peers.

While examining the issue of competitiveness within an Islamic framework through the paradigmatic case of Iranian primary education, this article investigates the reward and punishment logics to which Muslim pedagogy continues to adhere, both within and beyond Iran. It also seeks to address a persistent gap in Islamic pedagogical literature: the lack of conscious engagement with syncretic educational approaches and the reluctance to acknowledge the psychological risks associated with practices such as reliance on extrinsic motivational resources and the stimulation of competitive tendencies in peer relations.

From a psycho-pedagogical perspective, it becomes evident that a school system positioning children within a hierarchical view of themselves and others—feeding in them the fear of rejection if they are ranked as inferior or subordinate—increases vulnerability, anxiety, and stress. In such a condition, the child is pushed to strive to avoid inferiority, exclusion, and the related feelings that may lead to a sense of defeat and depression. As confirmed by prior research, striving to avoid inferiority proves to be a significant predictor of psychopathology, thereby revealing the dark side of (induced) competitive behaviour¹.

As an original contribution, in addition to exploring the educational realities of the Islamic Republic through ethnographic research and presenting the case of Tehrān's Mofid schools which counter prevailing trends by adopting a distinctive, child-centred pedagogy, the article argues that educational approaches explicitly privileging intrinsic motivation may create the conditions for competitiveness to evolve beyond its traditionally antagonistic configuration and to be reconceptualised as a propaedeutic force capable of supporting the fullest realisation of individual potential.

Such a reorientation may prevent competitive energy from being dissipated in emulation, superiority seeking, or the avoidance of inferiority and exclusion, redirecting

¹ Paul Gilbert, *Psychotherapy and Counselling for Depression*, 3rd ed. (London: Sage, 2007); Paul Gilbert et al., "Development of a Striving to Avoid Inferiority Scale," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 46 (2007): 633–48, Paul Gilbert et al., "The Dark Side of Competition: How Competitive Behaviour and Striving to Avoid Inferiority Are Linked to Depression, Anxiety, Stress, and Self-Harm," *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, and Practice* 82 (2009): 123–36.

it instead towards the healthy flourishing of each child's natural dispositions.

METHOD

This essay is informed by both bibliographic research and empirical fieldwork, the latter personally undertaken by the author with a qualitative ethnographic method and the use of in-depth and semi-structured interviews. In practice, the interviews consisted of discussions conducted with active participants within the Iranian educational context and key informants. In accordance with qualitative ethnographic practice, the selection of participants was purposive. To elicit responses that were as spontaneous and unexpected as possible, the administration of written or pre-formulated questionnaires was carefully avoided. The in-depth interviews allowed for the narration of personal experiences and non-replicable explorations, whilst the semi-structured interview approach served to guide the conversation towards the topic of interest through prompts for dialogue, rather than the use of closed-ended questions. To avoid shifting the focus of this study away from the issue of competitiveness under discussion, I refer the reader to the essay cited in the footnote² for more detailed information regarding the data collection methods implemented during the fieldwork. Interviews and meetings were authorised by the Iranian government via the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO Tehrān), which checked and certified the fieldwork carried out during the months of January, February, and March 2017. The research was conducted by the author at kindergartens and primary schools in the Iranian provinces of Ostān-e Tehrān, Ostān-e Fārs, Ostān-e Bushehr and Ostān-e Sīstān-Balūcistān.

The identities of the participants will remain anonymous, as will those of the public and private institutions visited by the author across the listed regions, unless their explicit mention is deemed necessary. Taken as a whole, the aforementioned research benefited from the kind participation of Iranian clerics, preschool teachers, university professors, psychologists, and philosophers of education from Imam Khomeini's Education and Research Institute, Al-Mustafa International University, Shiraz University, and the Cultural and Research Centre Āyatollāh Rashād.

While this essay in particular focuses on the theme of competitiveness and explores the paradigmatic example of the courageous, counter-current didactic initiative represented by the Mofid schools in Tehrān, the entire field study was designed by the author with the aim of shadowing and collaborating with independent educational psychologists who, through private workshops held across the country, were pioneering the training of primary and preschool teachers in the use of materials developed within the method and in Maria Montessori's conception of childhood. It investigated the compatibility between Islamic sensibilities and the Montessori perspective and considered the potential of her pedagogical approach to support a form of care attuned to

² Paola Colonello, "Where The Map Turns Red: The Multiple Expressions of Risk In Ethnographic Research". In: D. L. Mulligan, P. A. Danaher (Eds), *Researchers at Risk. Precarity, Jeopardy and Uncertainty in Academia*. Palgrave Studies in Education Research Methods (PSERM), Springer International, 2021: 249–261. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-53857-6_16

the child's *fiṭra*. The researcher's knowledge of Islamic culture, combined with a close study of Montessori literature, was subsequently employed to formulate a scientifically grounded rationale intended to legitimise, in the eyes of the theocratic government, the benefits of embracing Montessori pedagogy within the Islamic Republic. This specific phase of the field research aimed to safeguard the security of the Iranian actors involved in the pioneering project by presenting to the Šī'ite clergy the affinities between Montessori's conception of the child's inner potential and the Islamic concept of *fiṭra*³—a comparative analysis intended to mitigate resistance and, consequently, to facilitate the introduction and dissemination of Maria Montessori's educational approach nationwide.

For the same safeguarding reasons, prior to publishing the contents of the present article, the author chose to wait for the unfolding of events, the loosening of governmental restrictions, the gradual opening of the first institutions explicitly adopting the Montessori method, as well as the publication of scholarly works in Fārsi reporting the results of research conducted within the country by psychologists of Iranian nationality.

The study continued remotely over the following years due to the subsequent impossibility of entering the country for research and teaching purposes owing to personal safety concerns. Collaboration with ICRO Tehrān itself also continued between 2020 and 2022, as evidenced by the research published by the author in her capacity as a member of the Scientific Committee on Education and Neoliberalisms at the University of Milan-Bicocca⁴. Concurrently, cyclical web-based follow-ups were maintained with the key participants of the fieldwork (primary school and preschool teachers, educators, educational psychologists, and academics). The findings presented here also draw on observations gathered through monitoring activities, which include the analysis of Iranian Ministry of Education training courses offered over the years via websites controlled by the theocratic government (such as the example documented at <http://emis.imps.ac.ir>).

The study was conducted ethically and transparently, with full respect for all participants and stakeholders involved, including the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which formally authorised the author's presence in the field and granted her the discretionary opportunity to carry out research. For the sake of transparency, prior to concluding her fieldwork the author submitted to ICRO Tehrān a formal report containing detailed information regarding her movements within the country and the individuals formally interviewed at the academic institutions visited.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The issue of competitiveness

During a discussion on the issues of competitiveness and competitive drive within learning environments, the Director of the Department of Islamic Culture and Civilization at Al-Mustafa International University in Qom, 'Abbāsālī Barāti, observed that,

³ Cfr. Paola Colonello, "Caring for Fiṭra: A Point of Encounter Between Islām and Montessori's Conception of the Child's Inner Potential," *Al-Musyrif: Jurnal Bimbingan dan Konseling Islam* 8, no. 2 (2025): 253–76.

⁴ Cfr. Paola Colonello, "L'Iran e le trappole neoliberiste in educazione. Conflitti e contagi [Iran and the Neoliberalist Traps in Education. Conflicts and Contagions]." *MeTis*, Suppl. (2022): 141–51. ISBN 978-88-6194-572-3.

paradoxically, despite its idiosyncratic stance towards the West, Iran has modelled its school system on the Anglo-Saxon one—albeit through a “zigzagging” process of adaptation. According to the scholar, this mimesis is what has led Iranians to emphasise individualism, competition, and the desire to prevail, not only in schools or academic seminars, but also beyond strictly educational settings. It is no coincidence, he observed, that Iranians tend to excel in individual sports such as *Zurhāneh* (wrestling), while proving less successful in team sports, which require harmony and collaboration—skills for which people are comparatively less trained.

Competitiveness differs from antagonism. It is rather characterised by a fluid energy that can be induced to converge in alternative directions and stimulated for evolutionary purposes, facilitating orientation towards improvement and the manifestation of distinctive qualities and talents. Conversely, if conveyed by tools that support a low level of awareness and forced to express itself as competitiveness, it can become a vector of needs such as arrogance, the desire to excel, the craving for power, the will to hierarchise human reality, and to attribute degrees of value and levels of presumed merit under whose label individuals are classified. This hierarchy of alleged merits does not take into account the perfection achieved in a personal skill: “best” or “winner” is not the one who has committed to refining talents and skills in order to perfect a performance deemed suitable for expressive needs, but rather the one who has carried out the same task required of many and done so in the way that best matches the personal expectations of the teacher or educator.

While setting themselves the goal of drawing closer to the realisation of the divine plan that the Creator has designed for humankind, why should Muslims limit their competitive satisfaction to competition among peers who are predictably imperfect in their humanity?

In other words, why should Muslims be induced to compete with their peers and to excel in the rankings displayed on classroom walls, when their goal of growth and empowerment should be directed towards individual refinement, in accordance with the prescriptions of their *fiṭra*?⁵

Barāti believes that this sort of scholastic approach is somewhat anachronistic and unsuitable for the consistent application of Islamic precepts, and that the country would benefit from its review and renewal. Since they are mainly oriented towards the development of a competitive-adversarial spirit rather than an evolutionary one, some educational approaches implicitly appeal to resources that are reviled by Islām itself and that belong to the low passions of the *nafs*⁶—such as envy, vanity, and greed, as well as the inauthenticity of a solicited emulation—when, on the contrary, while educating children’s will, we should learn to save them from destructive conceits, preferring work

⁵ For Islām, *fiṭra* represents the inherent divine essence of the human being. Although in Fārsi the word corresponding to the Arabic-Qur’ānic term *fiṭra* is “*feṭrat*”, in this paper the use of the Arabic expression (Qur’ān 30:30) is preferred, in respect of the language in which the Qur’ānic message was revealed to the Prophet.

⁶ *Cfr.* Paola Colonello, “Ġihād al-Nafs: An Inquiry into Striving and Spirituality in Dialogue with Western Psychology.” *Al-Jadwa: Jurnal Studi Islam* 5, no. 1 (2025a): 54–71. <https://doi.org/10.38073/aljadwa.3354>

that causes the inner life to expand and leads to great undertakings⁷.

Rewards and punishments are closely connected with emulation, since through them children are induced to consider those peers who obtain high marks and awards as cleverer than themselves, and they are encouraged to imitate and possibly overtake them. A consequence of emulation is children's renunciation of the pursuit of their authenticity and of nurturing harmonious feelings within their own lives.

In this regard, anticipating future Western pedagogical debates and Montessori's idea of education, in 1762 Rousseau bitterly observed:

*It is quite strange that since people first became involved with raising children, no instrument for guiding them has been imagined other than emulation, jealousy, envy, vanity, avidity, and vile fear—all the most dangerous passions, the quickest to ferment and the most appropriate to corrupt the soul, even before the body has been formed. With each lesson that one wants to put into their heads before its proper time, a vice is planted in the depth of their hearts. Senseless teachers think they work wonders when they make children wicked in order to teach them what goodness is. And then they solemnly tell us, "Such is man." Yes, such is the man you have made.*⁸

Feelings of emulation, jealousy, envy, vanity, greed, and vile fear all presuppose that attention is directed towards an external subject, one that is alternative to the Self. We emulate someone we think is better than we are, or whom we are told to consider as such; we are jealous of those persons or things we wish to be the only ones to possess; we are envious of the characteristics that distinguish other individuals or communities, of the riches or abilities that others have and that we are unable to obtain. We are afraid of those whom we perceive as extraneous, of those we consider other than ourselves, and in this way we widen the distances that tend to divide us. As long as the focus remains on competition, these are emotions that can arise and with which we have to deal. Different is an approach to life in which the other is complementary to us and not antagonistic: an ally, not an adversary. Different, too, is an educational solution that first allows the individual to ally himself with himself, instead of shaping himself around a reality that has the face of the adversary, of the enemy—of the competitor.

Paradoxically, the assumptions of Šī'a, in this regard, are clear. According to tradition, 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib⁹ defined the limits within which competitiveness can be realised in a way that is profitable for both the individual and the community, and stated that, if people are pushed to be competitors, they should reserve the right to be so only in establishing the ordinances of Allāh and in enjoining what is good.

⁷ Maria Montessori, *L'auto-educazione nelle scuole elementari [Spontaneous Activity in Education]* (Milan: Garzanti, 2014).

⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 91–92.

⁹ 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, *Ghurur al-Hikam wa Durar al-Kalim: Exalted Aphorisms and Pearls of Speech*, ed. N. al-Amudi, trans. T. R. Jaffer (Qom: Ansariyan, 2012).

The ambiguity of success

In order not to lose direction, man is naturally pushed to give orientation to his movement. His actions, when conscious, have a motion that is not only goal-oriented but also meaning-oriented. Human action is not a simple act; rather, it consists in giving meaning to what one does, in acting instead of being acted upon by others or by social automatisms. The alternative would lead to hiding all possible personal chances of happiness¹⁰. ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib¹¹ himself teaches that the one who is diligent becomes fortunate, and that the one who strives with all his effort reaches the core of his desired objective. However, this diligence and effort must be exercised consciously, and the objectives themselves, in order to be truly “desired”, must spring from intrinsic motivation: they must be part of the individual’s own project. The alternative would be to end up desiring the desire of others, fomenting rivalry against another desiring subject, and feeling incomplete and unhappy when we finally grasp what we believed we had spontaneously desired.

The French anthropologist René Girard¹² explains that this rivalry is not the result of an accidental convergence of the desires of several people upon the same object but is rather the outcome of the desire expressed by the rival, who becomes a model for the very essence through which desire itself is constituted. Perceiving himself as incomplete, man waits for someone else to suggest a way to compensate for his incompleteness, although the result of tracing himself upon another model ends up generating conflict when equally desiring subjects find themselves erected as mutual obstacles. As Āyatollāh al-‘Uzmā Ruḥollāh Khomeinī also recommended to the religious students of Naḡaf, “it is lamentable to note that amidst man’s endeavours to attain his desires and yearnings and the hullabaloo of man’s encounter with nature, an ever more precious truth has been consigned to the limbo of oblivion. That truth is the spirit and essence of man’s personality”¹³. That very essence is the source of authentic desires, whereas mimesis, by contrast, is inauthentic by nature. No one can desire in our place, just as no one, according to the Qur’ān¹⁴, can carry another’s burden, since everyone is responsible for himself and for his own effort along the path of growth. If purely extrinsic, motivation limits spontaneity and the authentic enjoyment of any achieved goal.

In supporting the priority that, in his view, should be given to Islamic education, ‘Allāma Muḥammad Iqbāl¹⁵—whom Iranian *Rahbar* ‘Alī Khāmeneī has praised unreservedly, with profound admiration—repeatedly stressed that *su’āl* (the act of asking, the dependence on others, the slavish imitation of their ideas and culture) always weakens the self, with the consequence that, unless individuals as well as the community develop self-reliance and cultivate the inner richness of their being, their potentialities will remain

¹⁰ Salvatore Natoli, *Il buon uso del mondo. Agire nell’età del rischio* (Milan: Mondadori, 2010).

¹¹ ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, *Ghurar al-Hikam wa Durar al-Kalim*.

¹² René Girard, *La violenza e il sacro* (Milan: Adelphi, 2005).

¹³ Ruhollah M. Khomeini, *Jihad al-Akbar, The Greatest Jihad: Combat with the Self (1964–1978)*, trans. M. Legenhausen and A. Sarvdalin (Qom: Al-Islam, 2002), 3–4.

¹⁴ Qur’ān 6:164; 17:15; 35:18; 39:7; 53:38.

¹⁵ Muḥammad Iqbāl, *The Secrets of the Self (Asrāri Khūdī)*, trans. R. A. Nicholson (London: Macmillan and Co., 1920).

warped and repressed¹⁶. In his *Asrāri Khūdī*, Iqbal¹⁷ returns to this issue again and again and uncovers the meaning of the evolutionary process of striving towards the achievement of a fuller and richer individuality. As Saiyidain observes, such a view of intellectual education favours “methods of self-activity and learning by doing: methods which confront the students with new situations and problems, compelling them to work purposefully with the resources of their environment, to fit means to ends, to rely on their groping but intelligent efforts, to learn to overcome their difficulties in their own way”¹⁸.

It was the Supreme Guide Āyatollāh ‘Alī Ḥoseynī Khāmeneī himself who reminded Iranians that the future of the country “will belong to the pious and motivated youth who can help the country achieve the peak of transcendence with their youthful energy, with clear ideas, and with creativeness”¹⁹.

Creativity *versus* mimesis

The convergence of desires has the possibility of being fulfilled outside the constraints of antagonism, but for this to happen it requires the renunciation of rivalry and of the claim to exclusivity, and the choice to collaborate for the common good.

Collaboration implies an exchange, while balanced learning among peers activates interaction processes and allows the development of relational dynamics that prove synergistic with intrinsic motivation, ultimately encouraging learning. Conversely, the establishment of hierarchies of merit promotes the individualisation of a form of success that—if it arose from spontaneous convergence—would allow the sharing of the satisfaction it generates, an outcome with beneficial implications for social skills, self-esteem, sense of belonging, and the motivation of trainees.

Training courses must present a balance between pressures towards collaboration and competition. By mediating between extremes and updating its formative indications, Šī‘a supports the refinement of individual potential, social cooperation, and the ability to pursue these aims in a “balanced” way, avoiding both Soviet-style collectivism and the individualism promoted by Western capitalism. This “balance” entails the effort to live in harmony with society and to engage collectively in activities aimed at the common good, which must be strongly encouraged, whereas the habit of evaluating children according to hierarchical logics exposes learners to negative feelings of self-conceit, superiority, and vanity—that conflict with Islamic values.

As the Viennese psychiatrist Viktor Frankl states, success should not be taken as a goal; rather, it should be regarded as an unintended side effect of personal devotion, an event that occurs without diverting energy towards worrying about it²⁰. What should be desired is not one’s success, but the acquisition of experience and the understanding

¹⁶ K. G. Saiyidain, *Iqbal’s Educational Philosophy* (Lahore: Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, Kashmiri Bazaar, 1945), 30.

¹⁷ Muḥammad Iqbal, *The Secrets of the Self (Asrāri Khūdī)*.

¹⁸ K. G. Saiyidain, *Iqbal’s Educational Philosophy*, 47.

¹⁹ ‘Alī Khamenei, “The Islamic Republic Is the Continuation of the Holy Prophet’s Be’tat,” Khamenei.ir, April 3, 2019, <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/6591/The-Islamic-republic-is-the-continuation-of-the-holy-Prophet-s>.

²⁰ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, revised and updated ed. (New York: Washington Square Press, 1985), 16–17.

gained during the learning process, which should always remain open to subsequent reconsideration. If it aspires to anything other than representing a milestone in the path of conscious and self-directed growth, success—so ephemeral and temporary in its essence—cannot provide the desired happiness. The pleasure of reaching a finish line is experienced when intrinsic motivations are satisfied in a harmonious relationship with what, for Muslims, is *fiṭra*, and when the skill of consciously conducting one's own existential experience is finally acquired. As Mihály Csikszentmihalyi also reiterates, only the sense of participation in determining the content of one's own life comes "as close to what is usually meant by happiness as anything else we can conceivably imagine"²¹.

Reward and punishment

According to the educational tradition embraced by the Islamic Republic, education encompasses a set of solutions aimed at nurturing and shaping a child's personality in such a way that they harmonise with the social criteria and norms approved by the theocratic government, in alignment with the dictates of religion²². In Islamic education, whether within or beyond the Iranian context, learning motivation constitutes a structural principle of the entire formative process, as it represents the dynamic force that sustains learners' persistence, commitment, and intentional orientation, both in its intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions²³. This motivation is intertwined with discipline and character formation, insofar as a coherent, orderly, and predictable educational environment facilitates the internalisation of positive habits, in accordance with the logic of positive reinforcement²⁴. For discipline to be effective, it must nonetheless arise within a pedagogical context that is safe, empathetic, and respectful of learners' rights, where adherence to norms stems from awareness rather than fear²⁵.

Character formation, from an Islamic perspective, does not consist merely in the transmission of knowledge, but entails a transformative process involving cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions, all oriented by religious, moral, cultural, and social norms²⁶. Discipline, understood as self-control and responsible adherence to rules, constitutes an essential component of this process, as it educates students in the

²¹ Mihály Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), 4.

²² Narges Badr Tale'i, "Pādāš va tanbīh dar neẓām-e tarbiyatī-ye kūdak va nawḡavān [Reward and Punishment in the Educational System of Children and Adolescents]," *Roshd-e Mo'allem [Educational Sciences]* 19, n. 6, Issue 156 (1379/2000): 56–59.

²³ Muhammad Rois Soleyadi, "Concept of Reward and Punishment and Its Implementation in Education in the Modern Era: Perspectives from the Quran and Hadith," *Al-Wijdā: Journal of Islamic Education Studies* 9, no. 2 (April 2024): 252.

²⁴ Nabila Khoirunnisa and Tumin, "Islamic Education Teachers' Strategies to Form Students' Discipline Character," *Journal of Islamic Education* 10, no. 1 (January–June 2025): 219–239.

²⁵ Evi Febriani and Akhmad Fauzi Hamzah, "Punishment and Reward in Schools: Educational Psychology Perspective," *Al-Ithath: Jurnal Bimbingan dan Konseling Islam* 5, no. 2 (2025): 71–79.

²⁶ Wahyu Basuki Rahmad and Asriana Kibtiyah, "Pembentukan Karakter Religius, Disiplin dan Tanggungjawab melalui Kegiatan Tahfidzul Qur'an di SD Islam Roushon Fikr Jombang," *Attaqwa: Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan Islam* 18, no. 2 (September 2022): 31–52.

management of time, duties, and priorities²⁷. Islamic education supports this trajectory through the exemplarity of the educator, whose conduct—together with institutional policies and models—functions as a normative and moral reference for students²⁸. Teachers therefore assume the role of facilitator, mediator, and motivator, responsible for sustaining learners' enthusiasm and ensuring a favourable educational climate²⁹.

Concurrently, in Iran, educational institutions support teachers' work by organising celebrations, awarding prizes, and incentivising gifted students, in order to instil in them a sense of success and worth. Recent Iranian studies call for the organisation of recreational programmes designed to reinforce students' sense of belonging and guidance, alongside activities including games, group projects, and experiential projects that facilitate deeper and more engaging learning³⁰. Other academic studies consider the significance of cultural factors, the family environment, and peers in shaping an individual's cognition, their attitude towards the learning process, and the intensity of their motivation. Within this framework, the desire to gain approval and trust is considered a stimulus for the repetition of positive behaviours, increased effort, and a sense of satisfaction, which ultimately strengthens learning processes and fosters the development of individual skills³¹.

Within this pedagogical configuration, reward and punishment constitute central educational instruments. Reward, expressed through the terms *thawāb* (spiritual reward or moral merit) and *targhīb* (encouragement, positive persuasion, and motivational stimulation)³², performs a reinforcing function for desirable behaviours and may take material forms, such as small school items or certificates, or immaterial forms, such as words of encouragement, gestures of approval, or public recognition³³. It operates as a motivational device, as a positive reinforcement mechanism, and as a tool for regulating the educational climate, contributing to the creation of conditions conducive to cooperation and well-being³⁴. In classroom practice, reward may manifest through verbal praise, smiles, approving gestures, positive eye contact, physical proximity, or appropriate physical contact, as well as through symbolic rewards such as images, stickers, certificates, or small school objects. It may also take the form of public

²⁷ Unik Hanifah Salsabila et al., "Peran Pendidikan Islam terhadap Pembentukan Karakter Disiplin Peserta Didik," *Jurnal Intelektual: Jurnal Pendidikan dan Studi Keislaman* 10, no. 3 (December 2020): 329–343; Nabila Khoirunnisa and Tumin, "Islamic Education Teachers' Strategies to Form Students'.

²⁸ Unik Hanifah Salsabila et al., "Peran Pendidikan Islam terhadap Pembentukan Karakter Disiplin Peserta Didik".

²⁹ Wahyu Basuki Rahmad and Asriana Kibtiyah, "Pembentukan Karakter Religius"; Evi Febriani and Akhmad Fauzi Hamzah, "Punishment and Reward in Schools".

³⁰ Mahbubeh Najari Pour, "Ġādū-ye angīze: raveš-hā-ye tašvīqī barā-ye dāneš-āmūzān-e ebtedā'ī [The Magic of Motivation: Encouragement Methods for Primary School Students]," *Faslnameh-ye Motale'at-e Ravanshenasi va Olum-e Tarbiyati [Journal of Psychology and Educational Studies]* 10, no. 2(1) (1403/2024): 38–46.

³¹ Davood Beshnas and Fatemeh Ramshgar, "Naqš-e bi-badil-e tašvīq va pādāš dar taqviyat-e angīze-ye dāneš-āmūzān dar masīr-e yādgiṛī [The Unparalleled Role of Encouragement and Reward in Strengthening Student Motivation in the Learning Process]," *Quarterly Journal of Strategic Research in Education* 2, no. 47 (2025): 585–595.

³² Nursyamsi, "Konsep Reward dan Punishment dalam Pendidikan Islam," *Mau'izhah* 11, no. 2 (Juli–Desember 2021): 1–26.

³³ Muhammad Rois Soleyadi, "Concept of Reward and Punishment".

³⁴ Muhammad Rois Soleyadi, *Ibid.*

recognition, such as mentioning the student's name or displaying their work, or of focused teacher attention, which values even partial responses and encourages improvement³⁵. Rewards are directed towards enhancing enthusiasm for learning and improving performance³⁶. On the spiritual level, they are grounded in the Qur'ānic conception of reward as a moral incentive and as an eschatological consequence of good deeds, with beneficial effects on the individual *nafs*³⁷. Although the Qur'ān does not explicitly mention reward and punishment in the educational domain³⁸, these practices are rooted in the concepts of *thawāb* (reward) and *'iqāb* (disciplinary punishment), or more generally *al-ğazā'*, which express the logic of moral consequence.

Despite the widespread use of reward as a preferred instrument of extrinsic motivation in Islamic contexts, its application is recommended with a certain degree of prudence: this should serve to shape the student's self-perception and provide them with a sense of personal worth and self-esteem that will support them throughout their life; however, excessive praise may indeed generate dependence on recognition and a desire for approval, particularly when it concerns behaviours that fall within the student's basic duties³⁹. The effectiveness of reward therefore depends on the teacher's psychological sensitivity, their ability to interpret students' needs, and the support provided by institutional and familial structures, since reward must be grounded in values such as justice, compassion, responsibility, and self-awareness⁴⁰.

Parallel to reward, punishment—designated in the Islamic tradition by the aforementioned terms *'iqāb*, *ğazā'*, or by the term *'uqūba* (punitive sanction)—performs a corrective and regulative function⁴¹. It aims to rectify undesirable behaviours, provide a proportionate negative response to violations, and restore a sense of justice within the educational environment⁴². If moderation is required in the use of reward, even greater care is demanded in the administration of punishment: its application necessitates caution, must not generate suffering, and represents the final recourse when admonitions and advice have proven ineffective⁴³.

³⁵ Hidayati Siregar and Muhammad Syaifullah, "Reward dan Punishment dalam Perspektif Pendidikan Islam," *Jurnal Ilmiah Wahana Pendidikan* 9, no. 18 (September 2023): 329–339.

³⁶ Najib Wahidiyah and Muhammad Munif, "The Role of Reward and Punishment Strategies in Enhancing Student Learning Motivation: A Pedagogical Perspective," *EDUCARE: Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan* 3, no. 2 (2024): 73–85.

³⁷ Akram Abdul Cader, "Towards an Islamic Model of Work Motivation," *Intellectual Discourse* 24, no. 1 (2016): 83–109; Mohd Abbas Abdul Razak, Maziah Bte Mustapha, and Md Yousuf Ali, "Human Nature and Motivation: A Comparative Analysis between Western and Islamic Psychologies," *Intellectual Discourse*, Special Issue, vol. 25 (2017): 503–525; Mohammad Ramdan Samadi, Mohamad Yudiyanto, and Laesti Nurishlah, "Perspektif Islam tentang Peran Reward dan Punishment dalam Motivasi Belajar Siswa," *Ta'dib: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam* 1, no. 1 (2023): 218–228.

³⁸ Muhammad Rois Soleyadi, "Concept of Reward and Punishment", 257.

³⁹ Faizin, Ainol Yaqin and Ratna Sari, "Application of Reward and Punishment Methods in Child Psychology Training," *EduSphere: Journal of Educational Innovation and Learning* 1, no. 1 (March 2025): 1–8.

⁴⁰ Anzar Aquil et al., "Punishment and Reward in Islamic Education: Implementation at MA Hidayatus Subban," *Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan dan Sains Islam Interdisipliner* 4, no. 1 (February 2025): 1–9.

⁴¹ Nursyamsi. "Konsep Reward dan Punishment dalam Pendidikan Islam." *Mau'izhah* 11, no. 2 (Juli–Desember 2021): 1–26.

⁴² Muhammad Rois, Soleyadi. "Concept of Reward and Punishment".

⁴³ Evi Febriani and Akhmad Fauzi Hamzah, "Punishment and Reward in Schools".

Although the prevalence of corporal punishment in Iranian schools has declined compared to the past—driven by shifts in educational paradigms and increased parental attentiveness towards their children—verbal, psychological, and emotional abuse, as well as the assignment of extra coursework as a minor form of punishment, still persist. In the not-too-distant past, based on such rationales, the infliction of various forms of violence against children was considered a routine practice. Alongside parents, teachers believed that the most effective method for instilling order and discipline in students was the use of a ruler or placing a pencil between the student's fingers. Regrettably, corporal punishment severely compromises a child's autonomy and initiative, hinders their ability to solve problems and practise self-love, and leads to the erosion of self-esteem. Physical punishment constrains a child's intellectual development and exerts a significant negative impact on their learning processes. Furthermore, physical punishment causes the child to experience feelings of isolation, profound loneliness, worthlessness, and a lack of value, causing their worldview to gradually become threatening and depriving them of a sense of belonging in the world⁴⁴. If enforced through overbearing power, violence, and harshness, this educational solution induces recipients to compensate for the pressure in ways that are often equivalent⁴⁵.

Punishment may take preventive forms and function as a deterrent against sinful acts⁴⁶—aiming to avert further infractions by associating the misbehaviour with a sense of discomfort—or repressive forms, such as light physical exercises, reflective assignments⁴⁷, admonitions, activity restrictions⁴⁸, the recitation of *istigfār*, the recitation of *sūrat Yā Sīn*, or public apologies⁴⁹.

In everyday practice, teachers integrate punishment with counsel and words that appeal to students' moral sensibilities, thereby reinforcing awareness of the value of discipline and preventing the recurrence of infractions⁵⁰. Nonetheless, punishment requires particularly careful use, as inappropriate application may generate low self-esteem, insecurity, or frustration, thereby undermining the educational process. For this reason, prophetic *praxis* indicates that both reward and punishment must be applied with patience, determination, forgiveness, love for fellow believers, proportionality,

⁴⁴ Tasnim Ghahramani, Maryam Momeni and Sajedah Amiri, "*Tarīqa-ye taṣvīq va tanbīh-e dāneš-āmuḥ-hā-ye madrasa [Methods of Reward and Punishment for School Students]*," paper presented at the 23rd National Conference on Management & Humanistic Science Research in Iran (19 February 2026), 2714–2720.

⁴⁵ Seyed Khalil Seyed Alipour, "Naqṣ-e taṣvīq va tanbīh dar modīriyat-e eslāmī [The Role of Encouragement and Punishment in Islamic Management]," *Faṣlnāme-ye 'elmī-taḥaṣṣoṣī-ye modīriyyat, sāl-e avval [Journal of Management Studies (Specialized Scientific Quarterly)]*, 1, (1383): 94–106.

⁴⁶ Wahyudi Setiawan, "Reward and Punishment dalam Perspektif Pendidikan Islam," *Al-Murabbi* 4, no. 2 (Januari 2018): 184–201; Muhammad Rois Soleyadi, "Concept of Reward and Punishment and Its Implementation in Education in the Modern Era: Perspectives from the Quran and Hadith," *Al-Wijdā: Journal of Islamic Education Studies* 9, no. 2 (April 2024): 251–265.

⁴⁷ Yusuf Bachtar and Hakimuddin Salim, "Instilling Student Discipline Through Islamic Religious Education Activities," *Indonesian Journal of Innovation Studies* 26, no. 3 (2025): 1–13.

⁴⁸ Kamaruddin and Andi Anto Patak, "The Role of Islamic Education Teachers in Instilling Student Discipline," *IJoASER* 1, no. 2 (July 2018): 15–26.

⁴⁹ Najib Wahidiyah and Muhammad Munif, "The Role of Reward and Punishment Strategies".

⁵⁰ Kamaruddin and Andi Anto Patak, "The Role of Islamic Education Teachers".

justice, graduality, and conformity to the *Šarī‘a*⁵¹. Ultimately, the effectiveness of these instruments cannot be separated from the teacher’s ability to create a safe and empathetic educational environment in which discipline is internalised as a value rather than imposed through fear⁵².

State-sponsored “Training course on effective methods of encouragement and punishment in education”

To update and train the human resources involved in child education, among other available courses, the Iranian government promotes a specific programme entitled *Training course on effective methods of encouragement and punishment in education*, which is offered online and free of charge to employees of the Ministry of Education (MoE)⁵³. By examining the questions included in the final test of this course, and verifying the answers indicated⁵⁴ as “correct” (درست), one finds statements such as: “If you have threatened to punish the child, you should do it, or your threats and promises will no longer be effective”, or “The proper way to punish a child is to lock him or her in a room for approximately one minute for every year of his or her age”. Among the statements considered “wrong” (نادرست) appear, instead, the following: “Creating an indomitable spirit in a child is one of the effects of corporal punishment”, or “The weakening of intrinsic motivation is one of the effects of the overuse of rewards”, or, moreover, “Keeping calm and explaining your expectations is one of the conditions during punishment”. “Wrong” is also considered the sentence: “Corporal punishment fosters a spirit of defiance and disobedience, with the result that a person will not have the courage to do great things.”⁵⁵.

Regardless of the questionable claims that candidates are asked to validate or refute during the examination, what should most invite reflection is the centrality that contemporary Iranian education assigns to rewards and punishments and to their alleged effectiveness.

It could be hypothesised that, being accustomed to the reiterated divine promises and threats contained in the Qur’ānic message, Muslims might feel somehow legitimised to think in terms of reward and punishment. It is, however, evident that the didactic practices adopted in school contexts go far beyond any eschatological ambition. Since they are preparatory and circumstantial, they require attention to be directed to the level of *praxis*, and their outcomes must demonstrate benefits capable of operating from the present moment. Even if pointing it out may appear superfluous, it is worth recalling that

⁵¹ Hidayati Siregar and Muhammad Syaifullah. “Reward dan Punishment dalam Perspektif Pendidikan Islam.” *Jurnal Ilmiah Wahana Pendidikan* 9, no. 18 (September 2023): 329–339.

⁵² Evi Febriani and Akhmad Fauzi Hamzah, “Punishment and Reward in Schools”.

⁵³ The *Training course on effective methods of encouragement and punishment in education* (course duration: 10 hours; course code: 91400485) has been promoted on the website <http://emis.imps.ac.ir>, which is administered by the Iranian government.

⁵⁴ I consider here some documents circulating on websites and in chat groups shared by Iranian teachers, which have been used by candidates in preparation for the test.

⁵⁵ The translation from Fārsi is by the author.

the conditions considered by the Qur'ān are understandably of a higher order than the “reward” earned for correctly performing a school task which, given its contextual nature, can easily be affected by fortuity or discomfort.

The pedagogical reflection of Maria Montessori—whose approach the supervisor of didactics at the Mofid schools of Tehrān, Dr Yadolla Saeednia, and his colleagues declare themselves to be in tune with—reaffirms that every child carries within himself a psychic plan and possesses potential developmental guidelines that are delicate and must be treated with care. The educational tool of rewards and punishments aligns with forms of training that push towards homogenisation and control—goals far removed from those achievable through the exploration and enhancement of personal talents. Didactics conceived in these terms, which do not seem to sufficiently grasp the essence and learning needs of the individual child, manifest themselves as “shaping” interventions on the part of the adult. As Montessori explains, the risk is high that such interventions may erase the spontaneous designs arising in the child’s spiritual intimacy or, at the very least, divert their realisation⁵⁶. In *Spontaneous Activity in Education*, Montessori notes:

Now that father with the spiritual ideals would not, in all probability, ask himself what he himself had done to enable his son to become strong and rise to the level of spiritual aid. Very likely he is a father who did his utmost to break the will of his son and make him submissive to his own will. No earthly father can make the spirit rise to such heights; this can only be accomplished by the mysterious voice which speaks within the heart of the man in the silence. A voice which is strident because it is raised against the laws of Nature, like the voice of the father who wishes to subdue another creature to himself, disturbs that “silence” where, in peace and liberty, the divine works are being accomplished. [...]. It is essential, therefore, to offer objects which correspond to its formative tendencies, in order to obtain the result which education makes its goal: the development of the latent forces in man with the minimum of strain and all possible fulness.⁵⁷

From the perspective of the Italian pedagogist, rather than being punished or humiliated for mistakes, children should be respected and loved by their caregivers and by the reference figures they invest with authority. According to her educational vision, the teacher should neither threaten nor inflict punishments, just as he or she should not presume to teach everyone in the same way or to obtain from each child the same degree of learning at the same time, since every child has his or her own peculiar feelings and requires that the deep needs of the soul be met in a way that corresponds to his or her capacities for internalisation. As Montessori argues⁵⁸, an educator who wishes to help the child find his way in life cannot be directive or prescriptive; rather, he should adapt to the child and quietly and respectfully assist his or her spontaneous developmental expressions, defending his or her forces without disturbing their expansion. “Every soul will be held in pledge for what it has earned”, the Qur'ān (74:38) recites, focusing on the consequences of man’s choice between good and evil and on the effort he devotes to

⁵⁶ Maria Montessori, *Il segreto dell'infanzia* [*The Secret of Childhood*] (Milan: Garzanti, 2013), 46–47.

⁵⁷ Maria Montessori, *L'auto-educazione nelle scuole elementari* [*Spontaneous Activity in Education*], 193, 169.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

directing his energies towards good. If man will be rewarded only for what he does (Qur'ān 37:39), it is conceivable that the outcome of his actions is facilitated by a coherent alignment between his deeds and his essence.

As Mohamed observes, it should be remembered that even Divine justice “is meted out with full knowledge of the individual’s circumstances and limitations. Man is beset with limitations which make him unable to exercise absolute freedom. [...] It would have been incompatible with the spirit of Divine justice to reward or punish a person for an act over which he had no control”⁵⁹.

Mofid schools

In line with the above reflection, in 2013 the Mofid project gave rise in Tehrān to preschool institutes and private primary schools, promoted by Dr Yadolla Saeednia with the support of the teachers whose work he continues to supervise. Although these institutes have not adopted the Montessori Method, the educational system they developed has been freely inspired by Montessorian philosophy.

As Saeednia explains, despite the experimental insertions and the pedagogical syncretism proposed, the Mofid schools do not disregard the teachings concerning the principles of Šī‘a Islām, the value of fasting and praying, obedience to God, and the need to manifest adherence to religion through one’s actions. Indeed, the Islamic values of integrity, honesty, fairness, justice, respect for one’s own and others’ dignity, personal responsibility, and an awareness of the consequences generated by one’s actions are strongly cultivated. However, innovative approaches inevitably face certain limitations in the Iranian context, due to the strongly textbook-oriented and centralised educational system, the competitive culture that characterises Iranian society, and the rigid regulations to which stakeholders still adhere. What essentially distinguishes ordinary schools from the Mofid schools I observed during my fieldwork is their holistic gaze, which attributes value to mind, body, and soul by integrating them; their commitment to nurturing the child’s intrinsic motivations; and their use of Self-Directed Learning (SDL).

Saeednia’s research on SDL in children from Tehrān (aged nine to eleven)⁶⁰ concludes that children are capable of undertaking learning on their own, just as adults do. What may restrain this ability, rather, is a school system that fails to invest resources in actualising this potential.

As I observed during my visits to the Mofid primary schools in Tehrān, and as the teachers I interviewed explained, particular attention is devoted to the personal expression of the child’s thoughts and feelings. Every week, teachers hang on the wall a set of photographs or a poster containing an image or a phrase intended to be inspiring. At the bottom, they leave several lined spaces in which children can write their reflections. Whenever a child feels inspired, they are allowed to stand up and approach the poster,

⁵⁹ Yasien Mohamed, “The Islamic Conception of Human Nature with Reference to the Development of an Islamic Psychology” (M.A. thesis, University of Cape Town, 1986), 215.

⁶⁰ Yadolla Saeednia, “Self-Directed Learning Among Children of Ages Nine to Eleven in Tehran: Generating a Persian Version of SDLRABE,” *US-China Education Review A* 4 (2011): 511–22.

free to write whatever they feel—whether a single sentence or a more elaborate consideration. By observing the content of what has been written and the child's commitment to participate, teachers evaluate the level of growth achieved, the child's involvement in the activity, and their ability to reason and produce something “of their own”. In the teachers' account, there is no class homework in which errors are marked in red, nor any judgmental grading. Competitive hierarchies among pupils are not envisaged, nor are the names or photographs of the best performers displayed on the walls. Teachers do not select anyone to reward or punish. Children are reportedly free to do their homework wherever they prefer: on the floor, on Persian carpets, on benches or chairs. They may lean against desks or rocking sofas, work in groups or individually, and choose whether to remain inside or step outside the classroom. According to the teachers, this arrangement is intended to let children carry out their tasks in the way that best suits their own learning needs. Mofid education, as its staff describe it, addresses the child's cognitive development and the construction of their social and relational competence; it also aims to sensitise children to environmental issues and to respect their biological needs. Chairs and tables are made of wood, the spaces are kept as open as possible, and a kitchen is available on the same floor as the classrooms so that children may have access to snacks and drinks (e.g., carrots, apples, cheese) whenever needed—even during lessons.

Teachers also reported that, in the Mofid schools, children are educated to respect both the traditions of their own country and cultures and ways of thinking different from their own. In their view, education for dialogue and open-mindedness—together with an education that fosters a more conscious and spontaneous connection with God—acts as a facilitator of the child's spiritual development, provided it is adequately stimulated. Space is said to be reserved for the expression of emotions, since teachers consider it important for the child to learn how to express them and, above all, to express them “in a balanced way”, communicating their nature through words, non-verbal expressions, proxemics, and the support of artistic activities and drawing. Small discussion groups are organised, according to staff, to encourage debate, stimulate the exchange of ideas and information, and, above all, foster attentive listening, since comparison and sharing are considered effective engines for the development of ideas. In this perspective, as presented by the school, learning transcends the limits of a simple transfer of knowledge and becomes an act of co-constructing meaning—an activity realised with and through others and requiring participation and mediation.

According to Saeednia and his colleagues, such didactics focus on facilitating the understanding of the value of encounter and compromise; they are said to favour collaboration and sharing over the hierarchical model of competition common in other learning contexts, which sets best against worst and winners against losers. In the staff's account, it is precisely cooperative competence and the willingness to engage in teamwork that become important objects of evaluation, combined with a qualitative assessment of learning that takes into account self-evaluation and the feedback offered by the pupils themselves—considered valuable, in their view, for any eventual rethinking

and improvement of the educational process. This self-presentation by the school's staff points to the attention that the Mofid schools aim to devote to children's needs and to their personal responsibility. What the school describes as its aim is a form of dialogue that not only places individuals in communication with one another but also seeks to bring into relation alternative systems of thought, educational styles, and learning opportunities—fostering, in its own account, interactive relationships among cultures and traditions that are, in themselves, still hesitant to recognise their affinities.

By way of conclusion, a necessary clarification must be made. To avoid any misunderstanding regarding the choice of the case study under consideration, it is pertinent to clarify that the pedagogy adopted in Tehrān's Mofid schools was selected as the key subject of this specific investigation due to its distinctive representativeness in shaping the impulses of modernisation within the cultural context under consideration: impulses that aim to distance educational practices from the standardising, anachronistic models currently in use, which, in addition to promoting a pervasive agonistic drive, tend to channel students toward a high degree of conformity.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on field-based ethnographic research, this essay has examined the logics of reward and punishment that shape Muslim primary education and, more specifically, the public primary school system of the Islamic Republic under 'Alī Khāmeneī's leadership, foregrounding the distinctive and pervasive role played by competitiveness.

By way of comparison, it has also presented the syncretic solutions proposed by the Mofid schools of Tehrān, which, drawing inspiration from Montessori's philosophy of education, shift the educational focus toward the child's intrinsic motivation. On the basis of this didactic shift, the essay puts forward a theoretical proposal: that competitiveness could evolve beyond its traditionally antagonistic configuration and be reconceptualised as a propaedeutic force capable of supporting the fullest realisation of individual potential.

Such a reorientation would aim to prevent the dissipation of competitive energy in emulation, in the pursuit of superiority, or in the avoidance of inferiority and exclusion, redirecting it instead toward the healthy flourishing of each child's natural dispositions.

The analysis has shown that, within the reward structures of state-run institutions, pedagogical practices are currently oriented toward the formation of educated citizens and morally upright Muslims, whose qualities of will and intention are cultivated predominantly through extrinsic motivational devices. In Islām, although these qualities are understood as trainable dispositions that should accompany the child's learning trajectory, they could also be regarded as part of the human being's intrinsic motivational endowment. On this view, the genuineness of their cultivation would depend on the conscious orientation toward good and on the growth and development of one's potential—whether understood as cognitive, emotional, relational, or spiritual.

The choice implied by free will could be characterised by proactivity; if constrained by extrinsic motivations, which serve corrective and homologating purposes, the child's action would risk being reduced to mere reactivity, ceasing to express itself through that

“determined” determination and “intentional” intentionality that Islām seeks to cultivate. From this perspective, an educational system that routinely employs rewards and punishments—thereby favouring the use of subtly coercive extrinsic motivations—would sit uneasily with this same ideal of authentic intentionality.

The didactic shift observed in recent Iranian teaching experiences such as the Mofid schools—which show a preference for intrinsic over extrinsic motivations—suggests a possible direction for this reorientation: competitiveness, rather than being steeped in an agonistic spirit, could be redirected toward a commitment *with* oneself and *for* oneself, undertaken for the holistic refinement of one’s performance and for cultivating the resoluteness considered essential in Islamic—and particularly Iranian—thought. Along these lines, the concept of “strength” could shift from being a display of “muscular” power to the strengthening of one’s resilience skills. That of “growth”, in turn, could shift from the enhancement of economic or political influence to conscious self-development, while that of “freedom” could shift from being a revolt to becoming the expression and care of one's inherent disposition.

In conclusion, were it to be appropriately handled along these lines, the competitive spirit—far from forcing the parties into a dual oppositional relationship—could become an ally of those evolutionary projects that aspire to the fullest manifestation of individual potential, an outcome that could in turn be expected to yield beneficial effects on the social body to which the individual belongs.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author did not use AI to generate research data, develop the main arguments, conduct the analysis, or produce the findings of the study. The author independently checked the accuracy of all references and citations and takes full responsibility for the content, interpretations, and conclusions presented in this publication.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

The author was solely responsible for all aspects of this research and manuscript preparation. This included conceptualizing the study, collecting and analysing the data, verifying the findings, reviewing relevant literature, and preparing and revising the manuscript. The author also reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript and takes full responsibility for its content.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All sources used in the study can be accessed by readers for verification and further research.

DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The author declares that there are no known financial, professional, or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research process, analysis, interpretation of the findings, or conclusions presented in this manuscript.

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