

Mapping the Terrain of Education Research

A Summary ¹

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Introduction

Advancing Education in Muslim Societies (AEMS) is a framework that guides the theoretical, empirical, and organizational aspects of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT). The lessons learned from AEMS will also give a voice in the discussion on reform efforts in Muslim societies and the Global South. The Mapping the Terrain annual study was designed to further the AEMS empirical research agenda, and this summary introduces the study and its results as a core for field-based evidence of the AEMS initiative. The research emerged to address the gaps in this area of non-academic education with the long-term goal of contributing to human development and a better future for all through a focus on psychosocial wellbeing and values. To accomplish this, we launched the study in the summer of 2018 to examine a set of values and related competencies and make the data publicly available for the use of researchers, policy makers, education change agents, and others.

The study

This research is unique in its adoption of a human development lens for reform of education as well as in its scope and target populations. The study includes more than 40,000 participants from several countries and areas in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East (See map in Appendix). The data was collected between the 2018-2020 academic years. In the first year, we targeted

¹ For the full report go to <https://iiit.org/en/aems-publications/>

youth in secondary education and in universities, in addition to parents and teachers. In the second year, we added university faculty. The two-year study brings the voices and aspirations of youth and young adults to the reform discussion and takes an asset-based approach to youth and their development. This is of particular importance in many Muslim societies because the young generations are reacting to the current geopolitical conditions (with resistance and/or resilience) without an authentic assessment of their struggles. This is important to ensure their futures in a global reality where employability and civic engagement are at the forefront of the reform agenda.

A thorough examination of the social science literature, education research, and values led to the selection of constructs such as empathy, forgiveness, and gratitude, among others (Table 1 below lists the constructs in both years). These values and their translation into competencies resonate with Muslims and non-Muslims alike and are central to socio emotional growth and overall well-being. Questions remain about how youth perceive these values and how adults infuse them and reason around them when challenged by everyday adversities and economic hardships. The exploratory nature of this study provides a space for dialogue and intellectual debates on aspects of human development that have practical implications for policy, leadership, assessment, and pedagogy. The wide distribution of the study results and the availability of the data sets has encouraged these conversations already.

Table 1

List of Examined Constructs

2018-2019	Repeated	Added in 2019-2020
Empathy	Empathy	Gratitude
Moral reasoning		Life satisfaction
Forgiveness	Forgiveness	Problem solving
Community mindedness		Meaning making
Self-Efficacy	Self- Efficacy	Collective-Individualistic orientation
Sense of belonging	Sense of belonging	Self/emotional Regulation
Religiosity	Religiosity	

The survey data from several regions and countries on the selected constructs not only improves our understanding at the conceptual level, but also – and most importantly – indicates how these constructs may be integrated and infused in education spaces (academic and non-academic and formal and informal) in Muslim societies. The study is therefore a platform for deeper investigations and recommendations for advancing and maximizing input towards reform of education. Current research confirms the viability of universal values and their derivatives in the Arab and Islamic contexts. For example, research on forgiveness in the Middle East suggests that integrating it in the curriculum and in teacher training helps create more understanding classroom environments (Abu-Nimer & Nasser, 2013). Likewise, research among Muslim Indonesian students shows that Islamic beliefs lead to higher levels of moral reasoning within that population, with such beliefs being positively correlated with beliefs, prayer, and understanding of justice and equality (Chang-Ho et al., 2009). Evidence from Bangladesh

suggests that happiness among Muslims is strongly related to sense of belonging and connectedness (Devine et al., 2019).

Adopting the human development approach suggests the possibility of reversing the “damage” done in fragile conditions (Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development, 2000) and moves the conversation away from the deficit model and toward an asset-based approach to education. The approach provides a unique framework for spiritual, values-based, and intrapersonal growth for Muslim youth and communities as part of a larger movement toward human understanding and prosperity. This study applies a comprehensive human development theory where values play an instrumental role in improving human lives.

Main Results and Conclusions²

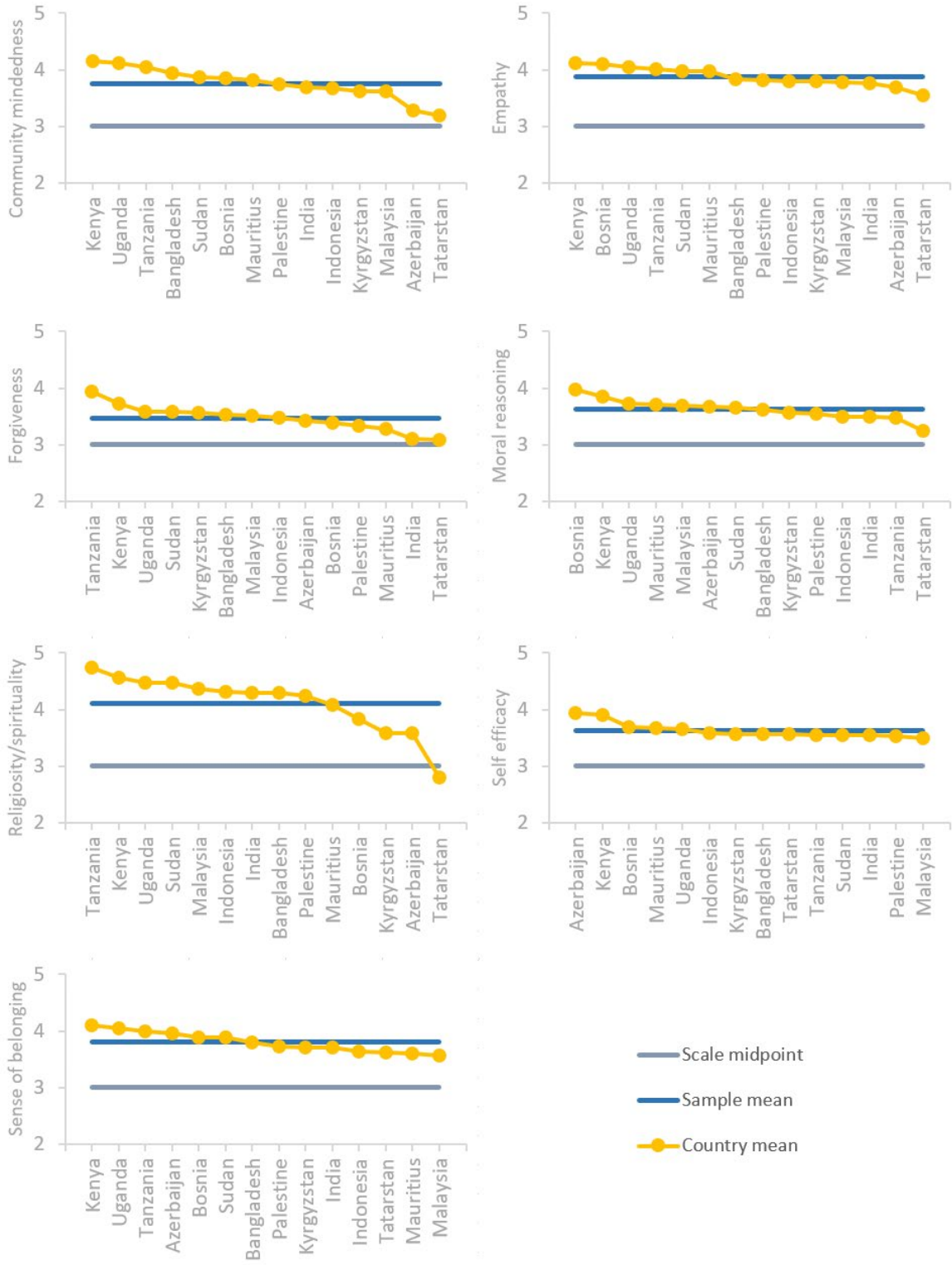
The results of this large-scale quantitative study suggest complex yet extremely important lessons especially as they relate to universal values and to youth and adults in Muslim societies. The results also provide lessons on the research methods used and their success and challenges, including the further development of context sensitive measures. For example, the data confirms that empathy functions as a predictor of forgiveness attitudes and suggests empathy as a powerful predictor of the willingness to forgive and be more community minded among the participants in Muslim societies. Demographic variables among the various target groups (students in K-12 and higher education, teachers, administrators, and parents) such as gender and education did not play significant roles in determining the results of either one of the two studies (See figure 1 for means in each of the countries for all participant groups).

² For a more detailed presentation and discussion of methods and results see the two completed reports.

Numerous research questions can stem from this study, including regional interests and analysis. For example, the results in East Africa may answer more specific questions about that region or the results from Central Asia may inform the fields of education, human development, religious education, and others regarding the unique dynamics in the region. The public availability of the data sets, this year and beyond, will support scholars interested in some regions or countries as well as specific constructs.

Figure 1

Scale Means by Country (2018-2019)



References

- Abu-Nimer, M., & Nasser, I. (2013). Forgiveness in the Arab and Islamic contexts. *Between Theology and Practice*, 41(3). <https://doi.org/10.1111/jore.12025>
- Chang-Ho, C. J., Ibrahim, Y., & Kim, S. D. (2009). Islamic personal religion and moral reasoning in social justice and equality: The evidence from Indonesian college students. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 259-274.
- Devine, J., Hinks, T., & Naveed, A. (2019). Happiness in Bangladesh: The role of religion and connectedness. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 351-371.

Appendix: Map of Participating Countries

