

Re-Imaging Teacher Education Programs Through Ethical Symbolism Among Universities in North-West, Nigeria: A Sociological Perspective

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Abstract

This study critically examines how Islamic ethical teachings, specifically the Hadith comparing a believer to a palm tree, can enrich contemporary teacher education through the lens of the sociology of education. It argues that the metaphor of the palm tree embodies moral resilience, social utility, and intellectual growth, qualities essential for effective and transformative teaching. Focusing on universities in Northwestern Nigeria, where Islamic values are deeply embedded in the social fabric, the study highlights the disconnect between existing teacher education curricula and the moral-spiritual needs of the region. The objectives of this paper are threefold: (1) to explore the symbolic and educational relevance of the Hadith, (2) to analyze the sociological implications of integrating spiritual ethics into teacher education, and (3) to propose a values-driven curriculum model that aligns with both Islamic philosophy and sociological theory. Drawing upon Émile Durkheim's theory of moral education and the symbolic interactionist framework, the paper contends that teacher education must transcend technical competence to nurture ethically grounded, socially responsible, and spiritually aware educators. Key recommendations include embedding moral and spiritual training into teacher preparation programmes, promoting community engagement, and fostering lifelong learning among educators. This integrated approach not only elevates the moral purpose of teaching but also supports societal cohesion and educational justice, particularly within culturally Islamic contexts such as Northwestern states in Nigeria

Keywords: Islamic Ethics, Teacher Education, Moral Education, Sociology of Education

Introduction

In contemporary educational discourse, the integration of moral and ethical dimensions into teacher training is receiving renewed scholarly and policy attention (Ibrahim, Islam, Zohriah, & Azid, 2024). With rising concerns about educational inequality, moral decline, and the erosion of professional integrity, there is a growing consensus that teacher education must move beyond the acquisition of technical skills to include moral and spiritual formation (Reilly, 2024). In many teacher education programmes across Nigeria, particularly in the north-western region, curricula continue to emphasize technical proficiency and cognitive skills, often at the expense of moral and spiritual formation (Ibrahim et al., 2024). This imbalance has contributed to a growing disconnect between the professional roles of teachers and the ethical expectations placed upon them by society. In predominantly Muslim communities, where religious values deeply inform social norms, the absence of structured ethical and spiritual training in teacher preparation creates a moral vacuum that undermines the teacher's role as a community leader and moral guide (Msangya, 2025). Furthermore, despite growing scholarly interest in value-based education, there remains a lack of context-specific frameworks that integrate indigenous ethical systems, such as Islamic teachings, into formal teacher training (Srinio, Muslihun, & Usman, 2025). This study responds to that call by drawing on Islamic teachings, specifically a Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) that likens the believer to a palm tree. The Hadith, as recorded in *Sahih al-Bukhari* (Hadith 5444), symbolically illustrates the virtues of resilience, beneficial presence, and steady growth—qualities which are critical for today's educators. It is a narration from Abdullah ibn Umar (may Allah be pleased with him), in which the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said:

“Among the trees, there is a tree whose leaves do not fall, and it is like the Muslim. Tell me which tree it is.” The people began to think of the trees of the desert. I (Ibn Umar) thought of the date-palm tree, but I felt too shy to speak. Then the people asked, “O Messenger of Allah, tell us what it is.” He replied: “It is the date-palm tree.” (Bukhari, 1997)

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This Hadith symbolically illustrates the virtues of resilience, beneficial presence, and steady growth, which are critical attributes for today's educators. By grounding teacher education in this prophetic metaphor, the paper proposes a transformative and values-oriented model of teacher development. This model is situated within the broader framework of the sociology of education, which views schools as agents of moral, cultural, and social reproduction (Bourdieu, 2018). The metaphor of the palm tree provides an ethical lens through which educators can reflect on their roles not only as instructors, but also as moral leaders and community builders. This study, therefore, seeks to bridge Islamic ethical philosophy with sociological theory in order to reimagine teacher education as a moral vocation. It argues that the integration of spiritual ethics into educational curricula can support the development of teachers who are not only professionally competent, but also socially responsible and spiritually grounded. Such a paradigm shift has the potential to address contemporary challenges in education and to foster a more just, cohesive, and morally conscious society (Bakar, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a dual sociological lens by integrating Émile Durkheim's Theory of Moral Education and Symbolic Interactionism, as developed by George Herbert Mead and later refined by Herbert Blumer. Together, these theories offer both macro- and micro-level perspectives for understanding the moral, social, and symbolic dimensions of teacher education, particularly within an Islamic ethical context.

Assumptions of Durkheim's Theory of Moral Education

Durkheim (1925, as cited in Weiss, 2022) emphasized the central role of education in cultivating morality and fostering social cohesion. His theory rests on the following assumptions:

- i. Education is a moral enterprise: Schools are responsible for transmitting shared values that sustain the social order.
- ii. Social solidarity is a key aim of education: Moral education enables individuals to internalize collective norms, leading to unity and cooperation.
- iii. Teachers are moral agents: Educators are entrusted with the task of shaping the moral character of future citizens.
- iv. Moral development is built on discipline, attachment, and autonomy: These are essential for nurturing responsible and ethically aware individuals.

Key Assumptions of Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic Interactionism, rooted in the work of Mead (1934) and formalized by Blumer (1969, as cited in Bakar, 2022), provides a framework for understanding how individuals construct meaning through social interaction. The theory is grounded in the following assumptions:

- i. Human actions are based on meanings: People act towards things (objects, events, roles) based on the meanings they hold for them.
- ii. Meanings arise from social interactions: They are not intrinsic but are formed through communication and shared experiences.
- iii. Meaning is interpreted and modified: Individuals constantly reinterpret meanings based on new encounters or contexts.
- iv. The self is socially constructed: Identity is shaped and reshaped through interaction with others.
- v. Symbols, language, and metaphors are central to meaning-making: These tools shape how individuals understand their roles and relationships.

Relevance of the Theories to the Study

The combination of these two theories provides a robust and holistic framework for analyzing the intersection of Islamic ethics, teacher education, and the sociology of education. For instance, Durkheim's theory supports the macro-level argument for integrating moral and spiritual education into the teacher preparation process. In a society like Nigeria, where religion plays a significant role in shaping social values, Durkheim's emphasis on collective morality and the role of schools in moral formation justifies the inclusion of Islamic ethical teachings such as the Hadith likening a believer to a palm tree, into the curriculum. It frames the teacher not only as a transmitter of knowledge but also as a moral exemplar and community leader. Symbolic Interactionism, on the other hand, provides a micro-level understanding of how these moral values are internalized and expressed by teachers in their daily interactions. The Hadith's metaphor of the palm tree,

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representing resilience, usefulness, and uprightness, functions as a symbol that shapes teachers' self-perception, classroom behaviour, and moral influence. This theory is particularly useful in examining how teachers derive meaning from religious texts and translate those meanings into professional conduct. In combination, these theories allow for a comprehensive exploration of teacher education as both a social institution and a personal moral journey. They support the development of a values-driven teacher education model that nurtures educators who are not only technically competent but also spiritually grounded and socially responsible

The Hadith and Its Symbolic Interpretation

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said:

"Among the trees is a tree whose leaves do not fall, and it is like the Muslim. Tell me what it is."

The companions began thinking of desert trees. Ibn Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) said, "I thought of the date-palm tree but felt shy to speak." The Prophet then said: "It is the date-palm tree" (Sahih al-Bukhari, Hadith 5444; as cited in Bukhari, 1997)

This Hadith is more than a simple spiritual analogy; it is a rich metaphor with deep educational and sociological implications. The date palm (*nakhla*), deeply esteemed in Arab and Islamic culture, is known for its durability, resilience, and continuous usefulness qualities that Islamic scholars such as Ibn Hajar (2004) have linked to the ideal character of a believer. When examined through the lens of teacher education and sociology, this metaphor becomes a compelling symbol for the formation of teacher identity and moral purpose. Just as the date palm provides benefit in every part and season, educators are called to be sources of stability, integrity, and positive influence within their communities.

Resilience and Stability

The palm tree is uniquely suited to survive in harsh and arid environments. With deep roots and a flexible yet firm trunk, it withstands strong winds and extreme temperatures. Symbolically, this reflects the believer's capacity to remain spiritually anchored and morally steadfast amidst social, political, and personal turbulence. For educators, especially in contexts facing systemic challenges such as underfunding, insecurity, or socio-cultural tensions, this resilience is vital. It aligns with the professional need for emotional intelligence, perseverance, and ethical consistency (Tsarkos, 2025). Teachers modelled after the palm tree are those who inspire trust and stability in their classrooms, acting as moral anchors in their communities.

Utility and Service

Every part of the date palm is beneficial: its fruit is nutritious, its trunk and leaves are used for construction and crafts, and its presence offers shade and beauty. This universal usefulness reflects the Islamic conception of the believer as someone who benefits others in every circumstance (Ruslan & Latifi, 2025). Translated into the domain of teacher education, this notion suggests that educators should be sources of not just knowledge, but holistic well-being, emotionally, intellectually, morally, and socially. The teacher, like the palm tree, serves beyond the classroom, supporting character development, fostering social cohesion, and nurturing civic responsibility (Firdaus & Suwendi, 2025). In this sense, the Hadith encourages a vision of teaching as an act of continuous service grounded in spiritual purpose.

Growth and Aspiration

The upward growth of the palm tree, ever reaching toward the sky, is symbolic of a believer's continuous striving for self-improvement, moral refinement, and nearness to God. This resonates with the Islamic value of *tazkiyah* (self-purification), which involves the ongoing cultivation of inner virtue and wisdom (Firdaus & Suwendi, 2025). In education, this metaphor promotes the idea of teachers as lifelong learners and reflective practitioners. It challenges educators to pursue both professional excellence and spiritual integrity. This aligns with modern teacher education frameworks that advocate for reflective practice, ethical orientation, and transformational leadership (Ibrahim et al., 2024).

Educational Implications of the Hadith

When incorporated into teacher education, this Hadith becomes more than a moral tale, it serves as an ethical paradigm for training educators who are:

- i. Resilient in adversity and grounded in ethical principles;
- ii. Beneficial to their students and society at large; and
- iii. Committed to lifelong growth, learning, and spiritual awareness.

This moral-spiritual foundation aligns with Durkheim's theory of moral education, which views schooling as a vehicle for transmitting collective moral values necessary for social solidarity (Durkheim, 1925, as cited in Weiss, 2022). It also

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connects with symbolic interactionism, which emphasizes the role of symbols and metaphors in shaping individual identity and behaviour within social contexts (Blumer, 1969). By drawing on culturally and religiously resonant symbols, like the palm tree metaphor, teacher education can foster educators who are not only professionally competent but also ethically driven and socially conscious.

Sociological Insights into Education

From the perspective of the sociology of education, schools are more than instructional sites, they are institutions that play a pivotal role in socialization, moral formation, and cultural transmission. Sociologists such as Emile Durkheim have emphasized that education serves a foundational function in fostering social cohesion and maintaining the moral fabric of society. Durkheim (1925) asserted that the aim of education is not simply to impart knowledge or develop intellectual faculties, but to cultivate what he termed the collective conscience, a shared set of beliefs, values, and norms that bind members of society together. Within this framework, teachers are viewed as moral agents who help reproduce and reinforce social values, not merely as facilitators of curriculum content. The classroom becomes a microcosm of society, where ethical behaviour, respect for rules, cooperation, and mutual responsibility are modelled and learned. Durkheim argued that the moral authority of the teacher stems from their ability to embody and transmit societal ideals, thereby helping to maintain social order and prepare students for participation in a democratic society. Moreover, contemporary sociologists build on this foundation by recognizing the complexities of pluralistic societies, where schools are also arenas of contestation, negotiation, and cultural exchange. Therefore, teacher education must not only prepare educators to uphold societal norms but also to critically engage with issues of inequality, diversity, and justice. This aligns with the symbolic significance of the believer as a palm tree, resilient, fruitful, and morally upright, offering a model of the teacher as both a stabilizing force and a catalyst for social transformation.

Curricular Implications for Teacher Education

The integration of Islamic ethical metaphors, such as the palm tree, into teacher education has practical curricular consequences. Based on the symbolic, moral, and sociological dimensions discussed, the following curriculum components are recommended:

1. Moral and Spiritual Training
2. Teacher education programmes should include modules focused on ethical reasoning, moral decision-making, and spiritual development. Such training fosters self-awareness, empathy, and a strong moral compass, traits essential for responsible and reflective teaching. As noted by Tsarkos (2025), moral education must be intentional and embedded throughout the curriculum, rather than treated as an additional component.
3. Community and Cultural Responsiveness: Teachers must be prepared to engage constructively with diverse learners and communities. This requires training in intercultural communication, inclusive pedagogies, and sensitivity to local values and norms, particularly within multi-ethnic and multi-faith contexts such as Nigeria. Ude (2025) highlights the importance of multicultural education that validates students' identities while promoting social cohesion.
4. Commitment to Lifelong Learning: Like the upward-growing palm tree, teachers should embody continuous personal and professional development. The curriculum should promote reflective practice, collaborative learning, and critical inquiry, encouraging educators to adapt to new challenges and enhance their craft. Rasmussen (2025) emphasizes that lifelong learning is essential for sustaining teacher motivation and effectiveness in dynamic educational settings.
5. Civic Engagement, Justice, and Social Responsibility: Teachers must be equipped to critically analyze and challenge systemic inequalities within education. This includes addressing disparities in access, representation, and outcomes, and fostering democratic ideals within the classroom. Giroux (2024) advocates for teachers to act as public intellectuals who engage with social issues and empower pupils to become active, informed citizens.

Conclusion

The metaphor of the believer as a palm tree offers more than religious imagery; it provides a conceptual framework for teacher education grounded in ethical resilience, societal contribution, and lifelong growth. When examined through the sociology of education, this metaphor supports a holistic, values-driven approach to teacher preparation. It is time to reimagine teacher education not merely as a technical undertaking, but as a moral and spiritual vocation

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Recommendation

1. Teacher education programmes should incorporate Islamic moral symbols, such as the palm tree metaphor, into courses on philosophy, ethics, and pedagogy. These culturally resonant symbols offer powerful tools for shaping teacher identity, professional purpose, and resilience.
2. The curriculum should reflect both macro-level (Durkheimian) and micro-level (symbolic interactionist) perspectives on moral development. Teachers must be equipped not only with technical skills but also with a deep understanding of their role as moral agents and socializers within diverse communities.
3. A holistic curriculum rooted in Islamic ethics and sociological theory should be adopted. This model must emphasize moral formation, community service, and lifelong learning, thereby producing educators who are ethically grounded, socially responsive, and spiritually aware.

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