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Modern And Prophetic Perspectives of Using Differentiation as A Teaching Strategy

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ABSTRACT

Differentiation is a teaching strategy that aims at designing tailormade instructions and content to cater for the diverse and individual needs of all learners. This can be done in several ways such as individual support, varying teaching styles to match each learner type or customised material that are at the right level of the learner's abilities. Differentiation is widely used in the West and research indicates that it motivates learners, creates engagement, improves learning, increases achievement, and reduces the achievement gap between high- and low-level learners. This paper conducts a critical review of modern literature on differentiation and discusses its benefits in the classroom setting. The paper then goes beyond the modern literature and analyses the teaching methods of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) to identify the theme of differentiation. Content and thematic analysis of the verses of the Glorious Quran and ahaadith of the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) have been conducted to uncover the theme. The analysis of the Quranic verses and ahaadith reveals that Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) would use several ways to employ differentiation in his teaching. He would use different teaching methods to address different types of learners. He would include several methods such as auditory, visuals, kinaesthetic, observations, demonstrations and drilling to match each type of learner. The paper concludes that differentiation is an effective strategy that is widely used in the West and there is enough evidence that Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) employed the strategy in his successful and effective teaching. The paper provides valuable insights on the importance and effectiveness of differentiation in teaching, both from the modern and Islamic perspectives. It provides valuable information that the teaching methodologies, as outlined in the Quran and Hadith– differentiation being one of them – are in perfect line with the current research.

Keywords: *differentiation, teaching, learning, Islamic, education, Prophet, Muhammad.*

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching and learning are the core concepts in Islamic education. Indeed, the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) was sent as a teacher to bring about fundamental changes in the lives of people. Seeking knowledge and its dissemination through teaching is a sacred and noble goal in Islam. Teaching and learning are, primarily, means to seek Allah's closeness and pleasure. The Quran, for instance, mentions in Surah Mujadilah, ayat 11:

يَرْفَعِ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ مِنكُمْ وَٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُواْ ٱلْعِلْمَ دَرَجَٰتٍۚ وَٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرٌ

Allah will elevate those of you who are faithful, and ˹raise˺ those gifted with knowledge in rank (Al-Quran 58:11)

Seeking knowledge is also a way of achieving personal growth and then conveying it further to change other people's lives. Thus, in Islam, it is not only learning but a practical application of the learning and conveying the message further to other people. Teaching, learning, practical applications are equally important in the Islamic concept of education. In other words, it means that Islamic learning aims at bringing about a change at all levels: moral, spiritual, mental, social, individual, and collective. In order to achieve this high goal, there must be teaching and learning strategies that can effectively produce learning environments, where the learners actively seek learning and brings about a change in individuals and social behaviours. The Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) was the most successful teacher as can be seen from the phenomenal changes he brought about through his teaching. The Bedouin Arabs, who were previously nomadic and illiterate people, became the custodians of knowledge, leaving a significant mark on the lives of people for many centuries. To bring about such a remarkable transformation, the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) must have employed the most effective teaching strategies, techniques and tools that have been recently identified by modern research. One of the most widely used strategy in current times, backed by contemporary research, is using differentiation in the classroom. In this article, a critical analysis of the modern literature on the subject of differentiation has been conducted and an attempt has been made to find similar practices of differentiated instructions, content, and its delivery in the Prophetic pedagogy.

MODERN PERSPECTIVE ON DIFFERENTIATION

What is Differentiation?

Differentiation may simply be defined as a teaching methodology which attempts to accommodate learners of varying degrees of ability. Blackburn (2019) calls it a teaching strategy that aims at providing learning opportunities for learners with heterogenous mental capabilities. Bartlett (2016) terms it a methodology that devises assessments methods, learning materials and teaching strategies by

adapting instructions to meet the individual needs of all learners in the classroom. Similarly, Tomlinson (2005) insists that "catering to individual's needs" is the basis and essence of differentiation. Adams and Pierce (2021) state that teachers must come up with variety of ways to organise learning with enough flexibility and challenging content to meet the potential needs of a specific learner. Commenting on the importance of differentiation, Westphal (2021) argues that it is not an option but rather a teaching lifestyle that at teacher must adapt. Adams and Pierce (2021) compare it with a lens; a lens for the teacher who looks through it to see classroom activities that could range from the simplest to the most complex.

Levels of Differentiation

The strategy itself is not something that is uniform across all situations. Every context, every learning environment, every group, and individuals need distinct strategies for effective learning. For example, Rock et al (2008) argue that differentiated instructions may be aimed at each individual or a group of learners depending upon the contextual demand, unique learning abilities, unique interests, and even unique perspectives. Some authors, such as Boelens et al (2018), go even further by contending that it should not be limited only to the classroom. At bare minimum, it should be at the administrative as well as the classroom level. On the administrative level, instructions must be tailored around considering the social, economic, ethnic and gender backgrounds. Administrative differentiation in teaching and learning refers to the process of adapting the management and organization of educational programs, resources, and services to meet the diverse needs and learning styles of individual students. This approach is designed to help schools and teachers provide a more personalized and effective learning experience for students by tailoring instruction, assessment, and support to match the unique needs of each student. Administrative differentiation can include things like grouping students by ability, providing different levels of support or resources, and using different teaching strategies to meet the needs of diverse learners. On the other hand, the classroom level differentiation should focus on assessments, content, and method of delivery. The teaching content should be customized to keep it simple or challenging so that each individual learner's needs are met. According to Boelens et al (2018), it is not necessary that the whole lesson should be divided into sperate lessons, rather it may be either the whole lesson or just a part of it. Similarly, it is not essential that materials are tailored for each single learner; the need and context shall determine whether differentiated instructions should be aimed at individuals, pairs, or groups. Differentiation is a multi-faceted approach that goes beyond simply dividing students into groups based on one rule, it involves, as Bartlett (2016) explains, tailoring instruction,

assessment, and support to meet the individual needs of students by differentiating tasks, resources, grouping, pace, outcomes, and support.

Benefits of Differentiation

From the above critical review, it is clear that many educational experts agree on the importance of using differentiation. Research studies have been conducted and authors have recommended methods to effectively use such differentiated instructions and content. For example, Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) conducted a study in which they found that with tailored instructions and content, there was an increase in the learners' achievement. It also narrowed down the achievement gap between high- and low-level learners. The study also found that learners in differentiated classrooms were far more motivated and engaged than those with one size fit all types of learning environment. Similarly, another meta-analytical study by Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001) identified higher levels of motivation, interest and engagement among learners who were presented with tailored made customized content to match their abilities.

It is natural that people differ in their physical and mental abilities. No two individuals are exactly the same in their pursuit of interests, learner type, physical strengths, and cognitive abilities. Such a distinction is a natural part of life and the same is true of every classroom consisting of learners with varied degrees of individual differences. It is, therefore, unlikely – and unnatural to expect – exactly the same, or even similar, response to the same stimulus from all learners. Differentiation is natural; it exists in nature; it exists around us; it exists in us. Thorndike (1906) draws an analogy to explain this very fact by stating that all trees do not grow tall reaching the same hight; all seeds do not produce abundant crop and that all horses – and other animals by extension – do not possess equal level of strength and speed. Thorndike (1906) further insists that the variations and the natural diversity in human character and intellectual capabilities is far more extensive and intricate than the basic comparisons of trees, seeds, and horses. Unlike trees and animals, humans are far more complex and possess sophisticated capabilities of making their own choices, personal likes, and dislikes. O'Brien and Guiney (2001) share a similar opinion by contending that even babies have a natural tendency to differentiate and would tend to attach to those who can provide more care and look-after than others.

Even though, there appears to be an extensive literature on the natural differentiation among humans, some behaviourists argue that it is not natural but acquired. For instance, Watson (1924), who is generally considered to be the founding father of the behaviourist school, argues that all individual differences are not natural; they are the result of learning experience. In one of his most notable quotes, Watson rejected the idea that mind or consciousness plays any

role in creating individual differences, instead he emphasized the influence of environment on shaping behaviour. He writes:

"Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I'll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select - doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief and, yes, even beggar-man and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations and the race of his ancestors" (Watson, 1924).

It appears that Watson's argument is a fallacy or probably he exaggerated to emphasize the role of environment and ignores the impact of nature. Diversity is natural; it exists around us and within ourselves. Accepting Watson's argument is putting a monkey and fish in the same learning environment. Neither can a monkey be trained to swim like a fish, nor can a fish be trained to climb the trees like a monkey. Both have natural aptitudes for their abilities. The lack of one ability does not mean the non-existence of other abilities. O'Brien and Guiney (2001) repudiated Watson's viewpoint. They argued that accepting Watson's view is to assume that all learners are fundamentally equal in the way they learn and that they have the same potential, ability, and the pace of learning. O'Brien and Guiney (2001) insisted that differentiation is neither complimentary nor contingent to be applied only when things become problematic. It should be included in the whole scheme of teaching and be readily available for implementation. Bartlett (2016) holds a similar view by asserting that differentiation is not a teaching formality; it is not an isolated practice, it should be an integral part and parcel of the whole lesson plan.

DIFFERENTIATION IN PROPHETIC PEDAGOGY

Indeed, the first reference to Prophetic Pedagogy is the Quran itself, as it was revealed to him; he taught it and lived by its example. The Quran in several places recognises the diversity among mankind. For instance, in Surah al-Hujarat, verse 13, Allah describes this diversity as:

يٰٓاَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اِنَّا خَلَقْنٰكُمْ مِّنْ ذَكَرٍ وَّاُنْثٰى وَجَعَلْنٰكُمْ شُعُوْبًا وَّقَبَآئِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوْا ۚاِنَّ اَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللّٰهِ اَتْقٰىكُمْ ۗ
اِنَّ اللّٰهَ عَلِيْمٌ خَبِيْرٌ

> *"O mankind, indeed, We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted."* (Al-Quran 49:13)

The verse is a clear indication that even though born of the same parents, humans have been divided into different nations and tribes, each with their own distinctive and individual characteristics. A similar message has been repeated in Surah Ar-Rum verse 22.

وَمِنْ اٰيٰتِهٖ خَلْقُ السَّمٰوٰتِ وَالْاَرْضِ وَاخْتِلَافُ اَلْسِنَتِكُمْ وَاَلْوَانِكُمْ اِنَّ فِيْ ذٰلِكَ لَاٰيٰتٍ لِّلْعٰلِمِيْنَ

"And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your languages and your colours. Indeed, in that are signs for those of knowledge." (Al-Quran 30:22)

And again, in Surah Fatir verse 27, Allah refers to the differentiation in nature.

اَلَمْ تَرَ اَنَّ اللّٰهَ اَنْزَلَ مِنَ السَّمَآءِ مَآءً ۚ فَاَخْرَجْنَا بِهٖ ثَمَرٰتٍ مُّخْتَلِفًا اَلْوَانُهَا ؕ وَمِنَ الْجِبَالِ جُدَدٌۢ بِيْضٌ وَّحُمْرٌ مُّخْتَلِفٌ اَلْوَانُهَا وَغَرَابِيْبُ سُوْدٌ

Do you not see that Allah sent down water from the sky with which We brought forth fruits of diverse hues? In the mountains there are white and red, of diverse hues, and pitchy black (Al-Quran 35:27)

Immediately in the next verse, Allah speaks of the diversity among people and animals.

وَمِنَ النَّاسِ وَالدَّوَآبِّ وَالْاَنْعَامِ مُخْتَلِفٌ اَلْوَانُهٗ كَذٰلِكَ ؕ اِنَّمَا يَخْشَى اللّٰهَ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ الْعُلَمٰٓؤُا ؕ اِنَّ اللّٰهَ عَزِيْزٌ غَفُوْرٌ

"And human beings too, and beasts, and cattle, diverse are their hues. From among His servants, it is only those who know that fear Allah. Verily Allah is Most Mighty, Most Forgiving (Al-Quran 35:28)

In Surah Al-Isra verse 89, Allah literally refers to the differentiated strategy so that everyone understands what has been revealed. Allah says:

وَلَقَدْ صَرَّفْنَا لِلنَّاسِ فِيْ هٰذَا الْقُرْاٰنِ مِنْ كُلِّ مَثَلٍ

We have explained things for people in this Qur'an in diverse ways to make them understand the Message (Al-Quran 17:89).

The Glorious Quran provides a conceptual framework where each teaching and learning concept can be seen implemented in the life of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him). It has been noted in the above verses that the Glorious Quran clearly speaks about the diversity that exists in nature and within us. In the Sunnah of the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him), we see the concepts practically demonstrated while teaching to the companions. For instance, the following hadith clearly differentiates learners on account of their potentials and learning abilities.

وَعَنْ عَائِشَةَ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهَا قَالَتْ: قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ: «الْمَاهِرُ بِالْقُرْآنِ مَعَ السَّفَرَةِ الْكِرَامِ الْبَرَرَةِ وَالَّذِي يَقْرَأُ الْقُرْآنَ وَيَتَتَعْتَعُ فِيهِ وَهُوَ عَلَيْهِ شَاق لَهُ أَجْرَانِ»

It is reported form Aisha that the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) said, "If a person is skilled in the Quran, he is associated with noble recording angels; but the one who falters and finds it difficult to recite shall have a double reward" (Mishkat al-Masabih 2112).

In the above hadith, learners are divided into two groups on account of their learning abilities. Those with high potentials and naturally gifted have been encouraged by associating them with noble recording angles. Those with learning difficulties have been encouraged as well as provided an added reinforcement in the form of a double reward.

Sometimes, the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) would differentiate learners on the basis of gender so that each group performs according to their natural abilities. The following hadith is a prime example of this type of differentiation.

وَعَنْ عَائِشَةَ قَالَتْ: قُلْتُ: يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ جِهَادٌ؟ قَالَ: " نَعَمْ عَلَيْهِنَّ جِهَادٌ لَا قِتَالَ فِيهِ: الْحَجُّ وَالْعُمْرَةُ "

> *Aisha reported that when she asked the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) whether it was compulsory for women to participate in Jihad, the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) replied, "Yes, a Jihad without fighting, that is, hajj and umra"* (Mishkat al-Masabih 2534 authenticated by Albani).

Given that men tend to have more physical strength than women on average, it makes sense that men have greater total body muscle mass compared to women. Therefore, it is natural to assign tasks that align with their physical strengths, and the same applies to women. In another hadith, the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) classified learners according to their physical, social, and emotional abilities.

وَعَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ قَالَ: قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صلى الله عَلَيْهِ وَسلم: «للمملوك طَعَامه وَكسوته وَلَا يُكَلف من الْعَمَل إِلَّا مَا يُطيق

> *Abu Hurairah reported that the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) said, "A slave is entitled to his food and clothing, and he should have imposed on him only such work as he is capable of doing"* (Mishkatat al-Masabih 3344).

Entitlement to food and clothing are the physical needs while imposing work that one is capable of doing implies both physical and emotional abilities.

The hadith literature is replete with examples of using differentiated teaching strategies to cater to the various types of learners. For instance, the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) would respond differently to different individuals with the same questions considering the context and the needs of the individual. The Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) would also give instructions according to the type of learner. For instance, he would sometimes pose a question for a curious leaner, employ a visual technique for a visual learner, deliver a speech for an auditory leaner, demonstrate for observational learner, or instruct learning by doing for a kinaesthetic learner.

CONCLUSION

Teaching and learning theorists, such as Thorndike (1906) and others, suggest that differentiation is natural and exists among humans and other animals. The Quran acknowledges such variations in many verses such as 49:13, 30:22 and 35:27-28. The Quran further employs the technique in order to ensure understanding of all as explained in Chapter 17:28. The modern literature suggests that differentiation is an effective and useful teaching strategy to improve student's learning. It provides to the need of all learners and creates motivating, engaging and enhanced learning environment. Modern day educational psychologists agree that all humans are not equal and that a variety of approaches must be employed with tailor-made instructions and customised content to ensure that learning takes place across the board. Evidence from the Quran demonstrates that there is a rich diversity among humans and that the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) used these various differentiation strategies in order to provide for the individual needs of all learners. There is a clear link between the modern teaching and learning perspectives and the teaching practices of the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) on the role of differentiation. Generally, the practice of differentiation is not followed by Muslims teachers especially in the context of religious education. It is highly important to revisit the Prophetic methodology and follow practices of the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) for effective learning.

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