

Research Article:

## **A Narrative Approach to Character Cultivation in Islamic Religious Education: Using Rumi's Mathnawi as an Example for Storytelling**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In our increasingly pluralistic world, the field of religious education faces significant challenges and transformations. This is particularly true for Islamic Religious Education (IRE), which must adapt to a diverse range of denominational and sociocultural differences in both majority Muslim countries and diasporic communities. Given the importance of ethical considerations in navigating interpersonal relationships, ethical learning emerges as a crucial aspect and focal point for IRE to foster the development of constructive relationships among Muslim learners. The article advocates for a narrative-based approach to character cultivation in IRE for primary school children. It emphasises the significance of integrating narratives into IRE to address contemporary challenges and expectations. The study delves into the utilisation of a story from Rūmī's Mathnawī, entitled "The Name for Grapes," as a case study to illustrate how narratives can serve as didactic tools within Islamic culture. Through the incorporation of narratives, Muslim children can gain a deeper understanding of ethical challenges, nurture character traits and align their thoughts, feelings and actions with Islamic values.

**Keywords:** Islamic Religious Education, character cultivation, Islamic culture, Rūmī's Mathnawī, storytelling

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## INTRODUCTION

In our rapidly diversifying world, the lived fact of plurality brings a rich tapestry of cultures, identities, beliefs and practices into multilayered intersections with each other and creates interconnections among individuals and communities that exert both enriching and challenging impacts on the fabric of societies. These developments have emerged across diverse domains of sociocultural diversity, bearing far-reaching implications for religions in general (Triandafyllidou & Modood, 2017) and, in our case, for religious education (Seligman, 2014). More specifically, within the context of the so-called “secular” public sphere (Arthur, 2017), the “public” but “ambivalent” dynamics of religion and education have been addressed as topics that cannot be neglected (Pirner, 2019). Some have even spoken of the potential for a “crisis” if the existing paradigms of religious pedagogy still theoretically and practically demonstrate “continuing failure” to contribute effectively to the visions of education in pluralist society (Barnes, 2019). In response to these challenges, numerous studies have underscored the role of religious education as a “valuable and rich resource” in cultivating various qualities for “global and responsible citizenship, “including critical thinking, tolerance, respect and mutual understanding (Shanahan, 2017). There are proponents who argue that religious pedagogy should align itself both constructively and critically with such public principles as equality, liberty, rationality and universality (Grümme, 2015) and that it is expected to aid in fostering communicative skills to benefit both the general public and religion and to guide the public sphere towards the pursuit of enlightenment and the common good through the implementation of “public religious pedagogy” (Schröder, 2013). Others have even opted for an evolving discourse on the significance of “religious education for all” (Biesta & Hannam, 2020). In addition to extensive empirical research, it should be noted that religious education has intrinsic value in that it provides children and adolescents with opportunities to become capable of appropriate judgement and action in increasingly complicated circumstances in which they must orient themselves (Isik, 2022).

The global landscapes of diversity have also influenced Muslim cultural geographies. These dynamics are visible not only in societies characterised by diverse demographics of minority or diasporic Muslim communities, but also in countries with majority Muslim populations (Kriener, 2018). This diversification of Muslim identity is fuelled by various factors, such as shifting migration patterns at the global level, resulting in the dispersal of Muslim communities across diverse regions and countries worldwide (Hackett & Lipka, 2018), interfaith and interethnic marriages leading to families with mixed religious and cultural backgrounds (Elmali-Karakaya, 2020), as well as experiences of conversion and religious change (Mihlar, 2019). These developments contribute to an increased heterogeneity within Muslim populations, as individuals from varying cultural backgrounds and ethnic identities need to coexist both Islamically or doctrinally as well as socially or ethically. When it comes to Islamic Religious Education (IRE), this growing plurality exposes learners and educators to wider ranges of diverse spectrums, where they encounter a variety of different interpretations, practices, and experiences of Islam in particular, as well as divergent worldviews regarding religion, culture and society in a broader scope (Tiflati,

2020). Although this exposure can generally broaden and enrich their understanding of the Islamic faith and practice from a cross-cultural perspective, it simultaneously entails more inclusive approaches to teaching Islam since learners tend to come from diverse sociocultural contexts, rendering a focus on building constructive intercultural encounters inevitable (Saada & Magadlah, 2021).

Multicultural contexts within the framework of IRE should challenge learners to engage in critical thinking and in-depth analysis, encourage them to examine and evaluate different viewpoints on Muslim identity, and lead them to develop a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances of Islam (Demirel Ucan & Wright, 2018). This process can cultivate the ability to engage with diverse ideas about Muslim life in an ever-pluralising world. Nonetheless, such settings of sociocultural plurality will in turn necessitate more flexible and inclusive pedagogies for IRE that can prepare learners to navigate the complexities of a pluralistic society while remaining grounded in Islamic principles and values. In the face of burgeoning demands and incentives from external sociocultural currents as well as those internal forces and dynamics among traditional denominations and stakeholders in Islam, we must (re)formulate an IRE pedagogy that is not only authentic to Islamic tradition and inclusive of a diversity of doctrines and worldviews, but one that is also responsive to the growing requirements of global and local societies (Memon & Alhashmi, 2018) and promotes education from a “wholeness” perspective (Brifkani, 2021). Therefore, developing an educational framework that encompasses spiritual, philosophical, and theological competencies is crucial to effectively responding to the complexities of today’s diverse Islamic life and landscape.

This new pedagogical paradigm, referred to as the “ethical turn” by Isik (2022), in IRE can establish a connection between the traditional methodology that has historically emphasised scriptural and canonical resources (such as the Quran and Hadith) for teaching doctrinal values and the non-canonical literary heritage of Islamic cultures that utilises spiritual and scholarly resources to educate learners on ethical virtues. This paradigm shift mirrors the ethical turn in IRE (Isik, 2021) and seeks to rediscover the classical concepts of *tarbiyah* (nurture), *adab* (manners) and *tabdhib* (edification) present in Islamic cultural history and adapt them, albeit critically and pragmatically, for contemporary application.

This ethical turn is given a concrete direction in the present article. We argue that to fulfil the demanding requirements of teaching and learning Islam in multicultural and diversity-orientated school settings, new developments and transformations within the conventional paradigms for IRE should be aligned specifically with “virtue-ethical cultivation of the self” (Isik, 2022). Historical tradition as well as contemporary data underline the necessity and relevance of moral cultivation (focused on *al-akblāq* (morals) corpus) as an integral part of programs for Muslim religious education. However, existing experience and research demonstrate that scant attention has so far been dedicated to designing, producing and implementing appropriate and effective pedagogies for ethical cultivation in today’s IRE discourse. The present article argues that such an ethical turn will necessitate a re-direction of pedagogies for IRE towards character cultivation in the moral philosophy of Muslim

learners' education. For pedagogical purposes, we offer a narrative-based approach to IRE so that it can contribute positively to the emerging challenges and expectations of multicultural schooling. Therefore, this article has two objectives: (1) to develop insights into the relevance of an ethical approach to character cultivation for contemporary and future IRE; and (2) to offer a sample pedagogy, in a case study, for the use of narratives in IRE for children's character cultivation.

## **THE ETHICAL TURN AND CHARACTER CULTIVATION IN ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

Conceptually, such a transformative discourse towards the cultivation of character virtues in contemporary Muslim pedagogy will resonate with a general appeal to the development of virtues in Islamic religious ethics and moral education. The existing literature offers significant insights into the potential and historical contributions of Islamic culture to moral education and virtue ethics; see, for instance, Bucar (2014; 2017), Halstead (2007), Izutsu (2002), Moosa (2020), Zargar (2020) and Isik (2022). Attention has also been drawn to the relevance of the spiritual cultures of Islam in view of morality and ethics; see, for instance, Ridgeon (2010) and Vasalou (2019). In addition, Hashim (2017) and later Zulkifli and Hashim (2019) have examined the efficiency of a *bikmah* (wisdom) pedagogy in the development of moral reasoning in a project for moral education. Of more particular interest will be Zargar (2017) and Isik (2022), with their focusses on the narrative dimension of the pursuit of virtue in Islamic philosophy and Sufism, where emphasis is placed on the perfection of the soul through the development of character.

There is abundant literature that addresses the significant dynamics of IRE in developing the religious ethical conduct of Muslim learners in educational settings. In the past decade, this has been promoted from various disciplinary perspectives and contextualised in numerous geographical settings among the Muslim communities around the globe. See, for instance, Draz et al. (2008), Kaymakcan (2006), Munastiwi et al. (2021), Susilawati et al. (2022), Tabroni and Romdhon (2022), and Taufik (2020). It has been suggested that IRE plays a vital role in shaping the character of learners by instilling beliefs in God and religion, promoting worship, fostering noble morals, and cultivating good values that translate into positive behaviour in daily life while also guiding individuals away from forbidden actions (Komariah & Nihayah 2023).

Acknowledging the early development of personality traits that opens the possibility of character cultivation, the present article advocates for a virtue-ethical approach to Muslim children's religious education that can contribute positively to today's concerns for "living together." This, in turn, entails an innovative change in current Islamic educational paradigms that can orient the themes, methods, and resources in pedagogies for children towards the goal of character cultivation. However, it is still essential for IRE to enhance

further pedagogical tools that can enrich it as a framework for promoting ethical values and fostering positive character traits that are essential for individuals to navigate diverse and complex social contexts. Our main argument is that applying a narrative-based or storytelling approach in IRE can greatly facilitate this purpose of character virtue cultivation in children in our multicultural societies.

## **A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

With a focus on the role of narratives in education, several studies demonstrate the significance of employing stories in children's religious pedagogy for enhancing character cultivation. In the existing literature, Okumuşlar (2006) underlines the "story" as an important pedagogical tool not only in the personal, psychological and spiritual development of children and young people but also in conveying meaning, especially in religious and moral education, socialisation, and acculturation. Some research in religious education emphasises the significance of storytelling in Islamic contexts, highlighting its role in transmitting ethical values and fostering moral development among young Muslims. The argument is that using storytelling, Muslim educators can create dialogic pedagogies that promote transformative learning experiences, enabling students to integrate ethical principles into their daily lives (Ahmed, 2019).

Hashim (2017) follows the Philosophy for Children (P4C) approach and primarily uses Quranic narratives, which she adapts for young readers in everyday contexts. This allows issues in the stories to prompt readers to think critically, question, analyse, reflect, and discuss. Ulfat (2020) draws attention to another aspect. She stresses that learners should build up interpretation competence as a process-related competence in religious education, which aids in understanding and interpreting religiously significant narratives of the Muslim tradition in relation to present, everyday life. Furthermore, Isik (2023) emphasises the pedagogical significance of storytelling as a technique for the cultivation of character and self-understanding in IRE. Likewise, Syahrir and Elihami (2019) associate storytelling with other activities and lessons such as playing, singing, etc. as methods for Islamic education to be implemented and developed in kindergartens to bring up qualified, healthy, and skilled children and to instil the values of Islamic teachings.

In response, we seek to revitalise the educational traditions of character virtue cultivation as expressly embedded in the spectrum of non-canonical literature of the Islamic tradition. When in the *Mathnawī*, Jalāladdīn Rūmī (1207–1273) suggests that there are many wisdoms and advices in myths and fairy tales, he is referring to a different aspect of fairy tales, i.e., the didactic function over and above customary functions such as entertainment, spending time or even distracting children to keep them away from adult matters, from harm, and more. What Rūmī seems to point out here is the complex levels of narratives that need to be explored, because storytelling is not only a human quality but also a human method that goes beyond simply telling and receiving what is being told. Narration always implies an opportunity for an exchange of opinions after what has been said. This dialogic

element can be highlighted as an immediate consequence of using narratives for IRE purposes in our plural society today.

Knowledge is passed on to the next generation through oral narration; hence, as a didactic method, it can be subsumed under the educational concept of *ta'lim* (teaching). In the Islamic educational tradition, storytelling by no means remained a domain for children and young people, but was addressed to adults from the very beginning. The greatest desideratum currently for Muslim religious educators is to select narrative texts that are appropriate for the reality of life, i.e., the concerns, problems, and ideas of children and young people, and to present them in a child-friendly, gender-sensitive, and didactically sophisticated form, adapted to be suitable for religious educational processes.

Storytelling has been widely recognised as a valuable educational tool in various studies within the field of education. Research has shown that storytelling can significantly impact learning environments by integrating instructional messages with engaging activities, creating more exciting classrooms (Smeda et al., 2014). Stories have a profound impact on young minds, capturing their attention and imagination. Through exposure to engaging narratives that embody Islamic values and virtues, children are not only entertained but also learn important moral lessons. These stories provide relatable examples of noble characters and righteous behaviour, enabling children to internalise these virtues and find their own self-reflexive ways to practice them in their own lives. Moreover, the power of storytelling lies in its ability to evoke emotions, give opportunities for identification and foster a deeper understanding of ethical concepts (Thambu, 2017). Through well-crafted narratives and well-designed storytelling practices, children can develop a strong connection to their own culture and tradition in the context of the plural society in which they live, learn about religiously desirable values, virtues and attitudes, and be motivated to apply them in their everyday interactions. A narrative-based approach to IRE can thus serve as a transformative tool, nurturing the character development of children and cultivating virtuous qualities that will guide them throughout their lives in complex sociocultural settings.

Not only the canonical literature of Islam, including both Qur'anic and Hadith narrations, but also the genre of didactic narratives in non-canonical literary and scholarly resources of Islamic intellectual history are possible tools that are in principle suitable for the initiation of religious education processes of ethical learning. Ethically charged stories enhance Muslim children's literacy, reasoning, and practice of virtues and contribute to their endorsement of virtuous lifestyles based on practical insights rooted in their own faith and tradition. In consequence, Muslim learners also become empowered with the necessary self-awareness to consciously orient their own feelings, thoughts and actions in the face of the ambivalent spaces of life in the modern and pluralistic societies in which they live.

## THE CASE OF RŪMĪ'S MATHNAWĪ TALES

We have argued in this article so far that one way to promote a transformative paradigm in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) today is to leverage insights from non-canonical Muslim literature and integrate them into innovative pedagogies so that they can contribute virtue-ethically to children's character cultivation. When it comes to the incorporation of such didactic elements into contemporary IRE pedagogies, the intellectual and literary-aesthetic legacy of the 13th-century Muslim sage, poet, jurist, scholar, theologian, Sufi mystic and spiritual master, Rūmī, holds tremendous potential as a relevant resource. This rich heritage has not yet received the meticulous attention it truly deserves in the context of IRE. As regards educational studies, Rūmī is often regarded as "an authoritative master of education" (Hokmabadi, 2011), and his understandings and teachings have been used as effective concepts for character education (Suwar & Endayani, 2021) and in approaches to pedagogy (Rahim, 2016). Particularly in view of a narrative approach to IRE, Rūmī's stories in the Mathnawī hold considerable significance.

Commonly known as "the Qur'an in Persian" (Mojaddedi, 2004), the Mathnawī (literally "Rhyming Couplets") comprises six books of poetry in didactic style and forms a "readily accessible and easily memorised" (Chittick, 1983) representation of Islamic theological, intellectual, moral and spiritual teachings. Not only can the literary taste and style of the collection of anecdotes, tales, and fables be enormously enjoyed by children, but their lively contents derived from and rooted in a considerable variety of Qur'anic, Hadith and folk sources can also meet the requirements of different IRE curricula. The Mathnawī has been an enduring source of inspiration for Muslims across different denominational and cultural backgrounds. There is an expansive and thriving tradition of Mathnawī readings in many Muslim communities, either in Islamic countries or abroad in diasporic communities. Countless adaptations, illustrations, and reproductions of the Mathnawī narratives have been published in a range of languages on a global scale. Nonetheless, the focus on Rūmī's spiritual and intellectual legacy has mainly cantered around its poetic aspects. This results in a gap when it comes to recognising the Mathnawī as an essential component of religious pedagogy and thus overlooking its potential as a valuable source of knowledge, competence, and skills within the regular IRE curriculum for children.

In response, we argue that the Mathnawī stories can be particularly appropriate and efficient resources for virtue-ethical application in multicultural contexts of IRE today. The six books of the Mathnawī feature nearly four hundred tales with a vast array of metaphors, characters, and themes, mainly around the central motifs of faith, tradition, love, truth and virtuous life, which can appeal to children both emotionally and mentally. In their didactic literary form, the tales apply a holistic perspective to different theological, moral, legal, and spiritual dimensions of a virtuous (Islamic) life. To measure such potential, we need to ask what can be learnt pedagogically from these Rūmī tales that might enhance our understanding of Islamic notions of virtues and how those exemplars might be processed, applied, and evaluated in character education for Muslim children. Arguably, our narrative model can contribute to IRE in ways that are not only authentic to faith and tradition but

also inclusive of the existing fact of denominational diversity and responsive to the growing requirements of global society and local communities. Rūmī's narrations seem primarily to have had an adult audience in mind, but the stories offer insights for all ages; our task here is to prepare a selected story from the Mathnawī for an IRE class based on the reality of Muslim children's and their peers' lives.

## **THE DIDACTIC APPROACH FOR VIRTUE-ETHICAL STORYTELLING IN ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION (IRE)**

In this sample pedagogical and didactic approach, we aim to show how storytelling can be applied as a technique in the virtue-ethical character cultivation of children in the context of IRE. Our proposed model is based on Rūmī's story, generally titled "The Name for Grapes" or "Four Men's Fight over the Grapes." We first outline several criteria for the selection of stories that can be appropriate for multicultural IRE contexts. Subsequently, we delve into the story and examine its pedagogical elements. To conclude, we provide a sample didactic model and showcase how the story can be used in the practice of teaching.

When selecting a story from the Mathnawī for the purpose of virtue-ethical character cultivation in IRE, it will be helpful to consider the following criteria:

1. **Ethical Relevance:** Educators should choose a story that contains clear ethical contents and provides meaningful guidance on character virtues such as honesty, compassion, integrity, humility, justice, forgiveness, patience, courage, etc.
2. **Accessibility and Engagement:** The selected stories must be age-appropriate so that they can captivate the attention of the intended audience, whether they are children and peers or young or even adult learners. In our example, the language must be child-orientated. In addition, the narrative should be engaging and relatable, allowing children to connect with the variety of characters in the tales and their experiences.
3. **Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusivity:** Particularly in multicultural settings for IRE, educators should ensure that the selected stories respect diversity and promote inclusivity when it comes to Muslim identities and various religious and spiritual experiences, as well as different social roles and backgrounds. Hence, stories that reinforce stereotypes or cultural biases must be avoided; instead, narratives that celebrate universal values shared by learners of various backgrounds should be chosen.
4. **Practical Application:** Stories that offer practical examples and solutions for applying character virtues in real-life situations are to be given preference. Such narratives will encourage the children to reflect on their own behaviour and

provide them with practical guidance on how to incorporate the virtues into their daily lives.

5. Narrative Style: The selected stories need to have an engaging narrative style, with vivid descriptions, dialogue, and storytelling techniques that enhance the overall experience of the learners. This helps capture the attention and imagination of the learners and facilitates their engagement with the virtues being addressed.

In part 112 of Book Two, the Mathnawī itself titles the story, “How four persons quarrelled about grapes, which were known to each of them by a different name.” While maintaining the story’s fundamental essence, we recognise the importance of adapting it to the age and comprehension level of the learners during the actual pedagogical process. The educator must ensure that it is effectively rewritten and adapted so that it becomes accessible and comprehensible to the intended audience. In what follows, we offer a sample didactic use of the story of “The Name for Grapes” in a multicultural primary school with the purpose of character cultivation in IRE. The pedagogy is addressed to a typical educator in IRE as the audience.

Here is the tale (with slight adaptations for contemporary language):

Once upon a time, there was a man who gave one coin, called a dirham, to four different people. The first person was from Persia and said, “I will use this dirham to buy *Angūr*,” which means grapes. The second person was an Arab who said, “No, I want ‘Inab, not *Angūr*, you devil!” which is another word for grapes. The third person was Turkish and claimed, “This money is mine. I do not want ‘Inab; I want *Üzümlü*,” which is yet another word meaning grapes. The fourth person, a Greek, interrupted, saying, “Stop this talk! I want *Istāfil*,” which also means grapes. These four people started fighting with each other, not realising that the names they used all meant the same thing. This lack of knowledge led them to fight each other with their fists. They were full of confusion and misunderstanding. If a wise person, who knew multi-language meanings of their words, had been there, he or she would have made peace among them. He would have said, “With this one dirham, I will give each of you what you wish. But you must give up your conflict and listen to me with open hearts. This one dirham can fulfil many tasks. Your one dirham can become four, just as you all wanted. Four enemies will become one through unanimity. What each one of you says separately produces division and conflict, but my words bring unity. So, be quiet and listen, as I will speak on your behalf for a dialogue.”

Below is a sample lesson’ plan for the pedagogical application of the story in a typical IRE class for primary school learners:<sup>1</sup>

Title: Pedagogy for Rūmī’s Mathnawī Story “The Name for Grapes” for Primary School Learners

### Objective:

The objective of this pedagogical approach is to facilitate the virtue-ethical character cultivation of primary school learners within the context of IRE through Rūmī's Mathnawī story "The Name for Grapes." This pedagogy aims to help learners understand the importance of such virtues as unity, friendship, empathy, communication, collaboration, and mutual understanding. Through this approach, learners will not only gain knowledge about these virtues but also be provided with practical ideas and experiences to apply them in real-life situations.

### Procedure

1. Outlining a virtue and value road map for the story before class:

It is crucial to outline a road map for the story that can show which ways of thinking are possible and identify the directions where the teacher can move with the children. However, an important aspect of ethical learning, even when working towards a virtue, is that the learning process is an open one. This entails practicing critical thinking skills by asking specific questions about the text. In what follows, we will address several such questions.

One important issue is the problem of unity and division or peace and conflict. Even if the characters in the story shared a common language, they would struggle to coexist without understanding each other's viewpoints. It becomes evident that true understanding is elusive whenever we evaluate things on the surface and fail to delve into the essence of matters. Those who remain fixated on surface superficialities cannot effectively communicate in the language of the heart. The underlying message of this story is unity. The further one strays from the objective of unity, the greater the separation becomes. This story sheds light on the problem of incomplete knowledge. Knowledge is often compared to an endless sea, vast and profound. However, as we can learn from the narrative, incomplete knowledge alone is insufficient in providing true guidance or assistance to individuals. Rūmī provides an example to illuminate this point: When we fall ill, we consult a doctor, guided by our intellect and knowledge. However, once we enter the doctor's office, our personal knowledge and intellect prove insufficient. Instead, we should heed the doctor's advice, relying on their expertise in treatment. Knowledge serves as our guide, assisting us in making the right decisions. Ultimately, it is impossible for humans to possess all-encompassing knowledge, and incomplete knowledge proves futile.

In this compelling narration that Rūmī constructs around the problematic "names" for grapes, a multitude of contrasting concepts are explored to highlight the dichotomy between the ignorant and the wise, the stupid and the knowledgeable, conflict and harmony, war and peace, and the superficiality of materiality versus the depth of meaning. Rūmī masterfully weaves these opposing elements together to convey profound insights and teachings within the narrative that can be useful for us today in promoting ethical decisions and behaviour

in a sociocultural plural context. By juxtaposing these contrasting ideas, Rūmī's narrative serves as a reflection of the human condition and can thus invite learners to contemplate the consequences of ignorance or lack of knowledge, the value of wisdom and seeking knowledge, the destructive nature of conflicts, the beauty and efficiency of harmony, the limitations of material pursuits versus the vast opportunities of ethical thinking and spirituality, and perhaps most importantly, the significance of embracing deeper meanings in life. Through these rich contrasts, Rūmī imparts valuable lessons that resonate beyond the boundaries of the story itself and can inspire the learners to reflect upon their own choices, attitudes and beliefs.

Another important aspect to consider, especially about the issue of communication in plural contexts such as multicultural schools, is body language. While spoken language is often the primary focus, the significance of nonverbal cues should not be overlooked. Body language, often neglected, serves as a powerful tool that complements and supports verbal communication. Even if two individuals use the same words from a dictionary, the meaning conveyed through their body language can differ significantly in the eyes of the interlocutors. It is through body language that emotions, intentions, and attitudes are often more accurately expressed and perceived. Subtle movements, gestures, facial expressions and posture can provide deeper insights into a person's true thoughts and feelings. Therefore, in our increasingly multicultural IRE settings, cultivating an awareness of body language is essential in fostering effective communication, as it allows individuals to convey their messages authentically and interpret others' intentions more accurately. By paying attention to both the verbal and nonverbal aspects of communication, learners can develop a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved in interpersonal interactions and enhance their ability to connect with others on a deeper level. This recognition of the importance of body language aligns with teachings in Islamic culture that emphasise the significance of ethical behavior and mindful communication with others, extending even to our physical interactions.

Rūmī's story brings forth another significant point: In situations where parties cannot reach an agreement and conflict arises, rather than resorting to fighting, their seeking the assistance of a respected mediator can lead to a compromise. Even when communication techniques and practices may be employed correctly, disagreements can still occur. It is in these moments that mediators, as highlighted by Rūmī, play a vital role in fostering social peace. As Rūmī has expresses, "The soul is a friend of knowledge and reason. What does the soul have to do with Arabic or Turkish?" (Mathnawī, II/56). He emphasizes that attaining wisdom is not bound by religion, language, nationality or race. This notion underscores the belief that all individuals, created by the same and the only divine power, should strive towards a common purpose and embrace peace. These words also resonate with the teachings in Islamic culture that highlight the universal messages of unity and understanding as well as the pursuit of peaceful coexistence among all people, regardless of their differences.

Finally, the grape holds profound symbolic meaning. It has been recognised as a sacred fruit to represent abundance, fertility, and productivity since ancient times in regions where viticulture thrived, particularly in the Aegean, Mediterranean, Middle East and Anatolian civilisations. It has emerged as a powerful symbol within mystical, religious, and literary traditions. The words associated with it, such as grape, raisin, cluster, grape bunch, grape seed, grape stick, grape leaf, vine, vine branch, grape juice, grape wine, wine, vineyard and more, frequently appear in various works of literature. In conveying his religious and mystical perspectives, Rūmī incorporated numerous symbols related to grapes and viticulture. This deliberate choice by Rūmī resonated with the mystical tradition both in the East and the West, fostering their fascination with Persian language, literature, and culture. The presence of viticulture in Anatolia, particularly the vineyards and gardens associated with the province of Konya over the centuries, probably contributed to the rich world of symbols within Rūmī's works. In the language of Rūmī, the grouse, grape, and wine symbolise different states of consciousness, i.e., knowing, finding and being, respectively. The grouse represents the raw and unrefined aspects of human nature (being *raw*), while grapes signify the process of maturation and transformation (being *cooked*). Wine, on the other hand, represents the ultimate state of being, where one attains self-awareness, grasps the essence, and reaches the truth (being *burnt*). In this regard, "being a grape" means knowing yourself, grasping the essence and reaching the truth.

## 2. Introducing the pedagogy

The actual practice of pedagogy in an IRE class can begin with an introduction to the story which sets the stage for what the learners are about to hear. This can include providing background information, establishing context, and generating interest. On this basis, explain to the class that the primary focus in this lesson will be on reading one selective story from Rūmī's Mathnawī and exploring its teachings with the purpose of deepening the learners' understanding of character virtues and thinking about their relevance to the daily lives of Muslims today. Briefly introduce Rūmī and his significance as a poet and spiritual leader, the Mathnawī as a sort of a Qur'anic commentary in the format of a collection of stories and poems that convey valuable lessons for personal growth and ethical as well as spiritual development and the story of "The Name for Grapes."

## 3. Activating previously learned concepts

With the aim of preparing the learners for a narrative-oriented IRE, it is advisable to present lessons in previous sessions of the class focused on good character and to delve into the topic of virtues prior to discussing the significance of Rūmī's stories. This preliminary discussion lays the foundation for the learners to understand and appreciate the importance of ethical values in their own lives. By familiarizing them with the concepts of good character and virtues, the learners can better grasp the lessons and teachings embedded in Rūmī's stories; this will pave the way for a more meaningful and enriching learning experience. In these preliminary sessions, the educator can explore such themes as friendship, empathy and mutual understanding in relation to Islamic teachings.

In the actual storytelling session, to warm up the class, you can open again a very brief discussion about the significance of good character and ethics, particularly in the everyday lives of young Muslim children. Encourage the students to actively participate by sharing examples of virtuous actions they have recently witnessed among their peers, in their own families, or in the community, or ones they have performed themselves. This will allow the learners to reflect on the positive behaviours they have observed or practiced. Additionally, emphasize the importance of ethical life in Islamic teachings. You can draw on canonical examples from the Qur'an and Hadith to explain how Islamic culture promotes the cultivation of virtues such as honesty, kindness, patience, gratitude and generosity. By highlighting this connection, you will help the learners understand that character virtue ethics aligns with their religious values and guides them towards leading a morally upright life.

#### 4. Telling the story

Distribute copies of the story to the learners and make sure that the language is appropriate for their age and comprehension level. Consider using visuals or props to enhance engagement. Read the story aloud and pay sufficient attention to proper articulation (in the language for the instruction that suits the school programme). Pause at appropriate intervals to allow learners to absorb the content. It is important to encourage the learners to listen actively and reflect on the story. While storytelling is an important technique, listening is an equally important key skill. Effective storytelling encompasses various creative and expressive techniques, including voice modulation, facial expressions, and the use of onomatopoeia, to captivate the audience. The choice of words should be concise, understandable and at the same time challenging.

#### 5. Narrating and discussing the story

Whereas the reading and telling of a story in the previous step will often focus on accurately presenting the written words, with an emphasis is on clarity and proper pronunciation, by retelling and further narrating the story the educator can engage the learners on a deeper level. This can allow for greater creativity, improve audience interaction and facilitate adaptability, making the storytelling experience more engaging, memorable and tailored to the specific needs and preferences of the audience. Certain intentions are associated with narrative texts that have an ethical implication or content, i.e., the narrator has an intention when narrating. In this step of oral retelling, children should be actively involved in telling and listening, and this ethical content should be made accessible. Even if the thematic level is fundamental as the supporting plot, in this step, the training of ethical perception plays a decisive role. At the same time, it is of course crucial how the ethical content is addressed in the narrative text. When it comes to activating, promoting and training children's ethical judgment, a narrative text should not provide concrete instructions for action. The morally good and bad should remain open. It is crucial to address this ethical content based on the characters and their actions, to analyse it, and to reflect on it. During the joint retelling, the concrete figures should therefore be questioningly emphasised in their ethical symbolic

power. This can slow down the perception process. Impulse questions related to the story here like the following could be helpful: Describe how these men feel themselves. How might one feel if he or she did not understand the other? What becomes clear through their actions? What is their way of communicating? What is the old sage representing in the story?

#### 6. Deepening the conversation about the ethical content

Immediately following the previous step, there is a conscious focus on the perception and analysis of characteristics and the emotions associated or triggered by them, which do not necessarily have to be verbalized in the stories. Emotions that resonate particularly in the stories can sometimes elude the perception of one or the other child and then need to be discussed together. In this context, two key competences gain significance and are important components of ethical educational processes: perception and interpretation. Children's perceptions of this process can be heightened by asking them to describe their sensations accurately, thereby drawing attention to introspection and making them aware of its effect on themselves. Only then is an analysis and interpretation of the perception possible and to be undertaken. Practically, to further facilitate reflection and discussion, the educator can divide the class into small groups or pairs for a reflection activity. Distribute worksheets (if available) or provide writing materials for learners to jot down their thoughts. Prompt learners to reflect on the virtues demonstrated by the characters in the story and discuss how they can apply these virtues in their own lives. Allow time for group discussions and encourage learners to share their reflections with the class afterward. In the context of the present story's theme of incomplete knowledge or ignorance, it raises important questions about the sources of knowledge and information; i.e., where do we get our knowledge and information? It prompts us to reflect on whether knowledge alone is sufficient or if it must be accompanied by action. Moreover, it compels us to ponder how unity can be achieved amidst differing perspectives and beliefs. These inquiries encourage us to explore the interplay between knowledge, practice and the pursuit of unity in our personal and collective journeys. You can ask what good it is if we know but we do not practice. Further, how can we unite? What would this entail?

#### 7. Taking on and changing perspectives

Change of perspective as a competency is closely linked to the previous competencies. A change of perspective means, in short, that something can be seen from different angles. The point of taking on someone else's perspective is to put yourself in the shoes of another person, less in the sense of an emotional empathy and more in terms of looking at something from the same point of view as the character in the narrative text, who is decoupled from your own point of view. This helps children understand not only that someone can see something differently than they do, but also that you can see the same thing from different angles. Furthermore, children can cognitively understand the inner life of characters in a situation-related manner without putting themselves in an emotional state (sadness or anger). After taking on the perspective of a character in the story, the

following question can be asked: How do you think he is feeling now? How do you feel when you do not understand somebody? By changing your point of view, the ability to judge can be sharpened and a sensitivity for cultural differences can be created, which in the long term can lead to an attitude that is at least tolerant, if not respectful.

#### 8. Reflecting and arguing

In this final step, children should be encouraged to think, i.e., to reflect on the basics of human action and existence. The desirable or commendable virtue and attitude in relation to the values and characteristics discussed in the story, which are given form through language and action, should become the subject of reflection. Competing values and norms certainly become part of such thinking. The only way to find one's way around this diversity is on the one hand to have a reasonable discussion of reasons, arguments and judgements presented, examined and revised if necessary, and to orient oneself around what God and the Prophet Muhammad consider ethically desirable and have named morally good. Friendship, for example, is recognised as a virtue not only by Aristotle but also by numerous Muslim moral philosophers. Both perspectives hold that the concrete idea of how to meet friends in a humane and friendly way may vary based on the cultural and historical context. The different starting conditions in children alone make it necessary to conduct relevant and context-related arguments about values and virtues, such as friendship. As part of a critical examination, one's own and other people's attitudes and values should be placed in relation to each other and discussed. This also requires highlighting virtues implicit in *Rūmī's* stories. By doing so, virtues are developed together and set in relation to each other. Which image of a human being is represented; which basic ethical attitudes seem to be worth striving for?

#### 9. Role-playing and problem-solving

As an optional step, the educator can organise role-playing activities to further explore the meaning of the story where learners enact scenarios that involve miscommunication and conflicts. Educators should discern whether a role-playing activity would be appropriate and useful in processing a given story, as this step may not always be necessary or fruitful. During role-play, encourage learners to find peaceful and cooperative solutions. In addition, it should motivate learners to apply the lessons from the story in their daily lives. For instance, the educator can assign reflective journaling or group projects that demonstrate the application of unity, friendship, communication, empathy and understanding in various contexts.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we have attempted to showcase that adopting a narrative approach to character cultivation in Islamic Religious Education holds immense potential for nurturing virtuous qualities in learners, particularly within our increasingly multicultural society. The Mathnawī narratives of Rūmī, with their rich symbolism, moral lessons, and universal

themes, serve as an excellent example of the power of storytelling to impart values and foster character development. By delving into the Mathnawī narratives, educators can guide learners on a transformative journey, enabling them to embrace virtues such as unity, friendship, compassion, humility and justice. Through the exploration of Rūmī's Mathnawī narratives, learners are not only connected to their Islamic heritage but are also equipped with the necessary tools to navigate the complexities of modern life with integrity and ethical awareness. This narrative approach in IRE not only imparts knowledge but also engages the hearts and minds of learners and empowers them to become morally conscious individuals who contribute positively to their communities and the wider world. We have argued that our proposed storytelling model can both strengthen the learners' Islamic identity and equip them with the values and skills necessary to build harmonious relationships and contribute to a pluralistic society. By incorporating Rūmī's Mathnawī narratives into IRE, educators can inspire learners to embrace the richness of their faith while promoting mutual respect, intercultural dialogue, and a shared commitment to creating a more compassionate and inclusive world.

To summarise, the following can be stated for future research. Multiple research efforts are required.

1. It is essential to select suitable stories from the Islamic heritage that encompass all Muslim cultures geographically to emphasise the ambiguity of cultural differences concerning ethical decision-making processes. Nonetheless, it is not enough to simply identify narratives; they must be linguistically and age-appropriately adapted to the respective cultural context in their translations.
2. Additional applications in schools with students are necessary for the development and testing of appropriate methods for applying and experimenting with stories in terms of religious-educational empirical research.
3. There is a growing demand for the creation of narrative books that aim to achieve an ethical-religious objective. Pictures, illustrations are very important for a better understanding of a text, a story.

Criteria of children's and youth literature are also worth considering here, especially when it comes to typography. Typography is an aesthetic category in the interplay of text and image. The typographic design of texts with images significantly influences the construction of meaning. Against this background, there is a need for narrative books where the illustrations harmonise with the text and there is a good text-image interaction.

## NOTES

1. While this serves as a general pedagogical approach, it is crucial to adapt it accordingly for each individual story.

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